

The Museum Newsletter

Since 2015

Volume 8, Issue 4

THE CHAIR'S REPORT



Jack Pollitt, Chairman
Canton Area Heritage Center
Executive Board
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The last report submitted had reference to four summer playground programs that operated Monday through Friday afternoons. I spent each afternoon there, but I remember that when the 4 o'clock whistle (later changed to 3:30) blew, I was to start home for supper. The I.H. whistle was important to many people and even today it brings up memories as well as inquiries.

Last week I received a call from an AP reporter wanting to review the whistle being shut down years ago by the EPA as noise pollution. He wanted to interview me and photograph the whistle in its new home atop the Cook Polymer Building, in his effort to prepare an article for presentation nationally by the Associated Press.

The whistle is down currently, as it needs repairs to its steam source. The downtime fit in with the reporter's completing work on another story, so we'll meet later. In the meantime, I'll reminisce about the EPA shutdown. We were advised that the complaint that led to the EPA action was caused by a single

telephone call from a person who lived near the plant...talk about a knee-jerk action without investigation! A local man who was active in county and city politics was able to obtain approximately 10,000 signatures, complaining of the shutdown in just a matter of hours.

Other support world-wide appeared, positively supporting the I.H. whistle. We received a call from our Geelong plant in Australia advising Canton had “made the news” there in print as well as on the radio. An article appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* poking fun at the EPA as well as reporting the importance of the whistle to the community. (While I did not confirm it, I was told news appeared in London papers.)

After the shutdown, local plant management performed an interesting test. The northwest corner of the plant which housed the tool room had a crawl space under the floor, prompting dampness at certain times of the summer and fall. The sidewalk outside with a few parking places attracted many, many crickets...thick enough that one would avoid the slippery walk. The Assistant Plant Engineer used a sound meter to test their "singing." At the same time, he went a few blocks south of the plant and registered the sound of the whistle at noon. Mother Nature won...the crickets were louder!

Corporate Office soon called and told us to do what was necessary to get the whistle running again.

Barbara and Beverly Bertrand were twin sisters and graduates of CHS in 1950. Barbara Bertrand Vires wrote a poem a few years after the whistle ceased blowing. It is reprinted on the enclosed page. -- **Jack Pollitt**

MEET GEORGE MILLS MAJOR DONOR

Editor's Note. George H. Mills has been one of our consistent donors at the Founder's Level. I asked him to tell us about himself, and below are highpoints of his life and career. He's giving back to his hometown, and we thank him.

George, only child of Jack and Laurine Mills, was born and raised in Canton. He graduated in the Class of 1957 at Canton Senior High School and the University of Illinois with an Architectural Engineering degree in 1963. He mentioned "his first real job" was working for Phillips Associates, Architects, and with William, the current firm principal, during summer breaks.

He married Crystal while serving in the Air Force. His college roommate, John Rettenmayer, had arranged a blind date for them to the 1964 Rose Bowl game when no. 4-ranked Illinois beat the U. of Washington, 17-7. Bases Mills served included Aviano Air Base, Italy, and Wiesbaden Air Base, Germany, until 1969.

He began his career in Houston, TX, on projects for the Texas A&M University System and the Corps of Engineers.

After moving to Fair Oaks, CA, in 1979, Mills worked at several architectural firms. Projects included the Sacramento Convention Center and the Historic Main Post Office. In the mid-'90s, George started his own consulting business doing technical writing for companies making construction products.

George designed their retirement “Dream Home” and moved in 2001 to Blaine, WA, a coastal town in northwest Washington state. Still later, the couple moved to a condo in Bellingham, WA, when his wife needed more specialized medical services. Sadly, Crystal died in 2018. George continues to live there enjoying life in the Pacific Northwest.

October-November-December 2025

Special points of interest

- BICENTENNIAL PHOTOS ON FACEBOOK, [Canton Illinois Bicentennial 2025](#)
- BUS TOUR TO RETURN IN FALL
- CONTACT MUSEUM,
PHONE (309) 647-2242 OR
EMAIL CAHCPO19@ATT.NET
- **ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DRIVE**
BEGINS FOR 2026 -- SEE FORM
ENCLOSED AND JOIN US.

