

## Bloomington Comes of Age

Early in January of 1839 a traveler from Michigan jogged into the "much talked of" town of Bloomington, then better known as the "Town of Pinch 'em Slily". Despite the contemplated Cedar River Canal and the immense water power rushing by its door, Bloomington's prospects did not impress the Wolverine. "The famous town", he recorded, "is tastefully gotten up on a gentle acclivity bound in by lofty" bluffs on one side, "a stagnant pool and inundated swamp" on another, and encompassed by "some tilable lands", but mainly "consisting of broken fragments of hills and precipices, that look as if formed for pasturage and shaken to pieces by a fit of the ague before it got dry".

The traveler awoke the next day to watch numerous inhabitants go to the river to "obtain water from holes cut in the ice". With the rising sun he sallied forth, "and found some of the houses stuck up against the hills on high blocks like stilts, and others dug into the bluff, so as to place the one end entirely below the surface of the ground. The town includes a great deal of broken, irregular ground, many of the lots stand precisely on one



end, others *hang a little over*; — such are bought and sold, it is said, by '*perpendicular measure*.'"

Although he had made glowing reports of other Iowa towns, the Wolverine found little to praise in Bloomington. "To attempt an enumeration of the improvements of the Bloomingtonians, would be rather an idle business", the dispeptic visitor wrote. "I will tell you, *not* what they *have*, but what they have *not* — They have no *Church*, no *Prison*, no *Court-House*; each of which are especially essential, if the people intend to serve their God, or the officers of justice their country. The absence of the first is justified on the ground of *no religion* — the latter on that of *no law*, which, in all these *sun-down* countries, means *no will to enforce it*. They have no printing establishment — no school house, or seminary — and no manufactories, save one for converting brick-dust and molasses into 'Sappington's pills,' an improvement invaluable in all *ague* countries."

In the three years since the town was surveyed in 1836, Bloomington had not prospered. When William Gordon arrived on September 28, 1836, he found William St. John, Giles and Jonathan Pettibone, J. Craig, John Champ, Norman Fullington, Moses Couch, Lyman C. Hine, Suel Foster, John Vanatta, James W. Casey, Adam Ogilvie, T. M. Isett, Mr. Norton and wife, and Robert C.



Kinney and wife already there. Gordon erected the first frame building, a structure measuring sixteen feet by thirty feet, containing three rooms below and three rooms above, which was used as a tavern by R. C. Kinney.

In 1837 Adam Ogilvie opened a log-cabin store on Front Street and Joseph Bridgman started in the dry goods business. A. O. and D. R. Warfield built the first sawmill on Mad Creek in the same year. William Gordon, Henry Reece, and H. H. Hine were employed in the carpenter trade. The Panic of 1837 probably stifled expansion, for the town contained only seventy-one inhabitants and thirty-three buildings when it was incorporated in 1839. Muscatine County had only 1218 inhabitants in 1838, increasing to a mere 1942 by 1840.

Failure to secure a newspaper was a factor in Bloomington's slow growth. True, James T. Campbell intended to publish the *Iowa Banner* at Bloomington in 1838. Unfortunately, however, Campbell died at Covington, Kentucky, on September 11th while on his way home to get a press. At last, on October 23, 1840, William Crum began printing the *Iowa Standard*, only to move his press to Iowa City in the following year.

Exactly four days after the birth of the *Iowa Standard*, the Bloomington *Herald* was born in a



wretched cabin no better than a stable. Editors John B. Russell and Thomas Hughes hoped their paper would meet a "hearty reception at the fire-side of every farmer in the county" as they took up the cudgels for the "democracy of Muscatine".

On April 19, 1841, the *Herald* expressed delight over the "great increase" of building construction. "Quite a number of frames have already been raised, and in every direction, the heavy timbers for others are seen, ready for the square and chisel. Mechanics of all the building professions, we believe, find ready employment. While times are dull and money scarce, no place in the west offers greater inducements to young mechanics than this." The editor believed in "growing up" with a new community and prophesied that Bloomington would soon become a large commercial city. The town was already the depot for a large district capable of "sustaining a dense population." Wealthy farmers were leaving the "old states" and seeking the "better farms at cheaper rates" around Bloomington.

When the *Burlington Gazette* asserted that "several good buildings" were going up and suggested that Burlington was "outstripping" other river towns, the *Bloomington Herald* demurred. "Don't be too certain, Mr. Gazette — Bloomington is going ahead at a rapid rate", declared the



editor. " 'Several good buildings have already gone up,' eh? That is not very definite, and if we were going to speak of our place in particular, we should say that *considerably upwards of several* have gone up, besides many that are nearly ready for raising."

