

Kenton County Historical Society

P. O. Box 641
Covington, Kentucky 41011

R E V I E W

September 1990

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM AND MEETING

On Tuesday evening, October 2nd, 7:00 PM at the Kenton County Public Library, Covington, Mr. Pat Harmon will speak on the History of the Latonia Race Track.

You may recall that on last February 8th Mr. Harmon spoke at the dedication of the Latonia Race Track Historic Highway Marker now located in front of the American Legion Hall at 38th and Winston Avenue in Latonia.

Mr. Harmon is the retired Sports Editor of the Cincinnati Post.

The program is free and open to the public. There will be a very short business session before the program.

ANNUAL ELECTION

At the last meeting the following election results occurred: John Boh--President; James Kiger--Vice-president; Dorothy Wieck--Treasurer; June Hazlett--Secretary; Ted Harris--Director. Please note that by vote of those in attendance the by-laws were suspended so that four of the five electees could succeed themselves. Mr. Harris was elected for the first time to succeed George Chavez. The terms of John Burns and Carol Whitehead (Directors) were unexpired. But the lack of candidates again points up the need for more participation by our members and for increased membership by those interested in local history.

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A KENTUCKY INVENTOR by John Burns

Here it is nearly October and time to be thinking of fire prevention week. Yet, how many Kentuckians can name the inventive genius who called Kentucky home and whose invention revolutionized fire fighting techniques around the world. For a hint, how about this? He was born in Ohio, but like so many others who were unfortunate enough to be born north of the Ohio River, preferred Kentucky as his home. Every Ohio and Cincinnati history buff is familiar with his name and deeds, yet it seems as though relatively few Kentuckians have even as much as heard his name.

So, you want a few more hints? Well, maybe these will help. This genius was born June 11, 1821, worked briefly in a cotton factory and subsequently in the U. S. Navy Yard at Washington, D. C., became a foreman in a Cincinnati machine shop, and in 1864 was elected to the first city council of Ludlow, Ky. Give up? Well, the answer, as every Ohio 8th grade history student knows, is Alexander Bonner Latta.

Latta himself, dropped out of school at about the age of 13. After some 7 years and 3 different employers, young Latta accepted the superintendency of the Harkness machine works in Cincinnati. There, in 1845 he constructed for the Little Miami Railroad the first locomotive that was ever built west of the Allegheny Mountains. Then, as if that wasn't enough, he served as the engineer on its trial run to Columbus and return.

Latta then invented and patented a whole series of

improvements in railroad appliances. The youthful master mechanic also designed and built a locomotive for the Boston & Maine Railroad that was probably the world's most advanced steam engine for its day. Among its many innovative engineering techniques was the fact that it carried an extra pair of steam cylinders under the water tank, the steam being taken back and the exhaust being brought forward again through pipes fitted with ball joints.

By this time, young Letta felt financially secure, and on October 21, 1847 married Cincinnati's Elizabeth A. Pawson. He had always wanted what he called "a country residence" and now began serious planning for such an exclusive site that he hoped to eventually acquire in Ludlow. It was just the previous year, in 1846, that he and his brothers, Edmundson and Finley, had established their own foundry. They set it up on the lower end of Cincinnati's Race Street from where it was but a short stroll to the Ludlow ferryboat landing at the end of West 5th Street. Even then, Letta was planning for a home in Kentucky.

After eventually moving to his Ludlow estate Alexander still found it impossible to divorce himself completely from his inventive work. Accordingly, he soon saw to it that his new Kentucky home also included a small work shop and laboratory.

Unquestionably Letta's greatest work was done during nine months of 1852 when he designed and built the world's first practical steam-powered fire engine, and then succeeded in selling it to the city of Cincinnati. It should be noted that a type of steam-powered engine had been developed for the New York Volunteer Fire Department as early as 1841, but it proved to be such a clumsy affair and plagued by so many difficulties and imperfections that it was taken out of service after but a few months of ineffective use.

Letta's new fire engine, named the Uncle Joe Rose in honor of a Cincinnati Councilman, was given a public test on January 1, 1853

at the corner of that city's 2nd and Broadway. A fire was lit in the engine's furnace as a team of four horses began the task of pulling the engine to the trial site. In less than ten minutes there was sufficient steam to operate the engine.

The horses drew the engine over several streets, including one which presented a steep downward hill. Critics said that the heavy engine could not be safely taken down such a steep grade. The skeptics though, had not considered the effectiveness of the breaking power that could be exerted by the steam engine when directed against the rear wheels.

Once the hill was safely descended and the engine reached the designated cistern the horses were detached and the engine's pumps began what turned out to be an unbelievable performance.

Among those on hand for the test was a company of the city's most experienced volunteers with one of their highly prized hand-powered engines. The volunteers were confident that they could easily out-perform the newly-built steam engine as they chose their strongest and most experienced men to work the hand-powered pump. When the contest began the volunteers strained every nerve and every muscle as they worked their pump. Then, Latta's steam-powered engine went to work. Soon, the steam engine was throwing water farther and farther, and in larger and larger amounts. The volunteers continued working their pump at an increasingly furious pace, only to be forced to concede defeat after collapsing in utter exhaustion.

