



VOL. 15 NO. 6

P.O. BOX 40087 FORT WAYNE, IN 46804

JUNE 2001

BUTTERMILK BABE



Rachel Henton, the daughter of Elem Henton and the grandmother of Cole Porter, has been recently identified as the young, attractive, and personable girl who passed out cold buttermilk at Lock #20, better known as the Buttermilk Lock, in Peru, Indiana.

Photo of a painting courtesy of the Miami County Museum and Kreig Adkins.

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Buttermilk Mystery Solved

By Carolyn Schmidt

The Canal Society of Indiana (CSI) headquarters knew that one of the locks of the Wabash & Erie Canal east of Peru was called the Buttermilk lock. This fact was related in Paul Fatout's book **Indiana Canals**. In it he states,

"Cheap whiskey was a popular refreshment, but also in favor was the mild draft of cold buttermilk on tap at Buttermilk Lock east of Peru."

This is an unusual name for a lock. The

May 4, 1925

canal engineers and the state of Indiana had established a numbering system which began at the Indiana/Ohio state line with Lock #1 and continued on to Evansville. However, most locks were known by the canal boatmen for the lock tender who operated the lock or for the town in which the lock was located. Buttermilk Lock was known for the fresh buttermilk they could get to drink at the site. But, who provided the buttermilk?

Miami County Historian and CSI Board Member, Kreig Adkins of Peru, recently sent a copy of a correspondence from Judge Hal Phelps written in 1925, which answers our question. The letter was recently found in the Miami County Museum Manuscript Collection by volunteer Betty Wilson. It is published here as written courtesy of the Miami County Museum, which also provided us with a picture of Rachel Henton.

Kreig gives us the following information to clarify who the people were that are mentioned in the letter. He says that Judge Hal C. Phelps was the founder of the Miami County Historical Society. He notes that Henry Moss was a very much respected black man in Peru. He also remembers visiting the store in Peru that Moses Falks opened after closing his trading post. It was in business for 130 years.

Although this letter is poorly written for a man who was a judge, Hal Phelps probably jotted down what he had just learned from his conversation with Barney Baer and Henry Moss and sent it to the museum so the reminiscences would not be lost. Kreig says he did this type of thing often in hopes of saving Peru's history.

I just came from the shop of Barney Baer, in the shop was Her Moss, a colored man and a bright man and a gentleman and he will be 70 years old his next birthday and Barney Baer is 66 years old and they got talking about the old times and they related and discussed the following stories.

Soloman Oppenheimer was a Jew and during the construction of the canal he carried his pack on his back and traded with the Indian (sic) and the whites. And about where is now located Lepolds Crossing east of Peru which in the canal days was called the Buttermilk lock he was way-layed by parties and robbed and he had a dog named Guyer and the dog located him under a brush pile with dirt first thrown over him and the dog dug him out. He regained his conscience but lost his hearing completely. He was later a lock smith and a gun smith in Peru, Indiana. He was also a brother of Moses Oppenheimer that owned the Woolen Mills in Peru, Indiana.

I asked these two men how the lock got the name of Buttermilk lock, and they told the story that in an early day one Elem Henton lived near the lock and he had a daughter by the name of Rachel that was a fine looking industrious girl and that she supplied the packets as they passed with buttermilk and the milk was so fine and the girl so pleasing and pretty in her manners that the canal folks called it Buttermilk Lock. Later Rachel Henton married J. Omer Cole, Sr. Her husband the said J. O. Cole of Peru, Indiana, at his death at the age of 94 had become the 2nd richest man in Indiana.

Barney Baer related the following story. He said that he road (sic) on the last canal boat that traveled the Erie Canal in the neighborhood of Peru, Indiana in about 1875. The name of the boat was Alace (Alice?) Stern and that she made the trip to about a mile and a half west of Lewisburg, pulled by mules. The excursion was run to that point for dedication purpose for the brick church that stood near the canal. He said that this boat was built for a freighter. That on the boat was the brass band the pride of the Peru citizens and in the boat was a bar and that they had a jolly time and that this was the last trip made so far by any packet on the canal. A short time later the banks of the canal was out and the canal was out of use. The supposition is that the Wabash Railroad had much to do with the cutting of the banks of the canal so as the shippers would ship over the railroad instead of the canal.

Barney Baer said that his father came from the old country in 1846 and that he walked from Cinn., Ohio to Moses Falks Trading Post near Peoria, Butler Twp., Miami Co., Ind., and that they were friends in the old country and the he then worked for Moses Falk. That Moses Falk started the Trading Post at said place in about 1844.