Despite such enthusiasm the Bloomington *Herald* had serious financial difficulty. Subscription rates were \$3 in advance or \$4 at the end of the year. At the close of the first year the editors offered to share the hard times "equally" with patrons if they would promptly pay \$6 for the two years. They had labored nearly a year without "dunning" and were in pressing need of a little money. On December 31, 1841, the editor promised to enlarge the paper if subscribers would pay up — otherwise let it die.

When thirteen-year-old John Mahin became a printer's devil on the Bloomington *Herald* in 1847 there were only two printers in the town. Mahin worked for his board and room — a humble beginning for a man who was to become one of Iowa's ablest journalists. In 1852 he took the editorship of the paper, which had assumed the name of *Muscatine Journal* in 1849. Orion Clemens purchased an interest in the firm in 1853 and Mark Twain joined the *Journal* staff for a short time that year. In 1855 the paper began daily



publication. John Mahin retained his interest in the *Journal* until 1903. In 1939 the Muscatine *Journal* had a circulation of 7648 and could count forty employees in a plant valued at \$125,000.

The Mississippi River was a vital factor in the early growth of Bloomington. Many pioneers arrived by steamboat and the great bulk of their supplies came up the Mississippi. During the season of 1837 steamboats discharged freight and passengers at Bloomington until mid-December. When the steamboat *Dubuque* blew up a short distance below the town on August 14, 1837, William Gordon served as undertaker and was allowed \$136 for making the rough coffins and burying the seventeen horribly scalded victims interred at Bloomington.

Beginning with 1840 such river news as the opening and closing of navigation, spring freshets and summer floods, low water, and high tariff rates were recorded in the weekly press. Thus, on February 26, 1841, the Bloomington *Herald* announced that the first steamboat had reached Keokuk from Saint Louis. The ice was already breaking up at Bloomington and the editor hoped the "puff" of the steamboat would soon be heard. By the middle of March the *Otter* had arrived, followed during the next two weeks by the *Agnes*, the *Chippewa*, the *Illinois*, the *Indian Queen*, the



*Ione*, the *Iowa*, the *Mermaid*, the *Nauvoo*, and the *Rapids*. The effect on trade was manifested on every hand: H. Musgrave alone received three tons of castings, including ovens, skillets, tea kettles, stew kettles, irons, lids, and miscellaneous equipment. On April 2, 1841, the *Herald* declared that heavy rains had caused the Mississippi to rise a foot a day. Boats continued to discharge heavy cargoes: the *Ariel*, *Brazil*, *Cicero*, *Des Moines*, *Gipsy*, *Miami*, and *William Penn* being among the new craft that appeared during April.

The rivalry between Bloomington and Burlington is reflected in river comments. In May, 1841, a Burlington editor boasted of the "booming stage" of the Mississippi at that point. "Wonder what river runs by Burlington?" queried the Bloomington *Herald* sarcastically. "We have a very respectable river running by this place in that direction, but it has not been within six feet of high water mark this season." Three months later, on August 13th, the editor was still grumbling. "The river is so low at this place, that it is beneath our contempt."

Great anxiety was displayed over the closing of navigation. On November 19, 1841, the *Herald* expressed delight when the *Rapids* arrived with upwards of one hundred tons of freight. The editor believed all would be well if the weather re-



mained favorable for a fortnight. Two weeks later the dwindling stock of paper caused the editor to curtail the size of his sheet. Ruefully he lectured his subscribers: "The late cold weather has broken into the calculations of many who anticipated a continuance of navigation. . . . Since boats have ceased running, almost daily we see extra carriages, waggons, or sleighs carrying home those who have been caught out by the cold weather."

Steamboating was still important a century later: in 1938 approximately 5,000,000 bushels of Iowa corn and other grain were shipped from Muscatine to New Orleans on Federal Barge Line boats at the rate of four cents per 100 pounds. According to the *Muscatine Journal*: "Eating places, filling stations and other businesses profited from the influx of truckers. Higher grain prices put thousands of dollars into the pockets of farmers." One man brought corn from distant Odebolt and returned home with cottonseed meal.

Bloomington was slow to acquire adequate ferry service. In 1837 the district court granted Robert C. Kinney the right to operate a ferry "north of the old trading house". Moses Couch was awarded a similar license at a point close to Kinney's. On July 2, 1838, the county commissioners granted James W. Neally a Bloomington ferry li-



cense good for one year. The rates prescribed were: each footman, 25 cents; man and horse, 50 cents; wagon and two horses or yoke of oxen, \$1.50; each additional horse, 25 cents; cattle, 25 cents; sheep and hogs, 6¼ cents. These first ferries were crude flat-bottomed skiffs propelled by poles and oars.

