

## The Chester Historical Society's



Hello CHS Members and Friends. The June 2018 CHS Newsletter starts off with a history of the 150+ year-old Black River Playhouse (54 Grove St.). It has been the home of the Chester Theatre Group and they are celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year. Our second story recounts some of gentleman farmer Carl Kleiber's forays into horticulture. Carl is better known as "Chester's civic conscience" who fought against higher taxes, landfills, and unresponsive local government. Oh by the way, he helped invent the refining process that produces gasoline for our cars. The third story involves two prominent Chester institutions: Bell Labs and the Sturzenegger clan. It wasn't all land based ships and underground oceans at the 100-acre outdoor site as you will see following Bill Sturzenegger for a day.

**SAVE THE DATE for the CHS Annual Meeting and Luncheon, SEPTEMBER 16, 2018 at the Community Presbyterian Church, 220 Main St. 1-4pm.**

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## **The Incredible Journey of the Black River Playhouse** **Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Chester Theatre Group** By Edward Ng – Chester Historical Society

The Black River Playhouse is one of the most iconic buildings in Chester. It is certainly the most mysterious looking in the historic village having had an incredible journey, physically and functionally: trials, tribulations, trauma, and finally triumph. This is the story of how a bankrupt Bedminster Baptist Church became the Black River Playhouse, home to the Chester Theatre Group for the last 50 years. House of worship, house of government, house of burlesque, house of silent and talkie movies, and after much turmoil the Black River Playhouse. Luckily our story is not a tragedy, but there are heroes, heroines, and rats. Let the play begin!



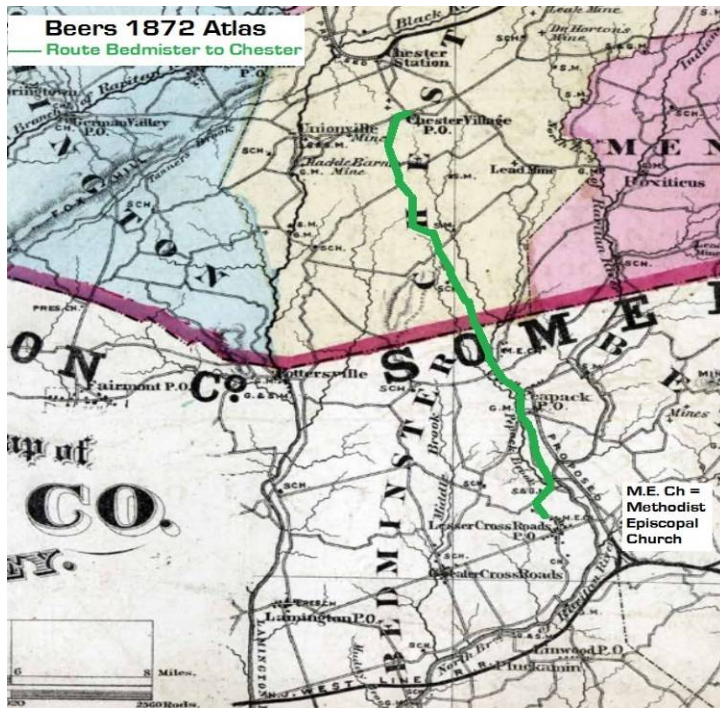


**Act 1: There's Method(ist) to his madness** – (à la Shakespeare's *Hamlet* Act 2)



Our first hero is not Hamlet, but Bishop Edmund Storer Janes (1807-1876). Not only was he a senior bishop, he also earned doctorates in divinity and medicine. His leadership took him to most states and Europe. A ministerial encounter, recounted by his biographer, illustrates his strengths and mettle. It happened just before the Civil War when he travelled to *“the town of Bonham, Texas, in February, 1859, which still adhered to the Methodist Episcopal church at a time when the blood of southern chivalry was up to a fever heat, when for one less bold and courageous and of less diplomatic tact, it would have been all his life was worth to be at work in any good cause among such hot-headed, fiery-tempered upstarts of that peculiar region and critical day. He faced such conscious offenders and bore himself with his usual dignity, grace, and urbanity, as he rose to the importance of the occasion. He spoke calmly and with Christian forbearance to their impertinent leaders, who were lawyers and judges. His commanding presence, gentleness, and extraordinary self-possession, triumphed over mob wrath, over the fury of these disturbers of good order, despisers of law, and of the rights of American citizens.”*<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Janes' "madness" was his plan to buy the bankrupt Bedminster Baptist Church and eventually have it moved to Chester which occurred after his death. In the cold winter of 1880-1881, the disassembled church building was loaded onto wagons pulled by 6 mule teams "in large sections, all mortise and tenon construction" to Chester where it was set up at its new location on Grove St. and Maple Ave.<sup>2</sup> (right).



