

THE KENT HISTORIAN

The Newsletter of the Kent Historical Society

Winter 2011-12
Number 74

'All About Kent' features rediscovered author

Rogue vagabond, author who spent
time in Kent topic of Nov. 1 event

By Paul Bauer
Author and Kent book dealer

A short, slightly stooped middle-aged man stubbed out a cigarette and walked through the door of my bookshop in Kent, Ohio. In the six years I'd known Mort Krahl this scene had repeated itself hundreds of times. Mort (real name Ron, Mort being a nickname acquired in tribute to comic Mort Sahl) was such a frequent visitor that I often handed him the keys to the shop when I was away. Mort had survived the turbulent 1960s and his own personal aftermath in the 1970s to become one of the fine poets associated with Shelley's Book Bar at the corner of Franklin and Summit. He was also a first-rate bread baker and tended bar at the Town Tavern. And he was an inveterate note-taker, stopping every few feet in his wanderings around town to jot down whatever struck him as interesting. Mort could be curmudgeonly and irascible – I regarded that as part of his charm – but was at his core a bookish and gentle soul.

On this particular summer afternoon in 1992, Mort, as usual, mentioned whatever book he had just finished. His typical review was, "It had its moments." Mort was an omnivorous reader but consumed paperback mysteries like salted peanuts. He also asked about one book in particular. Mort requested a copy of *The Bruiser* by Jim Tully, who was regarded by many as the father of hard-boiled fiction.

I was slightly pained to say that I'd never heard of the book since I was a great fan of the genre. My humiliation was complete when Mort added that Tully had lived in Kent for six years.

When Mort said Tully was a hard-boiled writer, I'd assumed he wrote mysteries. Yet Tully didn't appear in any of the usual mystery references. He did, I discovered, appear in my favorite reference book, William Coyle's *Ohio Authors and Their Books*. The entry for "Tully, Jim" was written by Paul Chapman, an English professor at Mount Union College in Alliance.

Tully's biography, according to Chapman, was fascinating. Born in 1886 (Chapman gave an incorrect date) in St. Marys, Ohio, Tully had little formal education beyond a stint in an orphanage.



Jim Tully, above, is the topic of KHS' "All About Kent" program that will be held Tuesday, Nov. 1, at Christ Episcopal Church, 118 S. Mantua St. in Kent. Tully lived in Kent before making his way to Hollywood, where, for a time, he worked for Charlie Chaplin, seen at right with Tully.



While still a child, he hopped a train and spent the next years crisscrossing the country. As Chapman gently put it, he "had wide, first-hand experience with various unattractive aspects of American life ..." Tully traveled with drifters, slept in hobo jungles, worked as a circus roustabout, a tree surgeon, professional boxer and newspaper reporter. Tully's life was the stuff of pulp nonfiction.

And, we later learned, he wooed and lost Nellie Dingley, Kent's first librarian. During his road years he haunted public libraries and between trains was kept company by Conrad, Twain, Dostoyevsky, and others. He found his way to Hollywood, where he committed himself to writing, saw his first book published and, for a time, worked for Charlie Chaplin. That book, *Emmett Lawler*, like most of those that followed, was autobiographical in nature and drew on Tully's road years.

How, I wondered, could I have never heard of this guy? Surely, my well-read friend Mark Dawidziak, then at the Akron Beacon Journal, would be able to tell me more about Tully. When Mark dropped by the shop, I mentioned Tully. Nothing. I pulled Coyle off the shelf, opened it to Tully's entry and jabbed my finger on the page. Mark was intrigued. He later

found a copy of *Shanty Irish* at The Bookseller in Akron and, after reading a few pages of Tully's autobiographical novel of his childhood in western Ohio, he too was hooked.

We started rounding up Tully's books. This was not as straightforward as it seemed. There was no bibliography and no Internet. We compiled a working list of his books from Tully's dust-jacket flaps and began collecting magazine articles by or about Tully, as well as books about Hollywood, boxing, vagabondage and histories of St. Marys and Kent. And I started pulling newspaper microfilm at the Kent State University Library, scanning reel after reel, year after year, looking for Tully's name to pop up in

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Kent Historical Society

The Kent Historian is a quarterly publication of the Kent Historical Society, a nonprofit organization that strives to be the primary Kent history resource and reference center, leading the community in the collection, preservation and interpretation of Kent's heritage through exhibits, educational programs and activities. The society offers educational programs to schools, businesses and civic organizations.

