

KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Bulletin

June 2001

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KCHS MEETING

DATE Tuesday June 12

TIME 7 PM

PROGRAM The Good Old
Days of Baseball
1880s to 1890s

PLACE Trinity Church
4th & Madison
Covington, KY

Bill Kappel and Ken Shields will describe professional baseball's beginnings. Did you know that the Reds were the first team to be paid for playing baseball?

Jimmy Lee Eldred

A Living Legacy in Local Music and Teaching by Karl Lietzenmayer

After sixty years in the profession, Jimmy Lee still teaches 25 to 30 piano students each week. His pace today is somewhat reduced from the eighty students he had at the height of his career. What makes his schedule the more remarkable is that he just celebrated his 86th birthday. Mr. Eldred uses Jimmy Lee as his career name.

James Lee Eldred was born on Johnson Street, Covington, in 1914 to James and Dora Blaycock Eldred. His mother died when he was 9 months old, and his grandparents, James and Jessie Eldred raised James. His father remarried and resided in Cincinnati. Jimmy stated that Eldred is a Welsh name, meaning "terrible." (It's fortunate he wasn't named Ivan.)

Jimmy began studying piano at age eleven with a private teacher, Nellie Raywood,¹ and later studied with Dorothy Sultenbach Payne. By age 15, he was playing piano for WCKY radio when it was owned by L. B. Wilson with studios located at the southwest corner of 6th and Madison. Mr. Lee (as his students know him) played for Edyth Mitchell and was pianist for the WCKY's 7 AM show, *Alarm Clock Melodies*, hosted by George T. Case. The show had a flexible format, covering news, weather, live music and story telling.

Jimmy remembers one occasion when the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, along with singer Mildred Bailey, was in town to play at Castle Farm. The orchestra had to cover their radio commitments as well. WCKY was an affiliate of NBC and hosted the Paul Whiteman Orchestra to broadcast their live nationwide show. They were all jammed into the tiny WCKY studio. Jimmy describes with amusement the picture of Paul Whiteman carting the bass drum up 5 floors to the studio for the broadcast. There was no elevator in the building at the time.²

By the early 1930s Jimmy was playing with the John Cavanaugh Band at the Glenn Rendezvous in Newport, Kentucky. In 1934-5, he remembers playing for a dance act headed by a Doris Kappelhoff, we all now know as Doris Day. She began her career as a dancer until an injury took her into a different direction, which may have been the most fortunate for her.

From 1935 through 1940, Jimmy also served as accompanist for the Heile-Tranter Dance Studio.³ In the mid 1940s, the Dance Studio presented a four-hour review of their students at Taft Theatre in downtown Cincinnati. At the time, the Taft Theater contracted a union house band, the Harry Willsey Orchestra. Jimmy Lee had to get permission from him to replace their pianist. Since Jimmy was intimately familiar with all of the Heile-Tranter dance routines, Willsey gave his permission in gratitude. Jimmy introduced the show by playing the Willsey Orchestra theme, "If You Knew."

After leaving Holmes High School at the age of 15, Jimmy became a student of Herbert Newman at the early College of Music located on Elm Street, Cincinnati.⁴ By now he wanted to get away from the night club scene and decided it was time for a change. In 1940, he canvassed Northern Kentucky neighborhoods for piano students. He recruited thirteen and charged 75 cents a lesson.⁵

Jimmy's training at that time was almost exclusively classical and he felt somewhat insecure about teaching "tin pan alley" and other pop music. He credits his study with Frank Wolf, a private teacher, with his ability to merge the old classical school with modern piano. He says, "students' interests need to be piqued by offering both styles." His early strictly classical training was normal for the time.

After World War II, Jimmy had a radio show on WZIP from 1947-50 called *Serenade by Lee*. It was a musical show with Eldred at the piano and a local singer, replaying the latest songs from the national Hit Parade. His show played the hits on Monday which had been broadcast nationally the previous day. Sometimes a hit song would hang in the Top Ten for weeks at a time requiring the singer to present the same tune time after time. Jimmy remembers the singer sometimes getting bored with having to sing the same tunes so frequently.