Fact or Fiction? The church is shown on the 1872 Beers Map in Bedminster (lower end of map) and is marked as "M.E.C.", initials for **M**ethodist **E**piscopal **C**hurch. Also shown on the map are the roads which could have been used for the trip (green lines). The roads were laid out much earlier by the West Jersey Proprietors (1674-1702) who made a track from Brunswick Landing on the Raritan River near Piscataway, through Somerset and Morris Counties, to Sussex. The modern Gladstone-Chester Road is part of it. The road was intended to encourage settlers to buy nearby land. Also the winter 1880-1881 was cold with minimum temperatures in the 20's and 30's so the roads would have been frozen not muddy<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> 1868. *Janes Family – A Genealogy and Brief History* by Rev. Frederick Janes. John H. Dingman Publishers; Pages 228-229.  
<sup>2</sup> Francis Greenidge, *Chester, NJ – A Scrapbook of History* 1991. Published and available from the Chester Historical Society.  
<sup>3</sup> Atlantic City Marina long term weather data series

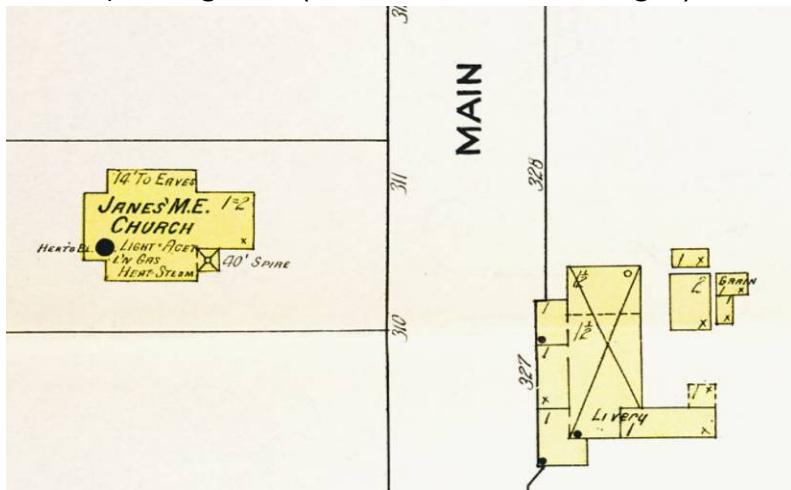


A Methodist preacher had been in Chester since 1868. Economics made the need even greater. In 1867, Perry Skellenger discovered a vein of iron ore near Academy Lane. The vein ran behind Main St. and quickly over 2 dozen mines were in operation. By 1880 Chester's population increased to 2,337. There were 150 houses and 15-20 shops in the village. In fact there was a miners' boarding house across the street from the Methodist Church on Grove St.

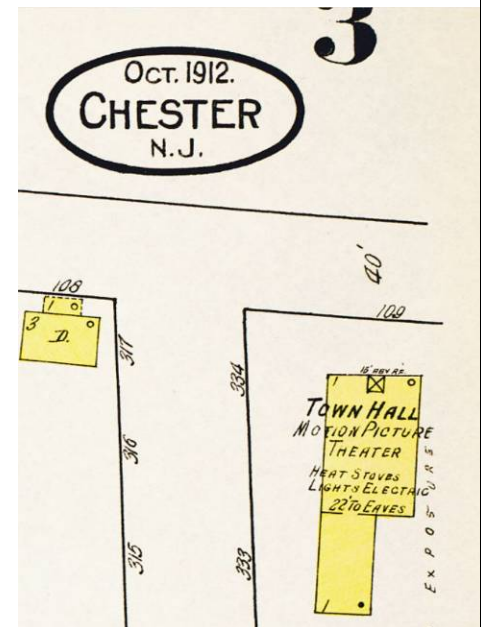


William J. Taylor's innovative Chester Furnace (left) started production in 1879 and was soon producing over 300 tons of quality pig iron per week. Another sign of economic success was not one, but two railroads servicing Chester: the Central of NJ (depot near SW corner of Rts. 206 and 24) and the Delaware Lackawanna & Western (depot near Bernie's at 125 Hillside Rd).

