

WHO WAS BLIND CHARLIE?

By Barbara Mask

No one could have predicted how well-known Charlie Baker would become. Even by his first name only, local and regional residents knew where he once lived. In 1965, when Fulton's biggest natural disaster inundated the city, his name was used on national television broadcasts as a port of entry and departure for the flooded city. "Charlie's Corner," was identified, as a place where people departed on a rescue mission, on NBC Nightly News

Charles Baker lived on a small acreage on the north-east side of the east-west road (Union Grove Road) along the bluffs in Ustick Township. Oliver Baker owned the farm that bordered on both sides of the bluff (Smaltz) road and Charlie, whose relationship to Oliver is unknown, resided at the intersection of these two roads. His home/store was part way up the slope and built part way up into the hill. His small store offered soft drinks, tobacco and other articles and many area farmers would stop there, but the business could not support him and his wife. Charlie Baker married Miss Nancy Jeffers in 1853. According to Wayne Bastian, "In 1851, he became blind although there are no records to show how he received the affliction." Charlie was a good fiddler and played at many country dances. There were at least two benefit dances for the unfortunate couple: one in 1899 in the Ustick Town Hall and another in the Ustick Creamery. When Mr. Baker's health deteriorated in August, 1899, the two were taken to the Whiteside County nursing care center; then called, the 'Poor Farm.' Bastian described the scene, "straw was placed in a wagon and bedding was laid thereon. The couple wept at the sad removal but the township supervisor told them kindly that they would receive better care. Both of them died there."

In Nancy Baker's obituary, dated February 11, 1902, it is stated, that "Nancy is about seventy years. Mr. Baker lost his eye sight and shortly afterwards they located under the bluffs in Ustick and opened a small store..." The obituary states that Mrs. Baker had many warm friends in Ustick Township who have "extended a helping hand in many ways." Interment was made in a lot in the Round Grove cemetery which was provided by their Ustick friends. She was survived by her aged husband, Charles. No obituary was located for Charles Baker.

The corner was referred to as 'Blind Charlie's Corner' for many years and then the moniker subsided, however, when Roy Smaltz bought the acreage and built a cabin atop the bluff at that site, he used the designation again. The T-intersection became "Blind Charlies's Corner" by signage. Roy took an old refrigerator door and in bold, black letters painted the site's name. (Smaltz spelled 'Charlie' as 'Charley'.) He used it as identification for the entry location of Smaltz cabin built atop the bluff. The large sign was nailed to a tree and remained there for many years.

Members of the Fulton Historical Society located its whereabouts three years ago when researching, "The Flood of 1965 in Fulton, Illinois." It was donated to FHS by Mr. Russell Garrett. Warren Wiersema painted it as the rust on the door had obscured the lettering.



Roy Smaltz painted the words on this refrigerator door and nailed it to a tree at the T intersection.



Pictured is the T intersection at Smaltz and Union Grove roads, the site of Blind Charley Home Store, and later, the sign seen above.

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Speculation abounds that the hillside once was a stopping place for the Underground Railroad. Oliver Baker, who owned the acreage was a well-known abolitionist. The Abbott farm several miles east is a documented site so there is a probability, but no proof. Part of the hill was used during construction of the dike in Fulton so any trace of evidence would no longer be available. Also, the movement of slaves was shrouded in secrecy.

Atop the bluff, sits a deserted cabin and lake, once the site of fishing, picnics and reunions. The Fulton Kiwanis Club had an annual outing there and Wayne Bastian wrote many articles about this special place with an awesome view. A booklet, "The Smaltz Cabin," written by Janet Smaltz is filled with facts and stories about the special space enjoyed by many for a long period of time. Anyone who is interested in learning more about the Smaltz Cabin and Lost Lake is welcome check it out..

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