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Our hours are
Fridays, 10am-12 noon
Saturdays, 10am-2pm
Sundays, 1pm-3pm
Come see us!

The Museum Newsletter

Editor's Note. An archaeologist, Nick Hanson, who was raised in Smithfield, visited the museum earlier this year. He offered his help to research and write descriptions of artifacts or historical events of the area. When I asked him what pieces of area history we were missing, he replied, "Forgottonia." And, he quickly volunteered to research and write about the famous name (and phenomenon) brought to national attention by a group of WIU students. I didn't know that **Forgottonia** encompassed 16 counties in Western Illinois. Did you? We'll soon have a graphic of the Forgottonia area at the museum. Here is Nick's narrative, with our thanks!

Remembering Forgottonia

Forgottonia is a term that many in the area have heard. Its popularity has risen in recent years, with the Forgottonia Brewery once open in Macomb, as well as *The Forgottonia Times* newspaper located in Bushnell. However, what is the name and what is the meaning behind it? Like many parts of Illinois history, it starts with Chicago.

Ever since its founding in 1837, Chicago has been the center of attention in Illinois. That attention has only grown over the decades as the expansion out west drew more people into the state. Beginning as a trading and fishing settlement with a population of 4,000, it grew into a hub of activity and by the 1900s grew to over 1.5 million residents and the center of politics in Illinois. Chicago grew larger both physically and politically every day. The state shifted its attention more and more towards the up and coming major city, which led to more state money as well. This meant the rest of the state was left with pennies by comparison.

Residents of western Illinois felt this lack of attention from the state, more so than others. In 1956, the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 was being founded. This act, put forth by President Eisenhower, would help fund the Interstate Highway System, which would allow for easier travel across state borders to larger population centers. With new funding, a Chicago-to-Kansas City interstate route was planned, which would bisect western Illinois, bringing with it vital infrastructure and business to an underdeveloped region. This route was denied. A proposal was submitted by Representatives to appeal the denial, along with suggesting multiple smaller state route alternatives. These were all subsequently denied in favor of routes that benefited Chicago and its suburbs. With

each denial, it became more apparent that western Illinois would be left in the shadow of Chicago.

All of it left a bad taste in the mouths of three men – Jack Horn, John Armstrong, and Neil Gamm. Together they formulated a plan to get public attention on how western Illinois has been "forgotten." Horn and Armstrong would handle the technical side while Gamm would be the front man.

The idea was this, "...we would secede from the Union, immediately declare war, surrender, then apply for foreign aid." This is from an interview done with Gamm in 2010 for the *McDonough Voice*. Gamm may have said this with some satire, but this publicity stunt would, in their hopes, get the attention of the local media and eventually the state. Horn, Armstrong, and Gamm put this idea into action and spread it to the surrounding counties. With this, a sovereign state was founded in 1971, and officially named, The Republic of Forgottonia.



Photo shows Neil Gamm posing next to newly erected "Forgottonia Freeway" sign

Once the Republic of Forgottonia was “officially” founded, news of what these 16 counties had done spread fast. Not only did news of this extend across the state, but the entire nation, too. Once word that a part of the United States had seceded hit the outlets, everyone wanted to know more. Soon, Gamm was at the forefront of it all, saying *“It was just supposed to be a local kind of deal, and it ended up going national.”* Soon, Gamm was leading tours through Fandon, a small town located southwest of Macomb, which was intended to be the new nation’s capitol. Other counties were capitalizing as well. The name “Forgottonia” was plastered onto everything from billboards to roads signs to barns. There was even a toll road set up in Bernadotte on its locally famous bridge.



Bernadotte Bridge in 1970

It was at this point that Gamm started to realize the situation that he was in. What started as a small, satirical movement grew into something much bigger. He suddenly became a voice for people's frustrations and complaints. The highlight of the nation’s short life was the reopening of an Amtrak train station in Macomb. The funding of passenger transportation to the area once again brought hope. This seemed to be the state taking recognition of the newly founded nation.

Unfortunately, this would be the nation's most significant accomplishment. Slowly the stunt petered out of the public interest.

