

Champaign County Historical Society and Museum  
Est. 1934

March./April 2025

# CHAMPAIGN CHRONICLES

## 2025 EVENTS

Our events subcommittee has been working hard to plan this year's events. These include two discussion dinners, a picnic on the lawn, Oktoberfest, a holiday cookie or gingerbread house decorating open house, and a couple surprises. We will be updating you on these on the website, our Facebook page, and in the newsletter.

Please join us at the museum on April 23, 5:30-6:30 p.m., for "Lost Voices of Champaign County," a project-based learning event presented by 6th, 7th, and 8th grade Urbana Junior High students. There will be presentations, scavenger hunts, and prize drawings for adults and students.

We also look forward to seeing you at the grand reopening of the museum this summer (date to be announced) to celebrate completion of our capital improvements.

Cheryl Ogden  
Museum  
Director

*Photo from the 2024  
Picnic on the Lawn*



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# A MESSAGE FROM OUR BOARD PRESIDENT

Dear Members,

We want to send a huge thank you for joining us for the annual membership meeting on January 26! Your support and enthusiasm mean the world as we continue improving the museum. The carpeting is finished, and the fresh paint is making a big difference. We can't wait for you to see the updates!

We also have exciting news that new display cases are on their way. They'll give us even more opportunities to showcase our collections. Unfortunately, the cases will not arrive in time for us to open in March. Our new opening date is April 6, 2025. We will have an official grand reopening in July!

Looking ahead, we're planning a fantastic summer lineup full of events and new programs. Stay tuned for details!

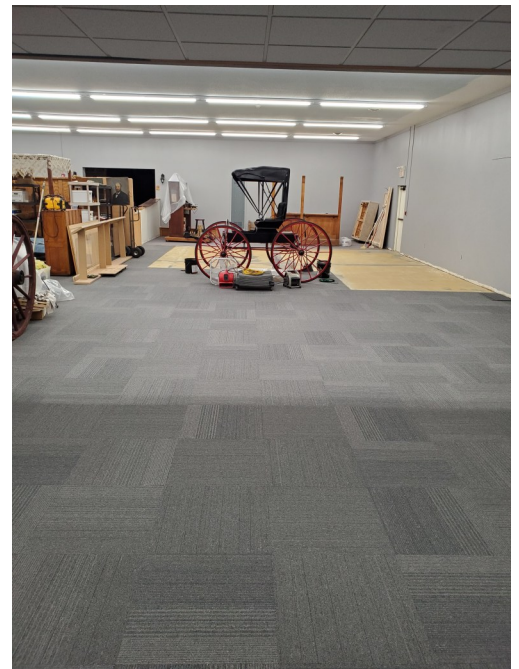
On a more serious note, at our meeting, we talked about the need to diversify our revenue to keep the museum running strong. Events like the picnic and Oktoberfest are community favorites, but they take a lot of work and don't always bring in the funds needed to cover expenses.

That's why **we're introducing an easy way to become a Sustained Supporter**. For as little as \$10 a month, you can set up a monthly donation to the CCHS using your credit card. Pick the day of the month that works for you, and your contribution will go directly toward keeping the museum thriving. Whether it's \$10, \$25, or \$100, every bit helps us preserve and share our local history. Please call the museum for details or contact our treasurer: [treasurer1934.cchs@gmail.com](mailto:treasurer1934.cchs@gmail.com).

We truly appreciate everything you do to support the museum, and we're excited for what's ahead.

Best,  
Terry Koster  
Board President

*New carpet and painting are completed, to allow us to proceed with project completion.*



# RENOVATION UPDATE

Reopening of the Champaign County Historical Society (CCHS) Museum, originally scheduled for March 4, has been delayed due to a vendor's holdup in manufacturing and shipping new display cases for the museum's collection.

The museum, which closed to the public on December 20 to accommodate improvements to the facility, will reopen Sunday, April 6, in conjunction with a 2 p.m. program, free and open to the public. Regular museum hours will resume on Tuesday, April 8: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays.

At the April 6 program, Kalen Howell Sr. will speak about the legacy of his grandmother Barbara Howell, who was appointed in 1967 as the first director of the Head Start program in Champaign, Logan and Shelby counties.

