

# The Nolin Horseshoe Club

The Nolin Horseshoe Club was said to be officially organized in 1928, although they definitely were pitching during the 1926 season, becoming one of the top clubs in Kentucky through the 1930's. The Club was located in the little Kentucky town of Nolin, which is located 10 miles south of Elizabethtown, near Sonora. Nolin was a little town on the rise during this era thanks to the L & N Railroad and an operating Mill. The town also included a General Store, Bank, Hotel, Baptist Church and a few other establishments.



Nolin Mill- Staple of the Nolin town, went bankrupt in 1929. Sold. Closed sometime shortly after 1939.



Nolin Hotel- Popular spot to stay for tourists and railroad travelers.



Nolin General Store- Owned by James L. & Sarah Harris.



Nolin Depot. Nolin depot sign. At the end of 1937 the abandoned depot was purchased by the nephew of S. B. Monin, Harold B. Monin.



Nolin Bank/Grocery. The Nolin Bank is the last standing building/business in the old town of Nolin.



For some backstory on the town of Nolin, it was a thriving little town, progressing to 250 people in 1900 thanks to the L & N train stop. It had a rather large business section with two groceries and a general store. Nolin also had blacksmith shops, a flour mill, a stockyard, lumber yard, a bakery and two saloons.

The Nolin Horseshoe Court was likely built around 1926, coinciding with sport's popularity with the big city neighbors to the north. The court photos provided for this article perhaps yield the most important clues as to its beginning and ending. Six photos, originally in the ownership of Harry Aker's son Darrell, were preserved by the "Images of The Past Photographic Archive of Hardin County". Examining the 1926 court photo, the court itself is clean and immaculate. The walkways are sharp, and the grass appears untraveled. This in comparison with the photos of 1929, shows a court site that is now well worn, the grass is worn, the pit shows much use, and much dirt and pit material has been displaced. Lots of pitching! The 1926 singular photo may very well have been to show the newly constructed court.

The Nolin Horseshoe Club was comprised of local farmers, primarily all related and connected. The club began having match games against other cities on Sunday afternoons. The horseshoe pitchers could travel down to Nolin by train, pitch on Sunday, and stay at the nearby hotel for accommodation. Some, as did the visiting Horseshoe World Champion Putt Mossman, took pleasure in taking a swim in the nearby Nolin River.

President of the club was Stephen Bigler Monin, who was a well-respected and widely known member of the community. Farmer, Granville Worth Ennis served as the Club's Secretary. The Aker's family comprised the bulk of the pitching firepower. Powell Barlow Akers and his sons, Lee, Harry, and Frank were the prominent family members that pitched regularly in the Nolin Club match games. Lee would establish himself as the family's best player and youngest son Frank "Dickey" Akers was hot on his heels. In a listed census of 1930, Lee, age 35, John Thomas, age 32, Harry, age 24, Powell Jr. "Boss", age 19, and Frank, age 16 were all living in the household of parents, Powell, 71 & Agnes Akers, 62. James Lewis Harris, the owner of the Nolin General Store and father-in-law of Harry Akers may have been the true organizer of the club. He is prominent in most of the team matches and often referred to as a court contact.

In an early article from the Elizabethtown News, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1926, the "Nolin Horseshoe Club" was active and good at tossing the steel, mentioned here defeating one of the experienced Louisville Clubs. (*below.*)



The Nolin Horseshoe court seen here in 1926. Powell Barlow Akers is pitching against J. L. Harris. The Lynnland Mill is seen in the back right.

## Nolin Horseshoe Club Wins.

Nolin, where the pitching of horseshoes is the principal diversion, won a match game from a Louisville club several days ago. The score in favor of Nolin's team was 13 to 9.

