

# Village Voices

## In Our Own Words

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### **“BAD BOYS”: THE MEEKS MURDERS** by Kathy Hoff

My father was a great story teller who taught me lots about his family’s history, but I learned about the murder in his family only after his death—via the internet. This is how that came about.

My family name is *Taylor*. That name is so commonplace that it thwarts genealogy research. One day I was lucky, though. In an online *Taylor* forum, I found a posting by a *Holland*. A Holland married a Taylor several generations back. The modern internet poster, married to a Holland, was able to give me information from a Taylor Bible handed down from my third-great grandparents. After the Bible entries, she emailed this afterthought: “You had some very bad boys on your side, didn’t you?”

Really? Did I? That was news to me. The Taylor grandfather I knew was a pillar of his community, a model of rectitude, the superintendent of his church’s Sunday

school. His pioneer father before him was a hard-working, civic-minded wheat rancher and one-term Oregon state senator. Nothing in the family history that I knew about had any hint of “bad boys” beyond boyhood mischief by my father. My father was gone, so I couldn’t ask him. Intrigued, I poked around on the internet and discovered William and George Taylor and the Meeks murders of Linn County, Missouri. William and George were indeed bad boys.

The Taylors are described in various sources as wealthy and influential. Both were married family men. George, like many of his Linn County neighbors, was a farmer, but William, unusually for his day, had studied law at the state university and, in his mid-twenties, had served in the state legislature. William worked in the Peoples’ Exchange Bank in Browning, where he, with the collaboration of his brother, had gotten into the forgery and larceny difficulties.

Their murder victims, the Meeks family—father Gus, mother Delora, and two

little girls, ages four and 18 months—were attacked along the road outside Browning, Missouri, on the night of May 10, 1894. The two adults were shot; the two girls had their heads bashed in with a rock. A third child, six-year-old Nellie, left for dead alongside her sisters, regained consciousness at dawn and staggered to a nearby farmhouse to get help.

Local citizens found the victims, loosely covered with straw, on the farm of George Taylor. George promptly fled, along with brother William. In late June, the Taylors were captured in Arkansas and were returned to Carrollton, Missouri, for trial. They were tried twice. The first trial ended in a hung jury. In the retrial, they were convicted of the first-degree murder of Gus Meeks. The brothers, sentenced to hang, broke out of jail on April 11, 1896. George escaped and was never recaptured, but William was hanged on April 30, 1896.

Gruesome details of the murders are readily available online. By googling “Meeks Murders Linn County Missouri,” one can discover all one would want to know. One source, *Murders by Gaslight*, includes it among “notable nineteenth century murders.” That account includes a photograph of the Meeks family corpses, studio photos of the brothers, and a photo of the public hanging of William. The murder and subsequent trials were widely covered in

the press, not only in Missouri, but also in *The New York Times*, where the murder appeared on p. 5, May 12, 1894, and the capture of the fugitive Taylors in Arkansas on the front page, June 25, 1894. It was sensational stuff.

Before the murders, the Taylors were already in difficulty for forgery, larceny, and arson. They murdered the Meeks family to prevent Gus Meeks from giving state’s evidence against them for cattle rustling. The Taylors’ flight set off a widespread manhunt. Once they were recaptured, lynch mobs gathered at various stations along their return route. Their trials evidently involved perjury and definitely produced a subsequent conviction for jury tampering.

The Meeks murders became the stuff of public entertainment. Little Nellie Meeks made a career of telling her story at carnivals—or singing it. Her family’s story soon circulated in ballads, of which this is a sample:

*About one mile from Browning town,  
At the foot of Jenkin’s Hill,  
Took place this awful murder  
By the Taylors George and Bill.*

*Gus Meek’s wife and children  
Were taken from the home,  
Were taken by those tailors  
To meet their awful doom.*

Both trial and hanging were public spectacles, attracting crowds and opportunistic vendors.

My first reaction to the bad boys' story was denial. *William* and *George* are such common given names appended to an already common surname that I rejected the murderous "bad boys" for my family tree. But as I investigated, I found that I could not deny the connection. My Taylors certainly moved west from Linn County, Missouri.

I don't believe my father ever knew this story. We used to laugh about his sister, my Aunt Maxine. As the family story went, she began researching family history in an attempt to connect our Taylor line with the Virginia line of President Zachary Taylor. When she discovered a horse thief, proper Aunt Maxine promptly gave up on family research. Now, I suspect Aunt Maxine was actually onto something. Quite possibly she did discover not a horse thief, but the murderous cattle rustlers William and George. She kept the secret, having good reason for shock and shame. The "bad boys" were her father's first cousins. The western Taylors never spoke of them.



## **SWEET PRESERVES**

**by Alice Warshaw**

We moved to Pennington during THE war. The lot next door was nearly empty except for a few trees. The owner of that corner lot lived several blocks away and agreed to let my dad tend it. He put in a

victory garden and attacked the scraggly apple tree.

