

Bidwell's Forgotten Water Wells

By Charles A. Murray

This story is about a few of the many water wells that once existed in the village of Bidwell. No doubt that during the early 1900s, hundreds of water wells were dug by hand and were a necessary entity for each household in villages and rural areas as well. Their value was vitally important and should not be forgotten.

THE J. K. POWELL WATER WELL

About 140 years ago, a new village called Heatly began to develop in Springfield Township of Gallia County, Ohio. The Hocking Valley Railway Company had constructed a railroad connecting Gallipolis with Columbus, Ohio and a depot called Porter Station was built to serve the people. The railroad passed through properties that belonged to the Powell and the Heatly families. These two families became entrepreneurs and started a village called Heatly in honor of Charles Heatly. After the train station was built in 1881, John Kerr Powell built a store building within a hundred feet of the structure and dug the village's first a water well. The Powell water well still remains at the site. Heatly changed its name to Bidwell when the post office was established in 1892.

THE W. H. H. FREDERICK WATER WELL

In order to develop a new village, land had be plotted and sold to people. The Harrisburg Pike and the Hocking Valley Railroad provided the means for transportation, and a water supply became another important entity. William Henry Harrison Frederick was the first Heatly pioneer. His property was just east of the railway station. Lucy Frederick, William H. H. Frederick's daughter, became the first child to be born in Heatly. The Frederick house still exists in present-day Bidwell along with the water well. The hand-dug well not only served his family, but it also served the patrons of the railway station for many years. The train station did not have a water well on its property.

Soon after the Frederick house was constructed, more people purchased lots and built more houses and opened new businesses. Water wells or cisterns had to be dug to provide water for each home. Water wells had to be dug down to the bed rock in order to provide a sufficient supply of water. If the water supply was insufficient, a cistern was built to serve as a reservoir for rain water that fell on the roof tops. In 1906 more land was sold for housing developments, and Bidwell soon had a hotel, two doctor offices and, a dentist, a flour mill, a brick and tile factory, a school, two churches, a black smith, a livery, a bank. The railroad business brought many people, jobs and homes to Bidwell during the early 1900s,

THE JESSIE ROBINSON WATER WELL

Most of the home owners in Bidwell had private, hand-dug water wells on their properties, however a few did not. If there was no well or cistern on the property, the owner or renter had to borrow water from a neighbor's well. During the 1940s, one family, who rented a house on Union

Street in Bidwell, had to carry buckets of water from Jessie Robinson's water well to use for drinking, washing clothes and dishes, cooking and bathing. Jessie Robinson's well might be called a community well because several families used water from her well. A pitcher pump was used to pump the water from the well into buckets. The family had eight children including two sets of twins. No doubt there were many trips made to the Robinson water well 24/7 by the members of the Willis McBride family. The Robinson water well was dependable, and the water was always free. What a wonderful blessing! This well still exists along an alley way called Globe Street about 150 feet south of State Route 554. Many stories can probably be remembered by those with links to the Jessie Robinson water well.

THE ANTHONY MURRAY WATER WELLS

In 1936, Anthony Murray purchased property in Bidwell with two wells. The house had been built in 1911 and was located on the northeast corner of State Route 554 and Market Street. At the time of purchase, an enclosed breeze way connected the house with an outdoor cellar. Inside the enclosure was a water well with a pitcher pump. During times of no rain, this well occasionally went dry. During such times, an eave spout was connected to catch water from the roof.

Outside the house, another hand-dug well with a hand-operated pump existed. At some point of time during the 1940s, a man was hired to dynamite the bottom of the well hoping the underground water would be diverted over to the well inside the breeze way. The idea was a success, and neither wells ever went dry thereafter. One note of interest however should not be forgotten about the outdoor well because a tragedy almost occurred. Later that same day, Allery Clark, a helper, climbed down a ladder into the well to observe the well's condition. Fortunately a rope had been tied around his waist because the fumes from the explosion were too potent. The condition caused him to become unconscious down inside the well, and he had to be rescued. After regaining some fresh air, he revived and survived. How scary was that? The well remains at the present time, but the house no longer exists at the location.

Throughout the years of Bidwell's history, the villagers were fortunate to have a sufficient supply of water, and as time progressed an even better water system emerged. It was the year 1972 that a public water system came to Bidwell. Private water wells were not needed after the Gallia County Rural Water System began its operation. The public water system has been a blessing to many inhabitants of rural Gallia County as well. It was the first big step of progress in meeting the needs of modern times. Progress has continued, and now includes a public waste system.

Gallia County

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