

John the Spaniard

"John the Spaniard here"; so entered William Grant in his diary on October 4, 1913. This is the first known written evidence of John Milan being in Edwards. His journey in arriving here can be followed in very general terms.

John's early life

John was not one to talk much about his childhood, but it is known from his death record in Edwards that he was born in Malaga, Spain, 19 March 1889, a son of Mr. Milan and his wife, Valverde. Nothing is known of his siblings.

He told that they were a poor family and had to struggle to live. In the late 19th century, when John was born, in a country where the majority of the population was Catholic and the Church ruled the daily lives of its parishioners without mercy, John had some bad memories that turned him against his religion. In those days the Church demanded money for many of the services it should have provided its people without regard for remuneration. Since the Milan family had no money to pay for these services, apparently they were denied some that John could never forgive the Church for withholding from his family, and he never practiced Catholicism, or any organized religion, while he lived in Edwards.

Perhaps President Theodore Roosevelt's United States Isthmian Canal Commission was John's salvation. Roosevelt had appointed men, through his agency, to go to United States, Europe and the West Indies to find men to work on the proposed Panama Canal. It is possible that the agency had the power to pay the ocean passage for young men they recruited to work on the Panama Canal, with an agreement that it would be paid back as they worked building the Canal. This theory could have been how John got the money to leave Spain since John related about working on the Panama Canal. He would have been around eighteen years old, just the right age to look for adventure and try to fulfill a dream of a better way of life.

Since the weather in the Canal area is hot and humid, one story John related to his buddies in Edwards village was a memory of this type of climate. As the sun beat down on the tools the men were using, the metal parts became very hot, so while the crew was having their lunch break they buried the tools in the dirt in an attempt to cool them down enough to be able to work with the manual labor equipment in the afternoon.

John had no skills, but apparently was willing to use his young strength in common labor. The unskilled or semiskilled workers were paid in silver coins while the professional men received gold coins as their pay. This practice brought about the terms silver workers and gold workers. Maybe John, the silver worker, was able to save some of his coins to take his next step for a better life.

It is isn't known how long or when John worked on the canal, the actual work of which began in 1907, but he left that job to go to Cuba. Did he have relatives or friends there? No one knows. Perhaps he just wanted to be in a country where he could speak the language.

The search for a life that satisfied him brought young John Milan to the United States and somehow to Newton Falls. It seems John had worked at Newton Falls in the paper mill, before he came to Edwards. One of his recollections was the necessity of having to get out on the dam in the river at the mill to do some work and how cold the water was. Nothing more has been discovered about his time in Newton Falls.

John came to Edwards to work in the mines. The mine was becoming built up at that time and possibly the word got around that workers were being hired. He was to board with a family at the mines, but soon after he got there someone

in the family developed scarlet fever. In those days the house was quarantined when a contagious disease was in the household and while John was at work one day the doctor came and quarantined the family's home. John was given a tent and for two weeks he had to camp out near the mines so he wouldn't be quarantined with the family. That was quite an introduction to life in Edwards.

John was still working at the mines on Friday, June 26, 1914 when the new "fireproof" mill caught fire. In later years he told Wayne Fuller that it possibly was a belt on one of the machines that caused the fire and "if I'd uh pail, I could uh put him out". He was probably right because a newspaper account of the fire states that "it took some time for the firemen to reach the building by pulling the piece of apparatus over the road". They had only a dozen men at first, and were pulling a hose cart by hand!

One known household with whom he boarded was the Urb and Mary Kerr family. They lived in the house between Emery Webb's and the Post Office, now the home of John and Shirley Clark. This bit of information was from the records of Stuart Casanova, a grandson of Urb and Mary Kerr.

His English must have been rather scanty although he probably could make himself understood by this time. He was taught to read and write English by a businessman in the village, Henry Grant. (This information also from Stuart Casanova). However, he never lost his Spanish accent. Quite possibly this man became his teacher because John opened his own business, an ice cream parlor, in the building Henry and his father, William Grant had built for a furniture store - the building that later became known as the Grange Hall.

Another job John held, recalled by Karl Jones of Edwards, was working on the new bridge being built across the Oswegatchie River to the depot and which opened sometime in 1914.