Latta, who was managing the steam engine, delighted the crowd of spectators by continuing the exhibition. He turned on more steam, and the stream of water went higher and farther. The crowd cheered, stomped, applauded, and shouted its approval as its members were treated to more than half an hour of additional and unscheduled demonstrations.

Even after the demonstrations ended there remained those critics who now maintained that the heavy engine could not be

successfully pulled-up the hill which it had originally and successfully descended. Again though, the engine's abilities surprised the critics. When the horses were hitched to the engine and began pulling their heavy burden they suddenly received enough aid from the engine's steam power that they were enabled to speed up the steep hill in what seemed like a record time. Again the crowd of spectators cheered, stomped, applauded, and shouted its approval. The critics were strangely silent.

For those who are more interested in the mechanical aspects of the new engine it is worth noting that its boiler consisted of two square chambers, one placed inside the other. The inside chamber was utilized as the fire-box, and contained a maze of horizontal pipes which criss-crossed one another, but still maintained the general shape of one continuous coil. Steam and water were contained in the space between the two chambers, and it was from there that the water was drawn into the lower end of the coil and passed upward until it reached a point where it evaporated.

Once enough steam was generated the pumps could be depended upon to throw large amounts of water for what were previously unheard-of distances. So too, the engine could operate for extended periods of time without experiencing the human frailty of tiring. Indeed, the engine's capabilities amazed all who saw it perform, and prompted one Ohio official to declare that such an engine would never become drunk or engage in brawls as the volunteers were known to do. In fact, the official declared that its only drawback was that it couldn't vote.

Latta's successful engine not only captured the attention of the world's fire departments, but also became a favorite subject with many 19th century artists who liked to depict it being pulled by a team of racing firehorses while its fire box and chimney dramatically spewed out dense clouds of smoke. In fact,

this type of pumper continued in use until well into the 20th century when the job was taken over by motorized equipment.

The engines that were subsequently inspired by Latta's work helped give rise to the professional, paid fire departments which now began to be rapidly introduced in various cities of the world. One of those earliest paid departments was that of Covington where the volunteer department gave way to a highly efficient professional organization in 1864. The equipment which the city acquired for the new department included a rotary-type steam pumper which was ordered from a manufacturing company in Seneca Falls, N. Y. The Civil War was at its height, and strongly Unionist Covington promptly christened its engine the Ulysses S. Grant when it arrived here on June 26th.

The next day about 1,000 spectators gathered at 4th and Russell Streets to observe a test of the new engine, and were amazed at what they saw. It took but 7 minutes from the time a fire was kindled under the boiler until the engine was forcing a 1 1/2 inch diameter stream of water through 200 feet of hose, and throwing it an additional 220 feet. When the hose length was increased to 1,000 feet the new engine still threw the same size stream for a distance of 145 feet.

There had been a number of improvements in the manufacture of steam-powered engines by the time Covington acquired its first such device. Latta himself, subsequently built several lighter and more improved engines which were adopted by a number of American cities. It should be noted that he also perfected a 3-wheeled, self-propelled engine. This vehicle's two rear wheels were connected by rods to the same steam cylinders which powered the pumps. When the vehicle reached the scene of the fire its rear wheels were propped off the ground and then used as flywheels.

In 1862 the Kentucky inventor decided to retire from his

work with fire engines and collect the royalties that were offered to him by those firms that succeeded him in the manufacture of his engines.

Retirement though, seemed to hold little appeal for Alexander, and the lights often burned late in the laboratory and workshop of his Kentucky home. Here, he made a number of improvements to the nation's oil-well machinery, and in 1863-65 succeeded in introducing the manufacture of aerated bread into the local region. This method of manufacture, it should be noted, caused bread to rise during the baking process by introducing carbon dioxide into the water that was used in making the bread dough.

Latta's mechanical talents and his modest and self-effacing manner won him many friends and admirers who, in March of 1864, elected him to Ludlow's first city council. They reelected him in February of 1865, but on April 28th of that same year his career was cut short when he was suddenly overtaken by death. Latta was not quite 45 years-of-age at the time, and was said to have been engaged in more of his inventive work when stricken. He was taken to Cincinnati's Spring Grove Cemetery for burial.

LUDLOW-BROMLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

On Saturday, September 8 the Ludlow-Bromley Historical Society hosted an open house at the Latta house, the octagonal-shaped residence in Ludlow, once a funeral home. Well over 60 people attended. After a very informative talk on the front porch by a student from Miami University (on the subject of Latta much of which is mentioned in the enclosed piece by John Burns), some of the people who attended retired to the rear patio for refreshments under the heavy clouds of a rainy evening.

NEW MEMBER

New members include Mr. and Mrs. David Stolberg, Covington. Welcome.

A NEW YEAR

Our Annual Meeting and election on September 11 begins a new year. We invite all those interested in local history to become members or to renew membership. Please don't forget. Membership is \$5.00 per annum paid to the Treasurer, P. O. , Box 641, Covington, Ky 41012.



THE KENTON COUNTY SESQUICENTENNIAL YEAR
1990

9-90

Kenton County Historical Society
P. O. Box 641
Covington, Ky 41012

Kenton County Birthday, April 30, 1990 (150th)
Covington Birthday, February 8, 1990 (175th)
Bromley Birthday, May 23, 1990 (100th)

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