

THE PALIMPSEST

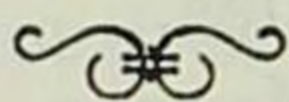
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Days of Horses and Wagons

When I think back to the Davenport of the 1890's, I have to look with the eyes of a little fellow who stands peering through a picket fence at the southwest corner of Third and Harrison streets. His wide-open eyes take in horse cars rattling across the intersection, gray-painted brick buildings across the way, and a road of macadam, ground to powder by the heavy iron-rimmed wagons that roll past endlessly. For his was a horse-drawn world, filled with the pounding of hooves and the shouting of drivers, where dust swirled around corners and got into the little boy's eyes.

The picket fence separated the street from an open space that once had taken in the whole corner lot. Now this area was limited to a yard in front of a one-and-a-half story cottage, wedged between stores and shops. Stores occupied the east third of the property and faced Harrison Street; they backed against the house, which once had stood alone amid trees. The trees had long since gone. West of the house ran a walk and

beyond that the whole west side of the property was occupied by a long, one-story wooden building — my father's wagon works. Here he made the Davenport farm wagon, and occasionally a surrey with the fringe on top, but his principal output was heavy vehicles.

My father, Hans Hansen, was born in Slagelse, Denmark, in 1836. He tried to enlist as a drummer boy in the troubles of 1848, but was turned back because of his youth. Apprenticed to a wagon-maker, he learned the trade and served his time as a journeyman, moving from town to town getting experience, and having his papers properly endorsed by the authorities at each stop. In 1856 he reached Montreal in a schooner after a seven-week voyage. After a short stay there he came to Davenport. I never asked why, but suppose he was influenced by associates. His first partners in wagonmaking were named Saeger and Schultz. When I was born my father had been established at Third and Harrison streets for years and his partners were dead.

The house was a large clapboard cottage that had a wide front porch with square pillars and a sloping roof with dormers above the porch. In front of its west windows stood pots of geraniums and fuschias, popular in every household. Although I lived in this house only the first eight years of my life, I carry such a vivid impression of the locale that I can recall the whole terrain.

To this small boy the most interesting part was the shop, built in the form of an ell. Fronting the street was the smithy; here two men worked at a glowing forge, pounding redhot tires into shape on iron anvils and fitting hub caps over solid iron cones. I recall how hot tires were fitted to the hickory wheels, and how the smoke flared up when they touched the wood, and how anxiously my father watched the proceedings to make certain the product would be sound and durable.

Next after the forge came the carpenter shop where the wagons were put together, and where I liked to play in the long curling shavings. Beyond the carpenter shop came the paint shop, and here painters applied bright green paint to the wagon box, while the wheels received vermilion, and the whole was highly varnished.

All this was manual craftsmanship; everything was done by hand, and before a wagon was turned over to the buyer, my father inspected every plank and often tightened the bolts. In later years I asked him what such a wagon cost. "A plain wagon sold for \$60 to \$100," he said, "and for more money the farmer received extra sideboards, stronger brakes, and so on." On a number of occasions, as we walked along the street together many years later, we would see a heavy-duty wagon, drawn by draft horses and devoid of every vestige of paint, and my father would say: "There goes one of my wagons." He built wag-

ons to last a lifetime, for the theory that replacement creates sales had not yet become current in America.

Years later I happened to be standing with my father at the northeast corner of Third and Harrison streets, waiting for a streetcar to take us "up the hill." Father was staring at the opposite corner and with a smile he said: "It looks different now." I had not recalled for a long time that on the corner opposite once stood the house in which I was born, and adjoining it, father's wagonshop and smithy. Now a one-story structure of stores, uniform in appearance, covered almost half a block. "It's all gone," said my father, "except this."

He pointed overhead. There, attached to steel braces but standing free of the building was an immense wooden rifle, one story tall, its barrel pointing upward like a lightning rod, and luminous with silver paint. It was an example of the advertising symbols that America used so plentifully at the time, and it represented Emil Berg's sporting goods business. "That gun," said father, "was made right across the street, in my shop."

The first brick paving was laid on Third Street before I had entered school. I remember watching the operation from this Harrison Street house. The basic foundation was of cinders, packed down by the steam roller, which we children welcomed with feelings of apprehension and delight.

Then came a layer of brick, laid flat, with a cover of sand above and below. On top of the smooth sand came the heavier paving brick, laid edgewise, with the narrow surface on top. Streets were a foot or more below sidewalk level and called for metal ramps from the curbs at the street corners. These ramps were often broken when heavy wagons rolled over them. They were replaced by metal stoops.

The sidewalks at our corner were of brick, but wood was permitted for a long time in the residential districts. The first concrete sidewalks seemed most attractive, for they were laid with a smooth, polished surface, but so many people slipped on them in wet weather that the Board of Public Works ordered contractors to provide rough surfaces.

Any reference to homely customs of the past shows that they have changed for the better. In the horse-drawn days a hitching post was considered a necessity. The better posts were made of iron; others of wood. Some saloons had long hitching racks, where the farmer could tie his horses. Often horses that had been standing there for hours could be seen pawing holes in the pavement in their restless desire to be off to the home barn. In time teamsters learned that it was simpler to attach a heavy iron weight by a strap to the horse's bit, and posts disappeared.

My father once drew my attention to the steeple

lights that were still in use in Davenport. These were tall metal frames like those of windmills, on which were hung a number of arc lights. The light was diffused over a neighborhood like pale moonlight. They were found impractical. Arc lights were then hung over the intersections of streets, and every morning a man cleaned dead insects out of the bowl and replaced the carbon sticks. Outside the business district he simply threw the used carbons into the street, where wagons ground them into the dirt. Sidewalks were not much cleaner because spitting was general, abetted by the habit of chewing tobacco. The walls of warehouses and grain elevators along the Rock Island tracks advertised Battle Axe, Navy Cut Plug, and similar "chews," before cigarette smoking displaced them.

My father sold his plant to Henning Frank about 1890. One of the last apprentices to work for him was a young German named Hein who, reversing the usual routine, returned to his homeland and opened his own shop there. As in Europe, the apprentice lived in the master's house in Davenport; thus my parents became well acquainted with Hein and kept up a correspondence with him in subsequent years. They did not live to learn the final chapter in Hein's career, which I heard about in an odd way. In the 1930's a German painter was working in my house in Mount Vernon, N. Y., and in asking whence he had

come I found that he had known Hein. The painter told me that during a political riot a stone flung into a crowd had crushed Hein's skull and killed him.

HARRY HANSEN