

Bits and Pieces

of Hardin County History

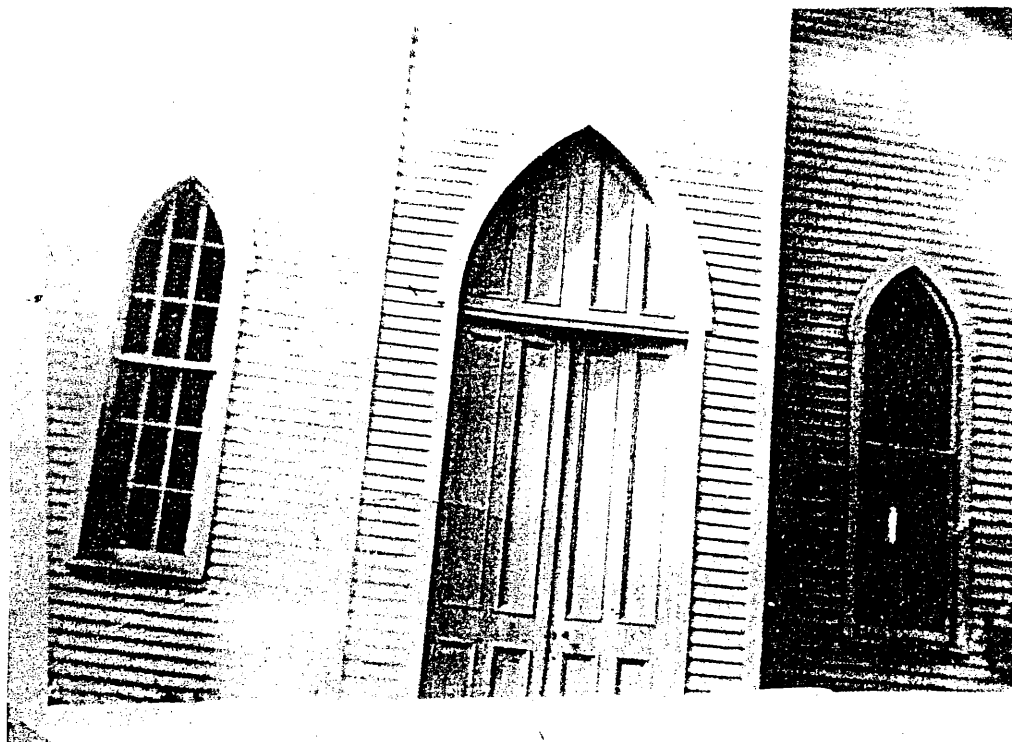
A PUBLICATION OF HARDIN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL XXI NO. 2

MARY JO JONES, EDITOR

SUMMER 2002

SAINT ELIZABETH CATHOLIC CHURCH



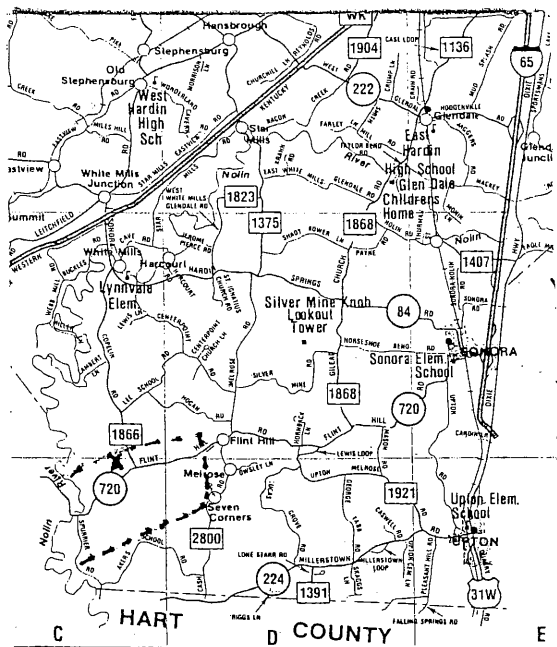
Doorway of St. Elizabeth Catholic Church

In the early 1800's a small community of Catholics moved into the area east of White Mills known as Harcourt. These Catholic families were visited occasionally by missionaries, and for many years mass was said in the log home of Sylvester Boarman.

