



WAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY *Newsletter*

Don't let local history be a mystery!

HELLO SPRING!

SPRING
2021

*The PAST is your lesson, the PRESENT is your gift,
the FUTURE is your motivation!*

Wayne County Historical Society
Fairfield Public Library
300 S.E. 2nd Street
Fairfield, Illinois 62837

Early History Museum & Archives
300 S.E. 2nd Street, Fairfield
Open Saturdays year-round
10:30am - 1:30pm

Hanna House Museum
100 E. Center Street, Fairfield
Open Saturdays April-October
10:00am - 2:00pm

Olive Branch Schoolhouse
Leo French Park, Fairfield
Open various times and by
appointment

e-Mail:
wayneillinoishistory@gmail.com

Website:
wayneillinoishistory.com
Wayneillinoishistory.org

Facebook:
[Wayne-County-Historical-Society](https://www.facebook.com/Wayne-County-Historical-Society)

Suddenly, the days are a little warmer, the sun a little brighter, the grass is greener, and the daffodils are blooming. Many Wayne County citizens have recently gotten the COVID vaccine and are feeling a bit more protected from the virus. The April municipal elections will decide a new mayor for Fairfield, and various city, county, and township positions. The Wayne County Board is grappling with the decision to repair or relocate the courtrooms and offices housed within the courthouse.

With warmer weather comes the opening of the Hanna House museum. The 2021 season unveiling will be Saturday, April 10th and the museum will be open Saturdays from 10am—2pm until October.

The Early History museum, located at the Fairfield Library, continues to be open on Saturdays, 10:30am—1:30pm. Please use the exterior door on the south side of the library.

Our thanks to Jami Roethe, Niki Roethe and Gina Bashore, our archivists, who do an amazing job with the museums.

The Historical Society met in January at the library for a short business meeting. The February meeting was postponed a week, due to the snow storm that buried Wayne County in about a foot of snow. The February speaker was Matt Vaughn who spoke about Charlie Harris and the FBI.

Steve Lee was the speaker for the March meeting. His topic was Family History.

Planning meetings have begun for the 2021 Historical Society Cemetery Tour. The BIG EVENT will be held September 10 and 11, 2021. Volunteers will again be needed to fill acting roles, assist with parking and various other jobs.

There are many ways to be active in the Historical Society. Activities, meetings, museums, publications and preservation appeal to different people. Membership is open to anyone and is only \$15 annually.

Warm regards,

The Wayne County Historical Society Officers

Charlie Harris and the FBI - Presentation by Matt Vaughn

I don't see how Charlie Harris is brought to justice unless the FBI is involved. I think this was a problem bigger than local law enforcement could handle. - Matt Vaughn

Charlie Harris was born in 1896 and grew up in the Pond Creek area of Wayne County. He claimed to be a descendent of Isaac Harris, the first white settler to come to the area. Charlie's name is forever linked with the Shelton Gang, bootlegging, and violence. This dapper gangster eluded prosecution for 30 years.

At the February meeting of the Wayne County Historical Society, local lawyer, Matt Vaughn shared his recent research on Charlie Harris. In March of 2020, under the Federal Bureau of Investigation Freedom of Information Act, Matt requested all available records of the Bureau's dealings with Charlie Harris.

In typical bureaucratic fashion, five months later, Matt received a response of over 439 printed pages. We appreciate Matt sharing his research with us. As he states; "these documents raise way more questions than they answer. There are no smoking guns in these documents." Still, after all these years, the story is fascinating.

For many more details, and to learn more about Charlie Harris and the FBI, as presented by Matt Vaughn, watch the presentation on our [YOUTUBE page](https://youtu.be/fj6xl100cqo). <https://youtu.be/fj6xl100cqo>

The following is an excerpt from the presentation.

Most people have heard of the Shelton Gang and their dealings in Southeastern Illinois during probation. If you lived in Wayne county in the 1930s, the 40s and the 50s, you probably had some dealings with the Shelton gang. That did not make you necessarily a criminal. Having said that, if you're here tonight to hear some sentimental tale about gangsters of old robbing from the rich and giving to the poor you're in the wrong place. I have very strong opinions about this. The Shelton gang were killers and thugs and criminals.

