



Ferguson Has a History Museum

Ferguson has a Historical Society and a History Museum. We encourage any people reading this article to join in the conversation or become a member. Contact information is at the bottom of this article.

Last month we featured some of the stories by an early Ferguson resident, Mr. Harry Behle (in 1972). This month we will continue with Mr. Behle, along with the same disclosures: There could be some language which by current times may seem inappropriate. For clarity some words of Mr. Behle will be deleted as indicated by . . . Finally, we may use *italics* to add words to clarify something.

We do not know a lot about Mr. Behle, but we know that he was a second generation Fergusonite as he talks about his father being here before the Civil War and the fact that he was a life-long resident of Ferguson. We put his birth slightly prior of the start of the 19th Century. He begins by telling a story of his father and the early railroad locomotives of that era.



“The train left St. Louis for St. Charles. The engineer (*of the train*) came by the match factory (*which wasn't there at the time but was there during 1972*) where It's an upgrade hill and sometimes could not make the grade. My father was plowing on the north side of the railroad track with his team of oxen when he seen the predicament the engineer was in – he unhooked his team of oxen from the plow and hooked them onto the engine and with the team of oxen he pulled them over the hump and the engineer took off for St. Charles and my father went back to his plowing”

Remember, the Ferguson family arrived in the Ferguson area in 1845. The Civil War began in 1860 – 15 years later. 1848 saw significant European emigration to America. Mr. Behle goes on, “. . .about that time my father and Uncle Henry Bailey came from Germany, and they got acquainted with Mr. Ferguson and they rented the ground. . . They cleared some of the land and raised farm crops on it. They were well established when the Civil War broke out and all the men had to serve in the army. Mr. Ferguson and Mr. Bailey were family-men but

my father served as a single man and during the war Mrs. Henry Bailey lived in Mr. Ferguson's house which he had built for himself on Clay Avenue. She was the only living soul in Ferguson with her children during the Civil War. Her older son, Charlie, was the first white baby born in Ferguson. If there was any other babies before that, they were Indians. *We cannot verify that these final statements are true – it is not probable that in the 1860's there was only one person here - but it is a good story.*

“One tragedy that happened was in 1894 (*year of Ferguson's official birth*) when the business district burned to the ground. They had a lumber yard, harness shop, tailor shop, butcher shop, grocery store – both sides of the street on Church and Florissant Road burned to the ground.” *Buildings at this time were mainly wood constructed. This gave way to many of the present brick buildings we see along Florissant Road.*

Mr. Behle goes on to say “One thing that was very important that I would like to mention, they had a plank road built from Florissant to St. Louis. They cut big heavy timber and laid them crossways across the road for miles. Under the Wabash Bridge was a toll collector and everybody that went beyond the bridge either way had to pay 25-cents to maintain the board roads . . .” *The Ferguson before 1900 was a very different place from after. The years of “Mr. Ferguson” were pioneer years. After 1900 Ferguson begins to look like the 20th Century city we all can recognize. Also, the bridge that Mr. Behle mentions is not the railroad overpass over the current Florissant.*



Finally, Mr. Behle gives a good description of the Ferguson railroad station: I know a lot of people in Ferguson now will remember a huge water tank that



was standing north of the station. The Wabash Railroad build a large tank there no doubt 14 to 16 feet in diameter, but the tank didn't mean anything if they didn't have no water so the railroad company bought the January Lake from Mr. January and laid an underground pipeline from the lake into this tank. The tank was about the same level that the pond was so they had a tank full of water at all times. All the steam engines that

came from St. Louis going west would stop there and get their supply of water enough to go all the way to Kansas City if they wanted to. . . (*steam engines required wood or coal to heat the boiler – the boiler needed water to create the steam necessary to move the train*) This all happened during that time and we

must all realize at that time the whole county belonged to the City of St. Louis. St. Louis was not interested in the county and was no help to the county. In 1876 the city separated from the county and let the county high and dry, had no courthouse, had no officers nor anything else. I was told that a saloon man on Olive Street Road collected the taxes and that is where they held their first meeting to organize the county.” *That certainly gives an historic view of the city-county split that is so much a current concern – only the other way around.*

In next month’s article, we will take a look at another early resident, with a focus on the Christmas holiday celebrations in turn of the century Ferguson.

These Stories come from documents in the Ferguson Historical Society archives. Mr. Behle’s comments were recorded in ”History of Ferguson compiled by Ferguson-Florissant School District – 1975”

Membership in the Ferguson Historical Society is open to anyone – the price is \$20.00 to \$50.00 a year. If you are interested in joining or have any suggestions, questions, or items to donate to the Ferguson Historical Society, please contact Jerry Benner at fjbenner@mindspring.com. You are also welcome to visit the History Museum at 1064 Smith (behind the Community Center) by e-mailing the above address. Note: we will need to schedule a date for you, so ask well in advance.

“The Ferguson Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the history of Ferguson Missouri. Membership is open to all sharing our interest.”