In about 1830, with the establishment of Bethlehem Academy, the first resident priest arrived in Hardin County. He attended several missions in the county, including

Harcourt. The congregation at Harcourt, known as St. Ignatius, was encouraged to give consideration to building a church. A small brick structure was completed in 1842.

This parish continued to grow until about 1878 when several families in the Akers Valley area decided to build a church in their neighborhood. A conveniently located tract of six acres was given to the church by S. M. and Rachel Peerce. In 1926



X - Location of St. Elizabeth Church
 --- Approximate Area of Akers Valley

By this time, the money had all been spent. The parishioners were again solicited for contributions to complete the interior of the building. They were farmers who barely made a living for their families. The reply was, "We've given all we can."

The building was never finished on the inside. The walls were never plastered. There were pews, likely home-made, and there was a communion rail, also constructed crudely by members. There were two wood stoves for heating in the winter; however, services were not held in severe weather, as members came in horse-drawn vehicles. The Henry Beeler home in Akers Valley was always home to the visiting pastors of St. Elizabeth until the death of Mrs. Beeler in 1903.

when the church was abandoned, Mr. and Mrs. Peerce deeded the land, containing the cemetery and the church building, to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Louisville.

The Akers Valley parish was known as St. Elizabeth. Plans for the building were drawn, and contributions were solicited. People were poor, but they gave what they could. The building was constructed, weatherboarded on the outside. The interior walls were finished with laths, ready for plaster.

St. Elizabeth continued to minister to the small congregation until it closed in 1926 because of the small number of families constituting the parish. The building was razed in 1934. Today, only the foundation stones of the building and the cemetery remain. On a visit to the cemetery in 1980, sixteen graves marked with legible stones were found. There were a number of other graves, recognizable by field stones and/or depressions in the earth.

(Sources: Interview with Jerome Peerce, Jan. 5, 2002; Public records of Hardin County; Mary M. Olson, *A Complete Index to Webb's Centenary of Catholicity in Kentucky*; Letter, Fr. Dale Cieslik, April 1, 2002; Ben. J. Webb, *The Centenary of Catholicity in Kentucky*.)

AIRPLANES AT GLENDALE

Emergency Landing Field in Hardin County

About 1930, residents of Hardin County noted an increase in air traffic in the local area. One or more airplanes passed over almost every day. Previously only an occasional barn-stormer visited Elizabethtown with his two-seated plane, taking local residents on a twenty-minute ride over the town and countryside for about \$3.00. His 'landing field' was generally a farmer's cow pasture near town. Local residents were curious in August, 1931, when a couple from Owensboro, both of whom were licensed pilots, flew here for a week-end. They landed in a field on the farm of Silas English, a mile west of town.

Meanwhile, the U. S. Postal Department had found that moving the mail by air was not only possible, but desirable. Contract air mail routes were established between major cities throughout the country. For the sake of safety, plans included beacons at intervals of about ten miles, and emergency landing fields about every fifty miles along the airway routes. One such airway was the Louisville-to-Dallas route, passing almost directly over Elizabethtown.

It was announced in April, 1931, that four lighthouses were to be located in Hardin County to guide the mail planes. These beacons, with fifty-foot towers, were to be located at Tine Huffman's farm near Wooldridge Ferry bridge; Julius Farley's farm near Elizabethtown; a point three miles west of Sonora; and on the Hardin-Hart county line at Cash. An Elizabethtown newspaper observed that these beacons, being located often in remote rural sections, indicated "the march of progress" in the United States.

