

36. Early Bloomington

As we have learned, Taft's grist mill was the economic driver that led to the development of Tafton/Bloomington. Built in 1852 of native limestone, it was used for the grinding of wheat, which was the dominant crop grown in the area at that time. The 1852 date is confirmed by the large date stone over a door on the west side of the structure. Old grinding stones are set in the ground as part of a walkway leading into the building. When the mill could no longer make money and the mill race (a waterway dug on the south side of the Bloomington main street, which eventually caused the main street to become known as Canal Street), behind it deteriorated, the mill ceased operations and the building was modified for use as a residence. The family of Gilson Thyler lived there starting in 1912.

On the following pages we will see some wonderful old photos of Bloomington as it was in the late 1800s, when hitching rails, board walks, and dirt streets were a reality.



South Side of Main Street before the 1870's



Tornowske's Wagon and Blacksmith Shop



Scene from Pleasant Street

The above photo of Bates Saloon was taken around the turn of the century. Bill Bates ran this saloon, which was located in front of John Wood's wagon shop, with Tornowske's blacksmith shop at the right. "Good" whiskey was 15 cents for a full ounce, a "full" quart went for 95 cents and it was 5 cents for a 12 ounce beer. Notice the pump out front for those who wished something not so strong. The wonderful old photo on the left is Pleasant Street showing the buggies congregated in front of the Mauer, Spencer and Pitts blacksmith shops on the left and the William Brown and Gene Spencer homes on the right. Blacksmith shops typically built buggies and wagons as well as shod horses.



South Side of Main Street Before The Fire of 1897

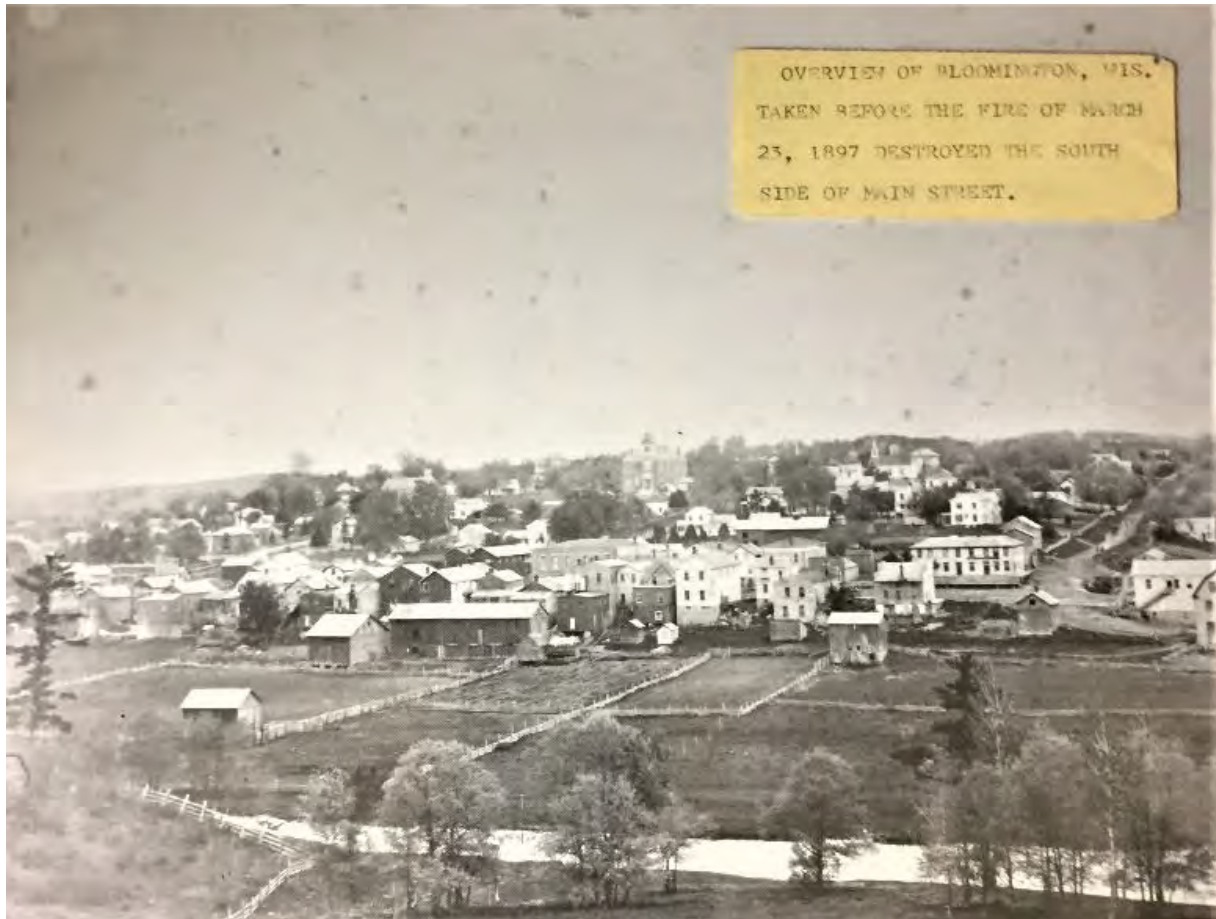
The second photo here is one of the oldest views of Bloomington's Main Street (Canal Street) and may have been taken after a bad flood, as reported in the June 6, 1878 issue of the *Grant County Herald*. The June 20th paper reported, "Bloomington though badly washed is yet alive and doing her share of business. On the 12th the people with one accord turned out en-masse to help Bidwell and Warwick replace their dam."