On December 14, 1838, the Territorial legislature granted Joseph Williams and Charles A. Warfield the right to establish a "horse or steam" ferry across the Mississippi at Muscatine. Their first ferry was the flatboat *Polly Keith* built in 1839 by D. C. Cloud and George Leffingwell. According to the Bloomington *Herald* the *Polly Keith* was kept in "the Slough, with ropes to propel it, so that travellers coming to it can ferry themselves, their wagons and stock across without difficulty."

This service was so inadequate that the *Herald* on December 11, 1840, carried an open letter regarding the "approaching forfeiture" of the ferry privilege by Warfield and Williams who, it was prophesied, could not obtain a renewal unless in "open defiance of the unanimous will of our citizens". Since the ferry would soon become a "valuable privilege" the writer believed Bloomington should either be granted the charter or else a stock company of citizens should be organized. In answer to this plea the Territorial legislature passed



an act on December 29, 1840, authorizing the president and trustees to "establish and keep a ferry" across the Mississippi for "one mile above and one mile below" Bloomington. The town officials had "full and entire control" of the ferry and could lease it for any period not exceeding ten years on terms "most conducive to the welfare" of the municipality.

On April 23, 1841, the town recorder advertised in the *Herald* that the ferry lease would be let to any one furnishing a "good and sufficient" steamboat. Captain John Phillips was granted the ferry license when he provided the diminutive steam ferry *Iowa*, a vessel which was condemned and dismantled at the close of 1842. For the next two seasons Captain Phillips had to resort to a flatboat with oars. In 1845 a horse ferry was introduced by Brooks & Reece. It was not until July, 1855, that the steam ferry *Muscatine* was placed in service. With the opening of the high bridge in 1891 ferry service was discontinued.

A century ago the streets of Muscatine formed a quagmire after every heavy rain. In pleasant weather the progress of the pioneers was impeded by ruts, deep holes, and stumps. The country roads were frequently impassible in wet weather. Small wonder that frontier mail service was slow: swollen streams, muddy trails, and drifting snow



were hardly conducive to overland travel. Now, by contrast, half of Muscatine's eighty miles of streets are paved. The city can boast 56.20 miles of sewers — troublesome Papoose Creek is now a closed sewer. In addition there are sixty-one miles of water mains and sixty-two miles of permanent sidewalks. The county has shown equal progress: 116.8 miles of primary roads are maintained by State and Federal funds. Muscatine County has gravelled approximately one-half of her 630 miles of county roads.

Hemmed in by an ice-locked river during the winter and uncertain seasonal highways, the Bloomington pioneers awaited anxiously for news from friends beyond the eastern horizon. There was no post office in town until 1839. County histories declare that Mr. Stowell was the first postmaster appointed but that he left before his commission arrived. If so, this may explain the delay in establishing a post office. Records in Washington indicate that Levi Thornton was appointed first postmaster on December 6, 1839. A little later, it appears, Edward E. Fay became postmaster. When Fay died his brother, Pliny Fay, succeeded him on March 2, 1842, continuing in office to the close of Tyler's administration. Times have changed in the Muscatine mail service: in 1938 postal receipts totalled \$93,234.20.



Postmaster Albert S. Barry received a salary of \$3500 for directing the work of fifty-four postal employees.

Professional men were among the earliest pioneers in Bloomington. The first physician in Muscatine County was Dr. Ely Reynolds, an Indianian who laid out the town of Geneva in 1835. Dr. Reynolds liked good whisky and horse racing, was kind-hearted and reliable, but, although he practiced medicine fifty-six years, was never wealthy. When J. P. Walton arrived at Bloomington in 1838 he found Dr. Reynolds was the leading physician for Bloomington as well as the country around Geneva. One of the first physicians in Bloomington was Dr. McKee, a Philadelphia bachelor, who practiced on others "to their sorrow". Another physician, W. H. Blaydes of Kentucky, is said to have been a better pork packer than a doctor.

There were other men with better training. Dr. Benjamin Weed came to Bloomington from New England in October, 1839, to practice medicine in a log cabin on Second Street. George M. Reeder, William L. Smith, Benjamin S. Olds, and James Davis were all practicing medicine in Bloomington by 1841. The grim reaper was no respecter of homes in those days: in September Dr. Olds's four-year-old daughter died of congestive fever.



