

THE HOOSIER PACKET - NOVEMBER 2015

OLIVER FRANKLIN BENNETT

From CANAL COMMENTS #65

By Terry K. Woods

William J. Bennett was a local photographer during the first few decades of the last century. He lived in Navarre, Ohio, and a great many of his photographs were views of the Ohio Canal taken in and around his home town. The Navarre Historical Society and the Massillon Museum both have fine collections of Bennett photos.

In 1934, William wrote a series of four articles for the *Massillon Independent*. The subject was Navarre and the Bennett family. The histories of both, and that of the Ohio Canal, are closely intertwined.

William's Grandfather, Oliver Franklin Bennett, was born on the Isle of Man (England) in 1807. Sometime during Oliver's fourteenth year, he and two of his friends were fishing in a small boat off shore near their home. Anchored in the bay nearby was a British Man-of-War. Two sailors came rowing toward their ship and passed close to the three youngsters. The sailors offered to give the boys a 'sight-see' of their vessel if they wished. At first the three declined, but were soon talked into the adventure. No sooner were the three boys on board, however, when they were overpowered and locked away until the ship got under way. They had been "Impressed - Shanghaied" into the British Navy.

Navy life didn't appeal to Oliver nor his friends, but there had been no chance for them to get away until about a year after they were first "impressed." Then they found themselves off the coast of Canada near a small town not far from Quebec. The three boys arranged to gather up a few bits of their clothing and possessions and steal away in a small boat.

When they reached shore, they hid the boat and managed to get into town. There they found the proprietor of a small wagon shop, who was no friend of the British Navy, and when he heard the tale told by the three boys, agreed to hide them in an upper storage area of his establishment. When three Naval Officers arrived hunting for the boys, the Wagon Shop Master led the officers astray by saying he had noticed them as they had left the town headed west.

With the assistance of their benefactor, the three boys were eventually apprenticed to a local shipyard. Oliver Bennett spent the next three years "learning a trade" and

gathering together a small nest egg. Finally, by the spring of 1830, Oliver had grown to full manhood and decided he had sufficient funds to strike out on his own.

He really didn't believe he had enough money to go back to England, however. Also, he had noticed how many men from his old home country were coming to the New World to "better" themselves. Therefore, he decided to also cast his lot here in this part of the world.

He had heard there were great opportunities in Cleveland, in the United States at the junction of Lake Erie and the Ohio Canal. He bid farewell to his two old friends and set off on his own with just a few clothes and carpenter's tools to call his own.

After a few prosperous years in Cleveland, Oliver decided to see a bit more of this new country. He thought he would travel through the southern states and maybe end up in New Orleans.

He boarded a canal boat at Cleveland in the summer of 1833, bound for a small, relatively new settlement on the banks of the canal - Massillon, Ohio. As soon as he arrived there he headed for the closest hotel to the docks, Nave's Hotel, just west of the canal on the south side of Main Street. Oliver originally planned to look around the town for a few days then catch another boat that was south-bound.

It seems, though, that the hotel's owner had a daughter, Sarah. Oliver's stay in Massillon lengthened. He soon had local employment as a carpenter and began courting Sarah Nave. They were married in the summer of 1834.

The young couple decided they wanted a place of their own. The founder of Massillon, James Duncan, had just initiated another new town and his wife named it Navarre. It was located along the canal, about five miles south of Massillon on a quarter mile strip of land between the villages of Rochester and Bethlehem. A new town meant new buildings would be going up and there would be an urgent need for good builders and carpenters.

Oliver and Sarah rented a small log house on the corner of present Market and 2nd Streets in Bethlehem. It was, reportedly, the first building erected in that village and dated from 1806 or 1807. Oliver found instant employment as Duncan's Mill, a grain warehouse, and many store rooms and private residences were being built during that year (1834) in Navarre and the two surrounding towns.

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A son, Henry R. Bennett, was born to the young couple on October 19, 1836. The elder Bennett prospered and began his own business. He also became known locally as something of a mechanical genius. In 1836, when Navarre's St. Clements Catholic Church wished to add a large bell in a new steeple atop the church's structure, it was Bennett who designed and constructed the apparatus and scaffolding that allowed the bell to be raised from the ground and placed securely into its new enclosure.

About the year 1840, Bennett invented and built, for the first time in the area, a mechanical device for threshing wheat. He called it a "Kracker" and it was considered a very good machine in those days when nothing but manual labor was available to separate the grain from the chaff. Local farmers looked upon it with great favor and as a wonderful device. This was a full eight years prior to Cornelius Aultman and three partners near Greentown beginning the manufacture of a superior improvement to the Hussey patent. Aultman's company expanded and moved into a new, larger facility in 1853 along the newly opened railroad in Canton between Pittsburgh and Chicago. Russell & Company of Massillon also soon began building threshers and related farm machinery on the banks of the Ohio Canal above Lock No. 5.

In the meantime, Oliver Bennett built a new home and grocery storeroom on the east side of the canal just above the lock between the regulating channel and Navarre's Main Street where he catered to the needs of town's people and boatmen, alike. He built a large grape arbor over a porch connected with his store room that crossed over the regulating channel. He planted and trained what eventually became an immense grape vine growing over the arbor, thus providing shade and ornamentation. He built benches between the large trees lining the hillside along the channel to provide resting places and added other interesting nooks to please the eye.

At that time (the 1840s) boats were quite numerous on the canal, passing through the lock almost continuously day and night. A spring of fresh water flowed from a hillside on the heelpath side of the canal about a hundred yards below the lock. Many boatmen would fill their water barrels here, while their craft was "locking through." It was a bit of a hike with a heavy barrel, though, or many trips with smaller containers, up a bank then across a narrow wooden walkway over the regulating channel.

Bennett soon saw that an improvement could be made. He designed and constructed an iron turbine in a

wooden enclosure and placed it in the tumble at the lower end of the regulating channel. The fall of the water here, turned the turbine which pumped water from the spring through lead piping into a trough at the south end of Bennett's storeroom some ten or twelve feet above the lock where boatmen could easily fill their water barrels.

This spot became sort of a summer resort and daily resting point for this section of the county. Hundreds of people, in addition to boatmen, visited this relaxing bower from time to time over the years.

During the spring of 1854, at the opening of navigation upon the canal, some problem developed with the fitting between the upper gates of the lock and the mud sill there. No boats could pass and they became backed up for nearly a mile in either direction.

Oliver Bennett had been feeling somewhat poorly at the time, but finally agreed to go down into the cold water with his tools and see what he could do to alleviate the problem. After nearly two days of arduous labor he was able to correct the situation, send the canal freighters and line boats on their way and break the traffic jam. Unfortunately, the intense physical effort and cold, wet conditions Oliver had been exposed to resulted in his catching a severe cold. It rapidly developed into pneumonia from which he died April 14, 1854, at the relatively young age of 47.

Oliver's son, Henry, eventually owned a grain warehouse and several canal boats, whose home port was Navarre, during his lifetime, but his son, William died childless.

A large sign in Navarre across from the Nickel's Bakery marks the site of Oliver Bennett's Grocery aside the Ohio Canal. The sign reads:

WILLIAM LOREN BENNETT PHOTOGRAPHER

Site of the Oliver F. Bennett home and grocery. Bennett's grandson, William, an early Navarre photographer, would take many photographs of Navarre and the Ohio & Erie Canal.

Location: South side of East Canal St. at Donut section of Nickles Bakery erected with Lock 6 sign.

OHIO & ERIE CANAL LOCK #6

John Quincy Adams would pass through the lock in November, 1843 on the packet boat Rob Roy.

Location: East Canal St. on South side by donut area of Nickles.