Near the Bloomington Hotel during the late 1800's

The first bank in Bloomington opened in 1871 located over Greer's store. William Humphrey and W. B. Clark were the incorporators. In 1873, a more commodious building was erected on Canal Street, into which the bank moved the same year. In this building it has since remained. "A simple private banking business is all that the proprietors aspire to at present, and in the line chosen they have been eminently successful, commanding the respect and confidence of all their

numerous patrons."



Fires were a constant hazard in town because of all the frame buildings. On March 25, 1897, there was a devastating fire in Bloomington that destroyed most of the south side of Canal Street. There was an even worse fire on April 21, 1910, just before my Johnnie and Lena came to town. The

Bartley and Brady buildings and the co-op were destroyed, and the I.O.O.F. and Ludden buildings were damaged.

THE BLOOMINGTON REVIEW

BLOOMINGTON, WISCONSIN, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27, 1910.

Fire at Bloomington

Business District Is Threatened Last Thursday Morning.

Total Loss Near \$25,000

Bartley and Brady Buildings and the Co-Operative Store Destroyed. I. O. O. F. and Lud- den Buildings Damaged.

About five o'clock last Thursday morning, April 22, fire was discovered on the main floor of the building occupied by the general store of the Grant County Co-Operative Company in the center of the south side of Canal street, and before it was extinguished had destroyed that building and the \$12,000 stock of goods carried, the Brady building, which adjoins it, and had done considerable damage to the I. O. O. F. and Ludden buildings, at the east and west sides of the fire respectively, and the stock of goods therein, total damage amounting to nearly \$25,000. It was the second largest fire in the history of the village.

When discovered the fire had gained considerable headway and though the doors of the Co-Operative Store were broken open it was impossible to get at the flames because of the dense smoke and the fire beyond control. The alarm was given and in a very short space of time a crowd of three or four hundred people had gathered and the work of fighting the flames began. Bucket brigades were organized and the efforts were centered on preventing the spread of the fire to the adjoining buildings and removing the stocks of goods that were threatened.

Fortunately there was hardly a breath of air stirring, which made the work of subduing the fire much easier than it would otherwise have been. It was apparent to everyone that the best places to stop the fire were at the I. O. O. F. building, in which is F. L. Greer & Son's store, and which adjoins the building where the fire started, and J. B. Ludden's store building, which had J. L. Brady's building between it and the fire. The I. O. O. F. building and the Ludden buildings are both two storied and the flames could be reached from above, as the co-operative store building, owned by P. Bartley, and the Brady building had but one story. Nearly everything movable was taken out of the Brady building, in which the owners conducted a temperance saloon and billiard hall, and some efforts were made to save it, but it was thought to be impossible to do so and therefore the hard work was done on the two other buildings mentioned.

