

HISTORICO

Sangamon County Historical Society Newsletter

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THAYER HISTORY BUFF Jim Allen looks over some of the historic photos of the community that he put on display at the Society's annual meeting on June 16. The well-attended gathering was held at Maggie's Restaurant in Thayer, part of the community's rich history. Look for a book about Thayer penned by Allen in the future. For more, see page 3.

Annual Meeting A Sellout

Shades of Thayer's Past: Coal, Bootlegging, More

Members of the Sangamon County Historical Society got an insider's look at the village of Thayer's historical past and more from local history buff and Thayer resident Jim Allen, when they gathered at Maggie's in Thayer for the organization's annual meeting.

Close to 100 members turned out for the June 16 session that also included the election of new officers (*see page 4 for details*), a personal welcome from Thayer Village President Brian Wood, the annual raffle, and a family style dinner of fried chicken, pasta, veggies and more.

"We were delighted at the turnout," president Nancy Chapin said, "and about the setting for the meeting that was so integral to the history of Thayer." Maggie's, which

opened for business in 1921 as a drinking spot, eventually transitioned into a family restaurant that served the coal-mining community. Established by Dominic and Maggie Enrietta, it changed hands...and names...many times over the years, before going back to its historical roots when the present owner, Josh Snodgrass, returned the Maggie's name to the popular local restaurant.

"During Prohibition, Maggie's was believed to be a 'blind pig,' a term dating back to the 1800s to describe saloons or bars that illegally sold alcoholic beverages," Chapin explained. "Instead of selling alcoholic drinks, 'blind pig' establishments gave them away free to patrons who purportedly

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NEXT MEETING: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15

TOPIC: *Potawatomi Trail of Death; Its Relevance to Sangamon County*

SPEAKER: George Godfrey

TIME: 7 p.m. **LOCATION:** Iles House, Springfield

More About the Meeting on Page 3!

Annual Meeting Sees Election of Officers, Directors

Members of the Sangamon Historical Society unanimously elected officers and directors at its annual organizational meeting on June 16 that was held in Thayer.

Society members approved the entire executive board slate, consisting of president **Nancy L. Chapin** of Chatham, vice-president **David Scott** of Springfield, secretary and historian **Curtis Mann** of Mt. Auburn, and as treasurer, **Paul R. Mueller** of Springfield. All but Mueller, who previously served on the Society board as a director, are returning officers.

Two directors who had served out unexpired terms on the board—**Tim Krell** of Springfield and **Sarah Thomas** of Springfield—were joined by three new directors to make up the Class of 2012. In addition, **John Huther** of Springfield, the Society's previous treasurer, will complete Mueller's term as a director, which was to end in 2011.

The three new directors are **Vickie Megginson** of Pawnee, **Bill Minder** of

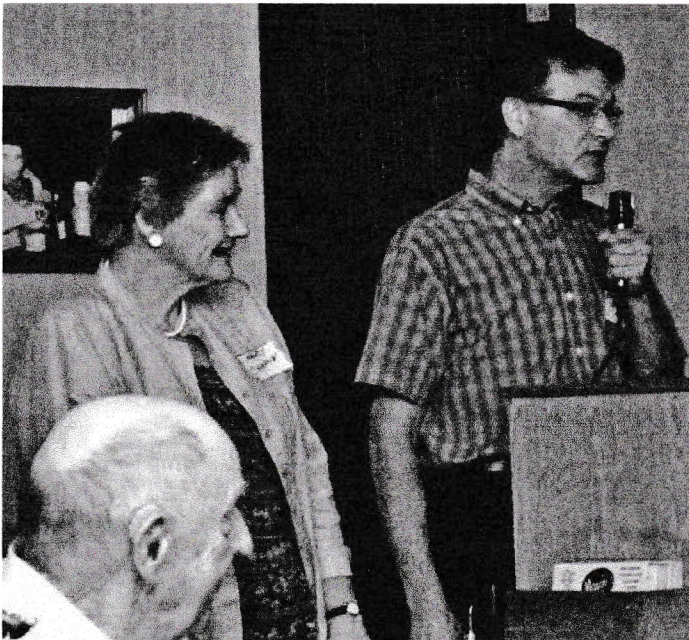
Pawnee and **Roger B. Whitaker** of Springfield.

Dr. Megginson, who serves as Associate Chancellor for Development at the University of Illinois at Springfield and senior vice-president of the University of Illinois Foundation, has been a member of the Society for four years. A UIS graduate raised in Illinois, she has served as a director of numerous non-profit and business organization boards. Dr. Megginson and her husband Norman, a grain dealer and owner of Megginson Inc., a farming operation, reside on a farm south of Pawnee near Springfield. They have five children, all grown, but one who is currently attending college. They also have two grandchildren.

