

## YELLOW HAMMER

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Have you ever been called a “Yellow Hammer” or even heard the term “Hammer?” Chances are you haven’t, and have no idea what I’m talking about. Well, let me enlighten you.

As it is true for many towns, my hometown of Wilmington, Illinois, has an extensive history. Part of that history created a unique term known (I’m sure) by each of the 4,400 people of Wilmington as well as others in surrounding communities. Unfortunately, “Yellow Hammer” carries a very negative connotation that reflects badly on Wilmington, despite the fact that the lifestyles and stereotypes of the original Yellow Hammers are purely historic. They have no bearing on Wilmington today. In fact, Wilmington has a lot of things to be proud of. It’s a great town and a wonderful place to grow up.

The term “Hammer” started long ago with Colonel Brodie. The Confederate Army captured Brodie and kept him as a P.O.W. until the Civil War ended. During this time of captivity, Brodie met many interesting people and made several friendships. When the war ceased Brodie invited his new friends to come back north with him. Brodie owned some land on the northwest side of town as well as a grist mill on the Mill Race. Carpetbaggers, people needing work, and others with nothing else to do followed Brodie home and squatted on his land, which soon attained the name “Brodie’s Woods.” As word passed, more and more poor uneducated whites in desperate need of work came up from the South. Brodie didn’t charge rent to live on his land. Anyone could throw up a shack, and then go to work mining at the nearby Peabody Coal Company.

Brodie’s Woods developed into a shanty town. Its settlers constructed crude looking shacks made from anything they could get their hands on: scrap metal, tin, boards, packing crates. They generally made the roofs from tar paper and the floors from cold hard dirt. These people lived quite primitively, without running water, electricity or plumbing.

Interestingly enough, a matriarch (whose name is not known) ruled the settlement. This lady was one of the few bright spots in the community. She attempted to put some order in the community and took it upon herself to see that the men didn’t drink their money away and that the children got fed. She cornered the men, confiscated their paychecks and doled out the money as she saw fit. The people she tended to first needed shoes, coats, food. This woman dominated; very rarely did people argue with her. Her word carried weight.

Virginia Weaver, a retired school teacher, remembers children from the settlement coming to school in the dead of winter without shoes, coats, or underclothes. The clothes they did have were ripped, tattered and worn, little more than rags. These children suffered severely from lice. If washing their hair in kerosene didn’t take care of the pests, parents resorted to shaving the children’s heads as the only way to keep the lice under control.

Charity often targeted people from the settlement. Yet they felt unwelcome in churches and other establishments around town. People in town looked down on them and considered them the lowest of the low.

Incest and other illicit sexual conduct are prominently associated with the Yellow Hammers. Many people did not get legally married. At times they wondered whose kids were whose. Incest ran rampant. This caused an abundance of birth defects. Even after the settlement broke up many of its people found it difficult to shake their reputation. Their physical flaws advertized it like a billboard. Two fellows often seen about town together leaned on each other for mobility. One of the men lacked legs, the other lacked sight. The blind man provided transportation in their homemade wagon as the legless man steered and navigated. Charlie Who, another character from the settlement, was not raised by his parents and no one seemed to know his real name. Somewhere along the line he got the nick-name "Charlie Who," which he adopted. Much later in life, Charlie tried to get state aid in order to correct blindness due to cataracts. However, before the State granted him any services they needed identification. Up to this point Charlie never bothered to find out his real name (or how old he was). He never needed a social security number, a driver's license or any form of identification for the type of life he led. A few years ago someone did some research for Charlie and obtained a copy of his birth certificate. Well into his seventies Charlie Who found out that his true name was Charlie Nowman.

There are two legends that explain the origin of the term "Yellow Hammer." One says it came about because Yellow Hammer was the state bird of the state Colonel Brodie came back from after the Civil War, and the home state of many of the inhabitants of Brodie's Woods. The other story is that the men from the settlement who worked in the coal mines painted the handles of their tools yellow. They did this because they didn't possess the cash to buy their own tools individually. Therefore, they shared and the tools remained at the mine round the clock for each shift. The painted handles formed a means of identification and thus the term "Yellow Hammer" began.

This term did not carry a negative association at first. In fact, they called themselves Yellow Hammers. The term, however, quickly became negative and highly insulting. The conditions these people lived amidst and the lifestyles they led made them targets of ridicule so no one wanted any association with the Yellow Hammers. Eventually this term evolved into a household name around Wilmington.

Shortly before our family moved into Wilmington in 1976 the settlement met its demise. The owner of the land decided the unsanitary conditions, bugs and disease had gone far enough. He evicted all the residents, bulldozed the settlement and finally burned the remains. A bus barn was built at the same spot where Brodie's Woods once stood. In the late seventies, even though the settlement no longer existed, the name "Yellow Hammer" lived on. At this time it was unwise to call anyone a Yellow Hammer unless you wanted to get punched in the nose.

Throughout the years, however, the meaning of "Yellow Hammer" became somewhat altered. It is now much less personalized. Many people, especially children, don't even know the history of Brodie's Woods. "Yellow Hammer" got shortened to just "Hammer" and is now used as slang. It is still negative but no more than any other light-hearted slang. For instance,

I might say about myself "Gosh, I look like a Hammer today," meaning I didn't do my hair or makeup and I'm wearing scummy sweats. Someone might also say "He's such a Hammer" and mean that he's a jerk. We also refer to the "burnouts" of our school as "Hammers." If one of my friends or a Wilmington native called me a Hammer I would not be offended. I understand that they are kidding; it's an inside joke. In fact, several years ago at Wilmington's Catfish Days, Mayor Weidling (in bad taste) wore a yellow t-shirt with "HAMMER" written across the front.

It would not be wise, however, for someone from another town to come to Wilmington and start calling us Hammers. Rival schools in our area try to make use of its old connotation by calling us Hammers, clearly to insult and get a rise out of us. We don't take too kindly to this. Many fights started this way. Also, many adults don't see the term as we kids do. They still think of it in its original sense and are offended to hear it used in any way.

Here at Valpo when I say "Hammer," purely out of habit, I find I get many strange looks. These instances are the first time I realized that this word, so common to me, is so localized and unique to Wilmington. I find it quite interesting to see how a word originated and how a language all its own developed.