



# NEWSLETTER

## McLean County Genealogical Society

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*Ruth Wilkerson*

*From the Editor's Desk* – Our communities before oceans of concrete were laid before there were hard roads.

We tend to grumble when we hit a pothole in town or when a street is closed and we have to go blocks out of our way to get to our destinations. I was reading “LeRoy Lore” from *The LeRoy Leader* recently and noticed a May 1936 blurb about Berenz and Son of Bloomington who were awarded the contract to furnish 10,000 cubic yards of gravel for arterial streets under the motor fuel tax program. Think of that! In 1936, arterial streets in Bloomington were paved with gravel. As we drive through Bloomington/Normal today dodging barricades, one lane roads, potholes and other road hazards, we forget how recently our streets were gravel. If not in our lifetimes, certainly in our parents’ and grandparents’ lifetimes roads were gravel. Go to the smaller towns and many roads were still hard packed dirt, not paved at all, much later than the 1930’s. In the archives of the Museum of History there is a 1938 photo of Berenz & Son paving the 400 block of North **Main** – that’s the same block as Bobzbay, Coffee Hound, Reality Bites today. In 1990, 402 N. Main housed the Republican Central Committee of McLean County; Wonderlin Galleries were at 405 N. Main; and at 406 N. Main was Winnie’s Menswear. Having paved streets makes a difference in commerce!!

Even today in rural McLean County there are dirt roads and lanes, a few lead to cemeteries with Weston and Clarksville being examples. Many cemeteries do not have paved roads. Barnes, Frankeberger and Gilmore Cemetery are just three.

There are times of the year when those roads simply aren't passable. Deep snow, heavy rains, ruts far deeper than the height of your car axle makes travel challenging at certain times of the year. Imagine living in a time when main and arterial streets in towns and villages and all of the roads going into and through Bloomington were not paved. According to the McLean County Highway Department, they maintain 366 miles of highway, 89 bridges and the Townships have 247 bridges over 20 feet in length.

After reading about the work of Berenz and Son in 1936 and beyond, paving arterial roads in town, I'm more than grateful for the work they and the generations of road workers have done.

~~editor

## *President's Message*



### **Catholic Cemeteries in Bloomington Area in 1896**

I am going thru the McLean County Death Register, Volume 3 which covers 1892-1900. Most of the cemetery designations are clear to me, but I was stumped for a moment on "German Catholic" cemetery. I asked Chatgpt.com and got this answer:

In Bloomington-Normal in 1896, a reference to the "**German Catholic Cemetery**" would most likely mean **St. Joseph's Cemetery**, associated with the German Catholic community centered around Holy Trinity Catholic Church.

Here's why:

- Bloomington had two major Catholic parishes in the late 1800s:
- St. Mary's Catholic Church — largely Irish Catholic.
- Holy Trinity Catholic Church — founded specifically for German-speaking Catholics.
- Contemporary records and later cemetery indexes show a cemetery in McLean County listed as "**German Catholic**", indicating that the cemetery was commonly known by that ethnic/parish designation.
- The cemetery now known as Saint Joseph's Cemetery on Alexander Road is the historic Catholic cemetery serving Bloomington's Catholic community and is where many early German Catholic families were buried.

When working with 1890s death certificates, obituaries, or burial permits, it was common for the burial place to be listed by the ethnic parish name ("German Catholic Cemetery") rather than the formal cemetery name.

I find AI to be useful so long as the answer makes sense.

*Rand Veerman*

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### **Passing of Ruth Woollen Wilkerson, TMC GS Board Member, Historian and Friend**



Ruth Ann (Woollen) Wilkerson 84 of Normal, IL formerly of Wapella, IL passed away 12 Noon, May 26, 2026 at her family residence, Normal, Ill. Memorials may be directed to the Wapella Christian Church, The McLean County Genealogical Society or the McLean County Historical Society. Ruth Ann was born July 23, 1941 in Wapella, Ill. the daughter of Otis Samuel and Merna J. (Armstrong) Woollen. She married Sherman A. Wilkerson September 16, 1961 in Wapella, Ill. Survivors include her husband, Sherman A. Wilkerson, Normal, Ill., children, Cheryl A. (Gene) Lynch, Champaign, Ill. and Caren A. (Andy Smith) Appel, Normal, Ill., and one granddaughter Jillian J. (Fiancé, Josh Toquothty) Appel, Williamsburg, VA. She was preceded in death by her parents and two brothers Earl and Tom Woollen. Ruth Ann was a

member and officer of the McLean County Genealogical Society and a member of the Wapella Christian Church. She had worked for GTE for five years before staying home to raise her daughters.

Long time board member Susie Scoville Pope adds: "Ruth's devotion to TMC GS and the history of the organization was unmatched. Her recall of historical details and her organizational abilities amazed all of us on the Board (and we were so grateful for it!). Ruth helped me to understand the logistics of her role in processing *Gleanings* for distribution, and the importance of supporting her in that work. We collaborated on projects and events that gave us a chance to get to know each other on a personal level. She was a great person. I miss our occasional brunch "meetings" so much. My heart goes out to her family. I know they have wonderful memories of her."