Minder, who has been a member of the Society for a decade, was raised in Pawnee. Now retired from Horace Mann where he was a data processing manager, Minder holds a degree in education from Illinois State University and taught for a few years before switching careers. He is the author of

several publications including a 500-page book on the history of Pawnee and three booklets about Abraham Lincoln covering his life in Kentucky, New Salem, and Springfield. Minder and his wife Helen have eight children and 10 grandchildren.

Whitaker, whose family settled in this area in 1826, has long had an interest in local history. Chief engineer of Long Elevator Company, Riverton, and a graduate of the University of Missouri at Rolla, he serves as family historian and is the designated Cass County contact for geneologytrails.com, a volunteer nationwide effort to make historical records and related material available free to all on-line. A recent member of the Society and its webmaster, he has been on the board of the Illinois Foundation for Frontier Studies since its inception in 2004, and is a member of the Sangamon Valley Ham Radio Club. The father of five children, he and his wife Vicky, a syndicated feature writer, have 10 grandchildren.



THAYER VILLAGE PRESIDENT Brian Wood welcomes Society members to his community. President Nancy Chapin (standing left) looks on.

Meeting Gives Society Close Look At Village of Thayer's Colorful History

(Continued from page 1)

came to see an animal attraction, thus circumventing the law." And, added Chapin, "it was the perfect setting for Jim Allen's presentation that followed dinner."

Allen traced the colorful history of the community, from its settlement in 1828 to its transition as booming company coal town in the early 1900s. He also brought several albums of photos from Thayer's early years that Society members were able to review at the end of the meeting.

At the dinner meeting, Chapin also reviewed the past year's activities, thanked those board members whose terms were ending and introduced the new board. "It was a great meeting," she said, "and I know all of us are looking forward to a new season filled with wonderful programs and activities."

Thayer's Roots: A Village Built On and By Coal Mining

Thayer had a history even before it was Thayer, says Jim Allen, a local history buff who has compiled the story of this small community on the southern end of Sangamon County.

Its transition from a sleepy rural community into a booming, wide-open coal-mining town and back, was described at length when Allen shared his findings with members of the Society at its annual meeting on June 16.

Like the meeting, his talk took place at Maggie's, a local restaurant with its own colorful history. The Society hopes to be able to publish Allen's work.

Allen based his research on interviews with present and former Thayer residents including Frank Maynerich, his father-in-law, and Patricia Puma; the Illinois State Archives; *Sugar Creek, Life on the Illinois Prairie*, a book by John Mack Faragher; and a college thesis written several years ago by Karen Bruna Musso, a Thayer native.

Allen discovered that the earliest record of the area now known as Thayer, dated back to 1828, when John Dick, an elder and preacher for the German Baptist Brethren, a group known as "The Dunkards," purchased some farm land close to the site of where Maggie's now sits.

Other members of the group followed, he says, including the Shutts, Vancil and Gates families.

Setting the stage for Thayer was Jacob Rauch, who

in 1832, purchased 40 acres of land on Sugar Creek, eventually adding on to his holdings "to include most of what is now Thayer," Allen says.

"Rauch built a saw and grist mill on Sugar Creek where it makes a sharp bend to the north. Before the mill was built not many people settled here because they didn't have the availability of a mill for their grain."

The real turn for Thayer came in 1900, when The Chicago, Wilmington, and Vermillion Coal Company purchased 60 acres from a local landowner, Alexander Gray Simpson, for \$36,312.50. The company sent Ruffin Drew Fletcher—Superintendent of its Streator, Illinois facility—to the area to open up a new mining operation. "Fletcher platted the town, got the mine into running or-

der, built 86 houses and a 26 room hotel. He also erected a large store building and a handsome residence for himself, locating permanently in the town on July 17, 1900."

Fletcher, who Allen describes as "one of the most successful superintendents of Central Illinois," made it possible for the miners to own their homes. "This had to reflect on the type of man he was in this time."

It's believed that the community was named after one of the coal mining company's stockholders, a man named Nathaniel Thayer, Allen says, but in any case, residents went to the polls on October 26, 1901 to vote on creating the Village of Thayer. "On Octo-

ber 20, 1901, the votes were canvassed and found 42 votes cast in favor of the organization and two votes cast against it."

Buildings sprang up along Main Street on both sides and by 1912. About 450 miners were employed at the Thayer mine, producing about 2,400 tons of coal each day.

"The Company Store offered about everything a miner needed, (and bought on credit so at pay day a miner could conceivably own everything to the Company Store and receive no pay or very little pay). The hotel that was built by the mine company, was joined by saloons, a movie house, a drug store, a lumber company, and grocery store.

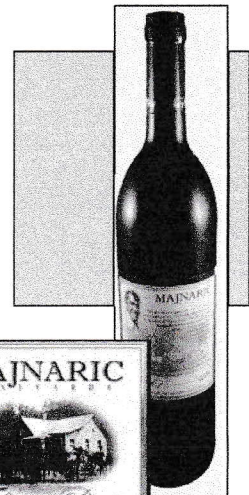
The grocery store, which was opened in 1913 by the Karaffa family, stayed in its hands until the 1970s. Andy Karaffa, who, with his wife Helen,

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Now That's A Real Taste of Thayer!

