

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #17

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

"Phinny" Williams - Legendary Local Figure - Part 2

We now continue with the life of Phinny Williams and a further story that made him a local legend in the Madison-Bouckville-Solsville area. This tale concerns Phinny appearing at a practice session for the Bouckville Brass Band in the upper room of the old Bouckville School on Saturday evening, June 30, 1850. The local band was preparing for their performance at the 4th of July Celebration at Morrisville. Phinny was 46 years old at the time and probably just curious as to what was going on when he heard the music coming forth.

(The old school in Bouckville was located on the corner of what we now call Rt. 20 and Maple Ave. and was made of cobblestone.) At the practice session, there were also speeches made and solos and quartets performed, as well as selections by the Brass Band.

Phinny had a peculiar speech impediment, which made him the subject of much merriment from the local youngsters. While the band was playing, Phin's continuous talking became very annoying to the players and the boys present began bothering him.

A young blood of the village spat a stream of tobacco juice with deadly accuracy into Phinny's eyes.

"Phinny told you not to do that," the victim said, "Phinny hurt.

P-tu! The marksman spat again into Phinny's eyes while the crowd roared with laughter. Phinny leaped to his feet, wiping the burning tobacco acid from his eyes with the back of one hand and drew a long fish knife from his belt with the other. Meanwhile, another young man, named Elezar Crosby, came into the room and seated himself near the door. He began laughing quite loudly at the boys and asked, "What was the matter with Phinny?" Phinny got up and started to go out. Crosby, not knowing that Phinny had a knife, playfully interrupted him and Phinny stabbed him, the knife entering his stomach. Phinny then left the schoolhouse but was soon caught and arrested. Crosby lived until 4p.m. on Sunday.

They took Phinny to the County Jail at Morrisville. He was brought into court shortly afterwards, convicted of manslaughter, and sentenced to a term of three years of hard labor in State prison. In prison the guards quickly discovered it was impossible to obtain a day's work from Phinny. After trying everything from a whip to a one-inch plank across his shoulders without results, the guards resorted to a "never-fail" system. They placed Phinny in a cistern with a water pump and forced in a steady stream of water. It was either pump out the water or perish.

But Phinny was not a laborer. The cold water rose over his ankles, then up to his waist. It rose steadily to his shoulders, his neck, and then went over his head. When the guards saw a few bubbles come to the surface of the cistern, they hauled Phinny out, revived him, and placed him in solitary confinement.

Phinny served between two and three years before he was released from prison. He once again returned to his old haunts and took up residence in the cellar of Festus Manchester's wagon shop in Solsville. It was cold and damp in the cellar but Phinny was comfortable. When he was hungry, all he had to do was to rap on a door in the community and ask for food. His plea was seldom denied by the kind-hearted housewives.

When Phinny reached the age of 91 without ever having been sick a day in his life, the residents of Solsville had him committed to the County Home in Eaton. It was there that he received his first bath. It took two husky men to persuade him, but they managed, using sand soap and an instrument "something like a curry comb."

Phinny kept his fishing pole, and even after he was confined to a wheelchair, managed to do a little fishing. He always tried to supply the type of fish that his friends at the County Home desired. Hunting and fishing friends came to visit Phinny at the home. He was even made an honorary member of the Earlville Rod and Gun Club.

Phineas Williams died suddenly at the County Home on Saturday, March 11, 1911 at 107 years old. He had lived there for the final 16 years of his life. There was no family and no heirs to mourn him, but up and down the Cherry Valley Turnpike the people who knew him have created a legend that will endure forever.

Again, I credit the article of George W. Walter for much of the information used in both Parts 1 and 2 of this story. Some modifications have been made to reflect more current information concerning Phineas Williams. "Phinny" is certainly an important part of our township's history.