

# Road trip

Last month I was rolling down Illinois Highway 49 in rural Clark County after an unexpected detour forced me from Westfield towards Martinsville, home of the “World’s Largest Horseshoe.” Annoying but not troublesome, the detour added only 8 minutes to my journey and I was soon distracted by hundreds of derricks pumping crude from the black fertile Illinois oil fields.

Then I saw a neon sign on a roadside diner that said “Oil Town” —or maybe it said “Oil Field” or “Oil City” —I honestly don’t remember, because another sign was flashing “Homemade Pies.” Talk about your roadside hazards. I kept driving but made a mental note to stop by on my way home to nail down the town name and a pie.

For the next ten miles the smell of pumping oil wells greased my reveries as I headed toward West Union, my official destination. It would seem that a town called West Union should have a companion community, an “East” or “North” Union to keep it company



**Paul Wilson and the “Fort Handy” historical marker reside in West Union, Illinois, an unincorporated dot on the blacktop between Martinsville and Marshall in Clark County.**



**Marshmallow clouds and a ponderous pavement led me to the edge of Clark County in east central Illinois.**

after dark. Some 19 Illinois towns were once called “Union,” according to the ISHS bible of small towns, *Illinois Place Names*, but not one was in Clark County. West Union enjoys its privacy.

I found my town and Paul Wilson, a retired Marathon Oil man who’d called the Society asking for help restoring a historical marker in the community park. The “Fort Handy” historical marker was erected in 1967 to commemorate a footnote in local history. The community park also has a missile and once had an F-16 Fighter Jet, said Wilson. “We couldn’t afford to pay the insurance on the jet, so they moved it to Texas,” he observed. The Fort Handy historical marker has been a local landmark for more than fifty years. Here’s the actual text:

“Fort Handy, built in 1816, was located 1200 feet southeast of this park on a knoll. The fort, the only structure of its kind in Clark County, was built by the family of Thomas Handy and contained three cabins and a well surrounded by a bulletproof palisade.

Erected by the West Union 4-H Clubs and the Illinois State Historical Society.”

No disrespect to the 4-H Clubs

of West Union or to the organization I work for, but the “Fort Handy” historical marker leaves a lot of questions unanswered, such as:

- *Why was the fort built?* The War of 1812 ended in 1814 with the Treaty of Ghent, and though it took a good two weeks for Andrew Jackson to get the word, surely the news got to eastern Illinois before 1816.

- *Was the fort built to ward off those pesky Piankeshaws,* known for raiding the settlements of European squatters in the Wabash River Valley?

- *Did the “bulletproof palisade” ever come under fire, and if so, by whom?*

- *Who the heck was Thomas Handy, and why should we care?*

Unfortunately, no one bothered to answer or research these questions before the marker was placed, which leaves the ISHS with a dilemma: *Do we take the sign down until the proper research is done and a new marker with actual documentable history replaces it, or do we simply clean it up, repaint it, and put it back on its original post?*

Mr. Wilson said he’d be pleased either way; he was just doing his civic duty to call attention to the plight of his town’s lone and faded marker.

I thanked him for taking the

marker down from its mount and I put "Fort Handy" in the boot of my van to take back to Springfield. This was something for the ISHS historical markers committee to consider. I still had my mind on a homemade pie, perhaps butterscotch.



***No self-respecting fisher should be driving when the road says "Angling."***

A couple of things I noticed on the way back home. The blacktop that took me into West Union was called "Angling Road." Although it meandered a bit the road was, for the most part, fairly straight, which had me wondering whether the fishing pole stowed in my van would have an opportunity to test the waters. I was thinking channel catfish for dinner.

I snapped a photo of the road sign and noticed across the highway "Potters Hall Church, Billie Ray Ulrey, Pastor." Potters Hall Church was a modest white frame meeting house with a belfry. I saw no cornerstone and there never was an Illinois town called "Potters Hall." The church's marquee was an upside down "home plate" hanging from a makeshift wooden frame at the top of which sat a large riverboat bell. In the entryway, a winged angel sculpture enveloped in flora and fauna and playing a harp greeted all visitors. A port-a-potty was positioned strategically out the back door of the church, should parishioners feel the call.

I drove through Martinsville on the way back home, stopping at the fairgrounds to pose with the "World's Largest Horseshoe." (I'm not convinced.) The summer festival was only a few hours away from opening its

gates, so I scurried back to the highway and that roadside diner before it closed. Banana Cream was sounding pretty good at that hour of the day.

Alas, the road that spat me out on Rte. 49 did so three miles north of the diner, so that pie and I will have to wait for another road trip to the oil fields of Clark County. You're welcome to come along. I can't promise pie, but an Illinois road trip is always  spectacular.



***Potters Hall Church (no apostrophe need apply) outside of West Union was free of denominational ties and possibly running water.***



***Resting at the Martinsville Ag Fair under the "World's Largest Horseshoe," and thinking about a pie.***