

Fifty Years Ago

By I. D. Claire

(John Henry Thomas)

By Jerry Long
c.2024



Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 16 October 1925, p.4:

FIFTY YEARS AGO

(by I. D. Claire)

It may interest some of the younger readers of the Republican to recall some events and conditions in Ohio County fifty years ago. I was then a lad of ten, living in the Sulphur Springs community, and I am writing from personal memory.

Fifty years ago three fourths of the dwelling houses, most of the schoolhouses and many of the churches were made of logs. A split log with stick legs formed many of the school seats. Ray's arithmetic, Goodrich's readers and the Blueback speller were the principal text books. Townball, tipcat and bullpen were the chief playground sports of the boys, while the girls made moss beds about old logs for their dolls.

Most farmers of that time kept one or two horses and a yoke of "steers." Sleds, called "slides", were common, but wagons were rare. Only one farmer in twenty had a buggy. The roads were poor, but since the chief travel was on horse-back. nobody worried about roads. Grain was cut with a "cradle" and grass mowed with a scythe. Threshing of the grain was done by standing the bundles on end in a circle upon which horses were ridden round and round until the grain was trodden from the straw, and the grain was separated from the chaff by a wheat fan, a few of which may still be seen on rare occasions in a shed of an old farm barn.

Looms and wheels in the attic of a few farmhouses will remind the older people of this generation of the time when women spun cotton and wool and wove cloth for clothes for the family. Many of the woman of the time did not have a rooking stove and, with a skillet, lid, pot and teakettle, prepared the family meals on coals on the open hearth. The family light at night was a tallow candle, or frequently a blaze from some old boards or fragments of fence rails burning on the fireplace.

Social customs, too, were different then. It was not uncommon for a family to have twenty or thirty people for Sunday dinner, and at Sunday church a neighbor asked, and usually urged, neighbors to accompany them home for dinner. It was a common occurrence, too, for a man and his wife and perhaps a half-dozen children to visit another neighbor Saturday night and remain over Sunday. There was no thought of. inconvenience; beds were "made-down" on the floor or

pallets spread for the children, and not infrequently the two families slept in a single room. The average poor farmer of that day had but one principal room with a side shed for a kitchen. Courting was usually done in the same room with the old folks, and no mother would think of allowing her girl and beau to use a room to themselves with the doors closed. |

The county then did not have a bank, and some prosperous farmer in each neighborhood did a business of lending money. Six per cent was the ruling interest rate; any amount in excess of that rate being considered usury. Washington Phipps, a Hartford merchant, was the chief money lender for the county. Phipps was in his day the richest man in the county, being worth perhaps fifty thousands dollars. He was a merchant as well as a money lender, and said to be miserly. He loaned the county much off the money for construction of the present courthouse, buying the county bonds at from sixty to sixty-five cents to the dollar, which would indicate the county's credit at the time was at a low ebb.

The younger generation will perhaps be amazed to learn that fifty years ago the poor people of the county, and most of them were poor, were eating corn bread for breakfast, and drank coffee without sugar. Canning had not yet become common and the only sweet goods was sorghum molasses. They had in winter only such vegetables as would keep green or could be dried. Apples, peaches, pumpkin and blackberries were dried in quantities and hung in bags on a nail driven into the wall of the kitchen. Potatoes, cabbage and turnips were buried in the garden and a mound heaped over them to keep them from taking in the rain. Such was the farmer's winter food fifty years ago.

Going to the mill was the dreaded lot that fell to the farm boy. Father placed a two bushel sack of corn across old Dobbin's back, placed twelve-year-old Johnny astride the sack with a basket of eggs on his arm and, with a solemn warning not to spill the eggs, started him for the mill, often miles away. Away out in some lonely woods the sack skewed to one side and Johnny was confronted with the problem of losing his sack or breaking his eggs, and his only recourse was to sit still until somebody passed along, all event more rare in those days of a sparsely settled community. I know because I have had that milling experience.

Another mention that will interest the older if not the younger generation is the passing of the great old forests. Then most of the river valleys and a greater part of the hills were thickly studded with the fine old oaks and poplars and hickories and beeches. Timber that would now be worth a fortune was ringed and let to rot while corn was cultivated around the trunk. Many men are now living who have helped at a neighbor's log rolling where mine old oak and poplar logs were rolled into heaps to be burnt in the "clearing." | I recall that my father sold a large number of poplar trees averaging four feet in diameter for one dollar a tree. Each of such trees now would sell for more than a hundred dollars. A little later than the time of which I write the sawlogger, the stave maker and the tie hacker began their destroying work and the great forest melted away like frost before a warming sun.

