



## Mile 146

Fall - 2018



Volume 11

Topeka Area Historical Society

Number 4

### “Elmer’s Flour Mill Goes up In Flames!”

It was a wintery Thursday morning, January 13, 1916, when one can only imagine the pandemonium that broke out in the offices of the Topeka Journal. The Topeka Journal’s printing press should have been cranking out the weekly edition of the town’s newspaper which was published on Thursdays. At 9:30 that morning a fire broke out that destroyed the Topeka Milling Company. The fire would serve as a call-to-arms for the residents of Hawpatch, and in less than two weeks the community would officially organize a fire department.

It’s amazing that, in an era when type had to be hand-set, the story appeared in the center of the front page of that January 13<sup>th</sup> issue of the Topeka Journal. We don’t know how close they were to being ready to print the paper that morning, but you can envision C. W. Mattingly, the editor and publisher, feverously writing the copy and scrambling to set the type and still got the paper out on time.

Equally amazing is that someone was able to take photographs of the burning structure. Who actually took the photos is not known, but sometime later the photos were made into postcards, one with the date inscribed across the bottom. The smaller photo came from the collection of Joe Conrad, Elmer Wisman’s grandson. Conrad also shared several other photos.

Fortunately, that edition of the paper was preserved on microfilm. The story details how the Topeka Grist Mill owned by M. E. (Milton Elmer)



THURSDAY, JAN 13, 1916

#### TOPEKA SUFFERS ANOTHER FIRE.

M. E. WISMAN GRIST MILL TOTALLY DESTROYED THIS MORNING

The Topeka Grist Mill owned by M. E. Wisman was completely destroyed by fire at 9:30 o'clock this morning. The fire fighters who responded to the alarm could have saved the building had they been able to get anything to fight fire with. It seems as though the people of Topeka have had their sad lesson and all should demand that we are given fire protection as soon as possible.

The water work plant in its progress of completion has come along nicely and is completed all but a few necessary fixtures. If it could have been used this terrible loss could have been averted.

The exact origin of the fire has not been learned, but it is supposed it was started by a hot boxing.

Wisman was a total loss primarily because the men who showed up to fight the fire had nothing to fight it with. The story was accompanied with a passionate plea for the people of Topeka to “demand that we are given fire protection as soon as possible”. It

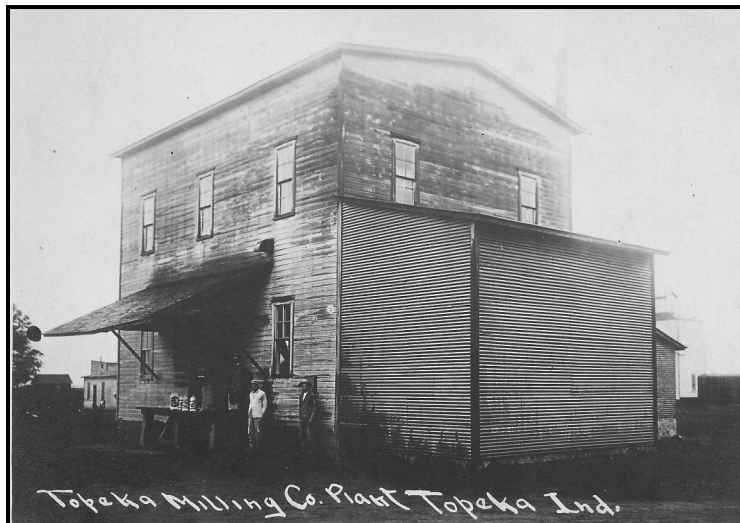
was also noted that the new “water work plant” was nearly completed and that, “If it could have been used the terrible loss could have been averted.”

Mattingly’s call-to-arms had its desired affect because on the front page of the January 27<sup>th</sup> edition of the paper was a story with a headline reading: “A Fire Department Organized”. The organizational meeting took place on Monday evening the 24<sup>th</sup>, when 40 people met in the office of A.W. Ritter. By the end of the evening, officers had been elected with Iris Stage as Fire Chief, and the other volunteers organized into two companies, one for the north side of town and

#### In this Issue

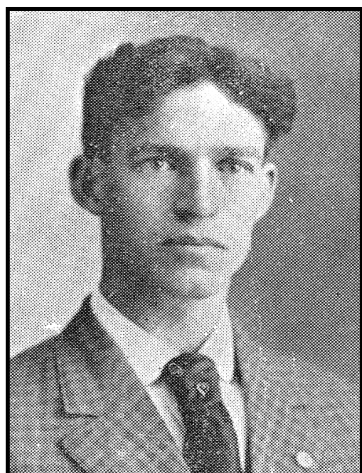
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the other for the south. The newspaper article did not report what they chose as the dividing line. It possibly could have been what is now Lake Street or it might have been the railroad tracks.