The apples were tasty, but wormy the first year. Watching Dad burn out the bagworm nests with a foul-smelling torch was interesting, but netted minimal results. Spraying the following year helped.

Mom didn't bake much during the war, because of sugar rationing. However, there was a special sugar ration for preserving fruits and vegetables. Fruit preserves became her specialty, shared with friends and family. There was always a jar out for our breakfast toast, pancakes, or oatmeal.

She loved making jams and jellies—finishing each jar with a quarter inch of hot paraffin. The primitive shelves under the basement stairs held apple butter and jelly and choke cherry jelly from the tree way out back. Scavenging around the neighborhood, she found beautiful crab apples for jelly, and over beyond Metsger's on Sked St., a the field of wild strawberries, and on the way to the railroad tracks down West Welling Ave., the meadows were covered with masses of blackberry brambles.

For jelly, a gauzy bag of sweet-smelling, boiled-up fruit pulp would hang for hours from an upper kitchen cabinet knob, dripping its goodness into a bowl on the counter.

“We never squeeze the bag. We never hurry it,” she said. “That will make the jelly cloudy.” I sensed there was something sinful about cloudy jelly.

Clearly more sinful was one of the neighborhood boys my age—about eight—who followed us around, as my sister and I picked basketfuls of blackberries. He persisted in squishing blackberries on my shoulders and sun suit.

“Don’t do that! It’ll stain. I’ll tell . . .”

Later, Sister explained he just wanted to get my attention.

“Strange way of doing it,” I grumped.

“Get used to it,” she said.

She was a wise 15, beginning to notice the ways people try to attract attention and savoring the sweetness of the attempt no matter how goofy.



## **THE WORK ETHIC** by Jay Chandler

At the early and impressionable age of five or six, I was introduced to (or forced to confront) *The Work Ethic* by our father, Jim. On a spring Saturday in 1937 or 1938, Jim was at home in Lakewood, Ohio. He happily announced

after breakfast, “You boys need to learn about Work, to help the family!” Billy and I looked at each other, eyes alight, then at Jim. “You’re going to take our lawn mower and cut the backyard. Jay, you’re two years younger, so you go first and cut half, and then, Billy, you cut the rest.”

Out back, Jim pulled open the double garage doors, brought out the small push-mower for me, and I got to it. Noticing the lighter grass track the mower made, I realized I could make designs, circles, zigzags. Joy!

When I had cut about half, I went in. Billy cried when he saw what I’d left for his work, and Jim made me go out to do more. That day I learned about workplace injustice.

In September 1940, after we moved into our new home in Rocky River, Jim advanced the work requirement by offering me the opportunity to polish his shoes. I would be paid for work while learning its rewards—five cents for each shoe polished satisfactorily. Saturday morning, I picked up a black shoe. Down to the basement I went to do fine polishing. Upstairs, I asked for immediate pay, since one nickel was all I needed. Injustice again, as Jim insisted I finish the second shoe before payment.

Mowing lawns required attention to detail and so was an uptick in responsi-

bility. When Billy had moved on to bigger challenges, it fell to me to manage our yard. I worked in the sun shirtless, smelling cut grass, walking on my knees around our lawn while clipping straight edges. I got paid, and it was all good. Discovering I could advance my circumstances through entrepreneurship, I branched out onto neighbors' lawns as well.

At twelve, I polished my business credentials by applying for and obtaining a paper route. Because the *Cleveland Press*, where Jim worked as a journalist, had a rule that employees' kids couldn't work there, I got a *Cleveland News* route. The downside was that the *News* had far fewer readers, so my route covered quite a few miles for its 30 customers.

My bike became a rolling office, decked out with the perfect attachment: a big canvas *NEWS* bag as my credential. I developed ever more critical skills for the job. While peddling madly, I practiced throwing a folded evening paper onto a porch so that it leaned on the customer's door. Upstairs porches were more difficult. Practicing this skill required parking my bike, retrieving an unsuccessfully tossed paper from wet bushes or somewhere else before a further attempt.

I realized, *This is a very small business; I must collect payments to pay the route man for the papers.* Lesson learned: not all my customers cared to or were able to pay

their bills. I went to each door once a month to collect and wondered if some folks just didn't answer.

By 1947, I was fourteen-and-a-half, six foot and an inch or two more, a skinny bean pole. The day after school finished, Billy and I slept late, and in the kitchen, we found, to our surprise, Jim standing by the breakfast table. He asked, "Aren't you boys going to look for a job?"

"Uh, yes sir," Billy said hopefully. I nod, nod.