In 1908, the new Janes' Methodist Episcopal Church was built at the spot now occupied by the Troop 9 Boy Scout Cabin, at the northwest corner of Collis Ln. and Main St. It has been described as "Lovely with a bowled floor lecture room opening into the main audience room, paneled ceiling, beautiful cathedral glass windows of elaborate design, steam heat, modern pews, choir gallery, a good piano, and lighted by acetylene gas<sup>4</sup>" (exterior view to the right).



The Sanborn insurance maps for Chester are a wealth of information. In 1912 the Janes' Methodist Episcopal



Church (above) is shown now on Main St. in the 1912 map. It had a 40' spire. So what happened to the building that once housed the M.E. Church after 1908?

<sup>4</sup> Greenidge page 103 from *Minutes of The Newark Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church. 1868-1920.*



## Act 2: You Can't Fight City Hall



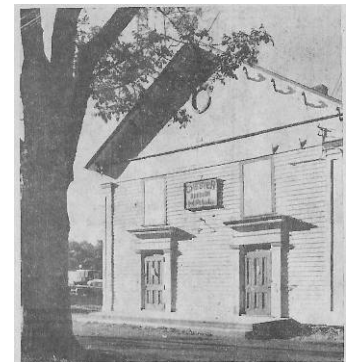
In 1910 the town of Chester bought the old church building. In the 1912 Sanborn map (previous page) the building is shown as "**TOWN HALL**- Motion Picture Theater - Heat Stoves - Lights Electric - 22' to Eves". Not only motion pictures were featured, but medicine shows, firemen's fundraisers, Sadie Hawkins dances, Women's Club Flower Shows, and most important, local theatre productions. The sign protruding from Town Hall reads "Chester Community Theatre".

One of the local theatre groups was the Second Nighters. How did Second Nighters get their name? Mae

Call, a member of the Second Nighters, explained "that a performance was going so badly that we asked the audience to let us start over". However her husband Bob suggested naming the company Second Nighters was to indicate their B team status behind a successful and popular radio show called First Nighters. The 1920's photo is their production of "A Womanless Wedding" with Chester Apgar Sr. in the lead role.



In 1930 the village of Chester voted to form their own municipality to provide water to town from the water company. Chester Borough was born and the building became the Borough Town Hall (right). It was the Borough Town Hall until 1964. Then what happened? As you have seen, not only did the Black River Playhouse get its start as a church, but churches have oddly steered it to its current fate.



We have to jump back to 1950 and 1964 to provide two important

subplots. In 1950, St. Lawrence RC Church built a concrete block church at 300 Main St. They used that church until 1962 when they built their current church at 375 Main Street. In 1958 Chester's growing population required the addition of an auditorium to the Williamson School. There was a stage, but no money for curtains, spotlights or backdrops. A group of residents performed Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* to raise the money. The play was a success and the Chester Theatre Group (CTG) was born. Two CTG founders are seen in the photo (left) featuring Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. In the center is Alan Rubenstein who played George and to his right is Ken Jenkins who played Emily. CTG quickly earned a reputation for quality shows<sup>5</sup>.



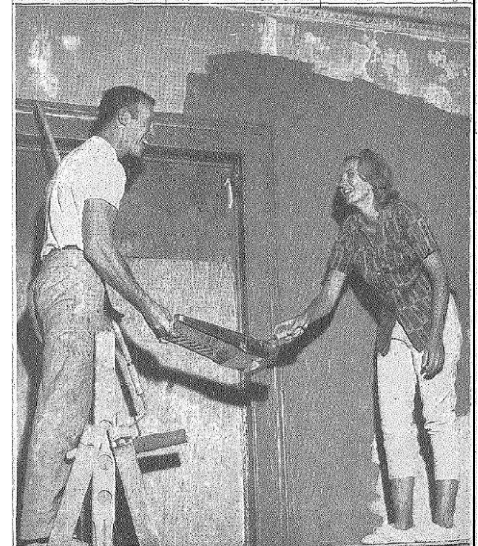
PICTURED ABOVE ARE MEMBERS OF THE NEWLY-FORMED Chester Little Theatre Group as they prepare for rehearsal of "Our Town." (left to right) Vincent Radice, stage manager, Alan Rubenstein who will be seen as "George" and Mrs. Edward Jenkins as "Emily."

