ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Vignettes of Historic La Crosse

By

Myer Katz

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This book is dedicated with love to

My Brother

SAM B. KATZ

whose altruism and compassion for all people are unparalleled! Words are inadequate to properly describe his goodness to me.

* * * * * *

And to his elegant wife, LINDA, whose outer loveliness is matched only by her inner beauty.

* * * * * *

"Surely God smiled warmly upon me when he let me be Sam’s brother."

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And to the many individuals who shared with me their knowledge, reminiscences and thoughts about local and state history, I proffer my heartfelt thanks.

Most of the photographs in this book are from my personal collections. Some, however, have been reproduced from photographs on file in the Area Research Center, University of Wisconsin, La Crosse. I am grateful for their courtesy in permitting me to use them.

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Foreword

This book is intended for the reading enjoyment of local history buffs. These stories have been carefully researched insofar as recorded materials were available to the author. Each tale is an independent unit and may be read out of context of the others, except when a series on a single subject is approached, yet all are inextricably joined into a cohesive feature. After all, together they relate to La Crosse history. Though I have written nearly two hundred articles on the city's past, some of them published in abridged form in the La Crosse Tribune, I have selected for this book those I felt would appeal most to my readers. Those who would seek an index to this book will find this amenity lacking. Since this is a compilation of historic narratives rather than a stark factual record of local history, an index would serve no real purpose.

M. K.
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Preface

Most of us find delving into our familial roots an intriguing pursuit. Equally fascinating is the examination of our city’s history, which is in essence its genealogy. Yet history, like genealogy, becomes a weary quest if it encompasses merely a monotonous recitation of dates and events. To understand and appreciate our past, we must transform its inhabitants into living and breathing beings who possess the same virtues and failings as we. Each of us, past and present, has contributed his or her personal share to form the total mosaic of our community. Indeed, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19th century American philosopher and essayist, said it best when he wrote, “There is properly no history, only biography.”

Thus, the history of La Crosse becomes a distillation of the lives of its people. Their hopes and dreams, successes and failures, joys and sorrows, expectations and disappointments — all are a composite of our city’s genealogy.

Despite progress and innovations, basic human concepts remain the same today as they were a century ago. Customs and habits tend to stay constant — our ancestors were not much different than we. Whatever their natural bent, people continue unchanged through generational changes.

There is an indefinable magical power in our past which, if we but try, can be released in words and present us with an understanding of our origins and their relevance to the present. This is the quintessence of what I have tried to do in writing these stories of our progenitors. These tales are historically authentic, told in narrative form, to render them more palatable to the reader.

The physiographic character of the La Crosse area also played a significant role in creating the city’s demographic personality.

Strategically located between the mighty Mississippi River on the west and the majestic bluffs on the east, La Crosse offered an unparal-
leled haven for the many escaping European immigrants in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848. Originally, the land was inhabited for many centuries by primitive Indians, explored by French Jesuits in the 17th century, but as white men settled here, its character changed drastically, though the settlers, as people, stayed essentially the same.

The lush pineries bordering the Black River gave birth to the lumbering and milling industries, which in turn fostered river transportation; together they became the life's blood of the burgeoning community. Situated at the confluence of three rivers with a fourth emanating from the west, the city became a significant water transport base. With the advent of the railroad in 1858, river transportation waned and the city became an important railway center. Lumbering too languished and by the turn of the century became almost non-existent.

The arid prairie between the river and the bluffs presented a challenge to the early settlers to build homes for themselves and to develop a prosperous and cooperative community beneficial to all.

Nathan Myrick, the first white settler, came here in 1842 and built his log cabin and trading post at the foot of State Street. In 1845 there were but 18 persons in La Crosse; less than a decade later, the population had increased to 745; today La Crosse is a thriving city of more than 50,000 souls.

The city was first populated mainly by Norwegians and Germans, but soon offered asylum for many other ethnic newcomers, all working together to form a viable and productive society, economically and culturally. Minorities were welcomed in the true American spirit and La Crosse became a sanctuary for many displaced persons, even to this day.

As a godly community, almost every religion is represented in La Crosse — Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Jewish, Mormon, and a host of others — each practicing its own faith freely, without molestation and almost free from prejudice.

The importance of education has always been foremost on the city’s agenda of priorities, developing from a one-room school, teaching only the fundamental learning concepts necessary for survival in a competitive society, to a complex educational system, public and parochial, proffering every conceivable subject to anyone who chooses to study. The first college opened its doors here in 1909; today
the city has three college-level schools. La Crosse also has one of the finest library systems in the nation, as well as superb cultural programs.

Located as it is, the city of La Crosse is a place of great natural beauty that invites excellent recreational facilities and indeed has become an enticing tourist attraction. The original arid prairie has evolved into a verdant city of quiet, tree-lined streets with attractive comfortable homes, inhabited by industrious and vibrant citizens. La Crosse has ever been a mecca for the ill and today boasts two of the finest medical facilities in the country, with splendid clinics and hospitals. The city is replete with industries of almost every kind, but is especially known for the manufacture of heating and cooling equipment and the brewing of fine beers.

Though the city has its share of urban problems, mainly well-adjusted and happy citizens live here in security and contentment — people who truly consider La Crosse "God's Country."

History is, in essence, but the endless ebb and flow of humanity. Our local ancesters, followed by their descendants of the present, have given us the dynamic city we inhabit today.

La Crosse, Wisconsin
May 1, 1985

Myer Katz
“Let Them Eat Grass” 1.

Ever since the advent of the white man on American shores, the native Indian has been subjected to unwarranted discrimination and mistreatment. He has been neglected and denied his legal rights and human prerogatives. He has been aided and abetted in his weakness for intoxicating drink so that it has been easy to prey upon him. Surely, this indifference, indeed this exploitation of the American Indian, triggered much misunderstanding and bloody conflict in our history. It has been only within relatively recent times that the Indian has been accorded some semblance of the human dignity and economic independence he deserves and has the right to expect. But there is still a long road to travel until he has attained full equality with his American counterparts.

One of the most costly of American wars, in terms of loss of human life and destruction of property, was the Sioux Uprising of 1862, also known as the Dakota or Sioux War. More than 500 white settlers and soldiers were slain, to say nothing of the carnage inflicted upon the Indians. The redman employed his unique methods of torture and ultimate death upon the captured white man, while the latter used war weapons to which not all Indians were privy. The Indian uprising inaugurated a series of Indian wars that terminated only with the Battle of Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1890.

The name Dakota means “friend” while the name Sioux means “snake.” Despite this contradiction in terms, the Sioux were part of the Dakota tribe. The Sioux were constantly battling with other Indian tribes as far back as the 17th century, and when the white man settled in his lands wars ensued. The Sioux uprising in Minnesota was merely a continuation of this long series of conflicts.

Two treaties during the 19th century diminished the area of Sioux territory. In July 1851, under pressure, coercion and threats, the Upper Sioux finally ceded to the United States their lands in southern and western Minnesota Territory for $1,665,000. The following month, the Lower Sioux were convinced to cede most of the area they owned in southeastern Minnesota for $1,410,000. Though this was a great deal of money in those days, the Indians had in effect sold their dignity and birthright. These two treaties brought to the United States Government nearly 24,000,000 acres of rich farm land, which in 1854 was opened to the white men for settlement, an opportunity of which they promptly took advantage.
The government arranged two reservations consisting of some 2,800 square miles, and on these the approximately 7,000 Indians in the area were settled. On these reservations the United States Government installed the Upper and Lower Indian agencies from which they administered Indian affairs and from which annuity payments were made.

Many Indians, and indeed some white men as well, felt that they had been bilked by the American government, and had been coerced into signing papers which they did not understand and which had not been properly explained to them.

By 1857, the white man had encroached upon the remnants of Indian-held land and insisted upon absorbing even more of it. Thinking in terms of increased annuities, several Sioux chiefs ceded another million acres of their lands for which the United States Government agreed to pay them the paltry sum of thirty cents an acre.

Several incidents that occurred were forerunners that pointed almost certainly to the Sioux uprising in August 1862. Prominent among other reasons was the late arrival of the Indians' cash annuities and goods promised. These were due between the end of June and the middle of July. But Congress was slow in appropriating the funds and later the United States Treasury wasted yet another month discussing whether the annuities were to be paid in paper currency or in gold. Finally, the $71,000 due (about $10.00 per person) arrived on August 16th, nearly two months late. During the interim period the Indians had little food and even less money with which to purchase staples.

In the middle of July, 5,000 hungry Indians gathered at the Upper Sioux Agency and demanded food that was stored in government warehouses. Reluctantly, American authorities distributed a minimal amount of provisions. These were soon consumed and two weeks later, the first week in August, 500 Sioux braves broke into one of the warehouses and helped themselves to food and other necessities to which they felt entitled. Though a unit of United States Army soldiers were on guard, theoretically to protect the storehouses from looting, they were obviously derelict in their duty. Faced with the threat of further theft of supplies, the government was persuaded to apportion additional goods and the Indians left without further violence.
At the Lower Sioux Agency the Indians had received some prov­ender in early June with a promise of more shortly. This promise was not kept. The Sioux then demanded credit at trading posts, but this too was refused by the American authorities. This flagrant rejection of their just and legal rights, a violation of decency and humanity, aroused the ire of the Indians.

One of the storekeepers at the Indian Agency was Andrew Jackson Myrick, brother of Nathan Myrick, the first white settler in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and known as the founder of the city. Nathan and Andrew were the sons of Barnabas and Lovina Bigelow Myrick of Westport, New York. In the fall of 1841, at the age of 19, Nathan traveled west and settled on the west bank of the Mississippi River, the area known as Barron’s Island. The following spring he crossed the river and built the first log cabin near the present site of Spence Park at the foot of State Street in La Crosse. Just to the north of his home he established the first trading post in the village. Nathan remained in La Crosse for seven years and in 1849 moved to St. Paul. Spence Park was designated an official Wisconsin State Historic Site in 1978.

Another Nathan Myrick, a great-grand-nephew of the original Nathan, today lives in Pembina, North Dakota. Andrew Myrick
married a Sioux Indian woman; this marriage produced two daughters. The younger girl was only seven months old when the Americans captured mother and daughters, along with other Sioux Indians, and imprisoned them in the army fort stockade. After her release the child grew up in South Dakota and married the Reverend Samuel D. Hinman, a young Episcopalian priest who lived with the Sioux and championed their cause. To this union was born a daughter Mary Myrick Hinman in 1889. When she was grown, she married a man named La Croix. Today, (1984) at the age of 95, Mary Myrick Hinman lives in Rapid City, South Dakota, still a vigorous youthful woman. Her son, Arthur La Croix, became mayor of Rapid City, South Dakota. Mrs. La Croix is probably the only living person who remembers Nathan Myrick. Her great-grand-uncle, Andrew Myrick, died nearly thirty years before her birth.

Andrew and Nathan operated an Indian trading post at the Sioux Agency. Andrew was the most hated trader by the Indians for he was a hard-hearted and selfish man. When the Indians complained that they did not have enough to eat and that their annuities had not arrived, that their children were starving and needed clothes, the cruel and insensitive Andrew refused to extend credit to them. Instead, he coldly and callously said, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass." This was the ultimate cruelty, the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. The Indians did not forget it and vowed vengeance.

On August 17, 1862 four Indians killed five white people at Acton in Meeker County, Minnesota in retribution. The fact that two of the dead were women aggravated the situation, and the exquisite tortures employed by the Indians prior to killing their victims aroused great furor.

The Indian chiefs met in council where emotions ran high and the decision was made to wage war on the white man. At dawn on August 18, 1862, armed Sioux braves launched an all-out attack on the Lower Agency.

The first white man to fall dead was James W. Lynd, a former Minnesota state senator, who was at the time a clerk at the Nathan and Andrew Myrick trading post. Lynd had married a Sioux woman and had two children by her. A few months prior to the uprising, Lynd deserted his wife and children and ran off with a beautiful young Indian girl. It was later surmised that his first wife's relatives had taken this opportunity to punish and kill him because of his infidelity and desertion of his family.
Andrew Myrick, now well aware of the ferocious anger of the Indians and that his own death was imminent, tried to escape by jumping through a second-story window at the back of his store and ran for cover in the nearby woods. Before he could reach safety, the Indians caught and killed him on the spot.

They then stuffed his mouth full of grass in retaliation for his insensitive remark "If they are hungry, let them eat grass."

A few days later, a group of white men scouting the area found several corpses of white men and buried them. Among the scouts was Nathan Myrick who found the body of his brother Andrew, his mouth filled with grass. Nathan buried Andrew and then returned to Fort Ridgely.

The war continued unabated far into October 1862. The Sioux were outnumbered and out-maneuvered in battle action by the white United States Army. Eventually, the Indians were forced to surrender and nearly 2,000 were taken captive and subsequently placed on trial. Unhappily, the trials were conducted by a military tribunal rather than by a civil court of law which resulted in much stricter sentences for the Sioux. More than 300 Indians were sentenced to death; the other 1,700 were sent to prison at Fort Snelling.

On the forced march to the fort, outraged white citizens gathered along the way and, intent upon revenge for deaths to their compatriots and relatives, attacked the Indians. The army drove them back, not as protection for the Indians, but rather because they wished to have the satisfaction of carrying out their own vengeance.

The entire matter was referred for final decision to President Abraham Lincoln. After due consideration, the President approved death sentences for 39 of the condemned Sioux. They were hanged on December 26, 1862 and buried in a common grave.

That same night, a group of physicians who were eager to obtain cadavers for anatomical study, dug up and confiscated the bodies. Among them was Dr. William Mayo, father of the two physicians who started the famous Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

In February 1863, the United States Congress passed an act banishing all Sioux and Winnebago Indians from Minnesota Territory. They were relocated on the Missouri River in Dakota Territory, but in later years, driven by superstition and love for their original root sites, a great many of them returned to their former grounds.
2. The Pictured Cave of Barre Mills

From prehistoric times to the present day man has been fascinated by caves. Ancient man needed them as a home, a dwelling place to raise his family and as a storage place for food and his primitive belongings. Caves were a refuge from his enemies and from the elements of the weather. Caverns have been romanticized by poets and dramatized by authors. Man has always been beguiled by the unknown, and aside from the practical utilization of caves by our primogenitors, our more recent forebears have wanted to solve the mysteries of caves and so have explored their depths. Perhaps some even dreamed of discovering untold treasures buried and hidden in caves many centuries ago. Indeed, during World War Two some European nations secreted their greatest art treasures in caves to prevent them from becoming the spoils of war. In addition to providing excellent hiding places, the constant temperature and humidity of caves the year round made these desirable places of concealment for works of art. During recent war times caves also served as air raid shelters. In earlier days they were often used as religious temples and monasteries.

Speleology is the scientific exploration, study, and conservation of caves and those who are dedicated to this study are known as spelunkers. In 1941 the National Speleological Society was organized to explore, map, and disseminate knowledge about caves. One of the speleologist’s prime objectives is the understanding of the natural forces that have acted in the origin and development of caves and cave life. Geological and biological phenomena found in caves are completely unlike those above ground and scientists in all related fields of study have cooperated to gain and share knowledge of these subterranean areas.

It has been estimated that there are some 50,000 caves in the United States, yet less than 6,000 have been discovered and named. The greatest cave regions that we presently know of are mostly in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. There are at least 1,000 caves between Pennsylvania and Alabama, and a great many occur in the mountainous areas of Arkansas and Texas.

Generally, caves are formed by the very gradual action of water upon stone, usually limestone. Rain water erosion upon such calcareous soluble rock fashions most caves. The constant beating of sea
waves against cliffs through countless years forms sea caves, while lava caves are created by the action of fresh molten rock flowing out through ruptures in solid volcanic crusts. Fault caves have been formed primarily in glaciated areas. Preceding the advent of the prehistoric glacier, water filled cracks in the earth and as the glacier progressed this water froze; the expanded ice in turn caused enlargement of these cavities. When the glacier receded, the ice turned back into water which ran off, leaving the large cavities or faults in the earth.

Our coulee region, known as the Driftless Area because it was untouched by glaciers, is said to abound with caves because this phenomenon did not occur here. This theory, however, presents a moot question and as many geologists and physiographists dispute this idea as those who avow its truth. We know though that caves in unglaciated areas are quite common as most caves are formed in the limestone which is plentiful here. Over thousands of years some of this limestone became solution and ran off as the water level dropped, thus creating most of the caves as we know them here today. It is safe to say that whether a specific area has been glaciated or not has little to do with the development of caves.

In modern times spelunkers have explored caves for scientific reasons — to determine their origin and formation, their relationship to other natural phenomena and especially their usefulness to man. Biologists have been interested to find that in this world without light there are many species of life — flora and fauna that have adapted to their special environment. Much has been learned about very early man in North America from fossils and other remains in caves, especially in southwestern United States.

Cave art — usually engravings, paintings, and bas-reliefs on the walls and ceilings of caves — has given us an insight into the lives of our ancestors. Often this art takes the form of geometric patterns, but the majority are subjects like wild animals, particularly game animals such as bison and elk, but fish, bird, and plant representations are also found. Frequently there are shown people in action — dancing, hunting, and the like. Carvings on rock are known as petroglyphs; paintings or drawings on rock are called pictographs; petrographs include both. Some men have been interested in exploiting caves only for commercial purposes. Many spelunkers have braved great danger to find the answers to the secrets of caves. Yet speleology as a true science today still remains in its infancy.
The Wisconsin Speleological Society, a grotto or branch of the National Speleological Society, and intimately associated with the United States Geological Survey, lists only eight known caves for La Crosse County, but for reasons of conservation and protection of the caves and the owners' properties, as well as for the safety of those who might seek them out, the exact locations of these caves are not revealed to the public.

In the La Crosse area no cave has engendered more interest for more than a century than that evidenced in the Pictured Cave near Barre Mills in La Crosse County. The vandalism and deliberate destruction perpetrated upon this cave through the years is sufficient testimony to justify the withholding of locales of other caves. Yet the history of the Pictured Cave presents an intriguing tale with its final chapter still unwritten.

In October 1878, Frank Samuel, 18-year-old son of David Samuel, set a trap for raccoons at a large hole in a hill on his father's farm. He found that by squeezing himself into this hole he could get into the aperture which had been dug by wild animals through a landslide. He crawled in and found himself in a large cavern. Later he with his two brothers and a friend got lanterns and explored the cave. They found the walls covered with pictures and figures and charcoal drawings carved into the walls. It soon became a rendezvous for young people and they built fires and had picnics there.

In June 1879 the discovery of the cave came to the attention of Rev. Edward Brown, who inspected it for the Wisconsin State Historical Society. He found the cave opening now large and easily entered. It was very cool and its ceiling was high, nearly 13 feet in some spots. Though the entrance was wide, it narrowed as he went further into the cave. At the end, his way was blocked by sandstone walls, and only a small tunnel, probably an animal burrow, went further. Rev. Brown concluded that a thorough examination and evaluation of the cave could shed much light upon the prehistoric aborigines of this area as evidenced from the wall petroglyphs.

Prof. John A. Rice, a state archaeologist, examined the cave the following year, again on behalf of the State Historical Society. It was his contention that originally the cave was an enlarged fissure in the soft Potsdam sandstone. This cleft was situated near the edge of a small marsh, surrounded on all sides, except the north, by a high ridge of this sandstone. The original opening was near the level of the
The Pictured Cave of Barre Mills

marsh and about 15 feet wide. Actually it was a rock shelter with a western exposure. At the time of its discovery the roof was an irregular arch extending some thirty feet back and about eight feet high, above several feet of layered sand and ashes.

The most interesting fact in connection with the cave discovery to Rev. Brown and Prof. Rice was the finding of the carvings and drawings on the walls of the cave. They were of particular significance because, according to state archaeologists, there was little evidence of cave-writings among Indians anywhere in Wisconsin. One method of establishing a relationship between the petrographs and early Indian tribes was by comparing the art styles. The few carvings and drawings found in other Wisconsin caves known to have been used by Sioux Indians bear a striking resemblance to those found in Pictured Cave, not only in their art style but in subject matter as well. The pictures and various characters seem to indicate that they were intended to be historical rather than engraved and drawn for amusement.

There were representations of buffalo, bison, elk, lynx, otter, rabbit, badger, heron and other birds, a man with plumes or feathers, probably an Indian chief. The pictures were of the crudest kind with no regard for relative or comparative size or perspective. From these pictographs was born the name Pictured Cave. Later it was variously called Samuel's Cave, Brown's Cave, Mystery Cave, and Swamp Road Cave.

Rev. Brown took measures to stop the vandalism, then enlarged the opening and cleared out the sand that had washed in from the landslide and half filled the cave. He made facsimilies of the carvings by pressing thin paper over them and carefully following each line with black crayon, thus obtaining perfect outlines; then by placing other sheets over these in the light of a window pane, made copies that showed the pictures in their original form and size. A set of these representations were sent to Prof. Chamberlain, Wisconsin's state geologist, and to Lyman C. Draper, secretary of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, for examination. Mr. Draper called in Dr. Rice (of Merton, Waukesha County) and Rockwell Sayer, a Chicago scientist. A group of 17 men then went to the cave with the necessary tools for exploration. The layers of sand were carefully removed and wheeled out into the open and each load was carefully inspected by experienced geologists. This examination revealed four alternate layers of
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Probably a bison or buffalo, 19"x15½"

Wounded animal with arrow or weapon near the wound, 22"x9"

Hunter with boy behind him, in act of shooting animal with bow and arrow, 25"x12"

Indian chief with 8 plumes and war club, 11"x7"

Heron, 17"x4"

Drawings Found on Walls of Pictured Cave
ashes, each four to six inches deep, containing charcoal and burned vitrified sandstone. The layers were separated from each other throughout the entire length and width of the cave by tiers of clean white sand, ten to fourteen inches deep. These strata were considered obvious testimony of four different periods of occupation with considerable intervals of time between them. Below this was water on the same level as the marsh that lay in front of the cliffs.

The lowest layer of sand and ashes contained nothing; in the second layer were found plain potsherds of clay and ground shells. In the third layer were discovered decorated pottery and many pieces of river bivalve shells as well as a piece of bone seven inches long. This bone, said to be from an elk, was sharp and smooth, obviously from use as a tool, and perfectly preserved. All four layers were compact and well stratified and all contained fragments of charcoal. In the topmost layer were found bones of birds and small animals, the claw of a deer and part of the bony structure of a reptile. The scientists concluded that the first occupation of the cave was very ancient and the most recent occupation probably had occurred more than 250 years ago as indicated by the growth of trees upon the landslide which closed the front of the cave. The antiquity of the petrographs have been variously estimated today to be from 400 to 900 years old. The cave was characteristic of the early occupation of the Indians, undoubtedly the Sioux of the La Crosse area.

Judging from their height upon the walls the drawings were from the third or fourth period of occupation. The fact that portions of the rock had scaled off and were buried in the sand layers would similarly suggest these periods.

In August 1888, a Dr. Hoffman, also with the State Historical Society, visited the cave and found many of the figures partially obliterated, due primarily to erosion and disintegration of the soft sandstone upon which they were drawn or carved. The inscription of names and dates of a more recent time and various symbols by visitors, the smoke of fires, and other kinds of vandalism, had rendered the cave nearly worthless.

The intervening years between Dr. Hoffman's visit and the present time have taken additional toll due to natural deterioration and to irresponsible human carelessness and vandalism. The cave is no longer accessible nor safe for explorers, and spelunkers today would find Pictured Cave disappointing despite its original fascination.
It should be pointed out to would-be visitors to the cave that it has been privately owned from the time of its discovery in 1878 until today. Among its owners have been David Samuel, William Stratman, the Bruemmer family, Gust Horman, Otto Leiske, and until recently, Conrad Nehls. It is today owned by a real estate developer who has no special plans for its exploitation. Entrance into the cave without permission would be interpreted as trespassing. Would-be curiosity seekers and investigators are cautioned against such trespass because of the dangers involved and because they would be subject to prosecution for invasion of private property. A few years ago a group of young people were apprehended smoking and storing marijuana in the cave area; since then it has been under constant surveillance by police authorities.

Some speleologists and archaeologists seem to feel that further and thorough exploration of the cave may be justified and are hopeful that additional passages and caverns may be discovered. This, they contend, would shed additional light on the origins of very early man in our country and particularly in this area. Others are less optimistic. It is nevertheless to be hoped that some day state speleologists, geologists, and archaeologists will pool their talents and undertake at least partial restoration and management of this cave.

It could prove to be of inestimable anthropological value.
Throughout its history, La Crosse has had its share of homicides — some sensational and scandalous, others undistinguished and of no great importance. In 1852, the city only a decade old and with a population of 745, citizens were rocked by a violent killing, a gory affair, deliberate and cold-blooded.

David Darst came to La Crosse from Galena, Illinois to settle in Mormon Coulee in 1851, where he built a log cabin, obtained a yoke of oxen and began farming. In the spring of 1852 a former friend of his, William Watts, came to visit and remained for several weeks. On June 3, 1852, the two men got into an argument and fought viciously, after which the enraged Watts, seeking an opportunity, maliciously and deliberately murdered Darst and stole all his belongings and money. He stripped the body of its clothing and hid it in the brush. He then dressed in Darst's clothing, yoked Darst's oxen and came into the village of La Crosse to sell his ill-gotten loot. A short time thereafter, a Mr. Merriman was riding his horse in the Coulee with his dog trotting alongside. The dog scented the decomposing body and led his master to it. He found a revolting sight — Darst's head had been crushed and his throat slit.

Merriman carried the information to the village where a great commotion ensued among the incensed citizens. While the tumult about the murder was going on in the village, Watts visited a saloon, became intoxicated, and boasted of having committed the killing. He was promptly taken into custody and forced to view the battered remains of his former friend and during the funeral was compelled to stand next to the coffin. He evidenced no emotion or regret. Several men in attendance at the funeral had concealed ropes on their persons and planned to lynch Watts immediately after the services. Elder John Sherwin, one of the founders of the local Congregational Church, learned of their plan and persuaded them to let the law take its course and not disgrace the community with an act of mob violence.

La Crosse had no jail at the time, so Watts was chained and locked in the basement of a building owned by a Col. Childs on Pearl Street between Second and Third. The ceiling of this temporary jail was constructed of joists fastened together; the area immediately above it was filled with a heavy layer of broken rocks. Had a prisoner tried to
drill through the ceiling he would have been inundated with stones. Instead, Watts dug through the foundation walls and escaped, but two days later a group of boys discovered Watts hiding behind Deacon Smith's store on Front Street. Once again Watts was taken into custody, heavily chained and locked up, but he escaped a second time. Not too long after that, a stagecoach driver recognized Watts who had disguised himself and was working as a hostler at a stage stop at Hazens. The driver reported it to La Crosse authorities and again Watts was arrested. This time he was taken to Bad Axe County (now Vernon County) for trial and there was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment at Waupun, September 10, 1853.

La Crosse County Sheriff Almanzo Eldred's account of the Darst homicide differs somewhat, primarily because it encompasses much of Watts' version of the incident. He stated that David Darst and William Watts came to La Crosse together from Peoria, Illinois and settled in Mormon Coulee where Darst purchased a land claim and upon which they built a log cabin together. They quarreled over money — Watts asked Darst for some funds which the latter refused saying that Watts already owed him $80. Watts became enraged and Darst, equally angered, attacked his partner. Watts tried to escape from the cabin but his path was blocked by Darst. Watts then seized a heavy ax handle leaning against a nearby wall and struck Darst over the head, killing him almost instantly. Watts then robbed his friend of his money, clothing and other belongings and dragged the body up into the bluffs near a stone quarry where he hid it in the brush. Then he went to visit his neighbors, the three Kimball brothers, and went fishing with them.

Later, Mr. Merriman met Watts and inquired as to Darst's whereabouts as he had not been seen for several weeks; Merriman said he wanted to talk to Darst about joining their ox teams on a work project. Watts replied that Darst had gone away on some personal business, and in order to avoid any further questions, added: "Yes, he's gone away for a few days, and says you are a damned scoundrel and wants nothing to do with you." Merriman did not believe Watts' story and discussed his suspicions with some men in the village. They instituted a search and with the aid of a pair of hunting dogs soon found Darst's decomposed body. Darst was 34 years old at the time of his death.

Sheriff Eldred found Watts and two of the Kimball brothers drunk
together and arrested all three and locked them all with himself in
the offices of Chase Stevens, editor of the Weekly Democrat. Watts
and the Kendall boys stood trial. The Kimball boys were set free, but
Watts was accused of the first-degree murder of Darst. He was placed
in the custody of a Mr. McSpadden who kept him locked in the
basement of his home on Front Street. Watts escaped and even
though a reward of $200 was offered for his capture he was not taken
until February 1853. He was then placed in the new jail. The jail in
which he was incarcerated was four feet below the ground surface in a
one-story stone building at the rear of the court house on Fourth
Street. The second trial took place in Crawford County where he was
convicted of deliberately murdering Darst.

When the Civil War broke out, Watts was pardoned upon the
condition that he would enlist in the U.S. Army. He did so, enlisting
as a private in Company A of the 15th Infantry on December 28, 1861.
He deserted on March 30, 1863 and no trace of him was ever found
again.

David Darst is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery in Section 100 next
to the road. The flat ground marker with now almost indistinguish-
able engraving reads: “David Darst was born in Meggs Co. Ohio,
February 2, 1818. Was murdered by William Watts June 3, 1852.”
4. Old Dexter, the Fire-Fighting Dog

This is a story for people who love dogs. Way back in the summer of 1889, Old Dexter, affectionately known as "Deck" or "O.D.,” La Crosse’s fire-fighting dog, died at 11:30 p.m., surrounded by his best friends, the firemen of the Main Street Fire House No. 1. He was beloved not only by the firehouse boys, but by nearly everyone in town, and was considered one of the city’s most venerable and remarkable citizens.

Old Dexter was not an ordinary mongrel. His father was an imported bulldog from Cincinnati and his mother was a black and tan terrier from St. Louis. It was love at first sight and Old Dexter was the result of this happy union.

Fireman Frank Pfeifer acquired Deck in 1869 from the father’s owner, C.L. Hood. The dog stayed with Pfeifer at the fire station all day and became his inseparable companion, accompanying him everywhere. He remained at the fire station while Frank was on duty, but went home with him at noon for lunch and in the evening for supper. When Frank Pfeifer died, Deck never went near his house again but lived at the fire station. Sometime later, the young son of Joe Goodland, another fireman, became attached to O.D. and the two became best friends. O.D. then stayed at the Goodland home, but when the little boy died, the dog was heartbroken and refused to go near the Goodland house again. It seems that Dexter needed one close human companion at all times. He later becomes pals with another little boy, the son of Phil Langdon, and when this young man also died, the dog avoided the Langdon house forever. His next companion was Jim Dunbar, also a fireman, who cared for the dog and once again he experienced the death of a much loved master.

Friendless and alone, Dexter one day wandered into the office of Isaac L. Usher, publisher of the La Crosse Chronicle from 1880 to 1889, and promptly adopted the editor as his friend and master, an affair that lasted for many years. O.D. was always on hand for midnight supper with the printers at the newspaper office, and during the day he followed Usher everywhere. As he grew older, Dexter found the long walk to the Usher home difficult, especially on cold winter nights. Somehow he found his way back to the fire station and decided to make his home there, but he always ambled over to the Chronicle office at midnight to have supper with his friends there.
Old Dexter, the Fire-Fighting Dog

Dexter once broke one of his legs when he tried to stop a runaway team of horses. Dr. Hoegh set the leg and encased it in a plaster cast, but the valiant dog hobbled about as best as he could. On another occasion the Ushers went on a picnic up the river to Dakota and took Dexter with them. O.D. got lost in the woods and the picnickers returned to La Crosse without him. The following morning Usher went back to Dakota looking for Dexter and found him in a cattle yard with another broken leg. Usher carefully placed the dog in his boat and took him back to La Crosse for medical treatment.

When Usher's wife died and he was gone from his office for some time, Dexter was disconsolate and could not be comforted. When Usher at last returned to his office, the dog was ecstatic with joy.

Dexter was a warm and friendly dog; he loved people and was for many years one of the best known personalities in La Crosse. He was possessed of unusual canine intelligence and learned the "fire business" very well. He knew that uncontrolled fire was the enemy of his human friends. He first attracted attention as a firefighter when he jumped into a pile of crumpled newspaper that was aflame and extinguished the fire with his mouth. Some cruel and insensitive people thought this was a clever trick and frequently fed him burning paper. This cruel action eventually singed off his eyelashes and whiskers and even the hair around his neck.

One Fourth of July the dog went into a frenzy chasing and extinguishing firecrackers. On another occasion he was badly hurt when someone put a large cannon firecracker on a fence post; O.D. jumped up and caught it in his mouth just as it exploded. After that he became wary of firecrackers but he still retained his dislike of fire. Indeed, he even seemed to recognize the word "fire" and hearing it agitated him. In his later years the firemen would lock him in a room on the Fourth of July in order to protect him from injury.

The firemen assigned ten cents a day for meat for Dexter. Each day he would go with one of the men to John Gautsch's meat market on the corner of Fifth and Main streets where he was given his wrapped portion of meat which he carried back to the station house in his mouth where he would eat it. On those days when no one could accompany him to the market, a dime was tied in a piece of rag around his neck. Dexter would then trot off to the market where Gautsch would remove the ten cent piece and give him his package of meat and the dog would trot back to the fire house to have his meal.
On a summer day in 1876, Dexter received yet another broken leg, when he chased after Jehlen’s Meat Market runaway horse. Somehow he got under the wagon and a wheel ran over his leg. On three legs he hobbled to Usher’s office and laid down on the floor. Usher brought in the town veterinarian who once more set the leg and encased it in plaster. During this painful ordeal which was administered without benefit of anaesthetic, O.D. hardly winced or whimpered, but bore the excruciating pain better than most men would. He only looked pathetically up at his master who petted him and spoke words of comfort to him. A few days later when the vet called at Usher’s office to inspect the leg, Dexter limped haltingly away as rapidly as possible and hid. He recognized the doctor and he was not about to submit to the painful process again.

Dexter must have been accident prone because on still another occasion when he accompanied Usher to the Dresbach stone quarry he ran after a passing train. The train struck him a glancing blow and knocked him under a railroad culvert. His back was severely hurt; he recovered but was never quite the same afterwards.

Whenever O.D. heard the fire alarm go off he would run after the fire wagon and horses. Once when he was locked in Usher’s office for the night, he heard the alarm and jumped through a window and ran to join the rescue forces. Another time when a chicken coop caught fire, O.D. “rescued” at least a dozen hens as they flew out of the hen house with their feathers ablaze. He caught them in midair and shook them violently until the fire was put out. He was unaware that most of the chickens were killed not by the fire, but by Dexter’s furious shaking process.

In his old age Dexter suffered from rheumatism and was almost totally blind and deaf, yet he always seemed to hear the fire alarm go off, and somehow, feeble as he was, he found some supernatural strength to join in the chase.

Dexter was a highly sensitive canine and remembered mistreatment. If anyone ever struck him or abused him in any way, he avoided that person permanently and could never again be pacified by that individual. On the other hand, those who cared for him and befriended him were loved for life and he showed his affection physically with a swipe of his tongue or by placing his head on his friend’s knee and gazing up at him soulfully. He knew who belonged in the firehouse and the newspaper office and any strangers who entered were eyed with suspicion and watched until they left.
Old Dexter, the Fire-Fighting Dog

Dexter lived to be more than 20 years old. One day in his dotage he got in the way of a huge gray fire horse who accidentally stepped on him. His ribs were crushed and he suffered severe internal injuries. The vet was called but could do nothing to restore him to health. Instead he put the loyal dog out of his pain and misery by administering a large dose of chloroform. His saddened firehouse friends gave him a decent burial. They tore up several planks in the floor of the fire station, dug his grave there and interred him with proper ceremony. Many of the tough and hardened firemen shed tears at the passing of their friend.

One of the firemen expressed the thoughts of all of them when he said, "I hope that Dexter is in the place where all good dogs go and I hope also that somewhere he will find Mr. Usher again for in his dog heart we know that is what he wanted most."
The Mystery of the Riverside Cannon

One of the most photographed landmarks in La Crosse is the cannon in Riverside Park. And yet through the decades very little has been known of its history. The only information available has been through inscriptions engraved on the gun itself.

Close physical inspection of the cannon discloses that it is meticulously fashioned with a considerable amount of ornate engraving. Through many years of weathering it has acquired a fine green patina characteristically found on old bronzes. Identical plaques on either side of the cannon depict a woman's head in helmet with right arm extended, bearing the inscription: “In Memoriam. U.S.S. Maine. Destroyed in Havana Harbor, February 15, 1898.” The background of the shield shows an eagle with outstretched wings and stars with the words “Patriotism” and “Devotion.” At the bottom of each plaque is a line stating: “This tablet is cast from metal from the U.S. Maine.”

The U.S. Army described the piece as a 5-inch .25 bronze gun with a weight of 4,300 pounds. On its right trunion appear the words “Cobre de Mexico,” testifying to the fact that the cannon is made of copper mined in Mexico. On the right trunion is the number P° 4375, probably a military identification number. On the breech of the cannon is one line reading “No. 1701 Sevilla 19 Octubre 1787,” indicating the date and place of manufacture. Just above the two handles on the tube surface is the word “Peleador,” which is derived from two Spanish words meaning “love of fighting,” hence the cannon was named “The Fighter.” This cannon could accommodate heavy “carcasses” or cannon balls, capable of firing shells filled with pitch or other inflammable materials that burned with intense heat.

Cannons such the Riverside gun were manufactured in 18th century Europe by melting metals to 2100 degrees Fahrenheit, then pouring the molten mass into molds where it was allowed to cool. It was then reheated and forged or pressed into the desired shape.

As to the history of this cannon itself — why was it brought to La Crosse? Who was responsible for bringing it here? And if it has international significance how did we happen to get it? These questions have piqued our interest for a long time. Now, at long last, the veil of mystery that has for many years obscured this information is about to be removed and the history of the cannon is about to be
revealed. But first, a word about the Spanish-American War which was after all the reason we have the cannon.

Atrocities perpetrated against the Cubans by Spain in the last years of the 19th century brought pleas to the U.S. to assist the small island in its battle for liberty and independence. Not only to aid Cuba, but to safeguard American economic interests there (primarily sugar and tobacco), as well as to remove the menace to U.S. peace, the battleship Maine was sent to Havana harbor in 1898 as a protective measure. Without provocation, the U.S.S. Maine was blown up on February 15, 1898 in which 260 American lives were lost.
Spain had long resented American interference in her affairs and so was accused of the nefarious deed. Spanish officials, however, staunchly denied responsibility for the Maine disaster. To this day liability for the act has not been proven beyond doubt. War with Spain became inevitable and on April 19, 1898, President William McKinley reluctantly declared war on Spain, a war which became known as "enforced pacification," an altruistic and moral war to liberate Cuba from Spanish domination. Eventually, Cuba was granted independence from world-wide imperialistic advances, but two years later the island was compelled to accept being placed under American hegemony.

In 1911 the sunken Maine was raised and examined and relics and metal were salvaged, then the ship was towed out to deep water and sunk irretrievably. From these salvage efforts came the metal from which were fashioned the plaques affixed to the Riverside cannon.

During the course of the Spanish-American War at least two cannons were captured by the United States. One of these two was consigned to La Crosse.

John J. Esch (U.S. Congressman from La Crosse, 1898-1920) was to a large degree instrumental in procuring the cannon for his native city. When he learned that captured Spanish cannons were being brought to this country, Esch promptly requested that at least one of them be turned over to his home town. Because of his Congressional influence and connections, his request was granted. Eventually two Spanish cannons were allotted to the State of Wisconsin, one of which is now in Riverside Park.

On July 13, 1899, Esch wrote to La Crosse Mayor Wendell Anderson advising him of the availability of the cannon through State Adjutant General A. C. Boardman in Madison. Throughout the negotiations a prime consideration appeared to be that the City of La Crosse would have to assume payment of freight charges for shipment of the gun. C. S. Van Auken, Director of the Interstate Fair Association, assured the mayor that he knew where he could raise the funds for transportation costs. After six months of dealings, William Lohmiller, freight agent of the Chicago & Northwestern Railway, told Mayor Anderson that his railroad would transport the cannon without charge from Chicago to La Crosse.

In February 1900, Brigadier General H. R. Buffington, Chief of
Ordnance of the U.S. Army in Washington, wrote to Anderson saying "This cannon is simply loaned to the City of La Crosse and is to be returned when demand therefor is made by the Secretary of War." Obviously, the Government has never requested return of the gun.

Once again, transportation costs came up and Major John Butler, Commander of Ordnance at Governors Island in New York Harbor, wrote to the mayor saying that costs from the New York Arsenal to La Crosse would be the city's responsibility. Anderson replied that La Crosse would pay the charges and arrangements were made to transport the cannon via the Erie Railroad and the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad to Chicago and thence to its final destination. In April 1900, the Chicago Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway, not to be outdone in its civic duty, became involved in the matter and also offered to pay the shipping costs. In due course the gun arrived and freight charges were paid though the amount was never disclosed.

Then the proper placement of the cannon became a matter of city-wide concern. Colonel Orlando Holway, head of the Third Regiment Wisconsin National Guard, and member of a well-known early La Crosse family, on April 28, 1900 advised the commanding officers of Companies B and M that selection of a site to place the cannon was to be decided by vote of the veterans of the Spanish-American War.

Captain Fred Schultz informed Mayor Anderson on April 30, 1900 that the veterans of Company B had selected the County Court House park as the proper site for the gun. Captain E. H. Chamberlain, Commander of Company M of the Third Infantry, three weeks later argued in strong terms that the cannon had been given to the city, not to the county, and the vote of his men was overwhelmingly in favor of placing the cannon in the triangle in front of City Hall on the northeast corner of Fifth and State streets. He further pointed out that in this location in front of the city jail, the gun would be less liable to vandalism. The city hall site was enthusiastically endorsed by most La Crosse citizens, and there it was placed and remained for the next eighteen years.

A final admonition came from Brigadier General Buffington cautioning that the ordnance was to be carefully examined by experts to make certain it was not loaded. He pointed out that one of the Spanish cannons loaned elsewhere was found to contain a powder charge and projectile.

On November 12, 1915, a resolution was introduced and unanim-
ously passed by the City Common Council that the cannon be re­
moved from the city hall grounds and placed in Riverside Park under
the jurisdiction of the Parks Commission. The Parks Commission
was to choose a proper location in the park, build a suitable base and
mount the cannon thereon. The cannon was mounted and placed in
the park on July 4, 1918, but no explanation has been proffered as to
why it took nearly three years for the council’s orders to be carried
out.

A small stone marker directly in the front of the cannon reads
“These trees planted and dedicated to World War veterans
1917-1918. By the La Crosse Women’s Club.” Why this particular site
was chosen for that marker is uncertain except that like the cannon it
honors war veterans. There are today no trees in evidence except for
two young saplings some distance away.

In September 1972, the La Crosse Muzzleloaders Club asked the
council for permission to fire the Riverside cannon. After consulta­
tion with the Parks Board, the request was denied because of possible
danger involved.

Though officially the Riverside cannon is only on loan to the city
of La Crosse, it has been in the city’s custody for more than 80 years,
and since no order has ever been issued by the U.S. Army for its
return, surely the cannon may now be considered to be the property of
the City of La Crosse.
Unrequited love has been a favored theme for many poets, and romanticists have often described it in idyllic rhetoric. In the 19th century Tennyson wrote "Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." An unhappy spurned suitor might dispute that sentiment. He probably would instead agree with Cowley, the 17th century poet who wrote "... the greatest pain is to love, but to love in vain."

Martin Dack, whose amatory advances were disdained by Inge Nelson, of whom he was hopelessly enamored, would probably have subscribed to the words of both poets, for the rejected Martin's love held tragic consequence.

Martin was born in Hellfors, Norway in 1863. As he emerged into teenhood he despised the farmwork to which he had been weaned and he knew that he did not want to follow in his father's and grandfather's footsteps. He dreamed of journeying to the "golden shores of America" where success was assured. He believed he would become rich in that "blessed land of opportunity" and would bring his parents and younger brother and sister to live with him in a great house with all the luxuries they had never enjoyed in Norway.

So in 1880, at the age of 17, he emigrated to America. He sailed on the cheapest steamer he could find, spending five weeks in the bowels of the ship, paying for his passage with his few hard-earned dollars. Enroute he became ill with that dreaded malaise, seasickness, and was nauseously indisposed for many days, often thinking that expiration would be a desirable alternative. But he was young and strong and inwardly he knew the discomfort was worth the price for he was bound for a land where the streets were "paved with gold" and where great wealth and fame would be easily attained.

Instead, when he reached New York with hundreds of other immigrants, he found only a dirty, grubby city, teeming with unfriendly people and foul smells and sounds — nothing like the sweet air and greenery to which he had been accustomed all his life. The new settlers spoke all manner of gibberish and he was able to converse only with a few Norwegians who were as discontented as he. He managed to find a few menial jobs which paid him a mere pittance, hardly enough to keep body and soul together. From this meager
income he put aside a few nickels and dimes with which he planned to buy passage to the west. He had been told that a young man’s greatest possibilities for fortune in America lay west of the Allegheny Mountains. He boarded a cattle train and got as far as Pennsylvania. There he joined a wagon train traveling west, paying for his passage and food by attending to the oxen, caring for small children in the group, and doing any odd jobs assigned to him.

A few Norwegians with whom he could communicate in his native language told him that many of his countrymen had settled in a place called Wisconsin. Thus he joined the influx of Norwegians who settled in western Wisconsin and Minnesota during that period in American history. He left the wagon train at Prairie du Chien and traveled up the Mississippi River on a river raft, paying for his transportation by working as a deck hand. When he reached La Crosse he decided to settle here because the river and the lush land at the foot of the bluffs reminded him of Hellfors where he grew up.

Many Norwegians in La Crosse during the 1880s were intent upon learning English and becoming Americanized. Though the blue-eyed sandy-haired Martin Dack recognized the necessity to speak English fluently, he experienced more difficulty than most in learning the new language. The few words and phrases that he was obliged to know he spoke in the accent and lilt of his native Norwegian tongue.

During the ensuing years he held a number of lowly jobs for he had no special talents or training. He worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant and as a city street sweeper. His social life was nonexistent. He had no friends and so spent a good portion of his time and wages in local saloons, soon becoming a hard drinker. He worked for more than a decade as a river raftsman on the Mississippi during the summer and in the logging camps in the winter. He lived in boarding houses in La Crosse, Onalaska, and Winona. By this time he was already past the age of thirty, yet had attained nothing. His hopes for a good life had almost vanished. In his thirty-third year he had finally had his fill of the hard river life and decided to settle in La Crosse and seek easier employment.

He obtained a job as a house painter with B. L. Johnson, a local painting contractor, and rented a room at the Nora House at 326 South Third Street. One of his first assignments was to paint the Hans Nelson house where for the first time he saw their 18-year-old
daughter, Inge. She was no beauty, just an ordinary blue-eyed blonde Scandinavian girl, but to Martin she was the fairest of the fair and he promptly succumbed to love. He could hardly wait to return to work each day and dawdled over his painting so he might more frequently catch a glimpse of his beloved. At last his employer told him to work more rapidly as there were other painting jobs awaiting him. Inge Nelson was completely unaware of Martin’s existence and never gave him more than a cursory glance.

For the next few months he thought of nothing but Inge and though he had finished painting the Nelson house, he began to loiter about their home in his every spare moment hoping to get a look at her. One day he came face to face with her on the street, but he was so tongue-tied that he could say nothing. She passed by him without even a glance. On another occasion he saw her walking to her home from downtown carrying several packages. He tipped his hat politely and stammeringly asked if he could carry them for her, reminding her that he had recently painted her father’s house. Without a word she handed over her parcels obviously being glad to be relieved of the burden of carrying them herself. Since he spoke very little English there was practically no talk between them. Inge made no attempt to make conversation either, so he walked silently beside her. When they reached her house, she took her parcels and said a brief thank you and left him.

Dack learned that she attended the Lutheran church on Sundays so he too began regular attendance, though he was hardly religious. Throughout the services he merely sat in church and feasted his eyes on his beloved. One Sunday after services, he summoned sufficient courage to ask if he could walk her home. She replied no thank you very curtly and without another word walked away with her girl friend. Martin was devastated but became even more smitten because she was so clearly unobtainable. Inge had a few casual suitors but Martin was certain that every young male in La Crosse wanted her. He hoped desperately to have her for himself, but he doubted if he stood a chance of winning her affection.

On one of his many visits to his favorite saloon he confided in the bartender, who advised him not to be so open in showing his feelings. The barkeep suggested that he leave La Crosse for a brief period and promised that Inge would become aware of his absence and miss him. If the truth were known, Inge did not even notice that he was gone.
Dack went to Burr Oak, a tiny hamlet some twenty miles northeast of La Crosse and remained away for two months. He obtained work on a nearby farm and saved his wages as there was no place to spend his money, not even a saloon. But all during this time he still was obsessed with his infatuation for Inge. When he could bear it no longer, he decided to return to La Crosse, if only to get a glimpse of her. He again took a room at the Nora House and got a job working in one of the local lumber mills. On Sunday he went to church hoping to see his beloved. And indeed he did see her — after church services she left holding hands with a young man as they walked off together. Dack learned that Inge was betrothed to the young man and that they were to be married within two weeks. His hopes were dashed and he felt that life was not worth living, but his love for Inge remained as strong as ever.

He was by this time already 34 years old and Inge only 21, but he was as miserable as a callow teenager in his new knowledge of the hopelessness of his love. He began to drink more heavily than ever, staying reasonably sober only long enough to put in his day’s work. His emotions overcame his reason; his dreams had clouded his good judgment since the day he had first seen Inge Nelson.

On the day after Inge’s marriage, Martin went to his favorite saloon and got as intoxicated as his funds would allow. Having spent his last dollar on drink he returned to his room at the Nora House, where he sat on his bed and contemplated his life. As he entered his room he found a note under the door from C. C. Rogstad, one of the hotel’s owners, reminding him in the strongest terms that he was two weeks behind in his room rent. He had been fired from his job at the mill nearly two weeks before because he had missed three days of work and had been drunk on the job several times. He had no job, no money even to pay for the next day’s food, and as he could not pay his back rent he would have no place to sleep that night. And above this pall loomed the great tragedy in his life — Inge belonged to another man and was lost to him forever. His boyhood dreams had turned into nightmares and gone were the thoughts of riches and success. His hope for a life with his beloved Inge had been destroyed for eternity. Always his thoughts returned to Inge. He sat on his bed in a half stupor thinking how unbearable and useless life was; there was nothing worth living for.

