

The Main Street I Remember

Corydon, Iowa

by William Lee Burton



PHOTO AND NEWSPAPERS, COURTESY VIRGINIA (BURTON) MELROY

William Lee Burton (back left) and friends at Senior Flunk Day, April 1924. The ads ran in the 1924 *C.H.S. Echo*, Corydon's high school paper. Burton was the editor-in-chief.

In many of the smaller county seat towns in Iowa, such as the one where I grew up, "Main Street" was actually a square, with the major business establishments around the four sides of the little park in which stood the county courthouse.

The courthouse in our town was a red brick structure of ornate design, with a clock tower. Inside, its ceilings were high, its windows tall and narrow. Stair banisters were of dark oak, as were the judge's bench and the railing in the courtroom. A distinctive odor always lingered about the place, a mingling of sweeping compound, stale cigar smoke, and human sweat. In this building the inexorable facts of life were centered: here births and deaths were registered, ownership of land recorded, marriages licensed or dissolved, taxes paid, criminals tried and sentenced. Even the clock regulated our lives. One of my earliest memories is of waking in the night and hearing its measured, booming strokes—a comforting, reassuring sound.

The architecture of the business houses fronting the square was as elaborate as that of the courthouse itself. The buildings

were mostly of brick, solidly built but with corbeling and other fancy brickwork which indicated the artistic proficiency of the builders. All were two stories in height, the ground floor occupied by stores, the second by the offices of doctors and lawyers, and by a few (very few) apartments. I considered these downtown living quarters a very superior kind of home. My parents lived in a house, as did almost everybody else in the town, and houses always had, in summer, lawns to mow and gardens to weed, and, in winter, sidewalks to shovel, wood or coal to carry in for cookstoves and base burners. How fortunate those people who could look from their windows upon the town's activities—people going by in buggies and wagons, or perhaps in a new Ford, Reo, Hupmobile, or Pierce-Arrow!

Sometimes there would be a fire, with the siren wailing like a banshee and everybody running; the butcher tossing aside his apron and cleaver, the drayman tying his horses to the nearest lamp-post, the grocery clerk dropping cans and boxes in his haste to join the other volunteers on the chugging truck. And always small boys like myself, running along behind, panting and breathless with excitement.

Until the 1930s depression, the town had three banks, impressive-looking structures with much iron grillwork and walls of polished marble—the very picture of stability and strength. Two large clothing stores (we called them “dry goods stores” then) occupied cor-

ners of the square, their windows exhibiting the fashions of the day: men's suits in sober blacks and browns, ladies' dresses of silk moire and dainty cotton, decorated with yards of lace, braid, and flounces. The interiors of the stores were rather dark, and they always smelled of mothballs. The young lady clerks, all trying to look like Gibson girls in their high-necked white blouses, their hair done in elaborate puffs, moved discreetly behind the long counters, measuring out cloth, suggesting patterns and colors. At the conclusion of each sale, one's money traveled in a little basket over humming wires to a dim aerie at the back, where a high priestess of finance sent one's change zipping back with admirable promptness.

The town had one bookstore, run by a Mr. Bowers, whom I remember as a tall, formally dressed man, very grave and reserved, as befitted his calling. The books which he sold (or which perhaps remained on his shelves unsold) were of high moral character: no dime novels or penny-dreadfuls here! Mr. Bowers was superintendent of the Sunday School, and from Saturday night until Monday morning his business remained adamantly closed; he even pulled down the shades of the front window, lest he be accused of exhibiting his wares on the Sabbath.

To my childish eyes, the most attractive places on the square were the movie theatre and the confectionery and ice cream store. The latter I remember rather dimly. It was apparently a bakery, and I was impressed by the fact that the proprietor made his own cones,

Sunday and Monday
CONSTANCE TALMADGE
 in
“D U L C Y”

Also a
NEWS REEL AND COMEDY

Sunday and Monday

APRIL 6 and 7—
The Big Special
“UNSEEING EYES”

CORYDON CAFE

SPRING IS HERE!

You will need Lime, Sulphur and Arcenate of Lead for Spring.

We have them at the RIGHT Prices.

KING'S DRUG STORE

NEW PERFECTION OIL STOVES

MAJESTIC RANGES

JOHN DEERE IMPLEMENTS

We Sell Quality Goods

CORYDON IMPLEMENT CO.

THE NEW

MILLINERY

HAS ARRIVED

—at—

MRS. FLORA SALLMAN'S

SEE the latest Ladies Ready-to-wear Hats before you buy.

Men's Straw Hats in all Makes

LUGAR'S DEP'T STORE

South Side of Square

31

Phone

31

FIRST NATIONAL BARBER SHOP

Best Haircuts and Shaves

Under First National Bank.



Frocks

Featuring the Straight Line, Basque and many other ideas in the new fashions for Spring.

\$16.50 to \$45.00

Let us tell you about Hess & Cloak's Poultry Panacea and Stock Tonic and Dip. All guaranteed or your money back if not satisfied.

T. F. KING
Drug Store

Start Your Baby
Chicks on
MOR KIK
For Sale At
LUGAR'S DEP'T STORE

SCOTT & VAN BENTHUSEN

First in FRESH and CURED
MEATS.