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"We are happy to help you in your search to find your McLean County ancestors. Please send an email request to [mccgs.research@gmail.com](mailto:mccgs.research@gmail.com) Your request for assistance should include as much information as you have about the person/family for whom you are searching. Do you know the area in McLean County where your ancestor lived? If so, that would be helpful in conducting a search. Family Group Sheets and/or a link to your [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) tree (if you have one) are also helpful: they help avoid duplication of research and provide guidance in the search for your ancestors, especially

where the surname is common in this county."

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### Dr. John Edgar Welch and Blood Plasma discovery: its beginnings in Bloomington



Did you know that on March 28, 1956, a former resident of Bloomington who is credited with originating human blood plasma died in Ithaca, NY? He was Dr. John Edgar Welch, 83, a native of McLean County and an 1896 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University. His introduction of blood serum to medicine in 1909 led to wide use

of plasma, saving many lives of American servicemen in two world wars. Few servicemen or blood donors whose lives are saved by plasma know the background of the lifesaving blood. Dr. Welch had practiced medicine in New York City for more than 50 years. While serving as pathologist at New York City's Lying-In Hospital, Dr. Welch used human blood serum for the first time to prevent the death of a baby from bleeding internally. Within hours of the subcutaneous injection, the baby improved. Within three days, the baby was out of danger and went home with its mother.

Dr. Welch, born on Sept. 26, 1872 on a farm in Randolph Township, was the second child of Lawson D. and Arabella Jane Lemen Welch. He married Lucy Ragsdale Bates of Bloomington. Lucy Bates, who was also a graduate of Illinois Wesleyan, was the daughter of Joseph Baxter Bates, editor of the Daily Pantagraph for many years. The couple had one child – Lucy Welch Mazzeo. The sole close survivor of Dr. John Edgar Welch in the (Bloomington) area was Lawson Henninger, a nephew. In one of the many obituaries for Dr. John Edgar Welch, it

was noted that, “Dr. Welch, at the Wesleyan, cared little for social affairs or athletics, but was noted for his keen mind and his close attention to his studies.” (The True Republican, 3 Apr, 1945, pg. 1) Dr. Welch is entombed at Park Hill Cemetery, Bloomington, as are his parents.

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Tuesday, July 7, 2026 2:00-3:00pm Genealogy Meetup at the Normal Public Library in the Community Room. Registration is required:

<https://www.normalpl.org/event/genealogy-meetup-45265>

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### MORE ABOUT HOW LIFE IN MCLEAN COUNTY HAS CHANGED! - **Berenz and Son**



Not only did Berenz and Son pave many of the streets in town, in April 1909 they also were awarded a contract for building seven concrete and steel bridges in Bloomington with the bid for the seven being \$2,280.14. I'm not certain how many of the Berenz bridges are still in place, but they were “near **Cox's place**, two near **Givens' place**, one in the **Stringtown road** near **Eicher's place**, one on **Morris** avenue road near **Miller Park** lake, one on **Stringtown** road near the Scogin cemetery, and the last on the same road near **Bennecke's place**.”

October 1909 brought a contract for “putting in a concrete bridge over **Sugar Creek at Linden** Street. The price is \$530.” The bridge would have been built sooner but **Fell** Avenue has been blocked for traffic most of the summer. The delay allowed one street to be open between Bloomington and Normal. One street!

(*The Pantagraph*, 14 Apr 1910, pg. 11) Henry Berenz & Son of Bloomington had the lowest bid on replacing the **Broadway Bridge** with the paving work to be done during the summer. Walter Arbogast was appointed inspector at \$4 per day in chief of the paving work done during the summer with Richard Yazel was appointed assistant at \$3 per day.

An ad that was placed numerous times with variants was one for “eight concrete men at new sales barn at the corner of **McClun** and **Taylor** Streets.” “Wanted – Ten concrete men at once.” In Oct. 1910, an ad was placed for “MALE HELP WANTED - Five good men at **Miller Park** to work on new bridge.” The bridge was a pathway for carriage rides across Miller Park Lake. By August 1911, “Berenz presented a bill for \$651.11 as the balance due on the bridge at Miller Park. The total cost of the bridge was \$1,200. The

bill was approved and sent to the city council.” In his mother-in-law’s obituary, it is noted that “Mr. Berenz is the man who built the new bridge at Miller Park.” The bridge, though long closed to carriages is, to this date, the site of weddings, sunset photos and just lovely Miller Park Lake photos.

