

# BASS RIVER GAZETTE

A newsletter from the Bass River Community Library History Committee and the Great John Mathis Foundation

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## JESSE JOHNSON -A LEGEND IN HIS OWN TIME

by Peter H. Stemmer

One of the things that I lament as I talk to old timers about the way things used to be in New Gretna, is the absence, today, of true individualism. People today seem too sanitized, too politically correct, and too molded to society's idea of conformity. Simply put . . . we have lost our characters, and what a shame! They were a part of the richness of the small town country life in the past.

When I was a small child, my parents read me the stories of Paul Bunyon, that legendary folk hero who travelled the north woods with Babe the Blue Ox. His stature grew bigger and bigger as the stories spread. How else would the Grand Canyon have formed had it not been for Paul dragging his pick axe behind him? Such was the case of Jesse Johnson, the resident Folk Hero around New Gretna a few generations ago. The stories grew and grew.

Jesse's fame came from two primary attributes. He grew into a hulk of a man, and he had a somewhat strange personality. In the politically correct world of today, we would call him mentally challenged. Folks back then just accepted him as being "a little squirrely". This combination of brute strength and somewhat irregular behavior combined to produce the legend that was Jesse Johnson. Today, it is difficult to separate fiction from reality, but we'll give it a try.

Born on December 3, 1850 to Edward and Lucy Cramer Johnson on a farm off the present day Hammonton Road (Rt. 542), not far from the old Cramer Mill on the Ives Branch of the Wading River, Jesse could claim deep roots in the New Gretna area. His mother Lucy was the daughter of Isaac Cramer who lived at Merrygold Creek in the house presently owned by the McCarten family, owned extensive property in the area, was a Revolutionary War veteran, and a successful businessman. The Johnson homestead where Jesse grew up came from his grandfather Isaac's landholdings. Isaac's July 12, 1839 will read ". . . I bequeath to my Daughter Lucy [sic] Johnson and to her heirs forever the place and premises where she and her Husband now dwell, and I also give her and her heirs forever six acres of cedar swamp which I purchased of James Willetts, Which James sold for John Ridgeway and others, and I give her and her heirs forever eight acres more or less of salt meadows on Ditch point of Wading River, . . ."

Charles Cramer, a respected businessman in the community who ran the Saw Mill near the Johnson household, was Lucy's brother and Jesse's uncle.



Jesse Johnson's neighborhood. (1) The Johnson Homestead; (2) The Charles Cramer Sawmill; and (3) The Isaac Cramer house. From the 1858 Kuhn-Janney Map of Burlington County.



Edward Johnson, Jesse's father, died on April 28, 1858 when Jesse was just 7 years old. He is buried in the Johnson Cemetery on River Road in Lower Bank. (9/6/07 photo)

The September 16, 1850 census shows Edward (56) and Lucy Johnson (49), neighbors of Charles Cramer, with six children - Nicholas V. (19), George W. (17), Isaiah (16), William (14) Charles (12), and Lydia (4). Edward was listed as a Blacksmith as were his three oldest sons who, likely, were apprenticing with their father. Jesse, the last of the Johnson children, was to join the family on December 3, 1850, a few months after the census was taken.

We find Lucy listed as the head of the Johnson household in the 1860 census with William, Charles, and Lydia still living at home. Her husband, Edward, died on April 28, 1858. Her oldest children (Nicholas, George, and Isaiah) are living nearby as heads of their own households. It is likely that they were given a portion of the Johnson Estate as they were married, as that was a common practice of the time. Jesse, strangely, is not listed in his mother's household. We find him listed as "Jessey", an 8 year old female, in his brother Nicholas' household. This illustrates an important lesson for those doing genealogy work. You can't trust everything written in census records. The 1860 census was taken out of the Vincetown Post Office by Thomas McNinney, an "out of townner" who would have been unfamiliar with the Johnson's neighborhood. He likely heard the name "Jesse" and incorrectly wrote down female "Jessey". Whether Jesse actually lived with his older brother, Nicholas, or was merely visiting is another question. Perhaps, he should have been listed in his mother's household, where we find him in the 1870 census.

By the 1870 census, the Lucy Johnson household had shrunk to just herself, at age 60, and Jesse who is listed as an 18 year old sailor. That Jesse turned to the sea was not unusual for young men in the area, as the nearby Wading River ran into the larger Mullica River which ran into Great Bay and finally the Atlantic Ocean. Nicholas, George, and Isaiah who had lived near Lucy in the 1860 census are no longer listed in the neighborhood as they moved to Stafford where their wives' families lived. That left just Jesse and his mother to fend for themselves, day to day, and they became increasingly more dependent on each other . . . Jesse supporting his widowed mother and Lucy looking after her "unique" child. The 1880 census shows an aging Lucy, now 70, and 28 year old Jesse still living alone on the

Johnson estate. Jesse, no longer a sailor, is listed as "working at home", probably so that he could take care of his ailing mother.

By this time the legend of Jesse Johnson had begun to grow. Stories of Jesse cutting prodigious amounts of wood spread throughout the pines, reminiscent of the tales of Paul Bunyon in the great northwoods. Jesse had no Babe the Blue Ox, but it was obvious that he could swing an axe with the best of them. His feats of strength were not limited to woodcutting, however. Jesse, as was the case with many young men of the pines, undertook many jobs to scratch out a living for himself and his mother. As he undertook each job, his legend grew.

Herbert Halpert, in his 1947 doctoral thesis entitled "Folktales and Legends From the New Jersey Pines" for the University of Indiana, related some

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# YESTERDAY'S RECIPES by Elaine Weber Mathis

## A NEW GREटना THANKSGIVING

In the October, 2005 *Bass River Gazette* (Issue #19), we featured the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC). At the same time we celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of Bass River State Forest. As a result of that special day, I met the lovely Cynthia Coritz, Superintendent of Bass River State Forest. She made the suggestion of using a CCC Thanksgiving Menu from 1936 as part of our next issue. I thought it was a great idea, so thanks, Cynthia.