At that, Jim opened the morning paper and said that the way to search for a job was to check the want ads. Up to then, I had opened a newspaper just for the funnies and sports news. Jim pointed to a spot in the want ads and feigned surprise to find good jobs available nearby at Mr. Barko's farm. We biked there and landed jobs at 30 cents an hour. For this job, we had to get Social Security cards. We soon shed our shirts while we worked with Barko's famous perennial flowers and vegetables. The older Billy was assigned to the horse-drawn cultivator. We both enjoyed the wonderfully cool-from-constant-spray washing room where we put vegetables through the washer. We also had to muck out the horse barn and do other farm chores.

On the first day, after bolting down the good things in our lunch boxes, Billy said he was going to talk to Barko about

our pay. *Really?* I thought. Billy had found out that all those stooped-over Slovak women working in their voluminous clothing and head coverings were getting 50 cents. He went away mad and returned to me quiet. Mr. Barko told him that the women were each worth two of us. But—hooray—Barko raised us to 35 cents an hour. We were to work nine hours Monday through Saturday—54 hours a week.

Once Mr. Barko came up to me in a field and ordered, “Move that truck over there to the big field down the road.” I jumped on the running board and scooted onto the driver’s seat, wondering how to move a truck. *Oh, yes, you turn this key . . .* At that exact moment, Mr. Barko jumped onto the running board to go along. The truck, in LOW LOW gear, started up with amazing jerks, which caused the open door to flap and strike my boss, who yelled, “Don’t KILL ME!”

Another time, I watched Billy with the cultivator erratically weeding behind the angry horse and heard Barko yell to stop wiping out his prize delphiniums.

I still remember having great tomato fights with my brother, and getting black tomato goo stains on my hands.

Usually it was hot. Most days, we worked shirtless in bathing shorts, socks, and Keds. Working alongside others, especially my brother, made time swing

along. My skin sun-darkened, and my body hardened that summer of ’47. After football season in 1948, now 16, I got my driver’s license and landed a plum job at the Rocky River Food Market. Much of the time, I worked in the store as all-around handy boy, cleaning up, carrying boxes, restocking shelves. I learned how the butcher cleaned his huge and amazingly built “block” with salt and a heavy wire brush.

I was supreme as the delivery van driver, wearing a black leather purse held by an over-the-shoulder, thick leather strap. I found that when driving a load of filled grocery bags to various kitchens around town, it was best not to do racing drives around corners, because stuff flew out of the bags in the back. Eggs broke, and then I had to go to Kroger’s and buy a replacement dozen.

In Kroger’s checkout line, I felt conspicuous wearing my delivery boy outfit, holding my dozen eggs, under the curious eyes of the kind lady in front of me. An hour later, I pulled my chariot into the drive and carried the last grocery bag to the door, where I was met by that same lady. With cool calm, I carried the bag with Kroger eggs into the kitchen where I nearly bumped into her daughter, the most beautiful girl in high school, a tenth-grader—Fleur.

I married her seven years later, in 1955.

## CONFESSIONS OF A VOYEUR

by Doug Meaker

I don't recall how, but my mother became aware that I was saving my money to get a ticket to the Old Howard Theatre to see Sally Rand. She performed with balloons which popped one by one, revealing more of her—to the delight of a teenage boy (and older gentlemen).

Mother's reaction was simple: "Is she still doing that? She was performing that when I was a girl!" There is nothing like realizing that the object of your fascination is as old as your mother (maybe 35) to dampen the voyeur. I never made it to the Old Howard or the TROC (Trenton Royal Opera Club—Philly's version of the Old Howard).

A few girlfriends, 60 years of marriage, and three daughters have exhausted my interest in the feminine. A salesman neighbor down the road was noted for "fooling around." I told Robin, "You don't have to worry about me. I have quite enough female problems here at home to last a man a lifetime."

Don't know how she took that.



## LIES AND PRANKS PART II

by Jack Williams

Under the influence of my older sister Jean—as well as my own propensity—my high jinks continued. Jean was a free spirit and loved bringing home the stories of pranks her classmates were up to at Mt. Pulaski Township High School. One story Jean reported was delivery by a farm boy classmate of a 50-pound block of salt to the study hall desk of Elsie Saffley, Jean's close friend. The ensuing hilarity had to do with kidding her friend Elsie with being the Borden Cow "Elsie." For those not in the know of farm ways, blocks of salt are set among cows so they will lick the salt, drink more water, and produce more milk.

Given this training by a sister four years my senior, but with whom I was competitive, I was compelled to make my own mark.

First, I confess to have broken two bones while growing up. Both collar bones. Neither my own. One was from piling onto my third cousin in a football scrum; the other was trying to see if two could swing on a swing together as high as the swing could go. Darrell Richner and I did it, but at the end Darrell landed under me on the ground with his collar bone broken.