In 2011, Henry Berenz III gave the City of Bloomington and the Museum of History much of his grandfather’s archival materials representing his grandfather’s work. For more about the Berenz construction journals, photographs, records and receipts:

[https://pantagraph.com/news/local/article\\_97a3fa9e-1a3d-11e1-931f-001cc4c03286.html](https://pantagraph.com/news/local/article_97a3fa9e-1a3d-11e1-931f-001cc4c03286.html) and to the McLean County Museum of History archives.

It was during the building of the Miller Park bridge, that Henry Berenz Jr. convinced his father to invest in a concrete mixer – though not without problems, that eliminated the muscles and time to mix concrete by hand! Berenz and Son also had a 1922 Hug Model T, which had a gravity dump bed and pneumatic tires. This truck was used for over 20 years, further making concrete mixing and pouring a little easier.

Over the course of years many, many ads were placed in *The Pantagraph* for both workers and for building materials by Berenz and Son. For instance, in June 1911, the ad read: “WANTED – FOUR MEN FOR CONCRETE work; apply at **bridge near Alexander lumber yard**, Normal, Ill.” “For Sale – 20 thousand feet of good lumber.” **204 Kreitzer Ave.** (Bloomington). In Dec. 1912 a for sale ad was placed: 200,000 Brick at Old Stove Factory. Berenz and Son touched, were responsible for the erection of so many of the monuments, streets in Bloomington and Normal, including the concrete culvert on **Fell Avenue** between **Mason** and **Water** Streets. In the midst of numerous ads for construction materials, doors, etc. and need for laborers were ads for “Cherries for sale, at the corner of **Clay** and **Vale**” with the ads identifying Berenz and Son as the vendors. In fact, the first ad published in *The Pantagraph* with “Berenz and Son” as the sellers was for “Cherries Cherries” at the corner of Clay and Vale on June 14, 1905. Not for gravel or concrete, but cherries! In September, this ad was followed by an ad selling pears on East Clay.

The May 29, 1905 issue of *The Pantagraph*, noted that, “Mrs. Henry Berenz, of East Clay street, has hundreds of peonies in her yard and Saturday and Sunday people were passing through the rows of peony bushes to see the beautiful sight. Yesterday, two wagon loads of the flowers were taken to the cemetery for Decoration day and sixty dozen will be cut and sold this morning.”

In June 1912, M. Berenz and Son “were making satisfactory progress” on the base of the monument honoring the soldiers of McLean County. The foundation was laid at a depth of 8’ and is 33’ x 33’ in dimension. The supervisor of the work on the monument’s base, Dwight E. Frink “is inspecting the work and has acquired a beautiful coat of tan from contact with the sun and the elements.” Berenz and Sons Construction also

worked on the **Summit Street** bridge, the pavilion at Miller Park and the footbridge in **Forrest Park**, just south of Miller Park.

Berenz and Son began with Henry Berenz and his son Henry Conrad Berenz Jr.

Berenz was the low bidder for installation of concrete walks on both sides of the (named) streets on N. Main from Mulberry to Division Streets and on Grove from Main to Florence Ave., won the contracts. There was urgency about the completion of the work as there had been quite a bit of grading on North Main and the street was in “a torn up condition.”

Henry Berenz Sr. was born in 1864 in Germany, coming to America in 1883. He died in January 1936 just days after retiring on January 1<sup>st</sup>. He began his career as a bridge builder, expanded to roads, viaducts, and monuments. The Berenz Addition between Lafayette and Lincoln Streets has two memorial medallions at the Lafayette entrance to the addition.

His son, Henry Conrad Jacob Berenz was born in 1888 and worked with his father for many decades. Henry Jr. was also a founder of the National Bank of Bloomington. The Berenz Place addition was grounded by the houses he and his father built. There are only three houses that were built by someone other than Berenz and Son.



Berenz Addition medallion

Berenz and Son Henry Berenz Sr. (1864-1936), Henry Berenz Jr. (1888-1980) and the third generation owner of Berenz and Son, Albert Berenz, Sr. (1927-2006) are buried at Park Hill Cemetery and Mausoleum with family members.

Addendum: If you know where in Bloomington, Illinois **Cox's place**, **Givens' place**, **Eicher's place**, or the **Bennecke's place** were, please let us know at [mcgs.research@gmail.com](mailto:mcgs.research@gmail.com) Were they individual houses? Neighborhood buildings or shops? Orchards?



**McLean County Museum of History**

Photos by  
William P. LaBounty



***On the Courthouse Square, Bloomington, Illinois***

Contact: P.O. Box 488, Normal, IL 61761-0488  
Library: 309-827-0428, ext. 28  
<mailto:mccgs.directors@gmail.com>

Visit: McLean County Museum of History  
Stevenson-Ives Library  
200 North Main Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Downtown Bloomington

Online: <https://www.tmcgs.org>

Library/Archives: Appointments recommended.

Museum: Open to the public.  
Handicapped accessible. For details visit:  
<https://www.mchistory.org/visit/>  
FREE admission for MCGS members.

During their shifts, volunteers in the Stevenson-Ives Library are available to help visitors with their research.