Her memory lives on through Barbara Howell Park, 213 E. Market St., named in her honor in 1998. The Barbara Howell Park Conservancy, of which Kalen Howell Sr. is executive director, has been formed to revitalize the park and Urbana's historic Black neighborhood, empower youth, support the vulnerable, and promote unity across diverse communities.

When the museum reopens, work on improvements will continue, CCHS Executive Director Cheryl Ogden said. Painting and recarpeting are complete and some, but not all, of the museum's new display cases will be set up. The new cases are designed to exhibit at least 50 percent more artifacts than the museum's previous display cases and will provide visitors a better view of the museum's collection. Updated interpretive exhibit signage will also enhance visitors' experience.

"We look forward to welcoming back visitors and apologize for the delay, though it's something we couldn't control," Ogden said. "Once all work is complete, we will invite the public to a grand reopening event."



*Post Office in its old location*



*Post Office in its NEW location, at the front of the main gallery. A gift shop will be located behind the post office, to the left of the main entrance, as you enter.*



# BERT HIGHWARDEN

by Candy Gilliam



*Bert Highwarden*

Wilson Bertram Highwarden was just 20 years old when he first married in 1895. He and his wife, Ada Anderson, immediately started a family while Bert worked as a delivery man. In 1902, Bert and Ada bought their first home in Urbana, and life was good for the young family with their three young sons.

But just a few months later, the couple suffered the loss of their youngest son from pneumonia. Unfortunately, their next two children also died very young. A two-year-old daughter died in 1905 of whooping cough, and a two-year-old son died in 1906 of pneumonia. The toll of such devastating losses must have been a heavy burden for Bert, as he turned to alcohol and was often found in the local saloons. Ada Highwarden would go to the police seeking assistance in getting her drunk husband home, but after making threats to the officers, the unruly Bert was arrested.

In 1907, their home and property was foreclosed on and sold at sheriff's sale. Bert's drunkenness continued, and he was arrested again. This time for assaulting his wife after thinking she was poking fun at him over a picture of a drunk bum on a Valentine card brought home by their sons. His son was a witness to him striking his mother with pokers and broom handles. Bert was arrested. He spent 15 days in the county jail, being released with a scorching lecture from the judge. In 1909, Bert was arrested after fighting with a junk dealer. He was angry about remarks made against his young sons, and soon their conversation turned to violence. Both men were arrested and fined \$5 for the brawl.

Bert's drunken arrests continued into 1910 and 1911. As he was only working odd jobs during these years, his income was not steady and the condition of his home life was worsening. In March 1911, Bert was charged with intoxication and disorderly conduct after a horrible scuffle at home. Ada was supporting her five small children the best she could and had left to get milk for the baby. Upon arriving home, he became angry and attacked her with a baseball bat. While Bert was serving 30 days in jail for this offense, Ada Highwarden filed for divorce on the grounds of gross neglect and extreme cruelty. The divorce was granted in May, and Ada moved to Troy, Ohio, securing employment as a domestic servant. She left her children in the care of her mother.

The divorce did not sit well with Bert, and his anger intensified when she continually refused to reconcile. On August 1, 1911, Ada came to Urbana to meet with Bert and her attorney to discuss arrangements for their children. Ada stated she was temporarily putting them into

the County Children's Home. After leaving the attorney's office, she went to her mother's home on Kenton Street for an afternoon visit with her children. At 4:00 p.m., she was preparing to leave and placing a hat on her head when Bert suddenly stepped into the doorway. They spoke briefly about the children but were not quarreling. Ada was explaining that she would not send their children to the County Home if he would promise to help support them.

