

History – Decades-old Correspondence Gives View of Town Back Then.

I've been pouring over Henry Castle's writings, including letters written to his friend, Jack Robertson, in the 50's.

He comes through the pen and ink as a man opinionated to the extremes, a definite Wasp, and just when you are starting to mildly dislike him, out come a line so Twainish that I have to chuckle out load. Henry of course, was our early historian.

So many things which he writes are similar to events in the paper today. I look with new understanding at public works projects and schools, thanks to "The Squire".

Of a childhood trip to Lake Compounce (he was born in 1869) before the rides and heavy entertainment reigned, he wrote that he watched folks bowling, looked at the stuffed rattlesnake on the wall, and was rowed about on the lake.

Then the puckish humor overcomes the factual memory (I hope), and declares that one of his father's friends stirred the lemonade with his wooden leg! Some Castle's sayings that I love are, "Tougher than boiled owl", "Turned over a new leaf and put a brick on it", and "Hollering Torment". He also liked punch, but not if it "lacked authority", and also admired good coffee, "not the usual run of the tan-bark".

He tells of trying to get a very difficult photo with his home made camera, when a troupe of youngsters began teasing to have their picture taken. (Never try photography when schools getting out) He solemnly instructed them to line up, just so, smile, just so, and snapped the picture with them just out of the frame.

When Castle was a young man, he worked for the publisher and bookseller Brown and Gross in Hartford. Here he met many of the dignitaries of the day, including mark Twain. Why, oh why, didn't he leave his impression on the writer?

I kept reading and found in Castle's own handwritten recollections of his days in Hartford, the following: "Mark twain was an infrequent caller during my eight years at the store, regardless of the opinions of others, I did not take to him and if I saw him shuffling up to the door, I made for the basements , as if I knew he always had some fault to find with me or with someone else and I resented it. Perhaps, this was all my fault, but I never chose to change my attitude."

Who said never the twain shall meet?

In January 1950, he writes, "The Broad Street folks demand that the old wood Broad Street school building from 1872, be torn down and a new brick one built".

What the school Board seems to want is to put up a new building off Farmington Avenue, turn the present high school into a junior high school and build a new high

school about opposite the old burying grounds on East Street. He is aghast that this could cost the town over a million dollars. Oh, Henry! You should see what it actually cost!

Now still in January 1950, he reports, The White Oak Engineers (West Main Street) have notified the town to get out of the dump in back of the store and Strand theater, and find a new place for its tin cans and rubbish forthwith. (When the author came to Plainville in 1946, that dump was always smoldering and spreading a stinking pall over the center of town. Coming from the mountain where clean air was a “given” I was literally sickened). Castle continues, “People on Unionville Avenue have been patted on the back and assured that the lot that has been bought in back of King’s place would not be used for dumping”.

Now in 2002, that is exactly where it is called the landfill now.

Again in January, “Saturday was a fine day, with temperature near the 50’s, so I went for awhile to watch the bulldozers spread the sand over the dump,. The place now looks quite level, and all the unsightly stuff under, but cans and that sort of stuff make a poor foundation. I can feel the surface shake when the bulldozer runs across. The fill is at least 10 feet deep, but not yet high enough to be above high water in flood time”.

Interested in everything and mostly criticizing it, he goes up to North Washington Street. “The railroad began work on the overhead bridge up to the burial grounds (West Cemetery) it is expected to take ten days to pull out the old bridge, lay the new timbers and planks. They will build a narrow bridge for people to walk across on, but cars will have to go around Forestville to get to northern North Washington Street. In March he follows up with “The new bridge is finished and it was a cold job, taking longer than thought”. They had a crane and truck to handle the timbers, working from the south side of the street, not having to go down to the tracks. This new bridge will permit loads of ten tons, and today there are even some heavier than that.”

“It is now settled that the dump will be in the back of King’s, where the Blue Barn is”.

He then conjectures where the road will be cut in, connecting to Unionville Avenue with the dump. He estimates the price at \$40,000.

This would now be known as Granger lane. Now he tucks in a story: Twain to the hilt, about a lady on Washington Street whose cat died of old age. She acquired a new, young Thomas cat. The following he claimed, made the Herald and Hartford Courant. “ The new Tom Cat has probably heard of race equality, and one day she noticed that when she put down a dish of “cow juice” (milk) on the floor, the cat came to eat, and soon a mouse appeared and the two have eaten together ever since”. He declared that if she

ever wants to get rid of the mouse, she will have to do it herself for the cat won't. Henry Castle left us a lot of history and not a few good laughs.