Very deliberately Dack got up from the bed, walked to his wash-
stand and took his straight-edge razor and honed it carefully on his leather razor strop to its keenest edge. Then he again sat down on the side of the bed and with great precision he unhurriedly slashed his throat from ear to ear, thoroughly severing both carotid arteries. He fell to the floor, landing in a peculiar position on his hands and knees, the razor falling beside him. His throat was bleeding as if from a turned-on tap.

A maid, cleaning the room next door, heard gurgling guttural sounds emanating from Martin Dack's room and went to investigate. She opened Martin's door and at the sight, she emitted a piercing scream and rushed from the room, shrieking for Rogstad, the landlord. Rogstad came rushing up the stairs to determine the cause of the commotion. The pale, nearly-paralyzed, frightened maid could only point weakly at the door to Martin's room. Rogstad took one look into Dack's room and rushed downstairs to call the police. (The Nora House was one of the few places in La Crosse that boasted of having a new-fangled telephone.)

City detective John Coady and Chief of Police H. H. Byrne answered Rogstad's call and arrived at the Nora House in about fifteen minutes. They found Martin Dack still resting in the strange position on his hands and knees, the blood was now only dripping from his throat wounds. His razor lying beside him on the floor was nearly submerged in his life substance. Rogstad, ever the businessman, looked about the room and remarked to the police officers that the rug and bedspread were ruined and would have to be discarded!

The newspaper the following day carried only a terse account of Martin's suicide. He was buried in the north side cemetery on September 20, 1898, with only the briefest of services and no one present to mourn his passing.

When Inge's girl friend saw her a few days later she said “Wasn't that dreadful about Martin Dack's suicide?” Inge's reply was “Who was Martin Dack?”
7. The Tragedy of Mamie Cummings

The early evening hours of September 21, 1898 were sultry and humid. During the day the temperature had risen to 85 degrees, followed by a downpour that left nearly two inches of rain. The heavily wooded areas of Barron’s Island (today known as Pettibone Park) were already cloaked in semi-darkness. James Robinson, La Crosse’s veteran iceman, was driving his cows from the pasture toward his house at the north end of the island about 6:00 p.m. (Robinson was known as “Three-Star Jack” because he could neither read nor write and signed his name with three small stars.) As he approached his cowbarn, a putrid and extremely unpleasant odor assailed his nostrils. Thinking it might be emanating from a dead and decaying animal nearby, he entered the woods planning to bury the animal and thus rid the area of the offensive smell.

When he was a short distance into the woods he saw in the rapidly gathering dusk what appeared to be a mass of something beneath a large oak tree. Upon investigation a ghastly sight confronted him. He was horrified to find three bodies lying close together under the tree — a man, a woman, and a child. The foul odor was clearly coming from the bodies. Frightened, he beat a hasty retreat to his waiting cows and drove them hurriedly into their nearby enclosure. He then hitched his horse to his ice wagon and made his way as quickly as possible over the old wagon bridge (built in 1891 at the foot of Mt. Vernon Street) into La Crosse. He went directly to the Nora House at 328 South Third Street where he knew he would find one of the few telephones in the city. (Telephones were introduced in La Crosse as early as 1878 but did not enjoy wide usage until after the turn of the century.) At the boarding house Robinson “rang up” the police and told them briefly of his frightful discovery across the river.

Chief of Police Hugh H. Byrne, accompanied by detective John Coady, patrol officer E. H. Derr, and undertaker Adelbert Miller, came promptly to the Nora House and together with Three Star Jack they crossed the bridge where Robinson directed them to the grisly site on Barron’s Island.

The three cadavers lay on their backs on a small house rug, partly covered by a quilt. A young woman wearing a light robe lay in the middle, her head toward the north, her left arm around a baby girl who was still clutching in her left hand a chunk of “jelly-bread”
The Tragedy of Mamie Cummings

half-eaten. At the woman's right lay a young man, fully clothed, his head resting on the woman's right breast. It was obvious from the partially decomposed state of the bodies that they had been lying there for a few days, their condition aggravated by the hot moist weather. There were two or three empty beer bottles lying on the ground nearby and a basket with the remains of some food. The general appearance was that of a picnic that had ended tragically.

Detective Coady promptly identified the woman as Mamie Cummings, about 22 years old, a pretty, partly black young woman of "dubious reputation." The child was Mamie's daughter, Georgie, about a year and a half in age. The young man, blonde and blue-eyed, appeared to be in his mid-twenties who was subsequently identified as Nicholas Sletteland. Undertaker Miller had driven his mortuary wagon containing wooden caskets to the scene where he took charge of the bodies. He placed the mother and child in one coffin and the man in another and transferred them to his establishment in La Crosse for burial preparation.

Three-Star Jack had discovered the bodies a little before six o'clock on Wednesday, September 21st, and by 7:00 p.m. they were already in Miller's custody. A 8:15 p.m. an inquest was called, composed of a jury of six men headed by City Coroner Julius Hirschheimer, a local attorney. Autopsies were conducted by Dr. C. H. Marquardt and Dr. J. A. Rowles; they concluded that the deaths had occurred sometime between Sunday evening, September 18 and Monday morning, September 19, and thus had been dead for about three days when found.

Post-mortem examination of the cadavers at the mortuary by the doctors and jury disclosed the fact that the baby had a bullet hole in her right temple. Mamie had a bullet wound just above her left breast and one in her head. Sletteland had a bullet hole in his right temple and was still holding a 38-calibre revolver in his right hand when found. All three deaths were judged to have been instantaneous. Rigor mortis had already set in and it was difficult to pry the gun loose from Sletteland's hand. The gun had five chambers; four were empty, and four wounds were found on the three persons. There were no signs of a struggle so the jury concluded that Mamie had acceded to the killings or else she and the baby had been shot while they slept.

During the inquest, one juror, referring to a recent incident in which Sletteland was suspected of stealing from his employer, said
"Finding that his employer knew of his thievery and being afraid of what the exposure might entail, he decided to shuffle off this mortal soil." Another juror was of the opinion that Nick had killed Mamie and Georgie in a fit of jealous rage. Still another felt that Mamie had agreed to the murder-suicide pact because she felt life was not worth living and assented to the child's death because she knew from experience that the future held little happiness in store for a partly black child. But the general agreement was that Nick had performed the murders after the mother and child had fallen asleep and then turned the gun on himself.

Mamie was the offspring of an inter-racial marriage. Her mother was white and her father was black. Mamie herself was a very light-skinned black girl, young and attractive. Her mother, Margaret Anderson (surname uncertain), was the daughter of a highly-respected, prominent and wealthy family from Galena, Illinois. Margaret had become affianced to a young man, but her parents forbade the marriage because they considered him their social inferior. Margaret's father took steps to force the young man out of Galena and she never saw him again. Margaret was not only heart-broken but also so incensed at her parents' unreasonable attitude and action that she vowed publicly to her friends that she would run off and marry the first man who proposed to her, no matter who or what he was. This was to be her way of punishing her parents who she felt had ruined her life.

Robert Cummings, a handsome young black with some white blood, had admired Margaret's blonde beauty from a distance but had never dared come near her. When he heard of her vow he lost no time in getting to her and proposing marriage. True to her threat, Margaret ran off with Robert and married him without her parents' consent. They promptly disowned her and never spoke her name again and rarely appeared in public after that.

Robert and Margaret planned to go elsewhere to start their lives together but they had no traveling funds. Robert resorted to petty theft and was convicted and sent to jail for two years. When he was released he worked at menial jobs until he had accumulated enough money for them to leave Galena. In the meantime Margaret had given birth to their first child.

The young couple left Galena and came north to La Crosse. They subsequently produced six more children in rapid succession. Mamie
was the fifth of the seven offspring. As soon as two of the older children became teen-agers they left La Crosse for Chicago where they felt prospects for blacks would be better. Four of the other youngsters died at early ages, thus leaving Mamie as the only child with her parents in La Crosse. From that time on Robert worked honestly as a teamster and laborer to support his wife and daughter in their home at 307 North Third Street. Robert died in 1891 leaving Margaret and Mamie to fend for themselves. In the 1890s there was no public aid for destitute families, outside of church charities, and certainly none for racially mixed families.

Margaret took a job in Yeo and Clark's flour mills to support herself and her school-age daughter. Mamie attended the First Ward School on Sixth and Vine streets, present site of WWTF's Coleman Building. She was a bright and attractive student, but not a happy girl. Because of her color the other children made her life miserable with constant insults and taunting. Several of the school boys often made deliberately improper advances to Mamie but she repulsed them all. It takes little imagination to realize the agony and hurt inflicted on this unhappy and lonely young girl and the indignities she suffered at the hands of our so-called enlightened civilized society!

Mamie was glad at long last to leave grammar school. She took a job as a shingle-shaver and packer in a sawmill but was forced to leave there because the other factory girls made her life intolerable. She then obtained employment at the Yeo and Clark Flour Mills at 327 North Second Street, where her mother also worked, but again, she was compelled to leave because her coworkers made her life unbearable. Her mother too bore the brunt of much discrimination. Mamie then took a series of jobs as a domestic in some of the so-called "better" homes of the city, where her mistresses made her perform the most menial and often unspeakable tasks and paid her practically nothing.

Mamie had tried to live a respectable and circumspect life but La Crosse's "high-tone white folks" made that literally impossible. It is difficult today to understand why important persons in La Crosse, who contributed so much to the city's growth and development, would harbor such mean prejudice and bigotry against a lonely and defenseless young girl. In the meantime Mamie had blossomed into a beautiful young mulatto woman of 17 and many men found her desirable.
Often the men in executive positions at the factories where she worked, and not infrequently in the homes where she was a domestic, made advances towards her which she found unacceptable. She denied most of them but was often forced into an untenable situation. After struggling in this difficult kind of life for a few years she found herself pregnant at the age of 19, the result of unwanted attentions, in reality rape, forced upon her by the son of a prominent sawmill family for whom she worked. When she told him of her predicament, the cad left her high and dry and denied that he had ever had contact with her, a lie in which he was aided and abetted by his socialite mother, who promptly fired her. Mamie gave birth to a lovely baby girl whom she named Georgie in honor of its father.

Mamie succumbed to a “life of sin” only because she needed money to care for herself and her child. Her mother had died a year earlier and so that avenue of support was denied her. She had tried valiantly to live a respectable life, but was not allowed to do so. Prostitution had literally been forced upon her; it was the only way in which she could earn a few dollars and still remain at home to take care of her child. She was twice arrested for soliciting but it was later found that in both cases it had been the men involved who had solicited her. She had accepted their attentions only because she desperately needed money to buy food for her child. There were no welfare organizations in those days for young girls in trouble and especially not for a young mulatto girl with an illegitimate baby.

On one occasion a prominent judge sent her to jail for ninety days for robbing a drunken man in an alley; it was later discovered that the crime had been committed by another woman. Mamie had been at home at the time of the theft. No restitution was ever made to Mamie for the error. She was allowed to keep Georgie in her jail cell with her as no one wanted to accept responsibility of caring for the child.

Investigation into Nicholas Sletteland’s background revealed that he had come to La Crosse from Norway in 1890 at the age of 16. He had heard that La Crosse had a large Norwegian population that might offer him many opportunities, but the success he had hoped for was not easily attained. During his first few years here he worked at a series of odd jobs and boarded with the Albert Schultz family at 311 South Third Street. Schultz later claimed that Nick, who sometimes used the alias Nick Carter, was a heavy drinker and had been asked to move. He then took up residence next door at the home of Mrs. Maryanna Nace at 315 South Third Street.
Nick had seen Mamie on several occasions in downtown La Crosse, and enchanted by her exotic attractiveness, and learning that she was “easy,” he lost no time in getting acquainted.

About that time Nick had a stroke of luck and obtained a job as a stock boy at the Fred Kroner Hardware Company at 116 South Third Street. On one occasion he was standing in front of the hardware store with Gus Sexauer, who worked as a clerk there, when Mamie passed by across the street. Sexauer testified at the inquest that Nick had said “There goes my girl. No man had better try to get next to her or he'll be sorry.”

Nick rented a dilapidated house boat from Billy Friel on the river shore a short distance north of the old wagon bridge. He persuaded Mamie to move in with him. She acceded to his request because she could now remain at home and care for little Georgie while Nick worked. Mrs. Lou Crattick who lived in a shanty boat next to Nick and Mamie testified that she often heard them quarreling and that on some occasions when Nick came home drunk he would beat Mamie and Georgie.

One evening Mrs. Crattick saw Nick come home with a bundle that "jingled." The following day Fred Kroner accused Nick of stealing merchandise from his warehouse. The pilfered items consisted of some inexpensive tableware, a pair of shears, a cuspidor and a metal tray. The total value was less than ten dollars. Nick apparently planned to sell these items to obtain a few extra dollars. Kroner, accompanied by the police, searched Nick’s boathouse during his absence and found the goods hidden there. Kroner stated that since the stolen items had been recovered he did not wish to prefer charges against Sletteland, but the next day the police persuaded him to change his mind and he swore out a warrant for the young man’s arrest, but it was too late; Nick Sletteland was already dead.

Billy Friel, Nick’s landlord, declared at the inquest that Nick and Mamie had occupied the shanty boat for the past five or six months, but paid the rent on time and gave him no problems. He also declared that a few evenings previous to the discovery of the bodies, he had seen the little family crossing the foot bridge to Barron’s Island. Nick was carrying a basket and some blankets and pillows; Mamie was holding little Georgie in her arms.

Local police notified relatives of Sletteland who lived in Whitehall of his death and the circumstances surrounding it, but
they did not claim the body; indeed, they did not even respond to the notification. Letters in Nick's pocket indicated that he had a brother serving with the U.S. Navy in Cuba.

As soon as the inquest was completed, it was planned to inter the three bodies in Oak Grove Cemetery. Cemetery officials, however, refused to permit interment on its property because there was no one to pay for the graves or other costs related to the burial. Cemetery officials were eventually compelled to relent because there were no viable alternatives. Neither would any local clergyman consent to perform any kind of religious service, a fact which today we find incredible. It was later reported, though not verified, that the undertaker even took back the two caskets because no one offered to pay for them and the three bodies were buried wrapped only in some old blankets.

Consequently, Mamie, Nick and little Georgie suffered the final indignity of being buried as paupers in the potter's field section of Oak Grove, with no headstones, or markers to identify their final resting places. (La Crosse's official potter's field was established in 1916 when a parcel of land was set aside for this purpose at the base of the bluff just east of Hillview Home.)

This is not a pretty story in La Crosse's history, but it deserves to be told. Miscegenation, racial intermarriage, was not only frowned upon, but abhorred as the ultimate degradation in those days. Laws pertaining to cacogamy go back to 1661 and as recently as the 1940s was outlawed in at least thirty states, especially in the south and west. Bills prohibiting racial intermarriage were introduced in the Wisconsin Legislature several times, but each time were defeated by humanists and thus never became law. In 1967 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that laws against racial intermarriage were unconstitutional in this country.

The people of La Crosse were not kind to Mamie and Georgie. If they had lived, little happiness and comfort awaited them. Perhaps Nick rendered them a service by freeing them from a burdensome life which held no promise for their future. We may be thankful that we have come a long way since those dark days of unreasoned bigotry and we may hope that compassion and decency have triumphed. But let us yet be honest and admit that a long and tortuous path still lies ahead.

In a sequel to the entire ghastly business, Houston County
Coroner F. H. Whitney of La Crescent took issue with La Crosse and waxed indignant because he was not notified of the incident, not even requested to act as to the disposition of the bodies. He was correct in stating that the deaths had taken place in Minnesota and thus should have been handled under his jurisdiction. Coroner Whitney obviously cared little about the three unfortunate people; it was his prestige and authority that had been offended. Indeed, Whitney went to Madison and instituted action against La Crosse County, accusing it of holding an inquest "at its own peril and without authorization or jurisdiction for a crime committed on Minnesota land that should have been conducted under Minnesota law." Chief of Police H. H. Byrne responded by saying that common decency and humanity demanded that the bodies be taken care of without delay. Byrne said otherwise he would have been glad to turn the bodies over to Houston County authorities because "this is not the kind of business we are hankering for."

Barron's Island did not become the property of Wisconsin until 1919. After several years of controversy and bargaining, Wisconsin traded a piece of its land near Winona for Pettibone Park, a barter officially sanctioned by the U.S. Congress.
8.

Timothy Burns,
The City’s Second Founder

Spence Park at the foot of State Street has been called the “birthplace of La Crosse” because it was at this point that early visitors to the town first set foot. Timothy Burns has been characterized as the “founder of La Crosse” because he was the first to plat a large land tract into saleable lots. This premise has been challenged by those who insist that Nathan Myrick deserves the honor of being termed the founder; they call Burns the “second founder of La Crosse.” But no one will or can dispute the fact that Burns was one of the most important pioneers who played a significant role in the growth and development of our city. La Crosse has been particularly fortunate in having attracted a great many prominent settlers who have contributed mightily in the evolution of a treeless prairie into a thriving community.

Although he died at the comparatively young age of 33, and had lived in La Crosse only three years, Burns carved for himself a name that will live perpetually in the city's annals.
In 1903 the city council decided to name the park on Main Street between Seventh and Eighth Streets after Burns. Prior to that it was called Main Street Park or High School Park. (The first high school was across the street on the northeast corner of Eighth and Main streets.) A tablet placed on the Main Street side of the park reads: "To perpetuate the record of the gift of Burns Park to La Crosse by the Hon. Timothy Burns, Lt. Governor of Wisconsin, 1851-1853. This tablet is erected by his grandchildren, 1938. Sponsored by La Crosse Chapter, D.A.R."

Burns was born in Dublin, Ireland, on May 31, 1820, and came to the U.S. with his parents when he was three months old. He lived in New York until he was 17, when, like so many of his contemporaries, he followed the advice of Horace Greeley to "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country." He got as far as Mineral Point in Iowa County, where he worked at mining until 1844. In that year he was elected Iowa County sheriff, and two years later became a member of the Wisconsin General Assembly. He was re-elected for two years and was chosen Speaker of the House in 1848-1849. After he left the legislature, Burns became one of the State Commissioners of Public Works and in 1851 was elected Lieutenant Governor of Wisconsin, an office he held until his death in 1853.

A few years earlier, in 1847, when he visited La Crosse on business, he became "captivated with the scenery." He felt economic possibilities in La Crosse were unexcelled because of the many natural
advantages of the area. He had strong affiliations with important men in Milwaukee and spoke with them about the possibility of establishing a railroad line between the two cities.

Because of his astute business acumen, his prominence in state affairs, as well as his pleasing personality, he was favored by everyone in the city. He became chairman of the first County Board and was chosen the first La Crosse County judge. He moved his young family to La Crosse in 1850 and made his home here while simultaneously pursing his political career in Madison.

Burns was convinced that La Crosse was destined to become one of the leading cities in Wisconsin and so invested heavily in land. At one time he owned nearly one-fourth of all the land comprising the original townsite. He bought half the land interest of Nathan Myrick and H.J.B. Miller and thus was born the first land tract, the Myrick-Miller-Burns plat. The official plat of the original town site was surveyed by William Hood in 1851 under the personal direction of Burns. This encompassed roughly the area from the Mississippi River east to about Sixth Street and from the La Crosse River south to Mt. Vernon Street.

He then laid out lots on this plat which were sold to settlers who decided to remain here. The lots facing the Mississippi River sold for $100 while those a little further east on the prairie sold for $25. Thus Burns became the first true real estate dealer in La Crosse.

The village of La Crosse was laid out parallel to the Mississippi River, with little regard for town lines. Later, as land additions occurred, the town lines were taken into consideration. Unfortunately, original discrepancies could not be easily rectified; this accounts for jogs in some of our streets, for example, at Sixth and Main, Fourth and Pearl, Fourth and Pine, West Avenue and Pine, and others. Streets parallel to the river were numbered — Front, Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth. The original town plat also shows named streets running at right angles to the river. It must be remembered that the river did not run in an exact north-south direction at all points, which accounts for some irregularities in street lay-out.

Main Street was so named because it was the principal street in the city. Nearly every small midwestern town has a Main Street, a characteristic of the area and the times. The name, State Street, was selected because the original name considered, Wisconsin Street, was considered too cumbersome. Mt. Vernon Street was named after
George Washington's home; La Crosse Street was chosen to honor the city; and River Street was so called because it ran parallel to the La Crosse River. Alleys on the first plat were named after presidents: Washington Alley between Front and Second Streets; Jefferson Alley between Second and Third; Madison Alley between Third and Fourth; and Monroe Alley between Fourth and Fifth Streets.

In the summer of 1853, Burns took his family to visit his brother-in-law, Warren Johnson, in Lafayette County. Leaving his wife and children there, he went to Madison to the Democratic state convention as a delegate from the La Crosse district to nominate new members to the legislature. Having completed his business, he returned to his relatives' home, where he became very ill with an attack of bilious fever in the middle of August. A few weeks later when he began to recover he returned to his home in La Crosse to convalesce. He had a relapse shortly thereafter and died at noon on September 20, 1853, at the age of 33.

The funeral was one of the largest ever held in La Crosse. Burns was buried from the Baptist Church; Rev. John Sherwin of the First Congregational Church conducted the services. There were more than 30 carriages in the funeral procession from the residence to the cemetery, each carriage carrying from two to ten persons; several hundred followed on foot.

Burns' eulogist called him a "man of enterprise, public-spirited and of commendable ambition, a man who always advocated activities designed for the public benefit. To him belongs the honor of giving the village its real existence. Wisconsin has lost one of its most gifted statesman and La Crosse its most popular and distinguished citizen."

A public meeting was called at the county court house, with William Hood acting as chairman, at which a resolution was passed expressing the community's sympathy to the Burns family and extolling his many virtues. The city remained in official mourning for ten days and all stores and offices in the city were closed on the day of the funeral.

Another committee was formed to erect a suitable monument over Timothy Burns' grave in Oak Grove Cemetery. Still another group expressed the intent to work harder than ever to bring Burns' dearest wish to fruition — the establishment of a railroad line into La Crosse, which in due time did indeed become a reality.
In Madison, a month after his death, a memorial service was held at the court house with most state legislators in attendance, to commemorate and honor Timothy Burns. He was eulogized in the Madison Argus on October 8, 1853, in a four-column spread.

Timothy Burns' accomplishments on behalf of La Crosse and his generosity to the city of his adoption have proved to be of inestimable value to this day.

Whenever the death of a prominent person occurred in the 19th century, it was customary to report and describe the proceedings and funeral in the most dramatic, even macabre, terms. Burns' death was described in this way:

"The scene — the last view for the relatives of the deceased — was a scene long to be remembered by those who witnessed it. The deep and overwhelming grief of his aged parents; the utter desolation and despair of his widow; the violent outburst and wailing and inconsolable moanings of his sisters and children; the subdued and pungent sorrow depicted upon the manly features of his brothers; with the impressive solemnity of the whole community — all conspired to produce a lasting impression upon the minds and feelings of the spectators.

"The corpse looked pleasant and natural and when one glanced at the high and intelligent forehead, so pure and clear, one could scarcely realize that nothing remained on earth of the powerful man — the hope of his family and his tried and true friends — all is nothing but dust."
Joseph Clarke, A Forward-Looking Mayor

A packet of brittle yellowing letters written during the Civil War period speak eloquently of the affection and dedication of a son for his widowed mother. Written in the spidery calligraphy of the time, but nonetheless masculine, the ink now fading and sometimes totally obliterated by time, the letters are testimony of a deep and abiding filial devotion in an era when life even at its best was difficult.

The letters came to light recently when John Boe, 1022 State Street, a local carpenter, found them imbedded in a wall of the house at 125 South 10th Street which he was remodeling.

Why do these letters warrant attention now, 120 years after they were written? Because the writer, Joseph Clarke, served as our 17th mayor, in 1880.

The house in which the letters were discovered was his residence for more than 30 years and in which he died in 1904. Now converted into apartments, the house bears no resemblance to its original single family form.

As these letters of tenderness and compassion are read it becomes readily apparent that not only was the Clarke family fortunate in having this man as its protector, but that the city of La Crosse as well was lucky to enjoy his leadership, if only for a brief period. Clarke's life was a panorama of activity and accomplishment, exhibiting a remarkable altruism for his adopted community and for all whose
lives touched his. Said his eulogist to the grief-stricken city at the
time of Clarke's death: "His breadth of view and force of character
have made him an influence for good . . . a useful citizen, a cheerful
and beloved gentleman."

Joseph Clarke was born in Philadelphia on January 16, 1841 and
received his early education there. In 1862, at the age of 21, he came
west to work for family friends who had gone into business in La
Crosse. As the oldest of seven children in his family, his total devotion
to his widowed mother and younger brothers and sisters was nothing
less than remarkable. Contemporary sociologists would surely find a
comparison between Clarke's youthful attitudes and those of his
counterparts of today a challenging and interesting study. During
the four decades he lived in La Crosse he made a good name for
himself and worked diligently for the best interests of the city of his
choice.

From a small frame building on the west side of Front Street near
State, the Lloyd and Supplee Hardware Company grew and pros­
ered from 1856 until 1861, when they moved to the four-story stone
building on the southwest corner of Main and Front streets. A year
later Joseph Clarke came to La Crosse to work for this company, first
as clerk and bookkeeper and later as a full business partner.

In 1867, William J. Lloyd (who was mayor of La Crosse in 1865)
and his partner, W. J. Supplee, moved back to Philadelphia, and a
new partnership was formed, made up of Frank Lloyd (William's
brother), Joseph M. Custer and Joseph Clarke. In 1868, Clarke mar-
ried Anna M. Custer, sister of Mrs. William J. Lloyd and daughter of Joseph Custer. Lloyd married Lizzie Custer, daughter of Nathan Custer, brother of Joseph Custer. Joseph and Anna Clarke produced four children. Thus, the Lloyd, Supplee, Custer and Clarke families were all related through marriage.

The firm of Lloyd, Custer and Clarke was dissolved in 1872; Custer's share was purchased by the other two partners and the name became Lloyd and Clarke and remained so for the next 20 years, when it went out of business.

In 1891 Lloyd opened a hardware store at 326 Pearl Street which was later purchased by the Tausche family. Joseph Clarke then became associated with the Saulte Ste. Marie Water Power & Land Company as its president. The following year the La Crosse Cooperage Company was organized with headquarters in the building on the west side of Front Street between Main and Pearl, which was three years later occupied by the newly-formed La Crosse Rubber Mills. Clarke was secretary and general manager of the cooperage firm. He then moved back to Philadelphia in 1894 and there took employment with the Supplee Hardware Company with which he had started 33 years earlier in La Crosse. He lived in Philadelphia until 1900 when he returned to La Crosse where he accepted a position as secretary of the La Crosse Plow Company, founded by Albert Hirshheimer in 1865.

During his years in La Crosse, Clarke was active in many civic and commercial enterprises. Besides his commercial involvements, he served two years as vice-president of the Board of Trade (precursor of the Chamber of Commerce) and then was elected its president for two years in 1886-1887. He was also the first president of the Manufacturers and Jobbers Union which he organized, and later he became president of the Badger Steel Roofing Company.

He twice refused requests to run for mayor of La Crosse, but in 1879 he acceded to popular demand and was "magnificently and unanimously" elected on a non-partisan ticket for the year 1880. In taking the oath of office he made no promises, commitments, or recommendations. He said only that with the help of the common council he would determine what was best for the city and then do his utmost to fulfill those aims.

During his mayoral regime he was instrumental in advancing educational facilities and helped raise funds to procure land and to
erect new elementary schoolhouses. An ordinance was enacted which fixed license fees for theatrical performances: circuses and caravans at $50; concerts $5 each, and miscellaneous entertainment $3 each.

The city sorely needed a new post office which had been housed in the McMillan-Sill-Bliss Building on the northeast corner of Third and Main Streets (later known as the Valentino Building, demolished in 1981). The construction of a new federal building at the time was considered impractical. Clarke made arrangements with Abner Gile for the post office to occupy part of his building on the southeast corner of Fourth and Main streets (site of the Park store, later Doerflingers). An area, 35 by 75 feet, on the first floor of the Gile Building with a diagonal corner entrance was leased in 1880 for use as the post office. The Gile Building (Park Store) was completely destroyed by a devastating fire in 1903 and rebuilt by William Doerflinger the following year. The remainder of the first floor was leased to the Trade Palace, a large mercantile establishment. The second floor was rented out for offices and the third floor contained a large meeting hall.

An ordinance was passed during Clarke's administration making it illegal to discharge guns or other fireworks on public streets. Also, during his time in office, the city scales were made official by common council action and "all loads were to be charged at 10 cents per load."

The crowning achievement of Clarke's mayoral term was the establishment of a new pumping station, which today is known as the Pump House at 119 King Street and houses an arts and crafts facility.
Early in 1880 the matter of a city pumping station was suggested and before the end of the year, under Clarke's direction, it became a reality. It was constructed to pump water into the city water mains which until that time had been accomplished through the private pumps of the John Paul and C. L. Colman saw mills. These private pumps which furnished water for fire protection as well as for domestic use were inadequate to fulfill the city's needs.

The contracts with the Paul and Colman mills would have cost the city $10,000 over a period of three years. It was not so much a matter of funding, which could have been met, but it was not considered in the best long term interests of the citizens to be served by private pumps. La Crosse was growing in population and expanding commercially and the two private mill pumps were not sufficient to meet the city's needs. At that time the city had eight miles of water pipes. It was estimated by the finance and fire committees that the pumps, boilers, engines and other appurtenances would cost approximately $14,000 plus an additional $3,300 to lay a new 16-inch water main from Front to Third streets. The city appropriated $18,000 from its general fund and proposed a plan to borrow the remainder needed on notes. Within a matter of only a few weeks a contract was drawn up with the George F. Blake Manufacturing Company of Boston to supply the boilers and other needed items for $9,500. M. Funk, a local boiler manufacturer, was given a subcontract to furnish the remaining requirements.

The site chosen for the new pump was on lower King Street between Front and Second and the building was erected at a cost of $7,677. The new pumps discharged 2.5 million gallons of water daily.

La Crosse, with a population of a little over 16,000, was the fourth largest community in the state. Milwaukee, Racine, and Oshkosh occupied the first three spots in that order. Although Racine was second in point of population, due to the many manufacturing plants which had settled there, La Crosse was superior in most other ways. Racine was behind La Crosse in public improvements; it had fewer miles of paved streets, had no bus or street car lines, no board of trade, and no water pumping station. La Crosse had all of these and more.

During Clarke's term as mayor, a bill was passed permitting assessment of the cost of laying water mains to the owners of properties abutting these at a fixed charge of 40 cents per foot. These charges were made retroactive to owners who had pipes laid before
the bill became law. Revenues of $25,000 were generated from this action. The public was elated over this improvement which guaranteed an adequate water supply for fire protection and for household use for many years to come.

Joseph Clarke died on January 17, 1904, one day after his 63rd birthday. To honor him as one of La Crosse's most influential citizens, city offices and most business establishments were closed on the day of the funeral and the American flag flew at half staff on city hall. Simple Episcopalian services were held with Rev. C. N. Moller officiating. At Clarke's own request, the minister read the deceased's favorite poem "Crossing the Bar" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson as part of the services.

"Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I set out to sea.

"I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar."
A perusal of Joseph Clarke's letters to his widowed mother and other members of his family in the 1860s reveals a young man of sensitivity and compassion. Though he was only 21 years old when he left his home in Philadelphia to build his life and future a thousand miles to the west, one of his primary concerns was his widowed mother and his several younger brothers and sisters. From the small salary he received as a hardware clerk he sent his mother two dollars a week and often expressed his regret that he could not send more. There was no public welfare or aid to dependent children in those days. Joseph felt it was his responsibility to provide for the fatherless home he left behind.

His letters are intelligent and well written and disclose a young man of some culture and refinement. His devotion to his family and his thoughtfulness for their well-being is evidenced in the fact that he brought his brother Jacob to La Crosse and gave him permanent employment in his own firm. He educated his younger sister Mary who later became director of nurses training at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. He provided dowries leading to the marriages of his other younger sisters. Excerpts from his letters appear below and speak for themselves.

April 17, 1862 — Joseph wrote to his mother saying that he had arrived in La Crosse at 4:00 o'clock that morning “safe and sound as a new penny.” He describes the store where he is to work and further says “From the rear of the store can be seen the large steam boats going up and down the Mississippi River. They stop directly in the rear of the store to discharge passengers and freight.”

April 25, 1862 — “Sie has 'listed’” (enlisted in the Union Army). He says further “The river is up six feet and still rising and is completely flooded upstream.”

February 19, 1863 — Zeke Clarke wrote to his mother on stationery of Headquarters, 12th Corps, Army of the Potomac: “I expect to obtain a furlough before next Christmas. In the Army of the Potomac, there exists a systematic arrangement of granting furloughs; two to every one hundred men reported for duty. I presume my turn will be around before the war is over. I don’t think McClellan will ever resume command of the Army of the Potomac, but I do believe he is
more capable than any other man for the position now held by Hal-leck. Relative to General Slocum, I have the honor to inform you that he is a graduate of West Point, commanded a regiment at the out-break of the rebellion, was wounded in the first battle of Bull Run and for his services was appointed Brig. General. He afterwards served with McClellan on the peninsula where he earned his two stars. I like him very much and think him a soldier and a gentleman. The natural characters of the two—Banks and Slocum, are different, though both are very gentlemanly—of Banks, I think had he a military education he would be one of our greatest chieftans. I have sent no picture of Pope or his staff home to you for the simple reason that I never thought enough of him to carry any of his trash with me . . . “Everything is lovely and the rebels will soon hang high.”

April 24, 1863 — Clarke bemoans the fact that he could not vote in the city election because he had not been a resident of the state for at least a year.

May 31, 1863 — “I suppose you have heard that my friend Brady was taken prisoner at the last battle. I received a letter from him a few days ago informing me that he had been paroled and was at the parole camp in Annapolis, Maryland. He was treated pretty roughly and came near being starved to death while at Richmond.”

August 27, 1863 — To his mother he sent $5 and “$5 more to buy a clothes wringer.”

May 29, 1864 — He sent his mother $10 for “little things.” His mother replied in July asking if the “draft has come to La Crosse” and hopes Joseph “will escape.” She then writes “Brother Zeke is in the Army at Warrenton Junction, Virginia, and says he has been in the saddle every day since the 13th of June and is tired of that but thinks its not so bad as having to walk.” “Sam Wigus was wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg (Gettysburg) and died last Sunday. His brother brot him home on last Thursday and he was boreed buried yesterday. Jesse Elberson was here yesterday. He is drafted and he don’t want to go. He don’t want to pay the $300. They are asking $200 for substitutes. John Plish paid that bill. Mac Dument got clear on account of inflamation and I don’t believe he has ever had a bit of it.”

September 28, 1865 — Joseph to his sister Lizzie: “I managed to get down to the fair this afternoon in company with a young lady friend. Saw all there was to be seen and came home with a headache.”

November 12, 1865 — Joseph wrote his mother that he had just
purchased a “coat, vest, pants, boots and hat.” He also sent his mother $2 and added “don’t return it.”

December 16, 1865 — Joseph to his sister Lizzie. “It has been so long since I have been to church that I almost forgot what one looks like, but tomorrow I think I shall go, as a young man, a friend of mine, is to be ordained. I very seldom go to Methodist church here. They have such a poor one and then they always have the misfortune to get such poor ministers. The Baptist church here seems more like our own church at home to me and I consequently go there more than to the Methodist or Episcopal. The Universalists have nearly completed a church so that we now have nearly as many denominations here as are to be found in Philadelphia, excepting the Society of Friends.” Then he goes on to say “What changes have taken place since last Christmas. Our country has weathered many changes and we in our family have not escaped. A year ago how little we thought that when another year should roll around that one of our number, and a dearly loved one too, should be taken from us to join the Angel Throng above. I do hope the rest of us may be spared to meet again in happier times around the social board.”

February 21, 1866 — Joseph sent $30 to his mother and also a draft for $18.55 which he had been paid for a special bookkeeping job. He wrote “Use the $30 for your back rent and the balance as you choose. I send it willingly and I would send more if I was able to do so.”

September 4, 1866 — Joseph to his mother: “I was glad to learn that the money I sent had been duly received. I hope you have already made use of it in the way I proposed and that your coal bin is now full. Mother, you must never think of sending money back to me . . . you say it worries you to take so much from me. Well, this must not be. What I send I send willingly, and you must receive it in the same way. I would like to send four times as much as I do. Indeed, mother, I can’t tell you how much pleasure I take in sending little amounts to you once in a while. I feel it is my duty but at the same time one of the most pleasant duties I can perform.”

September 16, 1866 — Joseph to his mother: “I received the bundle containing my shirts. They are very nice and I like them very much. The same may be said of the cuffs.” (Male office workers wore black cloth half-sleeves from elbow to wrist, kept in place with elastic, to protect their white shirt sleeves from becoming soiled.) “I thank you very much for the trouble you have been to in making them
for me. They will last me a long while.” Joseph also sent his mother $2
and wrote “I wish I was able to send you $10 a week instead of $2. I
would like it a great deal better.”

November 18, 1866 — Joseph to his young sister Clara: “I had no
idea you could write so good a letter and I thank you very much for
sending it to me. You must tell Jake and Zeke not to bother you by
laughing the next time you write.” He also enclosed $2, one for Clara
and one for Mary. “You must both let Mother spend it for you for
something useful. She will know what is best for you. I suppose you
and Mary help mother a good deal about the house now, don’t you?”

December 11, 1866 — Joseph to his mother: “If I only had the
means, nothing would give me more pleasure than making you com­
fortable.”

January 27, 1867 — Joseph sent $2 to his mother and wrote “Take
things as easy as you can, mother, and do not exert yourself too
much.” “You want to know if there is anything said of the draft out
this way. Not much. When it comes, all those who can pay $300 will
do so; the rest will have to run their chances.”

February 3, 1867 — Joseph sent his mother a draft for $100 “to
make yourself and Lizzie as comfortable as possible. Don’t fail to let
me know when you are in need of funds.” (The $100 was payment for
some special work he had done.)

February 18, 1867 — Joseph to his mother: “You must be tired
out, mother, having so much to attend to. I want you to get someone to
act as nurse or housekeeper for you, a middle-aged lady would be best,
a person what could relieve you of all the household responsibilities.
If you don’t know of such a person that can be had, then please have
some of your lady friends try to find such a person for you. I am in
earnest about this, mother, and will see that such a person is well
paid. I feel that it is not right for you to be working so hard, and as
long as I can raise any money and you need it, you shall have it.”

March 30, 1867 — Joseph to his sister Lizzie: “I wrote mother
about getting a person for housekeeper, one that can take charge of
affairs and relieve mother of all the responsibilities. She speaks of the
matter in her letter and says it will cost too much. Nevertheless I do
not think so and must still insist on her getting such a person if it is
any way possible. I mean this Lizzie and will supply the necessary
funds. I am afraid that Mary may overtax herself working about the
house.”
May 8, 1867 — Jacob Clark to his mother describes a fire though he does not name it: "We had quite a fire here last Sunday week. A hotel, which was really the best kept hotel in the place, took fire about two o’clock in the morning, and in the course of a couple of hours was completely burned to the ground. The building was of wood, and the heavy wind blowing at the time made it burn very rapidly. The steam fire engine that we have was unable to save the hotel, but was yet fortunate in saving the surrounding property from destruction. One man boarding at the hotel was so frightened when they burst into his room and told him that the house was on fire, that he gathered up his clothes under this arm and ran into the street and dressed himself in the cold night air. He could not even stop long enough to take his gold watch from under his pillow, but seizing his trunk, he threw it from the window and got downstairs as quick as possible. Joe picked up a part of the watch case the night of the fire, it was supposed the watch was thrown out along with the bed. They recklessly threw out of the window everything they could lay their hands on, looking glasses, stoves, spittoons, chairs, and in fact all they could get through the windows. They even threw a bureau out of the second story window. It might have been saved had they not been in such haste to throw it out. It was pretty well marked up by the fall.”

May 12, 1867 — Joseph sent his mother $5 and said “Use it for little delicacies and try to get a woman to help in the house.”

Joseph Clarke has not received a great deal of attention in La Crosse history, but surely the city was indeed fortunate that he chose to spend the major portion of his life here. His biography and his personal correspondence provide ample evidence of his many achievements during an important period in our community’s growth and development.
The first mayoral election in La Crosse was of considerable interest when the office was won by a majority of one vote. Thomas B. Stoddard and John M. Levy were the two candidates for the post. In early March 1856 Levy asked Stoddard to discuss with him the matter of who should run for mayor. Stoddard indicated a reluctance to run and stated that he had already declined an invitation from a group of citizens to be their candidate. A day later Levy wrote to Stoddard offering to withdraw his own candidacy if Stoddard decided to run for the office. After an exchange of communications between the two men the matter still remained unresolved.

On March 14, 1856 at a meeting of Democratic voters, an informal ballot gave Levy 26 votes and Stoddard 20. The first formal ballot gave Levy 39 and Stoddard 31. Levy declined to run because there "was not enough unanimity." The next ballot gave Stoddard 61 and Levy 15, and Stoddard was unanimously nominated. Stoddard again declined because he said he was not a member of the Democratic party. Levy was subsequently nominated without opposition.

The following day at a non-partisan meeting, accusatory politics entered the discussion. The minority group of Republicans promptly nominated Stoddard as their candidate. Again Stoddard declined, saying he was opposed to "baptizing our young city in the dirty puddle of politics." "Dirty politics" did indeed enter into the first public election of the city. The final outcome of the election was 216 to 215 in favor of Stoddard. Stoddard was duly notified by mail that he had been elected. The letter read as follows:

To Thomas B. Stoddard:

Sir:

Please take notice that an election held in the City of La Crosse under the Charter of said City, you received the highest number of votes cast for the Office of Mayor and are declared elected.

Dated April 3 A.D. 1856

Jacob Bagley Supervisors
Silvester Smith of the Town
R. B. Travis of La Crosse

Attest
J.S. Patten
Town Clerk
Levy later confessed that he had voted for Stoddard; Stoddard had voted for himself. Had Levy voted for himself the outcome would have been just the opposite and Levy would have won by one vote. Stoddard held the mayor's office only one term. Most of the citizens regarded Levy highly and were determined that he was to be their leader. He was elected to three terms as mayor in 1860, 1866, and 1867.

The charter for the city of La Crosse was written by Hon. Samuel D. Hastings in March 1856 and introduced to state government officials by Dr. Dugald D. Cameron, who was the assembly representative for the La Crosse district. The charter was approved by Governor William Barstow on March 14, 1856, and went into effect on the first Tuesday of April 1856. The following offices were listed in the charter: Mayor, City Clerk, Assessor, Superintendent of Schools, Police Justice, Justice of the Peace, Marshall and Attorney, a Constable and an Alderman for each ward.

The city was divided into three wards: the area north of State Street constituted the first ward; between State and Cass Streets the second; and the area south of Cass Street the third. All offices were to be held for one year except the Police Justice and the Justice of Peace, which were to be held for two years.

The mayor was to be elected by popular vote of the citizens of La Crosse. From 1856 to 1887 his term of office was for one year; from 1887 to 1980 he was elected for a term of two years. In 1980 by popular
The people decided that the mayor was to hold office for four years, starting in 1981.

The mayor was from the first admonished against "over legislation" and especially against "over extending the credit of the city in any speculative enterprises." The La Crosse National Democrat of April 18, 1856 published the City Charter and Articles of Incorporation in its entirety so there would be no question about the city’s new rules and regulations.

La Crosse has had 38 mayors who have served for 79 terms of office: 19 mayors served one term, 9 served 2 terms, 4 served 3 terms, 4 served 4 terms, one served 5 terms and one served 9 terms. La Crosse mayors have come from all walks of life: physicians, attorneys, accountants, businessmen, druggists, tailors, tradesmen. They have been Republicans, Democrats, and non-partisan; Catholics, Protestants and Jews — surely a democratic and heterogenous representation.

The mayor of La Crosse is vested with many powers and responsibilities. He is required to preside over meetings of the Common Council but has a vote therein only in case of a tie. He may veto any ordinance, resolution or appropriation passed by the council; however, his veto may be canceled by a 2/3 vote of the council. He is responsible for the enforcement and observance of all state laws and city ordinances. He is head of the police and fire departments and is trustee of their pension funds. He has the power to administer oaths and affirmations and to certify acknowledgements of legal instruments. As chief executive of the city he may appoint special officers in case of riots or other disturbances. He is ex-officio member of the La Crosse Public Library Board of Trustees and of the Pettibone Park Commission. He is also a member of the Board of Review which passes upon city property assessments. He appoints the City Engineer, City Weed Commissioner, members of the Parks and Recreation Board, Police and Fire Commissioners, and members of the City Historic Sites Commission. He makes recommendations for appointments to the Aviation Board. In fact, he makes appointments or recommendations for appointments to nearly every official municipal government board not elective, subject to approval of the Common Council.

The mayor is also authorized to sign city bonds when issued. He is further required to meet with any citizens, individually or in groups,
The Mayors of La Crosse

who wish to discuss matters of city importance. He issues proclama-
tions for observance of holidays, disasters, emergency calls, and spe-
cial events. In addition, he is the official greeter to official visitors to
the city of La Crosse and represents the city at various public conven-
tions and other official functions. Finally, he is required to communi-
cate in writing once a year to the Common Council such information
as that body may require.

In April 1856, an Act to Incorporate the City of La Crosse, Chapter
9, Section 12, states that “No compensation or salary shall be paid out
of the City Treasury to the Mayor or any Alderman of the City for
their services, and they are hereby prohibited from being in any
manner interested in any contract made by the authority of the City.”
No official serving the City in any official capacity was to receive or
accept any benefit, gift or payment of any kind in return for special
services or favors extended to any individual or groups. La Crosse has
remained remarkably clean in this respect.

As the mayor’s office assumed more and greater responsibilities
as the years passed and eventually became a full-time job, the regula-
tion as to non-payment for services was rescinded and all official city
positions became salaried employees.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Mayors of La Crosse

Thomas B. Stoddard ... 1856  William Torrance ... 1905-1907
E. D. Campbell ......... 1857  W. A. Anderson ....... 1907-1909
David Taylor .......... 1858  Ori J. Sorensen ....... 1909-1911
James I. Lyndes ....... 1859  John Dengler ......... 1911-1913
John M. Levy .......... 1860  Ori J. Sorensen ....... 1913-1915
Wilson Colwell ....... 1861  A. A. Bentley ......... 1915-1917
Albert W. Pettibone .. 1862  A. A. Bentley ......... 1917-1919
Albert W. Pettibone .. 1863  A. A. Bentley ......... 1919-1921
Albert W. Pettibone .. 1864  A. A. Bentley ......... 1921-1923
William J. Lloyd ...... 1865  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1923-1925
John M. Levy .......... 1866  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1925-1927
John M. Levy .......... 1867  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1927-1929
Theodore Rodolf ...... 1868  John E. Langdon ....... 1929-1931
Charles L. Colman ..... 1869  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1931-1933
Theodore Rodolf ...... 1870  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1933-1935
Alexander McMillan ... 1871  C. August Boerner ... 1935-1937
James I. Lyndes ...... 1872  C. August Boerner ... 1937-1939
G. van Steenwyk ....... 1873  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1939-1941
G. M. Woodward ....... 1874  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1941-1943
James J. Hogan ....... 1875  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1943-1945
James J. Hogan ....... 1876  Joseph J. Verchota ..., 1945-1947
George Edwards ....... 1877  Charles A. Beranek ... 1947-1949
David Law ......... 1878  Henry J. Ahrens .... 1949-1951
David Law ......... 1879  Henry J. Ahrens .... 1951-1953
Joseph Clarke ....... 1880  Henry J. Ahrens .... 1953-1955
H. F. Smiley .......... 1881  Milo G. Knutson .... 1955-1957
David Law .......... 1882  Milo G. Knutson .... 1957-1959
David Law .......... 1883  Milo G. Knutson .... 1959-1961
W. A. Roosevelt ....... 1884  Milo G. Knutson .... 1961-1963
D. Frank Powell ....... 1885  Milo G. Knutson .... 1963-1965
D. Frank Powell ....... 1886  Warren Loveland ... 1965-1967
David Austin ...... 1887-1889  Warren Loveland ... 1967-1969
John Dengler ........ 1889-1891  Warren Loveland ... 1969-1971
F. A. Copeland ....... 1891-1893  W. Peter Gilbertson ... 1971-1973
D. Frank Powell ....... 1893-1895  W. Peter Gilbertson ... 1973-1975
D. Frank Powell ....... 1895-1897  Patrick Zielke .... 1975-1977
James McCord ....... 1897-1899  Patrick Zielke .... 1977-1979
W. A. Anderson ....... 1899-1901  Patrick Zielke .... 1979-1981
William Torrance ..... 1903-1905
Onalaska, A Proud and Independent City

On a number of occasions through the years the citizens of Onalaska have faced plans to annex or consolidate their community with the city of La Crosse. Each time the measure was overwhelmingly rejected. The two main issues have been the property tax base and education. Onalaskans did not want to become merely a tentacular suburb of La Crosse with only token representation in the important areas of government. They have always wanted to make their own decisions fully and independently and without pressure from special La Crosse interests.

In every phase of endeavor Onalaskans have always volubly indicated their intense pride in their community, its history and its growth; they have wanted to be the arbiters of their own destiny, never merely an appendage of a larger city. Their history, they felt, was just as unique and important in the growth of this area as was that of any other community.

During the middle of the 19th century Onalaska felt that it had a better than even chance of becoming the important water traffic metropolis in this region. Even though La Crosse was directly on the main channel of the Mississippi River and at the confluence of three rivers, it was after all nothing more than a treeless prairie in the 1840s. Onalaska, five miles north, on the other hand, was a verdant lush timbered area that would attract settlers more readily than would Prairie La Crosse. So reasoned the early settlers of Onalaska. The geographic location of La Crosse however made it a more feasible stopping point for steamboats traveling up and down the Mississippi River. Records show that several smaller steamboats regularly docked at Onalaska but never in the great numbers that stopped at La Crosse. For many years the two towns vied for prime stature in the important lumbering industry of the time which was dependent upon the river as its transport medium.

In later years an Onalaskan wrote “Fate robbed Onalaska to make a city of La Crosse. Had the powers which shape the destinies of nations not ruled otherwise, Onalaska would today be not only a rival, but superior to her larger neighbor to the south.”