And the "seng" diggers. I was about to forget them. In the early spring while father went to the field to plow mother and the younger children took their hoes, or perhaps sharpened stick, and went to the hills in quest of "seng." The root was then worth about seventy-five cents a pound, and the daily reward of mother and children rarely equaled a pound of dry seng. But money was money in those days; not that it would buy so much more than now, but the people were accustomed to having so little of it. No ginseng story would be complete without mention of the snake-killing that accompanied it. Snakes were more plentiful than seng and easier found, so from each excursion the diggers recounted to father and the older boys the day's experience in killing snakes. Rattlers and copperheads were the poison snakes of the time,| and the party counted it an

off day when they did not kill a half-dozen or more of the feared reptiles. They invariably brought home the rattles as trophies of their prowess. The "seng" diggers did their part in ridding the woods of poisonous snakes.

And, young girl, what do you suppose your grand-mothers used for fans? Not a silk folder, nor even a palm leaf, but a turkey wing. After the Thanksgiving dinner the turkey's wings were spread while still fresh and a hot iron run over the fleshy part till it was dried, and then with some fancy fabric the bony end was covered and granny was equipped with no cost in money and but little in labor to keep herself cool in the few spare moments she could spare from the family drudgery.



Ohio County News , Hartford, KY, Friday, 1 May 1931, p.6:

THIRTY-THREE YEARS AGO

By I. D. Claire

Thirty-three years ago, or more exactly now just a third of a century, I became a citizen of Hartford. The changes in the old town since then mark the passage of time with accent to the older generation. January 1908 seems a long way agone. Births and deaths have made a new town and a new life of all, or almost all, that then was.

Among the active business men of that time only two, I believe, remain: Uncle John Riley and Jim Williams. Uncle John, then as now, was a banker, and Jim Williams was dispensing drugs at his present stand. Will Fair was yet a young man, doing a general merchandising business. Henry Carson, now retired, was just beginning a successful business. The Herald and Republican were living a sort of hand-to-mouth existence at a three and five cent an inch advertising rate. Three saloons were supplying the need, or maybe the luxury of drinks for the community. Mose Hudson, Al Nall and Lee Chinn, were mixing the highballs.

Among the merchants, I recall other than Carson and Fair, were a Jew named Bach, Dock Carson with a grocery and the Thomas brothers, Pete, Ellis and John, with groceries and hardware. Dyer White, long associated with the Phipps Brothers in the mill business, also conducted a grocery on Main Street. A character of the small business men of that time was Gross Williams, who prided himself on the cleanliness and good cooking of his restaurant. Uncle John Riley was wont to say that Gross was the best five and ten cent business man he ever knew. A Hartford institution of that time was Ed Bullington's barber shop. Ed was a jovial Irishman that everybody liked. His assistant was "Smokeball," a colored product of Hayti. "Smokeball" was a confirmed liquor addict, and I recall many times giving him a dime to get a drink to steady his nerves before I took a chance on his giving me a shave.

Among the legal fraternity of that third of a century ago I had many friends, M. L. Heavrin, then as now, was of the outstanding lawyers. Will Barnes was just beginning his successful legal career. John B. Wilson was also practicing law and doing general surveying. All the other legal lights of that day have moved away, either to other terrestrial or celestial abodes. Press Neal, James Miller, James Glenn, Lee Simmerman, Jesse Fogle, Lige Walker, and perhaps some others. I cannot now fore recall have already appeared before the great and impartial judge of all causes.

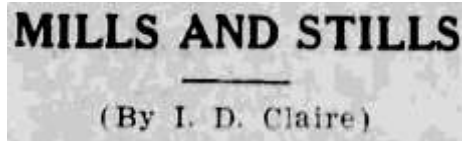
Claude Smith, Shelby Taylor, Ernest Woodward and Joe Vickers hied away to more promising pastures.

The doctors who treated the infirmities of the body and consoled the spiritual perplexities of that generation are all gone upon this earth or elsewhere. Dr. E. W. Ford, noted for his brilliancy and wit, is somewhere in the South. Dr. Stanley, one of the most outstanding intellects of Ohio County production, is, I believe, living somewhere in Colorado. Drs. S. J. Wedding, J. E. Pendleton, and J. T. Miller, eminent in their day, have all joined that endless procession to the eternal city of the dead.