Residents of Elizabethtown were excited, in April, 1931, to learn that Elizabethtown had been chosen as the site of an emergency landing field, to be located on the farm of Julius Farley, at that time about one mile southwest of town. (This area now--2002--is well within the city limits.) The City Council proposed naming the airport "Wells Field"

in honor of Starling Wells, Jr., a local young man who had lost his life in an airplane crash in April, 1929. However, the Commerce Department explained that it was customary to name the government landing fields after the post office address nearest to their locations.

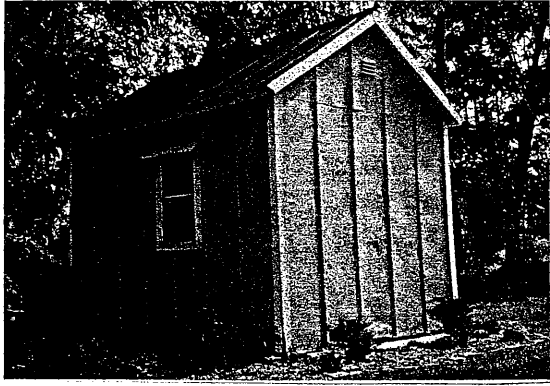
The other Kentucky field was built at Smith's Grove. These intermediate landing fields were established and maintained by the Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce along the Federal airways for use by aircraft which needed to make emergency landings between terminal points along the route.

Bids were taken for the grading, draining and fencing of Elizabethtown's new landing field on the Farley farm, and the contract was let to the Jenkins Construction Company of Elizabethtown.

However, in November, 1931, plans were abruptly changed and the site of the field was moved to Glendale. The Farley farm was deemed undesirable because the runways were too short, there were unfavorable surrounding land altitudes, and nearby power lines created an obstruction.

A 70-acre tract on the farm of W. B. Coyle, a mile north of Glendale, was selected. It was found that the Coyle land would allow longer runways, without obstructions, than the one near Elizabethtown. The Department of Commerce leased the tract for a period of five years at a monthly rental of \$700. It was designated Site 75-B, Dallas-Louisville Airway.

In December the engineers set stakes for the grade and drainage on the proposed field. It appeared there was not a great deal of work to be done, as the Coyle field had natural drainage. The work was reportedly to be completed as soon as the contract could be let. In *Airway Bulletin No. 1*, January 1, 1936, the Glendale field was described as a "Department of Commerce intermediate field, site



Utility Building (2002 Photo)

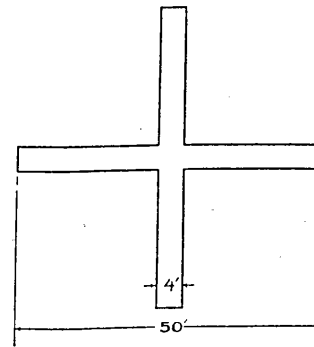
75B, Dallas-Louisville Airway.” It was located one-half mile northeast of Glendale, latitude 37°37'; longitude 85°55'; altitude 694 feet. It was triangular, sod, level, with natural drainage. There were three landing strips: NW/SE 2,400 feet, NE/SW 2,200 feet, and E/W 2,560 feet. “75B D-L” was painted on the power-shed roof. There were buildings, trees, and a blinker to the north and pole lines on the west. There was a blinker on the field flashing characteristic “5” (. _) and a 24-inch beacon with green course lights also flashing “5” (. _) .located on a hill ½ mile southwest. There were no servicing facilities. Pilots with disabled planes that could not be readily repaired often spent the night at the Coyle home, as there were no other overnight accommodations available in Glendale. They would share with family members exciting tales of their travels.

In a conversation with John Coyle, son of W. B. Coyle, who was a teen-ager in the 1930's, I received a wealth of information on the day-to-day operations. John described the beacon tower, about 87 feet high, which he climbed many times to change or repair lights. There were marker lights at the ends of the runways; ordinarily they were green, but if the weather was bad or snow or water on the field made landing unsafe, the lights would be changed to red. This had to be done by hand. The blinking lights on top of the tower had to be changed likewise. About 60 feet up on the tower was a cat-walk, without side rails, at the end of which was a windsock, bright yellow-orange, 7 or 8 feet long. It revolved freely 360 degrees and showed the wind direction very clearly. If it became worn or tangled and had to be replaced, W. B. Coyle did the work himself--he would allow no one else to maintain the windsock. John said it was a very scary job.