In the summer of 1851 Thomas G. Rowe, a native New Yorker, like many other young men of his time, came west to seek his fortune. La Crosse, already nearly ten years old, appeared to be a likely place
to settle. He engaged a room in the Western Enterprise Hotel while he looked about. This hotel, located at the corner of Front and Pearl streets, had been built by John M. Levy, a prominent La Crosse businessman, but was operated by Simeon Kellogg. Rowe, a tall, blue-eyed young man with sandy hair, was interested in literature, with a particular penchant for reading and reciting poetry. During the day Rowe scouted the area for a locale to establish his roots and soon found the Onalaska terrain much to his liking. He promptly registered the site at the Mineral Point land office and employed a surveyor to lay out the town that fall.

John Levy had just built the wooden frame for a building which he intended to erect on La Crosse’s waterfront. Rowe induced Levy to sell the frame to him, and immediately erected a tavern/hotel for rivermen in Onalaska. While living at the Western Enterprise Rowe became a friend and later roommate of Harvey E. Hubbard, a young attorney from Milwaukee who had settled in La Crosse. During the evenings Rowe and Hubbard would sit on the front porch of the hotel and speak of many things, but invariably Rowe brought the discussions back to literature and to his favorite poetry. Hubbard later described Rowe as “a well educated, intellectual and genial gentleman.” One of Rowe’s favorite poems was “The Pleasures of Hope” by Thomas Campbell; it spoke of “oonalaska’s shore,” a name which captured Rowe’s fancy. He decided to call his new location “Oonalaska;” Hubbard suggested he drop an o and thus was born the name Onalaska. While most of the names in the area were of Indian origin, Onalaska was of Aleutian and/or Russian derivation. The only other name similar to it was Unalaska, a seal fishing village in the Aleutian Islands. In the late 1880s, as the lumber business waned, many Onalaskans moved to Arkansas in order to enjoy a more temperate climate. There they banded together and called their town Onalaska, Arkansas; it was short-lived and soon went into oblivion. Today there are two other Onalaskas in the United States: one in Washington, the other in Texas.

Lumbering was the most significant business in this area during the last half of the 19th century and both La Crosse and Onalaska owe their origins and existence to it. The white pine logs which were floated down the Black River each spring formed the basis for the lumbering industry in Onalaska and La Crosse. A vast system of piers was built to accommodate the great masses of logs that backed
up and thus sorting of logs became necessary. Each log was marked at its cut end with the insignia of its owner. The Nichols Lumber Company, the most important in Onalaska, for example, had as its mark a zigzag N. There were at least 33 sawmills that reached from Onalaska to La Crosse between 1850 and 1900, but not all were in operation at the same time.

C. M. Nichols and N. J. Tompkins built the first sawmill in Onalaska in 1852-1853. Shortly thereafter it became the property of C. H. Nichols, F. E. Nichols and F. E. Pooler. It was the town's most active business for 50 years and closed its doors in 1902. Other mills in Onalaska were Royce, Boice and Melville, Bateman, Sparks, Hall, Shingle, and Island Mills. From 1855 to 1899 more than six billion board feet of logs were floated down the Black River. Men employed in the lumbering industry included loggers, rivermen, millworkers, raftsmen, and towboatmen. In 1893 the number of men in the lumbering industry hit a high of nearly 4,400 men. Jobs were provided not only for great numbers of men in Onalaska, but for a considerable number of women as well, who generally worked in the shingle mills as edgers, sorters and packers.

The men who settled in Onalaska to work in the lumbering industry came largely from Canada, as well as many from Maine where they had already been initiated into the business. Norwegians formed a large segment of Onalaska's early population because they too were naturally attracted to the lumbering possibilities. Indeed, one of the shanty areas where many of the lumbermen lived was known as Fort Norway.

A large group of Dutchmen had emigrated from Holland and settled in New Amsterdam, but many of them moved to Onalaska. One of them, Oepke H. Bonnema, who later became a wealthy grain dealer, visited Onalaska in 1853 (he spelled the name Anna Lasky) and purchased 800 acres of timberland, a large part of it in Onalaska.

During the winter season a great exodus took place as men left for the woods to fell trees. It was not unusual for crews to be composed of more than 100 men each. The men who remained in town worked at odd jobs and prepared and renovated the sawmills for the spring influx of logs.

The men who went into the woods provided well for their wives and children before leaving by arranging for sufficient wood and food for the winter months. Fuel usually consisted of shingle blocks not
suitable for building purposes, and food was great chunks of meat, flour and other staples. The additional goods needed by these families were purchased at the stores on credit; the men settled the accounts when they returned home in the spring. Food needs were augmented by family gardens in the summer, chickens and cows, and nearly every family kept a milk cow in its back yard. During the grass-growing season these cows were herded by boys for 50 cents per week per cow. People made their own soap and candles, used kerosene lamps, and pumped their own water. Ordinary day-to-day living was difficult.

The lumbering industry was also responsible for the establishment of many other businesses as well — stores and services of all kinds, and especially saloons and hotels. Of particular importance was the advent of railways in 1855 which became a significant means of land transportation. Onalaska was served by no less then four steam railways during the peak of the lumbering industry. There was also a horse-drawn interurban railway which was later converted to electricity. As the forests were depleted and sawmills waned, the railroads discontinued their services and many hotels and taverns went out of business.

A man named Welch is said to have built the first residence as well as the first wagon track in Onalaska in 1852, a fact that might well have been disputed by Thomas Rowe, who is generally regarded as the town's founder. The Dutchman Bonnema is reputed to have built five houses shortly thereafter.

Onalaska was incorporated as a village in 1872 and as a city in 1887. In 1877 Alex Moran and a Mr. Ball started Onalaska's first newspaper, at first called the La Crosse County Record, which later changed its name to the Onalaska Record-Times. It published its final edition on January 16, 1969, after 92 years of continuous service.

From its beginning Onalaska has been served by at least one Catholic, one Methodist, and several Lutheran churches. These in turn gave rise to parochial schools sponsored by the various churches. Later, public non-religious schools were established. Ellis B. Usher, prominent editor of the La Crosse Chronicle from 1878 to 1901 stated that his mother had much to do with the establishment of public schools in Onalaska. He bemoaned the fact that "... mother took a careful interest in Onalaska schools much more to my mental improvement than to my temporary exaltation of soul."

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As the decades passed, Onalaska progressed and prospered with the times, and even regressed occasionally. Onalaska's population grew steadily during the last century, from 680 in 1875 to 4,909 in 1970 to 9,200 in 1980. There was a slight recession in population only during the first two decades of the 20th century. It is significant also to note that throughout its history Onalaska's citizens have been relatively young. During the 1960s more than half of its population was under 25 years of age; today more than 40 percent are less than age 40. During the decade from 1970 to 1980 the city's population nearly doubled. This gave rise to a need for more homes and several attractive housing developments were built, especially by the Raymond Brothers.

Erickson's Hardwoods, Inc. was established in 1934 and at one time employed more than 70 persons. In recent years it was sold to Weyerhauser Wood Products Co. which still operates it. Outers Laboratories and Metallics, Inc. both located on adjoining Brice's Prairie (named after George Brice who settled on a farm there in 1863) add a great deal to Onalaska's economy.

The Oak Forest Sanitarium, a prime medical facility for persons suffering from tuberculosis, was built on a hilltop southeast of the city in 1918. As the disease came under control, it ceased operations in 1972. The J. S. Gedney Pickle Co., one of the country's larger canneries, operated a plant in Onalaska for many years. It was reorganized in 1906 and its name changed to the Onalaska Pickle and Canning Co. Its products went by the trade name of Opaca. It closed its doors in 1939. Of more recent origin is the Center 90 shopping center built on a 26-acre tract in 1974.

Onalaska has had only four mayors since World War Two — Ben Sias, 1946-1950; Irving Pertzsch, 1950-1972; Earl Phillips, 1972-1976; Shirleigh Van Riper, 1976 to date.

Though Onalaska has had many individuals who have contributed greatly to the progress and growth of the city; one man in particular stands out — Irving H. Pertzsch. He served in public office for nearly 40 years, nearly 34 of them as mayor. He was elected as an alderman in 1934 and in 1936 became mayor, serving five consecutive terms. In 1947 he resigned as mayor and served on the school board until 1950. In that year he again was elected mayor and served continuously until 1972. He was honored in 1950 by having the new public elementary school named after him. While mayor, Pertzsch
was largely responsible for the installation of the city's sewage system and for laying many of its paved streets. Pertzsch headed his own construction company building roads, bridges, sewage disposal plants and other structures. As an octogenarian, he continued to direct his construction business on a daily basis, working as hard as many men half his age. Irving Pertzsch died in December 1984 at the age of 80, leaving behind him a formidable reputation of progress for his community.

A history of Onalaska could never be complete without mention of the charmingly indestructible Mrs. Ben Sias. Born Floyde Johnson in 1897, she became a legend in her own time; her name is almost synonymous with that of the city to which she dedicated her life. There was hardly a project or civic enterprise in the town that was not touched by Mrs. Sias in some way or other. As a young woman, Floyde played the piano accompaniment to the silent movies in the Crystal Theatre built by her father, often improvising the music to fit the pictures being shown. She taught school in Onalaska for 19 years, became a licensed real estate operator in 1950 and was voted Realtor of the Year in 1970. The La Crosse Chamber of Commerce named her Woman of the Month in July 1973. She married Ben Sias in 1937 and together they operated a real estate and insurance business. He was mayor of Onalaska for two terms. After he died in 1950, Floyde continued to run the business alone, and at the age of 87 this venerable and beloved lady continued to operate her business on a daily basis. The Sias Boat Livery on Sias Isles, a 35-acre tract on the Mississippi, was one of this couple's successful business ventures. In 1969 the firm was sold to Ronald Schams who continues to run it under the Sias name. Floyde Sias produced and directed the Onalaska Centennial pageant during its three-day gala in 1952. The Onalaska public library was named in her honor in 1978. Floyde Sias died in April 1985; the community was enriched by her presence.

Today Onalaska is an attractive small city with good homes, fine educational facilities and library, few serious governmental problems, many prosperous businesses, beautiful parks and playgrounds, its own lake, excellent recreational facilities, tourist attractions, and other advantages that make it a good place to live and work. Its close proximity to La Crosse is an added benefit. Although 75 percent of its working population is employed in La Crosse, their loyalty lies with their own city. The citizens of this progressive city are justifiably proud of their community.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Boisterous Antics in Early Onalaska

The archival history of every community is replete with vignettes of its early days that render an excellent insight into its settlers and their mode of living. Onalaska, like other small midwestern towns, offers many such tales and a few are here recounted.

Social life for early Onalaskans was simple. Their main sources of amusement other than conversation, were cards and especially dancing. Often a dance was spontaneously arranged late in the afternoon and by 7:00 o’clock the party was in full swing, with music provided by a violin, bass viol and accordion. During the proper season, huge pots of oyster stew were served at these dances. At other times the menu consisted of venison, beer, and baked beans baked in a “bean hole.” In later years young people gathered at the Aldrich Drug Store and the Milbright Jewelry Store in the evenings for social purposes and not infrequently for mischief. The Hyatt and Adams barbershops where a haircut and shave could be had for 50 cents were popular spots where men could get details of all the local happenings. The ladies had their own societies and sewing circles, usually connected with their churches, where they kept up with all the local gossip.

Hunting was a favorite pastime for men of that period and duck hunting on the Black River was especially popular. On one hunting expedition a group of men bagged an unusually large number of ducks, but none of the men knew how to prepare them for eating. One of the younger men offered to cook the ducks for the evening meal. After engaging in several ball games and consuming large quantities of beer, the hunters returned to camp ravenously hungry and ready to enjoy a savory meal of duck broth followed by succulent duck meat. Their first taste of the soup changed their expectations to wonder and curiosity at the strange flavor, followed by revulsion and vomiting. When the birds were taken from the broth it was discovered that the young inexperienced cook had boiled the birds whole, without removing feathers or entrails!

There was camaraderie between the rivermen of La Crosse and Onalaska and they attended each other’s parties, often uninvited, which frequently led to trouble. On one occasion a group of 100 firemen were having a picnic just outside the city limits of La Crosse. About 30 rivermen from Onalaska decided to attend the party where they were received in good fellowship and made to feel welcome. All
went well until the Onalaska rivermen, considerably under the influence of beer, decided to confiscate the La Crosse firemen's helmets. They donned the headgear and took off for Onalaska, with the La Crosse men in hot pursuit. It became known as the “three-mile race” and ended in a fierce free-for-all that was talked about for many years afterwards. As the two groups of men ran through a wooded area between the two towns, their clothing was ripped to shreds in the underbrush and many of them arrived nearly naked. Later the Onalaska men went back with knives and ready fists and the fight continued until a peace was declared when the men from both sides were exhausted.

Destructiveness was not uncommon. One story told was that of an unpopular saloon-keeper who had his place of business on the main street of Onalaska. One night a group of rivermen decided to let the saloon-keeper know how unpopular he was. Nearly 100 men entered his tavern and all ordered whiskey. The owner was greatly surprised at this sudden good fortune and supplied all the whiskey called for until his entire stock was depleted. In the meantime another group of men outside placed heavy ropes around the frame building; then at a signal all the men threw their combined strength and weight on the ropes and dragged the saloon building off its foundations and into the middle of the street. A lighted match was applied and soon the saloon-keeper was left with nothing but a heap of ashes to remind him of his place of business and his unpopularity.

Apparently this was a favorite method of sport and retribution. On another occasion, in another saloon, a card game was in progress in a back room. A group of men outside took a half-hitch about the front wall of the building, and at a pre-arranged shout from their leader they pulled the wall completely off, leaving the interior of the tavern exposed. The card-players, who were obviously aware of the plan, continued to play their game calmly throughout, and one was heard to say “That was a pretty good trick. Let’s all have a drink on that.”

Disciplinary problems were not uncommon in early Onalaska schools. Classes were conducted by male schoolmasters, most of whom were husky men. Women teachers did not appear until some time later. If a pupil showed reluctance to learn his three R’s, the schoolmaster hammered the instruction into his head, sometimes literally. "Hank" Powers, a large and very strong schoolmaster conducted his classes in
Boisterous Antics in Early Onalaska

the basement of a sawmill. He was not averse to meting out severe punishment to refractory students. Some of the boys often played tricks on Powers to get even with him for his harsh discipline. The sawmill was a sturdy stone structure and entrance to the basement classroom was through a heavy double door at the base of an incline. One very cold winter day a group of boys were coasting on their double-runner sleds down an icy hill. Their ringleader, an older husky boy, induced the group to play a trick on Powers. They tied their sleds together, with the largest one in the lead, and went sailing down the icy hill at full speed, all pointed directly at the school doors. Just as the first sled approached the doors, they all tumbled off their sleds into a snow bank. The steersman’s sled with the coasters behind went crashes into the door tearing it from its hinges, all landing in the middle of the schoolroom. Hank Powers did not hesitate a moment to act; he grabbed a large piece of cordwood from the woodpile behind the school stove and made for the invaders. He caught the leader and punished him publicly in front of the assembled students, much to the former’s chagrin and pain.

On another occasion a group of boys who wanted a winter holiday, entered the schoolhouse after it was closed for the night and filled the pot-bellied stove and the stove pipes with solidly packed snow. There was still a bit of warmth in the stove remaining from the daytime heating, just enough to slightly melt the snow packed in the pipes. During the bitterly cold night it froze into solid blocks of ice in the stove and pipes. No one ever discovered the identity of the culprits; and the boys got their holiday while the damage they caused was repaired.

As the community developed and prospered, its citizens outgrew such childish pranks and today manifests a mature and sophisticated image to the public.
True Gothic Splendor
in our Midst

Through the years a score or more locally important landmark structures have unfortunately disappeared into limbo. They are now but memories, preserved only in photographs and a few memorabilia. For a long time the magnificent Gothic Mons Anderson house at Fourth and Cass streets was in jeopardy of joining that roster of recollections.

In October 1982, the mansion was placed on the auction block and was purchased by a local history-oriented businessman. He paid a staggering sum for the sadly deteriorated edifice and at the present writing is in the process of totally restoring the house. This man has rendered a great service to the community in saving this once-elegant building from demolition and his plan to restore it to its former pristine beauty for posterity is surely noteworthy, for it is one of the remaining few structures of our notable architectural heritage.

The life and times of Mons Anderson, the original builder of the mansion, occupies a special niche in La Crosse history and the retention of his home is a fitting memorial to his memory.

Mons Anderson was born in Valders, Norway on June 8, 1830. He received his early education in Norway and in 1846 emigrated to America, settling in Milwaukee. His first job was as a jack-of-all-trades in the City Hotel there. During this same period he furthered his schooling by attending Professor Bach’s private academy for two
years, becoming proficient in English and learning American ways. He spent another year working in Herbert Reed's grocery store as clerk and stock-boy.

While in Milwaukee he learned that La Crosse was a progressive town and so in the summer of 1851 he came here to settle permanently. He took employment as a clerk in the Front Street general store of Samuel T. Smith, a Baptist preacher. Always a progressive entrepreneur, within a few months he became Smith's partner and in little more than a year was sole proprietor of the store. Primarily for economic reasons, he took Deacon W. W. Eustick as a partner for a year and E. Oleson for another two years. He seemed not to fare well with partners, perhaps because of his aggressiveness and determination to try advanced ideas, while his partners were reluctant to cooperate in new ventures.

In 1856 he acquired a sizeable piece of land on the northwest corner of Second and Main streets and there constructed a one-story brick building (the second brick structure in the city; all others were of wooden frame construction) into which he moved his inventory. Two years later he built an addition to his store and expanded his stock. In 1861 he added a third building. In this structure he opened his dry goods and clothing enterprise, which was later to earn him the title of "Merchant Prince of La Crosse."
Anderson became well known in the entire area for the excellent quality of his merchandise, his fair prices and the orderly manner in which he conducted his business. His courtly mien and unfailing courteous treatment of customers assured him of their repeated consideration.

La Crosse continued to grow and competitive dry goods and clothing stores appeared, but Anderson’s establishment retained its supremacy in the city. In 1870 he once again embarked upon a building program, nearly tripling his square footage. With the erection of this latest construction, he completed the imposing edifice which remained a La Crosse landmark for more than a century. It was demolished in 1974 to make way for the Harborview project. So ingenious was the joining of the parts of the building that it was almost impossible to detect any line of demarcation between its four sections. The final construction resulted in a handsome four-story building unequaled anywhere in the area.

On his frequent buying trips to New York, Anderson took careful note of architectural details of buildings there. Upon his return to La Crosse he informed his builder, William J. M. Nichols, a stone mason, exactly what he wanted incorporated into his own commercial property. This resulted in the installation of the handsome pedimented window heads; the pilastered center section, the corner quoins and especially the typically French mansard roof, covered with slate in two colors to form a geometric pattern. Inside, the wall piers were encased in fluted columns and Corinthian caps. A balcony at the rear of the building was made accessible by an elaborate staircase at the top of which was an ornamental double door.

He stored tanks of gasoline behind his building and established his own gas producing plant, thus generating energy for the bright lights that graced his store. When the Brush Electric Light Company was employed to install the first electric street lights in La Crosse, Anderson also engaged them to install electric lights in his shop. The Mons Anderson Building at Second and Main streets was indeed the most notable structural edifice erected in La Crosse during the second half of the 19th century.

At various junctures of the mansard roof there were what appeared to be carved stone gargoyles used as ornamentation. When the building was demolished in 1974 it was discovered that the gargoyles were in fact half-body pseudo-lions made of galvanized tin which had
acquired a green patina through years of exposure to the elements. Two of these tin lions were given to the Houston County, Minnesota Historical Society along with several cornices and ornamental grills from the building's windows and doors. The rest were acquired by the La Crosse County Historical Society and now remain in its archives. Because Mons Anderson owned vast acreage in Houston County and its environs, Norwegians in that area have always held a proprietary interest in him. Indeed, in 1974 the town of Houston named its city park in his honor.

When Anderson bought John Paul's tailor shop in 1860 he acquired not only his inventory but also a bronze reclining lion that Paul kept in his shop window. Paul advertised his goods "at the sign of the bronze lion." When Anderson took possession of the lion, word went out that "Hereafter the lair of the lion will be at the corner of Second and Main streets." Anderson placed the lion in front of his building. Shortly thereafter, friends visiting Paris, France, discovered a matching lion, purchased and presented it to Anderson as a gift. Anderson placed these two life-sized stone gilded lions outside his building, one on Main Street facing east and the other on Second Street facing south. Indeed Anderson adopted the lion as his trademark and its photo appeared on his business and personal stationery, as well as on his bills, invoices and other commercial papers. On his desk he placed a small replica of a seated lion and manufactured clothing under the name of Lion Brand. Later, Mons Anderson gave one of his precious lions to his close friend, Mons Fladager, a clothing merchant in Spring Grove, Minnesota, and one of the founders of that town. It was subsequently moved to the Spring Grove City Park; the other lion is presently in the courtyard of the Swarthout Museum in La Crosse.

Norwegian immigrants who came to La Crosse in the latter decades of the 19th century looked to Anderson as their mentor and advisor. Because he had been an immigrant he had great empathy for their problems in adjusting to their new circumstances and helped them in whatever way he could. As banks were not yet firmly established in the city, newcomers were somewhat distrustful of them. Instead they turned over their gold and silver to Anderson for safekeeping as they trusted him implicitly. As receipts Anderson issued coins and paper bills in various denominations which were recognized and readily accepted as legal tender in the entire area.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

After the Civil War he returned the money he held to the surviving kin of those men who did not return home.

Anderson received permission from the U.S. Government to coin a copper penny with a smiling lion depicted on one side while on the other he had inscribed advertising: "Mons Anderson — Dealer in dry goods, clothing, boots and shoes, etc. — La Crosse, Wisconsin." The earliest of these coins was dated 1863. He was performing another special service in issuing his monetary notes as it protected his countrymen from dishonest persons intent upon bilking immigrants of their money. He stopped minting and printing in 1880.

Mons Anderson was a director of the "Green Bay Bank" which was located in a small wooden building on the corner of Second and Main streets, the site of his subsequent clothing manufacturing establishment. One summer morning in 1858, Daniel Wells, Jr. of Milwaukee, president and principal stockholder of the bank, wired Anderson to "Close up my bank." followed that afternoon with another frantic telegram saying "Did you obey my order?" Anderson did not agree with Wells’ order and wired back "No, I did not obey your order." Wells had become agitated when a mob in Milwaukee attacked Alexander Mitchell’s bank in that city, and feared runs on all of the state’s banks. As it turned out, Anderson’s refusal to close the bank was a wise decision and Wells expressed his appreciation. (Incidentally, the Green Bay Bank was the predecessor of the First National Bank of La Crosse, today the Norwest Bank.) Anderson later transferred his bank and vaults to the basement of his building.

Mons Anderson became an unofficial immigration commissioner for western Wisconsin, southern Minnesota and the Dakota Territory. Periodically he went to New York to meet new immigrants coming from Norway. He selected from among them those he believed to be the finest of his countrymen and invited them to settle in La Crosse. He chose only men who were at least six feet tall and women who were at least five feet ten inches tall. Unions from these people he felt would assure La Crosse of many stalwart Norwegians. In La Crosse he housed and fed them in barracks he built on Front Street until they became self-reliant and could establish themselves in their own jobs and homes. Many of them worked in Anderson’s clothing factory.

In his manufactory, the first floor was devoted to dry goods and clothing, the second held offices of a number of the city’s pioneer
lumbermen, while on the third floor was a large hall rented by the Masonic Lodge. The fourth floor was unoccupied. Later, Anderson took over all four stories of the building for his own business interests. In its heyday, Mons Anderson employed some 70 people. He had seven traveling salesmen who covered territory within a considerable radius of La Crosse. In the summer they traveled by means of horse and wagon and used sleighs in the winter. He was also the first local businessman to employ women in both his office and factory, and though he was criticized for this unorthodox procedure, he continued the practice.

He was thoughtful of his employees, paying them well and providing for their physical comfort while on the job. On Christmas he entertained all of his employees and their families in his home and presented each with a handsome gift. He was described by his peers as a man of “sterling integrity and of high moral aims.”

Anderson was a member of the executive committee of the La Crosse Manufacturers and Jobbers Union, organized in 1886, and was active for more than twenty years in promoting trade in the city and in fighting for fair railroad rates. He was interested in the city’s tree planting project for he recognized the necessity of solidifying the prairie land and preventing erosion. In 1871 he sponsored the planting of nearly 8,000 trees from Main to Cass streets and from West Avenue east to 17th Street.

James G. Peterson who worked as a traveling salesman for Mons Anderson for many years, in 1946 described his former employer in these words: “Mons Anderson was a short, stocky individual, rather aristocratic in appearance, and always well-groomed. He wore a long bow tie, most often black. He would attract attention when walking on Main Street. He used a cane and nearly always had it with him. When seated in front of his establishment at the corner of Second and Main streets, he had a bunch of keys in his hand which he would swing incessantly. He had deep, piercing eyes, and very little did he miss seeing. Mr. Anderson had a very human side also. In 1899, three of his employees were married. At that Christmas season he invited the three newly-wed couples to be guests in his home. “We were treated royally, and when we were ready to leave, each couple was presented with a fine wedding gift. Ours was a set of sterling silver knives and forks, the knives of Sheffield steel with pearl handles.”

Some years ago a nonagenarian, Edward Herlitzka, who worked
for Anderson as a messenger boy in the 1890s said that his employer always had cold hands, probably due to a circulatory disorder. On the radiator in the front hall of his home he kept a large rock wrapped in flannel. When the boy delivered packages and messages to Anderson he often found him in the hall holding the heated rock in his hands.

Mons Anderson and Jane Halvorson were married in La Crosse on July 23, 1853 and to their union were born two sons and two daughters — Samuel, Alfred, Mary (Bunn) and Emma (Crosby).

In 1864 Mons Anderson purchased the stone house at Fourth and Cass streets, built by Alexander W. Shepard a decade earlier. He instructed Nichols, his stone mason, to enlarge and remodel it so that it resembled an elegant Gothic residence, surrounded by spacious lawns and shrubbery, enhanced by many life-sized stone statues as in a formal garden. Even today one can detect the restrained and simple ornamental detail, the Gothic arches used on both doors and windows and in the front loggia. The tower or cupola is simple but impressive, though here Nichols departed from the Gothic mood by endowing it with a French mansard roof, perhaps to reflect that of Anderson's factory. The original fence surrounding the property was of cut stone which was later replaced by one of ornate cast iron.
The stately Mons Anderson mansion, deteriorated into a bad state of disrepair and disarray over the years, but continued to show unmistakable signs of its former elegance. It had some 16 main rooms and a great many alcoves, halls, closets and small side rooms. The plaster frescoes around the rim of the ceilings crumbled with time, but are being restored. The main hand-carved staircase was in its prime a thing of beauty and the curved stairway to the third floor was a joy to behold. The house boasts of six fireplaces, all of them carved of precious marble, still intact and revealing their original loveliness.

The one unforgettable room in the house is the magnificent, second floor library which runs nearly the entire length of the mansion from east to west. Above its superbly carved marble fireplace, adorned with two fluted side columns, is a wall of hand crafted and painted tiles, each about eight inches square, reaching to the ceiling. These depict scenes from Shakespearean writings and from well-known children’s fairy tales. Directly above the mantle are twelve tiles beautifully illustrating the twelve months of the year. The black walnut encased shelves once held Anderson’s fine library of classics, encyclopedias, and commercial books, as well as many objets d’art, large and small, while on the walls were hung fine oil paintings. The woodwork throughout the house is of the finest woods and of exquisite workmanship. Mrs. Anderson was one of La Crosse’s most gracious hostesses and presided at many elegant dinners and soirees within her luxuriously furnished home, as well as at lovely garden parties on the capacious lawns.

Mons Anderson died of pneumonia on February 3, 1905 in his home. In his last days he was nursed by his faithful and loving wife. She died the following evening, some said of a broken heart, after more than a half century of a blissful marriage. Both are interred in Oak Grove Cemetery. Their granddaughter, Dr. Janet Anderson Caldwell (daughter of Samuel Anderson), became an eminent author and medical pathologist. On a visit to La Crosse in 1977 when she was 82, she said she felt that her grandmother’s death within 24 hours after the death of her husband was “something of a mystery”, but did not elaborate further as to what she meant. She also disclosed that her Uncle Alfred, one of Mons’ two sons, “cared not a whit about his father’s clothing business” and went west to Washington Territory to seek his fortune. She further revealed that while children of other wealthy and prominent families in the city engaged private tutors to
educate their offspring, Mons Anderson insisted that his children attend the public schools. He was truly a man of the people.

Despite his business successes and wealth, Mons Anderson died penniless; indeed he died deeply in debt and it took his children many years to pay off his creditors. He lost his fortune in ill-advised investments in Colorado silver mines and in unproductive real estate transactions. Yet Mons Anderson remains a heroic figure in the history of La Crosse, a man of substance and integrity. One of his eulogists said he lived a "life of busy usefulness for others."

The clothing manufactory on Second and Main streets was sold in 1903 to the Louis Martin family who operated it for several decades thereafter. During World War Two the building housed the Gateway Glass Company, owned by the Northern Engraving Company. That company's owner, Philo Gelatt, had a sumptuous office therein on the second floor at the north end of the building, reached by a private elevator.

When the Mons Anderson building was razed in 1974 to make way for the Harborview project, there passed into limbo one more of the city's historic landmarks, which is available to us now only in photographs and a few graphic memorabilia taken from its facade.

The Anderson mansion at Fourth and Cass streets was purchased by the YWCA in 1905 for about $10,000 and sold in 1920 for approximately $9,000. George Lassig acquired the property in 1922 and lived in the house until his death in 1982 at the age of 88. The YWCA executives described the house modestly as "a large well-lighted house with pleasant rooms in which are housed about 14 young women, two secretaries and three housemaids." The stables behind the house, long gone, were transformed into a gymnasium for YWCA members. On the first floor of the house, classes in English, French, German, bible studies, cooking and sewing were taught. Mrs. Molly Austin (widow of David Austin, La Crosse's mayor from 1887-1889) maintained a piano studio in the Anderson house during the first decade of this century.

The Mons Anderson clothing factory on Second and Main streets is gone, the site now occupied by the First Bank of La Crosse. Happily, the Anderson residence on Fourth and Cass streets is being restored, hopefully to its original elegance.
The Mons Anderson Coins

During the restoration of the historic Mons Anderson house at Fourth and Cass streets, a cache of gold coins was discovered beneath the kitchen floorboards. This presents intriguing conjecture as to their origin.

As early as the 1860s and certainly during the 1870s and 1880s there was an influx of Norwegian immigrants into the United States. This exodus was prompted to a large extent by poor agricultural crop production in Norway at that time. Large numbers of these immigrants were headed for Minnesota where they hoped to acquire land and settle. Of necessity, La Crosse became a railroad and rest transfer point for them. The topography of this area reminded many of them of their native homeland and so they decided to remain here. They brought with them valuable heirlooms, jewelry, gold, silver and cash.

Unfamiliar with the English language and with American customs, they naturally gravitated towards Mons Anderson, who was already well established in La Crosse as a successful and respected citizen. He soon became the acknowledged leader of the local Norwegian community and helped the newcomers in adapting to their new environment.

Anderson, born in Norway in 1830, came to La Crosse in 1851 and established his garment factory here in 1856. He purchased the elegant Gothic mansion at Fourth and Cass streets in 1864, which had been built by Alexander Shepard a decade earlier.

Because of the recent economic recessions, particularly the Panic of 1857, the Norwegian immigrants were understandably apprehensive of local banking institutions. Instead, they deposited their cash and other valuables with Mons Anderson. Anderson maintained his own private bank and vault in the basement of his establishment on the corner of Second and Main streets. In return for deposits, Anderson issued receipts in the form of his privately printed paper bills in various denominations and his own minted coins. Today that would be considered counterfeiting, but at that period in history, the U.S. Government granted permission to Anderson to print and mint money. These were readily accepted as legal tender because it was known that Mons Anderson money had solid value behind them.

If the gold coins found in the Anderson house had been of Nor-
Norwegian mintage there would be relatively little conjecture as to their origin. Since they are of American coinage, however, we can only speculate as to how they found their way into the Anderson house. Some of the Norwegians may have sold some of their valuables to local residents who paid for them in gold cash. Perhaps some of these people may have received cash remuneration in return for services rendered or received wages in cash which they left with Anderson for safekeeping. Another less acceptable possibility is that this hoard of coins may have been Mrs. Anderson's "mad money," though that does not seem too likely as their marriage was said to have been somewhat idyllic.

It must be reiterated that these are suppositions only, as incontrovertible evidence to substantiate these postulations has not been discovered. At any rate, the finding of these coins was an exciting revelation of life at that period in our local history, and leaves a wide-open field to many romantic ideas as to who secreted them and the real reason behind the concealment. Any more ideas?
The American Name Society met in Detroit in December 1951 for the purpose of promoting and encouraging the study of all categories of names — geographic, demographic, patronymic, occupational, scientific, commercial, personal, popular — and to disseminate the findings of these studies. The worth of what they accomplished in the field of onomatology is open to question, for most people and organizations confer names as they please with little regard for what others do. Even the International Committee of Onomastic Sciences has had little influence on the names and their origins.

There has been no national or even local policy of granting names to parks, schools, streets or other public sites or buildings. This universal practice of irresponsible naming was evident in early La Crosse and led to confusion, then and now. When our country was young and new areas were being occupied, settlers found it necessary to establish numerous names, hence we find many Indian names in this area, such as Winnebago, Mississippi, Winneshiek and the like. Others took on the flavor of French, German and Scandinavian origins depending upon the whims and fancies of the land owners.

Our public schools have generally followed the pattern of bestowing names after nationally or locally prominent persons, such as Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, Washburn, Jefferson, Logan, Harry Spence, Josephine Hintgen, Lincoln, Longfellow, Emerson, Aquinas and others.

There are no less than 47 names for the bluffs in the La Crosse area. New park areas and improvement of those already in existence led civic-minded pioneers to donate land for parks which were then named in their honor. Cameron Park was first known as Public Square or King Street Park, then was named in honor of Judge Angus Cameron. In 1903 the Common Council devoted one meeting to the task of reviewing park names, confirming some already in existence, changing others, and creating a few new ones.

Burns Park was first called Main Street Park or High School Park; the Common Council changed the name to honor Timothy Burns who gave the site to the city. Though Nathan Myrick did not give the land along La Crosse Street to the city, the park was named in his honor because he was a prominent pioneer and the first white
settler in La Crosse. It was originally known as Lake Park then Mounds Park and Fairgrounds Park before being called Myrick Park. Copeland Park on the North Side was named after Fred Copeland, La Crosse’s mayor in 1891-1893 and owner of large sawmills originally located on the Copeland park land site. Levee Park on the Mississippi River was changed to Riverside Park. Pettibone Park across the river was first known as Barron’s Island, then named after the man who bought the land and spent $80,000 to improve it before giving it to the city for the enjoyment of all people. Spence Park at the foot of State Street was called the Public Landing in 1853, then named to honor Thomas Spence, important pioneer businessman. Powell Park was so named in recognition of “White Beaver” Powell, early physician of La Crosse and four times mayor in the 1880s and 1890s. City Park, also known as Cemetery Park, at 12th and Pine streets was laid out by City Surveyor H. I. Bliss under the supervision of J. W. Losey; it is today known as Forest Avenue Parkway where apartments have been built for elderly citizens. Red Cloud park, opposite the Rubber Mills on the north side was so named to honor our American Indian hero of World War Two, Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. who received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

La Crosse today has 42 parks, playfields and other public recreational areas, nearly all named after men who have served our community in the past. In 1908 John Nolen, a famous landscape architect from Massachusetts, designed a park system for La Crosse, but retained most of the names approved by the council in 1903. The city’s first Park Commission was established in 1908 with such leading names as Hixon, Easton, Colman, and Gund gracing its administration.

In 1868 only business establishments had numbers; residences did not; the latter were designated only in such terms as “west side of Fifth Street between State and Main,” or “southwest corner of Fourth and Pine.” In 1869 an ordinance was passed assigning numbers on named streets, starting with 100 at Front Street and going east. The same system was used on numbered streets employing Main Street as the dividing thoroughfare between north and south.

The early sand streets were covered with sawdust left over from the sawing of shingles. Street paving was inaugurated in 1873, with Main Street being the first to be macadamized from the river to Fifth Street. Three years after the first paving the street was already badly
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deteriorated and described as looking like the "dried up bed of a mountain stream." Macadam paving was named after J. L. McAdam, an 18th century Scotch inventor who developed the road material. Macadam in La Crosse was made from limestone quarried from the bluffs and pounded with sledge-hammers into pieces of stone. These were laid with the larger stones on the bottom and the smaller ones on top, then rolled smooth. No binder was used, resulting in dust, ruts and holes formed as horses' shoes and wagon wheels stirred it up.

Shortly thereafter Nicholson pavement came into use, first placed on Front and Pearl streets. One-inch pine boards were laid lengthwise and nailed to stringers set in rows and boards across them and nailed to the boards below. Coal tar was poured on the top filling spaces and then the whole was covered with sand and gravel. On Cass Street the same method was tried using cedar blocks; this proved unsuccessful as the blocks swelled when they became water-soaked after rains. Brick streets came into use toward the end of the 1890s. The city issued bonds in the amount of $102,000 and 40 blocks of city streets were paved with bricks. The area so treated extended from Front to Fifth streets and Pine to Mt. Vernon streets and was completed in 1901.

By 1870 there were wooden sidewalks on State Street from Fourth to Seventh. Six years later found sidewalks on the east side of Tenth Street from Main to Cass. These wooden walks were made of two by fours laid on stones or on wooden blocks. During rainy weather, street intersections were muddy and hazardous, so flat stones were laid as stepping stones, mainly to protect ladies in long dresses as they crossed the streets.

The main mode of transportation was by horse-drawn wagons and carriages, consequently large accumulations of manure was inevitable. Garbage collection did not start until after 1900; until that time individuals were required to keep their premises clean and clear. Sanitary conditions in La Crosse at that time were horrible as sanitation was not legally enforced. Dr. James Furstman in 1911 was instrumental in establishing the City Health Board and by 1917 had succeeded in outlawing backyard privies.

Naming of streets in La Crosse did not follow a well-organized plan, indeed practically no plan at all. In the 1840s and 1850s large plats of land were purchased by individuals or groups of men who platted the land according to their own ideas and then offered lots for
sale, all without regard for the plans or operations of the owners of adjacent plats. They chose names that appealed to them; often it was their own surname or that of their children, friends, or of prominent men whom they admired.

As the city spread out and grew and as each land addition was platted and streets graded and names selected, there often tended to be a duplication of names with neither owner conceding to the other. This resulted in confusion that exists until today. For example, there was a Cameron Avenue and a Cameron Street; the latter has since been deleted. We have a West Avenue and a Western Avenue; Quarry Road and Quarry Place, Rose Street and Rose Court. Most confusing is Park Avenue, Park Lane, Park Lane Drive, Park Plaza Drive, Park Street, and Parkway Drive. Then there is Valley Place, Valley Road and Valleyview Place; as well as Redfield, Redwing, Redwood, and Redbird streets. There is a Calloway and a Callaway, Campbell Road and Campbell Street, and many other similar instances — all due to lack of official organization and lack of cooperation between land owners. This kind of action has been the root of several bends and jogs in some of our streets, such as that of Sixth and Main streets, West Avenue and Pine Street, Fourth and Pearl streets, etc.

Have you ever heard of Gold Street, or Silver Street? Yet they exist in our city, and at one time there was also a Lead Street and an Iron Street, both no longer in existence. There was once two North streets, one on the north side and the other on the south side. There were also at one time two Jackson Streets.

Today naming of new streets follows no special plan, except when they are extensions of already existing streets, then according to city ordinance the name must remain the same as that of the original thoroughfare. Visitors to La Crosse find it confusing that West Avenue, Lang Drive and George Street are in reality one continuous thoroughfare. There was a move in recent years to change the name to Veterans Drive, but the suggestion was rejected.

In 1937 a drive to initiate some street name changes was also sidetracked. At that time it was proposed that the Causeway, Third Street and South Avenue all be combined under one name — Grand Avenue. State Street was originally slated to be called Wisconsin Street; it was changed because it felt that State Street was a simpler name. Jay Street was so named because the letter J is the tenth letter of the alphabet and Jay Street is the tenth street south of the La
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Crosse River. At the same time it was thought to name King and Cass streets K and L Streets; this happily met with disapproval.

Even downtown alleys were named in early La Crosse, all of them after American presidents. Washington Alley was between Front and Second streets; Jefferson Alley was between Second and Third streets; Madison Alley between Third and Fourth streets; and Monroe Alley between Fourth and Fifth streets.

During World War I when most Americans were anti-German, Berlin Street was changed to Liberty Street, a name that still exists. Domke Street is not named after Esther Domke, long-time and highly-regarded County Clerk, who surely deserves a street named after her in recognition of her devoted and faithful service to so many for so many decades. Instead it is named after Fred J. Domke, owner of the land.

Most of the north side was originally owned by a small group of men — W. R. Sill, F. M. Rublee, Dugald Cameron, E. D. Clinton, and R. E. Gillette. All of these men named streets after themselves. They felt that the sawmills and manufacturing plants would be the primary settlers on the main street of the north side so they called it Mill Street. It was later changed to Copeland Avenue to honor our 23rd mayor in 1891-1893, who owned mills located on the site now called Copeland Park.

William R. Sill, one of La Crosse’s first engineers and surveyors, not only named a street after himself, but chose several others as well. He was one of the founders of the Apostolic Church; this resulted in St. Cloud, St. James and St. Paul streets. St. Cloud was chosen because Sill believed that the saints resided in heaven where the clouds were located. He named Windsor Street after his birthplace in Windsor, Connecticut. All of the men mentioned above were Republicans so they named Sumner Street to honor the famous Massachusetts Republican statesman, Charles Sumner.

Dr. Dugald Cameron (who committed suicide by drowning in 1867) had a hand in granting names to several streets. Cameron owned a great deal of land in the center of the north side. He named Caledonia Street in commemoration of his native birth city, Caledonia, New York. He called the street east of that Avon because Avon was the first town east of Caledonia in New York. Cameron was a close friend of Senator L. S. Rose of Beaver Dam; hence we have Rose Street. And Cameron, being a good Scotsman, named St. An-
drew Street after Scotland's patron saint. Cass Street was named after the governor of Michigan because Michigan territory was included as part of Wisconsin until 1836.

Peter Cameron, Dugald's brother, owned a plat of land next to that of Thomas Stoddard, so he named the dividing line between the two plats Division Street. Ferry Street was so named because Peter Cameron planned to establish a ferry at the foot of that street, but because the bank was too high the project was abandoned, but the name remained. But why was Market Street so named — there was never any market there, we can only surmise that one may have been planned at that location. Losey Boulevard was naturally named after the early prominent attorney Joseph W. Losey, although the important thoroughfare was actually planned and laid out by Bernard "Barney" Strouse. Stoddard Street was of course called after the city's first mayor.

In more recent times, we find in new additions, that names include the word view, bluff, side, terrace, circle, lane, etc., such as Bluffview, Cliffside, Hackberry Lane, etc. A number of streets carry the names of trees — Elm, Oak, Pine, Locust, Birch, Cedar, and others. Floral Lane was so named because of the greenhouses located there. Kranc Street bears the name of Rose Kranc, who owned the land. Sisson Drive is named after Frank Sisson, president of the La Crosse Development Company; Hoeschler Drive is named after the dentist Frank Hoeschler. Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Strong had four sons and thus named four streets in their subdivision Earl, David, Paul and Ray Places, and Jeanne Playground was called after their only daughter. The main street of the development is of course Strong Avenue. Jane and James streets were named after the grandchildren of Fred Hass who owned the plat. Polley Street was changed to Johnson Street; Looney Street to Adams Street; and Gibson Street to Green Bay Street. Green Bay Street was so named because of its proximity to the Green Bay and Western Railroad tracks. Barlow Street was named after Milton Barlow who owned the original site of the Stoddard Hotel; Horton Street after an early logger and merchant; Hood Street after William Hood, an early surveyor; Travis after an 1853 surveyor.

A La Crosse city ordinance now regulates all matters pertaining to streets in the city proper and within a three-mile radius of the city limits. But the matter of naming new streets is largely in the hands of
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the land owner and developer. Today the developers of newly acquired and as yet undeveloped pieces of land may still select whatever names they prefer, except direct extensions of already existing streets name choices must be submitted to aldermen who then present them to the city council for approval after they have been checked for duplication.

Pity the city workers who deal with this conglomeration of names daily — the post office and especially the mail carriers, policemen and firemen, bus and taxi drivers. All must familiarize themselves with the locations of all streets. It remains a perplexing situation.
Amiable controversy as to which community has the largest or oldest tree in the area is interesting, but surely of no great significance. The dispute is really academic, but in the interests of accuracy, it seems appropriate to examine the matter a bit further.

West Salem claims the largest surviving elm in Wisconsin, with a circumference of 17 feet, 2 inches. According to Bruce Allison in “Wisconsin Champion Trees” there were two larger elms, both of which succumbed to Dutch elm disease. The stump of one which had a 19-foot circumference still remains in Fond du Lac; a tree in Winnebago County had a girth of 21 feet according to Jim Clark of Larsen, Wisconsin. The University of Wisconsin, Madison feels that an elm on its campus with only a modest 12-foot circumference should also be recognized.

Ranking of tree size is based primarily upon trunk circumference at about four feet above ground level, but height and crown spread must also be considered. The West Salem elm has a 97-foot crown and a height of 92 feet. Genoa claims that an elm can be found on the rural Richard Bakken property that has a perimeter of 17 feet, 7 inches and a crown spread of 104 feet, but it is only 84 feet tall.

Allison lists 185 champion trees in Wisconsin, as well as a roster of contenders and national champions in other parts of the country. Special trees have been recorded in Wisconsin since 1941.

In January 1981, a survey on unique trees in the state was inaugurated at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Information was provided by the writer on special trees of the La Crosse area, past and present, that symbolized an unusual place or time; that were associated with folk lore or with a famous person; trees that had “witnessed” a singular event or that for any other reason might be considered distinctive.

Research disclosed the following data that was sent to Madison: The “hanging tree,” located on the south lawn of the old court house, on which Nathaniel “Scotty” Mitchell was hanged in October 1884 for the assassination of Frank Burton, a prominent La Crosse citizen. The appellation “hanging tree” clung to that oak for a score of years until the city removed it to erase the stigma of illegal mob action in the city.
On the east lawn of the old public library at Eighth and Main streets, was a stately non-shedding cottonwood tree; its great age was attested to by its ashen-gray bark as well as by its towering height and sizeable diameter. A long-time resident of the city once said "If that tree could talk it would save the historians of the city a lot of trouble." Its taper-pointed oviate leaves varied from three to five inches in length. The tree was removed when the new library was built.

As late as 1968, La Crosse possessed the two largest hackberry trees in the state, according to Walter E. Scott, administrative assistant of the Wisconsin Conservation Department. One was located on the boulevard at 1021 South Fourth Street and had a circumference of 10 feet, 4½ inches, and was considered larger than the previous state record because of its height and crown spread. The prior record was of a tree in Sauk County that had a perimeter of 10 feet, 6 inches, but its height and crown spread were considerably less than the La Crosse hackberry. The second largest hackberry in Wisconsin was in the side yard at 523 West Avenue South in La Crosse; it had a girth of 9 feet, 4¾ inches. The largest hackberry tree in the United States is in Maryland. Its circumference is 16 feet, 3 inches and it is 88 feet tall with a crown spread of 59 feet.

A tulip tree at Seventh and Farnam streets has a diameter of 20 inches; it is unusual because tulip trees are rarely found this far north. A smoke tree at 1807 Loomis Street is exceptionally tall — about 20 to 25 feet; smoke trees are ordinarily shrub-like.

In the summer of 1984 there was recorded what is believed to be Wisconsin's largest known white elm tree, located on the rural Onalaska property of William Varnum. It has a circumference of 18 feet, a limb spread of 100 feet and is 75 feet tall. On the King property, also in rural Onalaska, there is a giant elm that has a circumference of 15 feet, 3 inches.

According to Garland Amunson, La Crosse city parks superintendent, an elm tree in Pettibone Park behind the bandshell near the fountain, was cut down recently because of Dutch elm disease. At its core was found a steel musket ball about the size of a large marble. The tree stump showed 180 rings which means it dated back to about 1800, as trees produce one ring each year.

Amunson also says that a river birch at the southeast end of Pettibone Park is 10 feet in circumference. Another Pettibone elm
was damaged in a severe storm in 1980 and was subsequently removed because of disease; its stump had a circumference of 19 feet, 6 inches. James Kramer, city forester, claims there is an elm at Sixth and Mississippi streets that is 24 feet, 6 inches in circumference.

In Veterans Memorial Park on Highway 16 between La Crosse and West Salem, there is a red cedar about 20 feet tall. It is notable because in the spring flowering season it exudes a sticky and gummy excrescence that turns the entire tree into one huge mass of cedar-apple rust. During other seasons the tree’s bark is unusually leathery.

A red cedar on Grandad Bluff was reputedly here before the French Jesuit priests arrived in the 1600s. By counting the rings on one of its dead branches it is estimated to have sprouted nearly 400 years ago.

Jason Easton, La Crosse pioneer, built his home in the 1880s at 1315 Cass Street, present site of Bethany Lutheran Home. It boasted the most extensive conservatory in the state, with rare flowers and plants from nearly every climate in the world. A mulberry tree imported as a sapling from England by Easton was damaged by a storm in the summer of 1981 and was cut down to prevent its falling upon the roof of the building. Its rings indicated that it was more than a century old.

The most commonly planted trees in Pettibone were red birch or river birch, American elm, silver maple, cottonwood, and ash. The river birch grows to 90 feet in height and has a scaley or papery bark. These trees line the shores of the Mississippi River and the Pettibone lagoon, and in some instances lean over touching the water’s surface. One multi-trunked silver maple has a 12 foot circumference, standing 100 to 120 feet tall. Four cottonwood trees in Pettibone Park with perimeters of 14 feet, 6 inches; 13 feet, 2 inches; 12 feet, 6 inches; and 11 feet, 7 inches, were measured at 4½ feet above the ground. Some of the white ash leaves were six to twelve inches long. Other large Pettibone trees are a silver maple 12 feet, 1 inch across, two American elms, one 16 feet, 9 inches and the other 13 feet, 6 inches, and an ash 9 feet, 1½ inches. Sixty-eight different species of trees, representing 16 botanical families, grow in Pettibone Park.

Burls and galls on trees in Pettibone, though not common, are not rare either. Burls are hardy woody outgrowths on the trunks of trees, or wartlike growths often at the site of knots on the bark. Galls are
abnormal growths or swellings on trees usually caused by insects, but can also be the result of action by parasites, bacteria, fungi, viruses, and even by injuries or chemicals.

