

Henry Funk (1858-1938)

Apples and pears, chickens and bees—these were the business of Henry Funk. The fruits and creatures of the land were both his profession and his hobby. In McLean County, where farming usually means corn and soybeans, Funk raised fruits, **fowl**, and bees.

Henry Funk was born on January 18, 1858 and raised in McLean County. His family had no relation to the Isaac Funk family of Funks Grove, IL. His parents, Henry Sr. and Magdalena Funk, were immigrants from Germany who settled in Dry Grove Township in the western part of the county. Henry was one of six children, two of whom died in infancy.

Henry Funk's father was an award-winning farmer, and Henry Jr. followed in his father's footsteps. The greater part of Henry Jr.'s professional life was spent working for the Lilly Orchard Company. The company was founded in 1898 to grow high-grade fruits and nuts, including apples, peaches, plums, pears, blackberries and cherries. Although the orchard was located in Tazewell County (near the town of Mackinaw), the main office was in Bloomington. The land that Lilly Orchard occupied was near the **timber**, and the soil—unlike typical prairie soil—had a high concentration of clay. Funk believed, and went on to prove, that this soil was great for raising apples. In 1910, Funk was named a director of the company, and named general manager two years later. In 1912, the company, renamed Lilly Orchard Fruit Company, won the prize cup at an apple exhibition in Chicago. The company displayed 25 varieties of apples and defeated contestants from almost every other state in the country to win the prize.

By 1914, Lilly Orchard covered 240 acres, most of which was dedicated to apples with space also for peaches, pears, cherries, and berries. **Cover crops** included hay, **buckwheat**, **alfalfa**, sweet clover, and oats. Maintenance of these 240 acres was done through a scientifically scheduled system of spraying, **pruning**, **cultivating**, and **pollinating**. According to Funk, "There (is) no use going into the orchard business unless you spray...that is, as long as you also know what to spray for." While Funk was manager, the orchards at Lilly typically were sprayed three to five times each summer season. Horse drawn wagons transported double-barreled spray guns to rid plants and fruits of damaging insects. In Funk's opinion, a good farmer could not be a good orchard man because "the work of spraying (not to mention regular pruning and cultivation) comes at a time when other things are more pressing" for the farmer. But Funk was a dedicated **orchardist** who, according to the *Pantagraph*, "nursed (Lilly Orchard) like a pet child." And like a well-loved child, Lilly thrived. Farms just one mile from Lilly had trees with little or no fruit, and the only difference was in the care of the orchard. As Funk once said, orchardists simply had to "let the trees talk to you."

Funk was also an excellent businessman. In the 1920s, when weather and transportation problems made marketing difficult, he promoted the idea of local merchandising. To Funk, avoiding transportation costs and simplifying packaging made sense. He said, "with a little local advertising to tell the people when to come and a few signs along the road indicating the ways to the orchard...every bushel of fruit can be sold right at the shed." He regularly advertised in local newspapers. According to Funk, "For good sound fruit, there is always a market."

Funk continued to manage Lilly Orchard until at least 1933, and the orchard continued to operate until the early 1950s. Today, the land the orchard once occupied is part of the Mackinaw River State Fishery and Wildlife Area, which is owned by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

In addition to growing fruit, Henry Funk was also greatly interested in beekeeping. The McLean County Beekeepers Association was formed in February 1922. In the 1880s, Funk had

75 hives that produced 15,000 pounds of honey annually. But as the county grew, fields were drained and cultivated, and less honey was produced. But as one expert said, there was still room in Central Illinois for bees that “with proper care, could produce a handsome amount of honey and contribute to greater fruit production.” Meetings of the organization were occasionally held at the Lilly Orchard, and Henry Funk served as president of the association from 1926 to 1929.

Funk was also greatly interested in raising poultry, particularly chickens. He was a member of the Bloomington Poultry and **Pet Stock** Association, one of the oldest agricultural organizations in the state. He was president of this group from 1901 to 1903, and then served on the Board of Directors. He raised Barred Plymouth Rock chickens for pleasure and profit, winning a second prize at the Illinois Poultry Association’s annual poultry show in 1904. He regularly advertised the chickens and eggs for hatching for sale in the local newspapers. The Barred Plymouth Rock chicken was known as a dual-purpose breed, producing good eggs and as well as being good to eat. At one time, it was the most popular farm chicken in the United States.

Funk was also a member of the Illinois **Horticultural** Society and served as secretary of that organization from 1914 to 1915. He regularly contributed to their exhibitions and publications.

With all his success, profit was never Funk’s top priority. He felt cooperation among members of any group was key to the success of all involved. He was a great promoter of farm **co-ops**. As he once said, “Agriculture has an **abundance** of security if farmers really cooperate to provide it.” When overproduction led to a collapse in farm prices prior to the Great Depression, Funk felt that surplus food supplies should be sent to starving people in areas such as China or India, which were struggling at the time. He admitted that “it takes the world a long time to learn the lesson of world cooperation” but **maintained** that “we must cooperate or perish at our own prosperity.” This awareness led Funk to have a great interest in local social and political matters. He ran for public office twice, but was unsuccessful. The *Pantagraph* frequently published his letters and opinions.

A family man, Henry Funk married Bloomington native, Olga Frey on December 2, 1892. The couple had three daughters; Lela, Irene, and Ruth.

Henry W. Funk died at the age of 80 at Brokaw Hospital in Normal on October 13, 1938. His death followed a week-long illness. His wife, Olga, had died six years earlier. Funk is buried next to his wife in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: What connections were there between Funk’s interests in orchards, bees, and chickens?