



Genealogists of the
Clinton County Historical Society

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Clinton County Trails

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FIRST U S PRO-FOOTBALL GAME REMEMBERED

by Betty Jane Minsky

It was a success! What else can I say ... the 100th anniversary celebration of the first professional football game in America which was played in Shepardsville July 4, 1885. Our anniversary celebration was right to the day and we've all got **Art Wainwright**, that down-to-earth Channel 10 "On The Road" newscaster, to thank for it. It was he who discovered the 100th anniversary year just two weeks before the Fourth, and from then on a lots of folks shifted into high gear.

I've got to share with you how Art discovered it. He stopped at **Clare Alderman's Store** at Shepardsville hoping to "discover what happened there that might have been historic. In a lot of little towns nothing happens and I wondered if maybe this was a case of someone driving over a mouse on M-21 one day and it caused so much excitement they were still talking about it yet," he said. (I know he'll deny he told me that.)

Imagine his surprise when **Alderman** directed him to a weather-beaten sign out front which indeed noted the historic game. The **Clinton County Historical Society** had placed it there in 1977.

"You need a new sign," Art said when he called me that night on the phone. "They passed the hat at that first football game and raised \$3 which they split among the players and that made them pros. Let's get up a game and pass the hat for a new sign."

I reminded him July 4 was less than 2 weeks away. It was a Thursday. The papers would be hard pressed to get

something in the next edition. "I'll come over tonight. We'll get it written and take it to them tomorrow. We'll just invite people to come out and play," Art said.

The local papers ran the story - front page. And that's how this year's game got started.

With no time to organize committees, we issued an appeal and the response was typical of the 1800's - everyone wanted to help. **Sharon and Jerry Reha** immediately sent a check for \$70 for whatever we needed to get started; he agreed to build the goal posts. **Ted Lewis** offered his sound truck. The **Shepardsville Methodist Church** opened it's doors and offered up the recreation field behind it. The **Ovid-Elsie Schools** lined the make-shift field. Townsfolk stuffed collection boxes placed in Shepardsville and Ovid area businesses agreed to a telephone solicitation to send money. **Goff's** supplied hot dogs; **Alderman's** supplied buns and ice; **Beck's** supplied pop and **Art's wife, Dortha**, baked huge trays of white-frosted cupcakes with red and blue sprinkles, topped with American flags. Players and spectators were so exuberant they stuffed the huge pickle-donation jar. Sweatshirts and hats were quickly imprinted and sold like hot cakes and orders are still coming in. **Ovid Historical Society** members showed up to help and brought along some "Carriage Days" T-shirts for workers to wear.

I'd like to give a complete account but I'm in the process of moving my elderly parents to St. Johns from Wisconsin and the truth is I haven't had time to get with Art to figure out how much money came in (profit will be used to replace the sign) and who all pitched in to help. But you have my promise. For a future issue we'll give you a complete account of everything that happened July 4; who did what; who

contributed; and we'll even glean through the many clippings people supplied us on that 1885 game and reprint some of that.

To contribute send checks to the **Clinton County Historical Society** with a note that it's for the Shepardsville sign.

J.Q. FITZGERALD - TRAVELLER

John W. Fitzgerald was born in Coburn, Ontario, 16 March 1845, and came to Brighton, Michigan, at age eight. During the Civil War he served in the 3rd Michigan Cavalry. He established *The Clinton and Shiawassee Union* newspaper at Ovid in 1879. Then in 1886, after being elected Register of Deeds, he sold the paper. In 1905 he was elected mayor of St. Johns. He became an employee of the St. Johns State Bank where he pioneered the use of newspaper advertising for financial institutions. He was a candidate for congress in 1908. Known as an eloquent speaker, he performed at many functions. He retired in 1917 at the age of 72.

His first wife was **Gertrude Yerkes**, whom he married 7 October 1868. There children were **Maude I, Howard H., Harry Y.** and **Roy C.** The sons all followed their father in the newspaper business. After Gertrude's death Fitzgerald married **Mrs Lena Martin** in August 1900.

He died 19 September 1931 at his St. Johns home. Following his funeral he was escorted to Mt. Rest Cemetery by a contingent of ex-servicemen. **George Kimble** and **F.W.Redfern**, old comrades in arms, were among those who attended the last rites.

After Fitzgerald's retirement he travelled and wrote extensively to his

friends back home. *The Clinton Republican* published his long letters. The following excerpts regarding his attendance at a Michigan state picnic which was held by the residents there.

I could fill a volume with the heart aches that have come to fortune seekers who have failed in the winning as told at these picnics, as of others who have been successful and have nothing but praise to offer for California. Of course our party visited the Michigan picnic which was held on the 17th inst. in Sycamore Grove...The first thing to do at one of these gatherings is to find your county and register.

"We met and visited with **Mr. and Mrs. B. E. Teeter**, late postmaster of Duplain, who has a fine bungalow home at Alhambra, as well as a store nearby. **Mr. and Mrs. Myrtle Richardson-Acton** and her mother, **Mrs. Mary Richardson-Nicholas**; **Mrs. Guy Norton**, accompanied by her two children and her niece, **Esther Ellis**, the daughter of **Bird Church-Ellis**; **Orrin E. Osborn** and wife, who at one time was a bookkeeper in the St. Johns National Bank, but who is one of those who have made good in the west and is at present the assistant manager of the Wright-Martin Aircraft Corporation, one of the big industries at present and turning out several flying machines daily. I wish to say for the benefit of the friends of Mr. Osborn that he has very greatly improved, age seemingly having developed him into a keen, bright businessman, while the climate of southern California has evidently agreed with him in every way, adding to his avoirdupois something like thirty pounds.

"Then we saw at the picnic **H.W. Tuttle**, formerly a resident of Elsie, and who at one time conducted a meat market in St. Johns. Tuttle is one of those who located just right and into whose hands

dame fortune placed some of her treasure, as he is a landed proprietor here owning besides many houses which he rents, a large apartment house which is so well located that it calls for desirable tenants at all times. He extended an invitation to our party to attend a ball which was to be held in the fine ball room which is located several floors up in the apartment house. He promised everything free, and as all of our acquaintances back east know how **Frank Swain** likes to "trip the light fantastic toe" we consented to make the visit... Mr. Tuttle is no longer the timid gentleman his friends back east remember, but an up-to-date businessman who carries a check book and a good balance at the bank.

"At the Michigan gathering we also met **Mrs. A. M. Eaton**..., well known in Ovid where her husband was a prominent businessman for years. Her home is now Los Angeles and has been for some years."

"We met **Fred Atkin**, a former resident of St. Johns whose father resides just east of the fair grounds. He has been in the west many years and has made good. **Fred Lee**, at one time in the hardware business with **John Chapman**, now a resident of Long Beach, was at the picnic shaking hands with old friends."

"Then we met **Will Wheat**, a brother of **John Wheat**, who was accompanied by his wife, they having come here from Arkansas some years ago, where he settled after leaving St. Johns."

"**Frank Alderman** and wife were present, this city being his home, having settled here some six years ago since which time he has conducted a grocery business here. His brothers are still engaged in the mercantile business at Shepardsville, but Frank says, "'the east is the place to make money all right, but this