[ *Editor's note: Because of our failure to regularly publish the "Gazette" during the last two years, it's actually two years since Superintendent Coritz's CCC Thanksgiving menu suggestion. Elaine wrote the article in a timely fashion, as usual, but it was not printed until this issue. It's still timely, in that Thanksgiving, 2007 is approaching next month; however, we have lost two dear friends since Elaine's interviews, Almira Steele and Margaret Johnson. We remember them fondly. PHS ]*

Below is the 1936 Thanksgiving dinner served at the Bass River CCC Camp.  
How does it stack up to your most memorable Thanksgiving dinner?  
There are some local boys listed on the right side of the menu. Do you know who they are?

THANKSGIVING DINNER 1936		ROSTER OF C. C. C. COMPANY No. 225 NEW GREटना, N. J.		
<i>"Eat, Drink and be Merry"</i>		CAPT. ROWE H. NELSON, <i>Commanding</i>		
CELERY	STUFFED OLIVES	LT. H. P. WRIGHT <i>Supply Officer</i>	MR. W. H. VAN SLYKE <i>Educational Adviser</i>	LT. S. E. DiFIGLIA <i>Medical Officer</i>
SWEET RELISH	SWEET PICKLES		MR. J. W. JOHNSON <i>Project Superintendent</i>	
CREAM TOMATO SOUP	CRACKERS		FOREMEN	
	ROAST STUFFED TURKEY	H. A. Somes	A. A. Cabberly	G. R. Moorhead
DRESSING	GIBLET GRAVY	C. A. Smith	Thomas Wood	H. B. Chalfant, Jr.
	CRANBERRY SAUCE	C. R. Bush	A. H. Koster	N. P. Taylor
			Walter B. Sagirs <i>First Sergeant</i>	
SNOWFLAKED POTATOES	CANDIED SWEET POTATOES	Norris Maxwell <i>Supply Sergeant</i>	Chas. E. Warner <i>Mess Sergeant</i>	Fred Ridgeway <i>Canteen Steward</i>
BUTTERED PEAS			Sigmund Strenkowski <i>Company Clerk</i>	Francis S. Sears <i>Forestry Clerk</i>
WALDORF SALAD			FIRST-AID	TRUCK DRIVERS
			Norman Adams	Daniel Walker
MINCE PIE	ICE CREAM		Richard Allen	Theodore Blodgett
				George Fauser <i>Camp Utilities</i>
PARKER HOUSE ROLLS			FIRST COOKS	SECOND COOKS
			Mathew Hemphill	Albert Oharah
CANDY	NUTS		Vernon Black	Grover Johnson
	FRUIT			
CIGARS	CIGARETTES	Russell Murphy	LEADERS	Ernest H. Cotterell
			Ralph Loveland	
COFFEE		John H. Carr	ASSISTANT LEADERS	John Kirsch
		Howard C. Parker	Rupert Fenimore	Mearl Seyler
		David Streater	Ralph Pharo	George Thompson

As long as we are thinking of Thanksgivings of long ago, I thought it would be interesting to ask some local folks what their "Most Memorable Thanksgiving" was? Following are some of those memories of long ago.

**Benny Allen:** When I was about 12 years old I bought a wood stove from Ash Lamson for \$10.00 with money that I had earned from working on the Walter Adams Farm milking cows, picking strawberries and many other chores on his farm. I remember the home baked bread and pies that Mom, Rae Mathis Allen, made in that old wood stove. It was so much more work in those days to cook and bake. The bread and pies smelled and tasted so good.



Ben Allen's mother, Rae. (Photo courtesy of Ben & Elaine Allen.)

**Mildred Shropshire Felsburg:** I remember on Thanksgiving when I was a young girl, I pulled a wagon with our share of the dinner over to Aunt Alice's and Uncle Walter's house (Alice Shropshire & Walter Mathis). Aunt Alice made some of the

food and Mom (Minnie Mathis Shropshire) made some. Our family and their family all had a big dinner together. Mom always liked to make pies.

**Alston Allen:** The most memorable Thanksgiving that I remember is when I was about 19 years old serving in the Army in Germany. We had a big turkey and all the other dishes that went with it.

**Steve Potter:** What I remember most is my daughter, Sheryl, being born.

**Bob Mathis:** Pop always had to work on Thanksgiving, so we had our big dinner on the following Sunday. I remember that Pop used to grab a chicken by the feet, put it on the chopping block



Mildred's mom, Minnie Mathis Shropshire - 1943. (Photo courtesy of Murray & Jean Harris.)



and then with an ax wacko went its head. Then he'd throw it on the ground and it would 'flop' around for a few minutes until it died. Pop had a small stove in the back yard with a 5 gallon bucket of boiling water. He'd dunk the chicken up and down in the boiling water a few times to loosen the feathers and make it easier to pick. He'd cut off the feet and clean out the guts. Then Mom would cook it. Of course, I never ate any of it. The best thing that I remember about Thanksgiving was I didn't have to go to school.



Bob's mom, Alice Shropshire Mathis - 1955. (Photo courtesy of Murray and Jean Harris.)

**Betty Lamson West:** The Thanksgiving that I remember the most was after my marriage to Floyd (nearly 56 years ago). It was the 1<sup>st</sup> Thanksgiving that I wasn't at home to have Thanksgiving with my parents (Ferron and Dorothy Lamson). I cooked dinner for the two of us and a couple of friends. I was a student nurse at the time.



Betty's parents, Ferron and Dorothy Lamson- 1970. (Photo courtesy of Floyd and Betty West.)