In 1928, the Nolin Club issued a challenge to any 6-man team to play them on their home courts in August, promising a return match to anyone that accepted. Louisville's Pan-American Club accepted the invitation. Nolin won the match 10-8 and 20-18 on August 7<sup>th</sup>. In the 1928 Ky. State Tournament, held September 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Nolin Club was represented by brothers Lee & Frank Akers, billed as Hardin County Champions and J. L. Harris billed as the Nolin Champion. Lee would attain a 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish, but Harris and Frank Akers would find the bottom of the Championship Class, finishing 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. Still yet, for the club to put three of its players in the top group was a proud achievement, which undoubtably made the other clubs stand up and take notice.

## Nolin Horseshoe Club Desires Opposition

Special to The Courier-Journal.  
Nolin, Ky., July 30.—The Nolin, Ky., Horseshoe Club member of the Kentucky Division of the National Horseshoe Pitchers' Association challenges any six-man team in the State to play a match game at Nolin, the first Sunday in August, promising a return game to any team accepting the challenge. Address G. W. Ennis, Secretary, Nolin Horseshoe Courts, Nolin, Ky.

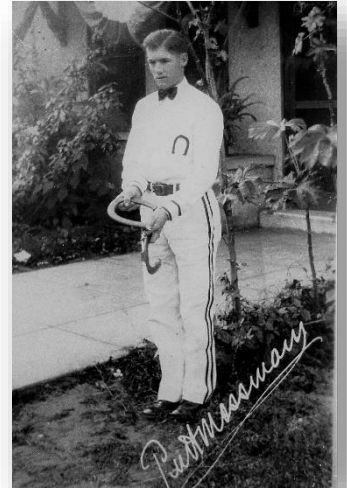
Louisville Courier Journal- July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1928.  
The Nolin Club challenges nearby teams to come and pitch at the Nolin Courts.

1929 was the most successful year for Nolin Horseshoe Pitching! On Monday night, March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Nolin courts had a special visit from former horseshoe World Champion and exhibitionist, Putt Mossman. Putt was making stops all over Kentucky in 1929, matching and defeating all of Kentucky's top players. Putt challenged the Nolin players and done some trick pitching. He defeated J. L. Harris 25-13 in a match while pitching blind folded. He defeated Nolin's best player, Lee Akers, in a 50-point game 50-22. The Nolin Club was active in team play throughout the 1929



Lee Akers accepts the 1929 state trophy from Edwin Beckman.

season and defeated the Louisville Stansanco Team in home and home matches to win the 1929 Kentucky State Team Championship. The Championship Team was comprised of Lee, Frank & Harry Akers, along with J.L. Harris. The skill of these four players were the best of Nolin at its peak. At the 1929 State Singles Championship, held September 9-14, Lee Akers captured his first title. Lee posted a record of 14-1. None of the other Nolin Club members pitched in the Championship Class and it is unknown if any pitched in Class B. Also in 1929,



Putt Mossman- 1929.

the Nolin Club acquired a new member in Lawrence Cay Reece, a traveling preacher who was from Adair County, Ky. It appears he was holding services at the Sonora Christian Church and started pitching with the Nolin Club during the 1929 & 1930 seasons.

Reece held a revival in "horseshoe park" in late 1929. On September 29th, Nolin Ky. completed a five-match series of games against the horseshoe club from New Albany Indiana. The matches were very competitive. Nolin won 57 total games to New Albany's 54. One Nolin member wrote of the series: *"We, the Nolin boys, wish to say that the Inter-State boys of New Albany, Ind. are the best sports we have ever met, and the best of good feeling prevailed throughout the series of games."*

In November of 1929, Nolin pitched a return match against Stansanco on indoor Louisville courts but were defeated 7 games to 2, due to Dick & Harry Akers not being able to attend. They were subbed by Ennis and Reece who failed to tally a win. This would be a sign of things to come for the future of the Nolin Team.

1930 was another good year for the Nolin boys, continuing a series of match-ups vs New Albany Indiana.