<sup>5</sup> Observer Tribune Oct. 8, 1959

Continuing the game of musical buildings, in 1964 Chester Borough moved their offices to the recently vacated St. Lawrence RC church building. In September, 1965, the Borough held an auction to sell old Borough Hall. Bidding on behalf of the Chester Theatre Group, Alan Rubenstein had the winning bid of \$6000. However, he had forgotten about the 15% deposit which he didn't have. So he "passed the hat" among the auction participants and the needed \$900 was raised. In another twist, the sale was due to close on Dec. 9, 1965, but the Borough did not have the deed. It was never transferred from Chester Township to the Borough! Chester Township Mayor Conover, after a bit of good natured teasing, graciously gave the deed to the Borough who then conveyed it to the Chester Theatre Group.

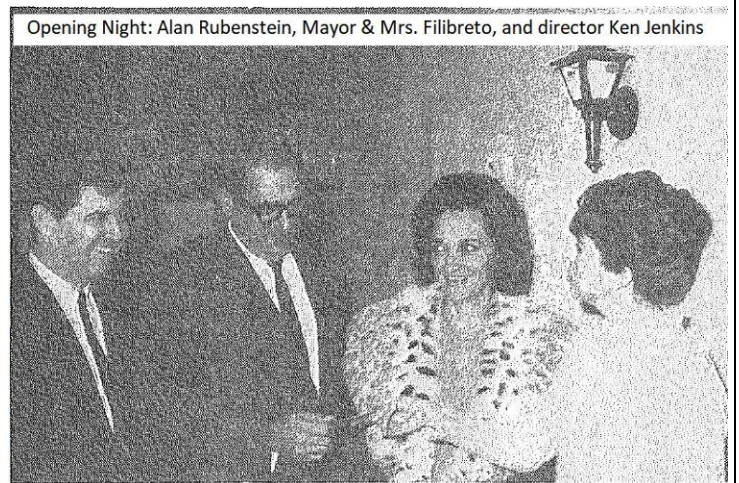
Most of 1966 was spent converting old Borough Hall to the Black River Playhouse. New windows were installed and the walls were painted velvet blue. Heating, plumbing, and stage equipment were installed. Of course there were many fund-raising activities. One big contributor was an auction of donated items which included a J-4 Piper aircraft frame and a 1938 Ford convertible with a Corvette engine.

The refurbishing of the playhouse coincided with the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair in Flushing, Queens. When the Fair ended, many of the furnishings from the exhibits were sold off. Alan Rubenstein alertly bid and won 181 seats from the Chrysler Pavilion and a complete set of toilet fixtures from the Bell Telephone Pavilion. Both would come in handy when the CTG had their first performance in the Black River Playhouse.

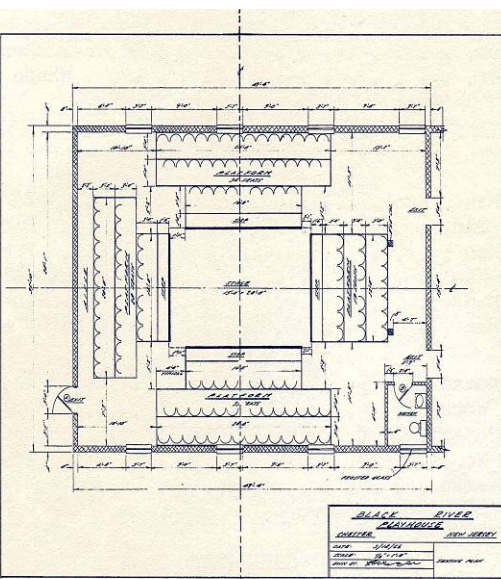


GETTING INTO THE ACT of readying the old Borough Hall in Chester for its new role as the Black River Playhouse are members of the Chester Theatre Group, which recently bought the 100 year old building as a permanent home for their active organization. Sam Gibson of Succasunna and Mrs. Frank Carroll of Chester are the members onstage. (Photo by Carrousel)

On January 14, 1967, *A Thurber Carnival – A Revue with Music*, directed by Ken Jenkins and produced by Wanda Praisner, opened the playhouse. This revue by James Thurber was adapted by the author from his stories,



Opening Night: Alan Rubenstein, Mayor & Mrs. Filibreto, and director Ken Jenkins



cartoons and humorous short pieces, nearly all of which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*. The critics called the CTG production "A Smash Success". The program (left) featured a schematic of the theatre layout and a view of the plastic chairs from the Chrysler Pavilion.