Dutch elm disease, the bane of all tree growers, was first detected as a menace in the early 1960s and in the next two decades had reached epidemic proportions in the La Crosse area. The disease is caused by a fungus-carrying elm-bark beetle. An attempt was made to control the disease by injecting a special fungicide into the trees. This procedure met only with a modicum of success and it was necessary to destroy thousands of infected trees at tremendous cost to governmental agencies. The centers of the dead tree stumps were bored out and filled with soil and not permitted to perpetuate themselves. The dead elms were replaced with summit ash, Norway maple, silver maple, Schweidler maple and evergreens.

The devastation of trees in La Crosse caused by Dutch elm disease was enormous. Nearly 20,000 trees were destroyed by this malady and were removed from parks and residential areas. La Crosse Rotary East in 1980 inaugurated a program to replace these trees with disease-resistant varieties. The club’s aim was to plant 1,000 trees a year for five years. The program was funded by public contributions of $5 per tree. By September 1984, 4,000 trees had been planted. Sites for the plantings were selected by the club and the trees were planted by the city’s parks department. The club plans to continue the planting program until as many of the lost trees as possible have been replaced.

In the beginning, the area that is today La Crosse, was but a vast and treeless prairie covered with sandburs, with here and there a scraggly scrub pine. The area immediately abutting the La Crosse and Black rivers was lush with greenery, with abundant stands of pine that formed the basis of the city’s first important industry — lumbering. At the foot of the bluffs to the east there was rich vegetation, but the area between the river and the bluffs was arid and almost void of life. Indeed, the city was at first known as Prairie La Crosse.

Pioneers traveling up the Mississippi River from Prairie du Chien to St. Paul seeking a homeland in which to plant their roots, found the La Crosse area inviting, due to the majestic bluffs at the east and the river at the west. It promised a sound economic future for settlers.

Nathan Myrick was the first white settler here in the spring of
1842, but moved to St. Paul seven years later. John M. Levy, the first permanent white settler, came to La Crosse in 1845 and found only a rutted road about a half mile long parallel to the river. The site was inhabited by only thirteen people — nine men and four women. As early as 1853, Levy envisioned Main Street as a wide boulevard reaching from the river to the bluffs. The center of the boulevard was to be some 25 to 30 feet wide with rows of beautiful trees, green grass and flower beds. On either side were to be sidewalks for strollers and benches along the way for resting. On the sides of the walks Levy conceived of roadways for carriages; he was our first citizen to think of one-way streets. North and south of the roadways handsome residences were to be built. Unfortunately, Levy’s great dream never came true.

However, when Levy became mayor of La Crosse in 1860 (he was again elected mayor in 1866 and 1867) one of his first official projects was the planting of trees for city beautification and he urged home owners to do likewise.

In 1860 Stephen Martindale set out 100 trees in the vicinity of his own home at Tenth and Cass streets. The same year Angus Cameron and H. T. Ramsey bought cottonwood trees for 15 cents each and planted them about their private properties near Ninth and King streets. Five years later Cephas Martindale, Stephen’s brother, set out trees on the public square (today Burns Park) on Main Street.

W. R. Sill, pioneer engineer, railroad entrepreneur and mill owner, planted trees around the Episcopal Church on Ninth and Main streets and carried water every day from his home at Tenth and State streets to make sure they would grow.

In 1870 C. W. Burns planted two 30-foot pine trees on his property; he procured them from a forest area near West Salem. C. L. Colman planted a 50-foot pine on his lot at Eleventh and Cass streets. In 1874 Mons Anderson, the “merchant prince,” set out trees on his own property at Fourth and Cass streets. Several years later he planted nearly 8,000 trees from Main to Cass streets and from West Avenue east to nearly 17th Street. C. L. Colman in 1878 took upon himself the task and expense of moving all elms along La Crosse Street out three feet from the road and properly spaced them to ensure better growth.

The city council in 1882 ordered all cottonwoods in the city to be cut down with no specific reason given for this action. W. W. Jones
The Biggest and Oldest Trees in La Crosse

circulated a petition protesting this removal and obtained 130 signatures. In 1885 the school board issued an edict that 32 cottonwood trees around schools were to be removed. Despite opposition the project was carried out.

John C. Smith planted scores of trees on the land that became the Schagticoke Country Club, later called the La Crosse Country Club. The territory was originally Miller Coulee, owned by Harmon "Scoots" Miller, who was Nathan Myrick's partner in his trading post. It was named Schagticoke in honor of Miller's home town of that name in New York.

Very early in the city's history, parks and trees were recognized as a necessity for the well being of the citizens on the treeless prairie as well as for its beautification. The Reverend John Sherwin is credited with having the first trees in the city around his house at the southwest corner of Fifth and State streets.

In April 1890, the city observed Arbor Day and Mayor John Dengler appointed a committee to sponsor a fund-raising campaign for a tree planting project. Citizens were invited to subscribe one dollar each for planting one tree. More than $600 was collected and after the planting program was completed, $46 remained which was turned over to the Board of Public Works to set out more trees. The fund was responsible for planting 147 trees along the wagon bridge road, 132 trees on Market Street, 132 trees along La Crosse Street, 99 trees on the Causeway and 90 trees around public schools.

Today, La Crosse has been transformed from an arid treeless prairie into a verdant community of beautiful trees, shrubs, flowers and grass. John Levy and other pioneers who were so deeply involved in the beautification of the city would have reveled in the present beauty they so ardently wished for their adopted city.
An American President
Visits La Crosse

When an American president visits a relatively small midwestern town of 30,000, it is marked as a great day. When a city of 30,000 dedicates a fine new public recreational facility it is an event of special local significance. When both are combined it becomes a red-letter day indeed. And so it was on Friday, September 17, 1909. For on that day President William Howard Taft, our 27th president, came to La Crosse, especially to dedicate the city’s new YMCA building at Seventh and Main streets. He came here at the invitation of George W. Burton, prominent pioneer and civic leader, as well as president of the First National Bank. The two men had been classmates at Yale University and maintained a close friendship throughout their lives.

The original land site, legally designated as Block 2, Lots 7 and 8 of the Burns, Farnam, Burns Addition, is the northwest corner of Seventh and Main streets. The first tenant there from 1866 to 1874 was Leonard Lottridge, editor of the Republican & Leader. He sold the dwelling to Gysbert Van Steenwyk who lived there from 1874 to 1905, when he died. Van Steenwyk’s widow, Mariette, continued to live in the house another two years when it was acquired by the
YMCA trustees. Van Steenwyk was an important pioneer figure in La Crosse, born in the Netherlands in 1814, who came to the United States in 1849. He established the Batavian Bank (now First Bank) in La Crosse in 1861 and was mayor in 1873.

The YMCA was organized in 1848 in England by seven young men; it grew rapidly and a branch was started in Canada the following year. The organization moved to the United States in 1851. In April 1883, a meeting of a small group of young men, led by E. E. Bentley and J. M. Holley, was held in the Light Guard Hall in La Crosse, and ten days later a constitution and by-laws were drafted and accepted by the trustees. George Burton was the first signer of that constitution.

George Burton, 1858-1941

Its first meeting locale, essentially a reading room for young men, was in the Rodolf Block on Main Street between Front and Second streets. The following year they moved to larger rooms in the Callahan Block in the 500 block of Main Street. In April 1885, exactly two years after its inception, the Y trustees purchased Scandia Hall (later the Labor Temple) for $13,000. Here they established a gymnasium, two bowling alleys and a reading room. The North Side branch of the Y was organized in 1887 and was established primarily for railroad men; its cost was partially subsidized by the Milwaukee Railroad.

W. W. Cargill, wealthy La Crosse pioneer businessman, in 1906 offered $25,000 for the erection of a new YMCA building if the city
would come up with an additional $65,000. By May 1907 the money had been subscribed, the Seventh and Main streets site acquired and construction begun on the $100,000 building. Parkinson and Dockendorff were the architects and Wells Bennett supervised the construction of the four-story and basement recreational and residential structure. Its architectural style is considered eclectic, a combination of several different styles. In general appearance it was similar to the Stoddard Hotel, which was built five years earlier. George Burton was chairman of the building committee for the new Y. Its first director was E. E. Bentley and its first general secretary was M. B. Williams.

In soliciting funds for erection of the new building, citizens were told that "Through the YMCA scores of young men each year are kept from leading evil lives; hundreds have come here strangers and have found in the Y good companions, good boarding places and good employment. Thousands of letters have been written to families, thousands of baths have been given to those who needed them, while free lectures, medical talks, entertainment and educational classes have all had a part in rounding out a grand work." It was also pointed out that "traps have been set all over our city to ruin young men," but the YMCA was instrumental in halting such practices.

President Taft, was born in Cincinnati on September 15, 1857, and observed his 52nd birthday two days before he arrived in La Crosse. He was not considered one of our great presidents but his-
An American President Visits La Crosse

torians record him as one of our prime legislators. He graduated second in his class at Yale in 1878, then went on to the University of Cincinnati Law School and passed the Ohio bar.

He soon became judge of the Ohio Superior Court and then a federal circuit judge and dean of the University of Cincinnati Law School. In 1900 President McKinley appointed Taft to establish civil government in the Philippine Islands in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. He accepted an appointment as Secretary of War in President Theodore Roosevelt’s cabinet in 1904, and became the latter’s most trusted advisor and trouble-shooter. Whenever an especially difficult matter arose, Taft was sent to “sit on the lid.”

He won the presidency in 1908 over William Jennings Bryan in an electoral vote of 321 to 162. As president, Taft was responsible for far-reaching legislation, such as special powers for the Interstate Commerce Commission, creation of the postal savings department and parcel post system, passage of the 16th and 17th amendments establishing a graduated income tax. His attitudes toward conservation, however, were not always popular and occasioned much criticism. Taft and Roosevelt became estranged because of differences regarding anti-trust legislation, but in later years resolved their variances and again became good friends. Taft was the first president to receive a salary of $75,000 a year and $25,000 for travel expenses. After leaving the presidency he became Kent Professor of the Yale Law School and then president of the American Bar Association. In 1921 President Harding appointed him Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, a post he held until his death in 1930.

President Taft was a huge man — 6 feet, 3 inches tall and weighing more than 300 pounds. He was said to be conservative in all things except in consumption of food; his appetite was prodigious. He was so large that a special bathtub had to be constructed for him in the White House and a hoist was rigged to lift him into and out of the tub. While in the Philippines he made a 200-mile inspection journey on mule back, then sent a cabled report to Secretary of War Root on his findings. Root wired back his congratulations on the success of the trip and added his “sympathies for the mule.” While in the Philippines, Taft purchased 400,000 acres of valuable land for the United States for seven million dollars — an excellent buy, at $17.50 an acre.

Mrs. Taft, nee Helen Herron of Cincinnati, whom the president married in 1886 was an outstanding First Lady. They produced three
children whom they took with them to the Philippines. Inauguration Day on March 4, 1908 was an extremely cold day so the ceremonies were held in the Senate chambers rather than outside as was the custom. Their oldest son, Charlie, who was eleven at the time, took with him a copy of Stevenson’s Treasure Island to read in case he became bored with the inaugural proceedings. As it turned out, he was fascinated with the ceremonies. Mrs. Taft was the first First Lady to ride in the inaugural procession with her husband from the Capitol to the presidential mansion. Even though the day was very cold, Mrs. Taft wore a spring-like outfit of purple satin in the parade, which included 60 bands and 30,000 marchers. To Mrs. Taft belongs the credit for setting out the first cherry trees at the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. and for supervising the planting of the 3,000 cherry trees the Japanese government sent to the United States as a gift. To this day the spring cherry blossoms are a favorite tourist attraction in Washington.

President Taft’s host when he visited La Crosse, was George W. Burton. Burton, only five months younger than Taft, was born in February 1858 in Manchester, Vermont. Both men graduated at age 20 from Yale in 1878. Burton came to La Crosse at the invitation of his uncle Judge S. S. Burton and obtained a job as teller in the National Bank and remained with that institution for 52 years until his death in July 1941 at the age of 83. He was a civic-spirited man, the last of the pioneer bankers of La Crosse. He was promoted to cashier in 1881 and advanced to the bank’s presidency in 1905. Burton was active in YMCA affairs and was on its Board of Trustees for many years and later its president. He was also active in the Red Cross, Pettibone Park Commission and Public Library Board. He belonged to the Congregational Church and was president of the La Crosse Country Club. The Burtons lived in the large house on the southwest corner of Fifteenth and Main streets. Some considered the trim of large colored stones somewhat garish and called the house an architectural monstrosity because of its conglomeration of styles; others considered it a handsome residence. For some undisclosed reason the Burtons moved to 218 North Eighth Street in later years and it was there that Burton died.

The National Bank started in 1877 at Second and Main streets with a capital of $100,000. Gideon C. Hixon was its first president and Giles R. Montague its vice-president. In 1881 the new Gothic style
An American President Visits La Crosse

bank was constructed at the southeast corner of Third and Main streets. It was destroyed by an arsonist in December 1979. In 1886 the bank's capital was increased to $200,000 and ten years later was reorganized as the National Bank of La Crosse with a capital of $250,000. Another new building, Grecian in architectural style, was erected on the east side of Fourth Street between Main and State streets in 1904 as the bank's new home and its most recent facilities on Fifth and King streets were dedicated in 1957.

Taft and Burton, though they were many miles apart during their adult productive years, maintained the close relationship they had formed in college days at Yale. Both men were devotees of YMCAs throughout their lives.

Inasmuch as Burton had been one of the prime leaders in the erection of the new YMCA building in La Crosse, it occurred to him how appropriate, as well as exciting, it would be if the building were to be dedicated by his friend, President Taft. The President was quick to accept Burton's invitation, not only because Burton was his close friend, but because he too was devoted to YMCA advancement throughout the country. Indeed, just before coming to La Crosse to dedicate the new YMCA, Taft had spoken at Ys in Dayton, Cincinnati, Omaha, Seattle, and even in Hong Kong and Manila.

Taft had just completed an official governmental journey of 13,000 miles. During his travels he had kept in touch with the White House through special telegraph wires which were connected to telephones, and as soon as the president's entourage had passed from one point to another, the wires were disconnected and rearranged between the next two points. So the president was in constant touch with the White House and Washington.

His itinerary included an 1,165 mile trip on a steamboat down the Mississippi River. Just prior to beginning his hegira, Taft had taken a 40-day vacation on Massachusetts Bay, bathing in the salt water and playing golf. He was in Boston on September 15, his birthday and in a speech there he declared that there must be a personal touch between the administration and the people. The federal administration, he declared, should realize that it had only temporary power. He said that the banking and monetary system of the time satisfied no one and needed reorganization. He spoke of the importance of a new tariff bill, of inter-state commerce and anti-trust laws. He felt that government departments needed total reorganization in order to
promote greater efficiency and economy, and to effect reform in business. He said "We are on the eve of business expansion prosperity. Proper legislation will create these ideas into positive fact." (To this writer, it seems we have heard the same rhetoric from every U.S. president right up to the present!)

President Taft traveled from Boston to Chicago, a train journey that took twelve hours. He made a station stop at Pittsfield, Massachusetts where he was presented with a five-foot floral wreath in honor of his 52nd birthday. In the parade in Chicago, more than 15,000 pupils were lined up along Michigan Avenue waving flags and cheering the president. Many thousands of other Chicagoans were also along the parade line to roar their approval of the chief executive. While in Chicago he also took time to see a National League baseball game between New York and Chicago teams.

President Taft's party arrived in La Crosse, at the Milwaukee Road's north side depot. Local dignitaries, led by Mayor Ori Sorenson, boarded the train and accompanied the president to the south side station at Second and Vine streets. Eight of the finest automobiles in the city were waiting at the Vine Street depot and the procession made up of a score or more of the city's most prominent men, took a circuitous route through the city before returning to the Seventh and Main Streets site for the ceremonies. As they passed Mr. Burton's home at Fifteenth and Main streets, Mrs. Burton stood in the front doorway and waved to the president who smiled broadly and returned her greeting.

Mayor Sorenson had requested all business establishments along the line of march to decorate their premises with the national colors in bunting and flags. The city had draped public buildings and wound red, white and blue ribbons around lamp posts and the president's picture was everywhere. Several hundred military men from the National Guard Armory were on alert all along the way. Police and security men were everywhere; police mounted on motorcycles were on either side and in front and back of the presidential car. Many area bands were included in the parade.

Then, as now, assassination attempts were a constant concern for authorities whenever a president appeared in public. Captain A. W. Butt, the president's military aide, and Detective James Sloane, were in charge of the Secret Service men and in unflagging attendance and watch over the president. Indeed, Sloane was the "boss of the town for
the occasion and whatever orders he issued to police and drivers were promptly obeyed without question."

A stout platform had been constructed on the Seventh Street side of the YMCA, several feet above the heads of the spectators so everyone could see. The president's corpulence was not forgotten and the largest chair in the city (really a reinforced loveseat) had been placed on the stand for his comfort. On the platform with the president were Mayor Sorenson, George Burton, Frank P. Hixon, L. F. Easton, W. W. Cargill, L. C. Colman, and other local dignitaries.

After the invocation and playing of the national anthem, Burton introduced his friend, saying "I have the great privilege and the great honor of presenting to you a man whom we all love, William Howard Taft, President of the United States." The crowd roared its approval and affection in an ovation that lasted more than a full minute.

Taft arose and took off his light topcoat — he was wearing a neat-fitting blue serge suit, gray silk tie and white vest and made a handsome appearance. His speech was fairly long and he exhibited exuberance and good humor; the audience which extended far back into Burns Park listened attentively. He spoke of the YMCA's influence on everyone, but especially on youth. He said the Y "helps to protect young men from the dangers and temptations that beset them. It sponsors temperance and puts young men back on their feet if they have fallen and makes them into good citizens and good members of the community." "Of course," he added, "it is different in La Crosse. You have no problems with your youth, for La Crosse is a moral city. The Y disregards color and creed and everyone is welcome. The Y supports brotherhood of all religions and it teaches young men how to spend money wisely and economically." Taft then suggested that citizens contribute generously to the support of the YMCA, and he particularly appealed to the city's "millionaires" to give liberally.

Throughout the city placards and posters urged males of all ages to join the Y. These were displayed prior to the president's arrival and read "Join the Y. Be a member when the President arrives. Join now at special rates." The advertisements then went on to describe the facilities of the organization and also urged young men from outside the city to live in the new building. There were 38 rooms for men "richly furnished and comfortable and well cared for." Rooms rented for $1.50 to $3.00 a week — depending upon size and location. They
said this was an "elegant home for men at very reasonable rentals." Memberships were not cheap for 1909 — boys ages 11 to 14 cost $4 and $5 a year; ages 15 to 18, $6 and $7; seniors, $8; regular, $10; businessmen, $12; sustaining memberships cost $15 to $100.

After the dedication ceremonies at the Y, the president was escorted to the Stoddard Hotel where he occupied the finest suite in the building. He was guest of honor at a banquet in the main dining room, where he was served a substantial American dinner of steak and potatoes. His friend, Burton, and of course the mayor and other local luminaries, toasted the president and praised him. When he left La Crosse he went on to Winona and the Twin Cities.

Mr. Taft must have liked La Crosse for he came back for another visit when he was no longer president, on December 20, 1915. Once again he was regaled at a sumptuous dinner in the Stoddard Hotel. His hosts on this occasion were the men of the Manufacturers and Jobbers Club and again his friend George W. Burton was toastmaster. The topic of the former president's speech was "Signs of the Times."

For a long time after President Taft's visits to our city, his presence was remembered as one of the highlights in La Crosse history.
A Terrible Fire on Third Street

It was two below zero on Thursday evening, February 2nd, 1899, and the downtown streets of La Crosse were deserted. It was a night fit for neither man nor beast and every right-thinking person was at home keeping as warm and snug as possible. A few stragglers who had no home, or perhaps only a lonely hotel room, were having a late supper snack in the Novelty Restaurant at 111 South Third Street. The cafe manager, Henry Rooney, was brewing a pot of fresh coffee to help keep the patrons warm.

William Horschak, the solitary police officer on the foot beat, well bundled up against the bitter cold, was making his rounds on the east side of Third Street between Main and Pearl, checking to see if shop doors were properly locked.

At about 9:30 p.m. as he walked past the Chicago Store, a dry goods, notions and clothing store, at 113 South Third, he noticed a strange orange reflection in the plate glass windows. He peered through the front door glass and saw a huge fire burning at the back of the store. He ran to the fire call box on the corner of Third and Pearl
streets and pulled the alarm lever. As the alarm bells began to ring, Rooney and his customers ran out to determine the cause of the commotion. They broke the front door glass, reached in and opened the door lock. They then rushed in and began to pull down display draperies and curtains and other inflammable articles. They gained little headway, however, as the flames had advanced so far as to make it impossible to save anything. The heat was so intense and the smoke so thick that they were driven back onto the street.

The fire department which was only a few blocks away in the 400 block of State Street responded as quickly as possible, but they were hampered by hard, snow-packed icy streets which caused the fire horses to slide. As soon as they arrived at the scene of the fire, Fire Chief C. A. Hunt took one look at the blaze and issued a 4-11 emergency call which brought out every fire house in the city.

One of the large plate glass windows in the front of the store buckled and blew out as a result of the great heat on the inside and the fierce cold on the outside, and thick black smoke billowed out into Third Street. Fire hoses were laid from the hydrant at Fourth and Main streets through the alley behind the store and in its back door. Another hose was connected to the fire hydrant at Third and Pearl and brought in the front door of the shop. The fire department worked rapidly and efficiently despite adverse conditions. Chief Hunt’s objective was not so much to save the store as he could not reverse the damage already done, but he aimed to keep the fire from spreading. The extreme cold weather caused the hoses to freeze and become quickly covered with ice which further hindered the firefighters. By 11:00 p.m. the fire was out but the Chicago Store inside was a shambles of fire-blackened and charred debris. By this time, despite the below zero weather, a considerable number of people had gathered at the site to watch the proceedings.

During the remainder of the night small fires kept erupting intermittently as embers and sparks blazed up. One fire company stayed on duty and put out these small conflagrations as they occurred. A hose at Fourth and Main streets broke and flooded the street to a depth of eight inches, covering the street car tracks and froze there. It was impossible for street cars to pass and it was nearly noon on Friday before city work crews had chopped the ice out of the tracks thus enabling the cars to pass. The City Board of Public Works also had the chore of putting the fire hydrants back into operation to keep them from freezing in the event of another fire.
Sam Abrams, manager of the Chicago Store, was attending a party at the time of the fire and was not notified until the blaze was nearly extinguished. Abrams said a stock inventory had been taken about ten days earlier. He estimated the value of the goods destroyed at $40,000, and said that insurance covered only a small portion of the loss. The building itself, owned by C. & J. Michel, received only minor damage and Charles Michel said it was well covered by insurance. The street level floor as it appears today has been entirely remodeled and bears no resemblance to the original. The upper two floors, however, are substantially the same as they were at the time of the fire, except that they have been painted blue. The name C. & J. Michel still appears at the top of the building.

There were some personal injuries to firemen who fought the blaze, all of whom acquitted themselves admirably. William Gage, a city fireman from company No. 2 slipped on the ice and fell in the alley behind the shop, but disregarded his injuries and continued to battle the fire. Fireman Frank Liska, of company No. 3, also slipped and fell, breaking his ankle; he was removed to the St. Francis Hospital for treatment. Fireman M. S. Weinell, of company No. 2 had been ill at home prior to the fire, but when the 4-11 emergency was sounded, he left his sick bed and reported for duty. While up on a ladder behind the store he became faint and fell off. He was carried to the Hebberd Drug Store at Fourth and Main streets where Dr. D. S. McArthur attended to his injuries and he was then carried home.

All in all, it was an exciting night in La Crosse on February 2nd, 1899.
The Devastating Gund Brewery Fire

Fire was a scourge in La Crosse during the 19th century. This ever-present menace exacted a severe toll on the small developing town. Buildings were nearly all of frame construction and a spark from a pipe or cigar or an ember from a chimney could inaugurate a fire, and in moments a building would be engulfed in flames, often spreading to adjoining structures. Frequently an entire block would be destroyed in a short period of time.

After a particularly devastating fire in 1857 an edict was passed stating that new construction within specified areas, mainly the business district, was to be built of brick or stone.

Fire prevention and fire control in that era was a far cry from the sophistication and efficiency of our present day fire department. Fire control procedures were directed by a city chief fire engineer and three assistant engineers. It was not until 1896 that La Crosse organized a central fire department with paid firemen.

Because lumbering was the prime industry in La Crosse at that time, fire was a constant hazard. Smoking was prohibited in the sawmill areas and watchmen were employed to make certain that this regulation was obeyed. Some sawmill owners refused to purchase fire insurance because premium rates were excessive. A number of important mills were totally destroyed by fire; indeed, the large Colman sawmill was gutted on three occasions, in 1868, 1874 and 1886.

One of the most disastrous conflagrations in the city's history occurred in the early morning hours of September 23, 1897, when the Gund Brewery was almost totally destroyed. The loss was estimated to be nearly $200,000; translated into today's terms it would be well over a million dollars. Nearly every building in the brewery complex was devastated. The cupola of the cold storage building was burned, but the remainder of the structure was saved only because of the extraordinary efforts of the firemen. The inferno continued unabated for almost three hours, leaving behind a mass of blackened debris, and was still smoldering at noon the following day.

At about 1:00 a.m. that Thursday, Fred Schultz, the night watchman, saw a small flame in the upper part of the brew house on the south side of the plant. He promptly alerted the fire department, but
by the time they arrived a short time later, the roof was a mass of flames. The raging fire was almost beyond control. Fire Chief C. A. Hunt immediately placed a 4-11 emergency call which brought out every fire department in the city to battle the blaze. It was believed that the fire had been in progress for some time before Schultz detected it.

There was great dismay among the firemen when the water hoses were turned on because the water pressure was so low that the streams could not reach the fire. Water pressure was estimated at 60 pounds and the streams were less than 30 feet long, thus insufficient to fight the fire effectively. Hunt directed that the two water streams be combined, thinking that double force might help, but the conflagration was too far advanced to be quelled. The brave firemen had to climb ladders to great heights carrying their hoses with them in order to get nearer to the sources of the flames.

In remarking about the poor water pressure, Chief Hunt said, "The water fell over in a sick sort of way that made the firemen want to pull their hair. It was one of the hottest fires I ever had to deal with. With the water pressure so poor, I expected to see the entire plant go, including the stables and offices." It was later learned that the new ten million gallon pumps at the city water works were not in operation as they had been shut down for repairs. Only one small pump was in operative condition.

The fire extended from the brew house to the malt house which was one of the largest buildings in the plant complex. Another structure, containing ice machines, pumps and engines was totally destroyed. The malt house was completely gutted and 2,000 bushels of prime barley and three carloads of malt were ruined.

John Gund, the brewery's owner, at first stated that the loss exceeded $200,000, later he revised that figure to $175,000 when he discovered that 12,000 barrels of beer had been saved from one of the storage buildings. He estimated the cost of the salvaged beer at about $52,000 on the open retail market. The brewery complex was insured for $125,000, but only 80 percent of that amount was recovered.

It was thought by some that the fire started in one of the brewing kettles, while others said it was caused by spontaneous combustion. Actually, no one ever really knew for sure what caused the fire. Gund wasted no time in repairing the damage and getting back into business.
First log building of Gund Brewery, 1854

Gund Brewery Buildings, 1873

Gund Brewery Complex, 1899
The Devastating Gund Brewery Fire

The following morning, at 7:00 o'clock, some five hours after the blaze began, a crew of men, upon Gund's orders, was busy clearing away the debris. The same day Gund sent for experts from St. Paul to repair the damaged machinery and to put the brewery back into operation as soon as possible. Plans were made to fill outstanding beer orders from the undamaged surplus found in the cold storage house.

John Gund, born in Germany in 1830, learned the brewing trade in his youth. He came to New York in 1848 and two years later moved to Galena, Illinois where he worked in a small brewery. In 1852 he came to Dubuque, Iowa where he married and began another small beer operation. He came to La Crosse in August 1854, where he started a brewery in a log cabin on the corner of Front and Division streets. Four years later he sold his building to C. L. Colman, a local lumberman, who used it for board storage. Gund then joined forces with Gottlieb Heileman and together they formed the City Brewery on the corner of Third and Mississippi streets.

The main building was 142 feet long; the malt house was 140 feet long and three stories tall. They were capable of storing 60,000 bushels of grain. They also constructed a dry kiln and an engine house. The bottling house on the east side of Third Street could produce 2,500 bottles daily. Gund sold his interest to Heileman in 1872 and began another operation the following year, called the Empire Brewery. In 1880 he organized the John Gund Brewing Company which he controlled with his sons. When John Gund Sr. retired, two of his sons, George and John, moved away from La Crosse and son Henry took over management of the business.

An addition was built in 1884, consisting mainly of a new ice house, the third one. The new building was 71 by 66 feet, 42 feet high, with a mansard roof. All interior work — girders, beams and floors — were manufactured of iron according to scientific specifications for most efficient space and ventilation requirements. The capacity of this new structure was 7,000 barrels. J. Burgemeister did the stone work; Scharpf & Tausche the tin work; Larson Hansen & Co. the wood work; Ott & Sons the iron work. Ice house number one was 38 by 65 feet, ice house number two was 71 by 58 feet. Gund Brewery thus had more storage space than any brewery in the northwest.

In 1897, at the time of the fire, the Gund Brewing Company produced more than 60,000 barrels of beer annually; the buildings
covered some five acres of land and the company employed more than 100 men, exclusive of the office staff. By August 1898 the new brewery had been rebuilt, all of massive stone and iron construction, all fire-proof.

The Gund Brewery was incorporated in 1880 with a capital of $100,000; by 1900 the stock was valued at more than two million dollars. Henry Gund Sr. became ill late in 1900, languished for a decade and died in May 1910. All breweries and saloons in the city were closed on the day of the funeral, attended by the company's 450 employees.

Gund's Peerless Beer was internationally famous, winning awards at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and in New Orleans in 1904. The Prohibition Act closed the brewery in 1919, but shortly thereafter Gund began to manufacture 2.3 to 4.0 percent "war beer." In 1920 the brewery closed again because of the Volstead Act. This, along with a company-wide strike by the Brewery Workers' Union of La Crosse the same year, was too much and the Gund Brewery closed permanently. The Gund family moved to Ohio, where many descendants still live, and became important benefactors of that state's educational system, especially universities.

The advent of breweries in La Crosse was an economic boon to the city of La Crosse as it struggled to overcome the loss of the sawmills and lumbering industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Several breweries became significant factors in La Crosse's continued growth.

Beer drinking, then as now, was the cause of many quarrels and much bloodshed. Excessive beer consumption is still the cause of a great many automobile accidents and deaths. However, in at least one instance beer drinking averted violence. Marcus "Brick" Pomeroy, editor of the La Crosse Democrat from 1860 to 1868, was anti-Lincoln and his editorials frequently advocated getting rid of Lincoln even strongly hinting that assassination of the great man would be desirable. After Lincoln had actually been assassinated, a group of angry citizens marched to Pomeroy's office with the intention of lynching him. On the way they stopped at a saloon to quench their thirst; many of them became intoxicated and forgot the purpose of their march. It saved Pomeroy's life.

A century ago there existed many saloons and drinking went on unabated with many disastrous results. Happily, there is today a
nation-wide effort to curb excessive beer drinking, especially by youth. Drunken drivers are dealt with seriously. Some breweries are now manufacturing beer with lower alcohol content in an effort to curb intoxication.

The Gund men were not only beer brewers but were involved in many civic affairs as well. Henry Gund was a member of the city's first Board of Park Commissioners in 1908. When John Levy's Augusta Hotel burned in March 1862, John Gund rebuilt it in 1866 as the International Hotel. George Gund was the first treasurer of the Board of Trade, and was one of the original incorporators in 1879 of the La Crosse Street Railway Company. He was also the first president of the La Crosse Baseball Association.

The Gund family was a significant force in the economic and cultural growth and development of early La Crosse. Their departure was a great loss to the city.
The Great Park Store Fire

Fire — the bane and the boon of mankind. Leigh Hunt, the 19th century English poet, called it "the most tangible of all visible mysteries." Without it life would be impossible for in its various forms it literally controls our lives. And yet, throughout history, despite its beneficence, fire has been one of the most devastating elements to plague man and to wreak vengeance upon us.

La Crosse was prey to many fires as our city developed and often entire blocks of structures were quickly turned into embers. Most buildings in the early days were constructed of wood and a spark from a pipe or cigar could and often did prove disastrous. In 1857 a local law was passed requiring that all new structures were to be built of brick or stone.

One of the most devastating fires in La Crosse occurred in April 1903 when the Park Store (later Doerflingers) on the southeast corner of Fourth and Main Streets was turned to smoldering rubble in a few hours as the result of a raging fire that threatened to engulf the entire downtown area. And even as the fire was at its most frenzied point, the store's owner, William Doerflinger, as he watched the flames consume his property, vowed to rebuild it into an even greater enterprise. And within one year he did exactly that.
William Doerflinger was born on April 13, 1857 in a log cabin near the foot of Mormon Coulee on a farm homesteaded by his grandparents, who came to the United States from Baden, Germany in the mid-1840s. He received a limited education in La Crosse public and parochial schools and at the age of 14 went to work as a messenger and cash boy for Mons Anderson who was known as the "merchant prince" of La Crosse. At 16, Doerflinger took a job as clerk in the general store of Rau and Klein on Third Street between Main and Pearl streets. A year later he was employed at the Trade Palace, a large quasi-department store, located in the Abner Gile Building at Fourth and Main streets. The U.S. Post Office was in the corner building while the Trade Palace was two doors east on Main Street.

In 1881 Doerflinger and Edward Bosshard formed a partnership—a small department store in a frame building, 16 by 30 feet, on the west side of Fourth Street between Jay and King. They dealt mainly in dry goods and dress materials. Because of its proximity to the park across the street, it became popularly known as the Park Store, a name it retained for several decades. The business was moved to a building at the southwest corner of Fourth and Pearl Streets in 1888.

In 1891 Doerflinger bought out Bosshard and became sole proprietor of the Park Store. Three years later he moved to a building on the east side of 4th Street just south of the Main Street corner. In 1898 he acquired the premises of the Trade Palace and the following year he obtained the corner of the Gile Building which was then occupied by Joseph Gutman's Great Western Clothing Store. Shortly thereafter he procured the Coren Dry Goods Store and the Farlane Millinery Store, both in the 400 block of Main Street. Thus the Park Store occupied space on both Fourth Street and on Main Street. Doerflinger broke through the walls between the various stores and formed archways to create wide-open spaces between the various departments.

On the night of April 21, 1903, tragedy struck the Park Store. A. P. Pfiffer, the store's night watchman, was just retiring for the night, about 10:00 p.m. when he noticed smoke curling upward in the area near his room. Upon investigation he discovered a small fire in a rear room of the basement. Pfiffer immediately sounded the fire alarm and in a few minutes the city fire department, which was only a block away in the 400 block of State Street, arrived with horse-drawn fire wagons and hoses. The smoke in the basement was so thick it was
nearly impossible to see anything. In a matter of moments the conflagration had spread to the upper floors and flames and smoke were pouring out from every window in the building. Fire Chief Bradfield sent out alarms to every other fire station in the city and all responded within minutes. N. D. Bacheller and Under Sheriff Chris Burns rushed into the building and shut the fire doors on the first floor, but unfortunately the night watchman had neglected to tell them of the fire doors in the basement which were left wide open. No less than fourteen strong streams of water were played upon all parts of the building, but to little avail.

Mayor William Torrance telegraphed to Winona, Minnesota for assistance, but before firemen there could respond the north wall of the building on Main Street collapsed. La Crosse's courageous firemen, with little regard for their personal safety, fought valiantly and soon had the fire contained, thus protecting surrounding structures. The call to Winona was canceled, as it was evident that the entire building was doomed.
The interior of the building and the fixtures were largely of wood construction and thus the fire raced rapidly throughout the premises. Large crowds of people congregated to watch the blazing inferno and police were called out to herd citizens away from the terrible fire. People seemed aware of the imminent danger of personal injury and complied with police orders to stay on the other side of the street which was cordoned off.

Within less than an hour of the first alarm the entire Park Store was a mass of seething flames. The fire on the Main Street side of the building was fiercest with flames shooting 30 feet into the air. The McMillan Building (now the State Bank) across the street was in jeopardy. Its awning caught fire from sparks, but the intrepid fire-fighters played their streams of water on them and in short order extinguished the flames. The heat was so intense that the windows of the Poehling Dry Goods Store on the north side of the street cracked and melted. The store windows of the buildings on the south side of Main Street bulged and fell smashing and splintering in flames onto the ground. At 11:30 p.m., an hour and a half after the first alarm was sounded, the entire north wall of the Park Store collapsed and fell crashing into Main Street with a noise that could be heard for blocks around, and tons of brick and mortar flew through the air and onto the surrounding area. Strangely, the Thornbury Dress Goods Department, leased from Doerflinger, withstood the flames longer than any other part of the building, but eventually its roof caved in and it too was destroyed. It was later found that the huge quantities of water that were poured into the Thornbury store did almost as much damage to the merchandise as the smoke and fire.

By 1:00 a.m. the fire department had succeeded in vanquishing the appalling conflagration and an hour later the fire was confined to the basement which was now a mass of smoldering rubble. The Park Store, building and merchandise alike, was totally destroyed. The loss was estimated as amounting to about $300,000 of which only 65 percent was covered by insurance.

When the fire first started the water pressure was very good, but as it progressed and more hoses were brought into play, the engines at the pump house on lower King Street were forced to operate beyond their normal capacity and several hoses became inoperable. At one point the water pressure was not sufficiently powerful to enable the firefighters to shoot streams of water from the street level to the top of the 3½-story building.
Fire Chief Bradfield directed his men with the greatest efficiency and they in turn reacted with bravery, bringing credit to themselves, their department and the community. In spite of the colossal heat and the danger of falling debris, the men stayed at their assigned posts and performed in an unexcelled manner. This laudable attitude and execution of duty has been a tradition with the La Crosse Fire Department throughout its entire history.

April was considered the worst time of the year for a fire as all departments had just received large consignments of new goods to replenish stock for the summer trade. Indeed, the newly arrived merchandise had not yet been entirely unpacked and appraised for insurance coverage. In a matter of moments, it was all consumed in the furious flames. Aside from the Park Store losses, the Norden Society which had offices on the third floor of the Gile Building had considerable loss as well, including the destruction of a very valuable library of rare books and a fine antique silk American flag which had cost $200. The origin of the fire is unknown to this day. It appeared likely that it started either in the basement grocery department or in the furnace room.

The rubble and debris had hardly been cleared away before Doerflinger began to build a finer and larger department store than La Crosse had ever seen. And in a year, almost to the day, the four-story building that now occupies the most important corner in downtown La Crosse was opened to the public. On April 27, 1904, Doerflinger
hosted a festive social event that brought tremendous crowds of people to celebrate the grand opening of the new store. It was called the "greatest triumph in the city's mercantile history." Doerflinger had also purchased the entire inventory and good will, valued at $25,000, from the John Willing Shoes and Bootery Company on lower Main Street.

At 7:30 in the evening, at a signal from Doerflinger, an orchestra on the balcony of the new store began to play and 2,600 electric lights, all turned on simultaneously, illuminated the newly-decorated store windows. The doors were opened and masses of people surged into the store in such great numbers that the doors had to be locked at intervals to keep the building from being over-run. Souvenirs were distributed from the jewelry department and the frenzy of the customers to obtain the free merchandise was so intense that people pushed each other to the point where glass show cases were dislodged and one was turned over and shattered. Much valuable merchandise was picked up by unethical persons. Mons Anderson, for whom Doerflinger had worked 33 years earlier was a special guest at the festivities.

Doerflinger's policy was to carry high-quality merchandise at reasonable prices. The store's buyers purchased large quantities of goods at lower prices, the management contending that it was satisfied with smaller profits and that the store's success was based upon volume sales.

William Doerflinger was a civic-minded man as well. He was a member of the Board of Trade (precursor of the Chamber of Commerce) and also belonged to the Merchants' Protective Association. He was on the board of directors of the Batavian National Bank (today First Bank) and was vice-president of the Central Electric Company. Doerflinger was a staunch Republican and at the age of 28, in 1885, was elected treasurer of the city of La Crosse, the first Republican to hold that office in 21 years. During the first election for that office he won by 80 votes; the second time around he won by 2,800 votes.

Each year Doerflinger gave a Christmas party for the youngsters of St. Michael's Orphanage. During World War Two, a large area of the store's first floor was devoted to selling war bonds.

William Doerflinger married Louise Bayer in September 1885 in St. Joseph's Cathedral and they produced two daughters — Viola
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Louise, who married Sam Fellows, and Leona Claire, who married Myron Locke. When Doerflinger died on February 1, 1926, Alfred W. Langenbach became president of the store, and upon his death in 1933, John L. Halik took charge. Viola Fellows began to work in the store in 1929 and in 1935 became president of the company, while her husband acted as vice-president and general manager. Their son, Sam Fellows, Jr., entered the business in 1946 when he returned from World War Two service, and upon his mother’s death in 1954, became the store’s president.

Extensive alterations and modernization were carried out during the ensuing years. A $250,000 renovation program in the downtown store was completed in 1975. The company expanded by opening a branch in the Village Shopping Center on Losey Boulevard. Doerflinger’s most ambitious project took place with the opening of a new store in Valley View Mall. Three additional branches were short-lived; one on Campbell Road across from the University of Wisconsin, one in Jackson Plaza and the third in Center 90 in Onalaska. In recent years a total reorganization occurred and many long-standing departments were closed.

A changing retail market and mass merchandising in the industry, accompanied by a deteriorating economic climate in the 1970’s caused insurmountable financial hardship to the Doerflinger enterprises. The branch stores were closed one by one. In the spring of 1984, after 103 years in business, the downtown store at Fourth and Main streets closed its doors permanently. It marked the end of an era that saddened the entire community.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

The Legacy of Our Dedicated Fire-Fighters

Dante, the Italian epic poet of the 13th century, wrote "From a little spark may burst a mighty flame." La Crosse has always been able to attest to the verity of that statement, for from its earliest beginnings the city was the hapless victim of scores of fires. Yet to balance these tragedies, the city was always blessed with a fire department second to none. Our fire chiefs from the first to the present have been not only dauntless firefighters but leaders and administrators without peer.

Though there were many fires before 1857, the first conflagration of magnitude occurred on March 7th of that year. It started about noon in the New England House hotel on Front Street, and though the townsmen fought the blaze valiantly, by evening Front Street from State to Mt. Vernon was nothing but charred ruins.

Other extensive fires occurred in La Crosse in 1862, 1864 and 1867. Original buildings were frame structures which were destroyed in minutes like tinder boxes from the tiniest spark. After the 1857 disaster it was decreed that new buildings had to be constructed of brick or stone. This included Front and Second streets and the cross streets from Jay to Vine. In 1864 these limits were extended to Third Street and to Fourth Street in 1869. The Batavian National Bank and several other buildings were destroyed in 1863 by a wind-whipped fire. In 1903 the Doerflinger’s Park Store was totally devastated by a tremendous blaze. It was rebuilt and ready for business within a year.

Fire control was dependent upon volunteer fire companies in our early history. Some of these companies purchased and owned their own equipment which was subject to city inspection. Later, the city purchased fire-fighting equipment.

A chief fire engineer and three assistants were nominated by the various companies and confirmed by the city council. Subsequently, the council chose the chiefs as well as an administrative fire marshall. But it was not until 1896 that fire department personnel became paid city employees. Unhappily, there were often political squabbles about appointments. This was obviated in 1897 when a police and fire commission was appointed consisting of four persons, not more than two of whom could belong to the same political party. These posts were appointed by the mayor and appointees served for
four years without compensation. The board had the power of making all firefighting personnel appointments which were based upon the "merit system." Men applying for appointments were examined as to physical and educational qualifications, personal habits, reputation, experience and standing in the community. If appointed, men retained their posts only so long as their behavior was exemplary. The purpose of the system was to eliminate political influence in making selections. Thus the men who operated and administered the fire department were obligated to do so on the most efficient level.

Because there were many lumber and sawmills in La Crosse in the early days, fire was an unremitting danger. Smoking in and about the mills was strictly prohibited and watchmen were employed to make certain the edict was obeyed. Mills found it nearly impossible to obtain insurance on their properties and when it was available, premium rates were excessive. Despite these precautions, several La Crosse mills burned in the mid-19th century. Among them were the Holway, Polleys, Colman and Paul mills. Indeed, the Colman Mill was destroyed by extensive fires three times, in 1868, 1873, and 1886, and each time was rebuilt.

The downtown area of La Crosse was made up almost entirely of wooden structures, all crowded on the streets near the river. Even though great care was exercised to prevent fires, they still occurred frequently. Whenever a fire occurred, dozens of men rushed to the scene carrying buckets. Then they formed two lines between the river and the fire and passed leather buckets of water from hand to hand with empty pails returning the same way. Thus was born the term "bucket brigade."

The first fire-fighting company to be formed in La Crosse was in 1857 almost immediately after the disaster that destroyed Front Street. It was known as the Pioneer Engine Company No. 1; W. W. Crosby was its foreman. That year an ordinance was passed by the city council that required every building owner on Front, Second and Third streets from State to Ferry to place two buckets near their front doors to be "always in readiness for use in fires."

The men of the Pioneer Engine Company had special uniforms which consisted of black pants, red shirt with a broad collar and a shield on a patch of blue velvet on the front. This uniform was topped with a square-topped glazed cap with a shovel-board peak. Later they purchased the hats of the Milwaukee Engine Company and the uniform trimmings were changed from blue velvet to black braid.
A group of local men of German descent formed the Washington Engine Company No. 2 in 1860 and a rivalry grew between the Pioneers and the Washingtons. In October 1869 the Rescue Hose Company, with Theodore Rodolf (who was La Crosse's mayor in 1868 and 1870) as president. Its motto was "On to the Rescue." The following year this company was reorganized and called the Rescue Hose and Ladder Company.

In May 1871 a general meeting was held which resulted in the organization of a city fire department. In November of the same year a hook and ladder company of 25 men was formed in the Fifth Ward. The Hand Engine Company No. 3 consisting of 50 men was organized in the Third Ward in 1873. The original company formed in 1857 was disbanded in 1875, and in 1879 the Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 was reorganized with 20 additional men. Hose Company No. 2 with 12 men was established in 1880. By that time there were 125 men in the city acting as official firefighters. Only four of these men were paid by the city — the chief engineer and three drivers. The apparatus of the Fire Department in 1880 consisted of two Silby steam fire engines valued at $10,000, three vehicles at $1800, miscellaneous equipment including 10,000 feet of hose, valued at $10,000 and five horses. At the turn of the century La Crosse had five fire companies, with headquarters at 414 State Street, and other stations at 510 St. Cloud St., Sixth and Mississippi streets, Berlin Street (this name was changed to Liberty Street during World War One), and Denton Street.
Fire horses were specially trained to respond to fire alarms. Stable doors opened and horses went unattended to stand in assigned places before the fire carts, harnesses were dropped onto their backs and manually fastened to the fire engines and in moments men and equipment were ready to go.

The city soon became aware that sophisticated firefighting equipment was needed so a fire engine was purchased. This consisted of a tank and pump mounted on wheels. A long rope attached to its front was used by men who dragged it to fires. There was a long wooden bar on each side of the tank which was connected to the pump. Men stationed on each side of the tank operated the bars which in turn forced water through a hose. A few years later a "handpumper" was purchased.

La Crosse's first steam fire engine was purchased in 1867 and was named the T. B. Stoddard in honor of the city's first mayor. It was a steam engine mounted on wheels and contained a fire box and boiler in which the water was kept at the boiling point. It was operated by a pump that forced a stream of water through a hose. A team of horses to pull the engine to the scene of a fire was always ready. A second steam fire engine was purchased in 1873 and was named the "Gateway City."
Because it was inconvenient and certainly not efficient to always depend upon the Mississippi River as a source of water to fight fires, especially in winter when the river was frozen, a series of cisterns was constructed, each holding from 800 to 1,000 gallons of water. The first such cistern was at the foot of Main Street and another was built under the city hall on the north side in the 400 block of Main Street. As the years passed, more cisterns were built until in 1876 there were fifteen of them. They were filled by pumping water into them from the river.

The first fire station was built in 1868 in conjunction with the city hall in at 413 Main Street. Often social affairs were held by the fire department for the volunteer members. After a fire it was customary to hang the hoses in the building's steeple to dry. No. 1 Fire Station at 414 State Street was erected in 1886 on the south side of the street.

There was always excitement in La Crosse whenever a large fire broke out. The fire apparatus dragged by teams of horses, sparks flying from their hooves as the truck driver cracked his long whip over their heads to urge them on at a greater speed. Youngsters had the time of their lives running after the fire trucks to watch the conflagrations.

In June 1905 a steam fire engine was purchased from the Nott Steam Fire Engine Company of Minneapolis for $5,000, a very expensive item in those days. Gradually the fire department disposed of its horse-drawn equipment and purchased motor trucks. In 1942 new fire trucks were purchased costing nearly $8,000 each and 1917 models were disposed of.

Old fire alarm boxes patented in 1886 became a thing of the past in 1973 when the last one was removed from 13th Street and South Avenue. The old boxes had been purchased from the Chicago Fire Department and installed here in 1928.

Throughout the history of the fire department, La Crosse has been more fortunate than many cities of comparable size, both in its acceptance of newer and more sophisticated equipment and firefighting methods, but especially in the high quality of its personnel. Our firemen have been on call 24 hours a day for 365 days a year, ready at a moment's notice to perform their duties, courageously and without complaint, often at great personal risk. They have responded not only to fire dangers, but often to give life resuscitation to persons in need of such service. They respond just as readily and with good
grace to rescue a pet kitten from a tree or someone with an arm stuck in a pipe.

In 1975 the La Crosse fire prevention methods were voted the best in the state by the Wisconsin Department of Industry Labor and Human Relations. A letter of praise and commendation sent to Fire Chief Irvin Kahler the same year stated that the rapport that existed between the La Crosse Fire Inspection Department and the public was "remarkable."

This altruistic attitude has been characteristic of our La Crosse firefighters from the very first volunteer men in 1845 to the most recent. La Crosse citizens are truly fortunate in having men of such high caliber to serve the community.
Another City Landmark Passes Into Limbo

One of La Crosse's important historic landmark, has faded into limbo leaving behind only photographs and memories of its past grandeur. The Stoddard Hotel at Fourth and State streets, was razed and became but a pile of rubble early in 1982 and is today only a grassy plot.