Charlie Harris was a criminal and a killer and a convicted killer so I'm not here to romanticize what happened in the past. It's a dark stain on our community. This is a story about gangsters, thugs, killers, and criminals who do what gangsters, thugs, and criminals do. Regrettably, more often than not in the 1940s and 1950s, these things were done with impunity in our county, and all too often local law enforcement was either unable or unwilling to do much about it.

It was with the help of the FBI that eventually a convicted criminal, double killer; Charlie Harris was brought to justice.

The FBI documents fit into two categories. The first category includes a biographical sketch of Charlie Harris by the department in the year 1958. The FBI was hoping to use Charlie Harris as a criminal informant. A direct quote from the FBI files;

"...Harris will be interviewed for future information with the possibility of developing Harris as an informant who might be in a position to furnish valuable information regarding top **hoodlums**."

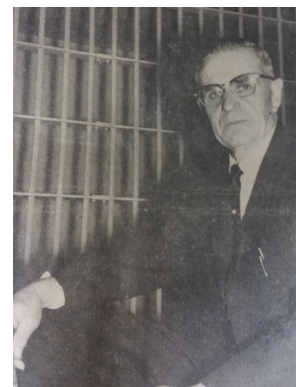
The second batch of documents is more voluminous and concerns the bureau's efforts to capture Charlie Harris during a nationwide manhunt s in 1964 and 1965. In August of 1964, two people are found dead in Wayne County. Immediately Charlie Harris is a suspect. The tone in the latter half of the FBI report is darker and more ominous. Time and again every special agent in charge in our country is told by the top level of the FBI that Mr. Harris is to be considered armed and dangerous and that he has killed some 20 to 25 people.

In 1964 Charlie Harris is 68 years of age and at that time, he was the oldest person ever to crack the FBI's top 10 most wanted list. There's Wayne County's claim to fame.

The manhunt for Charlie Harris covers all of Wayne County, across the U.S., Hollywood, Chicago, and northern Illinois. With the FBI closing in, Charlie Harris surrenders, and is jailed in Fairfield, in June, 1965. There is a local trial in November. Harris is convicted of two murders and sentenced to 60–75 years in prison. Fifteen years later in 1981, Harris is granted parole.

Our thanks to Matt Vaughn. The presentation can be watched on [YOUTUBE](https://youtu.be/fj6xl100cqo). The library and museums have more information on Charlie Harris and Wayne County gangsters.

<https://youtu.be/fj6xl100cqo>



Charlie Harris 1964
Wayne County Press Photo

The Courthouse: Expensive and Invaluable

By Judith Puckett

“Preservation is simply having the good sense to hold on to things that are well designed, that link us with our past in a meaningful way, and that have plenty of good use left in them,”



January 15, 1891: New county jail and courthouse plans proposed. The jail will cost \$9,950 and have a sheriff’s residence in front. Solid brick wall will separate residence from the jail cell wing. There will be four steel cells and two good cells for females or isolation. Cells will be in the center with passage around the entire room for prisoners’ exercise.

January 29: Commissioners accept specifications for new courthouse and meet with architect J.W. Gaddis of Vincennes. The “dome” will be 128 feet high. The county has a 49-year agreement for use of jail and privies. City donated lot for the jail.

April 21: John Curry’s brick factory, has two brick machines operating. First run of 8,000 bricks for the jail. Contract is for 160,000. The courthouse is expected to require 600,000-700,000 bricks. The Curry brick factory stretches from Johnson Street north to the Curry cemetery on North First street.

May 7: The courthouse plans are for a “massive structure, well-built throughout...and will cost \$24,700. Contract given to Bippus & Kansler, Evansville.

May 21: Removal of old courthouse takes only three days. The old structure lasted about thirty-five years and suffered severe problems early on. Entire contract for new teardown, new jail, and new courthouse worth over \$100,000. Builders bonded. Hauling sand for new jail begins. Locust trees on courthouse square are in full bloom.

“Old places have soul.”

June 4, 1891: Subcontractors Felix and McMackin begin work on jail and have foundations started in a week.

June 11: Seven bricklayers are working on the courthouse and jail foundations. Contractor in bricklayers from Evansville. Seven train carloads of brick from Evansville arrived. Drayman Slack wins contract for hauling the brick by horse and wagon from the Airline depot (later the Southern depot on South First). He is using six teams. The local Masonic Lodge plans a cornerstone ceremony.