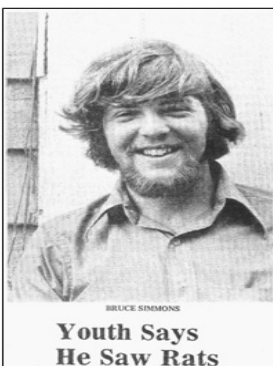
Ken Jenkins as Claire

Who is Ken Jenkins? He is a she! Ken was a co-founder, actress, producer, and director in CTG. In various newspapers and programs she was called "Mrs. Edward Jenkins", "Mrs. Ken Jenkins", and "Ken Jenkins". She was an author and "Ken Jenkins" was her pen name. As it turns out, "Ken" was actually her first name. She played Claire in CTG's 1969 production of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*. The reviewer wrote "***It is Ken Jenkins who walks away with top honors in a performance which must be the highlight of her career. She brings comic relief to the depressing drama, while at the same time adding her own grimly realistic interpretation of the developing situation.***"<sup>6</sup>

By 1973, CTG had done 40 productions in their playhouse, however as in any drama, the future wasn't all smooth sailing. Rats did the theatre in! After the Sing Out West Morris musical group had performed in the playhouse, a member of the group called the Borough sanitary inspector to report he had seen rats. This prompted sanitary, fire, safety, and structural inspections by Borough officials. Numerous violations were observed and the playhouse was closed and condemned. The fire chief declared the building a "firetrap". Penny Hoadley, the energetic CTG president, protested the closure saying that repairs were being planned. Furthermore, CTG were preparing to stage the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Carousel*, and a summer program for high school and college students. July 5, 1973 was a dark day for CTG when the Council voted to confirm the condemnation. The Borough Council ruled that the playhouse could only reopen after all structural, safety, and sanitary repairs were made.<sup>7</sup>



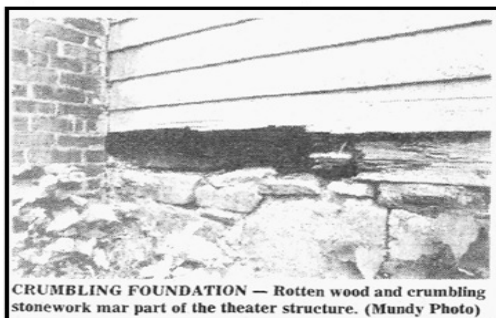
CTG President Penny Hoadley



BRUCE SIMMONS  
**Youth Says He Saw Rats**

### Theater Seen As Firetrap

CHESTER — "A firetrap" — this was the verdict given to the Borough Council by Fire Chief John Galayda about the Black River Playhouse on Grove Street, home of the Chester Theater Group.



**CRUMBLING FOUNDATION** — Rotten wood and crumbling stonework mar part of the theater structure. (Mundy Photo)

### Council Is Firm On Theater Closing

CHESTER — In response to pleas from members of the Black River Playhouse to allow the theater building to re-open on a limited basis, the Chester Borough Council on July 18 reiterated its position that the opening of the condemned playhouse is entirely up to the discretion of the building, health, and fire inspectors.

Conover, that the theater building violated the fire and health codes.

Alan D. Rubenstein of Mount Arlington, attorney and former president of the theater, contended that the theater had made the necessary improvements to comply with the codes that were violated.



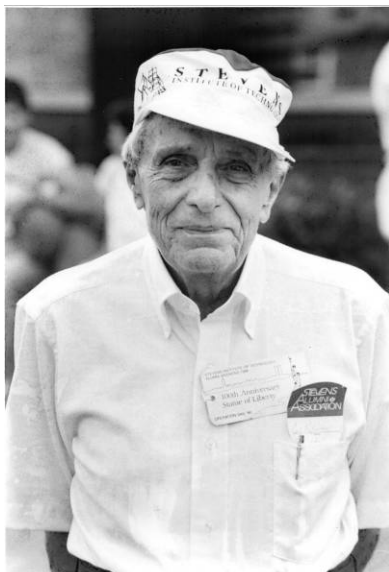
**"Intermission" - Act 3 and Act 4 will continue in our next Newsletter**

<sup>6</sup> Observer Tribune, Nov. 13, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Observer Tribune, July 12, 1973.

