

History Mystery

History comes to life at Douglas County Museum

On Saturday, April 23, Tuscola High School drama students presented a program at the Douglas County Museum portraying people represented on the museum's mural. These are the stories they told.

Minnie Conn Jolley Portrayed by Raeanna Boyer

I was born in 1901 and was one of six Conn siblings to serve in the military. Embry was in the Navy, Lucy was a WAC, Edith was a nurse, Jonas was in the Army, Stella was a WAVE, and I was a CAP, serving in the Civilian Air Patrol Auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force. At the time, there were many who thought women weren't capable of flying or being mechanics, but I knew planes inside and out. I even had to make my own propeller and put an engine together to qualify for service. I served as the Deputy Flight Leader of the CAP at Lunken Airport. I logged many hours in my flight books and could fix an engine or fuselage after I took a four-year course in aviation.

To further support the war effort during World War II, I raised money by giving people plane rides around Cincinnati in exchange for buying war bonds. The CAPS rose over \$600,000 for the war effort?

I didn't just love flying planes; I loved jumping out of them. My first jump was in 1936. I started parachuting because I wanted to gain confidence for future solo airplane flights. I became one of only 12 women in the National Parachute Jumper's Association. I started participating in stunt shows, parachuting in front of crowds. Parachuting represents a sensation one can never find anywhere else. I was honored with a membership in both the National Aeronautics Association of the U.S.A and The Greater Cincinnati Airmen's Club.

Joseph Gurney "Uncle Joe" Cannon Portrayed by Thomas Spillman

I was born in 1836. People called me "Uncle Joe." I was a United States politician and leader of the Republican Party. I even served as Speaker of the United States House of Representatives from 1903 to 1911, and many consider me to be the most dominant Speaker in United States history. I am also the second-longest continuously serving Republican Speaker in history and the longest serving Republican Representative ever, as well as the first member of Congress, of either party, to surpass 40 years of service.

I spent my childhood in Indiana, the elder of two sons of Gulielma and Horace Franklin Cannon, a teacher and doctor. My family was Quaker and I had been taught to believe in the equality of man in the sight of God. To us, slavery was abhorrent.

My father participated in the Underground Railroad operating in Parke County, Ind., and harbored fugitive slaves. He was once fined heavily because he defied the law and prejudices of his non-Quaker neighbors by letting me work in a field with a freed man. He had to sell his livestock and part of his equipment to pay the fine. Seeing my father's horses being taken by the sheriff was one of the most painful incidents in my early life. When I was 15, my father was killed trying to reach a patient. At this young age, I took charge of the family farm.

In 1858, I was admitted to



TUSCOLA HIGH SCHOOL drama students portraying Douglas County historic figures Saturday are, front row, left to right: Liriel Jones, Raeanna Boyer, Reggan Smith, Gracie Johnson, Elle Jones. Back row: Kaleb Jeffers, Caleb Haste, Brady Urban, Grant Kauffman, Karson Jeffers and Thomas Spillman. Submitted photo.

the bar and later relocated to Tuscola where I became state's attorney for the 27th judicial district of Illinois from 1861 to 1868. I was one of the charter members of Tuscola's Masonic Lodge No. 332, which was founded on October 2, 1860, and my brother William Cannon and I founded the Second National Bank of Tuscola. I also became a follower of Abraham Lincoln during the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858.

In 1872, I was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where I served for 46 years. In 1876, I moved to Danville. People would describe me as a staunch conservative who, because of seniority, held important committee chairmanships. As Speaker of the House, I exercised the power of that office to protect the prerogatives of the legislative branch as a check on the power of the presidency. That was until March 1910, when a resolution passed, making the speaker ineligible for membership on the committee on rules, which meant much of the power I held was taken away.

I later brought a federal Veterans Administration Hospital to Danville which continues to serve military veterans. I also appeared on the cover of the first issue of Time magazine. The newspapers frequently lampooned me as a colorful rube, clashing with fellow Republican Theodore Roosevelt, but in my opinion, he had no more use for the Constitution than a tomcat has for a marriage license. I didn't want change and reform... I wanted to protect the constitution and what it stood for.

Lester Alvin "Smiley" Burnett

Portrayed by Caleb Haste

I was born in 1911. I was a country music performer and comedic actor in Western films, radio and TV. I played sidekick to Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and other movie cowboys. I was also an accomplished singer-songwriter and I could play as many as 100 musical instruments. My career spanned four decades.

In my teens in 1929, I worked for Tuscola's WDW Radio station. I opened WDW at 6 a.m. and ran all aspects of the

radio station until 6 p.m., seven days a week. WDW's airtime was Dawn to Dusk and was originally set up to announce the grain prices in 1917 by James Bush. That's where I came by my nickname while creating a character for a WDW children's program from a Mark Twain character, Jim Smiley and his frog.

My character "Frog" and later "Smiley" as I was called, wore a checkered shirt, a tattered black Stetson cowboy hat with turned up brim, and I had a white horse with a black ringed eye. My checkered shirt and baggy pants gave me a whimsical, comical, yet lovable character look I wanted.

When I started in 1929, the station manager, Edith Bush or "Mom Bush" as we called her, insisted that all entertainment be performed live and in one room to prevent complete chaos. I loved the Bushes and I even wrote Mom Bush a song, entitled, "Momma Don't Allow No Music Played in Here."

In 1933, with Mom Bush's blessing, I was hired by Gene Autry to play accordion on National Barn Dance on Chicago's WLS-AM. In 1934, as sound films were gaining popularity, Autry and I were cast in Old Santa Fe. Gene Autry and I produced 62 Westerns together with me playing Autry's comedic sidekick, Frog Millhouse. By 1940, I ranked second only to Autry in a box-office magazine popularity poll of Western stars.