Suddenly, Bert withdrew a .32 caliber revolver from his pocket, grabbed Ada by the arm, and shot her in the head. Ada's mother heard the shot from outside and came rushing into the front room to find her daughter on the floor, blood gushing from her head. The bullet went through her temple, killing her instantly. She was only 32 years old and was buried in Oak Dale Cemetery. Bert immediately left the house, walking two blocks to police headquarters where he turned himself in and surrendered the gun. He pointed to his gun and said, "There it is, I



*Image of a .32 caliber revolver, similar to the one Highwarden used. He purchased the gun in Springfield.*

put her out." He was charged with first degree murder. His trial began in December 1911. Bert pled not guilty and insanity. The trial drew a lot of attention. Large crowds packed the spectator lobby. The prosecution was not able to make a strong case of premeditation, and the defense was not able to prove he was insane. The jury deliberated for six hours before returning a verdict of murder in the second degree. He was sentenced to life in prison. Bert sat with his head down, not moving a muscle, receiving his sentence

coolly. He was able to say goodbye to his friends and family before being taken by train to the Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus. His children were sent to the County Home.

Six years later, in 1917, Bert Highwarden filed an application for clemency, and the Governor granted him a pardon. His parole conditions were that he must support his children and remain away from saloons. Bert returned to Urbana, and began working in a furniture store. In 1922, he hired 27-year-old Rovilla Moss Everett, a recently divorced woman and mother of four young daughters, to be his housekeeper. After a brief courtship, they married in 1923.

But just a few months later, Bert's temper flared again, and he gave his new wife a large black eye. He pleaded guilty to assault and was fined \$10. But the abuse continued, as he struck Rovilla often. A year later, in July 1924, he punched her hard, knocking her against a mirror and loosening her teeth. Rovilla had enough of his mistreatment and filed for divorce, claiming Bert had an ungoverned temper, that he was cruel to her, and he threatened to kill her. She appealed for protection, and the police suggested she make formal charges, but Rovilla failed to do so. She also stated her husband never paid their rent and, since their marriage a year previous, they had been forced to move four times.

Three weeks later, on the morning of August 18, 1924, while Bert was walking to work, he met Rovilla on South Main Street where witnesses saw the couple in a lively argument. He was accusing her of double crossing him and becoming affectionate with her former husband. She did not like him telling everyone that she was "running around with other men" and said she

# BERT HIGHWARDEN

by Candy Gilliam



*Bert Highwarden, Urbana Daily Citizen,  
August 21, 1924*

would be asking for alimony in her divorce suit. Bert lost his mind in rage, and for the second time in his life (and 13 years apart), he pulled a .32 caliber revolver from his pocket and shot his wife in the abdomen. When she fell to the ground, he stood over her body, took careful aim, and shot her in the face. The shooting was so deliberate and coldhearted it made witnesses sick. As Rovilla laid dying on the sidewalk, Bert put the gun back into his pocket, picked up his tool case and walked leisurely away while neighbors made frantic calls for help. And just like before, Bert went to the nearby police station and turned himself in. He made no resistance to arrest, nor expressed any regret as he said to the officers, "By God, she was messing with me and I shot her."

Rovilla Everett Highwarden, only 29 years old, died an hour later and was buried in Oak Dale Cemetery. Her four daughters were sent to the Champaign County Children's Home. Bert Highwarden waived examination and was held without bail in the county jail. The citizens of Urbana were in such an angry uproar that extra locks were placed on all the entrances due to threats. Fearing mob violence, the sheriff decided to drive his prisoner to the Logan County Jail for

safety, where Highwarden cowered on the floor between the seats of the automobile on the drive there. Bert was charged with two counts of murder in the first degree, but he sought no legal counsel nor did he want to talk with lawyers. He sat alone in his cell, saying very little.

The courts appointed an attorney, and his trial was in October 1924. A handcuffed Bert Highwarden took the stand in his own defense, while nine witnesses came forward telling what they saw of the crime. He was calm and appeared at ease while he told his story, denying he had any plans to kill his wife. He explained if he had intentions of killing Rovilla, he could have done it many other times. However, the prosecution placed great emphasis on the fact that Highwarden had coldly murdered two wives and made nine children motherless. After days of testimony, a verdict of murder in the first degree, with no mercy, was returned for the first time in the history of Champaign County. Bert seemed dazed by the verdict and slouched dejectedly in his seat, but later regained the stoic demeanor that he had held throughout the trial. The courthouse was packed with over a hundred curious spectators while waiting for the