**Claire Kalm Allen:** I don't really remember Thanksgiving until after I was married. My Daddy (Otto Kalm) was always away working (as a Watchman in the bay), so we didn't celebrate Thanksgiving Day. After Alston and I were married, we had a big duck dinner with the duck that Alston had shot.



Claire's dad, Otto Kalm, patrolling on Great Bay. (Photo courtesy of Alston & Claire Allen)

**Almira Cramer Steele (1922-2006):** Thanksgiving 1966 was the most eventful Thanksgiving I can remember. It was the Thanksgiving when I got shot!

It was rabbit season and some of the local hunters decided they would go rabbit hunting that morning before all the festivities began. They gathered in the field just behind the gas station right next to my back yard, where the pen for our dogs was located.

My daughter, Ethel, and I happened to go out to the pen for a moment when we heard a gun shot. I pushed Ethel down behind the door of the pen to protect her when suddenly I felt a 'twinge' in my right leg. Kidding, I yelled "I've been shot, I've been shot". I was thinking that I had stepped on a stick or something, but when I looked down and saw my leg bleeding, I knew for certain that I had been shot.

A quick trip was taken to the doctor's and then to the police station with the bullet in my hand. The police examined the bullet and asked me if I thought it was an accident or done on purpose. I said I didn't know. All I knew was I'd been shot.

Needless to say that was the end of the Thanksgiving rabbit hunt. As for me, that's one Thanksgiving I'll never forget. P.S. I still have the scar to prove it.

**Steve Eichinger:** Most of my Thanksgiving memories were good. My most memorable Thanksgiving was when I was about 8 or 9 years old. At this time (about 1942) we lived in what was originally called "The McKean Hotel" at Wading River (also called Bridgeport).

We always had enough to eat. We would have turkey or maybe a large roasting chicken or even some fresh killed ducks. My father's brother, Louie Eichinger, was in the Army. He came home on a furlough. It was a big deal back then to see him in his uniform and listen to his stories.

My mother (Martina Adams Eichinger) invited Uncle Louie and his girlfriend for Thanksgiving dinner. Our dinner consisted of Piggies in

the Blankets, Mashed Potatoes, Rutabagas, Sauerkraut, Cole Slaw and Creamed Onions. Pumpkin Pie was dessert. Mom's Piggies in the Blanket were the best.

My father (Stephen Eichinger, Sr.) was from the old country, Germany (The Hungarian part). He used to make his own Kraut. In late October, Dad would buy late cabbage from a farm in Germania. It was sliced into a 30 gallon oak barrel. He would pick out about 4 heads of the cabbage and bury them in the Kraut. They would age and become soft as the Sauerkraut was curing. This is what my mother used to wrap the filling in for the Piggie's. For 20-30 years my father used that same barrel, a heavy stone for weight, and boards on cloth for covering the kraut.

All of the equipment is gone now except for the cabbage slicer. The memories of the good homemade Kraut and Piggie's in the Blanket will always remain with me forever, I guess.

**Margaret Sullivan Johnson (1917 - 2007):** My most memorable Thanksgiving was in 1942 when my husband, Howard, and I came home from Charleston, SC to spend Thanksgiving with my parents, Grover and Elsie Sullivan. After enjoying the holiday together, Howard went to Europe for 3 years to serve in the army and I returned to Charleston, SC by myself.



Margaret at her 85 birthday celebration in July, 2002.

**Catherine Wiseman Heinrichs:** I really don't have any special memories of Thanksgiving. They were always about the same every year. We always had a big dinner with turkey and all the trimmings that went with it. Of course we had homemade pumpkin pie for dessert.

**Helen Sears Carty:** The only thing that I remember about Thanksgiving when I was a young girl was my mother always having so many people to cook for. It seems that we were always feeding somebody. I remember it so well because I was the only girl and I had to wash the dishes.



Helen's mom, Vera Sears. (Photo courtesy of Helen Carty)

**Elaine Weber Mathis:** Thanksgiving at our house was celebrated on Sunday after Thanksgiving. My Dad, (Charles Weber), always worked every day



Elaine's mom and dad, Elsie and Charles Weber, Jr. (Photo courtesy of Elaine and Robert Mathis)

except Sunday, so that's the day that Mom (Elsie Ford Weber) made our big dinner. Mom always cooked a big dinner with turkey and all the trimmings, including my favorite, pumpkin pie. Mom was a great cook but was usually so tired that she didn't want to eat. We always had lots of relatives that came to visit after dinner. Sometimes they came before dinner and then Mom was even MORE tired.

## WHO WE ARE

The Bass River Community Library History Committee members are Harry DeVerter, Steve Eichinger, Jean & Murray Harris, Elaine Mathis, and Pete Stemmer. You may write us c/o **The Bass River Community Library, P.O. Box 256, New Gretna, N.J. 08224;** or call Pete Stemmer at 296-6748.

**Check out our new "Bass River History" Web Site at:**  
<http://bassriver-nj.org/history>

You'll find all the back issues of the "Bass River Gazette" there, along with a lot of Bass River related history.

# JESSE JOHNSON

(Continued from page 1)

Jesse Johnson legends he heard from Charles H. Grant in 1941. Grant recalled meeting Jesse and related three stories that captured the essence of Jesse, his uniqueness and prowess. Following are Grant's remembrances of Jesse.



Jesse Johnson (1851-1923) poses for a rare studio portrait. (Photo courtesy of Marian C. Broome.)

-- I heard lots of yarns about him. I seen him in fact, this old Johnson, when he was an old man. Seen him at Forked River -- seen him get weighed on a set of scales on what they weigh feed and stuff like that on. Was no flesh on him much -- only skin and bones. Two hundred and ninety pounds. Big as a horse -- biggest man I ever seen -- 'bout seven feet. That's been a long time ago. I was around Forked River workin' in a coalin'. They got talkin' about big men -- several big men around there at that time. Someone called him in -- and that's what he weighed.