But notwithstanding the passing of the eminent citizens mentioned the old town moves placidly along. A new generation will build, no doubt, more wisely and firmly than we who have passed forever from the stage. God speed the youth of today.



Ohio County News , Hartford, KY, Friday, 15 April 1932, p.5:



I read with lively interest the history of Ohio county's old mills, so cleverly written by my old friend, Alvis S. Bennett. Many of we older citizens of the county saw most of the mills mentioned, in the days of their actual operation.

I recall no mill not mentioned by Mr. Bennett, but want to mention a type of grist mill that will be entirely news to most of the younger readers of the News. Although none of them, so far as I know, was ever operated in the county, they were once common enough in the hill section of the state. I refer to the overshot mill. This mill could be operated only where a large spring flushed out high up on a very steep hillside. A sort of Ferris wheel about forty feet in diameter, with buckets where the Ferris wheel has its seats for passengers, was located just below the mountain spring. A small artificial pool was formed at the spring and a large trough led the water out over the wheel and emptied it into the buckets, supplying the motive power for operation.

I have seen only two of such mills in a lifetime. One' of these thirty| years ago was in operation near Mammoth Cave in Edmondson county, and, the other one was in actual operation a few years ago just a few miles north of Ashville, North Carolina.

And the stills, if it is lawful to mention them, were Ohio county industries during the lifetime of the older members. of the present generation. The oldest "still house", the name by which they were then known, was located about two miles south of Olaton, and was operated by Jock Lawrence. It went, out of operation before my time, but I had the old site pointed out to me when I was a boy. Another "still house" that I remember very well was located in a hollow just above Dundee and was operated by Alfred Hines. It used ten bushels of grain a day and the liquor was usually sold before it had time to age. It was sold for fifty cents a quart or two dollars gallon. Farmers frequently brought corn to the still and exchanged it for whisky.

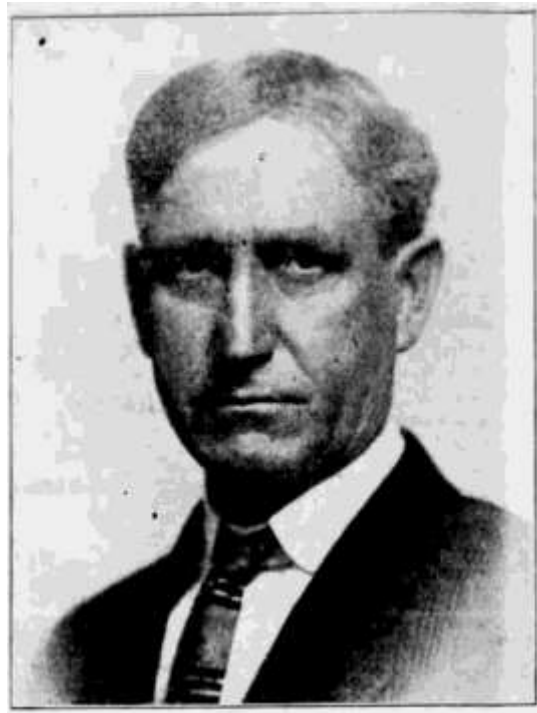
Another still operating about sixty years ago was located at what is yet referred to as Sullenger's Mill, a few miles east of Hartford. Many Ohio county people will remember its operator, "Uncle Jim" Sullenger, who died at Hartford not many years ago. Another still, widely known in the eastern part of the county was located on Rough river at the mouth of Caney creek.

It was run by Ansel Wilson, and had a wide trade in that section. Perhaps other stills had been earlier operated in the county, but those mentioned are all that I recall.

I hope other contributors will give us from week to week some story of the early history of the county's dead-and-gone institutions. A story of the old churches, lodges, cemeteries and etc., would prove an interesting feature of the dear old home paper. The material is inexhaustible.



**Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, Friday, 2 July 1915, p.2, 9 July 1915 p.2 , and
Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 14 July 1915, p.2:**

