

6A



The Quincy Herald-Whig, Sunday, June 25, 1989

*Billings*

# Lawless family played key role in Gilmer Township

6A



The Quincy Herald-Whig, Sunday, June 25, 1989

*Billings*

# Lawless family played key role in Gilmer Township



Pictured in this pre-Civil War photograph are, standing from left, Jams Sanford Lawless and Thomas Thomas Lawless. Seated fro left are John Quincy Lawless, Oliver Perry Lawless and William Conrad Lawless.

above all a windmill with a spinning fan and a 40-foot steel tower.

"Uncle Tom," as he was affectionately known, was the 7-month-old baby who made the trip in covered wagon from Kentucky. At the age of 19 he joined the gold seekers and made the overland trip to California. He remained there four years, mining by placer and hydraulic methods. He never got rich but "made all my expenses and a little money besides." He returned home by way of San Francisco, traveling down the Pacific Coast to Panama, walked across the isthmus and took a ship bound for New York.

Thomas remained on the farm until Sept. 2, 1862, when he enlisted in Company F 78th, Illinois volunteers and served in the war. He was taken prisoner at Missionary Ridge and taken to Richmond, from whence he was moved to the notorious Andersonville Prison. Here he languished for seven terrible months, but he survived and took part in the two-day Grand Review held in Washington D.C. when the

war was over. He then returned home and took up farming.

Thomas Lawless was elected to several township offices, as were some of his brothers. Two of John Lawless' grandsons were county officials. David P. Lawless was elected Adams County recorder of deeds in 1904 and Clay Lawless was elected treasurer in 1950.

During the more than 100-year period when the Lawless family was at the peak of its influence and development, they were united in marriage to other well-known Adams County families: Names like Yeargain, Judy, Lummis, Thompson, Callahan, Ferguson, Waddell, Myers and others.

They were involved in history. When Abraham Lincoln spent the night in the Fred Collins Hotel in Columbus, sometime before the Civil War, Ann and Clara Ferguson were dining room waitresses and served the future president. The Ferguson sisters married Thomas and James Lawless.

"Uncle Doc," as John Quincy Lawless was known, was also there

"When I was 21 I had 53 first cousins," my mother, the late Katie Lawless Wilkey has told me. Today, mother and all 53 cousins are deceased.

In the 1900 era it was common expression around the Adams County Courthouse that if a Republican candidate for a nomination in Gilmer Township did not have the support of "the Lawless boys and their relatives," defeat would be certain. Today, no Lawless name appears in the telephone directory for Gilmer Township.

But for more than 125 years the Lawless family, was involved in the social, political and economic affairs of central Adams County. Their day and generation is all but gone.

According to courthouse records at Williamstown, Grant County, Ky., John and Margaret Skirvin Lawless executed a power of attorney to Lawless' brother-in-law, John Lowe, stating that the family was moving to "either Illinois or Missouri." The date was Sept. 25, 1835.

The Lawlesses loaded a huge oxen-drawn Conestoga wagon with their possessions and a family of seven children ranging in ages from seven months to 13 years, drove onto a flatboat at the dock in Louisville, crossed the Ohio River and headed in a northwesterly direction through the tall prairie grass of southern and central Illinois, until they entered Adams County.

Eight miles east of Quincy, John Lawless said "whoa," pulled back on the reins, stood up and looked carefully in every direction. He decided this was the land he had been seeking.

"Father erected a pole to mark the site, for the wilderness looked the same in every direction," the oldest child, Mary Ann Lawless Judy, wrote many years later. "The building was constructed of logs, had a puncheon floor and clapboard shingles and door. The cracks between the logs were filled with mud. It was necessary to ride to Quincy for mail. There was no newspaper published in Quincy and few businesses in the hamlet."

In this cabin, and the house that succeeded it, John and Margaret

Lawless raised a family of nine children. Sons James Sanford and Oliver Perry were born there; the four daughters were married there (Mary Ann Judy, Elizabeth Jane Yeargain, Sarah Lummis and Susan McBroom) and both parents died there.

Four of John and Margaret Lawless' children lived beyond the age of 90 and their average age was 74.

Lawless possibly did not have \$200 to buy a quarter section of land, so he bought it in partnership with a man named Rueben Nichols. The partnership lasted a year and on Feb. 27, 1837, according to the division, Lawless became the owner of 58 acres. The cabin was located about a mile southeast of the present St. Joseph Catholic Church in Gilmer Township. The present brick home of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Fessler is on the site where the cabin stood.

Between 1837 and the time he died in 1865, John Lawless bought five additional 80-acre tracts, paying successively, \$550, \$600, \$2,000, \$2,500 and \$4,000. This reflected the ever-rising price of land on the frontier.

John Lawless was involved in local public affairs. In Kentucky he had held the office of "commissioner of the county levy for the lower precinct," an office comparable to our assessor and on April 2, 1850, he was elected justice of the peace in Dover (later Gilmer) Township. His commission was signed by Gov. Augustus C. French. He was apparently a supporter of the Whig Party.

The five sons of John Lawless were Gilmer Township farmers. Son Thomas farmed in his later years but not until after a somewhat spectacular career. During the golden age of farming, between the Civil War and World War I, each one built a gracious 2½-story farm home, with gingerbread and curley-cue fancy woodwork adorning porches, gables and roof lines. In the parlor was a spacious stairway, mindful of the southern mansions after which the house had been copied. Each had an adjoining summer kitchen and nearby ice house. Complementing the farmhouse were one or two barns, machinery and livestock buildings, a long, low buggy shed and towering





House built by Oliver Perry Lawless in 1877 was demolished in 1982.

Many times during his long life he was known to say, "the only time I ever saw Abraham Lincoln was on the streets of Columbus."

The old Lawless family is now legend, but they left their progeny. In 1968 there were Lawlesses living in 30 states, including Hawaii and two foreign countries — Mozambique and Portugal.

The family has always been rather gregarious and close-knit. Every year there has been a Lawless reunion since the first was held in Columbus in 1909. Two hardback family histories have been published. "A History of the Descendants of John and Margaret Skirvin Lawless" in 1927 and an updated and expanded edition in 1968.

As a boy I used to sit by the fireplace on winter Sunday afternoons at one of the Lawless homes and hear men discuss the various battles of the Civil War, the disputed Tilden-Hayes election of 1876 and how, because of his monetary policies, William Jennings Bryan was considered "a dangerous man." They talked about events in World War I and were opposed to "Wilson's League of Nations."

Not only are the old Lawlesses

gone but so are the homes they built ... homes where their families were raised, their daughters were married and where eventually they passed from this world to the next.

Not a fencepost, a well pump, foundation stones, a tree ... nothing today marks the places where these families lived and made history. The land now owned by Quincy Municipal Airport, for instance, was once Lawless land. They broke the virgin soil with ox teams. The neat bungalow facing Ill. 104 at the south edge of the airport is the spot where the rambling farm home of James and Clara Lawless stood for more than a half century. The other brothers' houses have met similar fates.

Today the old Lawlesses are found in the various cemeteries in the county and their faint echoes can be heard in the whispering evening winds that blow across Gilmer Township.

---

Keith Wilkey, a retired Herald-Whig staff writer, is a great-grandson of John Lawless and a grandson of Oliver Perry Lawless. He lives in Coatsburg.