## A Description of Weather...and Then Some!

By Marla Jackson – Chester Historical Society



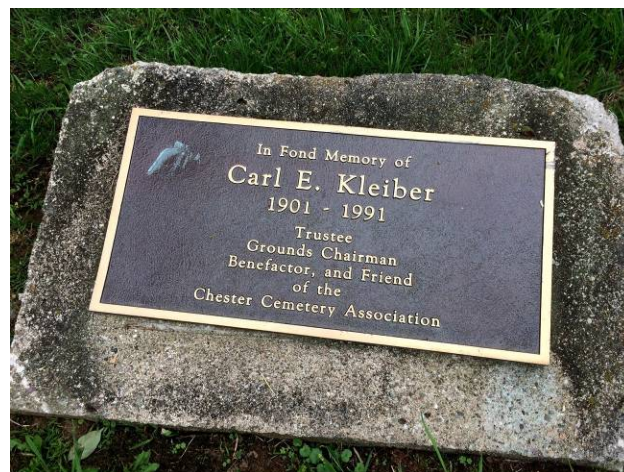
Carl E. Kleiber - 1986  
Stevens Institute of Technology Alumni Week

Carl E. Kleiber, a resident of Chester Township from 1930's until the 1980s, was active in the public life of Chester Township and also an avid observer of all aspects of life. Many of his papers have been donated to the Chester Historical Society. While inventorying his papers in the archive, Sandy Jacobson and Lois Taylor came across one of his journals, which chronicled his farming activities in Chester Township. The journal that provided the following excerpt starts in 1938, when Mr. Kleiber, H. F. Moore and G. F. Sohnle acquired land for orchards. The entries include references to economic as well as political situations of the times. He alludes to the high prices they expected to realize on their farm produce, as food was in short supply.

As a mechanical engineer for Standard Oil of NJ (later Esso which became part of present-day Exxon), Mr. Kleiber was involved in developing synthetic rubber during WWII as part of the war effort.

He developed numerous patents on the equipment used in oil and gas production.

Farming was just one of his many interests. He was a founding member of the Shongum Club and a director of the Upper Raritan Watershed Association. He was active in the Turn Verine German Culture organization in Irvington and the Chester Cemetery Association. He may be best known for his advocacy on local causes as an officer of the Chester Taxpayers' Association and through his frequent attendance at Chester Township meetings.

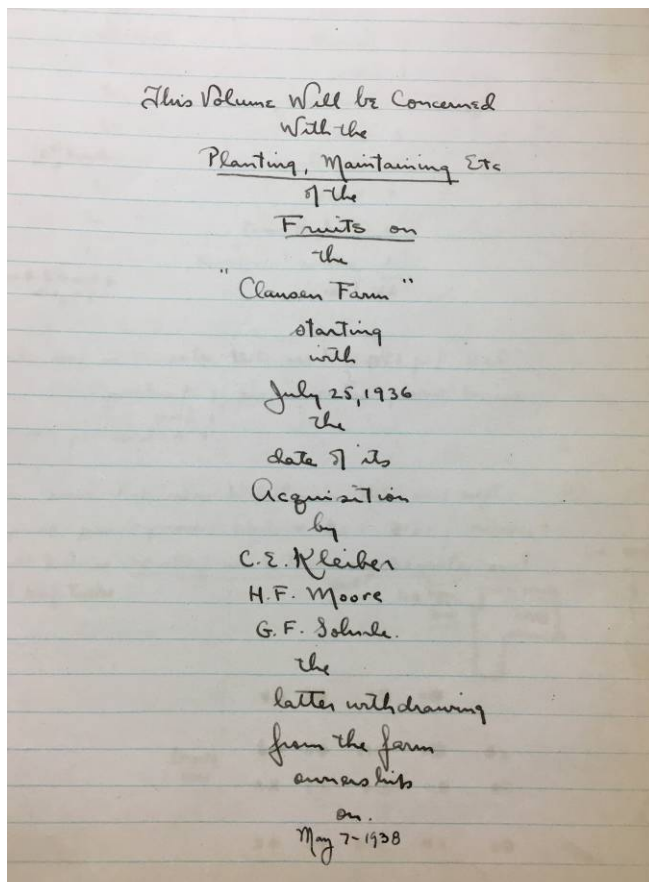


Memorial plaque in the southeast corner of the Chester Cemetery. He is buried at the Old Quaker Cemetery in Camden, South Carolina.