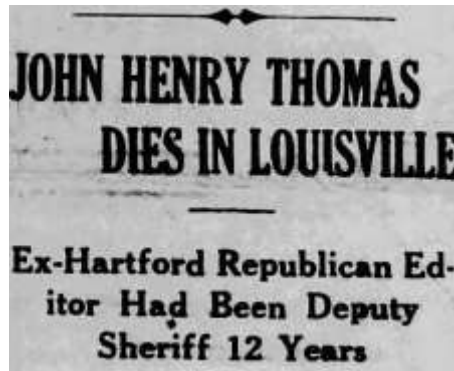


John H. Thomas

Hon. John H. Thomas, who writes "Beads Oddly Strung" for the Sun and which has attracted wide and favorable comment, is making a winning fight for the Republican nomination in the senatorial district composed of the counties of Ohio, Butler and Muhlenberg. Mr. Thomas has been a long and faithful party worker, always in the trenches in the past. He was connected with the last State Campaign Committee, in charge of the press bureau, and has a number of times managed campaigns in Ohio county where he is exceedingly popular with the rank and file as well. In fact he is the overwhelming choice of his home county, which, under a long established rule, is to furnish the nomination this time. In this district a nomination is equivalent to election, and Mr. Thomas' friends are already congratulating him on his election to the Senate, where he is sure to make a splendid record and bring honor to his district as well as faithful earnest service to his state.
— Sun. Advertisement.



Ohio County News , Hartford, KY, Friday, 10 March 1933, p.1:



John Henry Thomas died at St. Joseph's Infirmary in Louisville, at 9:30 Monday night, March 6, 1933, following an operation a few days previous. He was 67 years of age.

Thomas was reared in the Oak Grove community and had spent the greater portion of his life in the county until twelve years ago when with his family he moved to Louisville, where he had been a deputy sheriff under succeeding bailiffs since that time.

Mr. Thomas was one of the state's most versatile writers and was for many years editor of the Hartford Republican. He was at various times connected with the Owensboro Messenger, The Frankfort Journal, The Kentucky Republican and other Kentucky newspapers. Since residing in Louisville he had frequently contributed to this newspaper under the nom de plume of I. D. Claire. He also often wrote articles for other newspapers.

For a number of years Mr. Thomas was postmaster at Narrows and he had since attaining manhood been in close touch with the state Republican organization, usually serving in responsible positions during important campaigns. An ardent student and traveler he was a brilliant conversationalist and few could relate more history than he.

He leaves his widow, who was before her marriage Miss Martha Bean; three daughters, Mrs. Carson Park, of Narrows, Mrs. James Brashear and Mrs. John J. Weisbecker, of Louisville; one son, Linden, of Louisville, seven grandchildren; one halfbrother, J. W. Thomas, of Oak Grove community.

Funeral services were conducted at the family residence 1638 Edenside at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday, and at James church, at 9 a.m. Burial was Edenside cemetery.

[Ed. Note: Funeral was at the St. James Catholic Church and burial was at Calvary Cemetery, in Louisville, KY.]



Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, Tuesday, 12 March 1933, p.10:



John Henry Thomas, 67 years old. 1638 Edenside Drive, Jefferson County Deputy Sheriff and former editor of the Hartford, Ky., Republican, died at 8:55 o'clock Monday night at St. Joseph's Infirmary, after an illness of four days.

A native of Ohio County, Mr. Thomas spent most of his life there. When a youth he became connected with the newspaper, working every capacity from typesetter to editor. He served as editor of The Republican for twenty years.

Mr. Thomas came to Louisville twelve years ago. and shortly after was appointed a deputy Sheriff. He retained his position through succeeding administrations. He received his last reappointment from Sheriff Hubbard R. Petty.

Mr. Thomas is survived by three daughters, Mrs. Isabel Brashear. Mrs. Corinne Park, Narrows. Ky., and Mrs. John J. Weisbecker: a son, Linden Thomas, and a brother, J. W. Thomas, Narrows.



John Henry Thomas (1865-1933)



A Chick and Kin Book, Volume 3: Thomas – Thomas Families, Eula Eunice Park Mitchell (1915-2011), Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 1982, pp.17-18); Mrs. Mitchell was a granddaughter of John Henry Thomas (1865-1933) & Martha Temperence Bean (1867-1949).

A PEARL FROM THE PAST

The following article concerning a former editor of the Hartford Republican, John Henry Thomas was submitted by his granddaughter, Loraine Park Williams and was published in the Centennial Edition of the Ohio County News , December 26, 1974.

John Henry Thomas was born May 3, 1865 in Ohio County, Kentucky, son of Henry Lewis Thomas and Sarah Matilda Dockery Thomas. He was of Irish and French descent. His paternal grandparents were of Irish ancestry and lived in Maryland where they owned a fishery there. The family moved to Ohio County in 1849 and settled on what was later known as the Isom Lee property near Mt. Vernon cemetery. His maternal great-grandfather came to this country from France and settled in North Carolina. Later in 1846, the family moved to Ohio County where Mr. Thomas was born.