Sincerely, Hal. C. Phelps May 5, 1925, Peru, Indiana

This letter gives us the name extremely wealthy. Elem Henton who lived near the lock known as the Buttermilk Lock. Could he have been the lock tender? It says his daughter Rachel Henton married J. Omer Cole, Sr. of Peru, who became

From research done for "Passage Thru Peru" tour in March of 2000 we find that J. Omer Cole made his fortune in California during the

gold rush. He was in the mercantile business, sold water rights and speculated in West Virginia coal and lumber. He returned to Peru in 1867. He owned a brewery in Peru. Those canallers that attended the above mentioned tour will remember seeing the building which once housed J. O. Cole's Peru Brewery and now bottles mineral water under the name of Cole Bros. Natural Spring Mineral Water that is distributed by Coca-Cola.

J. O. Cole and his wife had a daughter named Kate who married Samuel Porter, a Peru druggist. Kate and Samuel had a son they named Cole after her maiden name. Therefore, the letter proves that the attractive girl with the pleasing personality who passed out buttermilk at the lock was the grandmother of Cole Porter, one of America's most accomplished song writers and lyricists of the 20th century.

Cole Porter wrote scores for Broadway musical comedies: *Paris* (1928), *Anything Goes* (1934), *Kiss Me Kate* (1949), *Can-Can* (1953) and scored several films. His more famous songs are "Begin The Beguine," "I've Got You Under My Skin," "Night and Day," and "What Is This Thing Called Love."

When asked if he knew of any pictures of Rachel Henton, Kreig replied that he thought he had seen one while producing his video on Peru's history "On The Banks of the Wabash: The History of Peru Indiana." He asked the Miami County Museum to locate it for him. They found not one but two very large pictures in storage that were donated to the museum a few years ago when the Cole House Bed and Breakfast went out of business. He had one photo reduced and sent it by E-mail to CSI headquarters for use in this article.

This letter also gives the location of the Buttermilk Lock saying it was at Lepold's Crossing. Today

we know that the Buttermilk Lock was located at the end of Benton Street by the feeder dam on the Wabash River in Peru and was Lock #20. According to the 1847 Chief Engineer's Report Lock. No 20 had a six foot lift, was built of cut stone, the stone came from the same quarry as that used by other nearby locks. (Salamonia Quarry was given in Lock #14 description in the report.) The upper courses of one wall for 2 or 3 feet in height were much dilapidated and partly removed. They needed repairing during the ensuing winter. The gates were estimated to last 2 years.

You will note that in his letter Phelps calls the canal the Erie Canal instead of the Wabash & Erie Canal. This practice is common among Hoosiers but leads to confusion with the Erie Canal of New York. The Wabash & Erie Canal was so named because it was originally intended to connect Lake Erie with the Wabash River. It did not connect to New York's Erie Canal unless one notes that New York's canal also connected to Lake Erie and canal shipments could be freighted across the lake and then put onto a canal boat on the other canal. Canal boats were not built for lake or river travel.

We learn the name of another canal boat of which we had no information - the Alace Stern. Phelps refers to it as the last packet to go so far on the canal but says it was built as a freighter. Packets, packet boats, or passenger boats carried passengers and packets of mail. Freight boats carried freight. State boats were used for maintenance. Phelps probably called it a packet because on this last journey its cargo was passengers and a brass band bound for a church dedication a mile and a half west of Lewisburg.

Phelps said this last boat trip was run in 1875. We usually give 1872 as the last date the canal was operational. However, short sections retained water years afterward and

were navigable. Kreig points out that this would also have been possible since the dam at Peru didn't wash out until 1876. We already have information stating the David Watkins carried wheat on the canal from Lagro to Wabash in 1875.

The robbery of Solomon Oppenheimer was also something new that we learned. Although robbery of canal passengers occurred from time to time since they carried their valuables with them when they moved by canal boat, this robbery happened before the canal was completed. The Native Americans were often given whiskey and robbed of their government payments by the whites at that time, but little is heard of others being robbed. Apparently Solomon was thought to be dead by the man who robbed him and buried him alive. Solomon would have died if not for his dog digging him out of the dirt.

Solving history's mysteries is a lot of fun. Take time to go to your local library or historical society to see what you can unearth and become a canal sleuth. Putting names and faces to sites and places brings history alive. A big Hip Hip Hooray to Kreig Adkins and the Miami County Museum for identifying the Buttermilk Babe.



OOPS!

Please note that the area codes given for the motels for the "Towpath Tacks Tour" Sept. 21-23, 2001 have been changed.

Lee's Inn (765) 966-6559
Motel Six (765) 966-6682

The (317) numbers were unfortunately copied from an old brochure when the tour was announced. We are sorry for any inconvenience you may have encountered when reserving rooms.