Nolin was runner-up to Louisville's Stansanco team in the battle for the

1930 State Team Championship. Nolin had lost one of its key members in the 1930 Championship battle. Harry Akers had pitched some in earlier matches during the Summer of 1930, but did not pitch in the Championship matches. He was substituted by L.C. Reece who was much lower in ringer percentage skill than Harry. Harry married Ethel Harris in 1930 and the young family had their son Darrell in 1931, so this appears to have been the end of Harry Aker's horseshoe pitching. In 1930, Nolin also participated in a series of "mail-in" tournament matches against Wilmington, Ohio, the only Kentucky Club to try this innovative method of matching games. At the 1930 State Singles Championship, Hardin



Brothers, Frank "Dick" Akers, age 16, & Harry Akers, age 24, on the Nolin Courts, 1929.

County sent Four players to compete, defending champion Lee Akers, brother Frank, J. L. Harris and G. W. Ennis. Frank Akers was the only one to qualify for the State Finals of 1930, although Lee had an automatic bid since he was the defending champion. Lee Akers finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in the tournament to Louisville's Sam Mattingly and Frank "Dick" Akers finished 3<sup>rd</sup>. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, the Aker's brothers of Nolin would once again show Kentucky they were among the elite players in the state. At a big tournament held In Lexington, Kentucky's Woodland Park, Lee, and Dick Akers would finish 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in what was basically a state championship rematch. State Champ, Sam Mattingly was Relegated to 3<sup>rd</sup> place by the Aker's brothers in a field of 10 of the State's best pitchers. Also in the field of the "Bluegrass Shoe Meet" was Nolin's J.L. Harris who finished 7<sup>th</sup>.

In 1931, the Nolin Club fell to third in the State Team championships, losing a tie-breaking game to the Will Sales Club. Once again, Louisville's Stansanco Club were the champions. In one of the team matches earlier in the year "J. Akers" is listed on the Nolin Team. This likely refers to John Thomas Akers, a brother to Lee, Harry, and Frank. Nolin was still trying to fill the fourth slot left open by Harry's departure to make the team with Lee, Dick, and J.L. Harris. The Aker's brothers were once again back at the State Horseshoe Pitching Championships looking to win the top prize. Of the top eight men in the finals, Lee and Dick would both qualify to pitch. At the end of the round robin play, Lee would find himself at 6 wins and 1 loss but in a tie with Louisville's William Gregory, who was also 6-1. In a best two out of three playoff Lee Akers defeated Gregory 52-45 and 50-23 to take his second state title. Lee averaged 46.0% for the tourney and brother Dick finished at 1-6 for 40.0% ringers.

In January of 1932, J. L. Harris was elected 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President of the KHPA. It is likely that Harris's tenure as an officer only lasted for the 1932 season. It appears 1932 began what was to be the downward slope of horseshoe pitching at the Nolin Courts. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, family patriarch, Powell Akers would pass away of a heart attack at age 73. Powell had suffered a paralytic stroke a few months prior to his death. The Kentucky State Team Championships mentioned that there were only three teams competing for state title, and the Nolin team was not one of the three. The Nolin Club is mentioned as the only Kentucky Club to take part in the National Mail Game League. (Scores sent in by mail and matched against other clubs.) There are no mentions found of any team activity taking place at the Nolin courts in horseshoe media for 1932. Lee Akers would once again return to the Kentucky State Championships in Louisville to defend his title. Lee would come up short in his bid, finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> with 12 wins and 3 losses. No other Nolin players are listed in the Championship Class.

On August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1933, the Louisville Stansanco team traveled to Nolin and defeated them 9 games to 7. It is mentioned that Dick Akers was 4-0, Lee Akers was 3-1. Since it was 4-man teams, the remaining two Nolin players would have been 0-4. This is the only team match found for 1933. Going into the 1933 State Championships, Lee & Dick Akers would qualify well, making the championship. Lee was the top qualifier with 221 points and brother Dick qualified 4<sup>th</sup> with 191 points. The remaining 13 qualifiers and defending champion were all Louisville players. Lee would toss a 50% average in the state contest winning it with a record of 14 wins and 1 loss. Dick Akers would finish in the 7<sup>th</sup> spot, going 8-7 with a 44% average.