Summer, 1891: Samuel Lappin, then a young man was clerking at the Bonham store (now the site of Neal Laws’ attorney office) and watched the construction. He recalled “a male quartet, busy cutting stone for the building, would sing together as they worked, much to the entertainment of passersby and listeners within earshot. W.O. Boze and John Alexander were two of the singers.”

June 24: Over 3,000 people witness the Masonic ceremony setting the cornerstone on the southeast corner of the foundation.

“There may have been a time when preservation was about saving an old building here or there, but those days are gone. Preservation is in the business of saving communities and the values they embody.”

July 1891: The brick work on the jail is almost finished. Work is progressing very nicely. The height of the brick walls is now up to the second story windows.

September 3: Slate roof is being installed on courthouse roof. Plasterers are busy with the interior walls and ceilings.

September 10: Men with teams of horses grade the public square to get it back in shape after the construction. Locust trees are trimmed. The interior woodwork is nearing completion. The jail cells arrived last week. White Brothers painting and working on the inside of the jail.

September 17: A.H. Andrews & Company of Chicago wins contract to furnish the upstairs courtroom with a judge’s stand, witness stand, jury box, plus 315 opera chairs. Cost totals \$1,437.75. Committee authorizes an iron fence around the square. Plans call for stone walks from front doors to different gates. Front walk will be ten-feet wide; back walk will be five-feet wide. County proposes a fourteen-foot span of stone walk along south street on south side if city will pay half.

September 24: Jail has first four prisoners, all from Wayne City, and each charged for cutting timber without permission.

*“In the end, our society will be defined
not only by what we create,
but by what we refuse to destroy.”*

October 1, 1891: Baker and Keen buy the old plank fence around the square and haul the lumber to their farm. Barbee Wire & Ironworks from Lafayette, Indiana will erect an iron fence at one dollar per foot or \$800.J.D. Reinhard gets contract for 10-foot stone walks at \$250; John Curry given contract for brick walks at front, back, and side.

October 8: The finishing touches are being applied to the second-story court room and the clerks’ offices on the first floor. The county will have “the best and handsomest courthouse in the lower part of the state.” Fairfield’s population is 1,881.

October 15: The county treasurer’s safe is the first furniture moved into the courthouse. The door for the vault in the circuit clerk’s office arrived from the Hall Safe & Lock Company.

*“We are the only country in the world
that trashes its old buildings.
Too late we realize
how very much we need them.”*

October 29, 1891: Judge Carroll C. Boggs, who will later become Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, gives the dedicatory speech that summarizes the people and events in the earlier courthouse. Attorneys Robert P. Hanna, Judge Edwin Beecher, Attorney C. Thompkins, and others from Carmi, Flora, and Shawneetown also give speeches. Boggs talks about Abraham Lincoln—“a man who afterwards became known everywhere”—and Stephen Douglas, General Logan, Judge S.S. Marshall, and others who handled cases or spoke in the old building.

The first court was in 1819, before there was a courthouse or any county officers. The first judge, Thomas C. Brown, appointed them. The session was held in Alexander Campbell’s house. At that time (72 years earlier) “only one or two people lived here” and Kaskaskia was the state capital.

The courthouse furniture has not arrived in time for the dedication. Fairfield’s mayor is Alexis B. Rider. Aldermen are John Sparr, Thomas Dickey, John Curry, A.M. Vernon, W.E. Felix, and F.M. Brock.

January 21, 1892: The board proceeds toward “some provision for paying a janitor” to maintain the courthouse yard. Only a “narrow path” leads from the front gate to the entrance”. The yard shows “evidence of neglect and untidiness, to say the least.” They are also concerned about the welfare of people walking from the gate to the door for fear “one of Sheriff Calvin’s hounds” bothering pedestrians. The argument was that the “authoritative animal” would force the person to wade “snow knee deep”. The walk should be prioritized as the first to be shoveled.

February 11, 1892: The yard is leveled, and grass seed sown. There is grumbling that the ground has not been appropriately graded first. “Now if John Curry will push the laying of the brick walks around the square and to the side and back entrances, the square will present a neat and attractive appearance.”