sentencing. Despite being opposed to capital punishment, Judge Middleton stated, "I will not regret doing it, if I am called upon to pass this sentence. I will regret only the necessity of it. If this is not a case where a verdict of murder in the first degree without mercy should be returned, then there never will be such a case." Then he preceded to sentence Highwarden to death by the electric chair. This was the first time the judge had been called upon to impose the death penalty. He ordered the warden of the Ohio State Penitentiary to "before sunrise on the morning of February 9, 1925, cause electrical current to pass through the body of Bert Highwarden until he is dead." Not having much to say afterwards, Bert walked back to his jail cell and smoked his pipe. He also asked for a cigar, as tobacco was his chief comfort. This trial cost Champaign County \$370 in jury fees, mileage, and meals; \$177 in sheriff costs and witness fees; and \$150 in public attorney fees. This was equivalent to nearly \$13,000 in today's dollars.

Without tears, Highwarden said his goodbyes to his sister and a son before being driven by car to the Ohio Penitentiary for the second and final time. For the next 100 days, Bert was in solitary confinement, except for 30 minutes each day, in which he was allowed to walk along a corridor for exercise. He read his Bible every day. He stated, "I have made my peace with God and have nothing to fear. I am ready to die." The day before his execution, Bert had a talk with a clergyman and a nice long visit with his son. For his last meal he ate chicken, potatoes, cabbage, pumpkin pie, strawberries, and coffee. In the early morning of February 9, 1925, Highwarden was led from his cell on Death Row to the seat of the electric chair. He walked to the death chamber calmly,

gave a brief glance at the witnesses, but said nothing to them. Two minutes later, he was pronounced dead, and his body was taken back to Urbana by his son. He is buried in Oak Dale Cemetery. Bert Highwarden is the only person ever sentenced to death from Champaign County.

Highwarden's death warrant

**DEATH WARRANT.**

(Rev. 1922 to 1924, as amended, R. C. 103.)

THE STATE OF OHIO,  
*Champaign* County, } IN COMMON PLEAS COURT

TO THE SHERIFF OF SAID COUNTY:

Whereas, on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of October A. D. 1924 as is shown by the record of proceedings of said Court Bert Highwarden was sentenced to be electrocuted by causing to pass through his body a current of electricity of sufficient intensity to cause death, and the application of such current being continued until he is dead, said punishment to be inflicted within the walls of the Ohio Penitentiary, at Columbus, Ohio, on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of February, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred & twenty-five, you are hereby commanded that within the next thirty days from this 28<sup>th</sup> day of October, if the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred & twenty-four in as private and secure a manner as is possible to be done, you convey the prisoner the said Bert Highwarden to the Ohio Penitentiary, where the said prisoner shall be received by the Warden, and securely kept until the day designated for his execution. And the Warden or Deputy Warden of said Penitentiary is hereby commanded to proceed at the time and place named in this warrant, to cause the said prisoner to be so electrocuted as hereinbefore described; and of the manner of his execution of this warrant and his doings thereon, he forthwith make return to the undersigned clerk of the County from which the said prisoner was sentenced.

Done under my hand and the seal of said Court at Urbana, Ohio, this 28<sup>th</sup> day of October, A. D. 1924.

*James F. Garrison*  
 Clerk of Court



**WARDEN'S RETURN.**

WARDEN'S OFFICE,  
 OHIO PENITENTIARY } February 11 A. D. 1925

To the Clerk of *Champaign* County, Ohio

On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of February, A. D. 1925, I received this your warrant, together with the prisoner named herein, whom I securely kept until the day designated for his execution; and on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of February, A. D. 1925, I caused the said prisoner Bert Highwarden to be electrocuted, by causing to pass through his body a current of electricity of sufficient intensity to cause death; and the application of such current being continued until he was dead.

*J. A. Johnson*  
 Warden of this Penitentiary

# WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

## Mission Statement

The Champaign County Historical Society collects, preserves, and interprets relevant artifacts, documents, and other resources from Champaign County to educate current and future generations about our history.

Robert Puglia  
Marilyn Woods  
John Bry

Champaign County Historical Society  
809 E. Lawn Ave.  
Urbana, OH 43078  
Phone: 937-653-6721  
Email: [champaigncchistory@gmail.com](mailto:champaigncchistory@gmail.com)