I was able to play a sidekick to not just Gene, but to Eddie Dew, Sunset Carson, and Bob Livingston, and Roy Rogers. Charles Starrett and I were paired together in 56 films.

I loved writing music... I wrote more than 400 songs and sang many on screen. One of my hits, "Ridin' Down the Canyon," was later recorded by Willie Nelson and other artists. I also composed musical scores for such films as The Painted Stallion and Waterfront Lady.

Then, in the mid-1960s, I got a part on TV portraying railway engineer Charley Pratt on the CBS-TV programs Petticoat Junction and Green Acres. Unfortunately, I became ill with leukemia just a month before my 56th birthday just after filming wrapped for the fourth

season of Petticoat.

Even after I made it big in the movies, I came back to Tuscola to see everyone, especially the Bushes, and give my thanks to them for giving me a start.

Douglas County is also home to actor James Gammon of Newman, and actress Jennie Garth, who spent much of her youth on a 25-acre horse ranch between Sadorus and Arcola, and for a time in Tuscola, too.

Maxine Thayer Portrayed by Liriel Jones, Thayer's great niece

I was born in 1921 and was a softball player and coach. I was born and lived in Tuscola and played softball from the early 1940s till 1955. I then went on to coach and manage ASA Women's Fast Pitch teams like the Anchoresses for 29 years, participating in seven National Tournaments with a 3rd place finish in 1974. I became the most winning coach with 1,118 wins and 475 losses. I also coached AAU basketball and softball and basketball at Arlington High School and was co-owner of the Metro Softball Stadium. I served as Deputy Softball Commissioner for 28 years in Indy and was the league director of slow pitch for girls under 19 years old.

Indy was so good to me... They dubbed me Indy's First Lady of Softball. I was presented in 1963 with the All Sports Award medal by the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, was nominated for 1976 Indianapolis Woman of the Year, and I was included in the 1977-78 edition of Who's Who of American Women. In 1984, I was presented with the Sagamore of the Wabash award by Governor Robert Orr, and Mayor William Hudnut declared August 19, 1984, "Maxine Thayer Day." I also became the first woman lifetime member of ASA in 1978 and was inducted into the ASA Hall of Fame in 1988.

Douglas County is also home to another ball player. Richard Hyde, who was born in Hindsboro, in 1928, was an American relief pitcher in professional baseball who worked in the Major Leagues for six seasons from 1955 to 1961 for the Washington Senators and

Baltimore Orioles. His son, Rich Hyde, was also a professional baseball pitcher.

Dr. Benjamin Franklin Roller Portrayed by Grant Kauffman

I was born in 1876. I was a physician, university professor, and three-time American Heavyweight Champion wrestler. I grew up on a farm in Newman before attending school in Indiana. There I played football and track. I was captain and coach of the track team and football team, and was pronounced by the Indianapolis and Chicago papers the best football player in the central states. I also represented the Chicago Athletic Association against that of New York, and broke the world's record in discus throwing, and made 148 feet, 6 inches with a 16-pound hammer.

I found college was expensive and I needed a way to earn money to pay for it. An opportunity presented itself and I became a professional football player. It helped put me through school. I graduated from Du Pauw University, completing the seven-year course in five years.

After college, I practiced medicine briefly before I started teaching. During my tenure at the University of Washington in Seattle, I became a professional wrestler at the age of 30, with my first match in 1906. My first professional match was against Jack Carkeek. I won two falls in a period of 17 minutes and received \$1,600. After that, I started having matches around the Northwest, under the names Dr. Roller, Dr. B.F. Roller, and Doc Roller.

I next wrestled Frank Gotch in an exhibition match, for which I received \$4,000. After the bout with Gotch, I decided to use wrestling as tool for traveling the world and studying under the noted professors in both the United States and Europe. Over the span of my career, I defeated many of the top wrestlers of my day. These wrestlers included Farmer Burns, Fred Beell, Ed Lewis, and Joe Stecher. I was a good wrestler winning my fair share of matches, and held the Amer-

ican Heavyweight title on three occasions.

From 1906-1918, I posted a record of 39 wins, 26 losses, and four draws in 69 matches. Frank Gotch, considered to be the best wrestler of all time by many, hailed me as the "second best" wrestler in the United States in 1909. I continued to wrestle and break many ribs along the way.

I retired in 1918 and continued to practice medicine until 1933. During this time, I wrote a syndicated column for newspapers around the country on health and physical culture topics and even came up with my own training system dubbed "Rollerism."

Johnny Gruelle Portrayed by Kaleb Jeffers

I was born in 1880 in Arcola. I was an American artist, political cartoonist, songwriter, children's book author and illustrator. I am best known as the creator of Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy.

My father, Richard, who was a self-taught portrait and landscape painter, was associated with the Hoosier Group of American Impressionist painters. I was the eldest of three children and our parents exposed us to music, literature, and art. I became interested in art, and learned drawing from my father.

My cartoons first appeared in print in the Indianapolis Star in 1905. From 1906 to 1911, my cartooning work appeared in many newspapers usually signed as Gruel, including The Toledo News-Bee, The Pittsburgh Press, The Tacoma Times, and The Spokane Press. My big break came in 1910-1911, when two of my entries for a full-page, comic-drawing contest sponsored by the New York Herald won first and second place among the submissions from 1,500 entrants. My first-place entry, "Mr. Twee Deedle," was syndicated in weekly installments nationwide until 1918.

As I earned notoriety as a cartoonist for the Herald, I also pursued writing and illustrating my own fairy tales. My first major illustrating commission was a single-volume edition of