The Ludden building was comparatively safe because there is a space of about four feet between it and the Brady building, which, being nearly empty, did not make nearly as hot a fire as the Bartley building. It took some desperately hard work, however, to save the I. O. O. F. building, and a peculiarity in its construction, of having the wooden joists go clear through the brick walls, was responsible for most of the trouble. This was the main cause of the destruction of the Brady building, although the wood under the tin roof caught fire also. The upper story of the Odd Fellows' building was on fire several times, but the bucket brigade provided plenty of water and by chopping away part of the floors it was possible to get at the flames and extinguish them. When the Co-Operative Store was burning soot, fire, a son explosion was heard, and part of the ceiling in the lodge room of the Odd Fellows' building fell. Luckily no one happened to be in the room at the time, and the explosion was more fortunate than otherwise, as after it happened little flames near the roof were discovered and extinguished, and they probably would not have been noticed had the ceiling remained in its proper place. The west wall and the upper story of the building were badly damaged.

Some excellent work was done in removing the stocks of goods from the Greer and Ludden stores and carrying them across the street and out of danger, and a great deal more water was at hand than many people thought could be provided in an emergency of this sort. Walt Taylor also hauled a tank full of water clear from Patch Grove and this was of great use in helping to save the Odd Fellows' building. Many of the farmers from the surrounding country came in and helped fight the fire, and nearly everyone present is to be praised for the hard work done. The people kept cool and made their work count for something.

The origin of the fire is something of a mystery, but the only explainable theory seems to be that mice got at the matches in the Co-Operative Store. Lincoln Abraham, the manager, reports that they had been bothered with mice for several days, and as the blaze started exactly where the stock of matches were kept this seems to be the most likely cause. Mr. Abraham locked up the store at 8:30 the evening before and of course left everything in good shape, and was past it again about eleven o'clock and noticed nothing wrong. Rev. Woolley and others passed the store at two o'clock in the morning and noticed nothing wrong, and if the fire had started at that time, as it undoubtedly had, there was too much smoke to notice any blaze, as was the case when it was finally discovered. The Co-Operative people did not save even their books and with the comparatively small amount of insurance carried the stockholders—some thirty-five in all—stand to lose considerable money.

The estimated loss is as follows:

P. Bartley, general store building	\$10,000
Grant County Co-Operative Co. stock	12,000
Insurance	2,000
Odd Fellows' building, two story brick	2,000
(damaged)	1,000
George V. Hiekkok, stock (insured)	500
J. L. Brady (insurance stock)	10,000
Dr. J. E. Heraty, office furniture etc. (insured)	200
Miscellaneous damage—broken windows across street etc.	500
Total	\$25,000

It is impossible to estimate the damage on the Greer and Ludden stocks. All the insurance losses in the village companies were adjusted Friday and Saturday by Mr. W. H. Rothermel, representing the Western Adjustment Co., of Chicago, and the losses in the various mutual companies have been adjusted since. Satisfactory settlements were made in all cases.

J. B. Gilligan sustained a loss of about \$100 for palls, rope, and other articles obtained from his store for use in fighting the fire. Of course they were not paid for, and it is hardly likely that the loss will be paid by the insurance companies, but we understand that Mr. Gilligan will be reimbursed by those whose losses were covered by insurance.

It is thought likely that both buildings will be rebuilt in the course of a few months.

FIRE NOTES.

J. B. Ludden was absent from town during the fire but his property was well taken care of just the same. It was surely remarkable to see how hard a number of the ladies worked, many of them doing more than some of the men.

Most people have been looking after their insurance policies and seeing that they were all straight and correct since the fire.

We had ordered a picture of the fire to print in this paper but for some reason it failed to arrive. It will probably appear next week.

Just as the fire began to subside a light breeze sprang up and continued to blow harder and harder all day. The dead calm during the fire was certainly fortunate.

The assistance of the people from Patch Grove and the surrounding country was greatly appreciated. Many neighboring farmers were on the scene before some town people and did a great deal of fire fighting.