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Pufferbelly Restaurant marks 30 years this Dec. 16

By Sandy Halem
KHS President

Everyone has always credited Sam Apicello with the idea of beginning the Kent Historical Society in 1971. Sam gathered the other founding trustees, Bill Birkner, John Carson, Titus Jackman, Leland Keller, Jim Myers, Reed Strimple and Loris Troyer, to help create the organization that would preserve Kent's history. While Sam served as its first president, the task of creating a museum and all of the exhibits fell to Bill Birkner, who would devote thousands of hours of his time. Our first Board of Trustees reflected a variety of skills that would serve as the template for future board members. This was going to be a "working" board that had to craft a mission worthy of our community.

Though the board drew up a list of important buildings worthy of preservation around Kent, the fate of the Erie Depot became the focus of all its energy. The Depot exists because of that mixture of public/private partnerships

which seems such a familiar phrase today.

With the opening of the Pufferbelly restaurant on Dec. 16, 1981, the Kent Historical Society had an anchor. By 1984 both the Kent Historical Society and the Kent Chamber of Commerce would occupy the second floor. The Pufferbelly Restaurant, now under the ownership of long-time manager Kevin Long, continues to be a destination point.

www.pufferbellyltd.com/

The second floor is now rented to Jason Noble who specializes in studio photography. His web site is [//www.nobleimages.net/](http://www.nobleimages.net/)

This past year the society acquired a new home at 237 E. Main St. I urge you to spend an hour with us before the end of the year and perhaps shop for something special for your holiday gifts. The warmth of our home, its beautiful rooms, displays and artifacts delight everyone who has visited.

I smile every day I come to volunteer.

Remember our hours are 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, or by special appointment for research or tours.

Tell us your memories of Kent landmark

On Aug. 28, 1972, a Kent landmark burned to the ground.

But many people have pleasant memories of shopping at Kent's commercial block, located at Main and Water streets, erected in 1836-37 by Zenas Kent.

Roger Di Paolo, editor of the Record-Courier, is writing an article to mark the 40th anniversary of the event next year and would

like to hear some of your memories.

Where did you shop? Do you have photographs of the fire?

Help us paint a picture of that block's most recent history and its tragic end.

Please email your written memories or photographs to khs@kentohiohistory.org. You may also mail them or bring them in person during our regular hours.

John, Jean Jacobs honored with first Birkner award

This September, the Board of Trustees voted to create the “William A. Birkner Distinguished Service Award.”

No two people could fill this extraordinary call to service more than Jean and John Jacobs, named our first recipients. Jean and John Jacobs first volunteered on Jan. 24, 2008. Hundreds of hours later, the two of them have shown the same love, devotion and respect to our society and museum that they show for one another. John and Jean are a team. They have a long and distinguished history within our community which unites two outstanding families: the Longcoys and the Jacobs. They don't just volunteer to do what they want – they volunteer to do what needs to be done.

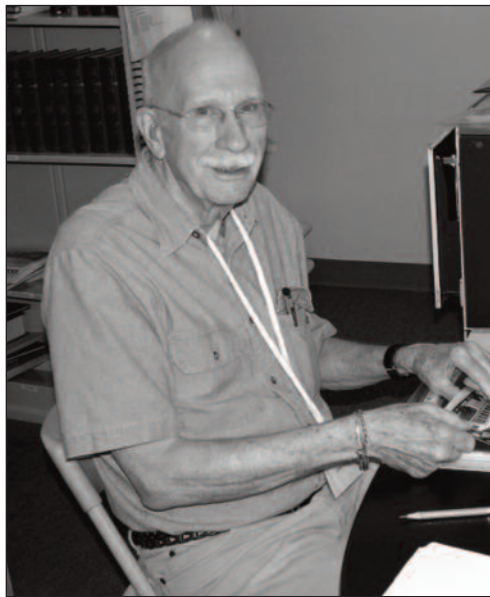
Please join with our board of trustees, staff and friends, including special guest Carol Birkner, as we honor our dear friends the Jacobs at the special award ceremony and reception following the “All About Kent” program on Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2011, at Christ Episcopal Church in Kent. The program begins at 7 pm and features guest speakers Paul Bauer and Mark Dawidziak.

John Jacobs was born in Kent and graduated from Kent State High School in 1945. He graduated from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathy and was a physician in Kent for 39 years. He retired from family practice in 1993.

After becoming interested in learning about Jean's genealogy, their involvement at KHS “just seemed kind of natural,” Dr. Jacobs said.

“There are good people and interesting things to do and we are always learning,” Dr. Jacobs said.