Knowing that her demise was imminent, her glassless windows stared like sightless eyes at the city she so dearly loved for nearly eighty years. But until she was demolished, she stood straight and tall, a proud old dowager, confident that she would be remembered for her open-hearted hospitality and for the gracious parties and balls she hostessed and for the famous and the ordinary people she fed and housed. Most important of all, she saw La Crosse history — social, economic and political — enacted within her walls. She went to her well-earned reward, gracefully and with head held high. The Stoddard Hotel, this elegant and dignified old lady, as she existed in her glorious heyday, became but a cherished memory.

The Stoddard had fallen upon hard times and her once impressive facilities deteriorated and finally provided diminished refuge to elderly men, truckers and a few transients.

From its beginnings La Crosse recognized the need for good hotels. The city was a central stopping point along the Mississippi River for traders, rivermen, hunters, itinerant preachers, and pioneers seeking a desirable locale to settle, and migrants on their way north and west. Thus a brisk industry in hotels developed, many of them really little more than second-grade boarding houses, to accommodate the early visitors to La Crosse.

The first inn was John Levy's home at the corner of Front and Main Streets. While her husband was engrossed in his many business and private pursuits, Fredericka Levy opened her home to any traveler who crossed her path, offering food and shelter, clothing mending services and care for the ill. Even when they lacked money to pay, John and Fredericka Levy gave unstintingly and generously, their only recompense the satisfaction of having helped someone in need. Nathan Myrick, La Crosse's first white settler, also, though to a much lesser extent, took in travelers who needed temporary housing.

By 1856, when La Crosse officially became a city, there were already a dozen hotels in La Crosse, all of them located near the
Mississippi River. Among them were the Tallmadge House, the New England Hotel, the Harrington House, Simeon Kellogg's Western Enterprise, and William McSpadden's Black River House. (It was in the basement of McSpadden's house that William Watts was chained and imprisoned after murdering David Darst in 1852.)

In 1856 John Levy built the Augusta House (using his wife's middle name) on the northeast corner of Front and Pearl Streets. It was the largest hotel of that time, four stories high, each floor 80 by 80 feet, with a total of 100 rooms. It was destroyed by fire in March 1862 and four years later John Gund erected the International Hotel on the same corner.

As time passed, the city grew more populous and migrants in covered wagons and prairie schooners arrived more frequently. This national hegira pointed to the need for additional housing in the La Crosse area. The advent of railroads into La Crosse in 1858 created an even more urgent need for hotels and boarding houses which enterprising businessmen were eager to provide.

During the last two decades of the 19th century the Cameron House at Second and Vine streets was the most prestigious hostelry in La Crosse. As the city gradually moved eastward, the Cameron lost some of its earlier significance. Because it was primarily a railroad depot hotel, it catered chiefly to railroad personnel and itinerant travelers, drummers and hucksters. This, coupled with the fact that it had a limited number of rooms, some of them rented to permanent
Another City Landmark Passes Into Limbo

tenants, it often could not accommodate all visitors who needed satisfactory lodging. Then, too, the west end of the city was becoming a bit seedy, supporting a great many saloons, brothels and gambling houses, which surely was not an attractive inducement for all guests. The Cameron House management did not have sufficient funding nor interested investors to support either remodeling or expansion. All of these factors combined to make the city more aware of the acute need for a special hotel that would bring credit to the community.

Cameron House Hotel, 1910

In April 1902, an astute but comparatively unknown gentleman, Baltimore Worthington, in a published piece, castigated the city for its failure to erect a much needed hotel. He said, "A city of 30,000 without a hotel! Any resident of La Crosse will tell you such a thing is absurd, but I will tell him he is living in just that town . . . La Crosse has not a hotel in the modern view of what constitutes a hotel." Worthington attributed this lack to factional strife, failure of all those concerned to work together cooperatively. The younger men of La Crosse antagonized the older men. The older group had the capital but were too conservative; the younger element had energy, enthusiasm and ideas, but little money to invest. Worthington claimed that La Crosse did not have a suitable hotel simply because of the misdirected efforts in sponsoring such a project. The Railroad Committee of the Board of Trade (precursor of the Chamber of Commerce) reported that the Milwaukee Railway would commit itself to erecting a new depot-hotel that would cater to railroad patrons as well as other visitors to the city. The railroad officials contended that since 1880
the only fairly good hotel in the city was the Cameron House and that was rapidly deteriorating. They said La Crosse needed much finer accommodations if it was to compete with other towns of comparable size in the midwest and northwest.

As early as 1898 a group of prominent businessmen discussed the advisability of building a fine new hotel in La Crosse. Their meetings produced much rhetoric, but no action. Once again, Worthington blamed their failure to act upon the apathy of the people and their disinclination to recommend bringing new industry to the city; surely a new hotel was a minor consideration in such an attitude. In retrospect and in review of our history, we can surely take issue with Worthington’s observation that La Crosse was lax in encouraging industry to settle here.

The “young blood” of the city, said to be a group of nearly 300 young men, met and formed the Progressive Association. Their aim was to advocate and encourage industry to locate here; they felt a fine new hotel would be conducive to bringing new business to La Crosse. The young men blamed the Board of Trade for its sluggishness in promoting the city; they claimed that organization was composed only of the older and wealthier men of the city and accused them of not being "public spirited." Today we find that this harsh criticism is certainly moot and open to discussion.

There was, however, a real difference of opinion between the Board of Trade and the Progressive Association regarding the procurement and use of capital. The Progressive Association asked the Board of Trade to provide capital, but the latter’s membership, who owned much of the city’s real estate, rejected the younger group’s proposals. The established businessmen of the city seemed content to deposit their excess funds in banks at three percent, but were apparently unwilling to take risks. Worthington claimed there was sufficient money in La Crosse, as well as brains and enterprise to secure the erection of a new and modern hotel but the older “fuddie-duddies” were reluctant to take action. The Progressive Association eventually fizzled out.

Charles K. Lush and John C. Burns came to the rescue. They revitalized the hotel project, assisted by R. A. Thompson. They scouted the town for an appropriate site for the new hotel and decided that the southeast corner of Fourth and State streets was best. The site, described as Block 33, Lots 1 and 2, was originally used as a
Another City Landmark Passes Into Limbo

police “bull-pen,” established in 1857. It was a kind of stockade surrounded by a six-foot-high fence. Drunks, thieves and other prisoners were brought there from their jail cells each morning and incarcerated for the day under strict security. The men were given heavy sledge hammers and assigned to the “rock pile” where they “turned big rocks into little rocks,” which were then used primarily for paving streets and for building foundations.

During the following years when the two lots were privately owned, the bull-pen was informally abolished, but in 1892 the city council reactivated it. It was then established on the market square, today the site of the parking ramp at Fourth and Jay streets. This bull-pen was a plank pit about 40 feet square encircled by a 12-foot high fence constructed of two-inch thick planks. A 16-foot roof at the east end of the pit protected prisoners during bad weather and also acted as a restraint against escape. Prisoners were marched in and out of the pit through 10-foot gates, one at either end of the caged area. Parents frequently brought their children when they disobeyed and ordered them to gaze between the fence slats at the hard-working inmates. This was intended to act as a deterrent to misbehavior and young miscreants were told this would be their fate if they continued to be bad.

In May 1865 the lot at Fourth and State was sold at public auction for non-payment of taxes to Milton and Lavinia Barlow. Barlow was a receiver for the U.S. Land Office on lower Main Street, who for political reasons found it expedient to include his wife as co-owner of the property, a rare practice in those days. In 1875 they acquired the adjoining lot to the south which was sold for a one-dollar token payment on a quit claim deed from Cyrus Sharples to Lavinia Barlow.

Prior to this a man named John Brabant had constructed a small frame house in 1857 on lot number two. City Treasurer George Scharpf conducted the auction and paper transfers. On the corner lot the Barlows built their home, designated as 120 North Fourth Street. Milton Barlow died in 1884, but his widow continued to live there until 1903. In 1891 Lavinia sold lot number two and the house thereon to C. J. Enger of Cook County, Illinois for $11,500. In January 1903 Lavinia Barlow sold corner lot number one with her house to Lush and Burns on a quit claim deed for $22,000. That lot had increased in value from $600 in 1857 to $22,000 in 1903. In 1981
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the two lots, comprising 18,000 square feet, was valued at $147,000, while the Stoddard Hotel building was assessed at $232,000, for a total of $379,000. In 1980 the building was valued at $296,200 and thus had decreased in value by more than $64,000 in one year.

Lavinia Barlow then moved to 1216 State Street where she lived until her death in 1911. The Barlow house on lot number one was moved to 713 Badger Street; the Brabant house on lot number two was moved to 620 Vine Street. Both have long since disappeared.

An option was filed for the Barlow property with the Register of Deeds in 1902, with security endorsed by Charles K. Lush and John C. Burns, acting for the revitalized Progressive Association. Though the property was valued at $22,000 the security was only $100, surely an indication of good faith and trust in the two young promoters. The option continued for four months with the privilege of extension for another four-month period while Burns and Lush raised funds.

The funds, amounting to more than $20,000 for the purchase of the corner lot were obtained through public subscription. The leading donor was the Salzer Seed Company with $2,000; Colman Lumber Company, Frank P. Hixon, National Bank, and Batavian Bank each came up with $1,000; followed by 111 individuals and companies each pledging $50 or more. After procurement of the land site, Lush and Burns, with practically no money but with a great deal of hope and faith, planned to build a $300,000 hotel that would be the “talk of the town.”

Frank P. Hixon, local lumber baron and financier, one of the organizers of the Board of Trade and founder of the National Bank of La Crosse, decided to help “cope with the problems of La Crosse.” Lush and Burns had made the city hotel-conscious, but it was Hixon who provided the real money to build the hotel and induced his wealthy friends and business associates to do likewise. Assisting him in the capital investment were John J. Hogan, W. W. Cargill, George Linker, E. H. Hunt, L. C. Colman, B. E. Edwards, Albert Hirshheimer, Mills Tourtellotte, F. A. Copeland, Henry Gund and other prominent local businessmen. They organized the Northern Hotel Company in January 1903, with an original capital stock investment of $100,000 which was shortly thereafter increased, as building costs escalated, to $225,000 plus furnishings costing $50,000. Lush was appointed to handle public relations.

The firm of Handy and Cady, Chicago architects, was hired to
draw the plans and John Nolen, a local contractor, was signed to build the hotel. It was said at the time that the new hotel would be "as grand as the most fastidious hotel anywhere and would provide for La Crosse hotel accommodations unequalled anywhere in Wisconsin." It was further reported that the new hotel would mean a fine new Milwaukee Railroad depot, a project confirmed by John Earling, president of the Milwaukee Road. As we now know, the latter structure never became a reality on the south side of La Crosse and the north side depot was not built until many years later.

Construction for the new hotel was started in the early summer of 1903 and was completed a year later in June 1904.

The hotel was opened to guests on June 23, 1904; breakfast the next morning was the first meal served in its dining room. To John A. Anderson of Chicago fell the honor of being the first to sign the hotel register. By midnight of June 23 three pages of the register had been filled with the names of paying guests.

The formal opening of the Stoddard Hotel occurred on July 3, 1904, and was celebrated with a grand banquet honoring the hotel as "an emblem of the progressive spirit of La Crosse, symbol of the faith of its citizens in the future and a monument marking the opening of a new era." Attendance at the banquet cost ten dollars a plate (a high price for dinner in 1904) but it was a sumptuous meal of French and American cuisine and "champagne flowed like water." John C. Burns was in charge of ticket sales and he buttonholed everyone he knew.
and in a brief time succeeded in selling more than 200 tickets; a great many more who wished to attend could not be accommodated. A large contingent of “ordinary people” gathered outside to see the guests as they arrived and left. Snobbery, even then, as now, was based upon personal material wealth.

Roland B. Gelatt, editor of the La Crosse Leader-Press, was the master of ceremonies and said in his speech “La Crosse now has, without doubt, one of the finest and most modern hotels in the northwest.” Other after-dinner speakers included F. A. Copeland (mayor of La Crosse in 1891-1893) whose topic was “The Stoddard;” Fred B. Smith, the hotel’s manager and shortly thereafter its owner, spoke on “The Landlord;” U.S. Representative John J. Esch paid tribute to “The Builders;” Attorney Paul W. Mahoney extolled “The Town;” and City Attorney John F. Doherty spoke on “The Willing Workers,” the men who had made the hotel possible through contributions, hard work and many sacrifices.

A surprise guest and speaker was John M. Levy, who at 84 was the city’s oldest and most venerated citizen. Levy had been mayor of La Crosse for three terms during the Civil War and the city’s first innkeeper. His impromptu speech was described as “brilliant, a gem, the big hit of the evening.” The seven-course banquet was a gourmet’s delight. The gala affair lasted until 2:30 a.m.

The Stoddard in 1904 was said to be the only fire-proof hotel in the state. It was modern and up-to-date in every particular; its interior was elegant and in excellent taste. Its location was perfect and easily accessible to every important point in the city.

The Elizabethan-Corinthian style of architecture was reminiscent of an old English inn. It was simple yet refined, five stories high exclusive of the basement, constructed of pressed Purington brick, white stone ornamentation, steel and terra cotta, and contained 122 rooms. Beams were of steel and the poured concrete was made of a special sand which, when it set, became an almost impenetrable rock-like consistency. Walls and ceilings were of hollow-tile, fire-proofed material. Door frames and window casings were of steel while many passageway floors and stairs were of marble or mosaic tile. Iron fire-escapes, fairly new to the city, were installed along with racks of folded fire hoses ready for immediate use in case of emergency. Six ornate arched stained glass windows, three on each side of the main Fourth Street entrance, graced the first floor. Another six identical
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windows were on the north side of the building, with a seventh above the ladies’ entrance on State Street. The building was heated by steam and had its own electric power plant as well as a private 78-foot deep artesian well that pumped 125 gallons per minute of fresh clean water throughout the structure. An electric elevator was installed in the north wall of the lobby. The building was said to be “as modern and complete as twentieth century science and skill could make it.”

When the Stoddard Hotel opened its doors to the public in June 1904, one’s first impression was of distinction, elegance and richness. The main lobby boasted of marble floors, complemented by dark oak woodwork and bronze grillwork. North of the lobby on the corner was the reading and writing room, containing a fine collection of books. This room later became the offices of an investment house. To the south of the lobby was the billiard room — this in later years housed the Colonel’s Corner cocktail lounge. The main dining room, later converted into the Crystal Room, was at the north east and was 41 by 61 feet and 18 feet high, with a balcony built into the east wall for musical entertainers. A ladies’ reception room was next to the stairway just inside the State Street door which was designated as the ladies’ entrance. On the second floor corner was a sumptuous parlor and a music room next to it. A collection of original oil paintings said to have cost $4,000 hung on the walls of the public rooms. These gradually disappeared through the ensuing years; it was later reported that one of these paintings was seen in a nearby antique shop.

Single guest rooms and suites were available, at least 40 of them with private bath. Every room was richly furnished and equipped with a 35-pound hair mattress and spring. Telephones were installed in nearly every room, a rarity in those days. The hotel operated on the American plan, with rates for single rooms for $2.50 to $5, while suites cost from $5 to $8 a day. The Stoddard sent horse-drawn coaches, and later automobiles, to meet all trains to transport guests from depots to the hotel. Meals offered presented an almost unbelievable choice of ordinary fare as well as a great many delicacies.

The original staff consisted of 80 employees which included 13 bellboys in dark green uniforms. Suite 201 was the best in the hotel, elegantly furnished with velvet rug and draperies and hand-carved furniture. It was in later years known as the “Brayton Suite” — so named because it was the La Crosse home for A. M. Brayton, former editor of the La Crosse Tribune and then publisher of the Wisconsin
State Journal in Madison. During the late 1950s and the 1960s this suite was set aside for the exclusive use of the Trane Company for visiting executives. Earl Richmond, wealthy retired executive of the Auto-Lite Company occupied the corner third-floor suite, and furnished it with his own belongings.

In subsequent years when the Stoddard was under the able aegis of John Elliott, the entire decor of the hotel was modernized and changed to reflect the new times. The exterior, however, remained constant through the hotel's entire history.
Three Men Who Managed
The Stoddard

Anyone with a modicum of entrepreneurial comprehension is aware that any enterprise is no better than its management. Statistics prove beyond a doubt that the primary cause of business failure is due to mismanagement, though in all fairness it must be admitted that other factors may also contribute to organizational downfall. The destiny of the Stoddard Hotel during the first seven decades of its existence came under the management of men of sterling qualities embodying the best of business acumen. A hotel operation is an extraordinary venture that demands men and women with special talents and personalities if it is to be successful and profitable. A hotel is a unique undertaking because it must cater to persons of diverse backgrounds, tastes and needs. The innkeeper must be a person of understanding and acuity, certainly a student of human nature with perceptive compassion for personal foibles.

The destiny of the Stoddard Hotel came under the governance of three men for eight decades — Fred B. Smith, Calvin W. Baker and John Elliott — all possessed the requisite qualifications to manage a first-class hotel that would be a credit to La Crosse.

Fred B. Smith, the first owner-manager of the Stoddard came to the new organization in 1904 with an excellent background as an innkeeper. His father, D. P. Smith, had been owner of the Cameron
House at Second and Vine streets, since its opening in 1880 and trained Fred in every aspect of hotel management. Fred worked as a desk clerk at the Cameron and as his father's assistant until the latter's death in 1904. Fred not only took over ownership of the Cameron but at the same time also obtained a ten-year lease to operate the newly established Stoddard for the Northern Hotel Company. Until 1910 he ran both hotels, then gave up the Cameron and concentrated on managing the Stoddard Hotel.

Soon after taking over the Stoddard in 1904, Smith hired young Calvin W. Baker, who until that time had been desk clerk and bookkeeper at the Cameron House. While Baker acted as quasi-manager of the Stoddard, Smith traveled extensively around the United States studying hotel operational methods in other comparable cities, checked new equipment and other features that could be adapted for use at the Stoddard. Smith was well-liked and highly-respected in La Crosse and was effective in bringing recognition to the city.

He died early in 1912 leaving the Stoddard in the hands of his widow and her brother, Frank Root. Neither had the interest or inclination to continue operating the hotel in a personally active role. In May 1912 Calvin W. Baker purchased the entire stock of the Stoddard Hotel from Mrs. Fred Smith and her brother, for more than $200,000.

Baker was described as enterprising and agreeable, a self-made man, a man of strong character, scrupulously honest and a true gentleman. Baker died of a sudden heart attack on July 9, 1916, after having run the Stoddard only four years. The ownership then passed into the hands of his widow, Eva McDonald Baker, and their three daughters — Virginia, Helen and Dorothy. The Baker estate was administered by John A. Bayer, president of the Batavian National Bank. Mrs. Baker was consulted on major decisions, though she had no real affinity for business. Her three daughters were too young to be involved in hotel matters. Bayer was a banker, not an innkeeper, and his judgments were not always as astute as they might have been. For the next decade the Stoddard foundered along under the management of Charles W. Spencer, who had been promoted from clerk to manager, making ends meet, earning a respectable profit, but it was not a huge success.

In the meantime Virginia Baker enrolled at Rockford, Illinois,
Three Men Who Managed The Stoddard

College from which she graduated in 1926. While she was a student there she met John Elliott who was managing the Nelson Hotel, Rockford's largest inn. They married the following year. Elliott, born in Brooklyn, graduated from Notre Dame University in 1926 with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree, majoring in commerce. His uncle, of the same name, had built the Jefferson Hotel in La Crosse at 222 Pearl Street. Though John Elliott did not work for his uncle he felt a kinship for the hotel business.

He came to La Crosse in 1927 and was for a short period employed at the Continental Clothing Company, owned by Henry Boehm. He then accepted a job as assistant manager of the Stoddard Hotel working under Spencer's tutelage. The same year Spencer was offered the managership of the Park Hotel in Madison; he accepted and Elliott was promoted to full management of the Stoddard. During the next 45 years the names John Elliott and Stoddard Hotel were practically synonymous in La Crosse.

Under the guidance of John Elliott, the Stoddard Hotel was lifted out of the doldrums it had suffered at Bayer's hands for eleven years and once again became a viable and prestigious hostelry. Elliott promptly inaugurated a complete renovation and restoration of the hotel that began in 1927 and was not completed until eight years later.

Parenthetically, it should be added that the Baker estate owned a good portion of the west side of Fourth Street between State and
Main, directly across from the Stoddard Hotel. After the sale of those land parcels in 1919 for the ridiculously low price of $25,000, the Rivoli Theatre and the Rivoli office building were erected by Max Rosenstein and Frank Koppelberger.

One of Elliott's first moves was to change hotel policy from the American to the European plan, which proved to be economically sound. During the first year nearly $50,000 was spent on changes and improvements. An additional $150,000 was expended during the next few years in a complete modernization and expansion program. When Elliott assumed management, most of the hotel employees were housed in the building. Elliott asked them to move out but raised their wages to make up for their additional living expenses. This provided 22 additional rooms for hotel guests. Several particularly large rooms were converted into two rooms; this provided additional rooms to the south and east. Private baths and telephones were installed in every room. The lobby and 122 guest rooms were totally refurbished; old-fashioned beds and outmoded furniture were replaced with contemporary styles. Two new heating units were installed with boilers fed by automatic stokers.

Of special interest was the new and attractive Wisconsin Room cocktail lounge and bar with entrances from both the lobby and through an outside door on the south side of the building. The bar was semi-circular and 30 feet long; the front was made of French lacewood with Formica counter and chrome foot rests. The room's focal point was a colorful mural back of the bar depicting DeSoto discovering the Mississippi River. A special fusecolor glass process developed by Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company was said to be the first in the country. The glass was engraved on its reverse side, then sandblasted, the mural was then painted on the back and color fused into the glass and copperplated. A mirror was placed behind the mural and electrically illuminated to produce a beautiful effect. Local organizations were invited to hold their meetings in the hotel's public rooms and during succeeding years, Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions and many other clubs began to hold regular luncheon and dinner meetings at the Stoddard.

The entire decor of the dining room was changed; a parquet floor for dancing was installed in the center of the room and the surrounding tiled floor was covered with rich carpeting, enhanced by a blue and white color scheme and new furniture. A new chef, Dewey
Thomas, formerly with the Lafayette Country Club of Minneapolis, was hired to prepare menus and oversee the preparation of food. A loud speaker system was installed throughout the building to page guests and to play music in all rooms as well as to broadcast local radio news and weather programs. The hotel’s private electrical power plant was phased out and Elliott subscribed to city electricity, an economically sound move.

In 1935 the Stoddard Hotel was lauded as one of the “most beautiful, most complete and most modern hotels in the northwest.” It had a staff of more than 60 employees with an annual payroll exceeding $50,000. At a private preopening party, managers and owners of hotels from Rochester, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Chicago were invited. On August 8, 1935 the hotel’s formal public opening was celebrated. A sumptuous banquet was held, with entertainment, music and dancing, and invitations were issued to prominent persons from the entire area and beyond.

Frank Burgess, publisher of the La Crosse Tribune, introduced Frank Sisson who acted as master of ceremonies and introduced the speakers. Congressman John J. Esch who had been a speaker at the 1904 opening also spoke at this banquet, along with A.M. Brayton, publisher of the Wisconsin State Journal, and former publisher of the La Crosse Tribune. Other local notables present included attorney George H. Gordon, banker Fred Hankerson, businessman John C. Burns, who was one of the earliest proponents of the hotel in 1902; attorney Otto Bosshard and dentist E. A. Gatterdam. All of these men had been present at the 1904 banquet and were special guests at the 1935 gala.

The newly remodeled hotel was characterized as having “purity of style and beauty of adornment.” Elliott in his speech said “The success of the hotel is tied up with the growth of the city.” John Elliott was credited with the success of the hotel renovation and for the great economic potential it brought to the city. The Stoddard was said to be one of the most perfectly appointed hotels in the entire northwest because it offered convenience, comfort and beauty.

In 1947 Elliott launched another remodeling project for the Stoddard. This was immediately after World War II and the hotel had been exposed to rough usage during that time. Elliott spent more than $200,000 in a total interior restoration of the hotel. It was during this period that the decor of the Crystal Room was changed to
the ornate red satin motif with which most people later became familiar. In yet another renovation in 1968 a long open porch was added on the south side of the building in order to provide private access to the coffee shop and bar. To break the monotony of the long porch wall a row of medallions of all nations was affixed. This presented somewhat of a problem as some of these insignia were stolen periodically. Through the ensuing years, Elliott made certain that the beauty and effectiveness of the hotel was strictly maintained.

In the early 1960s Elliott saw a need for expanded space, particularly for the parking area. He acquired the Standard Oil station on the corner of Fifth Avenue and State Street; then the La Crosse Club and Knights of Columbus buildings on the west side of Fifth Street between State and Main. He later purchased the old fire station on State Street for $39,000 and razed it to provide additional parking space for guests.


Elliott sold the Stoddard Hotel to Peter Hurtgen in 1972. Subsequently, the Elliotts took over ownership and management of the Elliott Arms Apartments on Eighth and Cass streets.

Of the three men who guided the destinies of the Stoddard Hotel through 70 years, John Elliott, during 45 years of management, stands out as the most remarkable — a man of vision and foresight, who recognized the needs of the city and worked indefatigably and wisely to achieve what was best for all.
Famous People Who Slept in the Stoddard Hotel

For nearly eight decades the dignified and elegant Hotel Stoddard acted as host to the great and near-great personalities, national and international. It was only natural that these famous persons would stay at the best hotel in the city when they visited here. Among the dignitaries who have been guests in the Stoddard through the years are included notable politicos, stage and screen stars, writers, opera and popular singers, athletes, artists, musicians and others—all in the public eye. A cursory check of hotel registers shows no less than 160 such well-known people at the hotel, ranging from presidents of the United States to rock-and-roll singers and boxing champions.

President William Howard Taft, 27th President of the United States, came to La Crosse in September 1909 to dedicate the new $100,000 YMCA at Seventh and Main streets. He was invited by his close friend and Yale classmate, George Burton, one of the early presidents of the First National Bank. After the dedication ceremonies, President Taft was the guest of honor of Mayor Ori Sorenson at a gourmet luncheon banquet in the Stoddard dining room. President Taft visited La Crosse a second time in December 1915 and was the speaker at a gala dinner in the main dining room of the Stoddard. The dinner was a seven-course French cuisine banquet. Again, the president’s friend George Burton was the toastmaster and the subject of the President’s speech was “Signs of the Times.”

When Elvis Presley appeared in concert in La Crosse, police officers had to spirit him to his room in the Stoddard’s freight elevator to avoid screaming teenagers (and not a few more mature ladies as well) who were bent upon touching him, obtaining his autograph or perhaps even an article of his clothing. The police action was essential, as in other cities where safety precautions were not taken, Presley was nearly denuded by his admirers.

Sinclair Lewis, the famous first American author to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, was in La Crosse to give a lecture. An admirer asked for his autographed photograph, which Lewis refused, saying “Only a conceited s.o.b. would carry around pictures of himself.” He, too, stayed at the Stoddard.

Tallulah Bankhead, the southern actress, she of the husky voice and flamboyant style, answered a knock at her hotel door late one
evening to find there a Stoddard Hotel night porter who had aspirations of becoming a popular singer. He requested Miss Bankhead's help. She stood in her doorway and compassionately listened to the young man who remained in the hall singing to her in a very ordinary voice. Realizing that he did not possess the talent to become a great singer, the actress spoke to him very kindly and let him down gently.

Richard Nixon, the ill-fated 37th president of the United States, was a guest at the Stoddard while campaigning, three weeks before being elected president in 1968.

Famous Metropolitan opera stars who appeared in concert in La Crosse, all stayed at the Stoddard: Mme. Amelita Galli-Curci, the coloratura soprano; Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink, the Austrian contralto; Geraldine Farrar, the American soprano who made her debut at the Metropolitan in 1906 singing the title role in Romeo and Juliet. Others were Marian Anderson, Lily Pons, Roberta Peters. Among noted male singers were Robert Merrill and James Melton.

Classic actors and actresses who were guests at the Stoddard through the years were Walker Whiteside, Chauncey Olcott, Fiske O'Hara, Lenore Ulrich, David Warfield and Judith Anderson.

Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous American architect, noted for his innovative style known as "prairie architecture" of which there are many examples in La Crosse, also stayed at the Stoddard.

John F. Kennedy, our assassinated 35th president, was our youngest president and the first Catholic to hold that office. He was a guest at the Stoddard while campaigning for the presidency.

Jack Dempsey, world's heavyweight boxing champion, came to La Crosse to referee a wrestling match. According to his contract he was kept in seclusion in his room at the hotel until ten minutes before the wrestling began, and he was then escorted to the arena by local police so that he would not be mobbed by fans and autograph-seekers.

Other notables, and it is impossible to mention them all, included Gladys Swarthout, Yehudi Menuhin, the Trapp Family, Rudolf Serkin, Liberace, Ann Landers, Abbott and Costello, Kay Francis, Gene Tierney, Gloria Swanson, Cole Porter, Gene Autry, the magician Harry Blackstone, Tex Beneke, Wayne King, Sammy Kaye, Lawrence Welk, Spike Jones, Guy Lombardo, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Senator Joe McCarthy, Senator Robert Taft, Wendell Wilkie, Dale Carnegie, Joe Louis, Dizzy Dean, Bob Feller, the Globe Trotters (who needed special long beds), Bishop John Treacey, the Notre Dame Warriors, and dozens of others.
Famous People Who Slept in the Stoddard Hotel

The Stoddard Hotel guest registers are a veritable autograph-hunter's dream. These are currently in the possession of John Elliott, the hotel's long-time owner and manager, along with scores of autographed photographs.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

26. Some Colorful Employees of the Stoddard Hotel

It is inevitable that in an organization that employed scores of people during its eighty-year history, there would be numbered among them a few colorful personalities.

One such employee of the Stoddard Hotel was John C. Hopkins, familiarly known by nearly everyone in the city as “Hoppy” Hopkins. Hoppy was a “baggage smasher” nearly all of his life and first began to carry baggage for the old International Hotel at Front and Pearl streets, built in 1866 by Henry Gund. When the Cameron House opened at Second and Vine streets, Hoppy took a similar job at that hotel. As soon as the new Stoddard Hotel became a reality in 1904, Hoppy went to work there. He was born in 1846 and was 58 when he came to the Stoddard, a bit too old to be smashing baggage so he was placed in charge of the hotel’s checkroom, where he remained for a quarter of a century.

In 1933, at the age of 87, he was struck and run over by a fire department truck and walked on crutches his few remaining years. Yet at 89 he was present at the opening of the newly renovated Stoddard in 1935 and was officially recognized as a special personality. Hoppy was known for his cheerful disposition, his willingness to please everyone and his big hearty smile.

David Kenyon was a veteran jack-of-all-trades at the Stoddard for more than 35 years. He was an excellent handyman and it was said he could “fix anything.” His job was to take care of all the hotel machinery and see that everything mechanical was in proper operating condition. On one occasion a lady guest dropped a diamond ring down the sink drain in her bathroom. She claimed it was a huge diamond worth many thousands of dollars, and she held the hotel responsible for its loss. Kenyon was called in to see what could be done; he disassembled the plumbing and found the ring without any trouble. It turned out to be a ring having only a very miniscule stone, not at all the size or value the lady claimed. At first she denied that it was her ring, but the hotel manager convinced her of the improbability of two diamond rings being lost in the same drain. She then admitted that the very small diamond was indeed hers and that she had overestimated its size and value. Embarrassed and chagrined at having been caught in her own web of deceit she promptly checked out of the hotel, never to be heard of again.
Some Colorful Employees of the Stoddard Hotel

Minne Woods, blonde and brassy, was familiarly known in La Crosse as "Stoddard Minnie" and was for many years the chief waitress in the main dining room. She was a peroxide blonde long before it was fashionable to be one. Minnie was kind-hearted and well-liked by everyone. It was said too that she donated liberally to many local charities.

Emil Olson was the hotel's chief barber for a great many years. In his basement barbershop he kept a rack which held several dozen shaving mugs and brushes, each with a gentleman's name inscribed thereon in gold. Local men who came in for their daily shave by Emil were lathered from their own personalized mugs. The prestige that this conferred upon the gentlemen was perhaps as important as the sanitation of the practice.
Debts Doomed The Stoddard Hotel

Without finger-pointing or fault-finding, surely without recrimination, now that the Stoddard Hotel has become only a memory, a brief review of the courses that led to the demise of this significant landmark becomes a part of the story.

On November 28, 1972, John Elliott, proprietor and manager of the Stoddard Hotel for 45 years, announced the sale of his hotel to a newly-formed corporation called Stoddard Properties, owned by Peter Hurtgen and James McLoone, both of La Crosse. Under the aegis of this new firm the Stoddard Hotel rapidly lost much of its former elegance and became a residence for elderly retired men, truckers and occasional transients.

Under Elliott's direction, the Stoddard had always been a viable and financially profitable institution, and he sold a hotel that was "in the black." The new owners tried mightily to continue operations in a gainful manner, but this unfortunately was not destined. Perhaps it was the tenor of the times, economic conditions, or "tight money" that brought about its failure. Perhaps its non-success may have been at least in part due to inexpert management.

The cocktail lounge, just south of the main lobby, called the Colonel’s Corner in honor of Colonel Stoddard, La Crosse's first mayor, became a rendezvous for the late afternoon cocktail crowd. The northwest corner of the first floor was the office of B. C. Ziegler Investment Company, but they soon sought new quarters. The coffee shop in the southeast corner attracted a downtown luncheon group. The Crystal Room, still showing evidence of its earlier elegance, continued to be the scene of dinner parties and businessmen's luncheon meetings, but it was becoming a bit seedy. Money, unavailable, was needed to maintain and renovate the room.

Despite valiant efforts to continue as a profitable entity, the hotel southerned, debts grew, payments could not be met, and its dismal future became evident. Hurtgen announced in December 1979 that the Stoddard would cease to exist as a hotel as of January 1980. He had plans to convert the hotel into eighty luxury apartments, a $22 million dollar renovation project, to be financed by La Crosse people, with work to be done by La Crosse contractors. The heating plant on the south side of the L-shaped building was to be razed and replaced with a fine courtyard, and the 140 rooms on the top four floors were to
Debts Doomed The Stoddard Hotel

be sealed off so work could be started promptly. Hurtgen said that with the new Radisson hotel in process of construction, there would be sufficient hotel rooms to serve the city's needs, but desirable downtown residential apartments were practically non-existent.

The problems of converting the hotel into an apartment complex were many. The City Common Council felt that such conversion would create parking problems, especially when conventions were in town. Further, an apartment complex could not meet current zoning requirements. The hotel was in a commercial zone and regulations did not permit the establishment of private residences in any building above the first floor. Apartments already in existence were excepted. A special zoning variance would have to be granted which the council was reluctant to concede.

The Wisconsin Housing Financial Authority had approved the conversion project and was prepared to provide substantial financial support, but when the precarious financial position of Stoddard Properties was disclosed and the city's attitude was learned, the authority brought the matter to a halt.

Hurtgen was in default of a vast loan made by the State Bank. Original financing had been awarded by First Federal Savings and Loan in 1972; refinancing was provided by the State Bank in 1977. After many conferences and much debate, it was announced in March 1981 that the Stoddard Hotel would be auctioned off to settle an $846,000 judgment against Hurtgen — a $663,000 loan plus $183,000 in interest, legal fees and other expenses.

Another problem arose, when in January 1980, permanent residents of the hotel were given eviction notices. The legality of this action was questioned because the tenants were not given the 28-day eviction notice required by law. One of the tenants, an elderly eccentric bachelor of 75 years, Willard Fox, committed suicide by hanging himself in his room when he received his eviction notice. Fox had lived at the old YMCA on Seventh and Main streets for many years and had moved to the Stoddard when the Y was taken over by WWTL. Finding a new home and moving seemed an insurmountable problem for Fox; taking his own life apparently seemed the easiest way out. He was the son of a former well-known La Crosse businessman who owned and operated the Fox Buick Automobile Agency on North Third Street.

The hotel's destiny was determined when the State Bank an-
nounced its decision to foreclose on the mortgage it held. William Barney, president of the bank, said, "Unless alternative short term uses for the hotel premises can be developed within the near future, demolition of the building is a likely possibility."

A sheriff's auction was held on May 15, 1981. The State Bank purchased the Stoddard Hotel and the land adjoining it for $404,897. The bank's bid was $255,000 for the corner of Fourth and State streets which included the building and land, and $149,897 for the parcel of land east of the alley to Fifth Avenue and State Street. The Fifth and State property is currently occupied by the bank's drive-in banking facilities. In the sale agreement the State Bank was required to assume unpaid back taxes for 1978-1979-1980, amounting to $29,608 plus $21,327 in accrued interest.

Three alternatives were available to the new owners of the property: leave the premises as they were and retain the current business and tenants; remodel and improve the entire property at considerable cost; or demolition of the building.

Though the Stoddard building was solidly constructed, modernization would have been prohibitively excessive. Barney reiterated his earlier statement about the need for new short-term uses, and added, "Such short term uses are not likely to be found." Unverified rumors abounded that the State Bank was considering either remodeling its own property on the corner of Fourth and Main streets with expansion onto the Stoddard Hotel site, or else planned a complete new bank facility after demolition of the hotel.

The contract for demolition of the building was awarded to the Harry Viner Company; razing was to be completed within ninety days. The empty lot was grass-seeded and at this time has not yet been put to use. Several options are under consideration for ultimate use of the land site but no firm decision has yet been announced. Because of its historical significance it might have been preferable to keep the hotel intact, but changing times, economic conditions, the opening of the new Radisson Hotel and many new motels, all pointed to the necessity of demolition.

During the summer of 1981 a series of seven auctions were held to dispose of the hotel's furnishings, with Robert L. Morris of West Salem as auctioneer. At the final session in the Crystal Room, a $4 registration fee was charged to attend the auction and champagne was served to prospective buyers. Eight crystal chandeliers, specially
created in Czechoslovakia for the hotel and which gave the room its name, were sold for prices ranging from $1,500 to $2,250. Also sold was a five-foot-tall coffee grinder and a barber pole that stood on the Fourth Street side of the hotel next to the outside stairs leading to the basement barbershop; this went for $250. John Elliott gave the original barber chair to the Radisson Hotel as a gift. The first-floor stained glass windows were sold for $200 each. The mail box that stood in the lobby for many years was purchased for $550. The huge Stoddard Hotel sign which graced the corner of Fourth and State streets for so many years was renovated and is installed in a new restaurant at the corner of Second and Main streets to be known as the Stoddard. A great many other items, a number of them of considerable historical importance were also auctioned off.

When all was sold and the few remaining tenants had moved elsewhere, the Stoddard Hotel's doors, which had been hospitably open for eight decades were closed and locked for the last time. And thus passed into local history, one of La Crosse's last remaining historic landmarks — the venerable Stoddard Hotel. An era in La Crosse history was gone forever.
How The Stoddard Hotel Got Its Name

The matter of choosing a proper name for La Crosse's beautiful new hotel in 1904 became a subject of consuming interest to the townspeople.

Charles K. Lush, owner of the La Crosse Chronicle, asked Ellis B. Usher, the paper's former owner and editor from 1878 to 1901, to address himself to the matter of naming the hotel. Usher, said that inasmuch as John C. Burns and Lush were the two earliest proponents of the new hotel, he proposed the name of Burns Hotel ostensibly for John Burns. Others insisted, though it was never clearly established, that Usher had in mind Timothy Burns. John C. Burns, a wholesale fruit dealer, had surely been instrumental in getting the new hotel started, but many others had also been involved in its establishment, yet their names were ignored by Usher, as was that of Lush.

Timothy Burns was an important pioneer in La Crosse, had been lieutenant-governor of Wisconsin from 1851 to 1853, and was often referred to as the "second founder of La Crosse." Prior to his death in 1853, Timothy had given as a gift to the city the park on Main Street between Seventh and Eighth. In 1903, the common council had renamed all of the city's parks and had honored Timothy by calling that park Burns Park, so it did not seem fair that the hotel too should carry his name. The Burns name was summarily dismissed by the naming committee as controversial.

Usher then suggested several Indian names; he particularly favored "Otonkah," the Sioux name for the Winnebagoes, but this too met with disfavor. Usher presented a lengthy discourse in his newspaper on earlier hotels in La Crosse that had been named after their owners or prominent citizens of the time. He then proposed the name Stoddard Hotel after the first mayor of La Crosse in 1856, Thomas B. Stoddard, who had been instrumental in bringing the railroad to the city. He also presented the name of Cadwallader C. Washburn who had been governor of Wisconsin and whose La Crosse sawmills had been the largest in the area. Usher insisted that the name of the fine new hotel should have historical significance in the community.

Nearly everyone concurred that the hotel should be called either Stoddard or Washburn. A general meeting was held on August 23, 1903 of the entire corporation of men who were financially involved
in the hotel, to vote upon the name. Stoddard was the overwhelming choice with a vote of 11 to 3. And thus was born the name Stoddard Hotel.

Tearing a Building Down

An anonymous poet penned these words some years ago — they are appropriate to the demise of the Stoddard Hotel.

I watched them tearing a building down,
A gang of men in a busy town.
With a ho-heave-ho and a lusty yell,
They swung a beam and a side wall fell.
I asked the foreman, "Are these men skilled
And the men you'd hire if you had to build?"
He gave a laugh and said "No indeed,
Just common labor is all I need.
I can easily wreck in a day or two
What builders have taken a year to do."
And I thought to myself as I went away
Which of these roles have I tried to play?
Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life by the rule and square?
Am I shaping my deeds to a well-made plan,
Patiently doing the best I can?
Or, am I a wrecker who walks a town,
Content with the labor of tearing down?
In the past, many of our significant historic sites have been wantonly destroyed in the name of progress, much to the dismay of historians and preservationists. While we do not decry the importance of modernization or progress, often restoration and preservation of landmarks would be more feasible and acceptable.

One such structure was at the northeast corner of Third and Main Streets, in more recent years known as Valentino's. In this case, however, public safety was the overriding consideration and we must bow to that edict. The foundation of the building, according to city engineers, was so badly deteriorated through aging and former unwise treatment that repair was not practicable and the cost of restoration would have been too excessive to warrant such action.

A local architectural historian, Les Crocker, in a 1978 survey and evaluation of this building said "Down in the basement can be seen the huge timbers that support the interior walls and floors of the building. The soft texture of these wooden piers is caused by them having been sandblasted during the cleaning of the building. That technique does provide a pleasant texture on interior wood, but is ruinous to exterior wood surfaces. In fact, most restoration contractors and architects have stopped using sandblasting as a way of cleaning the outsides of buildings. Bricks have a hard ceramic outer face. Sandblasting erodes that surface and exposes the inner clay. In about ten years — depending on the climate — the brick will begin to flake away as water forms in the tiny air pockets of the clay and freezes. The mortar joints will stand out but the soft brick will flake away until the building must be torn down. Cleaning by other methods might be more expensive but it won’t cause the building to flake away." In the case of the Valentino building, Crocker’s prediction materialized sooner than expected.

And so this familiar building, which had been with us for a century and a decade was of necessity demolished in 1981. There was no one living in La Crosse who was old enough to remember the birth of this building. It had weathered five wars and had seen La Crosse grow from a town of 7,785 persons in 1870 to a city with a population of 51,153 in 1970. There had been many changes in our political structure, tremendous advancement in our cultural and social at-
titudes, an unparalleled rise in our standard of living, and unhappily, in some areas of living there was regression incompatible with our hopes and dreams. The community was saddened to witness the departure of this old structure.

When a famous person dies, it is customary to eulogize his lifetime accomplishments. Almost as important, in writing the obituary of a landmark building we must recount her history as well. And this historic site has earned the acclamation due an old friend who had been with us for 111 years.

In its earliest days, this corner was no more than part of a wasteland, a prairie covered with sandburs and a few puny scraggly oaks here and there. During the first score of years, as our city grew and gradually moved eastward, there appeared on this corner a small wooden frame building which, according to 1867 tax records, was valued at a little more than $1,000 for both land and structure. But as the city grew, three of our earliest prominent pioneers recognized the economic significance of this corner. The small frame building disappeared and in its place arose a magnificent and elegant three-story brick edifice. Tax records show that the value of the corner skyrocketed to nearly $23,000 in 1871. The building was formally opened on December 31, 1870.
The three men responsible for the building were Alexander McMillan, William R. Sill and Henry I. Bliss. Naturally the structure was called the McMillan-Sill-Bliss Building.

McMillan came to La Crosse from Ontario, Canada in 1853 and entered the lumber business. Indeed, he took the very first log raft down the Mississippi River to St. Louis. He also organized the La Crosse Gas & Electric Company in 1885. He was mayor of La Crosse in 1871 and chairman of the Board of Trade (precursor of our Chamber of Commerce) in 1876. In 1872 he was elected to the State Legislature and in 1873 became president of the National Bank of La Crosse. He also erected the building at the northeast corner of Fourth and Main Streets, present site of the State Bank, which for many years was known as the McMillan Building.

William R. Sill was born in Connecticut in 1822, educated as a civil engineer and was involved with our first railroads. He came to La Crosse in 1856 and platted North La Crosse and at one time owned more than one-fourth of all that section of the city. Sill, like many other early La Crosse men, made his fortune in lumber and owned four sawmills. He was instrumental in construction of a wagon road across the marsh between south and north La Crosse in 1857, thus greatly facilitating travel between the two sections of the city. The home he built on the northwest corner of Tenth and State Streets still stands, set back some distance from the street.

Henry I. Bliss was born in Connecticut in 1831 and graduated from Yale in 1853 as a civil engineer. He taught school for a brief period and then became involved in railroads in several states. He was to a large extent responsible for the establishment and development of the La Crosse & Milwaukee Railroad, the Southern Minnesota Railroad, and the La Crosse & Prairie du Chien Railroad. He originally came to La Crosse in 1855 but did not settle here until 1858 when the railroad first entered the city. He was the city's first prominent surveyor and was city engineer from 1860 to 1884. He planned the La Crosse City Water Works as well.

These, then, were the three men who had the foresight to recognize the potential of La Crosse's downtown and in 1870 erected the building at the northeast corner of Third and Main streets, that was demolished in 1981. Though many called it by the name of its builders, it soon became popularly known as the Post Office Block because in it La Crosse's first formal post office was established and remained
The Demolition of the Old Post Office Block

there for a decade, when, in 1880, the post office was moved to the Gile Building on the southeast corner of Fourth and Main Streets, the site of the former Doerflinger's Department Store.

The Post Office Block was erected in two sections — the first consisted of six bays completed in 1870; the second comprised an additional seven bays to the east was finished by 1886. The line of demarcation between the two sections was visible to the discerning eye for decades thereafter.

This proud old building provided a home for many offices and enterprises through the years, both professional and mercantile. Several physicians, dentists, and attorneys practiced their professions from this building. The first floor corner was the site of a series of pharmacies, starting with Thomas H. Spence who was its first tenant druggist. His wholesale operation was on the northeast corner of State and Front streets while his retail outlet was on the Third and Main streets corner. Later, there was on the same site the Cargen and Young Drug Store, the Edward M. Young Pharmacy, then Young and Boerner, and finally Gus Boerner's Drug Store. Boerner was mayor of La Crosse for two terms — 1935 to 1939 — and reached 100 years of age on April 22, 1984.

When the post office occupied the building, a vault was installed to keep stamps and money and was considered burglar-proof. When Gus Boerner had his drug store there, he used the vault to store prescription drugs. During the prohibition era when the law permitted only pharmacies to dispense intoxicating liquors and made it mandatory to keep these items under lock and key, the safe was used to keep intoxicants. The vault was entered through a huge iron door separated by a narrow air space from another inner door. The safe was made and patented by Sargent & Greenleaf in 1865.

Other business establishments that were housed in the Valentino building through the decades included a real estate office, floral shop, gift store, an office supply store, a building and construction company, a silent movie picture theatre, a few saloons, a shippers' association, a spiritualist church, a dance hall, a few clothing shops, a carpet company, a restaurant, a sewing machine center, and many others. And of course, most recently, Valentino's restaurant and night club occupied the building. Some residents may still remember the 300-pound Professor Charles Weiss who taught piano on the second floor and was also organist at St. Joseph's Cathedral. And
there are still relatives of Dr. A. E. Gatterdam who had dental offices there for many years.

The building's best known tenant, not only in terms of longevity, but in local area fame, was the Wisconsin Business University, popularly known as the WBU. It was founded by Frank Toland in 1890 and existed continuously until 1941. Toland had acquired the Wallace Business College which had been in operation in La Crosse from 1868 to 1890. The WBU was originally known as the Toland Business School before its name was changed. It occupied the entire third floor and consisted of two huge class-assembly-study rooms, with offices between them and a few smaller classrooms. Students were taught bookkeeping, stenography, spelling, arithmetic, English, and of course the famous Palmer method of penmanship. In one corner of the vast east study hall was a representation of a bank where students were taught banking principles and procedures. The school accommodated several hundred students each year who came not only from La Crosse but from the entire surrounding area, and from Minnesota and Iowa as well.

Frank Toland had three sons — Leigh, Hewitt, and Ralph — all of whom followed him in the school enterprise, and later, Leigh's daughter, Patricia McEldowney, became a teacher there. Frank Toland's home was the large frame house on the southeast corner of Fourteenth and King streets; it later became the home of E. M. Wing, one of the early presidents of the Batavian National Bank, now known as First Bank. Many prominent local businessmen of the early days, who did not attend college, received their business training at the WBU and were sent to their first jobs by the Toland family.

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that Ralph Toland's son, John, became an internationally known author and received the Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for his book on Japan, The Rising Sun. In 1976 he received great acclaim for his definitive book on that evil madman, Hitler.

The WBU was forced out of business in 1941 when the La Crosse Vocational School offered business courses of all kinds in both its day and night schools. Since these classes were given free of charge it was natural for students to take advantage of this instead of paying several hundred dollars annually for WBU tuition.

In 1981 the old Post Office Block joined other historic buildings — City Hall, Court House, Post Office, National Bank, Cargill House,
The Demolition of the Old Post Office Block

Central High School, and many others — and became but a memory to be recalled only through photographs and remembered stories.

The Jiracek Company of La Crosse acquired the building and in 1977 carried out a total renovation and remodeling program, transforming it into a posh restaurant and night club, known as Valentino's.

A building inspection in 1980 disclosed structural weaknesses, and city officials declared it a "public nuisance" and recommended demolition in the interests of public safety; this was so ordered by a circuit court judge. A legal controversy then erupted concerning costs of shoring up the common wall between Valentino's and the adjoining building to the east. The judge ruled that costs were the responsibility of the owners of the east building.