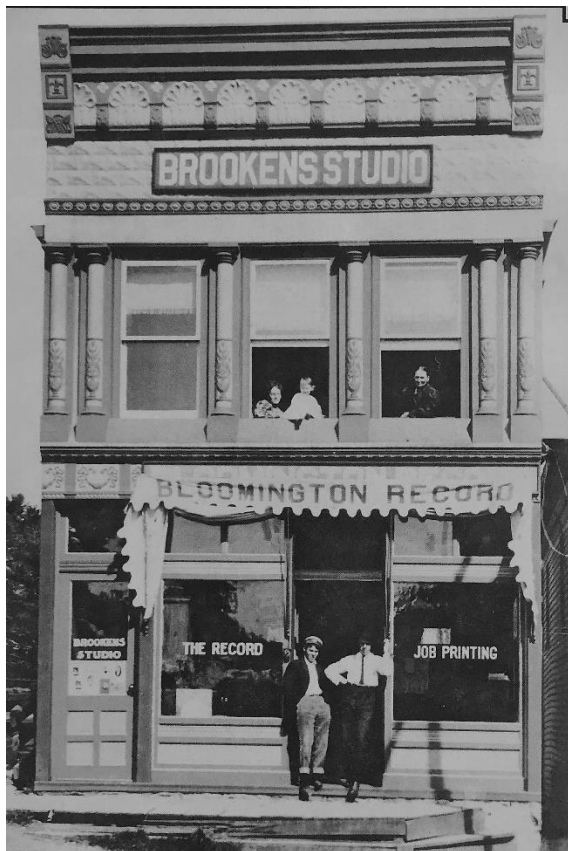
One amusing circumstance that everybody noticed was the difference in the quantity of hair worn by many of the ladies present when the fire first was discovered and later in the morning when they had been home and had then come down town again to take another look at the destroyed property.

It is no use to say that the fire was put out as it simply went out of its own accord. Of course the Odd Fellows' building was saved with the limited facilities at hand, but that was due to sheer luck as much as anything else. When the blaze was at the highest point a good many people who know what a waterworks system would accomplish were praying for just one stream of water with reasonable force behind it, as the danger would have been over in no time had it been at hand. We understand that there were some pretty warm arguments between a few people who have always favored fire protection and others who have always opposed it during and immediately after the fire.

The stock from the Greer store was put in the library room and the Sprague building and is now being arranged in the store again. Ludden's stock, which was moved across the street during the fire, was carried back to the store again as soon as the danger was over and a force of fifteen people succeeded in getting it properly arranged again by Monday. G. V. Hiekkok's goods and the furniture, books, medicines etc. in Dr. Heraty's office were also moved across the street and carried back after the fire was out. Dr. Heraty's stock of drugs and medicines was in great shape. A number of bottles were broken, tablets, capsules etc. all mixed together, and general confusion reigned. All are straightened out again now, however.

On February 24, 1915, there was another big fire. The Groom Store (old D. F. Brown building), and Frazier's Store and Dr. Glasier's office and residence burned. An estimated \$100 damage was

done to the library building (the old bank), but I was relieved that most of the books survived. Finally on November 15, 1916, a fire company was organized with J. B. Gilligan as the chief.



The first newspaper in the village was the *West Grant Advocate* started in 1873 by C. N. Holford. That same year the paper moved to Lancaster and continued as the *Grant County Advocate*. The *Bloomington Record* was started in 1880 and sold the next year to Holford who continued publishing. The photo above was the old *Bloomington Record* office, and the 1902 ornate building in the photo to the left was the new home of the *Record*. The upper floor was the Brookens photography studio. Brookens was a long-time photographer in the village. In 1881 Mary Saggio wrote:

"The Bloomington Record newspaper printed its initial press run July 15, 1880, with Mr. C. J. Glasier being the editor and proprietor. The paper was issued as an eight-column folio, which size it has since retained. Mr. Glasier has served his time at the "case," and for a time, with his sister, had charge of the *Richland Observer*. By perseverance and good management, he has placed the *Record* upon a stable footing, and, although a

comparatively new venture, it has evidently 'come to stay.' The *Record* is conservatively Republican in politics and furnishes for the citizens of Blake's Prairie just what they need in the shape of a bright local paper."

As I came to know the volunteer librarians over the years and they understood my interest in history, they began to save amusing or interesting notices from old copies of the *Bloomington Record* newspapers to show to me, like these:

- August 21, 1873 "Since the opening of the track on the fairgrounds between Canal Street and the creek, nearly every one that owns a horse thinks he is fast, and from early morn until late at night the sound of horses' hoofs are heard. One fellow was cleaned out of a horse and twenty dollars in short metre yesterday."
- February 7, 1878 "The floor collapses in Jesse Brooks' office during a trial."
- November 4, 1880 "There was an incorporation election for the Village of Bloomington: 82 YES and 20 NO."
- September 20, 1883 "Young English (house) sparrows are first brought to Bloomington by a resident who was visiting in Chicago."
- November 4, 1897 "Little boys are warned against shaking the foot bridge across the hollow to Brooklyn. The bridge cost several hundred dollars. The authorities have an eye on said boys."
- March 14, 1901 There is an article about a play presented in D. F. Brown's hall in the 1870s when the villain was supposed to be hanged and almost was really hanged.
- February 19, 1903 "The Village Marshall will kill all unlicensed dogs running at large in the village by order of the village board."
- November 5, 1903 "The bowling alley in the basement of the Ballantine building is to open on November 14. It is a double Brunswick alley. The alley existed on and off until October of 1906 when Fred Riese purchased the rear part of the building which housed the bowling alley and moved it onto his premises to use for a paint shed. The alley was taken apart and stored."
- November 3, 1904 "There was a pigeon shoot on the flat south of town on Tuesday. A number of sportsmen were here from neighboring towns."
- March 2, 1905 "The Calaboose (jail) was repaired by Marshal Hinch and is now warranted burglar proof."
- July 6, 1905 "A Petition was circulated in Brooklyn last week and signed by a number living near the village stone quarry asking the village board to stop the blasting there on the ground that the small pieces of flying rock after each blast made it dangerous for those living near the quarry."
- August 2, 1906 "The Bloomington School for the Deaf is a room in the primary building. It is very unusual for a village as small as Bloomington to offer this special class. The state provided the instructor and the funding."
- January 9, 1908 "The Salmagundi Club, a Bloomington federated women's club formed in 1901, petitions the village board to make an appropriation for the establishment of a free (public) library in Bloomington."
- April 8, 1909 "THE VILLAGE VOTES TO GO DRY."

- July 8, 1909 “3000 people came to hear William Jennings Bryan (an orator and statesman who ran as a presidential candidate three times) speak at the fairgrounds on July 5.”
- November 4, 1909 “An ordinance is being drafted for a speed limit of 6 miles per hour for automobiles in the village because of many accidents caused by frightened horses.”
- November 16, 1910 “A close call for Ora Hatch. The steam boiler on Hatch’s popcorn machine explodes and could have killed Hatch if he had been in the wrong location at the time.”



Post Office

As we have seen, the first post office in Tafton/Bloomington was established in 1855. By 1910 the men jokingly referred to the post office as “an early women’s lib enterprise” because the “ladies were in charge there.” Mrs. Elizabeth Nevins was Post-Mistress and Miss Cornelia Witcomb was her assistant.” Men were the rural mail carriers. On May 28, 1913, A. C. Bishop, the Bloomington Record publisher, became the postmaster. Some of the earliest commercial enterprises in Bloomington were Greer’s, D. F. Brown, and Ludden’s. The photo below, taken about 1900, shows the Greer family, who were long prominent in retailing in the village and who were famous for their slogan “If it’s from Greer’s – It’s Good.”