Jean (Longcoy) Jacobs was born in Kent. Joshua Woodard, Jean's maternal grandfather, came to Kent in 1811. Her paternal grandfa-



John and Jean Jacobs, above, are the first recipients of the “William A. Birkner Distinguished Service Award.” The Jacobs will be honored at a ceremony and reception following the Nov. 1 “All About Kent” program at Christ Episcopal Church.

ther, David Longcoy, settled in Kent in 1834.

Jean attended Kent State High School, where she studied business. She worked at the family-owned Longcoy Grocery, which began serving the community in the mid-1800s. The Jacobs married in 1950 and have two children, Steve and Jan.

“I love the city of Kent,” Jean said. “I love learning about it and helping others discover Kent's history.”

Birkner was a founding member, past KHS president (1981-1995) and director of KHS' Rowe Museum. Born in Kent, he served in the Navy during W.W.II and graduated from Kent State University upon his return. He worked for several companies, including Davey Tree,

and retired in 1989 from Field Local Schools, where he taught industrial arts for 18 years.

Birkner worked at building a historical society, collecting its earliest artifacts and helping raise awareness about the importance of preserving the history of the Kent community.

Loris Troyer, another founding member of KHS, described Birkner's role there in a newsletter article in July 1989:

“Bill Birkner was a virtual one-man director of the renovation effort. He spent many hours of on-hands labor, an effort the community recognized in 1982 when he was awarded the Kent Area Chamber of Commerce Public Service Medal. The Depot's central tower is named in his honor.”

Oral History ... Bill Birkner

Nov. 14, 1990 (transcribed and edited)
Prepared for the Kent Historical Society Oral History Project by Dave Ressler and John Capretta, students of Dr. William Wilen's Secondary Social Studies Methods Class in the College of Education.

Interviewer: When the trains were running through here (Kent) quite frequently, (what were some of the) problems of the traffic before some of the bridges were built?

Birkner: Sometimes it was almost impossible to get through town, because — this was especially during World War II. Of course, I can remember that quite vividly. There were trains

on this track all the time, and you had three places where you could cross — one was Crain Avenue and one was Main Street and one was Stow Street. And you might have trains ... actually, one train would come down the track this way, and just about the



Birkner

time that he was off of the three crossings, one would come from the other direction. And sometimes you would sit there — I know I have sat there for more than an hour, waiting

for a train. And then the other part that really got us was where the roundhouse was. They had all these tracks where they'd pull the cars off to unload them. It was like a terminal. And they'd be switching, and sometimes regular trains weren't going in and out — while the switches were on the tracks, and they were switching stuff around.

And sometimes they'd close Crain Avenue for 20 or 30 minutes before you could get across. And this is the reason that they finally built the bridge over the tracks.

(The new bridge over the Cuyahoga River to replace the Crain Avenue bridge is scheduled to open to traffic this November.)

the local papers. Mark and I compared notes on Sept. 24, 1992, and, we grandly announced to our wives that we would write the first-ever biography of Jim Tully. They were encouraging. Publishers, we would discover, were not.

Both of our big breaks occurred on the Kent State campus. The first came courtesy of Michael Cole, a KSU librarian. Michael had noticed my heavy use of the microfilm readers and asked what it was I was looking for. He noted Tully's name and promised to do some looking. A few weeks later, Michael surprised me with the news that he had located Tully's personal papers. Over 100 boxes were deposited at UCLA's Special Collections Library. In just a few months we'd gone from having little more than the entry in *Ohio Authors* to having more than enough material for a detailed biography.

With the help of my wife, Francine, and Mort, who watched the shop, I flew to Los Angeles in July 1993 and met Mark, who was already there on newspaper business. Mark's wife, Sara, also joined us.

The boxes of Tully's papers were even better than we'd imagined. There were Tully's manuscripts, published books and articles, tax returns, newspaper clippings, divorce papers and all the other raw material necessary for a biography. And, best of all, nothing had been touched since it was donated by Tully's widow in the 1950s. I will always look back on those UCLA days with much happiness. Opening every box was Christmas morning.

The trail in St. Marys and Kent had largely gone cold. Francis Kline recalled his father talking about Tully's visits to the family grocery in Kent, but that was it. So we were thrilled to learn that Tully's daughter, Trilby, was living just outside Los Angeles. If we were to be limited to just one interview, this was the one to get. Before flying out, we'd heard from Trilby's son, Robin, that his mother had suffered a stroke. With lowered expectations we decided to proceed with the interview and on a sunny California afternoon, Sara and I were greeted at the door by Robin and his wife. It was far worse than we'd imagined. Trilby was confused and speechless. All those memories. Gone. We'd missed her by just a few weeks.