About this time, he also began playing organ at the Main Street Methodist Church, where he met his wife, Naomi Evelyn Hamm. They married in 1949. As an organist, he has served other Covington churches including St. Luke Methodist, Scott Blvd. at 17th and Trinity United Methodist, Latonia. He currently serves as a substitute organist on call.

From 1940 through 1961, Jimmy Lee arranged recitals for his students at the Covington Art Club and, for a time, offered theory and piano as separate courses. Interest eventually waned and as students became less

prepared for these recitals, Mr. Lee discontinued them.

In the 1950s, Jimmy organized his students into a club called Flats and Sharps and led them on field trips to places as varied as touring a Coke plant to attending the Cincinnati Symphony. The club once attended a Pops Concert featuring Liberace and they were privileged to meet the artist backstage.

Since 1980, he has been a judge for the Junior Music Experience, an area-wide assembly of students, including select students of his own.⁶

Jimmy was a friend of late songwriter Haven Gillespie, a Covington native who wrote Santa Claus Is Coming To Town, Lucky Old Sun, and other well known and lesser known songs. Jimmy and Haven exchanged musical ideas many times. Jimmy Lee has tried his hand at composition but none of it got published. Haven advised Jimmy that the secret to getting works published was to send the lyrics and music separately to the publishers. Gillespie's experience was that many times the publisher might like the lyric but not the melody, and buy one and not the other. Jimmy Lee was not interested in this approach.

He once sent one of his compositions entitled "Drifting Down to Sweetheart Town" to the Joe Cherniovski Band, a local band of note. The group rejected the song because it was written in "uneven measure." Jimmy is amused today by that argument since so much of today's jazz and other forms of contemporary music is at least that complex.

Jimmy Lee and his wife Evelyn have been married over 50 years and have four sons, Jerry, James, Jeffrey, and John. Jeffrey resides at the Eldred home on Decoursey Avenue in Latonia, and is program director for WCVG, part of Kentucky Education Television.

Editor's Note: Karl's wife, Peggy nee Carson, was one of Jimmy's students. She still plays piano as well as organ. How many of Jimmy Lee's students still reside in the area and are still playing? Let's hear from you!

Endnotes

1. Nellie Raywood, piano teacher, 1718 Scott Street. Circa 1923 to 1936. Covington City Directories.
 2. Jimmy Lee Eldred, personal interview with author, 27 FEB 2001.
 3. Heile-Tranter Dance Studio, 11 West 8th Street, Covington. City Directories. Robert T. & Alma Tranter. Alma was the daughter of the family who owned the Heile Feed & Grain & Transfer Company. Robert is listed in the 1943 Directory as a vice-president of the firm.
 4. College of Music & the Conservatory of Music combined to form CCM, the College Conservatory of Music (part of the University of Cincinnati).
 5. Jimmy Lee interviews op. cit. Mr. Eldred now receives \$10 a lesson. He realizes this is below the norm, but has Social Security to supplement.
 6. The Junior Music Experience organized by Lenore Wilkinson, Cincinnati, OH.
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Did you Know?

The State Kentucky Archives is the central repository for Kentucky government records of enduring value. This remarkable facility houses over 96,000 cubic feet of original records and 47,000 rolls of microfilmed records available for public use. These holdings, dating from 1780, are some of the most significant original records available to document the Commonwealth's history, including:

- ✓ the public papers of Kentucky's governors, 1792 to the present;
- ✓ legislative records;
- ✓ a wide variety of local government records, such as deeds, marriages, and wills;
- ✓ copies of federal records, such as Kentucky census, military, and Works Progress Administration records;
- ✓ and other valuable information.

The Friends of Kentucky Public Archives, Inc. is a group of private citizens concerned with helping the Kentucky State Archives fulfill its role as caretaker of Kentucky's records.

You are invited to be a member. Your membership or tax deductible gift makes it possible to offer several services such as an annual Kentucky Archives Institute which trains citizens in public record research. The Friends also publish a newsletter quarterly.

John Boh is on the Board of The Friends of Kentucky Public Archives. Please contact him; he can tell you much more than space allows in this newsletter.