The structure was demolished in 1981. The Jiracek Company then sued the Clark Engineering Company of Minneapolis for negligence and causing the structural damage; Clark was found to be 37 percent negligent. Jiracek settled with Mechanical Design of Madison, Wisconsin, who directed the remodeling. They were found to be 73 percent at fault.

Thus the historic 111-year-old structure at Third and Main Streets passed into limbo along with so many other La Crosse historic sites which today are but a memory.
Some Early La Crosse Lawyers

"The memoirs of the early days of the La Crosse bar are not altogether devoid of interest, though there is not much either ex-cruciatingly ridiculous or movingly pathetic in connection therewith." So spoke a chronicler in 1881 when discussing the history of the legal profession in La Crosse.

Until 1850 lawyers were considered unnecessary for the town's welfare. Until that time there were few laws on the books and fewer authorities to enforce them. When an altercation occurred between two parties, firearms often decided the matter and the quickest draw was the victor. But as the population of the city grew, the need for more civilized methods of settling disputations became evident.

The first county courthouse was a frame building, erected in 1851 at the northwest corner of Fourth and State streets. Judge Wiram Knowlton presided as the magistrate in charge. He was competent enough in discharging his duties but was odd in his personal habits and so had few cases to adjudicate. That same year two attorneys, Edwin T. Flint and Charles T. Jonsen, established the first legal office in the county. W. H. Tucker, a Milwaukee lawyer, settled here in 1853. Another lawyer who came to La Crosse in 1853 was Carson Graham, but he died a year later and so made no impact on the city. Two young men — William Denison and James I. Lyndes — also came to La Crosse in 1853, looked over the situation but were undecided as to whether to settle here or to follow their original plan and continue to St. Paul. They decided the issue by flipping a coin; La Crosse won and they began their law practice here. Denison was murdered in a land dispute in 1859. Lyndes was elected mayor of La Crosse in 1859 and again in 1872.

In 1856 La Crosse officially became a city and as the populace had grown considerably by that time, additional lawyers thought they were needed here and a number of young attorneys settled in La Crosse. Indeed, some said that La Crosse had a surfeit of lawyers, a sentiment that has been voiced by citizens ever since.

One attorney who achieved prominence was Angus Cameron who came to La Crosse in 1859 and brought with him his friend Alonzo Johnson; together they set up a law office. Some years later Angus was elected to the United States Senate. The Cameron family was a large one that originated in Scotland and many of them settled in La
Crosse. Hugh Cameron, brother of Angus, practiced law here and subsequently became Judge of the County Probate Court.

Another family member, Peter Cameron, arrived here in 1843 and established one of the first land claims near the Mississippi River. Peter was said to be willful and arrogant and was disliked by many. He married the beautiful Emma in 1845, the fourth of her ten husbands. “Uncle Dan” Cameron became involved in a squabble with the city over a piece of land on King Street, today known as Cameron Park. After a decade of litigation the city had to pay the Camerons $6,000 for the land and $10,000 in legal fees. Dr. Dugald Cameron, another brother, committed suicide by drowning in 1867 under peculiar circumstances. This story is recounted in chapters 39 and 40 of this book.

A group of local officials met informally in 1858 with Judge George Gale presiding. Members of the committee were Joseph W. Losey, District Attorney, James W. Polleys, Sheriff, Leonard Lottridge, Clerk of Court; and John Walker, Register of Deeds. There were at that time seven law firms in the city consisting of some 20 lawyers. The city population was about 3800.

Judge Gale was said to be fair and impartial in his judgments when cases were tried before him, though some historians would dispute that contention. On a chilly March day in 1859 a court session was held in the county courthouse with the litigants huddled about the pot-bellied stove to keep warm. A land speculator from New York, named E. B. Vail, appeared in response to a land suit filed by La Crosse resident, Chase A. Stevens. During the course of the trial, Vail made an insulting remark to Stevens who responded in kind by accusing Vail of lying about the terms of a land contract. Vail punched Stevens in the nose knocking him to the courthouse floor and a wild fight ensued. Without hesitation, Judge Gale ordered Sheriff Polleys to “remove the men to an open field where they can have a free fight.”

In 1860, A. W. Bishop and B. F. Montgomery formed yet another law firm in the city. With the onset of the Civil War a number of young lawyers were called to serve in military services or elected to do so, thus reducing the legal profession population.

Judge Edwin Flint succeeded Judge George Gale in 1861 and remained on the bench until 1868, when Romanza Bunn took over. He remained in office until he received an appointment as a federal
judge. Bunn was replaced by A. W. Newman of Trempealeau. M. P. Wing, a La Crosse attorney, was elected state senator to represent this area and left the city for Madison. Two more lawyers settled here in 1871 — D. H. Johnson and former Lieutenant Governor Bingham. Neither found La Crosse to his liking and moved before the year was out. Several additional attorneys settled in La Crosse during the 1870s; among them was Mills Tourtellotte who subsequently became prominent in many local civic activities.

In 1868 the La Crosse Bar Association was officially organized. They met in the law offices of Montgomery and Wing on the corner of Second and Main streets. The avowed purpose of the group was to promote the common interests of the legal profession and especially to create a feeling of friendliness, good will and cooperation among the local lawyers rather than to perpetuate the cut throat tactics practiced by some attorneys. Hugh Cameron was chosen president, James I. Lyndes treasurer and M. P. Wing secretary.

Attorneys in those early days were not required to possess formal university training or degrees. Instead, a young man who wished to enter the legal profession, apprenticed himself to an established lawyer for a year or two and then, having supposedly acquired sufficient knowledge of the law, hung out his shingle. Many young men were attracted to the profession because it was a lucrative business. Then, as now, lawyers were frequently accused of charging exorbitant fees for minimal services, an attitude generally perceived throughout the ensuing years. Sometimes a client who could not pay legal fees in cash bartered with goods, such as livestock, poultry or produce. On one occasion a local attorney exacted as his fee a fine mare from his client, who later said the services he received were worth only a chicken.
Some Early La Crosse Lawyers

First La Crosse County Court House, 1851

Second La Crosse County Court House, 1867

Third La Crosse County Court House, 1904

Fourth La Crosse County Court House, 1965
The Ill-Fated La Crosse Medical College

Even in its earliest days, La Crosse was keenly aware of the importance of education. It was always recognized that good schools were essential if the community was to survive the rigors of settling in a wild area of the new country. Knowledge was significant if the town was to grow and develop into a viable and economically sound entity boasting of fine cultural values as well.

Within a month after the county and town of La Crosse were organized, in April 1851, a superintendent of schools, Lorenzo Lewis, was selected. Three months later, Lewis instituted La Crosse School District No. 1, which included much of what is today the near south side of the city. La Crosse became a city in 1856 and one of its primary goals was to promote education through proper schools for its children. In 1857 the First Ward School was built on the northeast corner of Sixth and Vine Streets, present site of Western Wisconsin Technical Institute's Coleman Building. In 1870 the Second Ward School was built on the southwest corner of Fourth and King Streets. At this same location the first rudimentary public high school was started.

John M. Levy, prominent pioneer of the 19th century, an uncommon man, when he was elected Mayor of La Crosse in 1860, said in his inaugural speech "There is nothing better calculated to promote the best interests of our city than a good system of schools — to close the school houses is to open the jails and poor houses." Albert Hirshheimer, important businessman of the era, was the moving force in establishing the first real high school on the northeast corner of Eighth and Main streets and was successful in improving and broadening its curriculum.

Academies and seminaries were introduced and there was a wide diversity in the kinds of education and studies offered to the people. Ethnic and religious groups started their own schools. Business colleges, notably the Wisconsin Business University on the northeast corner of Third and Main streets, were born and in time faded into limbo. Wealthy citizens engaged private tutors and governesses for their children. In due time, La Crosse boasted of a Normal School, started in 1909, which ultimately became a branch of the University of Wisconsin. Viterbo College, operated by the Catholic diocese, came into being and is still today an educational institution of considerable consequence in the La Crosse area. Western Wisconsin Technical
The Ill-Fated La Crosse Medical College

Institute, originally the La Crosse Vocational School, has become one of the most significant and progressive technical schools in the state.

But few people know that La Crosse once had a medical college — ill-fated and short-lived, to be sure, but it existed for nearly two decades. As one reviews the history of this medical college one can not help but wonder why it was even started, if there were ulterior motives for its inception beyond the motives proffered for its establishment.

One of its primary professed aims was to train new young physicians. Yet no candidate for a medical degree was ever enrolled in the La Crosse Medical College. Only one person is known to have applied for entrance into its program and even that came after the school ceased to exist. During its tenure, only three diplomas were conferred. One went to W. T. Wenzell, a local pharmacist; a second was given to Lafayette H. Bunnell, a hospital steward during the Civil War. In order to qualify for the post of assistant surgeon he needed a medical diploma; La Crosse Medical College provided one though Bunnell was never a student there. The third diploma was awarded to Ewen H. McMillan, a lawyer. All three of these diplomas were tendered within the college’s first six months and were honorary. It is interesting also to note that Bunnell’s diploma shows that it was issued by the La Crosse Medical College of the “Republic” of Wisconsin.

A group of six local physicians met on December 24, 1859 and organized the La Crosse County Medical Society. The group elected Dr. P. S. McArthur president. Two committees were appointed — one was to prepare and submit an application to the Wisconsin State Legislature for permission to establish a medical college in La Crosse; the other was to prepare a code of medical ethics. On January 11, 1860, a third committee was directed to draft a constitution and by-laws, and on January 28, 1860 they met again, this time to formulate a code of medical fees.

Two months later, though they had not yet received authorization from the state to found a medical school, they decided to establish their institution as a branch of Galesville University. George Gale, president and founder of that college, and after whom the college and the town were named, was made an honorary member of the board of trustees of the La Crosse County Medical Society and of the medical school branch. Dr. William M. Young, who was born in New York in
1829 and received a medical degree from the Chicago Medical College in 1852 at the age of 23, became the only teacher in the medical department of Galesville University; at the time he had practiced medicine for only a few months. Indeed, Young was the first teacher
of medical science in the entire state of Wisconsin. Dr. Young was a brother of Mrs. George Gale — nepotism was already at work even in those early days.

Because of disagreement among the members of the county medical society and because of the outbreak of the Civil War, the society was dissolved, though the medical college remained a viable issue, largely through the efforts of Attorney McMillan. That may have been the reason the college awarded him a diploma.

McMillan labored diligently on the project and on April 18, 1864 the Wisconsin State Legislature at long last granted a charter for the establishment of the La Crosse Medical College.

The school's Board of Trustees was made up of seven men — five physicians — Dugald D. Cameron (who committed suicide by drowning in 1867), P. S. McArthur, John B. Baxter, William L. Kennett, and Augustus Brummel. The other two members of the Board were William T. Wenzell, a chemist and pharmacist who received the school's first medical diploma, and the lawyer Ewen McMillan.

The college's declared purposes: "The intention, which will be sincerely and faithfully carried out, is to have as soon as possible a first-class medical college in the city of La Crosse, with the best apparatus to be found in such institutions, lectures, a dissecting room, etc., complete. Students will be taken and put through a complete course of study at moderate expense." These words, though admirable, proved to be hollow and false. It seems that the real intention was stated later by a reporter of the time: "The college was organized to make it legal to carry on dissection. Besides the name all there was to the college was the dissecting room." In addition, a few lectures were given by members of the school faculty to each other. The report went on to say "La Crosse once had a medical college which existed for a period of close to twenty years, though it never was a regularly established institution of learning in a building of its own."

The board of trustees went through the formality of appointing the following chairs: Surgery, Anatomy and Physiology, Theory and Practice of Medicine, Materia Medica and Therapeutics, Chemistry and Pharmacy, Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children, and Medical Jurisprudence. These were fine-sounding and impressive names, but nothing more than that. Dugald Cameron was elected president of the college, Ewen McMillan, secretary, and W. T. Wenzell, a chemist and pharmacist who received the school's first medical diploma, and lawyer Ewen McMillan.
zell, treasurer. Each member of the faculty was assessed one dollar to cover expenses of the school.

In November 1864, McMillan carried on correspondence with Charles Keil, janitor of Rush Medical College in Chicago regarding the purchase of cadavers for dissection. Keil wrote "I can furnish you subjects without any injection, at $15 delivered to the express office. I have no time to inject the subjects for you and I think it better to ship them before they are injected as the arteries break very easy when they are filled up. In regard to the embalming there is no danger that the subjects will spoil without it, as I should send you only fresh ones. If this suits you please send me your orders and I will fill them as quick as possible." One can surely look suspiciously at the administration of Rush Medical College if its janitor was in a position to conduct a business of this kind.

"An assessment of five dollars each was levied on the faculty, and any person choosing to attend the anatomical rooms should have the privilege on paying five dollars to the secretary of the college." This edict was issued on December 15, 1864 and all members of the faculty accepted, and City Surveyor H. I. Bliss also paid five dollars to watch the dissection. Apparently janitor Keil kept his word as the records show that Dr. Dugald Cameron was paid $20.30 on December 20, 1864 as reimbursement for "money expended in procuring anatomical material." On February 9, 1864, five persons, in addition to the faculty, paid five dollars each to observe dissection of a cadaver—one physician, three lawyers and one dentist.

Another body was purchased from a local undertaker in 1865. It was later reported that "The room where this body was dissected was rented in a building occupied by a woman of the oldest profession in the world, and the cadaver was obtained by one of our members, who was city physician at the time, and was probably the unclaimed body of a pauper."

In December 1865 each faculty physician was assessed an additional five dollars to meet current expenses. Each faculty member was also instructed to present five lectures to his colleagues during the next year. A committee was appointed to find rooms for anatomization, lectures and meetings. Lecture assignments and dates were posted but during the appointed time only two lectures were delivered. Rooms were procured on the second floor of the Inland Printing Company on the southwest corner of Second and Main streets. The old Elgin Hotel was also in the same building.
After Dr. Dugald Cameron committed suicide in 1867, Dr. P. S. McArthur was elected president of the La Crosse Medical College and of its faculty. McArthur owned what was probably the only microscope in La Crosse (a Nachet) which he used to examine specimens of pork for trichinae. The only other item of medical equipment purchased by the college was a Valentine knife which cost $8.43 in November 1865.

After seventeen uninspired and unproductive years, the La Crosse Medical College languished into obscurity in 1881. The County Medical Society was resurrected and reorganized in 1897.

Physicians today smile indulgently as they hear of the antiquated medical methods employed a century ago — the practice of bleeding, the use of leeches, lack of sanitation, crude surgery, and the like. Perhaps a century hence physicians will look at the medical practices of today and will smile indulgently at the antiquated medical methods of 1985.
One of the more important pioneer families in La Crosse during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the Easton clan. The American progenitor of this family, Jason C. Easton, was born in New York state in 1823. After attending Yale University he published a small New England newspaper which supported the Whig Party. Because he foresaw the economic development of the west, he traveled to Minnesota in 1856 where he opened the first bank in that state. Eventually he controlled eleven banks. He then began to acquire land and at one time owned more than thirty farms in Minnesota and thousands of additional acres of virgin forest land.

In the 1870s he began trafficking in grains, especially wheat. Because this led to a need for good transportation he became interested in railroads and by 1875 owned the controlling interest in the Southern Minnesota Railroad, which in 1879 merged with the Milwaukee Road. Within a decade he had acquired large quantities of stock in a half dozen or more other railroads.

Jason Easton moved to La Crosse in 1882 where he built his magnificent residence. This three-story stone mansion contained sixteen main rooms, each built of a different kind of wood, intricately
The Eastons' Importance in the City's Development

hand-carved, and nearly every one contained a beautiful fireplace. The house was sumptuously furnished. Mrs. Easton engaged a well-known New York artist to purchase fine paintings and other objets d'art in the United States and abroad for her home. Her collection of John Whistler etchings was the finest in the country. The Easton estate which was located in the 1300 block of Cass Street, extended north to King Street, with a frontage of 236 feet on Cass Street and 211 feet on King Street.

In addition to the main residence, the grounds included a number of additional buildings, among them Easton's offices, a gatehouse, the caretaker's house, servants' quarters, and the most extensive conservatory in the state, boasting of rare flowers from nearly every climate in the world. In his vineyards he grew more than 3,000 varieties of grapes. Easton also loved fine horses and started the Hillview Stock Farm (next to the old Fairgrounds) where he bred hundreds of fine animals.

Jason Easton House, 1315 Cass St., 1885

Easton and his wife, whom he married in 1855, had one son, Lucian F., who was born in 1859. After his schooling Lucian married Mary Losey, daughter of Joseph W. Losey, another prominent La Crosse pioneer, after whom Losey Boulevard is named. Lucian and Mary had four daughters: Louise, Sarah, Florence, and Margaret, and one son, J. Clark, who became a professor of history at the University of West Virginia.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Lucian was a charter member and the first president of the La Crosse Board of Park Commissioners which he served for 39 years. He was also a member of the Board of Education for 27 years, and of the City Plan Commission and the Pettibone Park Commission.

It was not generally known that Lucian earned his law degree from the University of Michigan, because he never practiced law as a profession. Besides administering to the Easton enterprises, Lucian had a hobby of engineering and invented the principle of thermostatic valve control. He died in 1947 at the age of 88.

Mrs. Mary Easton, born in 1865, died on her 81st birthday in 1946. She was the first president of the La Crosse Home for Friendless Women and Children, which was started in 1888. During World War I she was executive chairman of the American Red Cross, and was also on the Board of Directors of the La Crosse Hospital and the Social Service Society.

The three eldest daughters married and moved away from La Crosse, but Margaret, the youngest, never married and remained here. She was a volunteer worker for the La Crosse Easter Seal Society for 25 years and was honored by that organization for outstanding service. She also worked for the National Foundation for Cerebral Palsy and Muscular Dystrophy.

Margaret was born in 1891 and attended Smith College and the University of Minnesota. She had planned to become a physician but x-ray burns sustained in a laboratory resulted in permanent injury to both hands. A hip fracture in 1953 left her further disabled, but she continued her volunteer work for the handicapped.

In 1888 Jason Easton acquired the land east of his home and there built a handsome residence for his son Lucian on the northwest corner of 14th and Cass streets. Lucian and Mary Easton moved into it in 1893 and lived there until 1911 when they sold the home to Mr. and Mrs. F. A. Copeland, who was mayor of La Crosse in 1892 and 1893, and after whom Copeland Park is named. The Copelands remodeled the house extensively and in 1924 sold it to Thaddeus H. Brindley, a well-known La Crosse attorney, who in turn sold the house to V. Downing Edwards in 1951. Dr. Nabil Kader acquired the home in 1980.

The Easton fortune began to diminish in the 1930s and by the late 1940s was almost entirely dissipated when a cousin claimed his inheritance plus accumulated interest. The Easton mansion was
The Easterns’ Importance in the City’s Development

boarded up and the family moved to 1619 Ferry Street. In 1948 the Evangelical Lutheran Church obtained the house and converted it into a temporary home for the Bethany Home Association, which accommodated about 25 elderly persons. By the fall of 1953, the Easton mansion, one of La Crosse’s most beautiful landmarks was demolished to make way for the Bethany Lutheran Home.

It is ironic that in her old age Margaret Easton became a resident of the Bethany home on the exact site where her family had spent so many years and had contributed so much to the growth and development of La Crosse.

One of the more interesting features of the two Easton houses was a tunnel that was built between them, though no viable reason has ever been proffered for its construction. It was too late to be used as a hiding place for escaping slaves during and after the Civil War; it was never used for storage purposes as both houses had extensive cellars; and since it was only about three feet high an average person could not walk through it easily. When Mr. Copeland remodeled his house on the corner, he partially filled the tunnel and boarded it up at both ends.
La Crosse is indebted to many prominent pioneers for its growth and development into a significant metropolis. Prominent among these men was Abner Gile, one of the city's most eminent pioneers. He was eulogized upon his death in 1897 as a "man of superior business ability... interested in the growth and welfare of the city; a man of strictest probity, unusual force and strength of character; a quiet man of excellent sense, never a man of pretensions." He was a devout Baptist and a strong Republican party member. At his death he left an estate valued at over a million dollars, a tremendous sum at that time.

Gile was born in upper New York on January 3, 1820, the fourth in a family of ten children. His parents, Nathan and Lydia Yates Gile, both came from Vermont. The first Gile settled in Dedham, Mass. in 1636, then moved to Haverhill, Massachusetts, subsequently to Vermont and then to New York. In 1843, at the age of 23, Abner came west and settled in Waukegan, Illinois where he built a sawmill, dock and pier. He also purchased a considerable tract of land and farmed in that area for several years.

He had heard a great deal about the Gold Rush of 1849 and a year later, unable to contain himself, he too got the "gold fever" and traveled to California. He remained there for a year and then re-
Abner Gile, An Important Pioneer

turned to Waukegan in 1851, where he farmed until November 1854, when he moved to the La Crosse area. There is no record as to his success in the gold fields of California, but that he had amassed a sizeable fortune was evident from the extent of his investments here and elsewhere.

Gile became associated with Cadwallader C. Washburn, another important La Crosse pioneer, in the lumbering trade on the Black River, and also managed his own lumber camps there. He invested $5,000 in the logging business, considered a vast amount in 1854. With N. B. Holway he formed a partnership in the La Crosse Lumber Company which he later sold to Washburn.

His first partner in a local business venture was William Hodge, who was shot by a man named Perry in an altercation about mill interests below Black River Falls. Hodge refused his doctor's advice to have his leg amputated which was shattered by a bullet, saying he preferred death to being a cripple. Shortly thereafter he died of blood poisoning.

In the spring of 1856 Gile established most of his local business interests in the Onalaska area but lived in La Crosse.

He was responsible for starting the Linseed Oil Mill, which employed twenty people. His mill ground 175,000 bushels of linseeds annually; it cost $100 a month to operate the grinding machines. Gile's other commercial enterprises included part ownership of the La Crosse Abbatoir, meat packers. His real estate holdings included 1,200 acres of prime farm land in Minnesota, as well as considerable valuable lumber acreage in Louisiana, Florida and Oregon. Among his other assets was ownership of the New Orleans Cypress Company and the Island Mill Company, being president of both firms. He held a large share of stock in the Paul and Withee Lumber Companies in La Crosse and together the three men formed the East Coast Lumber Company in Lake City, Florida. Gile also held part ownership in the tea importing business operated by his brother, T. G. Gile.

In addition, he became interested in the development of real estate in the downtown area of La Crosse and built three business blocks, the most notable of which was the Abner Gile Building on the southeast corner of Fourth and Main streets, later the site of the Doerflinger store. Gile also was the first vice-president of the Batavian National Bank, today the First Bank of La Crosse, and held that office from 1883 until his death in 1897.
At 24, Abner Gile married Mary Elizabeth Smith, also of New York, and settled with her at Halfway Creek. They had two children: a daughter, Elsie D. Gile who later married Robert A. Scott. She was referred to locally by her full name, Elsie Gile Scott, and was the acknowledged social arbiter of the city during her time. Born in 1850 she came to La Crosse with her parents in 1854 and made her main residence here until her death in 1928, at the age of 78, in Miami Beach, Florida where she spent many winters. Abner and Mary also had a son, Wales Eugene Gile, born in September 1864. He was killed at the age of nine in an accidental shooting involving a young friend of his. When Mary Gile died in September 1877 at the age of 53, accounts of her death carried the epitaph that she was “one of the best and noblest women, unassuming but blessed with benevolent kindness; a woman of rare strength and beauty of character.” Her funeral was held from the original Gile home on the northeast corner of Eighth and Vine streets. Abner died in September 1897, twenty years almost to the day after the death of his wife.

The site the Gile Building at Fourth and Main streets was originally occupied by several very plain frame dwellings lived in by people of little means. In 1879 Gile purchased the property from John Hays for a “valuable consideration,” which records show to have been $3,250. The building was erected based upon plans drawn by C. F. Struck, a well-known architect of the day. Struck also designed the
National Bank on the southeast corner of Third and Main streets which was destroyed by an arsonist on December 31, 1979. Both the Gile Building and the National Bank were of Gothic architecture and were similar in appearance.

The Gile structure was completed in 1880 and the bank building in 1881. The Gile Building was constructed of brick with a frontage of 106 feet on Main Street and 80 feet on the east side of South Fourth Street. It was three stories high; windows and doors were trimmed with white stone. The front entrance was set at an angle on the corner, a characteristic of many of Struck's corner structures. It was topped with four galvanized iron pediments and an ornate tower, 90 feet tall, with a dormer window on each of its four sides. Zinc castings were used for ornamentation at various points on the building. The interior of the edifice was finished with great elegance, especially through extensive use of rich millwork, yet it was substantial and sturdy in construction.

The U.S. Post Office was the first unit to move into the new Gile Building in 1880, followed rapidly by other businesses, mainly those devoted to the clothing trade. The Trade Palace, one of La Crosse's first department stores, occupied the Gile corner after the post office moved out. The second story was tenanted by offices and a Norwegian library, while the third floor was occupied by an armory operated by the La Crosse Light Guards. The land and structure cost more than $40,000 to build.

The Abner Gile Building housing the Doerflinger department store, was totally destroyed by fire in 1903 and replaced the following year by a new Doerflinger store. William Doerflinger supervised and operated his new business, but its construction was financed by George Zeisler, owner of the Zeisler Brewery. The land and structure on Fourth and Main are still owned by the Zeisler family and leased to the Doerflinger business. The Doerflinger store went out of business in 1984, after 103 years, due to financial reverses.

The Gile mansion, constructed in 1888 at a cost of $23,000 on the southwest corner of West Avenue and Main Street, was always one of the city's showplaces and landmarks. It was known as "Pasadena," named after a "fancy town" Abner Gile often visited during his year in California. He was enchanted not only by the name but by its translation which was said to be "Queen of the Valley." The letter "P" was inlaid in brick relief above the front entrance to the house.
Prior to Gile's purchase of the grounds, the West Avenue and Main location was a shallowly depressed lot used by children of the city as a ballfield in the summer and a skating rink in the winter. The estate fronted 210 feet on Main Street and 280 feet on the west side of West Avenue South. The house itself was 80 feet long and 40 feet wide. Though it was considered to be two and one-half stories in height, in reality the half-story was a ballroom that could accommodate sixty couples at a dancing party.

The first floor contained seven huge rooms plus numerous alcoves, bays, closets and crannies. On the second floor were nine large bedrooms plus servants' quarters at the rear of the house. Some maids' rooms were also on the third floor.

Millwork and ceiling beams were of white birch. The fireplace frame in the drawing room was of solid mahogany; other fireplaces in the house were made of cherry wood. The main stairway in the huge central hall was of ornately-carved oak. Gile was in the lumber business and so had access to the finest woods which he used extravagantly throughout his home.

Some years after she assumed ownership of the house, Elsie Gile Scott, in order to enlarge the grounds, purchased and demolished the large white frame house to the west of her mansion. This house was notable because it was the home of A. M. Brayton, one of the founders of the La Crosse Tribune, which he published until 1919. He then became publisher of the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison.
The entire Gile-Scott estate was surrounded by a low brick wall surmounted by an ornate iron fence with several richly embellished wrought iron gates at various entry points.

The mansion was constructed of pressed brick and had a large semi-circular driveway on the Main Street side, served by two entrances, leading to a sizeable porte-cochere. The barn and coach-house located in the southwest portion of the estate could accommodate twelve horses and three cows, as well as several storage rooms.

Robert A. Scott, Elsie Gile’s husband, was postmaster of La Crosse for four years, from 1889 to 1893. He was also a sometime horse-breeder and prior to his death in 1907 spent considerable time in the barn area.

The coachman’s family lived on the second floor of the coach-house. John T. Haugen was coachman for the Gile and Scott families for 63 years. Mrs. Scott often rode about on the city’s streets in her two-seated richly-upholstered cutter drawn by two cream-colored horses. It was said that on rare occasions she imperiously deigned to nod to acquaintances she encountered while out riding, but only to those persons she considered socially acceptable.

Mrs. Scott, who inherited the estate after her father’s death in 1897, gave many lavish soirees in her palatial home and always had an orchestra hidden in an alcove during these parties. The house was sumptuously furnished; its rare and rich carpets were of such quality that after nearly eighty years of constant use they were still in excellent condition.

Robert and Elsie Gile Scott had two children — a daughter Edna who married John Paul, another successful lumberman, and Argyle who married Jessie Holway, daughter of still another lumber baron. The latter couple lived at 1721 King Street until his death in 1927.

In December 1931, three years after Elsie Gile Scott’s death, the YWCA purchased the buildings and grounds from the Gile-Scott estate for $35,000 and had to borrow half of the money to do so. The main floor was used for offices and public rooms while the second and third floors were remodeled and rented as sleeping quarters to working girls. The coach house was converted into a gymnasium. In October 1967 the mansion and coach house were demolished to make way for the new combined YMCA-YWCA. The low red brick wall presently surrounding the structure is the original Gile wall restored. The ornate iron fence surmounting the wall is gone.
And so there passed into history two significant buildings — the Gile Building on Fourth and Main and the Gile mansion on West Avenue and Main and with them a family that figured importantly in the growth and development of La Crosse.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

The Cowardly Assassination of Frank Burton

It was nearly eight o'clock on the evening of October 16, 1884; darkness had fallen more than an hour earlier and the lamplighter had already ignited the city street gas lights. The air was crisp and cool with just the hint of a breeze wafting the pungent aroma of burning leaves from the nearby residential section. More than 2,000 people had assembled at Fourth and Main streets, all in a festive mood, for an evening that promised to be exciting and fun-filled. Even though the citizens had congregated, ostensibly for political reasons, such motives were almost forgotten in the expectation of gaiety and enjoyment, to be followed later, inevitably, by visits to the city's many saloons for further celebration.

The Republican Club of La Crosse was planning a gala to crown the recent Blaine and Logan political presidential victories in Ohio, in the hope that they might be emulated in the upcoming Wisconsin elections. A torchlight parade, a grand fireworks display, speeches, band music, singing and dancing in the streets — all were in the offing and the people were prepared to enjoy themselves to the fullest. They were lined up three and four deep along the two intersecting streets. Marshals and parade participants in full regalia, civic and political groups in colorful costumes, banners and flags galore, and scores of printed signs were everywhere in evidence.

Frank Adams Burton, a prominent La Crosse citizen, a grain broker, a much admired and respected civic figure, president of the local Republican party, was to lead the parade. He was in the midst of assigning various groups to their appropriate places in the procession. At the very moment when he was aligning the brightly-clad Plumed Knights Marching Club, a rapid succession of staccato shots was heard which reverberated through the night air. And just as suddenly a 37-year-old man lay dead in the street in an ever-widening pool of his life's blood!

Handsome, young Frank Burton had been shot in cold blood on the corner of Fourth and Main streets in full view of hundreds of persons! In a matter of seconds, a moment of lunacy, the festive mood was shattered and jubilation had turned to stark tragedy. And within a few hours a civilized citizenry had gone berserk and an act of uncivilized violence and degradation gave the city cause to hang its head in shame.
Why was Frank Burton so blatantly assassinated before so many hundreds of his fellow citizens? What foul villain dared to commit this dastardly deed in full public view?

The man who perpetrated this heinous crime was Nathaniel Mitchell, known as "Scotty," a river lout and roustabout who worked on the Mississippi River barges in summer and in the lumber camps in winter. On the night that he committed this unspeakable act, he stood among the happy throng on the north side of Main Street, near Fourth, coolly watching Burton on the other side of the street and biding his time.

Then, with obvious relish and surely with premeditation and hatred in his heart, he stepped out of the crowd, walked slowly south across the street, and, within three feet of Burton, took a revolver from his pocket and fired point-blank at the unsuspecting victim's back. Burton staggered and fell forward on his face without a sound. Mitchell had fired four shots, threw the gun savagely at Burton's head, then took another gun from his inside jacket pocket, and standing over the already fallen dead man, fired five additional shots, threw the second gun at his victim and kicked him viciously in the head several times. As he did this, he screamed, "Damn you, you s.o.b, now I've got you! You s.o.b., you know why I'm doing this!" The entire episode had transpired in less than a minute.

Indeed, so rapidly had it all happened that hardly anyone, even those within a few feet, was aware of the true impact of the incident.
Most people thought that some firecrackers, intended as part of the celebration, had been prematurely exploded. A group of elderly gentlemen, sitting in their comfortable club rooms on the second floor of the Pomeroy Opera House on the southwest corner of Fourth and Main streets, watching the festivities, had an excellent overview of the proceedings. They later said they had seen nothing unusual and were unaware of what had occurred.

Gideon Lang, a local miller and part-time policeman, who was standing beside Burton, was the first to realize what had happened. He grabbed Mitchell and held him until police officers John Parks and George Edwards came rushing over a few seconds later. They hustled the murderer off to the jail two blocks to the north. (The jail was on the court house grounds near the southwest corner of Fourth and Vine streets.) Mitchell tried to struggle free but he was held in a vise-like grip by the policemen. As they hurried toward the jail, the crowd, many of whom were now aware of what had occurred, began to shout “Lynch him! Lynch him!” Others took up the chant as they ran after the officers and Mitchell. On the way to the jail, officer Parks said to Mitchell, “You dirty pup, what in hell did you shoot that good man for?” Mitchell replied, “If you knew the real reason why, you wouldn’t blame me.” Then he added, “For God’s sake, hurry and get me to the jail quick or they’ll mob me.” Sheriff Robert A. Scott, who was on duty at the jail, promptly took Mitchell in custody and locked him in cell number three of the lower tier of cells in the basement of the building.

In the meantime, Burton’s body was taken to T. H. Spence’s drug store on the northeast corner of Third and Main streets. Three physicians — Daniel S. McArthur, Frank Powell, and L. W. Alger — examined Burton but nothing could be done for him; life was extinct. His body had been riddled with nine bullet holes — one in the head, one through the neck, and seven through the back and chest — any one of which could have proved fatal. The outrageous act had obviously been committed by a vicious and depraved man. Burton’s wounds were cleaned and dressed, his clothing arranged and he was then carried reverently to his home at 710 Cass Street where his stunned and grieving family waited.

Mrs. Abby Burton, who was 31 at the time, had left her three small children at home with a housekeeper and had come to the festivities with friends, she was standing near her husband when he
was shot. Terror-stricken and unbelieving, she followed her husband’s body to the Spence pharmacy after the shooting. When he was pronounced dead, she collapsed, was revived with smelling salts and escorted to her home by relatives and friends. There, though bereaved and heart-broken, she later regained a measure of composure because she was aware of the ordeal that lay ahead and also because she realized that the care and upbringing of her children now rested solely upon her.

The crowd, now in a frenzy of madness, rushed from Fourth and Main streets to the jail, surrounding it on three sides, screaming, “Give us the murderer; we’ll hang him.” Torches that had been intended as part of the parade, flared all over the court house yard making it almost as bright as daylight. Sheriff Scott, along with his brother Undersheriff William J. Scott, Chief of Police P. L. Clark, and several police officers, stationed themselves as a barrier in front of the Fourth Street main entrance to the jail and attempted to keep the crowd in check. The sheriff shouted above the bedlam and pleaded with the crowd to disperse and go home and let the law take its course. He said he could not surrender the prisoner to the mob as it was his sworn duty to hold him for due legal process. The sheriff yelled to the crowd that Mitchell was insane and they screamed back, “Give him to us and we’ll cure him of his insanity.” Scott might just as well have shouted into the wind for all the attention he received from the mob; his words were lost in the tumult.

The pandemonium grew more and more intense by the moment and the hordes began to beat on the heavy metal jail doors with their fists, but the sheriff and his men bravely held them off for nearly two hours. By 9:30 p.m. the number of people in the yard around the jail and on the court house lawn had so increased that it was almost impossible to squeeze through the crowded mass of humanity. There were many women and children also among the masses of people, screaming as lustily and just as enraged as the men. The crush of blood-thirsty citizens, shrieking for revenge, were like a pack of howling maddened animals. Never before or since in the history of La Crosse had a scene like this been enacted or witnessed.

Several prominent citizens watched somberly from the edge of the crowd with blanched faces and shaking their heads in despair; not out of sympathy for the prisoner, but because they were distressed and ashamed to see their fellow townspeople acting like a swarming mass
The Cowardly Assassination of Frank Burton

of crazed wild beasts. Josiah L. Pettingill, county clerk, said later in a deposition at the inquest, that an "unruly mob of nearly 3,000 people surged agitatedly around the jail house, shouting for vengeance."

A group of about a dozen men, angered because they were denied easy entrance to the jail, organized themselves, determined to get their hands on Mitchell and hang him. They went to the Colman lumber yard and brought back a timber, 40 feet long and 16 inches square. They bawled to the sheriff to get out of the way, screaming, "We want that black-hearted devil and we're going to get him and hang him!" They were resolute in their determination to make Mitchell pay for his crime and to pay immediately.

One of the leaders of the mob was Nathan Smith, a black man who had been valet to Governor Cadwallader C. Washburn during the Civil War. Using the timber piece as a battering ram, they attacked the Fourth Street main doors of the jail. Twice the pounding ram failed, but upon the third thrust the doors burst open. As the mob poured into the jail corridor, other prisoners incarcerated therein were fearful for their own safety and readily pointed out the cell in which Mitchell was locked. The sheriff adamantly refused to give the up the cell keys demanded of him so one of the men hurried to Pete Jacobus' nearby blacksmith shop and returned with a sledge hammer and cold chisel; in a moment or two the lock was broken off the cell door.

Charles Snow of Onalaska was the first to enter the cell and tried to pull Mitchell out who was cowering beneath the cotbed. Soon a dozen hands grabbed Mitchell and dragged him outside where he was exhibited to the waiting crowd. The ensuing melee was horrifying as people began to shriek in frenetic fury "Hang him!" Hang him!" The frenzied cries from the mob were almost inhuman in tone and could be heard for blocks around. Swift and awful retribution was about to be meted out.

It was later reported that Drs. Frank and Will Powell, prominent La Crosse physicians, reputedly staunch proponents of law and order, were already seated in the crook of a 40-foot sturdy oak tree on the south side of the court house lawn, ready to assist with the hanging. Nathan Smith in the meantime had procured a stout rope and the doctors yelled to him, "Bring the rope here and throw it up to us." This charge against the physician brothers is hard to believe and was subsequently vehemently repudiated. An early historian claimed
that the hanging tree was located on the north side of the jail building, but photographs taken at the time do not corroborate this contention.

The rope was fastened over a stout limb of the tree and a noose formed at the other end was slipped over Mitchell's head. His hands were tied behind his back and his ankles bound together. Several men pulled the free end of the rope with such strength and fury that it broke and Mitchell fell to the ground. Someone in the crowd yelled that the assassin be allowed to say something. In the din and confusion his voice was drowned out, but a man standing nearby later maintained that Mitchell admitted killing Burton and was glad he had done it. Another stronger rope was obtained; it was pulled taut and in a few seconds Mitchell was dangling by his neck. As though that were not enough, the mob milled about the lifeless body, spitting on it, poking sticks and shouting obscenities at the hapless dead man. Within a short time, their horrible deed accomplished, the excitement abated and most of the crowd went home.

During the aftermath, Mayor W. A. Roosevelt promptly ordered all saloons in the city to be closed. He was later commended for the wisdom of his edict as it surely prevented other additional serious disturbances.

About a half hour later, police officers cut the body down and removed it to the basement of the jail where it was laid on the floor. Scotty Mitchell had been nicely dressed when he left his hotel earlier in the evening, wearing a brown-and-white checked suit, white shirt, dark tie, good boots and a black hat. But as he was dragged to the scaffold and as he swung thereon, much of his clothing was ripped off and was now in shreds.

Coroner H. M. Safford, who was also a local attorney and justice of the peace, called for an immediate inquest and appointed a jury of six eminent La Crosse men — W. S. Hanscome, Joseph Clarke, James H. McCord, Mons Anderson, Col. Theodore Rodolf and W. W. Cargill — to conduct the hearing. (Three of these men had been mayors of La Crosse.)

The jury which met very early the next morning viewed Mitchell's body dispassionately and found that his face was only slightly marked and bruised, but around his neck were livid red and blue swollen traces of the noose. One of the jurors described Scotty Mitchell, saying, "His face was that of a determined but not apparently
The Cowardly Assassination of Frank Burton

desperate man, with a small nose, firm set mouth, long black chin whiskers and black hair brushed back over a high forehead.

The jury's verdict was, "That the aforementioned Nathaniel Mitchell, alias "Scotty," was forceably taken by a large number of people from the La Crosse County Jail where he had been recently confined for the shooting and killing of Frank A. Burton, and between the hours of 10 and 11 p.m. on the 16th day of October, 1884, he, the said Nathaniel Mitchell, alias "Scotty," was taken to a tree on the court house yard in the city of La Crosse and then and there hanged by the neck till he was dead, by a great number of persons, to the jury unknown."

One of the jurors stated further, "When the jurors had got through viewing the body it was brought upstairs in the hall with the coffin lid off, and those people who chose, and there were several hundreds who so chose, passed through and took a last look at the calm and scarcely disfigured clay form from which the night before the soul had gone forth, in travail with the burden of a most appalling crime, to the Judgment Seat of all."
Who was Scotty Mitchell? La Crosse citizens wanted to know who this scoundrel was and why he had killed the popular Frank Burton. Surely such a horrible transgression must have been prompted by a serious grievance, or was the murderer merely a madman, a random killer?

Scotty Mitchell was a man of 31 (born in 1853) when he assassinated Burton, but he appeared to be several years older, perhaps because of his long black beard. After the lynching, a letter was found in his pocket from his brother William, in England. It contained family news and admonished Scotty to behave himself, to work hard and to save his money. It appears that he came from a respectable family and one can only conjecture as to the cause of his downfall.

The pilot of a raft on which Mitchell worked testified that Mitchell often went on drunken sprees and, when inebriated, was mean and vindictive, with a vile temper. When intoxicated he often made threats against people who displeased him in the slightest. He had been arrested many times for disorderly conduct. In July 1880 he had been arrested by Chief of Police Frank Hatch for creating a disturbance in the Star Saloon on South Third Street. Shortly thereafter he was again taken into custody for causing a near-riot in Katie Champion’s brothel at 223 South Front Street. There he had viciously attacked several of the women and had broken furniture, doors and windows. In a fit of spiteful retaliation, Mitchell hunted Hatch out and gunned him down. The irresponsible use of his gun, whether justified or not, was Mitchell’s customary response to any incident that irked him.

John Donahue with whom Mitchell boarded temporarily on Front Street said that Scotty had been struck on the head by a heavy swinging line on a raft on which he was employed. Donahue claimed that a result of this accident Scotty had “gone off his noggin” and had been confined to the Rock Island Mental Hospital for a brief period, and had “never been the same again.” Others who had employed Mitchell said he showed no evidence of mental disease but that he had a violent temper that was aroused at the slightest provocation.

A riverman colleague, August Franz, said that in the summer of 1883, in a saloon he heard Mitchell say “God damn that Frank Burton. He wouldn’t give me a hospital ticket. I am going to shoot the
The "Hanging Tree"

guts out of him some day, you mark my word for it." Another raftsman stated that Mitchell had applied for an admission card to the Marine Hospital (on lower State Street) for treatment of an undisclosed ailment, but Frank Burton (who was a hospital board member) refused to grant the necessary approval. Surely this was not sufficient cause for murder, yet Mitchell apparently thought it was.

Burton must have been aware that Mitchell was an enemy and that he posed a serious threat to his life. Charles Turner of Chicago, a friend of Burton, said they had shared a room in a hotel in McGregor, Iowa, when they were both attending a business conference. Turner noticed that Burton carried a gun which he explained by saying that his life had been threatened by a riverman named Scotty.

It was obvious that Mitchell deliberately planned and premeditated the assassination which was the sole purpose of his visit to La Crosse at that time. He had purchased two guns in Winona and came to La Crosse by raft about 5:00 p.m. on October 16, 1884. He took a room at Anthony St. Marie's boarding house, 114 North Second Street, changed his clothes, then went to the bar for a drink. He displayed his revolver, a new self-cocking kind, to Joe Ford, the bartender, who showed him how to use it. Mitchell filled the gun chambers of both guns with cartridges, placed them in his pocket, downed several whiskies, and left for the downtown festivities to keep his fatal rendezvous with Frank Burton.

Frank Burton was born in October on April 24, 1847. At age 13 he went to Ottawa, Canada where he was employed as a photographer's helper and later as a telegrapher. He came to La Crosse in 1868 at the age of 21 and became the first manager of the Northwestern Railroad office here. Two years later he became a lumber and grain broker, was financially successful and in a short time established a sound and substantial reputation as a pillar of the community.

In 1873 he married 20-year-old Abby Moulton, eldest daughter of Captain I. H. Moulton, an important steamboat line owner. The beautiful Moulton mansion in which Abby grew up was on the northeast corner of Sixth and Cass Streets and was one of La Crosse's showplaces for many years until it was razed. Burton built a home for his bride a block to the west, on the southeast corner of Seventh and Cass streets, where he and his wife and their three children lived a comfortable social life. Mrs. Burton, who was 31 at the time her husband was assassinated, continued to live in the home for the next
42 years, where she died in 1926 at the age of 73. She donned widow's weeds after her husband's death, never remarried and wore black for the rest of her life.

The funeral for Frank Burton was literally a Roman holiday extravaganza, the like of which had never been seen in La Crosse before. The services were scheduled for Sunday afternoon, October 19, 1884 at 2:00 p.m., a lovely day with clear blue skies and bright sunshine. It was the custom in those days to hold funerals from the private homes of the deceased rather than from churches or funeral homes. From 10:00 a.m. until noon on the day of the funeral the public was invited to view the remains of Burton. He lay in a beautiful hand-carved mahogany casket in the east parlor of his house. A poignant note that brought tears to many eyes was sounded when Burton’s little six-year-old daughter Charlotte was heard to say to family friends, “Have you seen Papa yet? He looks so nice.” Dressed in a dark suit and tie, his dark hair becomingly arranged, he did indeed look handsome, showing no trace of the violent death he had encountered. Little Charlotte Burton grew up to become Mrs. Andrew Lees, whose husband was a prominent La Crosse attorney during the 1920’s.

There were floral tributes by the hundreds, the rooms literally were engulfed in flowers. Many of the offerings had been taken to the cemetery ahead of time because there was no room in the house for them. One floral piece stood out — it was a huge American flag fashioned out of red and white roses and blue snapdragons. It had been sent by the women’s auxiliary of the Blaine and Logan Republican Club. Burton’s head rested on a pillow of white roses sent by his three children; it bore one touching word on a golden ribbon, “Papa.”

Grieving relatives and friends and sorrowing citizens entered the house through the main door on Cass Street, passed by the casket in the east parlor, then crossed the hall to the west parlor where the Burton and Moulton families sat to receive condolences, then out the west door to Seventh Street. It was estimated that nearly 3,000 people passed the coffin in the two-hour viewing period.

Reverend Robert Nourse of the Congregational Church conducted private services for the family in the residence. Because the huge crowds could not be accommodated either in the home or in the church, Mr. Nourse preached the sermon from the front porch of the Burton residence while thousands stood in the streets to hear the
minister eulogize Burton in the most glowing terms. He was said to be genial, generous, enthusiastic, beloved and respected, a man who expressed his opinions fearlessly but imposed them on no one. The minister spoke for over an hour and at times his discourse was so moving and emotional that many people wept openly.

The cortège to the cemetery was the largest ever seen in La Crosse. The procession contained 186 carriages and was followed by more than 6,000 people on foot. Many had come from Winona and other nearby communities, as well as from St. Paul, Milwaukee and Chicago. Nearly every shop in town was closed on the day of the funeral. Frank Burton was interred in the Moulton-Burton family plot just west of the mausoleum in Oak Grove Cemetery.

La Crosse newspapers and those in surrounding towns all carried editorials praising Burton in the most glowing words. Ellis B. Usher, editor of the La Crosse Chronicle wrote, "Their home has been desolated and enshrouded in gloom by the act of a wretch who had nothing but a worthless life to give in expiation for the one he so brutally took away. The murderer has lived the life of a ruffian and died as he deserved to die, at the end of a rope dangling from a tree." Despite these words which seemingly condoned the hanging, Usher actually deplored the lynching, writing, "The majesty of the law is the sole barrier between good order and anarchy in a republic like ours."

A news writer of the time casually referred to the tree on which Mitchell was executed as the "hanging tree." The term immediately struck a responsive chord among the people and it soon became popular and was used throughout the area. Children were taken to see the "hanging tree" in order to instill fear and obedience in them. Soon the tree became a primary stop for visitors and sightseers to La Crosse. City officials were distressed with the common usage of the expression because of the poor image it presented of the city. They discouraged its use but it persisted for many years. Finally, some twenty years after the lynching, the tree was cut down, but to this day whenever the Burton assassination is discussed the appellation "hanging tree" is resurrected.

An interesting but macabre sidelight on the unfortunate incident occurred when an enterprising entrepreneur obtained the rope used to hang Mitchell, cut it into six-inch lengths and sold them as grisly souvenirs. So successful was this venture that he then tore large sections of bark from the hanging tree, cut them into pieces, inscribed
the date of the lynching thereon and sold these as well as ghastly mementoes.

The citizens of La Crosse, still incensed at the wanton and senseless murder of Frank Burton, were not satisfied with merely lynching Scotty Mitchell. They were determined that the murderer was not to be buried among decent folk; they felt this would be a desecration of hallowed ground. Surely it would be an outrageous affront against the Burton family for the brutal murderer and his victim to be interred in the same cemetery. So cemetery officials held a secret meeting after midnight on October 17th and planned a private and hidden burial of Mitchell. Four men were involved in the scheme; they were sworn to secrecy and they alone performed the gruesome task.

An employee of Tillman Funeral Parlor on South Third Street, where Mitchell’s body had been taken after the inquest, left the morgue through a back door with the cadaver in a plain box in an ordinary wagon at about 10:00 p.m. In the event that someone might be watching and be suspicious, the wagon was driven south some distance out on Mormon Coulee Road to give the impression that the body was to be disposed of at some remote spot. After passing the last house at the south end of the city, the rig turned north off the road and traveled across the rough prairie. When it reached Oakwood Cemetery (as Oak Grove Cemetery was then called) the wagon crossed what is now Myrick Park and stopped at a point about 150 feet east and slightly north of what is presently the city water pumping station.

The four men — Joseph W. Losey, president of the cemetery association, Andrew Fontisch, sexton, and Prosper E. Steves, cemetery superintendent, and the wagon driver, dug a shallow grave in which Mitchell’s body was interred. It was such a dark night that Mr. Losey nearly fell into the grave when he momentarily lost his footing. Within an hour the grave was filled and the surface tapped level with the surrounding ground. Early the next morning a fire was built on the spot to destroy any evidence that might have remained of the burial. The next day a rumor was deliberately circulated that Scotty Mitchell had been buried in a field near Stoddard.