February 18: The lack of hitching racks is a problem. There is a rack on the north side at Mrs. Trousdale’s” but it is “useless in bad weather since the street is so poor.” Mrs. Trousdale’s house location is now the northwest corner of LeMond’s new car lot. Main Street, indeed, all the town’s streets would be dirt for about fifteen more years.

March 31: The locust trees on the courthouse square are debated. They are “ill-shaped” and better trees are being transplanted to improve shade. The locust trees “need to be removed”.

There is a steady increase in real estate transactions in the business properties that surround the new courthouse on the improved square.

*“I have often wondered
what it is an old building can say to you
about things that went on long ago in that building.”*

1912: “After nearly twenty-five years of waiting, the Board of Supervisors has decided to place a courthouse clock in the tower.” It will be a Howard clock that purchased “at cost” for \$1,100. Furthermore, the Board votes for a new “Twentieth-century steam heating outfit” for about \$1,500.

The Buildings and Grounds Committee will take up a proposal to address the hitch racks around the square.

January 1918: A small howitzer cannon is mounted on a concrete base as a war memorial. Photographs show that the courthouse roof line has a decorative iron trim. An electric pole shows. The trees in the courthouse yard are now medium-sized saplings, all the same height after being planted at the same time.

1924: A “subscription” campaign results in public donations to pay for Jett Brothers construction to build a “circular brick bandstand” on the southeast corner of the courthouse yard “about where the old public well once was.” By this year, photographs indicate the howitzer monument is gone and new diagonal sidewalks radiate from the main entrance to each corner. Long board benches, the first of several generations of “loafers’ benches” are evident.

October 1939: An estimated crowd of 12,000 gathers for a parade and dedication of the Lincoln Monument on the courthouse square. All school children in Wayne County attend. Small metal commemorative “coins” are given out. Wayne County was the first caucus to endorse Abraham Lincoln. The Lincoln Club gives a “coin” to each person who contributed to the cost of the substantial historical marker.

July 4, 1943: The Indiana limestone Honor Roll Arch is dedicated. Eventually a wood-and-glass frame cabinet will hold typewritten lists of Wayne County men who served in the Armed Forces during World War II. After several years, the paper lists are replaced by large bronze tablets. A star is included by the name of each person who died in the war.

1920s through 1970s: The long saga of the Shelton Gang’s activities in the county—gambling, bootlegging, intimidations, incarcerations, and murder—play out in the jail and courtroom over the years.

The tension is high. Lives and reputations are destroyed and made. The incidents include the bombing of the Farmers’ Club, a gambling room run by the Sheltons on the east side of the square. The explosion breaks courthouse and store windows all around the square. Earl Shelton is shot through a window in the same club by a mysterious gunman. Shelton survives.

The famous and controversial feud between Charles “Blackie” Harris and the Shelton gang members will become the longest-running series of court actions in the county’s history. Innumerable articles and several books will document the era. Of the two historic locations pertinent to the county’s most nationally infamous residents, the jail is demolished. The courthouse remains. So far.

At the time, Michael Mossburger headed an almost successful effort to list the jail on the National Registry of Historical Buildings, for a museum and tourist site. However, the county board pulled its agreement at the last minute. The site is now part of a parking lot.

*“There was a time in our past
when one could walk down any street
and be surrounded by harmonious buildings.
. Such a street wasn’t perfect,
it wasn’t necessarily even pretty,
but it was alive.
The old buildings smiled,
while our new buildings are faceless.
The old buildings sang,
while the buildings of our age
have no music in them.”*

The courthouse is the single most historic civic building that survives in Wayne County. There have been times in the past when the county rented downtown office space for specific departments. That strategy could be applied now to alleviate problems in basement offices. Then the mold issue, which varies in seriousness according to which side one is on, could be addressed in simpler, practical measures.

Money will be spent but equating the costs of rehabbing the courthouse versus rehabbing the old Peoples’ Bank site is misleading. This is not just economics; how many dollars here vs. there is simpler, but misses a crucial civic issue. A small town that is struggling to maintain its viability and attract or keep residents and businesses cannot “homogenize” its streetscapes with modern buildings that have only practicality as their strength.

Tearing down the courthouse guts the historic and civic landscape. It leaves Fairfield without a huge piece of its distinctive identity. That is intangible but also invaluable. A few people are stepping up to tastefully rehab key buildings. They do us a great favor.