In July of 1934, Louisville's Southern Veneer team made the trip to Nolin and took a horseshoe beating from the Akers brothers, losing 12 games to 4. It is stated that brother Frank out rung his brother Lee in the contest. Lee and Frank Akers had emerged over the seasons as Nolin's top two players by far and the reporting of horseshoes decreased



One surviving trophy from the "Nolin Horseshoe Club". Larue County Fair Champions of 1930. This trophy is in the possession of Tree Akers, the Grandson of Harry Akers.

in the news, they are near the only club members given a mention. Heading into the 1934 State tourney it is noted that Frank may have been favored to win the 1934 state title and was no less his brother's equal in pitching skill. Frank was 18 years younger than brother, but Lee had the necessary tournament toughness and experience to pull him through tight games and matches it would seem to appear. In the 1934 state contest Lee did falter in his last two games, having only lost one game at that point, while his brother Frank had lost three. Losing his remaining two games to two tough contenders in William Nuttall and Allen, Lee Akers found himself in a playoff against his brother for the title. In the best two out of three playoff, Lee got the better of his brother two games to one. Frank did give his brother a good run!

In 1935 the only mention for the Nolin Horseshoe Club or the Aker's brothers is in the 1935 State Championship. The Championship field was cut to 10 players and Lee was the only known Nolin player to compete and the only one in the Championship. At this point in time, a new caliber of player had hit the Kentucky scene, in Shelbyville's Van L. Young. Van Young would hit 58.5% ringers in the 1935 Championship and go undefeated at 9-0. For the first time in eight seasons, Lee Akers would finish outside of the top two spots. Lee finished 5-4 with an average of 51.0%. Lee was mostly holding steady in his skill level, while Young and Kentucky pitchers to come would push the level of play into the 60% range. 1935 was the last known year that Lee Akers appears in the standings.

The reporting for 1936-1938 only lists the top 2-4 finishing spots and Lee Akers was not among them. It is possible that he may have participated, and his average had not been good enough to make the grade. Lee was mentioned as expected to report to pitch in the 1937 Ky. State Fair and he was scheduled to appear at the 1938 State Fair. These were the last two news mentions of Lee Akers involved in horseshoe pitching found. Lee was not in the 1939 State as all Championship Class participants are listed.

So how did the Nolin Horseshoe Club come to an end? It is likely that the club was done somewhere between 1938 and 1942 or possibly even earlier. Things began to change in Nolin by the mid to late 1930's after the depression hit. The "empty canopy" photo seen here (lower left), may also yield some clues. If examined closely, you can see that the words "NOLIN COURT" are missing, faded away perhaps? The pit itself is missing the backboard. The seating boards to the right are dilapidated and grass has overtaken the walkway area, no longer worn by foot traffic. No other signs of lively pitching are present. Another question to



James & Sarah Harris



pose, would be, why take a photo of an empty canopy other than to record what once was? Of the six court photos, I'm guessing three years are represented: 1926 the beginning, 1929, the heyday, and this one, the "what once was". Another theory is that J. L. Harris may have been the court caretaker, and the courts demise may have coincided with events in his life. Factors: He is billed in articles as from the "Nolin Horseshoe Courts, Nolin, Ky." He is prominently featured in both, the 1926 and 1929 photos. Harris's wife Sarah, who was 14 years his senior, passed away on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1938. J.L.

Harris passed away in 1952 and his obituary stated that he had moved to Larue County Around 1945. It is noted the Harris sold the store to a J. R. Lawyer and Lawyer had already Sold the store by 1942 to Brack Craddock. Other Factors all culminated during those years. The L & N Railroad Depot was sold in December of 1937 to Harold Monin, Steve's

nephew. It was to be torn down and re-purposed. The L & N Railroad started closing small-town depots in the 1930's since the passenger service was drying up as people had their own forms of transportation. One newspaper article, years later, mentions that the town of Nolin did not die because of the closure of the train stop but that Nolin started to lose its population before WW2 because people began to move to Elizabethtown and Louisville for higher paying jobs. Club President, Steve Monin, passed away July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1940, at the age of 82. Club Secretary, Granville Worth Ennis, died on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1942, of a heart attack at the age of 64. What became of the Akers Brothers?



