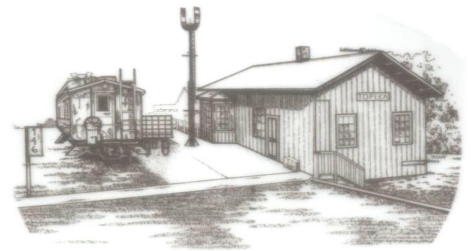




# Mile 146

April—June 2010



Volume 3

Topeka Area Historical Society

Number 2

## Who was Alma Blomkvist . . . . . . and How Did Her Trunk End Up in Topeka?

It's the kind of story you might watch on the PBS television show *History Detectives*. One day someone calls and says, "Hey, someone wants to bring us an old trunk that has a brass plate with Topeka, Indiana imprinted on it". Several days later the people arrive with the trunk and all of a sudden you are consumed with a million unanswered questions. And then the more you learn, the more intriguing it all becomes. It was time for our own Hawpatch History Detectives.

It all started with a phone call from Ezra Miller the president of the

### "Memorial Day Rites at Eden Cemetery"

Memorial Day will be observed at Eden Cemetery, Wednesday, May 30, at 10:00 a.m. The following program has been arranged:

March from the gate to the flagpole  
Singing of "America"  
Invocation  
The Gettysburg Address,  
Gary Stoltz  
Reading of the Honor Roll  
Remarks, Rev. Emery  
Firing Squad, LaGrange Post,  
American Legion  
Taps

Decoration of the Graves  
Mrs. Iva Henderson will be in-charge of flowers. All Scout organizations are invited to participate.

*The above article appeared on the front page, upper left hand corner of the Topeka Journal on May 28, 1956. I have tried to recreate it as it appeared in the Journal, complete with all the hyphens.*

*Notice that the "r" was left out of the word cemetery in the headline. Gary Stoltz was a sophomore at THS that year. And, "Rev. Emery" was Roy Emery who pastored the Topeka Baptist Church for many years.*

LaGrange County Historical Society who lives here in Topeka and is a member of the Topeka Area Historical Society. A couple from Munster, Indiana had called him and wanted to donate an old trunk belonging to a Alma Blomkvist to the county historical society. As they described the 100 year old trunk to Ezra he said, "That really belongs in Topeka".

And so it was that Patrick and Jackie Brennan made the drive to

Topeka on May 5<sup>th</sup> with their mysterious cargo. The 3 pm meeting at the Depot Museum was delayed because no one had thought about the one hour time difference between Munster and Topeka. However, a cell phone call quickly laid to rest any concerns. Once stowed inside the Depot the tale of the trunk began to unfold.

The trunk had belonged to a Dutch neighbor of the Brennans. How the neighbor came to possess it isn't clear. What is clear is that the neighbor wanted it out of her basement. It was either going into the trash or home with the Brennans. For Jackie, being a lover of antiques, there was no question about where Alma B's trunk was going. Jackie used it to store blankets and other things. Most recently it had been stored at their daughter's.

Jackie's daughter had done some online research. She found Alma in the 1910 Noble County census listed has a house servant. It wasn't much, but it was a start, along with the remnants of a steam ship label on the end of the trunk. The words are still legible: "S.S. Oscar \_\_" and "Skandinav.....line".

A quick search on Goggle proved helpful. The S.S. Oscar II was one of several steam ships in the Scandinavian America Line. It sailed from Copenhagen, Denmark on July 3, 1903 arriving in New York on July 13<sup>th</sup>. Unfortunately

*Continued on page 2*



Patrick & Jackie Brennan

### In This Issue

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- Col. Geo. W. Bain's letter to Andrew Carnegie
- Track Notes
- Grant Update
- Quiz

the passenger list is incomplete and Alma Blomkvist's name wasn't on it. We can only assume she was on the ship, clearly her trunk must have been.

Online 1910 census records answered some questions, but also raised a number of others. The brass plate on the trunk gives Alma's name as "Blomkvist", but the census records say "Blomquist". Immigrants frequently made spelling changes to their names, so that was not alarming. She was 34 years old and living in the home of 79 year old Jacob Strous. Also living at that residence were Theresa Goldsmith (48 yrs) and Mildred Goldsmith (20 yrs). Who was Jacob Strous? Was there a mistake on the census records? Was his name actually Jacob Straus? If so, it would be another link to the Jewish community of Ligonier, Indiana.