In addition to the tower, there was a small utility building on the field, and both that and the

tower were enclosed by a fence. The building contained all spare lights and replacement bulbs. It was necessary for someone to walk the perimeter of the field daily to insure that all lights were functioning.

There was a marker identifying this as an auxiliary landing field. It was a white gravel cross made up of two straight strokes 4 feet wide by 50 feet long, intersecting at right angles at their midpoint. It was Coyle's responsibility to keep this marker maintained and free of grass and weeds, so as to be readily visible from the air.



Marker used at Auxiliary Landing Fields

According to John, even before World War II, units from Fort Knox used the field for training--touch-and-go landing and taking off. This use continued until about 1942.

The lease on the property was not renewed when it expired on June 30, 1943. About 1949 representatives of the U. S. government (CAA?) removed the beacon, all lights, and all wiring above ground. They left the underground cable which connected the perimeter lights, as well as the utility building. The Coyles removed the underground cable and used it to wire the farmhouse. The utility building was moved near the house, where it may be seen today.

(Sources: Elizabethtown newspapers, 1931; Public records of Hardin County; Interviews with John Coyle and Michael Coyle; *General Airway Information (Airway Bulletin No. 2)*, U. S. Department of Commerce, Sept. 1, 1931; *Descriptions of Airports and Landing Fields in the United States (Airway Bulletin No. 2)*, U. S. Department of Commerce, Jan. 1, 1936.)

+++++

John C. Pirtle and Woodrow Wilson

(The Elizabethtown News, Aug. 2, 1935)

Well remembered by hundreds of Kentuckians are the visits to the State of the slender, crisp-featured Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and again as President in 1916, but only a few recall his first visit as a bespectacled, youngish scholar of 42 when he delivered lectures at Hodgenville in 1898.

A canceled \$60 check, drawn to the order of Mr. Wilson and endorsed with his signature, is perhaps the only documentary record of that first visit. It is a prized possession of John C. Pirtle, farmer at Howealvey, and one-time superintendent of Elizabethtown schools.

Made by Mr. Pirtle, the check was in payment of Mr. Wilson's expenses for the lectures, drawn on the Larue County Deposit Bank at Hodgenville June 23, 1898. Mr. Pirtle was then conducting the Kentucky Review and Professional School, a summer school in conjunction with Hodgenville's old Kenyon College, of which he was founder and president. Mr. Wilson, then a professor at Princeton University, was one of a number of visiting lecturers who augmented the faculty.

"Wilson spoke in the building which is now the old part of the Hodgenville High School," Mr. Pirtle recalls. "His topics were United States history and government, and he made strong pleas for patriotism. I was so impressed by his words that I was sure he would become a nationally prominent figure. When this check was canceled and returned to me, I said, 'I'm going to keep this because that man will some day be President of the United States.'"

The only person who agreed with him, he says, was the late George Kirkpatrick, Hodgenville merchant, a Republican. Mr. Pirtle does not recall how or from where Mr. Wilson came to Hodgenville, but remembers that he went on to Nashville to lecture at Vanderbilt University.

"His appearance was much the same as when he was elected President; he was tall and thin and had the keenest, most intelligent, penetrating eyes I have ever seen," he said.

Mr. Pirtle, born seventy-nine years ago in the house in which he now lives, has been a farmer all of his life, although he devoted most of his time to educational work for many years and served two terms as a State Representative.

"We wanted to pay Wilson properly, but he refused to accept more than this check, which only met his board and traveling expenses," Mr. Pirtle says. "He told me he was glad to give the school such assistance as he could."

Among others who lectured during the same session, Mr. Pirtle recalls Opie Read, William Lightfoot Vischer, John Temple Graves, Fred Emerson Brooks and Dr. Byron W. King. . . .