Thirty years later, in 1914, the story of the Mitchell interment resurfaced when the cemetery association disclosed plans to plat an addition to the east. Prosper Stevens, still cemetery superintendent, and now an old man, was the only one still living of the original four
who had handled the Mitchell burial. Fearing that the remains might be unearthed, Steves felt compelled to reveal what he knew of the episode. As late as 1938, when additional cemetery work was scheduled, attorney Andrew Lees, who was at that time president of Oak Grove Cemetery Association, and whose wife Charlotte was a daughter of Burton, disclaimed any knowledge of the Mitchell burial or its location. To this day, no evidence has ever been discovered of Mitchell’s remains.

Assasination — an ugly word in our lexicon — has been with us from the beginning of time. The word comes from the archaic root “hashishin” meaning one who murders when infuriated by hashish, a maddening drink made from hemp. Assassination is nearly always a premeditated desire to avenge a real or imagined personal wrong or to lead the overthrow of an existing political or social order. The first recorded assassination occurred in 336 B.C. and the most recent were the attempted killings of President Reagan and Pope John Paul. Unhappily, even our own town has not been a stranger to this heinous and malevolent crime.
Every age in history has had its beautiful and enchanting females — alluring women who inspired men to achieve the ultimate heights of success or have led them to unmitigated and utter destruction. Marc Antony fell under the spell of Cleopatra; the pulchritudinous Helen of Troy whose beautiful face is said to have launched a thousand ships eventually caused the Trojan War when she eloped with Paris; the beauteous Mata Hari cajoled men into revealing national secrets; even the redoubtable Liz and Zsa Zsa collected multiple mates. But none could surpass La Crosse’s own magnificent Emma Cameron who garnered no less than ten husbands. Towards the end of her life she expressed regret that she had not been able to “make it an even dozen.” Emma also holds the distinction of being the bride in La Crosse’s first wedding ceremony, no matter that her groom was number four on her list of male acquisitions. But even this marriage was a bit suspect in that it was solemnized by that scoundrel H.J.B. “Scoots” Miller, who was the city’s first justice of the peace. Miller was Nathan Myrick’s trading post partner. When he married Emma and Peter he said, “I now pronounce you man and wife and let no man put you asunder.” Little did he know Emma.

An unknown writer described Emma’s beauty in poetically elegant prose: “She was said to have been a woman of unsurpassingly beautiful figure and features, remarkable nerve, great presence of mind and wonderfully expedient, with the capacity to model one of the opposite sex to her wishes as readily and gently as an artist molds a figure in plaster. Her complexion was of a delicate olive tint, and the expression of her large black, glittering eyes was heightened by the long, silky lashes that fringed their lids. Her eyebrows, pencilled by nature with mathematical precision, arched symmetrically and met above a nose classically accurate and finely nostrilled. Her hair was dark, her hands and neck were plump, and kept company to a pair of arching feet put down upon the ground with an emphasis that indicated a precision of character. It is said that such an exquisite piece of womanhood was seldom seen in those early days in the west.” No wonder she was able to bag ten husbands!

Though the exact circumstances of her birth remain hidden, we know that she was born in 1820 “somewhere east of the Alleghenies,”
The Beautiful and Incredible Emma Cameron

perhaps of Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry. By her own account her "forefathers fought in the Revolutionary War for their freedom and rights." When she was a child her parents moved to Ohio. At the tender age of 14 she married a man named Van Sickle and was promptly disowned by her parents. She then found her way to Michigan territory where she met and married a man named Kellogg, and still later a younger man named Clinton Cunningham. Whether they died or if she disposed of them through divorce is not known; it is believed that she just married them and departed when she tired of them or met another man more to her liking.

During her travels in the 1840s, she met Peter Cameron, a La Crosse trader, who was returning from Utica, New York, with a wagonload of rich furs. Peter invited Emma to join him which she did with alacrity. He brought her to La Crosse where they married in 1845, and established their home on Second Street just south of Pearl Street.

Cameron had come to La Crosse in 1843 and purchased a large land claim next to that of Nathan Myrick. It covered the area from the Mississippi River east to Sixth Street and from Pearl Street south to Division Street.

Emma soon became the leader of society in La Crosse. At one point in her life she was known as the "Toast of the Northwest." She was often seen galloping up Front Street in La Crosse astride her spirited white horse, holding a rifle across her knees. She was an expert shot and on more than one occasion helped her husband fight off marauding Indians or return the fire of river bandits. She knew several Indian dialects well and established a friendly relationship with the redskins. This once saved Prairie La Crosse from a massacre when she succeeded in talking the Indians out of a planned attack.

Peter Cameron became somewhat aroused at his beautiful Emma's "eccentricities" with other men and sued for divorce. The decree was never consummated for Peter died suddenly in 1854. She remained a widow for nearly four years and in June 1858 married her fifth husband, Ralph Bowles.

A year later, Daniel Cameron, Peter's brother, claimed property that Emma insisted was hers as Peter's widow. Contradicting accounts of the episode are given, but Emma said that Daniel forced his way into her home and tried physically to take away from her certain papers that indicated clearly that he had no right to the property he
claimed. So she shot him — she claims that she only shot off one finger, but Daniel claimed that she had tried to murder him. Emma was charged with attempted murder and pleaded her own defense. Her eloquence was moving: "I want nothing but my rights that I worked hard for and I do not think it is wrong to protect my rights and my life."

When asked where her erstwhile husband was, she replied: "My husband, R. C. Bowles, has gone to Pike's Peak and was of no help. I have no remorse in defending my own life in my own home." Ralph Bowles never came back to Emma; instead he went to Missouri, so Emma discarded him in 1860. One account says that while in Missouri Bowles got into a brawl and killed a soldier and in turn was himself fatally shot. Bowles' body was returned to Emma for burial.

Eventually, Daniel won his suit and established title to Peter’s estate when he showed the court that Emma was not Peter's legal wife because she had neglected to obtain divorces from previous marriages.

Then came another short-lived matrimonial encounter, her sixth, this time with John Sharp, a man from Iowa. Her seventh husband was the brother of her first. He remembered his brother’s beautiful wife and when he learned that she was free he hastened to La Crosse to court her, thus once again she became Mrs. Van Sickle, and moved with her newest husband to his rich farm in Elkader, Iowa. Van Sickle died shortly thereafter, and an elderly neighboring farmer, Michael Stence, one day heard her singing while engaged in farm tasks. Stence sought out the owner of the sweet voice and became enamored of her beauty. Again she married and was subsequently again single. In 1892, at the age of 72, Emma visited La Crosse, claiming that she had walked the distance of 75 miles from her Iowa home. She vowed she would never marry again. At this point the succession of her conquests becomes somewhat clouded, but still luscious in her mid-70s, she had yet another brief wedded experience, this time with a Mr. Eastman. He too died. Emma was truly a femme fatale with emphasis on the second word of that term. Her final marriage was to a Mr. Wilson of McGregor, Iowa.

Emma was 85 when she died in 1905. Her eulogizer said, "She was a good woman in her way; warm hearted, she embodied a spirit of kindness and generosity, yet incapable of deep or abiding affection. She had her place among the pioneers, and when her day of youth and
beauty was past, took up with a stout heart and cheerful spirit the long narrow years of obscurity, labor and poverty." Emma is buried alongside six of her husbands in a small private cemetery she established on her own land near McGregor, Iowa. It is a queer necropolis, now overgrown and neglected, known as "Emma Van Sickle's Graveyard." The tombs of her husbands are marked with marble slabs bearing only the initials of her deceased spouses. One grave has no marker at all — it is surmised that here is interred Ralph Bowles. He was the only one of her husbands who deserted her and it is said that her way of punishing him for this inexcusable offense was by refusing to place a marker on his grave. Peter Cameron must have been at least one of her favorite mates, for his tombstone bears more than just his initials. It reads "Peter, died January 12, 1854, aged 53 years. By Emma." Another grave marker, believed to be that of another favorite husband, Clinton Cunningham, carried the legend, "Clinty, my heart sings to thee, love; In heaven I hope to meet above. You was ever kind and true to me; So was I to you. Emma G.V."

In an obscure corner of the graveyard is a small stone marker which is inscribed: "Peter D., son of Peter and Emma Cameron." There are those who said that Emma had no children by any of her husbands; they even referred to her sarcastically as the "Virgin Em." They claim that the small gravestone was a fake and that the mock burial was used as a tool to aid in her court fight against Daniel for the Cameron fortune.

Ten husbands — still a remarkable marriage dossier for an undeniably remarkable lady.

It has occurred to me as I wrote this piece that Emma's husbands were notably short-lived. She was known for her fiery temper and colorful language. She was a crack shot with guns and wielded an axe handle with considerable skill and accuracy. This statement is not intended to be construed as an implication or inference of anything at all; it is merely an observation. Certainly no historian has ever intimated that Emma was anything but circumspect in her attitudes towards her husbands. But certainly we must agree that none of them lived very long after they married her.
The Beautiful But Fiery
Emma Cameron

Emma was well aware of her great beauty and her attraction for men and often used her charms to her own advantage. Despite this, she was a warm and kind woman, went to church regularly, showed compassion for people in trouble, gave to the needy with generosity, and helped unselfishly whenever and wherever she could. But her need for male attention was a compelling force in her life and when it was not forthcoming easily, she sought it out and demanded it, using her abundance of feminine wiles and ruses with abandon.

On a warm Sunday afternoon in August 1852 a group of La Crosse people, Emma and Peter Cameron among them, went on a picnic on the Mississippi River shore. After lunch had been consumed and the picnickers were lazing about, Peter sat under a tree reading while Emma sat nearby singing to herself. Wanting attention, she called to her husband, saying “Peter, dear, come over here, I want to show you something.” Peter ignored her and continued reading. She called to him several more times, but he persisted in disregarding her. Emma was greatly annoyed and suddenly shouted “I wish I had never seen you. I’d rather be dead than be your wife.” Then she commenced to berate him and swearing like a trooper called him all the bad names she could think of. Peter calmly got up, put his book in his pocket, walked to the river, got into his skiff and started to row down the river. The irate Emma went home in a fury. She proved the truth of William Congreve’s words “Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.” Emma was like a volcano — a creation of great beauty outwardly, but seething inside with fiery anger, which, when provoked, exploded in a tempestuous burst of violence.

Just as Peter’s boat disappeared from sight, the picnickers heard Emma shouting from her house, “Help, help!” Some who had not seen Peter leave thought he was beating her and ran to the Cameron house to help her. They found Emma lying on the bed in a dreadful fit, thrashing about wildly. Actually, it was a self-imposed tantrum. Dr. Snaugh was among the group of men who went to her assistance and he instructed the men to hold her down by force so she would not injure herself. Never was there a group of men so eager to help a fellow human being. All of them were dying to get their hands on the beautiful Emma and in a moment her body was well in hand. Hardly
The Beautiful But Fiery Emma Cameron

an inch of her was not covered by willing male hands. One of the
town's leading citizens got to the scene a bit late and was much
chagrined when he was unable to find an empty inch of body to put his
hands. He promised himself that the next time Emma had a fit he
would be the first on the scene to help hold her down. A few of the men
became a bit too personal for Emma's liking, so she, who may have
been faking the attack, rapidly came out of her capricious seizure and
began kicking and clawing at the men, swearing and screaming and
telling them in no uncertain terms her opinion of them and of all men.
They all ran like rabbits to escape her explosive temper. Peter did not
come home that night, so the following day Emma went down the
river looking for him and soon returned with her errant husband in
tow.

On another occasion, Emma and Peter were sitting in their
kitchen one autumn evening, he reading while she sat composing a
poem. After a bit, she tired of her writing and asked Peter to talk to
her. Again, he ignored her and Emma in anger snatched his book and
threw it into the kitchen stove. Peter gave her a push and she fell
against a cross-cut saw he had left leaning against the wall next to
the stove. Her side was cut badly and she ran bleeding to the home of
Squire John Levy, a prominent pioneer to whom everyone went with
their problems. She asked Levy to see to it that Peter was placed
under arrest for abusing and attacking her. Because of her well-
known temperamental disposition, Levy doubted her story; Emma
undaunted began to remove her clothing to show him her injuries.
Levy probably would have enjoyed the display, but since his wife was
present, he dissuaded Emma from disrobing. Instead he called Dr.
Snaugh to give her medical attention. The next day Emma packed up
her things and left La Crosse and stayed away the entire winter. She
never told anyone where she went but she probably had spent the
winter months in Prairie du Chien, Cairo, or St. Louis; but wherever
it was, she undoubtedly enjoyed herself and had many admiring
suitors. In the spring Peter went looking for her, found and fetched
her back to La Crosse, but he never disclosed the details of her
absence.

Upon her return to her home, Emma learned that the woman
living next door to the Cameron home had been doing Peter's laun-
dry, cleaning and cooking during his wife's absence. This aroused
Emma's ire and in state of great excitement she grabbed an axe and
started for the neighbor's house. It was about ten o'clock in the evening and her neighbors were fast asleep. Emma found the doors and windows locked, but this did not deter her. She broke down the door with her axe, smashed the windows, and then started for the bedroom where she swore she would kill the "black dogs" in their beds. The woman leaped out of bed, seized her child in her arms; her husband grabbed his pants, and together they fled from the house and hid behind some scrub oaks on the prairie. They were afraid to hide in their barn for Emma had threatened to burn it down with them in it. Meanwhile Emma marched through the house wreaking havoc with her axe and destroying everything in sight. The next day Peter went to the neighbor's house to make peace and to pay for damages caused by Emma. Emma seeing him leave, again picked up her axe and followed him, swearing that she would chop all their heads off. Cameron had a difficult time quieting his wife, but after considerable physical effort he succeeded in appeasing her somewhat and took her home.

Not too long after this Peter died and Emma took for herself a new husband, and a new one, and a new one, and so on. But despite her many husbands and changes in names, she always referred to herself as Emma Cameron and history has done the same. Perhaps because Peter was somewhat indifferent to her beauty and charms and was not easily seduced, he remained her favorite.

Surely the very beautiful Emma Cameron was a unique character in her time and has remained so throughout La Crosse's history. She was a woman to be reckoned with, a woman who embodied all the varied qualities of womanhood, good and bad. Emma personified the words of Vicomte de Segur, the 19th century French dramatist: "Men say of women what pleases them; women do with men what pleases them." Shakespeare's shrewish Kate couldn't hold a candle to our own tempestuous and beautiful Emma.
The Drowning Suicide of Dr. Cameron

One of the most inexplicable and still unsolved mysteries in the history of La Crosse was the drowning of a prominent physician, Dr. Dugald D. Cameron.

At about one o’clock on the morning of August 6, 1867, two men stood idly chatting on the deck of the packet steamer Alice which was docked on the Mississippi River at the foot of Pearl Street. These men — the ship’s night watchman and the night clerk of the Northern Boat Line office — spied a lone male figure, dressed neatly in black, coming down Pearl Street toward the river. They wondered aloud why anyone would be out walking on the now deserted streets; surely all respectable people were at home fast asleep in their beds at that hour. They speculated that perhaps he might have some nefarious scheme in mind that involved their ship or its cargo, so they regarded his movements closely. Because this idea did not seem very likely they then decided he probably was walking off the effects of having imbibed too much, yet that too seemed improbable as he was not staggering but walking normally.

When the man reached the water’s edge he hesitated momentarily, then calmly, unhurriedly and deliberately walked off the levee and into the river, completely dressed and making no attempt to swim. The observers were too astonished even to call out promptly, but watched, stupefied. They then shouted to him, and though stunned, summoned sufficient presence of mind to throw him a life preserver but missed their mark by a wide margin. In the few minutes it took them to regain their senses somewhat and employ more effective rescue methods, the body was bobbing swiftly downstream, the strong river current carrying it along.

The night clerk ran uptown for help but at that hour it was not easy to rouse anyone to assist and by the time would-be rescuers arrived at the scene the body had disappeared completely. After some questioning, by morning it was strongly suspected, and later realized as a tragic reality, that the gentleman in question was Dr. Dugald D. Cameron, a prominent La Crosse physician. A corps of police officers and many friends of the doctor spent the entire day dragging the river and expert divers tried to find the body, but all attempts were of no avail.
At 41, Dr. Cameron, was a tall, slim, elegant man, somewhat of a dandy in his attire, educated and well bred. Why would a man well-liked and highly respected in the community take his own life? Perhaps it was a somnambulistic stroll that terminated in a bizarre accident, yet surely the shock of the enveloping waters would have awakened him from even the soundest sleep. All evidence seemed to point to intentional suicide — perhaps premeditated, perhaps a sudden but fatal decision. Two or three seemingly valid theories have since been propounded to explain the doctor’s suicide, but as none can be substantiated by authentically recorded history and are instead conjectural, it seems best for the purpose of this piece not to explore these hypotheses further. Readers should rather employ their own reasoning to solve the puzzle.

Dr. Dugald Dudley Cameron was born in Caledonia, New York on May 14, 1826, and early in life decided that he wanted to become a physician. He graduated from the Cleveland Medical College in March 1852 and within the year had traveled to La Crosse to establish his medical practice. Perhaps this move was influenced by the fact that several other members of the large Cameron clan already lived here. Cameron is listed in Rev. Spencer Carr’s 1854 Census of
The Drowning Suicide of Dr. Cameron

La Crosse as a "single gentleman." On January 30, 1856, when he was not quite 30, he was elected to membership in the Wisconsin Medical Society. His local practice was considerable as there were relatively few doctors in the city at that time.

During the same period, Cameron became much interested in local politics and at the age of 29 was elected by his fellow citizens to represent the La Crosse district in the Legislative Council of the state. A report at the time declared: "While we lose him from our medicine for so long a time, our best wishes will go with him to the seat of government. And we have full confidence that he will make himself as useful and popular among his new associates as he has ever been among us." Cameron felt intensely that La Crosse deserved to he officially recognized as a viable community by the State of Wisconsin. Because of his conviction, he accepted an appointment as a member of the local Committee of Seven which was determined to proclaim La Crosse a city.

On March 7, 1856, Dr. Cameron introduced a bill into the State Legislature containing a city charter for La Crosse. After only a few days of discussion in Madison, the bill was approved by Governor William A. Barstow on March 14, 1856 and just a month later La Crosse legally became a bona fide city.

Despite his involvement in local and state politics, Dr. Cameron still maintained active participation in his chosen profession of medicine. A group of physicians met in La Crosse in December 1859 and "organized the La Crosse County Medical Society in this city of 5,000." Cameron was elected Secretary of this body. One of the committees of this society was directed to obtain a charter from the Wisconsin State Legislature to "institute a medical college in La Crosse." It was not until April 1864 that the legislature granted the charter and Cameron became one of its incorporators. He was then asked to assist in drafting its by-laws, and became the first president of the La Crosse Medical College. Unfortunately, the college was not destined to be successful and closed its doors in 1881.

Dr. Cameron, obviously a man of many talents and interests, also saw service during the Civil War and in 1861 was appointed Chief Examining Surgeon of the 14th Wisconsin Volunteers, Infantry. He resigned his commission on August 5, 1862 because he felt he could not do full justice to his many commitments.

His own avowal while still in his teens was to spend his life
“healing people” and he now decided to devote his full time and talents toward that goal. He had accomplished so much by his 40th birthday and had the opportunity to serve his community for decades ahead, yet he chose deliberately to end his own life. Why?

The day after the drowning, August 7, 1867, a reward of one hundred dollars was offered for recovery of the doctor’s body and a great many persons commenced dragging and diving operations up to nearly a mile downstream, but without retrieving the body. Heavy grappling apparatus and chains were used to rake the river bottom without results. The following day, Captain John S. Bantam, a river boat skipper and bridge contractor, exploded a torpedo under water, hopeful that this would raise the body, which he thought might be lodged somewhere in the river bed. Though the explosion lifted a raft of logs several feet in the air and threw a fountain of water thirty feet high, and though the detonation was felt forty feet inland, the body did not surface.

On August 11, five days after the incident, a 14-year-old youngster, named Fischer, who lived with his family near the river bank a short distance south of the city, reported that he saw a body rise to the river’s surface and that he recognized the face as that of Dr. Cameron. He said that as he watched, the body turned over face downward and floated down the river. The boy told his story to some men in the area but they discounted it as a youngster’s active imagination.

Later that same day, Joseph W. Losey, a prominent La Crosse attorney and civic leader, and a close friend of Dr. Cameron, dispatched four men in skiffs to search the river near Brownsville, Minnesota, but again to no avail. The general feeling was that the body had floated downstream and had become lodged in a slough where it might never be found.

Ten days after the drowning, Dr. Cameron’s relatives offered a reward of two hundred dollars and the doctor’s gold watch, which he was probably wearing, for discovery of the body. A number of searching parties, many undoubtedly spurred on by the generous reward offered, explored the sloughs in the area, but without success.

On August 22, 1867, a boy found Dr. Cameron’s hat clinging to some underbrush in a slough about a half mile south of the city. Inside the hat were parts of the doctor’s disintegrated scalp adhering to the lining.

A month later, on Friday afternoon, September 21, 1867, John
The Drowning Suicide of Dr. Cameron

Moulton, a farmer living some seven miles below the city on Prairie Island, was rounding up his cattle a half mile from his house, when the frantic barking of his hound dog attracted his attention. Investigating the site to determine the cause of the dog's agitation, Moulton discovered an almost totally decomposed body lying across a log about thirty feet inland from the river's shore line. Apparently the high tide had washed it up, and when the water receded, the body remained, held in place by the log. Though it was in such an advanced state of decomposition that it was almost unidentifiable, the body was obviously that of Dr. Cameron, recognized by its clothing and personal effects. The physician's brother, Angus Cameron, who was called upon to make a positive identification, immediately recognized a golden ring set with an aquamarine on the skeletal finger of the left hand as belonging to the doctor.

It then became obvious that the young Fischer lad who had reported the body on August 11 was indeed correct; the incident had not been a figment of his imagination. The body had apparently floated down the river to Isle La Plume and thence to the point where it was discovered. A report at the time gave a detailed account of the presumed route the body followed before finally reaching the spot where Moulton found it. The report then presented a graphic description of the condition of the body so macabre and horrendous that it does not warrant repetition here.

Dr. Cameron's remains were treated with respect on the site, placed in a coffin and returned to La Crosse to his brother's home from which the funeral was held and which was attended by nearly everyone in the city. He was buried in Oak Grove Cemetery. His obituary read in part "A talented gentleman and true friend has gone and a community is united in its grief."

But the mystery remains. Why did Dr. Cameron, in the prime of his life and at the zenith of his career, commit suicide? There are clues in this story that might give indication as to the doctor's reason for taking his life. I am reasonably certain that I know why but since I cannot prove my theory, it is best not to disclose my conjectural thinking. Why do you think he did it?
The historical tale of the suicide-drowning of Dr. Dugald D. Cameron elicited unprecedented interest among La Crosse citizens, through the decades that followed. Everyone particularly wanted to know the reason for the doctor's action. Why did Dr. Cameron take this ignominious manner of ending his life? Surely a professional medical man would have recognized more readily than anyone else the devastating and ignoble effects upon a body exposed to water for a long period of time. If he thought at all of the ultimate physical effects of drowning it did not deter his action. As a physician, he most assuredly had easy access to lethal drugs that would have terminated his life in a much neater fashion. His reason for choosing drowning as well as his decision to destroy himself will remain forever shrouded in mystery. Obviously there must have been an overriding motive for his suicide. He left no suicide note nor did he give any indication to family or friends that he contemplated self-destruction.

It was later recalled by members of his family that during his youthful years he had occasionally been afflicted with bouts of depression and sometimes spoke with indifference about the prolongation of life. A short time before his death, he was discussing with a colleague a patient who was being tried for murder, whom the doctor considered to be insane because he wanted to do away with himself. Dr. Cameron recalled that when he was 18 years old he was strongly tempted to commit suicide by jumping off a three-story building, but did not disclose his reasons for wanting to die at that early age.

Some people conjectured that he might have had an incurable and painful disease; others thought he was unhappy personally or had family problems; while still others surmised that he might have had a drug or alcohol habit. It was also suggested that perhaps he had suffered business or financial reverses. One person thought that the doctor was in the throes of depression because of an unrequited love affair. All of these were mere supposition and topics of local conjecture.

A rather strange incident occurred the day after the suicide became common knowledge. A 24-year-old man, rugged and good-looking, named James Shimmins, employed by his father as a tin-
Smith, was found wandering about near the river soaking wet. When questioned by the police he said he had been wading and diving in the river searching for the doctor's body. When apprehended, Shimmins was walking around the streets picking up bits of paper. He said he was certain that Dr. Cameron had left him a note and perhaps by piecing together these bits of paper he could reconstruct the message. The police merely dismissed him as deranged and turned him over to his parents.

Dr. Dugald Cameron was eulogized as highly respected and admired. He labored long and hard for the preservation of the Union during the Civil War without regard for his own health or well-being. He served as Surgeon-in-Charge during the battles of Pittsburgh and Shiloh and never rested until he had aided every man who needed medical help. He was a man of indomitable energy and quick perception, with generous impulses toward anyone in misery or need. He was charitable to all churches regardless of denomination. It was said that his "heart, hand and spirit were always at the service of the needy. His faults were not of his own coinage. His patriotism and generous deeds gave evidence that he lived for his fellowman more than for himself."

It seemed odd also that though he could have lived in a fine residence with servants to attend to his personal needs, he preferred instead to live in a mean room above a saloon on Front Street. The few moments of leisure time he had were spent not with cultured colleagues but with rough rivermen, traders, trappers and louts in miserable saloons, playing cards and pool with them.

He apparently had emotional conflicts about these activities and suffered mental anguish as he contemplated the nobler purposes of his life and the evil influences that too often assailed him. One eulogist wrote "Let the mantle of charity cover the apparent blemishes in the career of Dr. Cameron. Think only of the accounts of his friendship, enterprise, benevolence and patriotism. His bereaved family and friends and the community are the losers in his death."

A few weeks after my story about Dr. Cameron's suicide appeared in print, additional data came to my attention that may place the matter in another perspective. A man phoned me to say he had several Cameron bibles which contained interesting notations made by the physician.

The Cameron family home was on the northwest corner of Fourth...
and Cass Streets; after the family moved it became the Dwyer Funeral Parlor. When that building was razed in 1938 to make way for an automobile agency, Cameron memorabilia, including the bibles, were found in the attic and thus entered private hands. Upon examination, the bibles did indeed disclose a fascinating and perhaps pertinent insight into the doctor’s thoughts and feelings as well as his actions. At first, I was somewhat reluctant about publishing Dr. Cameron’s confessions because of their personal nature, but then I considered that this was after all true local history and more than a century after the fact thus the data became viable in adding evidence to unravel the mystery of his suicide. Further, present members of the Cameron family had no objections to publication of material.

Dr. Cameron apparently had certain personal problems that are not disclosed in other areas of local or familial history. Perhaps he felt that making moral promises in his own handwriting in his family bible would aid him in keeping his resolve to expiate what he felt were “sins.” Here, then, are Dr. Cameron’s words, in his own handwriting, quoted exactly as they appear in his personal bible.

“La Crosse. Aug. 25, 1860. I have this day promised myself to discontinue utterly the playing of billiards in the town where I reside, God helping me. Dugald D. Cameron.”

“La Crosse. Aug. 28, 1860. I have made up my mind never again to play a game of cards in a public saloon, Heaven helping me. D. D. Cameron.”

“La Crosse. July 9, 1861. I have failed to keep the above promises. Today I renew them. God grant that from this time forward I may be enabled to keep them. To play cards or billiards in a saloon is disgraceful and wicked. Dugald D. Cameron.”

“La Crosse. Sept. 30, 1863. I have this day resolved to be more economical. Dugald D. Cameron.”

The reader should note that these confessions and promises were written several years before the suicide and thus their relevance to his suicide may be questioned, though he may have harbored these guilt feelings during the intervening years.

Dr. Cameron also signed his name in the margin of the Book of Exodus, at chapters 8 and 9, which describe the plagues visited upon Pharaoh and his subjects. This seems almost like a vote of approval of divine vengeance, and perhaps as a reminder to himself of the possibility of heavenly retribution upon those who defy supreme moral
law. Again, this is only a personal interpretation and is subject to diverse opinion.

The bibles were published by the American Bible Society in New York in 1854. They also contain records of births, deaths, and marriages of various members of the Cameron clan. These bibles, along with copies of the Cameron letters of the 1850’s have been permanently deposited in the Area Research Center of the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse. The choice of a permanent repository for significant historical documents is an important consideration.

Interested readers are cautioned to make their own decisions as to the thoughts that prompted the doctor to end his life.
Peter Cameron and his beautiful wife Emma figured prominently in the early history of La Crosse. Peter came to La Crosse in 1843, a year after Nathan Myrick’s arrival. He built his log cabin home on the river front between what is today Cass Street and Cameron Avenue. In 1854 he met the gorgeous Emma and married her in the city’s first wedding ceremony; Harmon “Scoots” Miller, justice of the peace, officiated. Cameron purchased a great deal of land along the Mississippi River; the plat still bears his name on official records. He also was importantly involved in the controversy surrounding the city’s acquisition of Cameron Park on King Street. Emma Cameron was known for her great beauty and for her penchant for collecting husbands — she acquired ten of them; Peter was the fourth. Emma was an intrepid fearless woman who used her feminine wiles not only on men, but to accomplish her aims politically and economically as well.

This was the era in which lumbering was the prime industry in La Crosse and great fortunes were accumulated. Log rafts were frequently seen floating downstream toward Cairo, Illinois, St. Louis, Missouri, New Orleans, Louisiana, and points in between. Altercations about ownership were frequent and were usually settled through the use of firearms. It was not always the man with the rightful cause who emerged victorious.

On a hot summer morning in early July 1849, a middle-sized log raft, obviously disabled, bearing two men was seen descending the river. It had split in the middle and the two raftsmen were trying desperately to join the two separated parts. They managed to repair the raft temporarily, then began to gather the many logs that had broken loose from the raft and were floating singly down the river.

It was customary in those days to mark the cut ends of logs with the name or symbol of the owner in order to identify them when they reached their destination. These logs were imprinted with the name “Ellis,” owner of the raft who was one of the two men handling it.

Peter Cameron was on his skiff on the river near Barron’s Island (Pettibone Park) watching the procedure of repairing the raft and recovery of the loose logs. Emma Cameron, watching from the La Crosse shore, had recovered several logs that had floated near enough for her to pull them in onto land. She shouted to her husband to come...
ashore immediately. When he landed Emma showed him the logs she had retrieved and insisted that even though they were marked “Ellis” they had been cut from trees on Cameron property. How she could determine this is an unsolved mystery as cut logs look remarkably alike especially if they come from the same species of trees, in this case pine. Emma though was not above such assertions and dealings.

The raftsmen moored their raft and went ashore to purchase some needed supplies from John Levy’s store at the corner of Front and Main streets. Peter Cameron stopped them on their way and claimed ownership of the raft which he insisted was composed of logs illegally cut from his land. He demanded that the raft be turned over to him without delay. A violent argument ensued, without resolution. Cameron strongly urged that it be settled through a bout of fisticuffs and offered to take on both men at the same time. The two declined to fight and turned away. Cameron thereupon released a vicious bulldog that he owned and was holding on a leash. He incited it to attack Ellis, who was seriously bitten by the animal. Ellis kicked at the dog and managed to escape, whereupon Cameron recalled the dog and tied him up. Ellis, very badly injured, limped away with the help of his partner. They planned to float their raft downstream to Prairie du Chien to seek medical assistance.

Just then Emma Cameron came out of her house carrying two rifles. She handed one to her husband and urged him to shoot Ellis who was hobbling painfully away as hurriedly as he could. Just as he reached the river’s edge where his raft was moored, Cameron sent forth a volley of shots which struck Ellis in the back and he fell, mortally wounded. As he lay helpless on the ground, Cameron approached and with the gunstock of his rifle proceeded to beat the prone Ellis on the head. His aim of course was to finish Ellis’ life and take possession of the log raft.

John Levy, a prominent storekeeper in the city, saw the entire incident as it unfolded and hurried to the river shore in an attempt to stop Cameron from killing Ellis. Peter and Emma confronted Levy and told him to be gone; that if he interfered they would do to him what they were doing to Ellis. Levy wisely left the scene. As he retreated Levy spied a skiff carrying two men approaching around the bend of Barron’s Island. Levy shouted to them to hurry and land as their help was needed. The two men proved to be Dr. Samuel
Snaugh (Snow), erstwhile business partner and friend of Levy and County Sheriff John Elder. They stopped Cameron's murderous intent and placed him under arrest. He was taken into custody, charged with attempted murder and incarcerated in chains in the basement of the McSpadden house which served as a jail since there was at that time no official building serving as a jailhouse.

The wounded Ellis was taken to Prairie du Chien for medical treatment, but he died on the skiff before it reached its destination and was buried at Brownsville, Minnesota. Peter Cameron was tried for first degree murder in Prairie du Chien and strangely was acquitted on grounds of justifiable homicide!
The Cameron Park Controversy

On a cool crisp mid-October day in 1889, at about 6:00 a.m., a horse-drawn wagon, carrying two carpenters and a load of long boards, posts and other building supplies, drove east along King Street and stopped between Fourth and Fifth streets. A moment later a buggy pulled up behind the wagon and out stepped a neatly dressed 64-year-old local businessman — Daniel Cameron. The men unloaded the lumber and supplies and under Cameron's direction began to erect a fence around the half-square-block park there. This was Cameron's method of asserting his ownership of the parcel of land. The men had not progressed very far with their task when Mayor John Dengler, who had been roused from his bed to be advised of the incident, and two city policemen arrived at the scene. They promptly called a halt to the fence building project, placed Cameron and the two workmen under arrest and escorted them to the jailhouse a few blocks north, near Fourth and Vine streets. Later in the morning, the three men were arraigned before Justice H. M. Safford. Safford, a local attorney and city coroner, released them on bail provided by Mr. Cameron. Cameron was familiarly known about La Crosse as "Uncle Dan" and was considered a very shrewd operator.

Thus began more than a decade of litigation — Cameron vs. the City of La Crosse, both of whom claimed title to the park land. During the succeeding years, Cameron won the case three times in court, the final trial being held in U.S. Circuit Court for the Western District of Wisconsin in Madison in March 1899. It was ruled that "The City of La Crosse does not and cannot lawfully retain possession of the King Street Park and Mr. Cameron is the lawful owner."

Cameron died shortly after this verdict was handed down and the City of La Crosse was forced to purchase the park for $6,000.00, awarded to Cameron's niece, Helen Janet McArthur. Even in those days legal fees were exorbitant and the city was compelled to pay an additional $10,000.00 in attorneys' costs.

One of the lawyers in the case, Charles H. Schweizer, prominent in city affairs at that time, reviewed the Cameron Park case in a lengthy and detailed treatise, describing it in involved and unintelligible legalese terms, the interpretation of which even today can be deciphered only by the most erudite of lawyers.

The first trial took place in January 1891 in Madison before Judge
Bunn, with attorneys George Gordon of La Crosse and W. F. Vilas of Madison representing Cameron, and City Attorney John Brindley, Joseph Losey and Gilbert M. Woodward representing the City of La Crosse. (Prior to this Woodward had been city attorney, district attorney, an alderman, and mayor in 1874.) The trial lasted a full week and after much vociferous debate, the verdict was handed down in favor of Cameron.

City officials were understandably disturbed at the court's unfavorable ruling and took the necessary steps to appeal the matter. Under state law governing ejectment proceedings, the losing party, the city, was permitted a new trial upon payment of taxable costs, in this case $300. In June 1892, the case went before the court for the second time and lasted twelve days. After many acrimonious charges and counter-charges, the city again lost. La Crosse then took the case before the U.S. Court of Appeals on a writ of error, citing 37 errors of assignment. That hearing was argued in March 1894 but a decision was not rendered until May 1897.

Almost the entire suit rested upon two words — “Public Square” — which appeared erroneously on the original plat. On this basis the
court stated that the city had held adverse possession of the land in question. The appellate court permitted a third trial which was held in March 1899 and for the third time the city lost its case. Cameron was given possession of the park land, measuring 380 feet on King Street and 260 feet on Fourth and Fifth streets. The plaintiff was also awarded $8,500, later reduced to $6,000, in addition to legal fees and costs.

Actually, the property was not considered desirable as it was too far from the center of the city to be valuable for business purposes and too near to commercial establishments to be suitable for residential use.

The history of the park was already several decades old when the first trial began. Peter Cameron, the first owner of the disputed land tract came to La Crosse in 1843 and in 1847 purchased a large section of land, covering an area roughly from Pearl Street south to Division Street and from the Mississippi River east to Sixth Street. In 1850, Peter deeded half of this tract to his brother Daniel, who was 16 years his junior, and the other half to Dunn and Dousman, prominent land dealers.

Daniel then returned to his native New York and gave Peter power-of-attorney to handle his La Crosse business affairs, including authority to lay out a public landing, streets, alleys, lots and blocks on the deeded land. In a letter that Peter wrote to Daniel on February 2, 1852, he said “The deed in which you gave me power-of-attorney is recorded and all straight, that there can not be any liabilities on you — it is fully and legally yours.” However, a legal limitation prevented him from making any donations of land for public use. Peter acted as he was authorized, but not to the fullest extent. He erred in filing the papers with the Register of Deeds as his own act, but failed to notify the register that he was acting only as Daniel’s agent.

Records were haphazardly filed in those early days and deeds were kept loosely in a desk drawer. In November 1851 the only official book in the Register of Deeds’ office was labeled “Volume One of Deeds.” On the original deed the north half of Block 15 (the area later in dispute) the words “Fourth Street Park” were scratched out and the words “Public Square” were written in. The entire controversy later hinged on this correction, and it was the premise upon which the city had originally taken possession of the park. It was never determined who had made the change on the deed, though John
Laird, Deputy Register of Deeds, later assumed responsibility for the correction, though he did not recall why he had done so. Peter and Daniel Cameron both swore that they did not authorize the change of wording. Peter’s testimony must have occurred prior to 1854 as that was the year in which he died.

During the trials of the 1890s, Daniel and the beautiful Emma Cameron (Peter’s widow) both gave depositions that the words “Public Square” did not appear on the original plat. Emma Cameron had taken possession of Peter’s papers in 1855. Among them was the original plat which she claimed had been destroyed by a fire in her Iowa home in 1883. Thus the original plat could not be submitted as prime evidence, which was based largely upon sworn testimony of the principals in the case.

In 1866, when the city was contemplating construction of a new court house, the piece of land in question had been suggested and discussed by the city council as a possible site for the new government building. This proposal was not consummated, as a formal offer was never advanced by either side. Daniel stated in his testimony that he had sold many lots in the original Cameron tract, but that he never had any intention whatever of making a donation of the piece of land to the city for park purposes.

Why Daniel waited thirty-five years before bringing suit against the city for return of the park to his ownership has always been a moot question and no clearly defined answer has ever been proffered. Some declared that he had planned to develop the half-square-block for real estate purposes, but his death prevented that plan from being accomplished.

In 1903 the City Council met to officially confirm some park names and to rename others. It was suggested that the King Street public square be renamed Cameron Park. This caused a tremendous outcry of protest from the local citizenry who thought it was being named in honor of Daniel Cameron. The Cameron Park case had become a local “cause celebre.” The townspeople felt outraged that a man who had recently caused the city so much trouble and money should be so honored. Antagonism toward Daniel Cameron was widespread. When it was explained that the name Cameron Park was in honor of Peter Cameron, one of La Crosse’s earliest settlers who had originally purchased the land, and to recognize his brother Judge Angus Cameron, who was a respected citizen, the protest subsided and the name Cameron Park was officially adopted.
In 1947, Edwin Erickson, president of Erickson Bakery, whose establishment was next to the park, left $25,000 in his will to the city to construct a bandstand in Cameron Park, to be called the Erickson Memorial. He stipulated that the bandstand was to be erected within five years after his death or the bequest would become invalid. The city did not accept this restricted qualification and so the structure never became a reality.

Today the City of La Crosse is the undisputed owner of Cameron Park and it is operated under the jurisdiction of the La Crosse City Parks and Recreation Department to be used for the enjoyment of all people.
More than a century ago the most impressive and prestigious hotel in La Crosse was the Cameron House at Second and Vine streets. Built of a wooden shell faced with brick, it was 156 feet long, 56 feet wide and 60 feet high. It cost $60,000 to construct in 1879 and for the next 37 years, when it was destroyed by fire, was the most elegant hotel in the La Crosse area. The Stoddard Hotel presented hard competition when it opened in 1904.

The main entrance to the building was on its west side which was surrounded by a broad promenade under a protecting portico. There were spacious and comfortable waiting rooms in the railroad depot portion of the building on the north while a luxurious lobby embellished the hotel in the south part.

On the ground floor of the hotel were reception rooms, parlors, a main dining room, several smaller private eating rooms, two writing rooms, a billiard room, kitchen and pantries, as well as hotel offices. These rooms were all 16 feet high and the woodwork was of hand-carved red oak. The main parlor had a Brussels carpet in a Japanese design; ebony furniture was ornamented with gilt and upholstered in

![Image of Cameron House and Milwaukee Railroad Depot, 1910](Image)
wine-colored plush. There was also a Hazelton upright piano in the parlor that cost $900, a marble-topped circular table in the center of the room, a tall pier glass, and the windows were covered with lace curtains and wine-colored velvet draperies.

Leading off the lobby was a massive staircase, ornately hand-carved in oak, leading to a mezzanine which held men’s and ladies’ restrooms. The staircase continued up to the other floors with a large square landing between floors. The rooms were all lighted by city-supplied gas; these were later converted to electricity. Elegant crystal chandeliers graced the parlors and reception rooms.

The rooms on the second floor were all finished in white ash or maple. It contained 24 rooms, eight of which were suites and the other 16 single rooms, each 13 by 17 feet and 13 feet high. The suites had complete baths, while the single rooms each had a beautiful Italian marble washbasin; toilet facilities were at the south end of the hall. The furniture was of black walnut, ornately carved; the beds boasted of upholstered springs and hair mattresses. All rooms were equipped with steam heat radiators and it was said that three pounds of steam would warm the entire building from the cellar to the top floor on the coldest day. The walls in several rooms were painted in various colors and patterns, some described as “dizzy.” Other rooms had doors painted to resemble leather with realistically painted iron strips and bolts, what today we call three-dimensional or trompe l’oeil.

The third floor held 19 less expensive rooms, but still handsomely furnished. Each was 14 feet high, but none had private baths. An observer of that time stated that several very attractive unattached young ladies lived in rooms on the third floor. That statement was not further clarified and one was left to imagine what he chose. The fourth floor tower contained five large rooms, each 23 by 23 feet. These were usually occupied by Milwaukee Railroad conductors who slept over in the hotel between runs when they were away from home. The top room in the tower was used as the railroad engineer’s quarters. The hotel maintenance engineer had a sleeping room in the basement next to the furnace room. In the basement were laundry, ironing, dry storage, fuel and boiler rooms, as well as six sample rooms, each 32 by 50 feet, for the use of salesmen to display their wares.

During the 1860s and 1870s in American history, railroads were expanding rapidly, particularly in the midwest, and there was urgent
need for lodging and food at important terminals along rail lines. The C.M.&St.P Railroad undertook the establishment of hotels in conjunction with its passenger depots and freight stations at such points. The hotel-depot-freight complex in La Crosse was designed by a Chicago architect, John Long, and built by the F. A. Fisher Company of Minneapolis. In appearance, the entire structure was not unlike the depots Fisher had built for the Milwaukee Road in Minneapolis, Milwaukee and Madison. The building was completed late in 1879 but was not formally opened to the public until February 1880 when it was inaugurated with great fanfare and a gala celebration.

Messrs. Fox and Bird assumed ownership of the complex. Warren D. Fox was a professional hotel man who had owned and operated the Fox House in Portage and came to La Crosse with considerable expertise in hotel management. Bird, who hailed from New York, sold his interest in the hotel to Fox shortly after the opening and returned east. Fox was then joined by D. P. Smith as his partner. (Smith was the son of Fred Smith, the first manager of the Stoddard Hotel.)

All fine banquets and special affairs in La Crosse were usually held in the Cameron House, and its facilities were patronized by many prominent local citizens, among whom were Frank P. Hixon, Joseph Hixon, Jason C. Easton, James J. Hogan, and others. One particularly lavish and prestigious banquet was given by Dr. Frank “White Beaver” Powell when he welcomed William “Buffalo Bill” Cody to La Crosse as his business partner. They had been close friends for many years during their days together on the frontier plains. The guests drank numerous champagne toasts to White Beaver and Buffalo Bill well into the early hours of the next morning.

The Cameron House, which was named in honor of Senator Angus Cameron, was known as the “round-up place for a toddy” among the men who were the “big fellows” who ran the city at that time. Those who regularly attended the late afternoon “toddy hour” (very much like our present day cocktail-hour) included those mentioned above as well as other prominent business and professional men.

In 1888, when President Grover Cleveland visited La Crosse, he arrived on the Milwaukee Road and was a guest at the Cameron House. In August 1909 when President William H. Taft came to La Crosse to dedicate the new YMCA at Seventh and Main streets, his private train was stationed on the railroad siding just west of the
The Majestic Cameron House

Cameron House, but he stayed at the Stoddard Hotel. The hotel’s guest registers indicate that most nationally prominent figures stayed at the Cameron House when they visited La Crosse.

The railroad depot and waiting rooms were in the north end of the building while the hotel occupied the larger portion in the central and south parts. The first railroad ticket agent in the new depot was Fred Ruiz who remained in that job for six years. He was replaced in 1886 by Frank R. Hartwell, who remained in that job for 30 years. He became almost a local institution himself and was said to be “as much a part of the city as the hotel-depot itself.” Warren D. Fox, owner of the hotel, was its first manager, but subsequently hired West Holt to act as manager while Fox devoted himself to administrative details. At the time of the great hotel-depot fire in 1916, C. C. Davis was the Cameron House manager.

The Van Noys Interstate Corporation of Chicago operated many railroad depot restaurants throughout the midwest. They were contracted to establish the hotel restaurant in La Crosse and the depot cafe which was known as the Interstate Lunch Room. Van Noys engaged Benjamin F. Locke, as its first manager and chef in La Crosse. He had been connected with many famous hotels and eateries; and had also been in charge of restaurants at two world fairs. La Crosse attained some measure of culinary fame because of the Cameron House dining room and depot lunchroom and subsequently became known far and wide as “the town where you get that splendid meal.” During the dreadful conflagration that destroyed the hotel and depot in 1916, firefighters were served sandwiches (gourmet style) and coffee from the Interstate Lunch Room; when they ran out of food, ordinary fare was sent from the Banner Lunch Room at 324 Main Street.

The destruction of the Cameron House removed an institution from La Crosse that belonged in the “landmark” class. It had served to make La Crosse well known throughout the midwest, “fully demonstrating that a first-class hotel is the best booster a city can have,” according to Frank Hartwell, the hotel-depot veteran.
The Ravaging Cameron House
Christmas Fire

December 24, 1916 — the day before Christmas. Nearly every household in La Crosse was being readied for the holiday. Women were in their kitchens baking and cooking special foods; children were stringing popcorn and cranberries to decorate the Christmas tree, while others were out skating or sliding on their sleds; gifts were being wrapped in gaily colored papers and ribbons and hidden away; men were grooming horses and polishing buggies and sleighs; those few who owned automobiles were making certain that they were in proper mechanical order so families could get to church services and holiday parties without breaking down. Store windows downtown were decorated brightly and special merchandise was on display; many people were planning to spend the day doing last-minute Christmas shopping.

Though it was Sunday, many stores planned to remain open to accommodate their customers. In short, it was like any other day before Christmas in La Crosse, though surely not on such a lavish or commercial scale as that found today.

The weather man had promised a white Christmas and was in the process of fulfilling that commitment. The temperature was down to five degrees below zero and four and a half inches of new snow had fallen on the five inches already on the ground. The wind velocity was very high and general weather was described by some as a "raging blizzard," though that seemed to be somewhat of an exaggeration.

Fifty-two people were sleeping peacefully in their warm beds in the Cameron House in the early morning hours of that eventful day, hardly expecting to be routed out into the icy weather in their nightclothes. Six of these were railroad men spending the night in the hotel before reporting for holiday train service later in the day. A half dozen young women, chambermaids and waitresses, were also sleeping over rather than braving the frigid weather they would encounter if they went to their homes. The remainder were guests from various parts of the country who planned to continue to their Christmas destinations on train connections later on.

Suddenly the holiday spirit was shattered and tragedy turned the city's festive mood into melancholy. Telephone lines throughout the city began to crackle as those who had phones began to call friends...
and relatives to report the tremendous fire that was rapidly consuming one of La Crosse's most venerable landmarks — the Milwaukee Railroad Depot and the Cameron House Hotel at Second and Vine streets. Those who did not have telephones ran by foot to tell neighbors of the debacle. As may be suspected, though the conflagration was totally destructive, the reports that were circulated were greatly overstated. They insisted that the entire city of La Crosse would be a desolate ruin by midday and everyone would be left dead or bereft. Happily, there were no casualties, but gossips had dozens of people lying lifeless in the building's smoldering ruins.

By the score, then by hundreds, La Crosse citizens, holiday preparations and festivities forgotten, streamed to the site to witness first-hand the inferno that was raging in the west end of the downtown area. School was out for the holiday vacation and practically every child in La Crosse was at the scene unless specifically forbidden by parents to be there.

La Crosse firemen fought the blaze valiantly under the most adverse conditions — subzero temperatures, high winds producing tremendous wind-chill and great gusts of swirling snow; fire hoses stiffened and frozen nearly solid by many coats of ice; fire ladders
slipping and sliding; vast masses of curious humanity underfoot, sometimes hampering operations. All of this, to say nothing of the cumbersome clothing they had to wear. Yet these men battled the fire courageously under these enormous odds and many acts of heroism were enacted.

The hotel night clerk, B. H. Rusk, had not had a busy night and was dozing behind his desk when the acrid odor of smoke in his nostrils brought him wide awake. It was obviously emanating from the basement so he rushed down the stairs where he found the hotel engineer, Peter Baus, fast asleep in his sleeping alcove next to the furnace room. Baus had checked everything before retiring and all was in proper order so he slept calmly. Together the two men found a fire in one of the unoccupied sample rooms in the central part of the basement. Knowing that it could spread rapidly and that their first duty was to alert the guests, they ran to the upper floors pounding on doors and waking people and urging them to leave the building. Within a few minutes an exodus from the hotel began — women in their nightgowns with hair streaming down their backs, men in their longjohns or pajamas, rushed out into the snowstorm, many in their bare feet. The halls and stairwells were by that time smoke-filled and
many fleeing persons held towels over their faces as they fled. Once outside, they ran to the nearest havens — other small hotels and rooming houses, restaurants, and some even sought refuge in brothels in Front Street.

