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Celebrating history
Wanatah holds annual Scarecrow Festival

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WANATAH — Amidst scarecrows perched on porches and benches and sidewalks, people dressed like them walking the streets, and children building them out of hay and old clothes, was a town with a history of great fires and floods, acts of heroism and plenty of humor.

And it was the subject of a tour conducted during the Wanatah Scarecrow Festival on Saturday by Wanatah Historical Society President Norm Grieger.

The tour, a catalog of all the great and tragic events that happened in the town since its founding, was conducted in a carriage drawn by two haflinger ponies, and passed by many of the areas important to the town's development, such as the train tracks by Second and Illinois streets.

Although Wanatah doesn't even have a grocery store anymore, Grieger said it was once a booming town sprouting around the stops of the Pennsylvania and Monon trains, and founded the same year Abraham Lincoln's funeral train came through the area, which was 1865.

He said several hotels sprung up around the tracks to cater to the many passengers tired of trian travel. All have since closed. And there used to be a stone pathway connecting the depots, so people getting off the Pennsylvania train from Chicago could get on the Monon train headed to Michigan City if they wanted to spend a day at the beach.

About 70 trains a day came through these tracks, so much so a local creek was dammed to provide water for their steam engines. And coal docks were also set up to provide them with fuel until diesel engines became popular in the 1950s.

And the coal docks were supplied by coal cars, which had to be stopped by a man operating a breaking wheel.

Grieger pointed out that during the winter of 1900, conditions were so slippery the coal cars didn't stop where they were supposed to, and ended up crashing into the break operator and sending him off the tracks and into the ground with the cars ontop of him. If it hadn't been for the soft cinder below, the man would have been crushed to death. although he reportedly begged people to shoot him because it hurt so much.

But the dammed creek supplying water for the trains also powered the town's flour mill, located where the grain elevators by Illinois and Cross streets are now.

"People came from all over to have their flour ground at that mill," he explained.

He said the area had good quality stones that could grind grain into a fine flour. The original structure was wood and was put up in 1867. This eventually burned down and was replaced by a brick structure which lasted until pre-ground flour became available at stores. It was made into grain elevators in 1912.

During much of this time Wanatah was known largely as a swamp, Grieger explained. He said the sidewalks were all board walks and were raised two feet off the ground so people could avoid getting soaked.

But this all came to a head in 1908 when the creek finally flooded the town. He said the creek was later dredged and moved. This dried the land out and turned it into some of the richest farmland around.

Linking Wanatah with the temperance movement was an incident in 1915, when workers building a school in Hanna decided they wanted a drink. Since Hanna was a dry town, Grieger said, the workers had to come to Wanatah to visit a tavern. So they ended up getting drunk and lodging their car in the train tracks.

While onlookers laughed, the Pennsylvania train came rushing toward them, going faster than usual because it was making up time for another wreck in a different county.

The onlookers rushed in to try and lift the car out of the way, but the train ended up hitting the vehicle, sending sparks and pieces of the car (including its entire engine) scattering along the roadway, and scalding both the train's engineer and fireman. Unable to get treated locally, they were taken by train to the Christian Hospital in Valparaiso and then to a more modern facility in a different city. They ended up surviving.

There were no casualties in the incident.

But another tragedy, which was intentionally planned, spelled the doom for Wanatah's only high school building.

Grieger noted that it was closed down as a high school in 1969, but continued to operate as a junior high into the 1980s when an arsonist was paid to set it on fire. Grieger said this was part of a scheme by the arsonist's employers to hide the destruction of their own ethanol plant, which was burned to the ground at the same time for the insurance money. It was hoped the fire department wouldn't be able to handle both blazes at once and all evidence would be destroyed. It wasn't.