It was in 1972 that the Republic of Forgottonia was disbanded with little more than a whisper.



Photo was taken by Bruce Morton

Forgottonia was more than the publicity stunt that it began as. People found a way to express their feelings towards a willingly oblivious government. This was an idea that people were actively behind, a chance to physically represent their feelings. The name represents the identity of a people that wanted change. Though movement behind the name has faded, it has grown into something else; a true sense of individuality.

With its origins many years past, the people of western Illinois still hold to that identity, embracing the idea and that is Forgottonia.



Bernadotte Bridge, 2014, pre-collapse

Nick Hanson, guest contributor

Preserving our history...

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We're on the Web:

www.cantonillinois.org/heritage-center

WE CELEBRATE OUR
10TH ANNIVERSARY
IN CANTON'S 200TH YEAR!

THANKS TO ALL WHO
HAVE SUPPORTED US.



UPCOMING EVENTS

OCTOBER 10, 2025, 8:30 AM – SPOON RIVER COLLEGE LIFELONG LEARNING CONFERENCE

Board members Cheryl Bielema and Jan Bruster will give a presentation on the 9 Sesquicentennial Farm Families honored during the Bicentennial. Sign up on the SRC website www.src.augusoft.net or by calling (309) 649-6260.

OCTOBER 25, 2025, 9:00 AM, 11:00 AM, or 1:00 PM – CANTON HISTORIC BUS TOURS

Back by popular demand! Join local historian and CAHC board member Harold Rose for a 60-minute tour of historic buildings and sites in Canton. Tours start and end at the Canton Area Heritage Center. Co-sponsor is Spoon River College. Tours sold out quickly during the Bicentennial and advance registration is required. Fee is \$10. Sign up on the SRC website www.src.augusoft.net or by calling (309) 649-6260.

NOVEMBER 13, 2025, 6:00 PM – CAHC ANNUAL MEETING

Annual reports, election and program. Location and more to follow. Save the date.

DECEMBER 6, 2025, 4:00-7:00 PM – MAIN STREET MERRY MINGLE

The Heritage Center museum will be a trolley stop during the Merry Mingle (formerly, Christmas Walk). We're busy planning a special event to make our stop not only educational but entertaining! More to follow.

MAJOR DONORS IN 2025

We want to recognize and thank these individuals, businesses and organizations for their support this year. We appreciate their confidence in our mission and programs as well as their generosity.

Benefactor Level-\$500+ and Founder Level-\$1000+

- Canton Area Chamber of Commerce -- webpage host
- City of Canton -- webpage host, hotel-motel tax and business development district grants
- Fulton County Board -- economic development grant for remodeling and promotion
- Graham Medical Group -- additional facility space, rent adjustment, materials for remodeling
- Helping Hands Resale Shoppe
- Brooks and Mary Ellen Carver
- Nancy Elson, in name of James Elson Law Office
- Mark and Julie Ludlum
- Robin Lynch
- George H. Mills
- Kathy Myers
- Roland Pettit
- Jack and Mary Pollitt
- Paul and Roberta Reber
- Robert E. Williams

RECENT MEMORIALS

Harold J. and Anna Mae Johnson Dare, Canton, IL, by Janice Dare Bruster and Henry Dare

Earl and Betty Grater; Raymond and Kathryn Bielema, Morrison, IL, by Ron and Cheryl Grater Bielema

Ralph Linn and Marian Gillette Paul by James, Ralph and Jeff Paul, and Kathy Luker; & **William Harry Luker**, owner of Luker Plumbing (1881-2005), by Mike (Kathy), Harry (Sandy) and Joel (Jolene) Luker

NEED A SPECIAL GIFT? CARDS, BOOKS, DVDs, CAPS & TEES AT THE MUSEUM



Local artist Mary Ellen Carver
notecards/postcards- @\$1 suggested
donation

Museum Caps-\$22; Tees-\$15

"Cemetery Walk Revisited"
DVDs-\$15 + postage

Books by local historians Brooks Carver, Roy Hopper,
Ed Lewis, Judge Albert Scott & Mike Walters-\$10-\$20

Email or see our webpage for more information.