## THE ENORMOUS STONE

They was a-quarryin' stone they call it -- diggin' sandstone out o' the ground, some'eres down around Bass River -- diggin' it to put 'buttmments off the bridge . . . And this old Johnson -- his name was Johnson -- he worked there, Nick Couch, a lot of 'em. I don't know all their names but Nick Couch -- he was a sort off preacher -- he told me about it. He said he'd come there in the morning, bring his dinner -- enough for half a dozen men. And he'd set there and talk all day -- wouldn't do no work in the daytime. Next morning when they all got back, he'd have out more stone than any two of them could do in a day. He done that every day.

Said one day they come there and he had a big stone oncapped down in the bottom off the quarry. And -- he didn't take it out that day, but next morning he had it out and up on the bank. Well he said the teams come in. They didn't have enough men to load it. They couldn't get ahold of enough men to handle it. They had to break it up. Made over a square yard after they did break it up -- couldn't get it all on -- so it made over a two-horse load. They never knowed how he got it out. They knowed one thing, he couldn't have had any help -- there was nobody there. You see he took it out after they left. They don't know how he got it out. He got it out somehow. They couldn't imagine how he got it out. It was down in the ground about eight feet when he uncovered it.

## EATING AND MOWING

I'm tryin' to think of another man told me a story about him. He was a preacher too -- come to my house sellin' Bibles. His name was Vanzant. I bought some books off him -- bought an album and a Bible. I paid fifteen dollars for two books -- I remember that -- I think we have them yet. And he stayed all night with me and he told me several stories, and one about this old Jesse Johnson.

He said when he was a boy, his father was a-farmin' -- he owned a farm and preached around there -- Bass River, Tuckertown, anywheres wherever they'd want him, he'd go. He had a twenty acres of rye in one field, and he wanted to get somebody to cradle it. And he said -- somebody told him to get Johnson, he was good. So he went and seen Johnson. Made a bargain with him -- he was to give Johnson a dollar an acre and his board while he was cuttin' it.

So he showed up the next morning a little afore sunrise, sun wasn't up yet. Preacher he told his wife to cook plenty -- he'd heard about Johnson -- he was a big eater. So she hustled around and put on the table enough for eight or ten men. Told Johnson to come in and

go to eatin' whenever he was ready. Johnson washed and come in and set down. And he said he went to eatin' and cleaned up everything on the table, and asked if she had any more coffee -- he'd drunked seven or eight cups. She told him no, but if he wasn't in too big a hurry, she'd make him more.

Johnson didn't seem to like that -- it made him mad -- she probably didn't say it very nice. Johnson he got up from the table, went and got his cradle -- and went to work. And this feller said when him and his father come in, preacher's wife wasn't in a very good humor. And she was a-fixin' up something for their breakfast, and she was tellin' 'em what Johnson eat. And she said that noon she was gonna fill him up -- she'd give him one square meal anyhow.

Well, he said, at noon Johnson didn't come up after his dinner, and he went after him -- he said he went after him himself. Told him to come up and get his dinner -- dinner was ready. Johnson wouldn't come, he was still a little bit miffed -- said he didn't want any dinner. When it came night, suppertime, he said he went again after Johnson. Well he said Johnson wouldn't come after no supper. Didn't want any, he said. Still cradlin' -- the moon was comin' up and Johnson was still cuttin' rye.

The next morning, he said, Johnson didn't show up for breakfast. Said after they got their breakfast, him and the preacher both went down there and didn't find Johnson. He'd gone home. But the twenty acres of rye was cut -- cut all on one meal. That's as much as a reaper-binder would cut in two days, that's sure -- He swore that was a fact. I guess he wouldn't lie; he was an awful nice kind of man: sold bibles, went around preaching.

## THE PULLED CART

I heard a good many things about Johnson. Said he used to peddle fish -- had an old team -- clams, you know -- he'd load it pretty heavy. And one of his horses would tire out -- couldn't go on. And Johnson he'd hook the tired horse behind the wagon -- hook hisself up 'longside the other horse -- take his share of the load. Didn't matter how far he had to go. Go to another town where he'd stay all night -- sometimes he'd be quite a ways off -- and through that sand, you know -- but he'd allus go right on. He was some man. -- That part I know is true: I've heard dozens of old people, they often seen him. In the morning when the horse be all right, he'd go on.



Joe Ware (1892-1948), who knew Jesse Johnson, related stories of Jesse to his son, Howard. (Photo courtesy of Howard Ware.)

The story of Jesse's exploits pulling a cart was substantiated by my friend, Howard Ware, from New Gretna. Howard, now 86, told me that his father Joe knew Jesse first hand. Joe ran various saw mills in the area and likely was familiar with Jesse's wood cutting prowess and other exploits.

Howard remembers his dad marveling over Jesse's determination and strength. According to Joe, Jesse eventually had no horse to pull his wagon. Jesse solved the situation by cutting the rear end out of a two horse wagon and, modifying it like a rickshaw, was able to take the place of a horse and pull the wagon over the area's sand roads. Joe told Howard that Jesse pulling the wagon to Egg Harbor to meet the train and pick up packages to be

delivered to various towns on his way back to New Gretna. I guess you could say that Jesse was ahead of his time . . . sort of the first UPS in the area! Joe related that Jesse often took his mother on his trips, pulling her weight in addition to the packages.

George McCarten, presently living in Jesse's grandfather Isaac Cramer's house on Merrygold Creek, tells that he read about Jesse and his wagon pulling exploits in an old family scrap book . . .