Notes Taken from African American History Colored Schools--1883-1954

by John Boh

In the 1880s in Kenton County, Tommy and Fanny Green and a family named Slaughter organized an African American school in the Erlanger area. Later, Tommy Green's grandson, Tommy Lewis attended the school. After college, Tommy Lewis commenced teaching at the one-room Dunbar School on Spring Street in Elsmere. He was still there in 1940 when Rosella Porterfield was hired to provide a second teacher. She began teaching grades one through three in the old Methodist Church hall. She recalled there was no library and no reading books; she had to provide the books herself. In 1949 Wilkins Heights School opened to replace Dunbar. It had two classrooms, a kitchen with indoor plumbing and a gym also used as a cafeteria. In the 1950s, students at segregated Wilkins Heights were transferred to another facility serving a racially integrated population in the Erlanger-Elsmere system.

In Covington after the Civil War, the Freedman Bureau organized an ad hoc school which operated under the Baptist preacher Jacob Price on Breman Street (now Pershing). In those years community activists also promoted public back education through the Colored Baptists and the Colored

Methodists. For a short time, two schools operated. Although the Kentucky legislature allowed for the establishment of black education, paltry funding for all education remained the norm throughout Kentucky. In the early 1870s, a colored school was operated in the new colored Methodist Church building on Madison Avenue.

Eventually, political cooperation with a progressive Covington politician, William Grant, led to the construction and opening in 1880 of the new and elegant Seventh Street School. Seventh Street soon administered both elementary and secondary schooling. Decades later a colored school in Latonia consolidated with Seventh Street. In 1932, the new Lincoln Grant School on Greenup Street replaced Seventh Street. In 1956, integration led to the closing of Lincoln Grant.

As late Covington resident Walter Whatley recalled, rather than attending the closer white schools, many students at Seventh Street and later at Lincoln Grant were from outlying areas; they traveled long distances to get to school. In the largely rural state of Kentucky, consolidation did advance efficiency and quality. Racial integration was another step forward.

Exhibition

Life on the Northern Kentucky Frontier: The Meeting of two Cultures, 1750-1820

Sunday June 3, 2001

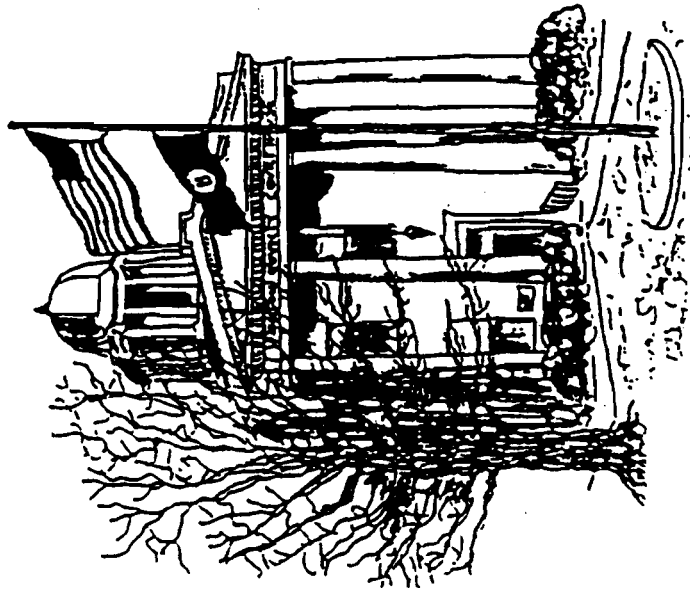
2 PM to 4 PM

Behringer-Crawford Museum in Devou Park, Covington

The group, Ole Kaintuckee Primitive, will set up their tents on the grounds of the Museum. They will reenact life as it was lived in Northern Kentucky in the early days, the overlapping of Native American Culture and the American Pioneer Culture. This exhibition is for all ages. The exhibition ends Sunday, July 22.

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and
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Kenton County Historical Society
P. O. Box 641
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Dedicated to preserving our heritage as the "Gateway to the South"