No information has been discovered as to when John opened his ice cream parlor, but probably it was sometime in 1914 and before the high school class of 1915 graduated. This is known because Inez Noble Brown, a member of that class, recalled that the school had an hour for lunch and she and her friends were allowed to walk downtown where they would go up the steps to the main floor of the Grange Hall, home of John's ice cream parlor, for an ice cream treat. Another person of Edwards who remembers going to John's place of business in that building when she was a child, is Katheryn Freeman Fuller. While her family lived on outer Maple Avenue, she could walk to Main Street for a quart of ice cream and get back home before it melted!

John operated his ice cream business from this location until 1925 when the owner moved the contents of her general store into the building. A news article of April 20, 1925 reads that John Milan's new building "is going up at a rapid rate due to the excellent weather of the past few days".

John Milan's Corner

Here, in his new building, John set up his ice cream parlor on the first floor, had his living quarters on the second floor, and for the rest of his life, 45 years, dipped ice cream for the public, never considering retiring.

The exact date of his opening for business is known as Saturday evening, June 6, 1925, from an entry in Velma Hall's diary stating "John Milan opened his ice cream rooms tonight." The building was only partially completed, but he needed to earn a living and was probably thinking that he wanted to be sure to get the summer ice cream business since that is when customers are in the mood for the cooling refreshment.

The building, on its triangular piece of property, quite likely would have been termed a "flatiron" building in any other town, but in Edwards, its being situated on the turn to New Street and toward the river crossing, became known by all as "John Milan's Corner".

Through the years John continued to operate his business regardless of Depression, Wars and local competition. The townspeople were loyal to his store though it was never updated or freshly painted. Perhaps it stood for those things that are reliable, never changing and also bring back memories of childhood.



John Milan's Corner in 1956. Notice the tree John was so determined to save by chaining the parts together. Also with a careful look, one can see a person shoveling the walk. Possibly it is John himself.

Approaching the door the customer could see the same original advertisements, faded, but never removed. He might add one or two, but not take any away. The large windows were smoke covered, probably a combination of wood and tobacco smoke. Upon entering the store one walked on the bare floor, nearly black from age, years of traffic, lack of mopping, and from the oil finish put on at some time to protect the wood. It is believed that the only floor care was an occasional sweeping.



John Milan's in 1963. It appears the tree is gone. The side entrance to his upstairs living quarters can be seen at the left of the picture.

On the right was the marble soda fountain counter with high wrought iron stools in front. The back counter had a large mirror behind it. Here stood the glasses for ice cream and drinks. Also he had boxes of chocolates, cigars, and cigarettes. Some were on that same counter and some were in a glass display case at the end of the marble soda fountain. In addition, he carried Ox Heart Chocolates in bulk, which he scooped out in amounts requested by his customers.

Throughout the business area light was filtered through the smoke and the hazy windows. However, the customer walked to the left where there were a few wrought iron tables and chairs if one cared to sit there instead of at the counter. (One set of table and chairs was purchased by Mrs. Floyd (Kathy) Hurley when the store's contents were disposed of after John's death and used in her kitchen in Hailesboro.)

One could purchase an ice cream cone or have it in a dish with sauce, if preferred. As John dipped the ice cream, he usually kept his cigarette, or occasional cigar, in his mouth, not minding if a stray ash fell into the ice cream. The cigarette was also left in his mouth as he washed the ice cream dishes and spoons in his tiny sink built into the soda fountain. It looked as if the same water was used over and over.

Relaxing with a treat and looking toward the rear of the store, one saw a free standing stove, which may have burned wood or coal, with a straight back wooden chair in front of it for John's own use. To the right of this, attached to the back wall of the store was a table (or wooden counter) on which was a disarray of papers, loosely organized bookkeeping materials, coffee mugs and ash trays, all handy for John's style of living. The window there provided natural light. This window, plus the ones at the front, usually was all the light the customers needed, in John's estimation, as seldom were the overhead electric lights on during business hours.

At the close of the day, John locked the front door, walked to the back, went out the side door, locked that and went upstairs, to begin again tomorrow, and so his routine went without variation.

In front of the ice cream parlor was an elm tree that John prized. When he had spare time he went out to sit by it in the shade, or sun, on a bench of some type he kept there for that purpose. In order to make sure the tree limbs did not break off he put chains around them and the main trunk many places. He also pruned branches when necessary. The telephone men noticed him one day, when he was well into his seventies, high in the tree sawing off a dead branch, having gotten that far off the ground by tying two ladders together to make an extension long enough to reach the height he needed to care for his tree, and climbing up with his saw!