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# JESSE JOHNSON

(Continued from page 4)

Jesse Johnson was quite a local character. An old bachelor, he lived with his mother in a big house on what is known as "The Johnson Place." He never wore shoes and he had rigged up a big box on the front half of a wagon. He fashioned a sort of harness which he fitted to himself and did a business of hauling "light" loads, such as casks of lard, etc. between New Gretna and Egg Harbor and similar distances. Once he had his old mother in the box on the wagon- half and along the road by the swamp above our place, he called out "The horse is getting balky Mom, he's out of control" and so saying he shied off into the ditch. The cart upset, the old lady fell out and broke her leg.

Charlie Kier, in a Spring/Summer, 1981 article in the "Batsto Gazette", also discusses Jesse's wagon pulling accident with his mom; however, Charlie's version embellishes the story even more, as we see the legend growing. . .

[Jesse's] life was routine, relatively obscure and his world very small for many years until his mother suffered an incapacitating stroke which made constant care imperative. This put an end to Jesse's wood-cutting career . . . Jesse finally came up with an idea that completely changed his way of life. He acquired a depressed-center milk wagon, a type of vehicle so very familiar to those of us who have passed the half-century mark and then some. Only Jesse didn't have a horse. He planned to use the wagon for two purposes; first, to earn a living and second, to have his mother with him at all times. Jesse served as the horse. His living consisted of salvaging salable trash. In addition, he collected bottles and clocks - any kind of bottles and any kind of clocks!

His trudging trips took him through the towns on Route 9 and across the causeway to Long Beach Island which he traversed from end to end. Apparently his salvage activities at least provided sustenance. It is difficult to comprehend how he was able to pull this often-loaded wagon, day after day, rain or shine, over gravel and sand roads. His strength and endurance were unbelievable. Doubtlessly he was often away from home several days at a time . . . Imagine, if you can, this man pulling the narrow-tired milk wagon, loaded with his mother, clocks and bottles, at least two or three miles back the deep sand roads to reach his home.

After years of serving as a dray horse, nurse and scavenger, Jesse's tribulations finally came to a sudden and totally unexpected ending. One dark night, through a lack of judgment, hurry, or near-exhaustion, as Jesse turned into the lane to his home, the rear left wheel caught on a tree, upset the wagon with its precious load. His mother was killed. Apparently this ended Jesse's forays for salvage and bottles. From this point on, little or nothing is known of Jesse or his activities.

Charlie Kier's account of Lucy's death enhances the legend, but is it reality? I have been unable to document when and how Jesse's mother Lucy died, nor where she is buried. There is no tombstone for Lucy next to her husband at Lower Bank or next to her parents at the Cramer Cemetery in New Gretna where Jesse was put to rest. But then, doesn't mystery accompany most legends?

Jesse's quirky behavior and obsessive nature in collecting and hoarding a variety of items, complement the strong man legend. George McCarten speaks of Jesse's hobbies . . .

Johnson had two hobbies, collecting glass bottles and old clocks. At the time of his death he had collected a pile of bottles nearly as high as the house. Old glass collectors carried away nearly all of these bottles as glass collecting became more popular. He had over 100 old clocks in his home at one time. They were set to strike all at different times so that a clock was striking at all times of the day.

Charlie Kier echoes McCarten's statements about Jesse's hobbies . . .

His love for interestingly shaped and attractively colored bottles, mostly medicines, resulted in a huge accumulation that overflowed

from his house into the backyard shed. Oh yes, we must not forget his collection of clocks. What he did with them no one knows . . . [After the death of his mother] It has been postulated that Jesse remained at the house cleaning and sorting his horde of bottles, which he stored in crates and boxes throughout the house and overflowing into the shed.

. . . His massive collection of bottles and many clocks were discovered about forty years ago [circa 1920's] before the site had become completely overgrown. When discovered, thousands of bottles had been shattered and scattered over a wide area, but there were still many left intact.

After the situation was discovered, either through knowledge of Jesse's horde, or by chance, gatherers from a wide area beat a well-worn path to Jesse's home site. The collectors were amazed at the wide variety and especially the quantity of Turlington Balsam bottles made in many different molds. There were literally thousands of bottles of all imaginable sizes, colors and shapes, in heaps and scattered all around the clearing.

Many residents of the area and New Gretna, collected Jesse's bottles by the basketfull. Those who visited the site very early were well rewarded for their efforts, even if they had to do a little digging. The late comers were able to recover only an occasional nondescript bottle. Even the well was cleaned out by persons hoping to find a "cache".

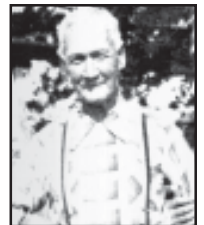
The names on the recovered medicine bottles probably read like a directory of doctors and druggists from New Gretna to Tuckerton and from the length of Long Beach Island.

Today [1961], nature has completely reclaimed the site. Only a close observer might notice a difference in vegetation which usually marks the location of a former home site.

Crate McAnney, who lived down the road from the Johnson Place, knew Jesse first hand and wrote in McCarten's scrapbook that Jesse occasionally got unexpected enjoyment from his bottle collection . . .

Jesse had a habit of filling the ruts in the old roads with bottles. Then he would hide in the bushes and as the heavy carts would roll over the bottles they would crack and explode with a great noise and Jesse would laugh uproariously.

I would have been sceptical about the existence of such a strange man in our little town of New Gretna, had I not spoken to two New Gretna ladies, Marian Broome and Margaret Cramer McAnney, who had memories of Jesse from their childhood. Both told me that they, as little girls, remember seeing Jesse. Both confirmed that he was a hulk of a man with a rather unkempt appearance and some strange habits.

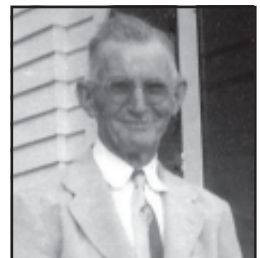


James Socrates "Crate" McAnney (1869-1956) remembered the old stories about Jesse Johnson. (Photo courtesy of Bette McAnney)



Marian Broome (1914-2004) remembered a Sunday dinner with Jesse Johnson. (Photo courtesy of Marian Broome.)