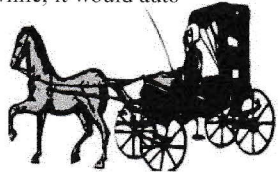
Two bottles of *Thayer Red* were presented to the Society at its annual meeting, one to President Nancy Chapin, the other for a prize for the annual raffle. The wine has been made by descendants of the Majnaric (Maynerich) family in Thayer since the early 1900s. You won't see *Majnaric Thayer Red* on the supermarket shelves. If you want to sip the limited edition robust wine grown from concord grapes in Thayer, it will have to come at the invitation of the Majnaric Family Vineyards. Cuttings to make the full-flavored red wine were brought to America from Delneice, Croatia by Luka Majnaric in 1905. Majnaric was among the wave of Eastern European immigrants who came to Thayer to work in the coal mines. Every year the family gathers to harvest the grapes originally planted by Luka in Thayer.



Was Thayer Wide-Open During Prohibition? Some Remember When

Here's some of the more colorful Prohibition era stories Jim Allen gleaned during his interviews with long-time Thayer residents that he shared with Society members:

Some people found clever ways to give and get a drink during Prohibition. All they had to do was knock on the right door of village residents. It's said that one man, who lived just outside the village limits, would come into town everyday by horse-drawn wagon for a shot of booze, stopping at the same house each time. His horse got so use to the routine, that after a while, it would automatically stop at the House, whether the man wanted it to or not.



"One lady referred to the town as being on the map from Springfield to St. Louis and being known as "wide open." Though there were "special police" assigned to the saloons, no one can recall anything "bad" ever happening."

"The Andy Sokatch house, located just North of Maggie's, was the scene of a fire during the prohibition. According to my father-in-law, his father was working in the basement of the building, making bootleg whiskey, when suddenly something blew up (probably the still). Fire engulfed the place. His clothes caught fire but his quick thinking saved his life. He jumped into the vat of mash. It put out the flames, but since the mash was still very hot, he received some very bad burns. My father-in-law remembers his father lying in bed with bandages on both arms. The remnants of the house's basement foundation can still be seen today but it's on private property."



Village of Thayer's Saga as A Boom Town Tied To Coal Mining Industry

(Continued from page 5)

were the last owners, would take orders from the elderly in the village and deliver groceries to their homes.

The whole northeast side of the Village became known as the "Washer Side, Allen points out, because of the location of the coal washer. "It was here that coal was washed in order to remove impurities. This operation was separate from the mine."

A large refuse pile of coal waste began to form that looked like a small mountain. Local people would pick up coal for use in their homes from this pile." After a while, they started burrowing into the side of the hill creating small caves. When one collapsed, two women were killed.

Thayer also had lots of saloons in the coal mine era, Allen's research found. "Among the saloons were The Little Red Onion, Riva's, Johnny Conners, The Belmont and The Pink. The Pink was owned by James Micheletta who with his family, lived at the rear of the building with a saloon on one side, a grocery store on the other and a dance hall upstairs." The Johnny Conners saloon was called "The Brick," Allen adds, because it was made of all brick. "The movie house was also brick and here one could see Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry and many others until the late 1940's or early 1950's."

Two railroads, the Illinois Traction Service and the C & A (Chicago & Alton), ran along the east side of the Village. Until 1910, the Interurban ran through the town, right down Main Street, then turned South toward Virden.

Many of Thayer's early residents came from Streator where they had worked for the coal company. Others were drawn from Eastern Europe, taking jobs in the mines to escape unemployment and political unrest. Many descendents of these hard-working miners, with names like Sestak, Bednarchik, Bednar, Semanik, Yacup, Majnaric (Maynerich), Morelock, Krainak, Fedor, Karaffa, and Sokatch, still live in Thayer today as do those who came from Italy, with names like Bolletto, Bruna, Castagno, and Puma. Many immigrants were devout Catholics who would walk to Virden for mass every Sunday, rain, snow or shine unless they were lucky enough to get a ride from someone who owned a car and had the room.

Thayer itself had two small congregations, one Episcopal, the other Methodist. The Episcopalians gathered for services in a room above a drug store and later in a small church. Thayer Methodist Church held its first services upstairs at the Company Store, eventually shifting to Walnut Grove Church a mile east of Thayer, which was moved to the village and occupied the site of the present church.

"Mr. Fletchers daughter, Edna, was clerk for the mine until it closed in 1924. In 1968 she recalled there were 600 miners on the payroll at Thayer during the "Good Days." After the mine closed many miners left to work in other mines or found work in the factories in Springfield.

All the old buildings on Main Street except the Village Hall have been torn down, says Allen. "All we have left is memories of the older generation and a few pictures of what this Village looked like just 50 years ago and earlier."