

Shirl Herr

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Shirl Herr, President of the Montgomery County Historical Society, died at his home in Crawfordsville on October 1, 1936. Only those closely associated with him in his career as an inventor, a philanthropist and an amateur historian can appreciate the full extent of the loss the community and the state suffers in his passing.

Mr. Herr was born in Lapland, Indiana, on April 21, 1875. His parents were pioneers of Pennsylvania-German stock, who came to Indiana after a period of residence in Ohio. Mr. Herr's youth was spent on a farm in Boone County, to which his parents removed in the seventies. The Herr homestead, a large two story log cabin, now stands in the Public Park of Lebanon, a permanent monument of pioneer Indiana preserved through the efforts of the D.A.R. of that community.

Shirl Herr's formal education included the completion of a district school course and a few terms in the Lebanon High School. In addition to this formal training, he achieved much in the way of self-education, especially in the science of agriculture. Seed selection in its relation to plant culture was always of great interest to him and this interest led him to seek employment with one of the outstanding seed companies of the Middle West, the Crabb Reynolds Company of Crawfordsville.

Mr. Herr came to Crawfordsville in 1906, and, after working for the Crabb Reynolds Company for some years, he became interested in the organization of the Crawfordsville Seed Company. It was during the apprenticeship period in the seed industry, that Mr. Herr married Miss Sarah Remley, daughter of another well known pioneer family. Mrs. Herr shared her husband's interest in pioneer Indiana, and, through her, the family influence in the activities of the local historical society has been continued.

Shirl Herr's contributions to the seed industry were of first importance. He not only improved but originated devices for the cleaning of seeds, and, up to the time of death, he was working on methods to make seed winnowing more effective.

Business was not his sole pre-occupation. He was a trustee of the Wabash Avenue Presbyterian Church, served in practically every organization interested in community welfare, and was President of the Board when the new County Hospital building was erected in 1929. His outstanding public service was recognized by the Kiwanis Club when he was presented with an award as the most useful citizen.

This memorial must perforce devote most of its space to his historical activities, but the demands of space and time are not so pressing that we can pass without notice the services of Shirl Herr as a citizen and scientist. He was a philanthropist in the finest sense of the word, for he gave to his benefactions not merely his time and his money but himself. As chairman of the Hospital Board, he had a foremost place in making the County Hospital one of the most efficient county hospitals in Indiana, and, to the day of his death, he was following its fortunes with unwavering interest.

To the world outside his immediate community, he is known as the inventor of the magnetic balance—a device for locating underground minerals and metals. This instrument, he used to locate the exact site of the Quiatenon battlefield, and with it he retrieved metal artifacts from the battleground at Fort Necessity, Yorktown and other historic sites, including Jamestown and Fort Niagara. The “balance” was also used by Mr. Herr when he was commissioned by the Italian government to locate a Roman galley hidden beneath the waters of Lake Nemi, and Thomas Poulter, second in command of the Byrd Expedition, found it a very valuable addition to the scientific equipment of that expedition. These important scientific accomplishments were not generally known, for Mr. Herr was unusually modest and reticent about his achievements, whether such achievements had national or merely local significance.

The members of the Montgomery County Historical Society knew him largely through his activity in saving and restoring *Lane Place*. This activity engaged all the time he could spare from his business and his duties on the Hospital Board. From the time he was elected President of the Society, Mr. Herr gave himself whole-heartedly to the task of preserving *Lane Place*. He won the support of the City Council and Administrative officials, and through them the City bought up the mortgage on the historic home. The building was trans-

ferred under a long term lease to the County Historical Society, with the proviso that the organization refurnish the house and convert it into a memorial. To the very difficult task involved in meeting this requirement, Shirl Herr brought a patience and energy that was an inspiration to those who worked with him. Family heirlooms were returned and restored, materials reminiscent of the Lincoln-Lane association were collected, and period furniture was obtained, as gifts or loans, to fill in the gaps left when the family furnishings did not suffice. The collection for the pioneer room was completed and Mr. Herr built up a representative exhibit of glassware as part of the Herr Loan Collection to the Museum.

It was this enthusiastic activity that won from his fellow-workers the recognition of Mr. Herr as an amateur historian. This man with no particular historical training but with a traditional pioneer background became, in a very real sense, the amateur historian—the lover of history. Citizens of the larger world will remember him for his scientific achievements. Citizens of Indiana may know him as a philanthropist and civic leader. The members of the Montgomery County Historical Society, while not forgetful of these services, will also remember him as one who cherished the pioneer traditions of Indiana and will recognize the fact that, in saving *Lane Place*, Shirl Herr not only preserved a permanent memorial to one of Indiana's pioneer statesman, but furnished an example that should be an inspiration to all those who are striving to save for posterity the memorials of our "living past."