Marian recalled her father, Ben Broome, inviting Jesse to an afternoon Sunday dinner in the Broome household. Jesse arrived wearing disheveled clothes with a vest covered in a variety of brightly colored badges, buttons, and bottlecaps. After observing Jesse's loud and somewhat unconventional behavior throughout dinner, Marian, somewhat frightened by Jesse's size and crude behavior, remarked to her father that she wished he hadn't invited Jesse to dinner. Anyone



Ben Broome (1874-1961) invited Jesse Johnson to a Sunday afternoon family dinner, to the consternation of his daughter, Marian. (Photo courtesy of Marian Broome.)

knowing Ben Broome wouldn't be surprised by

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# NICKNAMES

(Continued from page 8)

- Talbert Loveland was known as **"Tabby."**
- Walter Loveland's nickname was **"Ditty."**
- Milton Kauflin's nickname was **"Mutt."**
- Gerald Hickman was known as **"Skeets."**
- Leon Allen was called **"Minky."**
- Socrates McAnney was known as **"Crate."**



"Ash" and Anna Lamson. Ash owned a restaurant on the NE corner of Rt 9 and Maple Ave. from 1899-1929. (Photo courtesy of Betty Lamson West)

- Ashton Lamson was known as **"Ash."**
- Woodrow Allen was called **"Wood."**
- Washington Allen's nickname was **"Washy."**
- Irvin Cramer was called **"Greaser."**
- Patrick Loveland was known as **"Pokey."**
- **Reuben McAnney** was called **"Ruby"** by the female population and **"Rube"** by the men and boys.

James Adams was the father of Margaret Adams who was the principal of the New Gretna School for many, many years. She was called **"Miss Maggie"** and **"Miss Margaret"** by her students but **"Maggie Jimmy"** by most of her friends.

Harold Gerew, Jr. loved to watch the older boys play football. Of course being younger, he was much smaller than the players, but every time they would go into a huddle, Harold was right in the middle of it. Therefore, **"Huddle"** is his New Gretna nickname to this day.

George Hedevary was nicknamed **"Spinny"** because, I am told, he liked to take his car out on the ice in the dead of winter and spin around and around.

There was a restaurant on the corner of South Maple Avenue and Route 9 and the owners, at one time, were William and Annie Cramer. Mrs. Cramer ran the restaurant while her husband had a butcher shop in the rear of the building. Mr. Cramer was known as **"Bill Butcher"** and his wife as **"Annie Bill."**

When Elaine Allen who was from Long Island, N.Y., joined the Allen family, her father-in-law nicknamed her **"Shorty"** right off the bat. I guess that was her christening into the life and times of New Gretna.



Harry Allen & his wife Rayetta with their daughter-in-law "Shorty" in 1942. (Photo courtesy of Ben & Elaine Allen)

Peg McAnney, whose husband teased her about working so hard, jokingly chose the nickname of **"Tillie"** from the comic strip "Tillie the Toiler."

Alberta Cramer's son-in-law appropriately called her **"Queenie."** I guess he saw right from the start who ruled the roost on Cramer Hill.

I, too, have had a nickname all my life. My friends and family have always called me **"Al"**. Wherever I go, if I hear someone call out to me by my nickname, I know it's a good friend from New Gretna. It gives me a real nostalgic feeling, and I believe that is what the nickname is all about. It's the warm

and friendly camaraderie of the folks in our hometown, and I hope we never lose that special, tender touch with our Hometown Folks.

# JESSE JOHNSON

(Continued from page 5)

his response to his young daughter . . . "Then we wouldn't be good Christians, would we?"

The Broome family's connection with Jesse was verified by the discovery of a photo of Jesse in a box of old family photos in Marian's attic about a year before her death in September, 2004. Marian, with a sharp eye and a still keen mind, identified the photo as Jesse, the man who had come to that Sunday dinner so long ago. I had clearly spoken to someone who had seen the legend!

Margaret "Peg" Cramer McAnney became my second eye witness to Jesse Johnson's status as a genuine Bass River character. She remembered attending the New Gretna Presbyterian Church, as a little girl, and seeing Jesse Johnson come through the front doors wearing his badge and button cover vest. He sat down near the front and took out a number of old pocket watches and lined them up next to him on the pew. She said she never forgot it, because his behavior was so strange.

Peg told me her family lived in Frogtown when she was small, just a stone's thrown from Gertrude Sherman's house at Sherman's corner on the bend of Hammonton Road, now the site of the Burlington County Highway Department Maintenance Yard. Peg remembered Jesse, as an old man, living on the second story of Gert's house. As he grew older, it is likely that Jesse couldn't take care of himself at the old Johnson Place, and ended up a boarder with Gert Sherman.



An older Jesse Johnson in his "Sunday finest" outside Gert Sherman's house where he occupied the top floor during the latter part of his life. (Photo courtesy of Donald Maxwell via Margaret McAnney.)

Jesse's final move was from Gert Sherman's house, just down the street a ways, to the Cramer Family Cemetery where he was buried in March, 1923. A small stone marks the last resting place of this Bass River man who became a legend in his own time.

*If anyone has any additional stories about Jesse Johnson, please write to "Letters To The Editor, The Bass River Gazette, c/o Bass River Community Library, P.O. Box 256, New Gretna, N.J. 08224." We would love to hear from you.*



1924  
Peg Cramer McAnney (1914-2004) remembered Jesse Johnson in church when she was a schoolgirl. (Photo courtesy of Margaret Cramer McAnney.)

## Gazette Subscriptions

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# GENEALOGY CORNER by Jean and Murray Harris

We honor the memory of our "sister", Almira Cramer Steele (1922-2006), who has given us so much joy as a friend and through her "Another Thing I Remember" column here in the "Gazette", by looking at her Family Tree. As the roots are, so grows the tree.