Afterall, “how will we know it’s us, without our past?” Why would any business wish to relocate because there is one more parking lot where the courthouse used to be? With all its foibles structurally, a building is “not good because it’s old, it’s old because it’s good.” Nobody builds like that anymore.

One last opinion, a decision this crucial and with such permanent consequences for the town and county, both economically and historically, should not be made in an executive session. Let the voters speak in a referendum. Majority rules, for better or worse.

***“We should value what our forebears—
and that includes our own parents
and grandparents—
have done for us;
otherwise our history
will simply slip away.”***

*Article by Judith Puckett—
First printed in the Wayne County Press
March 18, 2021*

Sources for italicized quotes, in order: Richard Moe, Susan Anderson, Richard Moe, John Sawhill, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Carl Sanburg, Jonathan Hale, unknown.

In Memoriam

Margaret Marshall Walker, of Austin, TX, passed away in December 2020. Margaret spent her formative years in Fairfield, was an FCHS graduate. She and her husband, Ernest Walker, settled in Austin, TX, but Margaret never forgot her hometown.

Her enthusiasm for the Society’s mission resulted in a significant donation of Cooper-Elliott-Marshall family items connected to Wayne County. Furthermore, Margaret made a series of financial donations instrumental in the development of the Hanna House Museum for Contemporary History.

When the Society agreed to turn the old Fairfield Medical Clinic into a museum almost twenty years ago, the building was far from suitable or even usable. Then President Judith Puckett and uber-volunteer Richard Musgraves and their various work crews spent an intense couple of years rehabbing, remodeling, re-plumbing, cleaning, and repairing the interior before installing exhibits.

The Society’s normal budget, based on dues, individual contributions, and a few grants, simply was not sufficient to carry out the project. We had sweat equity and faith. Margaret Walker’s timely and generous checks provided a crucial financial bridge for many materials, exhibit supplies, and programs.

Her enthusiasm for Fairfield, her belief in heritage, and her desire to support the Society made her a cheerleader and advisor who boosted our morale in those difficult years. She helped us enhance the older Early History Museum and bring the Hanna House into operation.

Margaret Walker’s support helped carry this Society through a period when our ideas were bigger than our purse strings. We offer our sympathy to her family and our deepest gratitude for her confidence in us and generosity to this town.

[Margaret Walker Obituary - Austin, TX \(dignitymemorial.com\)](https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/margaret-marshall-walker)



Historical Society member **Sharon Dove**, 78, of Fairfield passed away, March 28, 2021 at Fairfield Memorial Hospital Skilled Care. Graveside services for Sharon were held at Mt. Zion/Farnsworth Cemetery south of Keenes.

Family History Odyssey - Presentation by Steve Lee

Steve Lee was our speaker at the March meeting of the Historical Society.

The presentation can be viewed on [YOUTUBE](https://youtu.be/A9bnuZznRGQ). <https://youtu.be/A9bnuZznRGQ>

The following is an excerpt from the presentation.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight. As a lifelong Wayne county native I'm interested in the county's history and in the many families who've made this area what it is today. My family is not really illustrious. So I can't saunter over to the bookcase and fetch a book to read about my family. It doesn't exist. Likewise, The Wayne County History which was written in 1884 has no sketches of my ancestors. So for my family to be remembered in posterity somebody has got to dig into the past and preserve that history. Therefore tonight I would like to share with you a family history odyssey I've been on for about 53 years, and some research skills I've learned.

Start with an interest in the past

When I was born in 1951, almost 70 years ago, I had four grandparents, eight great-grandparents and one great-great-grandfather. All of them living until I was about six ears old. I spent a lot of time with my dad's grandparents. I developed a curiosity and I learned a lot by talking to them about their families. They became my connection with a time so very long ago.

Collect basic information using basic methods

By my teenage years I began to develop my family tree. My term paper for Mrs. Sue Odom when I was a senior in high school was about genealogy, which at that time was kind of in its infancy as far as popularity. Now the market is flooded with people who want to help us and make money from us by helping us learn about our ancestors. That was not the case in the 1970s.

Before 1970 there were paltry few services that a genealogist could make use of; family memories, family bibles, clipped obituaries, courthouse records, library books, and church records. Word processing, saving documents, and making copies was a luxury.