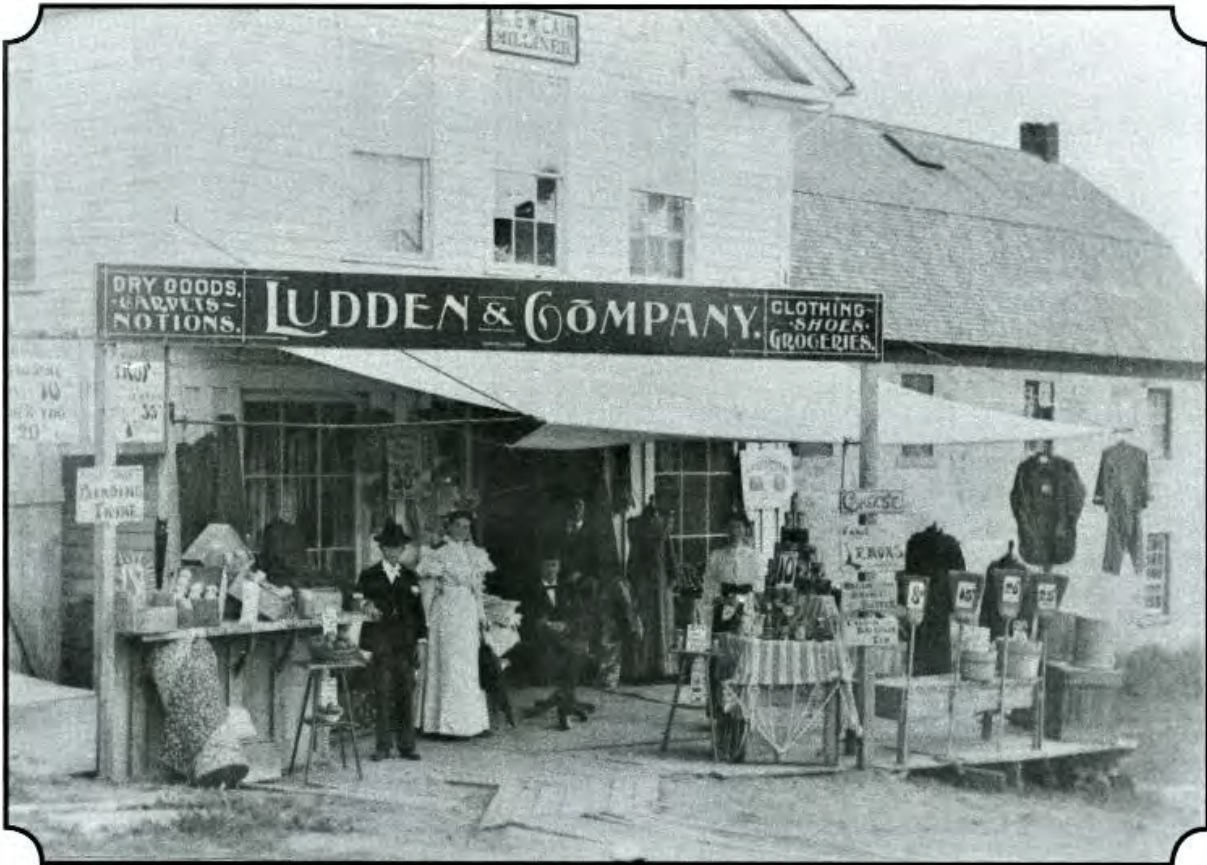
If It's From Greers—It's Good



The D. F. Brown general store was located in the substantial stone building shown above and in the photo below left. It was destroyed by fire in 1915. The original Woodhouse & Bartley Bank building is visible on the right. The photo below right, taken about 1895, shows the original J.B. Ludden & Company store prior to its destruction in the fire of 1897. The advertising signs suggest the wide variety of merchandise available in early “General Stores.” Patriotic bunting decorates the building for the Champion Sale “held during the fair.”



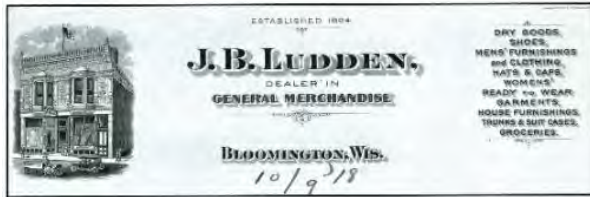
Ludden's Store (circa 1895)



Ballantine Building



The Ballantine Building was built in 1857 and used by a variety of businesses including Bloomington's bowling alley. In the photo above, taken after the fire of 1897, it had become the temporary quarters of the Ludden & Company store. The building adjacent on the right is the Taft's Mill. Cement sidewalks had not yet replaced the original boardwalk. The photo to the left shows the new Ludden's Big White Store, which was a prominent Main Street building from the early 1900s. Window displays of the time featured ladies clothing. Ludden's was destroyed by fire in 1934 and replaced by the current Municipal Building/Library.



The Brodt Brothers Jewelers was a prominent business in the early 1900s. Run by Marshall and Ora Brodt, brothers and business partners, it was known for its quality merchandise. The clocks and hanging lamps on display are interesting. The store was later taken over by Frank Riese, photo below, who offered fine china, displayed on the right, as well as jewelry. The large wood stove provided heat.



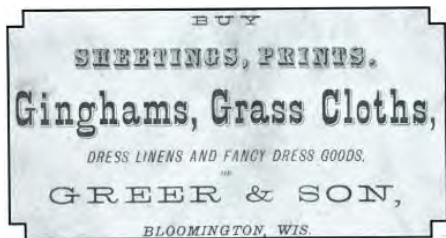
Riese Jewelry Store



Greer's Store



Greer's Store was in operation since 1871 and a long-lasting pillar in the commercial life of Bloomington. It was one of my favorite shops in the later years because they featured a good variety of merchandise.