Free Delivery!

C. L. CLARK

ABSTRACTS

"JEFF WEST"

uses
CLEAN TOWELS and
SHARP TOOLS
NEXT TO POST OFFICE

Pleasant Surroundings!
Wholesome Food!
Snappy Service!

"1ST NATIONAL CAFE"

"IT'S TIME TO PAINT UP"
Paints and Varnishes for all Kinds
Of Work

CORYDON LUMBER CO.

KING'S DRUG STORE

KODAKS AND SUPPLIES!

Drugs—Tablets—Pencils

at RIGHT prices

H. M. ELWOOD

FINE CANDIES
and
FRESH GROCERIES
PHONE—333

PRESSING AND CLEANING
Relining and Altering
Hemstitching and Pleating
Dyers Hatters

STROMSTEN'S

The Corydon Cleaners and Repairers

SEABURN'S SHOP

The place to get a good Hair Cut,
and Shave. Ladies' Hair bob
in all Styles

using a thin, sweetened dough which was baked and then rolled into a conical shape. Cooled and filled with homemade vanilla ice cream (there was no other flavor in those days), the result was like food for the gods; no other gustatory experience in my life has ever quite equaled that one.

But it was the Gem Theatre (a converted store building) to which I was most attracted. The Opera House, built in the 1890s at considerable expense, usually stood empty except for "home talent" productions or an occasional road company: *East Lynne*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or *Ten Nights in a Barroom*. The movies were a novelty then; makeshift theatres, called Nickelodeons because the admission was five cents, had sprung up all over the country, and people were flocking to them, enthralled by those jerky little shadows that actually moved. What if the folding chairs were uncomfortable, the long waits between reels boring and tiresome? What if the pictures that were shown had unconvincing plots and exaggerated acting? I went to the movies as often as my parents would let me, and if I didn't have the price of admission I peddled handbills, or swept the theatre after school, to pay for my ticket. A whole galaxy of new "stars" passed in review before my fascinated and uncritical eyes: Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Mabel Norman, Hazel Dawn, Fatty Arbuckle, Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart, Lillian and Dorothy Gish. I spent one whole winter with *The Perils of*



Pauline, merely existing in a fever of cliff-hung suspense, from one Tuesday night to the next.

The Gem was managed during one season by a Mr. Reizenstein, a fuzzy-haired little man who had come to Iowa from somewhere in the East, and who, a year later, drifted away as unobtrusively as he had come. He took tickets at the door before the show began, then scampered down the aisle to play the tinkly old piano, furnishing a musical accompaniment to the silent film. Though Mr. Reizenstein was always polite and deferential toward everybody, there was a certain reserve in his manner, as if he found the rest of us a bit crude and naive—no doubt we were. I wonder who he was, and how he came to choose our town?



SHS (IOWA CITY)

Brooms hang from the ceiling, doughnuts and dishes fill the glass cases, and canned goods line the shelves in Corydon's grocery store, April 1924. Note the Chautauqua poster on the far left and the barefoot girl in the back.

I wasn't much aware of ethnic backgrounds at that time. There were several families in town whose ancestry was Scandinavian, and one or two households of Irish Catholics, who were regarded with a certain amount of curiosity. Germans outnumbered all other racial groups; they were without exception industrious, hard-working people and good citizens—though later, during World War I, some of the schoolboys (myself included) joined in shouting taunts at the old German blacksmith, whose shop, we were convinced, harbored some deep and devious mischief.

The Main Street of my youth

has long since vanished. Television has killed the small theatres; supermarkets have replaced most neighborhood grocery stores. Only the statue of the Civil War soldier, leaning on his musket atop his marble column in the courthouse park, remains the same—perhaps dreaming, as I do, of the past that is no more. ❖

This sketch of Corydon, Iowa, was first submitted by William Lee Burton to a 1976 writing competition sponsored by the Iowa Council on Aging and later revised slightly and self-published. The original essay is in Special Collections, State Historical Society (Iowa City).

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—and—

ONE MINUTE WASHING
MACHINES

RAKES & SON,
Hardware

"1ST NATIONAL CAFE"

MEALS AND SHORT ORDERS
with Home Made Pies.
Tobaccos Cigarettes,
Candies Cold Drinks.

Office Hours: 8:30-12 and 1-5.

DR. R. A. McFATE
Dentist

Successor to Dr. Silvernail. Special
attention given to children and
Extraction

PHONES: Office 329; Residence 90.

WHITELEY MUSIC STORE

GREATEST VALUES IN MUSICAL
INSTRUMENTS

:-: AT THE AUDITORIUM :-:

FRIDAY and SATURDAY

MILTON SILLS

—in—

"THE FORGOTTEN LAW"

and

AN AESOPS

SUNDAY and MONDAY

LIONEL BARRYMORE

and

ALMA RUBEN

—in—

"ENEMIES OF WOMEN."

—Also—

A Comedy and a News Reel

1874

1924

WE WERE your Grandfather's,
your Father's and Wish to
be Your BANKERS

**WAYNE COUNTY STATE
BANK**

Let us tell you about Hess & Cloak's Poultry Panacea and Stock Tonic and Dip. All guaranteed or your money back if not satisfied.

T. F. KING
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