When I first arrived at Mt. Pulaski Township High School, the first jinks I recall was not entirely of my own doing. Kids were saying, "If you breathe deeply three times and then have someone hug you tightly from behind, you will faint". I said, "Here, let me try." The next thing I knew, Miss Martin, English teacher and librarian, was looking down at me on the floor, asking what happened.

Honing my talent for mischief, I suggested to my friends it would be a good idea to plug the keyholes of locks of all outside doors into the high school with toothpicks and glue, so school couldn't open. And yes, I was at home when I heard the deed had been done. Somehow the school administration had breached the fortress, and school went on that day. I was involved, just not in the field of action. I was so remote from it that I never even heard who got into trouble. But a twinge of remorse did set in when I saw the school's elderly janitors having to chip away at those jammed locks.

There was also a caper in Atlanta, Illinois, a town far from Mt. Pulaski, town of my high school, and Chestnut, where I lived. There are towns in between these two and Atlanta. We found ourselves in Atlanta one night, perhaps with a gallon of beer. We observed that there were streetlights over the center of every intersection, a very nice amenity of a very nice town.

We also saw that there was a flexible chain leading from each streetlight over a pulley and down a pole to a hook at the side. We decided it would be a good idea to ease one of those chains off its hook. When we let the chain go, this released the streetlight, that came rushing to the ground, stopped, by a catch on the chain, only five feet from the pavement. There it dangled, beaming light in various directions, as it rocked back and forth. Other chains were unfettered, then we skedaddled out of town. Some months later, we heard that the town-folk of Atlanta were enraged and were putting the blame on kids from the town of Beason, a town in between Atlanta and us. We kept mum.

The final high school antic was a close call. My father had insisted I take one semester of typing, and I did so. For homework, I used a Smith Corona portable. It came with two colored ribbons, one red, the other black. With my new-found typing ability and switching to red, which my typing teacher had never seen, I typed up something having to do with Principal Lloyd Hargis and beer cans along the hallways of the high school. I gave the scandalous sheet to my younger friend Alan Roos with the suggestion that maybe it would be a good idea to tack it to the bulletin board. Then I, chicken, left the scene. Lo and behold, the paper appeared on the bulletin board. This was not taken lightly by the administration. Mr. Hargis called me



into his office. He said, "John Noel, do you know anything about this?" He also raised Alan's name as the possible perpetrator. I gulped, and said, "NO SIR!!" A bold-faced lie, boldest I ever made. I thought I was doing it to protect Alan, but of course it protected me as well. How did they finger me? I suspect the Smith Corona ribbon was the clue.

In keeping with the character of my high school—conservative, demanding, but underneath, compassionate and understanding that kids will be kids—the matter was dropped. Alan continued as lead trumpet in our outstanding school band, and I was favored by the award of valedictorian even though Kathleen McCubbin had a better report card. She hadn't taken math, chemistry, or physics, but concentrated on home economics.

I grew up in a village, came to live in and love big cities, and now find myself, again, in a village I love and am devoted to. Just be glad though, that Pennswood has no outhouses susceptible to being tilted over at Halloween, because recidivism is something to fear.



## ELEVEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT APRIL by Phyllis Purscell

April starts foolishly.

In April, June brides double-check their  
To-Do lists,  
and useful husbands oil garden tillers.

Unlike androgynous August, April's  
gender is unambiguous.

Like every pretty girl, she's a tease, a  
delight to herself, among others.

April opens with ramifications of winter,  
concludes bullish on spring.

April revels in the too-muchness of red  
tulips,  
the frivolity of forsythia.

April is an ongoing mediation between  
March  
and May. She's nature's compensation for  
November.

By hook or by crook, the occasional  
April day  
intrudes upon the sovereignty of other  
months.

At least one day in April will want soup  
for lunch  
and an evening in front of the fire.

Any given April day can break what's  
left  
of your heart and salve your ragtag soul.

Of April, the old man ponders aloud,  
"How many more?"  
His children's encouraging smiles do not  
convince.



## YOUR STORY?

One of the wonderful things about  
Pennswood is that everybody's got a sto-  
ry—many stories.

Did you read these pieces in recent  
issues of *Village Voices*?

- Lynne Waymon spots the fox.
- Yoma Ullman tells how Nature Notes came to be.
- Jim McClellan explains how to talk about the books you haven't read.

What's YOUR story? Or poem? Or es-  
say? Or memoir? Or short story?

*Village Voices* is put together by a team of editors. We publish 10 times a year (not August or December) with funds from the Pennswood Village Residents Association. It's YOUR publication, showcasing YOUR life and YOUR ideas.

To add your voice, please email us your story at [hb@henrybaird.com](mailto:hb@henrybaird.com) or place a hard copy in our open mailbox (at the

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submission.

If writing is difficult, we'll send a scribe (one of the editors) to help you put your thoughts into words and your words on paper. Call any of us for help with shar-  
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We're waiting to hear from you.

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