Jacob Straus

Jacob Straus built a magnificent home in Ligonier in 1899 and started the Citizens Bank on the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Calvin. In 1905, along with Andrew Carnegie, Straus helped finance the building of Topeka's Sycamore Hall by giving \$5,000. His brother Levi is famous for the blue jeans.

So, the more we learn the more intriguing the questions become. Did Alma actually work for the Straus family? Were they related? Did she perchance attend the dedication of the first Sycamore Hall on November 24, 1905 and get to meet Hoosier Poet James Whitcomb Riley? We simply don't know. And, whatever happened to Alma Blomkvist remains a mystery. But for now her trunk is home in Topeka where it belongs.

HG

*The following letter appeared on the front-page of the Topeka Journal. We have tried to reproduce it as it originally appeared.*

Letter from Col. Geo. W. Bain to Andrew Carnegie

Enroute, March 16, 1906

Mr. Andrew Carnegie:

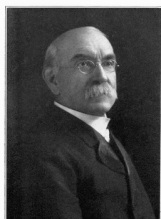
*My Dear Sir:* My life work has brought me in touch with many of your libraries and I hail your gifts for the enhancement of virtue and intelligence as among the greatest governing forces in individual and national life. For centuries your good name will live on in the memories of the just and a higher type of civilization will mark the world because you have lived.

A few days ago I lectured in the new hall at Topeka, Ind. I was never more impressed with a building of its cost. Surely brain, heart, and conscience went into material and work. I guessed the cost at almost doubled what was paid for it, and I learned this was due to Mr. Babcock having "stayed by the stuff" from beginning to end. I find the same conscientiousness marks the selection of talent for the platform and the growing excellence of the community shows the work of the society.

I congratulate you and Mr. Straus upon the wise investment at Topeka, and ask pardon for this intrusion that I may pay a simple tribute to your great work.

Very sincerely yours,

Geo. W. Bain  
Lexington, Ky.



George W. Bain.

- **Col. George W. Bain** was called the "Silver-Tongued Orator of Kentucky". He was a champion of prohibition. It is said that, "Bain loved Kentucky horses with the same passion he detested Kentucky Bourbon."

**Topeka**  
**Lecture Course**  
Under the Auspices of the Sycamore Literary Society

**Geo. Compton Concert Co.**

December 5

**Elbert Hubbard**

December 27

**Whitney Brothers**

January 8

**George W. Bain**

March 8

**Durno Company**

March 27

At least 360 tickets must be  
sold to insure the course

*The Topeka Journal, Thursday, October 19, 1905*

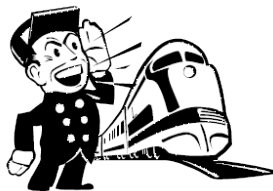
It's interesting to note that no prices or ticket ordering information was given. One can only assume everyone knew where to get tickets and how much they cost.

# Track Notes:



## Schedule of Events:

- *May 18, 2010*  
Bi-monthly meeting of the Topeka Historical Society  
Program: *Intro to the Horse Progress Show*  
*To be held in Topeka in July 2010*
- *June 15, 210*  
**TAHS Board Meeting 9:30 am**
- *July 20, 2010*  
**Picnic / Show & Tell, 6:30 pm**  
To be held at the Depot Museum  
Bring: A dish to share  
Your own table service  
A lawn chair/blanket  
Something from the past to show & tell



**“Get on Board”**

T.A.H.S. membership is only \$10.00 a year

- Receive the quarterly newsletter
- Help us provide newsletters to 3rd Graders

## *Matching Grant Update*

As you know, an anonymous benefactor has pledged to match dollar for dollar every dollar we can raise up to \$25,000. The purpose is to establish a sustainability endowment fund. To date we have raised \$4,527.00

This challenge grant will continue until November 1st. It would be a shame to leave even one dollar unclaimed. Please consider sending a generous tax deductible gift to help us reach our goal.

The Topeka Area Historical Society is a not-for-profit corporation with 501-c-3 status.

## TAHS Quiz

1. Who gave The Gettysburg Address at the 1956 Memorial Day observance?
2. What was Col. George W. Bain called?
3. How many tickets needed to be sold to insure the 1905-06 lecture course?
4. Who donated Alma Blomkvist's trunk to the historical society?
5. Who was described as “an original and versatile thinker”?