Lee & Frank Akers at a family reunion. This pic had to have been taken around 1959-1962, just prior to Lee's death.

Lee Aker's married late in life to Ruth Vinson in 1944. Lee did not have any kids of his own. Lee would have been around 49 years of age at the time of his marriage. He continued to live and farm in the Nolin community. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1962, Lee Akers suffered a heart attack at his home and died in the back of an ambulance on the way to the hospital. Services were held in the Sonora Baptist Church. Lee was 66 years old.

Frank Dickey Akers was still living in Nolin in 1940 and was working for the State Highway Dept. He later married Vera Johnson and had a son, Dennis, in 1947 after he had moved to Louisville. A second child, Patricia followed in 1948. In 1950, Frank was working as a railroad locomotive foreman. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1968, Frank's son Dennis was killed in the Vietnam War after the helicopter he was riding in was shot down and taken by a hostile force while it was crashed on the ground. In 1975, Frank retired from the railroad. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1977, Frank perished in a fire at his Louisville home at the age of 63. Frank had been a member of the Third Avenue Baptist Church and Plumb Masonic Lodge. His daughter Patricia passed in 2000 at the age of 51.

Harry A. Akers, brother of Lee and Frank was married to the daughter of J.L. Harris, Ethel Mae, around 1930. Harry and his family would later settle in Sonora, Ky. after leaving Nolin. Harry would live life as a farmer and have a son, Darrell in 1931. In 1956, Darrell would marry the Granddaughter of former Nolin Club member, G. W. Ennis, Ann Howard Ennis. Harry Akers would pass away on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1973, at the age of 73. His son Darrell passed away in 2002.



Harry Akers (left) At the Reunion From Above.

In 2022, there is little left of the town of Nolin, and nothing left for anyone to know there was ever a competitive horseshoe club and court located there. The only two buildings of the town the remain, covered in overgrowth, are the old bank building and church steeple. Frank Vinson, the son of old Nolin Club Member, Durward Vinson, recently passed on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Frank was 79 years old, born in 1944. Before his passing, Frank shared a few of his memories, saying that the old court was all gone at the time of his childhood. Frank remembers playing marbles in the area of the old court site because it was good flat level ground. Lee Akers

was Frank's uncle and he remembers Lee as a very meticulous man. If he was going to do something, he was going to do it and do it right. He says by the time of his growing up, Lee had been all done with horseshoes. Franks says he would try to ask questions of Lee and try to learn from him about how to pitch horseshoes and Lee would say "Just go out there and pitch'em!" On a side note, I had often wondered what became of Lee Aker's State Championship trophies and

unfortunately, Frank stated that they had all been lost to time. Franks says, Lee wasn't one to care anything about trophies, that they just weren't important to him.



2022- Nolin, KY. Above is the ground just across the RR tracks where the court is believed to have stood.

Two other views of the Nolin Horseshoe Court From 1929. Above: Putt Mossman squares off against J. L. Harris as the crowd looks on. Below: Lee Akers (left), Putt Mossman (center) and J. L. Harris (right) pose with their horseshoes at the court site.



Left- Remains of the old Baptist Church Steeple. Below- The old Bank/Grocery building that did stand in the time of 1929 and the Nolin horseshoe pitchers.



The Nolin Horseshoe Club and court are a window in time, a simpler time. One can picture what a Sunday afternoon may have been like in Nolin. Farmers, with a passion for the sport of horseshoes. Weekly work caught up and ready for a day of leisure and competition, gathering at the Nolin court after church services. Certainly, local spectators would have been dropping by and maybe the competitors might drop in the store, if open, for a sandwich and bottle of pop in between the action. Chatter, camaraderie, and the clanging of shoes on the stake! What a way to spend a Sunday afternoon!