His early boyhood was spent on his father's farm in the northeastern section of Ohio County. As a rather adventurous youth, he and some neighbor boys put together a raft of logs and launched upon their voyage from Narrows, Ky to New Orleans, LA. via Rough River on to Green River and then where the Green empties into the beautiful Ohio and on to the Mississippi, the Father of Waters, to their final destination. Once their logs were docked for market, their means of transportation left behind they set out afoot and walked all the way home to Ohio County, Kentucky.

Mr. Thomas was primarily a self-educated man, his formal schooling being limited to that available to the average country boy in Ohio County just after the Civil War. He spent much time reading and writing hence his interest in journalism.

On October 6, 1887, he was united in marriage to Miss Martha Bean, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Noble Bean of Sulphur Springs, Ky . To this union eight children were born, four of whom died in infancy and early childhood. Those living to adulthood were: Mrs. C.C. Park (Corinne), Mrs. James Brashear (Isabelle), Mrs. J.G. Weisbecker (Arlie Mariam), and Lawrence Linden Thomas. Mrs. Weisbecker is the only surviving child. She resides with her daughter, Dr. Dolores Jacone, an Instructor at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia.

Mr. Thomas became editor of the Hartford Republican somewhere near the turn of the century. Prior to that time he lived on a farm near Narrows but was not a farmer. At this time in his life he was Postmaster at Narrows. This was during the time the Illinois Central Railroad was being constructed from Owensboro to Horse Branch. There were nights when he slept with as much as \$2,000 under his pillow as he acted as paymaster for the rail-road workers.

After serving as Editor for the Hartford Republican; he went to Owensboro and served as city editor of the Owensboro Messenger. Also while in Owensboro he did revenue work. Later he edited a Republican paper in Frankfort. After leaving Ohio County, he wrote often for the Hartford paper a column entitled "Beads Oddly Strung" and used the pen name I.D. Clare [sic – Claire].

Perhaps the most interesting of all his writings was a long poem entitled "Ed Morrow Loves Kentucky". Mr. Morrow was governor of Kentucky from 1919- 1924. Mrs. Morrow had the poem framed and it hung in the Governor's Office.

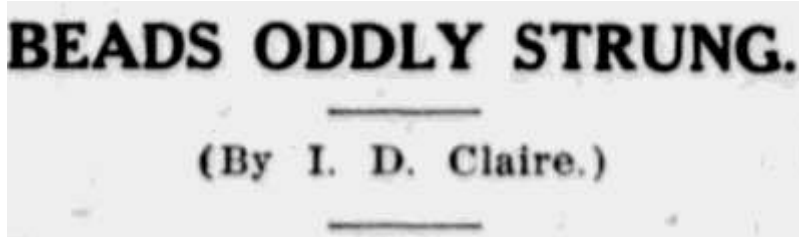
Until his death Mr. Thomas had a desk and a typewriter in Republican Headquarters in Louisville where he was active in politics and did much political writing.

He was a natural born story teller and entertained his granddaughter with whom he resided with Uncle Ned stories that he originated. It has been said they were fully equal to Uncle Remus Stories.

In gleaning information for this article his daughter Mrs. Weisbecker related the following: My father was a man of much common sense. We never used a dictionary at our house. We just ask "Pop". Once when I was a smart alecky young freshman at the university, I would occasionally correct my father in his English. To this he replied "The object of language is to convey ideas, you knew what I meant, didn't you?" (To those who knew Mr. Thomas this was quite typical of his wisdom and witticism).

At the time of his death Mr. Thomas was deputy sheriff in Louisville. He passed away March 6 1933. His remains were interred in Calvary Cemetery in Louisville.

To summarize Mr. Thomas' writing ability as an editor and also as a free lance writer of prose and poetry, he has made a great contribution to Kentucky journalism. From the topic of his former column "Beads Oddly Strung" and the information thus contained in this memorial to him he can truly be dubbed a "Self-Strung Pearl from the Past."



In 1916 John Henry Thomas (1865-1933) began writing the column, "Beads Oddly Strung", under the byline of "J. H. Thomas" in the Hartford, KY, newspaper, Hartford Republican. In 1917 the byline was changed to "I. D. Claire". On 19 February 1926 the two Hartford newspapers, Hartford Republican and Hartford Herald were merged and became the Ohio County News. The "Beads Oddly Strung" column by I. D. Claire continued to appear in the News until 1930. A few articles under his own name appeared in the News up to a short time before his death. Most of his articles were about current local, state and national affairs. A few were of a historical view.