Almira Cramer Steele was born and grew up in New Gretna. Her ancestors have been in the area since the early 1700s, before there was a New Gretna, or a Bass River Township. The earliest ancestor who has been traced is a William Cranmer who was one of the original settlers of Southold, L.I., N.Y. By 1665 he had moved to Elizabeth, NJ, then called "Elizabethtowne". He had three sons, Thomas, William and John. His third son John in 1702 bought land in West Creek, NJ with his brother William. They were both members of the Society of Friends and, in 1707, William was a signer on John's transfer from the Little Egg Harbor meeting to the Woodbridge monthly meeting.



Caleb Stansberry Cramer, Sr., (1855-1934) Almira's grandfather. (Photo courtesy of Margaret Cramer McAnney.)

John and his wife Sarah Osborne had four sons, two of whom spelled their surname 'Cranmer', and two of whom, Jeremiah and Stephen, spelled the name 'Cramer', as their descendants do to this day.

John's son Stephen is the progenitor of almost all the Cramers in what came to be called New Gretna. He married first Sarah Andrews and then Sarah Little, and had sixteen children. Stephen was a member of the Society of Friends and is mentioned in the minutes of the Little Egg Harbor monthly meetings in 1749 and in 1750. His farm ran along the Bass River to North Maple Avenue and beyond. Miller Cemetery was near the center of the farm and was originally the Cramer family burying ground. The farm was left to Stephen's son Caleb, who left it to his son Caleb Jr. (always called Caleb Jr. Esquire), and from Caleb Jr. to his two sons Joseph Baker Cramer and Caleb S. Cramer.

Caleb S. is the brother who is in Almira's line. He married Ann Darby, daughter of Recompense Darby, who lived in the old Sam Allen house which still stands on North Maple Avenue. The son of Caleb S. and Ann was Joseph Bareford Cramer. Joseph's son Caleb Stansbury Cramer, married Alma VanSant, the daughter of Joel VanSant, of the locally famous shipbuilding family, which built ships in New Gretna, Port Republic, Atlantic City, even as



Alma VanSant Cramer (1866-1941), Almira's grandmother. Probably taken in Atlantic City. (Photo courtesy of Margaret Cramer McAnney.)

far west as the Mississippi River. Caleb Stansbury was the chief foreman at the VanSant boatyard for many years. Their son was Doughty VanSant Cramer.

Doughty was born in New Gretna in 1892 and he married Alberta Mae Cramer at Lower Bank in 1910. They were the parents of Almira Mae Cramer. She was the youngest of their five children — Ethel, Margaret/Peg, Preston, Minerva/Erva, and Almira. The family lived on North Maple Avenue, which was then known as Allentown Road.

Almira's mother, Alberta Mae, was also a Cramer with a line going back to the same William Cranmer of Elizabethtowne. Alberta is descended

from his son William while Doughty is descended from his son John. As noted before, the two brothers bought land in West Creek in 1702. William's descendants tended to stay in the part of Little Egg Harbor Township which would later become Stafford Township. They also kept the spelling of their surname as "Cranmer".

After five generations of Cranmers, all named William, a William B. Cranmer was born April 16, 1792 to William and Nancy (Somers) Cranmer of Poplar Neck (now Cedar Run). This William B. Cranmer married on March 15 1818 Mary Adams of Bass River. After her death in 1825 he married Elizabeth Hughes of Tuckerton. The family Bible of William B. shows both the spellings Cranmer and Cramer. His first three sons Isaac, Charles A. and William, the children of Mary Adams of Bass River, adopted the spelling "Cramer". They all lived in New Gretna, and Isaac and Charles and their wives are buried in Miller Cemetery. William B.'s other children retained the spelling "Cranmer". They mostly lived in Tuckerton and West Creek and were buried in cemeteries there.

Charles A. Cramer, the second son of William B. and Mary (Adams) Cranmer, married Elizabeth Adams and had a son Albert Allen Cramer. Albert married, as his second wife, Margaret Elizabeth Wobber. They had children Hannah Elizabeth, Horatio Dean, Ervin Otto, and Alberta Mae, who married Doughty VanSant Cramer.

Almira's mother Alberta Mae was a school teacher before she was married, and lived with her parents and brothers and sister on the Leektown Road. Her sister Hannah Elizabeth married Winfield Allen, and they were the parents of Clifton Allen who was the original proprietor of Allen's Clam Bar in New Gretna. Alberta's brother Horatio "Tater" Cramer, Almira's uncle, owned the Chestnut Neck Boatyard and also operated the drawbridge across the Mullica River, the "Iron Bridge", which preceded the present Parkway bridge.



Horatio "Tater" Cramer, who tended the old iron Mullica River Bridge for over 30 years, was Almira's uncle. (Photo courtesy of Esther Slota.)

Almira Mae Cramer was born to Doughty VanSant and Alberta Mae (Cramer) Cramer on October 3, 1922. She married Clarence M. Steele Jr. in 1944, and they had children: Richard B. Steele, who married Charlotte Dockery; Susan M. Steele, who married David A. Southwick; and Elizabeth Ethel Steele.



The Steele family- (r-l) Almira, Susan, Clarence "Buddy" holding Ethel, and Ricky Steele. (Photo courtesy of Almira Cramer Steele.)

Almira went home July 11, 2006. Her husband, Clarence, passed away three and a half years earlier, on January 19, 2002. They rest in Miller Cemetery, together with countless Cramer ancestors, in the cemetery that began as the old Cramer family burying ground.



Doughty (1892-1962) and Alberta (1891-1967) Cramer, Almira's parents. (Photo courtesy of Margaret Cramer McAnney.)