Back at UCLA, Mark, Sara and I sat at long, wooden tables in the Special Collections room and made our way through the boxes. Our time in LA was limited and we worked quickly, taking notes (pencil only) on yellow legal pads or setting some papers aside to be photocopied by the library staff. We worked from opening to close with only a short break for lunch. It was both intense and exhilarating, but there was just too much to look at and too little time. Mark and I returned the following summer and Mark returned a third time to examine the last boxes. One afternoon stands out. We pulled a newspaper out of one of the boxes with a headline that was so shocking, we had to



Tully wooed and lost Nellie Dingley, above, Kent's first librarian, who later served as a nurse and died in France during W.W.I.

reread it several times. The incident we read about that afternoon at UCLA would provide the perfect ending for our book: shocking, dark and twisted.

We returned to Ohio and unpacked stacks of yellow legal pads and photocopies. We had gone from too little information to far more than either of us could remember – and none of it was organized in any useful way. Without logging it all into a database, it was worthless. Three years and 4,000 entries later, the database was complete. We wrote an introduction and began looking for a publisher.

A few more years slipped by before we struck an informal agreement with a small press. It wasn't a good fit and we eventually parted company. Thinking that an agent might have better luck we signed a contract with a New York agency. The response was the same everywhere. The acquisitions editors loved the idea, but the marketing people worried about promoting the biography of a subject so unknown.

Even with two of us, the writing was daunting. We were aware that this would be not just

the first biography of Tully, but possibly also the last. We had to get it right. The book needed to be rich in detail but could not become a data dump. We outlined the chapters and divided them between us according to interest. Mark, for example, tended to get the chapters on Hollywood, Chaplin and Broadway, while I worked on Tully's St. Marys and Kent days, including his boxing career. It was also important that the writing be seamless and have one voice so we edited each other's chapters. Disagreements were inevitable but rare and, in every instance, minor and quickly resolved. I had many occasions to congratulate myself on my choice of partner.

When our contract with our agent expired, we filed away the first few chapters we'd written and turned to other projects. Tully's life had seemed like a terrific idea for a book, but I was forced to concede that the project was beginning to look like a lost cause.

Our second big break came at a reception hosted by Kent State University Press. Mark and I had both known Will Underwood, the Press's new director, for a few years and when we bumped into Will, Tully's name came up. Not only was the Press interested in the biography, but they had a strong desire to reissue a few of Tully's books. This coincided with our real goal: reestablishing Tully as an important American writer. We spent years looking for a publisher only to wind up, literally, across the street from my bookshop. With Will's enthusiasm and the commitment of a publisher, work resumed.

With the biography finally rolling to completion, we began soliciting forewords for the reprints.

We were very fortunate to get forewords from filmmaker John Sayles (for *Shanty Irish*), historian Gerald Early (for *The Bruiser*), and my old friend Harvey Pekar (for *Circus Parade*). Harvey's fine piece was one of the last things he wrote. And Mark succeeded in getting a superb foreword from Ken Burns for the biography. The reissues appeared over the last two years and, after 19 years, Jim Tully's biography was published in spring 2011.

Nellie Dingley once wondered aloud to Jim, "It will be interesting to know what becomes of you ... if you do not get killed in some saloon or the ring." Now, at last, we know.

Books about, penned by Tully available at KHS

--The book "*Jim Tully: American Writer, Irish Rover, Hollywood Brawler*," by Paul J. Bauer and Mark Dawidziak, is on sale at the Kent Historical Society.

The biography "compellingly describes the hardscrabble life of an Irish American storyteller, from his immigrant roots, rural upbringing, and life as a hobo riding the rails to the emergent dream factory of early and

Golden Age Hollywood and the fall of his fortunes during the Great Depression," according to the Kent State University Press website. Also available are *Beggars of Life*, *Circus Parade*, *The Bruiser*, and *Shanty Irish*, written by Jim Tully.

Books also are available through KSU Press at (330) 672-7913 or at www.kentstateuniversitypress.com

Birthday bash for bridge comes off without a hitch

More than 100 people witnessed our celebration of the Stone Arch Bridge dedication.

The Kent Historical Society and Kent Parks and Recreation co-sponsored "Bridging Kent's History." A unveiling of the city's Bicentennial Sculpture was followed by a gala celebrating the 134th anniversary of the opening of the Stone Arch Bridge.