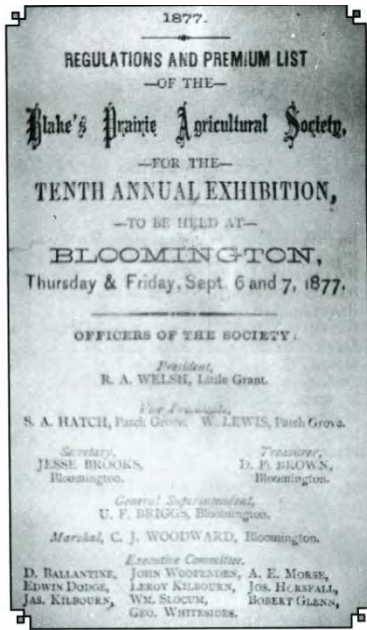




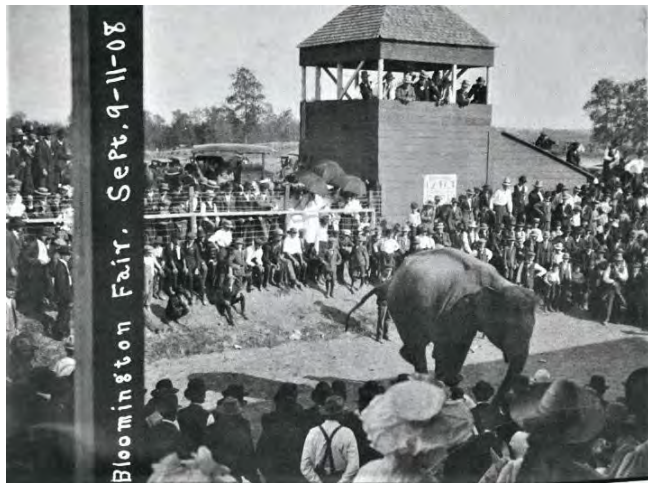
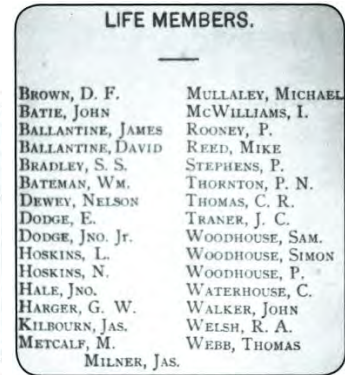
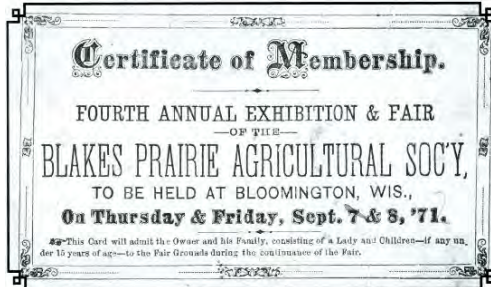
Congress Street was one of the earliest residential streets in Bloomington. These early 1900s photos show the intersection of Congress and 4th Streets. Like many Midwestern towns, Bloomington's streets were lined with elm trees, in this case newly planted. Although cement sidewalks had been poured, the street remained unpaved. The two large homes on the right were built by the Ludden family and remain in good condition.



In this photo a crowd is gathered on Main Street to see the results of the fire of 1910. Display cases still filled with merchandise are in the street. The fire started in the Grange building, which was destroyed as was the saloon next door. There must have been some devout temperance advocates who saw the fire as God's approval of the 1909 vote to go dry, and a warning of what might happen to those who failed to abide by the ordinance!



Probably one of the most enduring Bloomington assets is the Blake's Prairie Fair, organized in 1868 as the Blake's Prairie Agricultural Society. The first fair was held that year and an annual membership was \$1.00 with a lifetime membership of \$10. The first fairground was on the bottom between Canal Street and the bluff, and in 1887 was moved to a 15-acre site about one-half mile north, but still in the village, where the fair is still held annually.



Ora Hatch in 1908 on an Elephant on Main Street

The Blake's Prairie Fair of September 1908 was special in several regards. Ora Hatch had brought an elephant to town, borrowed from the Ringling Bros. Circus in Baraboo. Here a large crowd watches the elephant perform in front of the grandstand. "Tug of War", photo below, was a very popular competition sport in the early days of the Blake's Prairie Fair. There were organized leagues much like today's men's, women's and mixed softball and volleyball teams, and they competed on a regular basis.



But the most memorable event at the fairgrounds in 1908 was the appearance by Presidential Candidate William Jennings Bryan who campaigned on July 9, 1909, at the Blake's Prairie Fairgrounds. A souvenir postcard was issued inviting people to attend, and over 3000 people did attend.