# ANOTHER THING I REMEMBER by Almira Cramer Steele

I miss seeing the above masthead announcing Almira's *Bass River Gazette* column. It was my favorite part of the *Gazette*. It's been a little over a year since Almira left us on July 11, 2006, and her loss has made the continuation of the *Bass River Gazette* bittersweet. During the almost nine years that I worked with Almira on the *Gazette*, we grew from being colleagues to becoming friends. The photo on the right brings back fond memories of our many discussions about Bass River and the people Almira grew up with and knew throughout her life. I remember many winter afternoons with Almira in her favorite reclining chair, relaxing in the warm afternoon sun, while we "chewed the fat" about her remembrances of "good old New Gretna". Her wit was as sharp as her writing. We would laugh, as she suggested that we print a "Bass River Tattler Gazette" edition just for especially "juicy" news. She was sure we could "make a fortune" with that idea. Of course, she was too much a lady to print stories that might embarrass living family members, so her suggestion never materialized. We did have a lot of laughs about some of the items that she thought just might fit in the "Tattler Edition."



Almira Cramer Steele told many old New Gretna stories from her favorite recliner chair. (2002 Photo)

One afternoon, I asked Almira which of her *Gazette* stories was her favorite. She replied that it was between the "Bass River Nicknames" story in Issue #2 and "A Man Called Joe" about her uncle, Joe Cramer, in Issue #3. She couldn't have picked two better stories. The "Nicknames" story is my favorite. It follows for all our readers who may have missed it the first time and for those who want another walk down Memory Lane. We all miss you, "Al"! - - - Pete Stemmer

## Bass River Nicknames

by Almira Cramer Steele

Bass River has always been known for the many nicknames of its people. Years ago, the three most common last names in town were Cramer, Allen, and Mathis and a few of these also had the same first name. To distinguish between them, the nickname came into being.

The men were the ones who usually got the nickname that was often handed down to their wives and sometimes other family members as well. For example:



Winfield F. "Winnie" and Hannah Elizabeth "Lizzie Winnie" Allen with their children (l to r) Albert, Cliff, and "Winnie" Jr. (Photo courtesy of "Winnie" Allen IV)

- Frank Allen's nickname was "**Flick**" and his wife was called "**Lena Flick**."
- Joseph Mathis was known as "**Joe Pottie**" and his wife as "**Lizzie Pottie**."
- Harvey G. Cramer's nickname was "**Gid**." His wife "**Mabel Gid**."
- James Cramer was called "**Jim**." His wife "**Lottie Jim**."
- Winfield Allen's nickname was "**Winnie**," his wife "**Lizzie Winnie**," his son and grandson were both called "**Winnie**" and his great-grandson is known by the same nickname. That's four generations of "**Winnie**."
- Robert Maxwell was called "**Bob**" and his wife "**Maggie Bob**."
- Lorenzo D. Robbins was known as "**Dow**." His wife, "**Lib Dow**."

- Caleb Mathis was called "**Calie**," his wife, "**Ellie Cale**."
- Caleb Allen was known as "**Calie Flem**."
- Jenkins Mathis was called "**Jenksy**." His wife, "**Bertha Jenksy**."
- Harry Mathis was called "**Harry Nick**" and his wife "**Sally Nick**."
- Another Harry Mathis was known as "**Harry Kid**."
- Edward K. Allen was known as "**Keeper**," his wife "**Lynn Keeper**."
- Horatio Cramer was called "**Tater**," his wife, "**Annie Tater**" and oldest son, "**Stan Tater**."
- Eugene Mathis was known as "**Boot**," his wife, "**Stella Boot**" and his son, "**Jack Boot**."
- Earl Cramer's nickname was "**Crow**," his wife "**Viola Crow**" and his daughter, "**Eleanor Crow**."
- Earl's brother, Arnold, was known as "**Biscuit**," his wife, "**Gertie Biscuit**," his oldest son, "**Harold Biscuit**" and his grandson "**Jim Biscuit**."



"Keeper" and "Lynn Keeper" outside their North Maple Avenue home. (Photo courtesy of Earl Allen)

- George A. Cramer's nickname was "**Govey**," his wife, "**Emma Govey**," His oldest son, Mahlon, was also "**Govey**" and his second son, Townsend, is known as "**Towny**."
- Lemuel Cramer was called "**Tea-berry**," his son, Samuel, was called "**Huckleberry**" and his grandson, Nelson, was also known as "**Huckleberry**."
- Arthur Loveland, known as "**Cooney**" had five children and his youngest son, Arthur, was the one who inherited the nickname.
- Amasa Mathis was nicknamed "**Mace**," his son "**Dan Mace**," his granddaughter "**Helen Mace**," and his grandson, Walter, was known as "**Macey**."
- Marvin Mathis had the nickname of "**Pugg**." His wife was called "**Ida Pugg**."
- Uriah Allen was fondly known as "**Piper**." His oldest son, Uriah, was also known as "**Piper**," and his great-grandson, Gary Steinhauer, goes by the same nickname today.
- Lane Mathis was the father of Roy who was known as "**Roy Lane**."



"Biscuit" and "Gertie Biscuit" with 2 of their grandchildren, Helen and "Jim Biscuit" Cramer, in 1934. (Photo courtesy of Arnold Cramer, Jr.)



"Piper" Allen, Sr. supervising workers in the New Gretna bogs. (Photo courtesy of Etta Allen Bannan)

Sometimes the husband had no nickname while his wife was given a nickname to identify her with her husband:

- Jesse Loveland's wife was known as "**Lide Jess**."
- Milton Cramer's wife was called "**Marie Milton**."
- Albert Cramer's wife was "**Lib Albert**."
- John Mathis' wife was "**Sara John**."
- Harold Gerew's wife was "**Lizzie Harold**."

Some nicknames were given to the men only:

- Alvin McAnney was called "**Elvy**."

(Continued on page6)