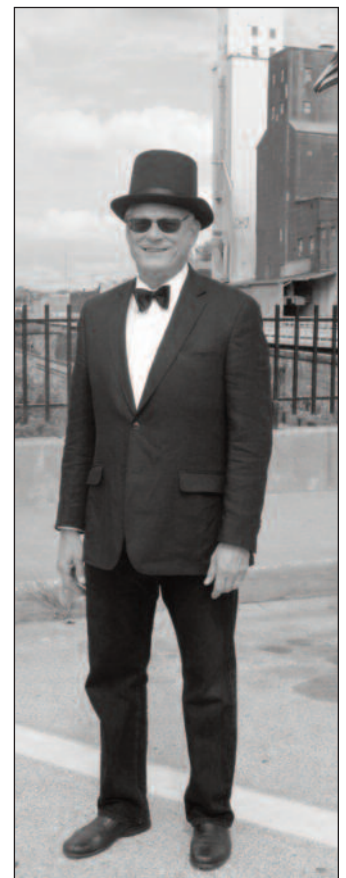
The sun came out to welcome the crowd that gathered by the Gazebo as artist George Danhires spoke about the creation of Kent's own Bicentennial Sculpture. The sculpture, which is a bronze relief, is mounted on a sandstone taken from Plum Creek Park. It is located between the Gazebo and the Pufferbelly Restaurant on Franklin Avenue.

Taking their seats directly on the bridge, spectators enjoyed a performance by the "Advanced Choral Ensemble," or A.C.E.s. The group, from Theodore Roosevelt High School, was directed by Donna Crews. Following a welcome from Kent Historical Society Director Tom Hatch, architect David Sommers of David Sommers & Associates spoke about the features of the bridge. Although there once were many similar bridges across the country, few remain because they were not large enough to accommodate traffic. Those responsible for the bridge's construction, particularly Marvin Kent, insisted that the bridge be built at 60-feet wide instead of the original proposal of 40 feet.

The crowd was treated to a re-enactment of the ceremony that marked the bridge's opening in 1877. Donning costumes for their roles were Jeff St. Clair as then-Mayor Charles Kent; Ron Burbick as Edward Parsons; Jim Myers as Simon Wolcott; John Jacobs as Edward Day; David Hassler as T.B. Townsend; and Bruce Dzeda as Marvin Kent. The original script was written by Sandy Halem.

The crowd smiled as an authentic 1891 Kramer freight wagon — owned by the Bourgeois family of Stow and Hudson — was pulled across the bridge by two magnificent Belgian horses named Jim and Cody, both about 9 years old. In the wagon were Harold and Harry Ruggles, who are the grandsons of Oscar Champney, the first person to drive a wagon over the bridge in 1877. Helping Jack Shuman with the horses were Roger Bourgeois, Ron and Kathy Sadler, Pat Shuman and Jessie Hodge, daughter of Pat and Jack Shuman.

The festivities continued at the Home Savings Plaza, where cake prepared by Judy Lanfranchi was served. Special thanks to Marilyn Sessions and Home Savings for their assistance in organizing this event. Tours in Heritage Park also were led by Cathy Ricks of Kent Parks and Recreation



Clockwise from top: The team of Belgian horses turns around on Franklin Avenue after participating in the bridge gala; Bruce Dzeda as Marvin Kent; re-enactors from the Portage County Historical Society get in step with Jeff St Clair who portrayed then-Mayor Charles Kent; waiting to take their turn, from left, are Hatch, Hassler, Jacobs, Myers, Sommers and Burbick.

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Bob Evans event benefits KHS



A fundraiser to benefit the Kent Historical Society was held Sept. 29 at Bob Evans in Kent. More than \$200 was raised to create a new train and transportation display. Enjoying the event, from left, are, Chet Williams, KHS board member Jim Myers and his wife, Sally Myers, Jean Fulton and Dr. John Fulton.

KHS revises hours for winter season

Your last opportunity to visit the Kent Historical Society this year will be Saturday, Dec. 17.

KHS will close for the holidays Dec. 18 and then remain closed to the public in January to allow the staff an opportunity to work on archives and artifacts.

Special appointments and tours still can be arranged by calling (330) 678-2712.

If you have a research question, have an artifact you would like KHS to consider for possible donation or have a special group that would enjoy a tour during January, please call the office and leave a message about your request. Staff and volunteers will call to address your requests as soon as possible.

KHS will re-open to the public on Friday, Feb. 3, 2012, and continue our regular business hours from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Friday and Saturday.