Kleiber was instrumental in the change to the Township's governing body from a 3-person committee to a 5-member council. He was also well known for his leadership in preventing the Filiberto Co. from opening a landfill off Pleasant Hill Road. He was quoted in a 1988 oral history done by the CHS as saying about the landfill: "I was aroused—I hadn't moved from Newark and the Hudson Tubes and Secaucus meadows and woods, to move to Chester, to live adjoined in the rural area to a garbage dump....I immediately, as a Paul Revere type, went around all of the citizens in the community...". He eventually purchased the Filiberto Co. property and the landfill ultimately moved to a location on Parker Rd. He had no role in the decision by Filiberto Co. to choose Parker Rd.

One entry I found particularly interesting began with a description of the weather in 1945: ***This spring of 1945 was most exceptional in that spring was about 6 weeks earlier than normal. Our orchards bloomed early and with most unusual warm weather bees & insects were also out early to pollinize blossoms. Temperatures in the 70's and 80's were frequent in March & April (early) and then followed wet, cool weather, with frosts in low lands, etc.***

**Temperature of low 20's in Flanders just as our first buds were breaking while in our southern exposed orchards on hillside about 200 ft. above river (Black) which resulted in good air drainage for us, the temperatures did not fall much below 28. In early May another cold spell which resulted (in) loss of much fruit in orchards surrounding us in low lands, while New England had 8" or so of snow. I was in Canada on May 1<sup>st</sup> where there were snow flurries & 3/4" ice in puddles. Fruit crops in Canada & Michigan reportedly severely ruined. As of middle May it appears that we should have an exceptional peach crop in our young orchard of some 300 trees (being 4<sup>th</sup> growing year). Also old orchard while hurt by drought of last year (June 5 thru Sept 8<sup>th</sup>) will have slim crop accounts of little growth (also ground not harrowed as it should have been account lack of labor.) (and I was in Canada most of year on synthetic rubber work). But young apple orchard of some 275 trees also should have fine crop. It looks like stands next door and ours should have best fruit hereabouts (our peaches better than his by much) and we should do well regards returns account high prices & general lack of food this year of V-E in Europe on May 8<sup>th</sup>.**



**Initial page Kleiber farm journal May 1938**

**Also this spring, I decided to fertilize all orchards well and we strip fertilized all orchards both sides of trees in young peach & apple orchards, down middle in old peach, 1/2 spreader width for former & full spreader width for latter. Put approx. 2 ton of 75-10-5 (best obtainable) in apple orchard, 2 ton of same on young peach orchard, and 1 ton in old peach orchard. Also spread manure in both peach orchards. Peach orchards ploughed and harrowed about last of April & 1<sup>st</sup> of May. & mustard cut by hand in rows of old peach orchard. The orchards look best ever for this time of year, although I normally pruned 99% of the trees (900+) myself during Jan—April – working 8-12 hours on Sundays plus 2 full days took off from work plus all holidays.**

He also kept a detailed record of the varieties planted. Apple varieties included some we would recognize today, like Gravenstein, Northern Spy, Stayman, Red Delicious, and Cortland. Other varieties, like King Baldwin, Turley, Spanish and Gallia Beauty certainly didn't sound familiar to me! Peach varieties also included some I knew (Elberta, White Hale) and some I didn't (Adams Late, 121). Not all were

successful, and he recorded those that were replaced.

It was interesting to find a letter from "Hildebrandt Nurseries, Charles A. Hildebrandt Proprietor," in Oldwick, N.J., noting the varieties available from his stock of "Fruit Trees, Evergreens, Shrubs." Some of you may know the Hildebrandt Nurseries today.

Thanks to Sandy Jacobsen and Lois Taylor for their research help and archives work. Other references for the article include the CHS oral history of Carl Kleiber, October 27, 1988 (interviewed by Ken Caro) and his obituary from the Observer-Tribune September 12, 1991. ■



June 25, 1940.