Monday morning, May 10th, Topeka's three 3rd Grade classes toured the Depot Museum. Third graders study local history and receive a copy of the TAHS quarterly newsletter. A highlight of the annual field trip always seems to be climbing into the caboose.



Answers: 1) Gary Stoltz; 2) The Silver-Tongued Orator of Kentucky; 3) 360; 4) Patrick & Jackie Brennan; 5) R.L. Thompson

## Topeka Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 33  
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[www.topekahistoricalociety.com](http://www.topekahistoricalociety.com)

### 2010 Board of Directors

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### Museum Curator

Susie Parker



# Topeka's Cultural Heritage

Few people today know that in the late 1800s and early 1900s Topeka was a cultural and literary center. There are plenty of fond memories of Sycamore Hall, but very few recollections of the group that worked so hard to build both buildings that were home to the Sycamore Literary Society. However, the letter Col. George W. Bain wrote Andrew Carnegie and the 1905 ad in the Topeka Journal (page 2) give us a glimpse into what went on.

Following the Civil War in 1865, the people of Hawpatch weren't to be left behind in what Mark Twain called The Gilded Age (1865-1900). The Gilded Age is most famous for the creation of a modern industrial economy. A national transportation and communication network began to take form and

corporations began to dominate the world of finance. By the beginning of the 20th century, per capita income and industrial production in the U.S. led the world.

All this generated indescribable wealth for the industrialists like Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Flagler, and J.P. Morgan. Labeled as "robber barons" for their opulent lifestyle, America's new super-rich established a pattern of philanthropy that financed the building of colleges, hospitals, libraries, museums and opera houses. Sycamore Hall was built with some of that money.

In Hawpatch, the Star Literary Society formed to sponsor debates

and lectures. In 1878, they obtained a charter and began to expand. At some point Jaynes Norman Babcock moved to the community from Ohio to teach in the Gerber School, one mile west of town, where literary society meetings were held. Babcock's involvement would prove to be critical in the society's development. Around 1879, the county superintendent of schools, S.D. Crane, prohibited the literary society's use of the school. With Babcock's help the group purchased Maple Grove's old building, moving it a mile north of town to donated land at what was called Sycamore Corners. That move prompted a name change to the "Sycamore Literary Society".

Countless news items appeared in the Topeka Journal on the literary society's activities. Debates were a regular item. One such debate appears in the March 6, 1906 edition. T.H.S. students, Maude M. Miller and Audrey Dowell for the Affirmative and Irma Vaughan and Dena Babcock for the Negative, argued the question: "**Resolved, That women should not enter the professions.**" The Journal reported that following a lively debate the victory went to the Affirmative and it was concluded that "a woman's place really is the home."

The same news item boasts of one of Topeka's own, "The growing popularity of Mr. R.L Thompson's "talks" was shown by the interest which the audience manifested in his talks on "History"...a forceful and optimistic discourse upon the promise which the future holds out for improvement in national, municipal and civic conditions. Mr. Thompson is an original and versatile thinker."

Let it never be said that the early settlers of Topeka were culturally backward. If anything, we have a lot of catching up to do.



**SIXTH ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT**  
Of the  
**TOPEKA HIGH SCHOOL.**  
To be held in the  
**Sycamore Hall,**  
Friday Eve.  
**APRIL 4, '02**  
**PROGRAM.**

Soldiers of Fortune, March,	L. V. Gustin
Invocation,	Rev. Belt
Overture, Welcome,	E. N. Catlin
Orchestra.	
Utopia,	Dena Babcock
Character,	Piebe Harshburger
Buds, Blossoms, Fruits,	Minnie Miller
Concert Waltz, Amorita,	J. A. LeBarge
Orchestra.	
American Expansion,	Clyde Brant
Class Prophecy,	Edith Fought
For Life, not for School, we learn,	Forrest Ritter
Isis, Intermezzo,	Theo. Morse
Orchestra.	
Dreams and Dreamers,	Frances Jones
Anti Expansion,	John Eamert
On the Threshold,	Grace Plank
Presentation of Diplomas,	Prof. H. D. Miller
Loop the Loop,	Jean Swartz
Orchestra.	
Benediction,	Rev. Belt

Baccalaureate Sermon by Rev. Hobart at the F. B. Church, Sunday evening, March 30 at 7:30.  
Admission 15. Tickets on sale at teacher's drug store.

Visit Us Online: [www.topekahistoricalociety.com](http://www.topekahistoricalociety.com)



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