Joe Conrad recently shared the following information about his maternal grandfather: "Milton Elmer Wisman (b. 3/19/1877 d. 11/28/1965), my maternal grandfather was born in Williams County, Ohio, to Wil-



**Milton Elmer Wisman**

taken around 1908

liam Wisman and Mary Lawson, the last of 11 children. William was a cabinet maker by trade and Elmer learned this family trade. When Elmer was 3 his father became ill and he went to live with his older sister Emma. Emma was married to Frank Hawke. Frank Hawke trained as a miller in Cleveland, Ohio, and then owned and operated a very successful mill in Edon, Ohio, at the turn of the century. They produced a popu-

lar product branded as "Big Chief" flour. His biggest market was in Angola IN, and nearby towns. Milton Elmer worked as a millwright for Franke Hawke and as he became of age they expanded their operation by opening a mill in Angola (circa 1908). I have a number of pictures and marketing brochures of that mill. The Angola mill also burned, but I am uncertain of the timing of that event.

"My mother told me that about the time that she was born (1911) the folks living in Topeka, knowing her father to be an honest and fair man came to him asking him to open a mill in Topeka. She always emphasized that this was considered a great honor of trust as Elmer was not Amish. Tax records indicate that Milton Elmer

and his wife Effie Mae Bennett Wisman in 1914 owned property in Topeka. I feel certain that the Topeka mill had been built and Elmer was serving as its miller by that date."



The fire totally destroyed Wisman's Topeka mill with an estimated loss of \$10,000. Conrad says that, "He never did much of that kind of work again, falling on hard times. My mother spoke of his suffering from injuries as a result of a fall in the mill. Perhaps that occurred during the fire?"

Perhaps in an effort to help Wisman secure financing for a new mill in Orland, Indiana, leading members of the Topeka community signed the following glowing letter of recommendation typed on Seagly Bros. letterhead and dated March 11, 1916. The letter was signed by such notable people as J.J. Yoder, R. L. Thompson, R.F. Miller, Ben Leming, and D.E. Greenawalt.

#### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

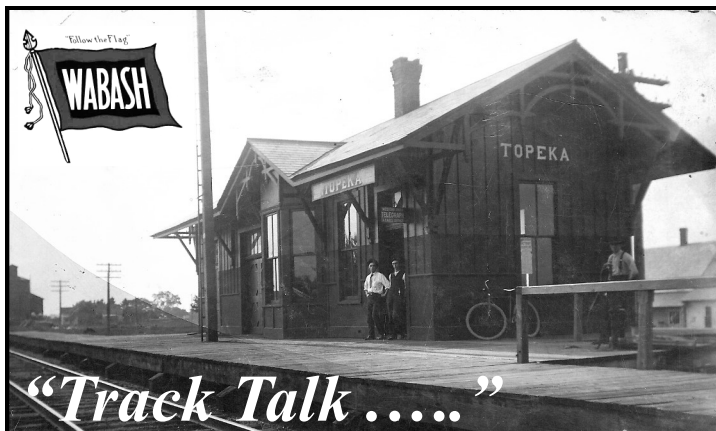
*We, the undersigned, have been personally acquainted with Mr. M. E. Wisman for a little over two years and have found him to be very efficient as a miller, to be a total abstainer from strong drinks, to be strictly honest and to be a man who is capable of handling all branches of a milling business.*

Joe Conrad says that Wisman also received a similar letter of recommendation from merchants in Edon, Ohio, dated three years later.

Elmer (M. E.) and his wife Effie Mae, a Steuben County native, made their home in Angola, Indiana. Times were hard; tax and bank records show that some (if not all) of their property went into foreclosure. At one-point Effie Mae was forced to bake bread and sell it on the Angola town square. She died on November 2, 1955, at the age of 74. Elmer, who was born in Pioneer, Ohio, died at the age of 88 on November 28, 1965. Both were laid to rest in Angola's Powers Cemetery.

There is a positive outcome from the fire that destroyed the Topeka Milling Company. Topeka now has one of the finest volunteer fire departments in the area.

Answers:  
1) January 13, 1916  
2) C. W. Mattingly  
3) \$10,000  
4) Big Chief  
5) June 14, 2043



Explore with Jason:

## Check out Jason's Topeka Videos

Jason Yoder, great grandson of Erman & Gladys Yoder (the founders of Yoder Oil Company), recently spent some time in Topeka visiting family. Since being in town, he has posted two short videos on his YouTube channel "Explore with Jason". The first is "Exploring Topeka Indiana" (6:50) and the other is "Exploring the Past: a look into a small town history" (5:02).



Jason, a 1991 graduate of Westview High School and a Chief Petty Officer in the US Navy with almost 20 years of service, is also a Microsoft Certified Trainer. His father, Dennis Yoder, was a member of the THS Class of '65. His mother is Beth Yoder, a retired Topeka Elementary School teacher. His grandparents were Robert (Bob) and Mary Yoder.

## Wabash Caboose Gets a New Paint Job

We are grateful to have a Wabash Railroad caboose as a fixture at our Depot Museum. It is on permanent loan from the New York Central Railroad Museum in Elkhart. However, that also means that we are responsible for its maintenance.