After 1970, additional services came along, greatly expanding the ease and availability of genealogy records. The computer made a huge difference, as did the internet. Suddenly, we had various for-profit companies that wanted to help us. Some of these amazing on-line databases are free. Probably the giant in this field is ancestry.com. There are other on-line services such as Family Search, My Heritage.com, FindaGrave.com and others. The ability to scan, digitize, and share photos had never been possible before.

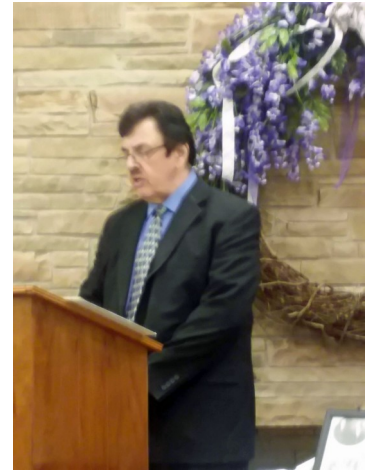
View the complete presentation on YOUTUBE

Mr. Lee goes on to explain that one of the key aspects of any kind of research, especially projects that have many different avenues to cover, is organization. Three ring binders, the handy three-hole punch, and file dividers to separate various family groups, are key to making the information come together in a more useable form.

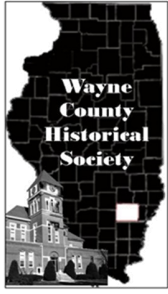
Steve Lee cautioned listeners about actual "fact finding," that when one is researching family history, some of the "facts" passed down through generations may not be completely accurate. He shared two stories from his own "research odyssey" that proved his point. He reminded his listeners that the best way to go about a quest for one's past is to do so with an open mind.

Mr. Lee shares creative ideas for using family history research to write articles, fictional stories, and books. He has used facts taken from his ancestor's diary to write the book *Covered Wagon Odyssey*. Steve has also assisted local minister; Carroll Kakac in publishing his memoirs. In addition, Mr. Lee has shared several family history stories in the Wayne County Press.

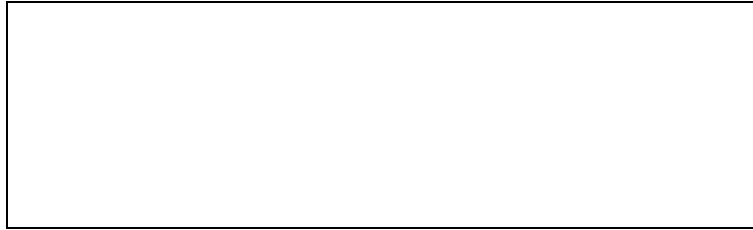
VIEW the remainder of the presentation on [YOUTUBE](https://youtu.be/A9bnuZznRGQ) <https://youtu.be/A9bnuZznRGQ> The presentation includes several family history stories and antidotes. In closing, Mr. Lee cautions the family history researcher to be mindful of half-truths, misinformation, and personal bias when it comes to family history. Still, time spent researching and organizing family history is rewarding and invaluable to recording local history.



THANK YOU for sharing with us Steve!



Wayne County Historical Society
Fairfield Public Library
300 S.E. 2nd Street
Fairfield, Illinois 62837



WAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER SPRING 2021

David Morris, President
Donna Savage, Vice President Terry Prizer, Secretary Judy Griswold, Treasurer
Trustees: Judith Puckett Otis Brach Don Wood Doug Aman
Archivists: Gina Bashore Niki Roethe Jami Roethe

*Now if you are not a member of the Wayne County Historical Society, why don't you join?
Everyone has something to add to our history, and you can help.*

***Don't let local history be a mystery! Support the Wayne County Historical Society.
Use the following form for **NEW** and **RENEWAL** memberships. Thank you!***

2021 Wayne County Historical Society Membership Form

First Name: _____ Last Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State/Zip: _____

E-Mail: _____ Phone: _____

High School attended: _____ Graduation year: _____

Option: Annual \$15 Lifetime \$300

Make checks payable to Wayne County Historical Society

Mail or drop off to:
Wayne County Historical Society Fairfield Public Library 300 S.E. 2nd Street Fairfield, Illinois 62837