Patent medicines flourished in Bloomington — J. Lightner, Charles H. Fish, W. Hollingsworth, and J. S. Lakin all sold such drugs as Champion's Ague Pills and Sappington's Pills. Dentists were slow in putting in an appearance, the pioneers generally relying on doctors to pull their teeth. In 1838 there was but one turn-key for pulling teeth in Muscatine County and it belonged to Dr. Reynolds. In October, 1839, Dr. James Weed began the practice of dentistry in Bloomington. A century later, in 1939, there were twenty-four doctors, ten druggists, and sixteen dentists practicing in Muscatine.

The legal profession was represented by some distinguished characters. Joseph Williams arrived in the fall of 1838 to serve as a judge of the Territorial Supreme Court. He was also Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court in 1847-1848 and 1849-1855. His tenure was interrupted in 1848 by S. C. Hastings, whose judicial service in Muscatine began as justice of the peace with the trial of a man who stole \$30 from a citizen and \$3 from the court. The sentence was thirty-three lashes and banishment to Illinois — a penalty which was inflicted under the eye of the court and before a large crowd of people. The names of David C. Cloud, William G. Woodward, Stephen Whicher, A. J. Leffingwell, J. Scott Richman, and



Ralph P. Lowe are boldly written in Iowa as well as Bloomington annals.

Schools and churches were said to be lacking in the "Town of Pinch 'em Slily". But that was in January, 1839, when there were only a half dozen children in Bloomington. The first school was taught by J. A. Parvin in May, 1839. Classes were held in a small log cabin which Parvin rented for eight dollars. The salary of Muscatine's first school teacher was determined by the generosity and prosperity of parents.

During the next decade several private schools were established. In February, 1841, Suel Foster notified stockholders of the Bloomington Education Society to meet at the "School House" to consider the propriety of selling the school building. In the following September, J. Purinton informed citizens of his intention to start a school and continue it through the winter. His tuition rates were \$3 for primary and \$4 for the higher branches. Extra charges would be made for room rent and fuel. It was not until 1848 that the first concerted action was taken for public schools. In 1938 there were 124 teachers instructing 3550 students in Muscatine, besides 102 registered in the Junior College. The valuation of public school property was set at \$1,078,000.

Bloomington manifested other cultural develop-



ments. On February 23, 1841, T. S. Parvin lectured to the Bloomington Literary Association on the "Objects and Advantages of Literary Associations". During the ensuing months the Literary Association listened to such men as Justice Joseph Williams, G. W. Humphreys, and Dr. Wm. H. Blaydes, the latter speaking on "Empyrecism".

When the Wolverine traveler visited Bloomington in 1839 he was astonished at the amount of drunkenness — the citizens were said to consume enough liquor annually to "float the whole town". By 1841 leading citizens had formed the Bloomington Temperance Society. N. W. Goodrich, J. A. Parvin, S. C. Hastings, and Rev. John Stocker spoke at the spring meetings. The "friends, foes, and neutrals" were "*all* invited" to attend the September temperance meeting to hear Robert Lucas and Dr. Law speak.

In the fall of 1837, the Methodists heard the Reverend Norris Hobert preach at Bloomington. About this time Barton H. Cartwright held services in the barroom of the Iowa House, Bloomington's first hotel. In July, 1839, the first Methodist class was formed. On October 3, 1840, the first recorded Quarterly Meeting was held with such men as Joseph Williams, J. A. Parvin, George Bumgardner, and Charles A. Warfield attending. During the same year the Methodists



and the Presbyterians began to use alternately a house for school and religious purposes. The Presbyterians had been organized on July 6, 1839, by the Reverend John Plank of the American Home Missionary Society.

The Episcopalians organized a church in 1839, the Baptists in 1841, and the Congregationalists in 1843. The Catholics performed their first rituals in a frame house constructed at Prairie du Chien and floated down the Mississippi. Church meetings were frequently recorded in the newspapers. Thus, on November 19, 1841, the *Bloomington Herald* announced that religious services would precede a "downeast" Thanksgiving to be held in the school room on Thursday.

In the years that followed, Bloomington had much to be thankful for: a rich soil, healthful climate, and homogeneous people have been important factors in causing the population to expand from about 1600 in 1846 to 16,778 in 1930. Muscatine still has her sash and door mills, reminiscent of lumbering days. Muscatine still employs almost four thousand pearl button workers, an industry that sprang up in the "Pearl City" in 1891. Muscatine still dwells in the sunset land, enjoying the rich educational, religious, and cultural heritage handed down by the pioneers of yesteryears.

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