C. E. KLEIBER  
APPARATUS FOR CRACKING OIL  
Filed Dec. 23, 1936  
INTER CONDENSER

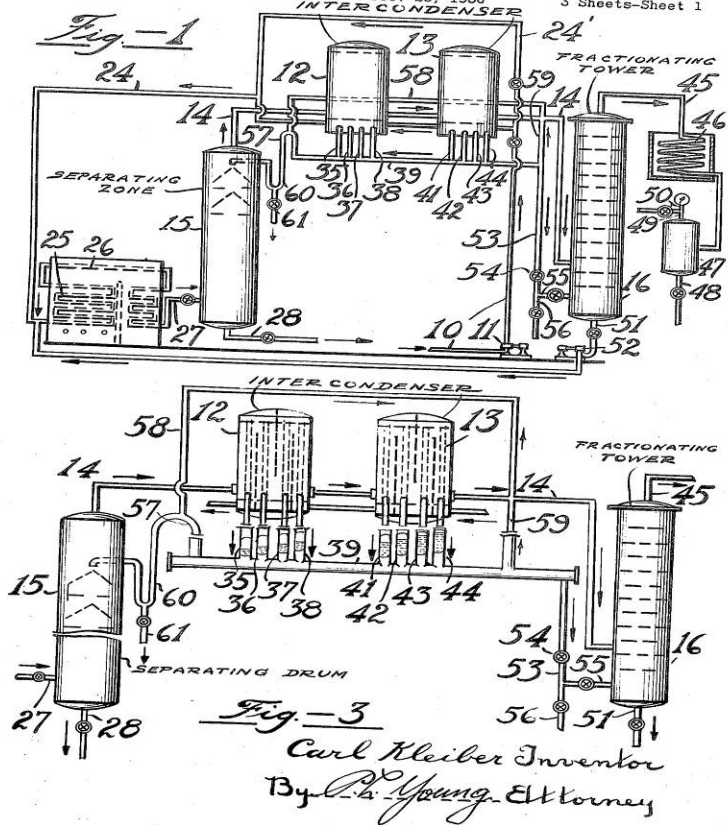
2,205,765

3 Sheets-Sheet 1

**Editors Note:** The bucolic excerpt from Carl Kleiber's farm journal should be balanced with an acknowledgment of his technical expertise. Here is a quote from his Observer Tribune obituary: **His career at Exxon resulted in the expansion of the cat-cracking technology on a worldwide basis; his holding of 11 patents invented in the field and he earned the distinction of attendance at the Smithsonian Institution presentation by Exxon of a cat-cracking refinery model in Washington, D.C. in 1963.** His agile mind helped him to rise to "the top of the corporate ladder." However, we can go back to 1940 to see one of his first patents (left), "Apparatus for Cracking Oil" (US patent 2,205,765) as the genesis for the refinery model, celebrated 25 years later.■



Carl E. Kleiber  
Esso Co. Directory



## Bell Labs Chester Outdoor Lab – A Day in the Life of Bill Sturzenegger

By Edward Ng – Chester Historical Society

Before we continue the exposition of the posters on the Chester Outdoor Lab displayed at Chester Township's Highland's Ridge Barn, let's take a homey look at life there. The Bell Labs Record had an article, "A Day at Chester Field Laboratory" (Oct. 1951) featuring a day in the life of long time Chester resident and Bell Labs employee, Bill Sturzenegger. Here is the day:



W.C. "Bill" Sturzenegger was born and still lives in this house, 10 minutes from the Lab. He oversees many of the outdoor experiments on the 100 acre research site.



Bill shares an early breakfast with his wife before starting the day.



The Rolph brothers troubleshoot a winch that isn't winding evenly.



Wayne Parks and Bill check one of the poles in wood preservation experiment.



Bill records data from a voltmeter on a test of a buried high voltage cable.



What else to do at the end of a long day? Bill enjoys the modern convenience of television in the living room of his 200 year old house.

## Acknowledgments - Contact Information - Announcement

**CHS Trustees and Officers:** President – Edward Ng Vice President – John Pfaff Treasurer – Anita Rhodes  
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Historical photos and maps are usually from the CHS archives including the Observer Tribune and other papers. Modern photos are by Edward Ng except as noted. Thanks to the Chester Theatre Group, Diane Butler, Penny Hoadley, and Lauri MacMillan for their help and access to CTG archival materials and photos.

If you would like to join CHS or if you have stories or pictures to share, please talk to a Board member or contact us at (908) 844-6717 or [chester.historical.society@gmail.com](mailto:chester.historical.society@gmail.com), or CHS Box 376 Chester NJ 07930. Membership information and a downloadable membership form are available at <http://historicchesternj.com/home/membership.html>.

On May 2, 2018 the Chester Historical Society Board voted to increase membership dues to offset the rising costs of postage, programs, projects, outreach, publicity, and support of the CHS archives. This is the first dues increase since 2003. For our fiscal year starting October 1, 2018, the annual membership dues are as follows: Individual \$15; Family \$25; Business \$100; Life (over 65 years young) \$200. Thank you for helping keep Chester's history alive!