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Kentucky Humanities Council works to "bring history to life"

Photos by Cecil Lawson

Duane Murner, who is Oldham County's Judge-Executive, portrayed embattled Kentucky politician Caleb Powers, who was accused in 1900 of conspiracy in the assassination of Gov. William Goebel, as part of a performance of the Kentucky Chautauqua Program at Friday's meeting of the Kentucky Humanities Council at Blue Licks State Park.

Nicholas County was well represented at Friday's meeting of the Kentucky Humanities Council at Blue Licks State Park. In attendance were, from left, Nathan Mick, Vice-President of StateBank International, Economic Development Advisor for Nicholas County, and Kentucky Humanities Council Board member; Ryan Osborne, Nicholas County Economic Development Assistant; Ben Chandler, KHC Executive Director; Bascom Sorrell, Carlisle/Nicholas County Industrial Development Authority Director; and William Francis, Chair of the KHC Board and grandson of the owners of Hopkins Drug in Carlisle. Not present for the photograph was Nicholas County Judge Executive Mike Pryor. Later in the evening, Nicholas County musician Jerry Goilbreath provided musical entertainment for the KHC Board dinner.

By Cecil Lawson
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Blue Licks State Park played host on Friday to the semi-annual meeting of the Kentucky Humanities Council, and members got a chance to experience one of the Council's most entertaining history programs, the Kentucky Drama, the Kentucky Chautauqua.

The Kentucky Humanities Council is an independent, non-profit agency funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and through private donations. It is one of 56 councils across the United States dedicated to preservation and promotion of state's history and culture.

The motto of the Kentucky Humanities Council is "Telling Kentucky's Story," and the council's programs do just that, through such programs as the Kentucky Chautauqua, the Speaker's Bureau, the Prime Time Family Reading Time, and Kentucky Humanities magazine.

"We believe people who are interested in the humanities make

mer Kentuck Attorney General and U. S. Representative Ben Chandler, who is the council's Executive Director, to those present at Friday's meeting.

Chandler noted that with the nation's current focus on science, mathematics, and technology education for students, it is important to not lose sight of the contributions of the humanities to the quality of life.

One of the standout programs of the KHC is Kentucky Chautauqua. The program is named after a popular adult education movement in the 19th and early 20th Centuries that began at Lake Chautauqua in New York State.

The Kentucky Chautauqua currently features 28 different historically accurate characters from Kentucky's past, ranging from pioneers George Rogers Clark and Daniel Boone to statesman Henry Clay, to entertainer Rosemary Clooney, to educator Alice Lloyd, to sports legends Pee Wee Reese and Adolph Rupp.

Chandler said that

historian, drama coach, and costume designer before they play their character for a public audience. He added that five more characters are slated to be added to the Chautauqua's list of performers and that the Council had received 49 applications for these positions.

Council members were treated to a performance by one of the Chautauqua performers, Duane Murner, who portrayed Kentucky Secretary of State Caleb Powers, who was one of three men accused in the assassination of Kentucky Governor William Goebel in 1900.

Murner, a transplant from the Midwest, received his education at Harvard and worked until his retirement in the financial services in-

as president of Commonwealth Life Insurance Company. He has previously performed in the Kentucky Chautauqua as John Cabell Breckinridge and Simon Bolivar Buckner. Murner is currently Oldham County Judge Executive.

For the audience, Murner "became" Caleb Powers, telling his story 31 years after the assassination that defined eight years of his own life.

"Eight years of my life were stolen from me," the character said with anger to the audience. "It is a story of unbridled arrogance, corruption, and violence that affected an election."

"I spent eight years in prison and eight years in Congress," Powers added. "I am the only Congressman who has

William Goebel was a politician, "thoroughly evil," as Powers described him, from Kenton County who rose through the ranks of Kentucky politics to become, for a time, one of the most powerful politicians in the state.

"He had neither charisma nor speaking ability, but he did have a brilliant mind and cunning," Powers said.

Following the contentious 1899 election, which included an armed 2500 man "Mountain Army" in Frankfort to protest the election results, a state election board created by Goebel named Goebel Kentucky's Governor over Republican contender (and popular vote winner) William Taylor.

On Jan. 30, 1900, Goebel was shot near the Capitol building in Frankfort by unknown

sworn in after the shooting and died four days later, making the first and only governor assassinated in the United States.

Caleb Powers, who at the time had taken office as Kentucky Secretary of State, was accused of the shooting along with two other men. "Justice was swift in getting started," Powers said. "I was a fool to think that I could get a fair trial."

Powers was tried four separate times in a highly partisan legal atmosphere. Three of those convictions went to the Kentucky Court of Appeals reversed the decision of the courts, and a fourth trial ended in a hung jury. After spending eight years in prison during this time, Powers was pardoned by Governor Augustus Willson in 1908.

Powers was able to rehabilitate his public image and was elected to Congress from 1911 to 1919. He later became assistant counsel for the U. S. Shipping Board for the later years of his life.

Murner brought the Powers' character to life for the audience, adding mannerisms and details and fielding questions about his life's story. Although the assassination remains unsolved, Powers said that he believed William Taylor was involved in the conspiracy, based on the fact that he fled the state following the shooting.

The Kentucky Chautauqua is just one of the programs sponsored by the KHC that brings history to life. If you would like to book a Kentucky Chautauqua performer, invite a member of the Speakers Bureau, or would like more information, check out the website at www.kyhumanitiescouncil.org, Phone: (859) 257-5932, or email kathleen.