Merv Miller and K & M Paint Service, LLC always do a great job. They know that we are a not-for-profit organization with a limited income, so they do their best to keep the cost down. But, a project like this isn't cheap.

The cost of paint, lettering stencils, and labor is around \$1,600. So, any and all contributions, regardless of the amount, will be greatly appreciated.



## Coming Down the Tracks:



Nov. 13, 2018 Dinner Meeting  
Speaker: Dennis Kutzner: *"The Gettysburg Clash When Character Counts and Why"*

Jan. 15, 2019 The Topeka Milling Company  
and the January 13, 1916 fire.

Topeka Area Historical Society Meetings are held  
at the Topeka Branch Library - 6:30 PM

Visit us online at: [www.topekahistoricalsociety.com](http://www.topekahistoricalsociety.com)

## The Mile 146 Quiz:

1. On what day did the Topeka Milling Company burn?
2. Who was the editor of the Topeka Journal?
3. What was the estimated loss of the mill?
4. What was the brand name of their flour?
5. When is the Topeka : "Time Capsule" to be opened?

## Donate Online

We are now able to accept online donations. Simply go to our website and click on the donation button.

**Donate**



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## Topeka Area Historical Society

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## 2018 Board of Directors

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## The Hawpatch History Detective

### There is a Time Capsule ...? We want to know more!

Is there anyone who remembers when the Topeka Area Historical Society buried a time capsule? Exactly where was it buried? We want to know. Better yet, are there any pictures? If so, please share.

The LaGrange Standard recently published something in their "Looking Back Through The Years" section from the October 15, 1993, LaGrange News. Twenty five years ago at 2 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon, people gathered at what is now the Depot Museum to bury a time capsule.

The time capsule was a full sized burial vault, donated by Frurip-May Funeral Home in LaGrange. In it were placed items related to Topeka's centennial celebration.

According to the article Topeka Ford-New Holland had donated a toy tractor; there was a 1992-1993 Westview High School yearbook; a variety of business cards from local merchants; and a copy of a recently published history of Topeka. Following the burial the Topeka Centennial Committee hosted a reception.

The plan was to have the time capsule reopened on June 14, 2043, to coincide with Topeka's Sesquicentennial.

There is a small plaque on the northeast outside corner of the old train depot about the time capsule. We presume that it was buried at that location. But, it would be nice to know for sure so we can pass that information on to the next generation.

HG

## Looking Back Through The Years

50 Years Ago  
in the *Standard*  
October 17, 1968

Potawatomie "March of Death" - by Paul Riddick. Currently some stories are appearing in papers of northern Indiana on the "March of Death," the removal of the Potawatomie Indians of the region to a reservation on the far west, a chapter of American history of which we are not proud.

LaGrange County enters the picture for there were Indian villages at Shipshewana Lake and at the site of the present Howe cemetery where Mongoquinong was located and no doubt scattered settlements through the county.

Tradition has it that the soldiers herded Indians perhaps from the southern part of the county for overnight

encampment on the night before the start of the march on what became the Hamilton place less than a mile south of the present Town Line road.

Others were herded together from along Pigeon River, Shipshewana Lake and elsewhere. Old Chief Shipshewana had to join the march with his followers and it is said that he grieved for his native home area and returned from the reservation to die at Shipshewana Lake.

Another Indian tradition of the near LaGrange area is that the farm of Luther Wear on the Town Line road south of LaGrange was the site of an Indian settlement, battleground or burial ground.

25 Years Ago in the *News*  
October 15, 1993

Time capsule to be buried

at Topeka - The old railroad depot in Topeka will be the site at 2 p.m. on Sunday of the burial of a time capsule containing items relating to Topeka's centennial celebration.

A reception will be held by the Topeka Centennial Committee after the capsule is buried.

The capsule is actually a full-sized burial vault that has been donated by the Frurip-May Funeral Home in LaGrange.

Items to be buried in the vault include a toy tractor from Topeka Ford-New Holland; a 1992-93 Westview High School yearbook; business cards from area businesses; and a copy of a recently published history of Topeka.

Plans call for the time capsule to be reopened on June 14, 2043, which will be Topeka's sesquicentennial.

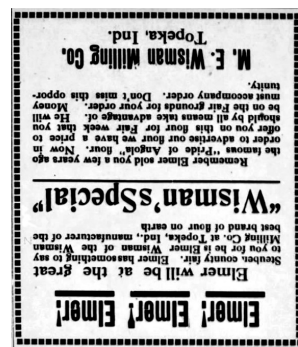
### It's Time to Renew Your Membership

It is time to renew your annual membership with the Topeka Area Historical Society. Membership is vital to our mission and to our survival.

Membership is only \$12.00 a year. With your membership you will receive our quarterly newsletter, meeting notifications, and you will also help us to continue to provide newsletters to each Topeka 3rd grader as they study our local history.



www.topekahistoricalociety.com



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