Though the origin of the fire was never definitely determined, it was thought that it started with a short circuit caused by defective wiring. A popular idea, one offered by Baus, though never substantiated, was that some hoboes had broken a basement window on the west side of the building and had entered an empty sample room to escape the freezing weather. There, Baus conjectured, sparks from smoking materials had ignited some waste material. George Skaff, a 12-year-old newsboy, was delivering the Sunday morning papers in the area. He noticed smoke coming from one of the hotel’s upper windows. George ran to tell his uncle who lived on South Second Street. The uncle instructed the boy to run to the fire department on State Street to report the incident.

It was shortly after 8:00 a.m. when the Central Fire Department was called and in a matter of minutes they were at the scene. Hoses were connected to water mains but were frozen solid almost immediately and were difficult to handle. The fire had already made considerable headway when the fire department arrived and it was apparent almost from the start that the building was doomed. The firemen were intent upon containing the fire and keeping it from spreading to other buildings in the area.

Fire Chief George McGlachlin directed his men expertly. He promptly issued a general alarm that brought out all five of the city’s fire companies. It was all in vain. Luckily, no lives were lost, but there was more than $50,000 in property loss, fortunately fully covered by insurance. The depot-hotel restaurant suffered a $3,000 loss, about $100 in cash was lost in the cash register, and some $2,500 worth of cigars and other items from the news agency in the hotel lobby. Office records and hotel registers were destroyed which made it difficult to check if all guests were accounted for.

The building was constructed of a wooden shell faced with brick and so burned like tinder. The entire building appeared to be one huge blazing mass with tongues of flames shooting out of nearly every window. It looked like a tremendous bonfire. The fire had apparently erupted in the center of the basement, just beneath the central four-story tower, and a strong northwest wind in the main
stairwell created a draft that sucked fire and smoke to the upper floors in minutes. It was a blazing inferno never before seen in La Crosse.

By 9:15 a.m. it was accepted that saving any part of the structure was impossible. Firemen attacked the fire from the south and east, but at 9:35 a.m. a roar emanated from the south end of the building as the second floor caved in. A moment later the roof fell in and the east wall of the third floor erupted in flames. Ten minutes later the north half of the building that contained the railroad passenger depot caved in. Large cracks appeared in the brick facing on the east side and policemen on duty had to force the onlookers to back up to keep them safe from injury by falling brick and burning debris. At about 10:30 a.m., less than two and a half hours after the fire was discovered, a wall of flames fell on the train sheds to the north and rapidly consumed fifty feet of warehouses.

Chief McGlachlin ordered sectional aerial ladders placed to reach the fourth floor tower rooms, which the firemen climbed dragging their frozen hoses with them. The men on the ladder were enveloped in smoke and the streams of water played into the building were totally ineffective. The chief ordered them down as their lives were in
The Ravaging Cameron House Christmas Fire

peril and it was clear that the building was doomed. They reached the ground just as a great blazing chunk of the tower cornice fell on the exact spot where they had been a few seconds earlier. Immediately thereafter the central tower crumbled and fell. Surely providence was on their side.

The La Crosse firemen showed great courage in battling the spectacular destruction and many evidenced special bravery. Some thrilling rescues were effected but the firemen took these in stride as part of their job. La Crosse had reason to be immensely proud of its fire department.

Firemen were now primarily concerned with saving lives. Three guests were rescued by ladder crews and carried from windows, and another who had somehow wandered onto the roof seeking safety was also brought down. Peter Baus, the hotel engineer, after being ordered by the hotel manager, O. C. Davis, to save himself by going outside and remaining there, for unknown reasons reentered the building and went to his basement room. He was promptly imprisoned by smoke and flame and screamed for help. Firemen heard his cries and knocked in a boarded up window of the furnace room and brought him out nearly suffocated.

Bernard Twite of Carson, North Dakota, was trapped in his third floor room on the west side of the hotel. He put his fist through the window pane and crawled out onto the window ledge. Though he was badly cut and needed medical attention the firemen saved his life.

Eliza Michelet, a chambermaid, who was sleeping on the third floor, after being awakened, ran through the halls pounding on doors to rouse guests still sleeping, then ran downstairs to save herself. When she got outside she remembered that she had forgotten her purse which contained her week's wages in cash, money she needed for Christmas food and gifts for her family. She ran back upstairs to her room, snatched her purse and outercoat but could not get down again because the halls and stairwells were engulfed in smoke and flames. Instead, she climbed the partially burned stairs to the fourth floor tower and out onto the south part of the roof. She screamed for help but in the noise, crackling fire, and general confusion she was not heard, nor could she be seen through the smoke screen. She then ran across the roof, crawled over the low dividing wall to the north roof. Her screams there attracted the attention of a firefighter who with his partner shifted a ladder near her and brought her down. On
the roof and on the ladder she remained calm but when her feet touched the ground she promptly collapsed and fainted. She was carried to a nearby restaurant where she was revived.

Nellie Mungen of Worthington, Minnesota was an extraordinarily sound sleeper, or perhaps deaf. She slept through the entire confusion and pounding on her door did not awaken her, so it was thought that she had escaped down the stairs on her own. Her brother, James Mungen, whose room was a few doors down the hall from hers, could not find Nellie among those who had escaped. He pointed out her room to the firemen who then put a ladder up to her window, broke the glass, entered the room and found her sleeping peacefully. A fireman put a robe on her and carried her down the ladder to safety, still asleep. When she awakened later she wondered what had happened and asked why she was outside in her bathrobe.

Mrs. Mary Norton who lived at 327 North 10th Street in La Crosse was the hotel matron and had a sleeping alcove in the hotel’s basement. She too had slept over because of the bad weather and escaped outside when the fire broke out. She remembered that she had ten dollars in cash in her purse as well as her winter coat which she had left in her room, but all was lost in the fire.

William McDonald and Herman Boerner, both hosemen from Fire Company No. One both had narrow escapes. They were playing streams of water on the west wall when someone yelled “Look out! She’s coming down!” They jumped out of the way just as the west wall fell outward on the exact spot where they had been standing seconds before. Once again, providence was at work. Chief McGlachlin and firefighters Otto Zierke and George Gibson were directing streams of water on the south wall which was enveloped in thick smoke when suddenly the wall caved in. Fortunately it fell inward and the three men were showered with bricks and burning rubble, but they were only slightly injured.

Anna Stoltz, a pretty and popular waitress who worked in the depot lunch room, was missing. Firemen checked every room they could possibly enter but she was not to be found. They decided she had died in the flames and planned to look for her body at the first opportunity. Suddenly she appeared on the scene, pert and smiling; she had spent the night in town with friends.

At noon the fire was under control but continued to smolder. Looters were already rummaging about in the ashes looking for
valuables left behind by fleeing guests. The police drove them out, put up a temporary fence around the ruins and posted a guard to keep trespassers out.

It is to the credit of the CM&StP Railroad that on Christmas Day business continued as usual and cars were spotted as near as possible to the destroyed depot. The freight station across the street served as a passenger waiting room. Train schedules were all on time and there was a slight delay in only one run which was due to a minor accident in Portage. The Interstate Lunch Room just north of the depot was also used as a waiting room.

On Christmas morning two small wooden buildings arrived on a flat car from Tomah and were placed temporarily on the west side of Second Street between State and Vine. They looked not unlike army barracks and served as the Milwaukee Road south side depot for several years thereafter.

Christmas Day in La Crosse in 1916 was celebrated as usual by its citizens, but during the day hundreds of people visited the still-smoldering ruins at the site of the devastating fire that consumed the Milwaukee Road depot and the adjoining Cameron House Hotel.
The Genealogy of a Magnificent River

Ol' man river, dat ol' man river,
He must know sompin', but don't say nothin',
He just keeps rollin', he keeps on rollin' along.
He don't plant taters, he don't plant cotton,
And dem dat plants 'em is soon forgotten,
But ol' man river, he just keeps rollin' along.

Majestic, stately, most often serene, but sometimes terribly turbulent and destructive, it seems hardly conceivable that the Mississippi River, flowing so quietly past our front door is, according to geologists, nearly 15 million years old.

The Cenozoic geological era, geologists tell us, occurred about 70 million years ago and lasted some 20 million years. During the Eocene epoch of that era, the Mississippi River covered all of what today is Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama. The delta of the river was near to what today is Cairo, Illinois.

Some ten million years later, during the Miocene geological era, the earth moved and gradually lifted the land lying under this vast inland sea. The water drained to a lower level some distance south and cut through the soft soil that was pushed up from the bottom of the old gulf.

Then, about half a million years ago, a mammoth ice sheet formed to cover the northern part of our country. The Ohio River to the west and the Missouri River at the east, together formed the southern boundary of this huge ice cap. As a result, the Mississippi took on a tremendous load of sediment and carved a deep channel, thus connecting the Missouri and Ohio rivers with the Mississippi. As the river flooded the area, vast alluvial deposits were spread on the river banks, accounting for the rich farm lands that abounded later.

The Ice Age ended and the ice cap gradually melted in the ensuing warm weather and created colossal floods. From what today is St. Louis to northern Illinois, unbelievable floods formed a channel hundreds of feet deep. According to Prof. E. J. Weinzierl of University of Wisconsin, La Crosse geology department "Melting ice together with drainage from glacial lakes provided the volumes of water necessary to convey the sediment far downstream."
The Genealogy of a Magnificent River

The ice at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River to the northeast was diverted, causing the melting glacier to flood the area west and south thus creating a vast fresh-water inland sea. The ice cap left a rough topography which was leveled as the water flowed out to sea, resulting in a rich even farming area later in the river's history. The Great Lakes are the remnants of that huge inland sea which remained after the St. Lawrence ice area melted.

As the rain water and melting snow washed their way south they carried away soil, gradually lowering the average height of the Mississippi basin about a foot every 5,000 years. The effluvia of this erosion is today still being carried on down to the Mississippi delta which is still being constructed. Geologists claim the delta is advancing into the Gulf of Mexico at the rate of 100 yards a year, about a mile every 17 years. The river discharges about 12½ trillion cubic yards of water into the gulf annually.

For 15 million years ol’ man river he just kept rollin’ along.
While on a gold-seeking expedition in the Florida area in 1541, Hernando de Soto explored westward through southeastern and southcentral United States land. In May of that year he and his men came upon the Mississippi River at Sunflower Landing near Clarksdale, Mississippi. He continued to explore further west of the river and then returned to the first site. He died in May 1542, exactly a year after his famous discovery. His body was sunk in the middle of the river, and his name has been perpetuated in many places.

De Soto had brought with him about 200 horses which he released on the west bank of the lower Mississippi River. These and the horses imported by Cortes in his conquest of Mexico became the ancestors of the wild mustangs that roamed the western plains of the United States for many years thereafter.

Fathers Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet, French Catholic missionaries, reached the Mississippi River in 1673, during their American expeditions, arriving by way of the southern tip of Lake Michigan. In 1682 Robert de la Salle was the first to explore the great river southward. Many other intrepid explorers including Father Louis Hennepin and Nicholas Perrot followed in succeeding decades. Through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States came into full possession of the entire Mississippi River basin. A detailed history of the Mississippi River explorations fills many volumes.

The Mississippi finds its source, or headwaters, as some call it, at Lake Itasca, Minnesota. Lake Itasca is roughly Y-shaped, 1,470 feet above sea level, about seven miles in length, eight miles wide and three feet deep.

A Chippewa legend relates that Itasca was the sky-daughter of the tribal god Nanabozho, whose falling tears formed the rivulets which feed the lake. At this inauspicious point the mighty Mississippi winds and twists through a thousand lakes, secluded forests and rapids, and some 550 miles to the south arrives at St. Anthony Falls at Minneapolis.

The mouth of the Mississippi was known 200 years before its source. It was under domination of French and Spanish forces, and Sioux and Chippewa tribes fought over it. In due time expeditions charted its headwaters. Explorers followed it north until it turned
back upon itself and they were amazed to discover the sweeping river there began its flow toward Hudson Bay. Eventually these explorers stood at the north end of Lake Itasca. Henry R. Schoolcraft was the leader of the group that found it in 1832.

With its tributary, the Missouri River, it is the longest river in the world, more than 4,300 miles. It is also the most crooked river in the world, which accounts to some extent for its great length. Its four main tributaries are the Missouri, Ohio, Arkansas and Red rivers.

It was originally named Missi Sipi by the Algonquin Indians, meaning Great Long River. The Chippewas called the river Mee-iss-see-bee which translates into "father of waters." Other names were Meche Sebe, Mesche Cebe, Messipi — all of Indian orgin. Cortes called it the River of the Holy Ghost. Still other names were Canalveral, Rio de Flores, Palisado, Escondida, and even St. Louis River, a name ordered by the King of France in 1712. An Englishman called it simply Big Water.

The Mississippi draws its water from the vastest drainage basin in the world — from Delaware on the Atlantic seaboard and thence from the entire country eastward to Idaho on the Pacific slope — a spread of some 45 degrees longitude. The Mississippi basin contains 1,200,000 square miles, exceeded in size only by the Amazon basin in South America. The river basin drains 19 states, about 40 percent of the area of our country and some parts of Canada as well.

It has been said that a century ago, for the most splendid panoramic continuous area of sheer unadulterated pristine beauty there was nothing in the world to compare with the Mississippi River between Red Wing, Minn. and McGregor, Iowa. Unfortunately, man has changed that picture but there still remain remnants of this once glorious sight.

The Mississippi River has hosted Spanish conquistadors, French missionary-explorers, Indians, pioneer white men, river pirates, wars, lumber rafts, steamboats by the thousands, levees, locks and dams, barges, pleasure excursions — all this and more. The great river has seen American history from its very inception and earlier, and has been a solitary participant through its all phases.

Commerce reached its pinnacle on the Mississippi in the 1850s, but the advent of the railroads presaged the end of this era late in the 19th century, and for sometime thereafter river traffic languished. But as human engineers improved navigable conditions in succeed-
ing decades, and as air traffic superseded rail commerce, the river began to regain some of its prominence.

Dredging has maintained navigability and the many locks and dams all along the river have provided the deepened channels. Canals permit water traffic between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River.

Throughout its civilized history the Mississippi has carried many millions of tons of freight, countless passengers, and has provided an important food source for man through its scores of edible fish species. It has also served as a recreation area for sportsmen and a pleasure source for the general populace.

Though it supplies great benefits for man, the river and its tributaries have often been unbelievably cruel and destructive. It deposits more than 400 million tons of sediment into its delta annually thus causing great problems in the south. Almost yearly, floods have wreaked havoc in scores of places. La Crosse will long remember the ruinous floods of the mid 1960s. Levees, hundreds of miles longer than even the Great Wall of China and 25 times as thick, constructed under the aegis of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, have to a certain degree alleviated the flood destruction along the river. But man has yet to best nature when it goes on a rampage.

Mark Twain, the great storyteller of Mississippi River tales, called the Mississippi the "body of the nation with all other parts merely members . . . as a dwelling place for civilized man it is by far the first upon our globe."
The Menace of Mississippi River Floods

Depending upon one's point of view, man either assists the Mississippi River in its orderly flow or he interferes with its natural progression to the sea. He builds dams, installs locks and levees and deepens channels. Knowledgable engineers claim that such construction improves man's economic and efficient use of the river. The great river patiently endures this interference but when it suits her purpose she exerts her force and effectively demonstrates that man can not totally harness nor control her. Despite his technological expertise and scientific advancement, man has yet to best nature when she decides against being conquered.

The Mississippi can, and often does, display her clout very easily and gradually or in one gigantic fell swoop. Floods! Simply defined, a flood is an overflow of water upon land not normally covered by water. Flood crest is described as the maximum stage that flood waters reach at a given point in time, after which nature allows the waters to recede.

Nature intended that man should use her rivers for pleasurable purposes as well as for commercial traffic. Boating, fishing, hunting and swimming are all a part of the joy rivers give to man. And in no small sense, man's economic survival depends upon the river.

In 1541 De Soto was the first to see the mighty Mississippi in flood condition and more than a century later, in 1684, La Salle also found the Mississippi River basin inundated. The French King Louis XIV, in doling out land grants in America, insisted that the recipients of such grants build levees to control flood waters. This was in effect the first real step in man's attempt to govern flooding of the Mississippi.

Floods on the Mississippi are primarily the result of melting snow in its northern areas flowing downstream, but the influence of its many tributaries plays an important role as well in causing floods. The continuous erosive action of water upon river shorelines causes tremendous quantities of soil to fall into the river, which is then carried south, forming sandbars and accumulations of silt. This activity in turn creates natural obstacles which sends flood waters to overflow the river banks.

Man has constructed levees which help to control the deluge of flood waters at important points along the river's course. Such con-
struction has necessitated the expenditure of vast sums of money to prevent extensive land damage. Earthquakes in the Mississippi Valley riverbeds have sometimes reversed the flow of water and caused great floods. Just such a phenomenon occurred in 1811 when the Mississippi created such vast flooding in the Tennessee Valley area that a new river path was formed, which resulted in a new lake. Glacial activity in prehistoric times has in some areas, as on the Mississippi shores of Illinois, flattened the topography and made the land even more susceptible to flooding. Severe climatic conditions, such as storms coming in from the sea, are a further important factor in causing floods.

Snowmelt in the northern parts of the Mississippi was to a large extent responsible for the record floods in La Crosse in 1965, when water levels reached 17.95 feet, 5.9 feet above flood stage. Excessive rainfall, too, such as that which occurred in the Ohio and Missouri river areas in 1973 can produce floods of devastating proportions.
The Menace of Mississippi River Floods

Before man devised a system of locks and dams and deepened channels, many farms along the Mississippi River were destroyed, and in its southern parts cotton and tobacco fields were totally ruined. Indeed, some small towns along the river were literally washed away when the waters went on a rampage. At that time the area was relatively sparsely settled, but today the picture has changed greatly. Industrial plants have been constructed on the river shores (mainly to facilitate inexpensive transportation) and riverside farms are no longer simple, but have become a complex business.

The flooding of the Mississippi and its tributaries today presents a problem of mammoth proportions. As a result, billions of dollars are spent annually on flood control. Certainly not to be slighted in importance is the fact that modern communications — telephone, telegraph, television, radio, aided by computers — have been instrumental in sending warnings of impending floods to areas in danger of approaching floods. Modern technology in weather prediction has also assisted immeasurably in preparing for floods, and the science of flood forecasting continues.

But fight as he will against nature, the Mississippi River continues to be her own force and man has not yet fully dominated her and probably never will.
Robert La Salle, Explorer

Several important explorers in the Mississippi River area in the 1600s were intent upon discovering and delineating this meandering yet elusive body of water, but one stands out with particular clarity. Born Rene Robert Cavelier, he assumed the name of Robert de La Salle after his family’s land holdings in France. From his earliest boyhood he had heard much about the St. Lawrence River in the western hemisphere and vowed even then that when he grew up he would explore that territory for he was convinced it was the logical passage to the Orient.

Even before he reached his majority, he traveled to Montreal in 1669 to join his older brother Jean Cavelier who was a missionary priest in that community. While there, Robert learned to speak several Indian dialects while ministering to their spiritual needs. He was particularly fond of and involved with the Senecas. Upon reaching the area known as Ontario, Canada, La Salle heard of another French explorer, Louis Jolliet, who had just charted the Great Lakes. Jolliet had been looking for copper mines northwest of Ontario.

The recently appointed Governor Frontenac of New France asked La Salle to act as an intermediary in arranging a peace treaty with the Iroquois Indians with whom Frontenac was having problems. Since La Salle spoke the Iroquois dialect and had an engaging manner he was successful in winning a satisfactory pact.

Subsequently, Frontenac convinced the Indians to bring their trapped furs to his fort for trading. This infuriated the established fur trading moguls in Montreal; they claimed that private fur trading was illegal and all money derived from any fur trade had to be deposited to the credit of the French crown. This law did not prevent widespread private illicit fur trading; it involved even priests as well as government officials to say nothing of piratic acts. The priests justified their illegal practices by claiming they used the money they earned for religious works, which was not always the case.

Many complaints were sent to the French King Louis XIV about La Salle’s unlawful fur trading activities. Frontenac sent La Salle to France to petition the king for permission to continue private trading. The king granted such permission but La Salle had to agree to send a large percentage of the money collected to the king and also to support Fort Frontenac without royal assistance. He was given the
Robert La Salle, Explorer

honorary title Sieur de La Salle and was appointed assistant governor, responsible only to Frontenac himself.

When La Salle returned to America he met Father Louis Hennepin on the same ship. In spite of his pleasant manner, La Salle had made many enemies who were jealous of his good fortune and friendship with Fathers Hennepin and Jolliet and several attempts were made upon his life.

La Salle built four ships which he sailed on Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River on trading missions. But he continued to be discontented; he thought constantly of finding the best route to the sea and hence to the Orient. He then sought and received permission from King Louis XIV to explore the upper Mississippi together with Hennepin. He was sure that would lead him to the sea.

La Salle built a huge ship which he named la Griffin, at the mouth of Niagara. The Indians were in awe at the size and complexity of the new ship; they were accustomed only to canoes and smaller craft. After many difficulties the Griffin set sail and eventually arrived at Mackinac Island, which was a famous fur trading post. La Salle then sailed across Lake Michigan, arriving at Green Bay, Wisconsin. There he found furs galore which he loaded aboard the Griffin and sent back to Fort Frontenac. Unfortunately, the ship was lost in a devastating storm and La Salle returned empty-handed to the fort, there to build another ship. Before he left, however, he sent Father Hennepin and two other explorers up the Mississippi River into Sioux Indian territory. Enroute they were captured by a tribe of savage Indians, but another Frenchman, Daniel Duluth, interceded for them and gained their freedom, and they promptly returned to Mackinac.

In 1682, La Salle and a small band of men once more sailed down the Mississippi to its mouth arriving in April of that same year at the Gulf of Mexico. La Salle took possession of the Mississippi and all its tributaries in the area in the name of the King of France. He called the Mississippi river the River Colbert and named the land Louisiana in honor of King Louis.

La Salle's men, still envious of his successes and also angered because of the many hardships they had endured on his account, murdered him in Louisiana. But his name is still remembered and revered as one of the outstanding explorers of the Mississippi River.
Though river traffic languished after the advent of railroads in the mid 1800s, World War I brought a resurgence of activity on the Mississippi River. By 1917 the railroads had become so overwhelmed by the demands of the military to move war goods that millions of tons of essential war material had amassed at railroad terminals and traffic was hopelessly bogged down.

The United States Government found it necessary to assume command of all available steamboats, barges, towboats, and other useful craft on major rivers. It seemed the only feasible way to transport these important military supplies to their destinations without further delay.

The Mississippi River once again became the Great Highway of the United States, as it had been a half century earlier. Surprisingly, and happily too, it was found that transportation costs via water were considerably cheaper than by land rail.

In 1920, after World War I, the Transportation Act was passed whereby the United States Government officially entered the business of water traffic movement. Government engineers began a vast program of channel improvement as the federal administration now owned a vast fleet of its own barges and boats. In 1924, the Inland Waterways Corporation was organized and went into business operating more than 200 towboats and barges under government auspices. The primary purpose of this organization was to encourage private enterprise on the rivers. The government proposed to sell its equipment, inventory and most of its interests to private entrepreneurs as soon as such investors proved themselves capable of handling these matters.

More than 20 million tons of merchandise were shipped on the Mississippi River in 1920. Two decades later the annual volume had increased five-fold to 100 million tons, but by this time the government boat lines carried only three percent of this tonnage. Private enterprise had met the challenge and assumed command of river transportation.

The Ohio and lower Mississippi rivers saw the first of this private movement and by 1928 pioneer individual barge line activity began operating boats upstream from St. Louis to St. Paul.

After it was demonstrated that this kind of river traffic was
feasible and economically sound, the United States Army Corps of Engineers instituted a project to install locks and dams that would open the upper Mississippi to greater and more efficient water trade. The engineering design was to build a series of navigable pools run by dams to provide nine-foot channels.

The first phase of this program was completed in 1937 and the veteran steamboat Golden Eagle was chosen to make the initial voyage up the river to demonstrate the efficacy of the new system. Though no comparison was made at the time, the embarkation of the Golden Eagle was later compared to the first trip of the tiny but undaunted steamer Virginia 114 years earlier. As the Golden Eagle made its way upstream, crowds stood on the shore all along the river front cheering and singing. Many bets were laid that the steamer would not get through the natural obstacles or the new man-made system of dikes, dams and deepened channel, but like her plucky little sister, the Virginia, more than a century before, the Golden Eagle came through triumphant and unscarred.

A new epoch in river transportation had come once more to our country on the mighty Mississippi.
The First Stern-Wheeler on the Mississippi

On a bright May day in 1823, a small stern-wheeler, the Virginia, came puffing up the Mississippi River — the first steamboat to reach St. Anthony's Falls, Minnesota from the south. She was under the command of Captain John Crawford, who guided the little vessel expertly through the rough uncharted channel between the bluffs and the opposite wooded shore. The Indians who had never before seen a steamboat stood on the shore in awe and fright at this strange little water craft that puffed and chugged and spouted “smoke.”

The Virginia’s progress was necessarily slow because of the many natural obstacles, such as sandbars and rapids. Also, each day Captain Crawford docked the boat at a spot which appeared to be favorable for his needs. At each of these stops, his crew, armed with axes, cut sufficient firewood to keep the steamer’s boilers operating until the following day.

At one stop, a Mr. Beltrami, an explorer and classical literature buff, wandered off into the forest to pursue his personal interests and got lost. The captain did not notice his absence and resumed the journey without him. Beltrami fired the coded distress signal with his gun and the captain docked his vessel and sent a scout in a canoe to bring him back aboard.

Another passenger, a stalwart Sauk Indian chief, named Great Eagle, who reluctantly shared a cabin with Beltrami and another male passenger, impatiently paced the deck because of the leisurely progress of the Virginia. When Captain Crawford delayed still more by docking his vessel while Beltrami was rescued, Great Eagle angrily jumped overboard, stalked ashore and continued his journey on foot in the traditional Indian manner. The following day when the little sternwheeler Virginia came snorting into Fort Edwards on the Des Moines River, Chief Great Eagle stood gleefully on shore grinning and waving at the little Virginia.

Captain Crawford guided his craft skillfully and safely through the rapids at Des Moines and Rock Island, a stretch of nine turbulent miles. At long last, the Virginia came to rest at Fort Snelling on the Minnesota River after traveling some 800 miles in 20 days — a remarkable feat considering the delays, obstacles and daily stops to cut firewood, to say nothing of the numerous sandbars that had to be
avoided and the difficult struggle through the many rapids. Small and clumsy though she was, the Virginia had accomplished a run that most said was impossible — she had ascended the Upper Mississippi without mishap.

In 1823 the Virginia’s voyage was considered an extraordinary achievement; by 1830 steamboat travel was commonplace and a decade later steamboats on the Mississippi River were a daily occurrence in great numbers.
During the maiden voyage of the Virginia in 1823, a 15-year-old boy, named Dan Harris, stood on the shore observing the small stern-wheeler's progress with more than usual interest. With his parents and four brothers, the lad had come to Galena, Illinois via the Ohio River. The Mississippi River held a great fascination for Dan and he had an insatiable interest in the vessels that sailed on it. Within the next few years the five Harris boys had built a steam engine of their own and installed it in their home-made boat. Young Dan was the leader of the group and this was the first of many steamboats constructed by the Harris brothers.

Dan strove constantly to improve the design of the Harris boats and was particularly interested in increasing their speed. The Harris steamboats soon became the most admired and popular on the Upper Mississippi. When Dan was at the helm no other boat ever passed him.

Dan's masterpiece was the Grey Eagle — it was considered the biggest, finest and fastest steamboat on the river. The Grey Eagle was built in 1857 at a cost of $63,000 and in it Dan Harris made his historic run, beating the well-known steamboat Itasca on a run to St. Paul. In 1861, the Grey Eagle struck the Rock Island Bridge amidship and within five minutes had sunk.

After that, Captain Dan Harris retired and tried to be content in nostalgically watching the river traffic from his home in Galena, though it was said there was often a wistful sadness in his eyes that he could no longer be active on the Mississippi.
River Barges and Towboats on the Mississippi

What became known as "western fever" a century ago turned the Mississippi River into an exciting, frantic and prosperous thoroughfare which some called the Great Highway of the United States.

Commerce began on the river in about 1820 and within 30 years had reached a feverish and stimulating climax. With the advent of railroads and the building of bridges to span the waterways, commerce had dwindled and languished in the next three decades so that water traffic came nearly to a standstill. In his writings, Mark Twain deplored this passing of an important and romantic period in American history. He spoke of "great arched bridges that carried a landborne commerce on its way with hardly a glance at the empty current below."

Just as steamboats had exiled the horse drawn vehicles, stage coaches and covered wagons from the prairies, so had the railroads banished river traffic from the scene. But despite its neglect by man, the great river continued to roll imperturbably on its way to the sea.

World War I brought a rediscovery and resurgence of river traffic in 1917. The railroads were swamped with the masses of war goods that needed to be transported without delay. The federal government promptly assumed command and instituted use of merchandise movement on huge barge lines. Twentieth century commerce on the Mississippi became one of barges rather than of steamboats.

The magnificent boats that had carried passengers gave way to river craft that carried tremendous loads of sand and gravel, stone, steel, fertilizer, grain and oil. Music and dancing on the steamers became a thing of the past and crowds no longer waited on the levee for the once glamorous river palaces. Instead, millions of tons of merchandise are carried annually up and down the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

Barges of many kinds traverse these important waters. Each barge may carry from 500 to 1,500 tons. Towboats can push a string of barges carrying as much tonnage as five or six freight trains. More importantly, it can carry these loads at cheaper cost than railroads or aircraft. It is necessarily a slow method of transportation as the top speed of a tow is usually less than ten miles an hour, even going downstream. Barge and towboat captains and their crews must be
stolid and patient men who are not in a hurry. Often the tow must be separated when special circumstances arise on the river. When this does happen, one-half is taken through the obstacle and then the tow returns for the other half of the barges, later merging them again into one tow.

These tows and barge lines are indeed accurately called the locomotives of the rivers.
Piracy on the Mississippi

Pirates on the Mississippi? Ridiculous! Buccaneers in our front yard? Preposterous! And yet, a century or more in the past, piracy flourished all along the mighty river from New Orleans to St. Paul. Corsairs plied their nefarious profession with some degree of impunity, and any likely-appearing cargo vessel was fair game for their thievery.

Captain Kidd, the most infamous pirate in history, was once an honest seaman, but circumstances offered temptations so great he could not resist and he willingly became a buccaneer. In 1695 Kidd was given a king’s commission in the British Admiralty which authorized him to “apprehend, seize and take into custody all pirates, free booters and sea rovers.” When he realized the vast booty that was available with relatively little effort, his unprincipled motives surfaced and soon he became the scourge of the seas.

Piracy on the oceans was as old as transportation of merchandise by water itself. Though first practiced only on the high seas, piracy soon spread to inland waters as well. The ancient rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, were infested with buccaneers. Though cargo marauders were everywhere on the oceans, it was in the Caribbean that most great ventures occurred and vast fortunes confiscated. Pirates along the Barbary coast for more than four centuries demanded and commandeered tremendous amounts of loot in the Mediterranean and Atlantic oceans. These rogues made war on the economic world and on all who had the temerity and courage to sail the open waters. Pirates were indeed a lawless breed of predators.

The most notorious pirate of the lower Mississippi River was Jean LaFitte, who with his brother Pierre and his band of thieves operated from their hideout in the Delta area south of New Orleans. His stolen merchandise was stockpiled in his camp and dishonest buyers came there regularly to do business with him. Toward the end of the War of 1812, LaFitte allied himself with the American army during the Battle of New Orleans; as a result President James Madison granted the entire LaFitte gang total amnesty. After the war, they returned to their lives of plundering; many were captured or killed by government agents; LaFitte escaped and was never heard of again.

Piracy on the Mississippi River moved swiftly northward.

At dawn on a misty morning in late April of 1858, a skiff moored
in a Mississippi River slough a few miles south of La Crosse. It slithered silently out of its hiding place and approached a small cargo vessel carrying assorted goods from La Crosse destined for Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, McGregor, Iowa and Cairo, Illinois. Sailing alongside the cargo boat at an angle, the marauding vessel effectively blocked its further progress downriver. In a moment the pillaging crew boarded the freight carrier with rifles at the ready and the brigand leader announced boldly that he was appropriating the entire cargo. The captain of the cargo vessel, standing up to the buccaneer leader, demanded that the thieving raiders leave his boat promptly and allow him to proceed to his destination unmolested. No sooner had he uttered his defiant words than one of the pirates struck him on the side of the head with the butt of his rifle. The captain slumped to the deck without a sound.

In a short time the pirates had transferred the entire cargo to their own boat and departed. The victim boat, now captainless but under the direction of one of its crew, proceeded to its next stop, McGregor, Iowa, where the theft was reported.

The following morning, two McGregor constables, Mr. Kee and Mr. Brown, together with S. L. Peck, a businessman, and several other indignant citizens, went in search of the pirate boat. They steered their skiff toward Big Island, opposite Wyalusing, Wisconsin, where it was said the bandits camped. As it was spring, the Mississippi had flooded its banks and Big Island was almost completely submerged and thus easily accessible by boat. On a high point of the island they discovered a camp occupied by George Sciville, another man and a nine-year-old boy. The McGregor constables apprehended and took the three into custody. They informed the lawmen that a Dr. Bell was moored in one of the island sloughs and was “loaded with stolen goods amounting to several hundred dollars.”

Early the next morning, the pirate-hunters went in search of Dr. Bell’s boat which they were certain was the culprit craft that had stolen the La Crosse vessel’s cargo. With the captive boy as their guide, Bell’s boat was readily discovered, but there seemed to be no signs of life on board. A dog on Bell’s skiff barked which awakened his master. Bell recognized the boy and mistakenly assumed the men with him were fellow privateers. He asked the constables’ party to wait as Mrs. Bell was still asleep and he did not wish to disturb her. His request was ignored and the lawmen promptly made an arrest.
Bell seized his rifle and fired, but missed. Peck returned the fire and Bell fell to the deck.

Mrs. Bell, a diminutive woman, had viewed the episode through her cabin porthole where she had the advantage of being invisible. The tiny Mrs. Bell then stealthily emerged from her hiding place, ducked behind a huge coil of rope and blazed away with her shotgun at the constables. Kee and Brown considered it advisable to retreat rather than to remain as sitting targets for the wee markswoman. Greatly chagrined, they hightailed out of range and moments later they watched helplessly as the pirate boat slipped silently downstream and out of sight into the dense morning fog.

The lawmen returned to McGregor where they assembled a larger force and returned to the scene to bring Bell’s boat and its occupants into port and subsequent justice. As the news spread through the town, its citizens were outraged and more than fifty men responded to the call for volunteers.

Captain Nelson of the Alexander McGregor was induced to run his boat “down to the battleground.” When they arrived at the island, Dr. Bell and his crew had disappeared and they found only Mrs. Bell and her young child on board. A guard was placed in charge of these two while the rest of the party made further search of Big Island. They discovered two more boats loaded with plunder. One of these was towed to Clayton City, Iowa by a Junction Ferry Line boat, while the other was taken to McGregor by the Pembina from St. Louis, along with Dr. Bell’s pirate boat. The next day, Nelson sailed his craft to Clayton City and brought the pirate boats to McGregor. On the way they met the Fred Lorenz boat loaded “with the booty in tow” and forcibly led it too back to McGregor.

The Clayton County, Iowa sheriff took custody of the pirate boats and estimated that the loot they carried was worth about $5,000. It included dry goods, boots, shoes, books, drugs, clothing, household goods, liquor, groceries, stoves, grindstones and “every conceivable article that could tempt the cupidity of a thief.”

Dr. Bell was never apprehended and so escaped legal punishment. It was reported however that a man fitting Bell’s description, a man about 35, with “large red whiskers,” had stopped at Wyalusing to have a physician “take a ball out of his head.” No less than eighteen men were apprehended and arrested as privateers and “as the rope is applied to the necks of some as a persuader, they told all they knew with great liberality.”
One of the corsairs implicated in the river piracy was John C. Bishop, known as the "Osage land robber." Some of the captive pirates turned informers, reported that two weeks earlier Bishop had sent a boat containing loot valued at $10,000 to St. Louis. It was "feared that many men formerly regarded as honest would be implicated in this astonishing villainy." It was fervently hoped that the courageous action taken by the McGregor lawmen would "result in breaking up one of the most formidable bands of robbers ever organized in the west." The hope proved to be in vain — piracy continued to flourish on the Mississippi, and many incidents similar to the McGregor escapade occurred.

Log rafting was a prime activity on the Mississippi River during the latter half of the 19th century, particularly in the La Crosse area which was one of the main lumbering centers in the midwest. Cut logs were lashed together with iron chains and hooks to form rafts which were then floated down river to their destinations. The river thieves stole anything that could move or float — entire log rafts, coils of rope, chains, cables, axes, saws, hooks, and any other articles they could lay their hands on.

It was a common practice for lumbermen to mark the cut ends of their logs with their individual mark carved or burned into the woods. The markings indicated ownership of the rafts and eliminated confusion with logs of other lumber shippers. If a log raft was moored overnight without strict security it was very likely to be missing in the morning. The pirates cut the ropes loose, floated the rafts into their slough camps where the marked ends of the logs were sawed off and bark markings obliterated, thus making it impossible to identify ownership.

Some unscrupulous steamboat captains formed a conspiracy with the pirates and transported their illegal log booty downstream where they disposed of it to wildcat sawmills at discount prices, splitting their ill-gotten gains with their fellow thieves.

Legitimate sawmill operators complained to the federal government that their logs were being stolen and demanded that steps be taken to stop the nefarious practice. Unfortunately, the government did very little about the matter. Local law enforcement officers, courageous captains and their crews, as well as indignant citizen volunteers, were far more effective than the government in combating the privateers in the La Crosse and other upper Mississippi areas.
The thefts continued unabated, though somewhat under control, until the lumbering industry dwindled in importance and log rafting became almost a thing of the past. But despite the illegal activities of the river-roving pirates, the lumber industry thrived in La Crosse and proved to be a significant factor in the growth and development of the city.

LOG MARKS.

END MARK.

McMILLAN.

SIDE MARK.

Locked M's.

END MARKS.

SIDE MARKS.

Lone E.

N.B. Holway.

Clc

AKX

CL Salmon.

PSD

Anchor Notches

PS Davidson.

NS

NS

N Zigzag.

Nicholas Foster.

END MARKS.

SIDE MARKS.

Anchor W.

Washington.

Wen

NEW

Washburn.

Reel.

D.J. Spaulding.

Price

W. Price

Spade.

LOG MARKS
The Unpredictable Whisky Jack

The Mississippi River basin, covering thousands of square miles of territory, spawned many kinds of men—heroes and cowards alike, and legends of their exploits or fears abounded, whether true or not. Fur traders, steamboat captains, pilots, raftsmen, loggers, voyageurs—most of them rough and tough, swearing, fighting, swaggering their way through life—rugged individuals who claimed the Mississippi River as their own domain.

One boat captain put it succinctly when he said “What’s the use of being a steamboat captain, if you can’t tell people to go to hell?” On the other hand, the river inspired some men to compassion, even to acts of chivalry and altruism, but these were few and far between. Understandably then, men of fact and fiction became staple fare when tales of the Mississippi were told.

One of these colorful figures in the early years of the 19th century was a man known only as Whisky Jack. Some said he was legendary while others swore he was a man of real flesh and blood. Jack was said to be over seven feet tall, possessed tremendous strength and enjoyed nothing more than a knock-down brawl and was never known to lose a fight no matter how many opponents fought him. He lived at the time before the railroads came puffing their way into American towns. It was the time when countless logs were lashed into rafts and floated downstream to Cario, St. Louis and New Orleans. Raft navigation was a dangerous and difficult way of earning a living and only the strongest and hardiest of men were engaged in the pursuit. Each raft carried its own pilot and cook, and each evening after tying up at the nearest shore, many of the men went into town to visit saloons, gambling dens and brothels. Others, who were not so inclined, perhaps because they had no money, stayed behind and amused themselves by singing, playing cards or swapping tales. A great many of these yarns were about Whisky Jack.

Jack came by his appellation honestly, for it was said that he could consume prodigious quantities of liquor, that it was nigh impossible for him to satisfy his nearly unquenchable thirst. Whenever word arrived in river towns that Whisky Jack and his men were on their way downstream, all saloons stocked up with great quantities of whisky. Whenever Jack learned of a wedding or other celebration on his route, he always attended, invited or not, and never left the festivities until all the liquor had been consumed.
The Unpredictable Whisky Jack

It was said that Jack was so strong that whenever his raft ran aground or was hampered by sandbars or other barriers, he single-handedly dismantled the raft and carried it across the obstacle, reassembled it and continued on his journey.

On one occasion Whisky Jack's raft was tied to the shore of a Wisconsin river town. He and his crew were mighty thirsty, but it was before payday and they had no money with which to buy whisky — a difficult quandary indeed for these men. Jack devised a scheme whereby they could obtain all the drinks they wanted without money. One crewman took a bundle of laths from the raft and went to a saloon where he offered to trade the laths for several drinks. The saloonkeeper agreed and told him to put the bundle outside the back door and then return for his drinks. After his thirst was satisfied, the raftsman left by the front door and returned to the raft. A second crew member then left the raft, went to the back door of the saloon, took the bundle of laths and with it entered the front door offering to exchange it for several drinks. He too was told to leave the bundle at the back door and come back in for his drinks. He had his drinks, then left through the front door. A third, a fourth, and a fifth crew member went through the same process. This went on throughout the night until more than two dozen men had received drinks, all with the same bundle of laths. Strangely, the saloonkeeper never suspected that he was being hoodwinked until the following morning, after the raft was long gone, when he found only one bundle outside his back door.

The cook on the raft had his problems too. His cookstove was mounted in a box of sand set in the middle of the raft. His only cooking utensils were a frying pan, a coffee pot, a few rusted metal pots and pans, a large soup kettle and some knives and forks. There was little variety in the meals he served to the men on a long plank set up for that purpose. Whisky Jack was tired of the same fare day after day, so he asked the cook if it would help to bring some variety to the menus if he were provided with a cook book. The cook replied that he had "one of them there cookery books but it was of no use." He said "Every one of them there recipes starts out with 'take a clean dish' so that stops me cold right there and then." One crewman, tired of the hash the cook prepared several times a week, asked him if he followed a recipe in making it, to which the cook replied, "Nope, it just accumulates."

The story was told that on another raft, not Whisky Jack's, the cook was somewhat simple-minded. The crew members were con-
stantly playing practical jokes on him by tying his socks into knots, cutting the seat out of his pants while he slept, and other mean tricks. The cook never complained, but accepted all the jokes smilingly and with good humor. This shamed the crewmen who had hoped to make the cook angry. They decided to stop the practical jokes and told him that since he was such a good sport about it, they would no longer play tricks on him. The cook smiled benignly and said, “OK, it’s a deal, if you don’t play tricks on me any more, I won’t pee in the soup pot any more either.”

Whisky Jack had no schooling at all; in fact he could not even sign his name. Whenever he received his pay, he signed the payroll register with a large X. On one occasion he signed his name with a double XX. When the payroll clerk asked him why, he said he had just “spliced up” with a lady in a river town and thought he had to change his name to indicate his newly married status.
The Legend of Princess Winona

Many people in this area are acquainted with the legend of the beautiful Indian princess Winona. Many insist that it is a true story while others are equally adamant in their belief that it is fiction. It is so charming a tale that it bears retelling for those to whom it is new.

Winona was the lovely daughter of the Sioux Chief Red Wing, who lived with her family on the north shore of Lake Pepin near Lake City, Minnesota. Her main task was to make beautiful soft-skin moccasins for her father; these she decorated with the wings of red birds which was her father’s trade-mark. Red Wing was anxious to see his daughter married to a brave Indian chief so that he might have grandchildren to carry on his family traditions. Many fine young Indians wooed her, but Winona was in love with White Eagle, a young Chippewa brave. Unfortunately, the Chippewa and Sioux tribes were enemies and Chief Red Wing forbade Winona to marry, or indeed even to see, White Eagle. Red Wing had chosen Kewanee, the Dakotah chief as a husband for Winona.

Despite Red Wing’s edict to keep them apart, Winona and White Eagle often met secretly on the top of the rocky bluffs of the area. Red Wing said he would rather see his daughter hurled from the top of the bluffs into the swirling Mississippi River below rather than see her married to White Eagle. He planned to hide men among the rocks of the bluffs to spy upon the young lovers, so they could capture young White Eagle and slay him. He told Winona, “White Eagle’s scalp shall ornament your wigwam in your new home with the Dakotah Kewanee.”

White Eagle was so enamored of Winona that he promised to leave his Chippewa tribe and become a member of the Sioux tribe if only he could marry his beloved Winona. But Red Wing hardened his heart and gave an absolute no to the offer.

He ordered his daughter to go to Kewanee’s village to prepare for the wedding. Red Wing planned to kill White Eagle while Winona was away. Instead Winona flew to her lover’s side to warn him of the impending danger and his imminent death. White Eagle convinced Winona to flee with him to his Chippewa village where he could protect her from the Sioux and Dakotahs. As they tried to escape they heard their enemies closing in upon them when suddenly an arrow shot by one of Red Wing’s braves pierced White Eagle’s heart and he
fell dead in Winona's arms. Holding her lover in her arms the beautiful Winona hurled herself and her dead lover White Eagle from the bluffs and fell with him into the deep waters of the Mississippi River, their love unrequited and unfulfilled. Since that time the bluff from which Winona leapt with her lover has been called Maiden Rock, where it can still be seen on the Great River Road above Lake City, Minnesota.
How Mark Twain got his name

Mark Twain, the most famous chronicler of Mississippi River lore, was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Mississippi, on November 30, 1835. What American boy (and girl too) has not read The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn? These, along with Innocents Abroad, The Prince and the Pauper, and many others have become classics in American literature. Not only was he a great teller of American tales, but he became an author without peer. He was also a pilot of steamboats on the Mississippi River and from these experiences came another great classic — Life on the Mississippi. He died in 1910 after living 75 rich years of giving to others, a gift which will live on and on.

In February 1863 he adopted the pseudonym Mark Twain. Many have wondered how he came by this ordinary name and why he preferred it to his distinguished birth name.

Old-time steamboatmen had to "read the waters" for bars and shoals and to judge the distance of the shore by the boat's whistle reverberating off the bluffs. The captain and many of his crew members had to know the boat's course at night as well as during the daytime. The crewman on duty reading the waters had to recognize every shore light and every channel marker and buoy. He had to remember the exact location of every sandbar, slough, turn and bridge.
From the bow, where the watchman called the soundings which were heard by all, came the cry: "Marrrk Three, Quarter-less Three, Half-Twain, Quarter-Twain, Marrrk Twain. Mark Twain translated into "two fathoms deep" — an old and familiar call on the Mississippi. This call meant that the river was as deep as the sounding holes, which was 12 feet long or two fathoms. And thus Mark Twain, the great American author, teller of Mississippi stories, boat pilot, and knowledgable river man took his name from the traditional river phrase — a name that has gone down in the annals of American history.
A Wagon Bridge for La Crosse

From the earliest beginnings of our country, the federal government was actively involved in many phases of public and private endeavors. As early as 1850, state governments were prohibited from rendering substantial financial assistance to railroads. This restriction, however, did not apply to local governments; indeed, they were expected to pay a sizeable share of costs for construction and maintenance of railroads that served their communities. As a result, many local organizations, private agencies, and individuals invested heavily in this new mode of transportation. Following a series of small recessions, and particularly the Panic of 1857, many investors were left with worthless stock in defunct railroads.

The building of railroad bridges across navigable rivers was covered by governmental regulations. No bridge could be built without federal approval and consent. The Southern Minnesota Railroad and the Milwaukee Road competed violently as each sought government endorsement to build its railroad bridge across the Mississippi River. Bitter controversy raged between La Crosse and Winona regarding the location of these bridges. Congressional approval was finally granted to the Milwaukee Railroad to build its bridge at North La Crosse in 1876.

Transportation across the Mississippi River in the middle decades of the 19th century was via ferries. The first such craft in the La Crosse area was the “Wild Kate,” a tread-mill ferry powered by one mule, owned and operated by William McSpadden from 1852 to 1854. The first steam ferry was the “Honeyoye,” owned by three La Crosse men known as “The Macs” — Thomas McRoberts, William McConnell, and John McCann. It ran from 1854 to 1857, when it sank after striking a sandbar. The H. M. Rice ferry came along in 1855 and the Thomas McRoberts in 1857; the latter existed for 20 years. The General Pope barge line offered some competition in 1862 but it too was short-lived. In 1878 the Warsaw replaced the McRoberts and ran from 1878 to 1891 when the wagon bridge came into existence. The Warsaw ferry was then sold to the Canton, Missouri Saw Mills in 1891.

Trade between La Crosse and the farm areas of southeastern and central Minnesota increased enormously from the 1860s through the 1880s. In 1869 alone, central and southern Minnesota produced 18½
million bushels of wheat. The vast production of grain during these years had to be moved into the marketplace swiftly and efficiently, and every mode of transportation had to be utilized. Some ferries were so solidly constructed that they could accommodate 24 loaded teams at one time. Passengers rode in a cabin above the main deck.

Prior to the advent of the railroads in the 1850s and the subsequent construction of railroad bridges, grain and other commodities had to be transported via these ferries at considerable cost to shippers which was naturally passed on to the ultimate consumers. During the winter, sleighs transported merchandise across the frozen surface of the river. This method was advantageous because nearly every shipper provided his own service free of extraneous costs. But winter created other hazards. Not infrequently the combined weight of loaded sleighs and horses caused breaking through the ice; horses were drowned and vehicles smashed to bits.

During the winter an ice road was laid out across the river each year between La Crosse and Brownsville, Minnesota. This not only saved toll charges to users of the ice road but shortened traveling distance and time as well. As soon as the river froze over and was safe enough to support heavy weight, the George Holtzhammers, father and son, laid out the road. Holtzhammer Sr. became known as the "Ice King." A wooden bridge was built from the eastern shore of the river to the ice road. The road was discontinued after a wagon broke through the ice and several persons lost their lives.

Concomitant with the bitter contention about construction of railroad bridges, the public, as early as 1867, was already discussing
the advisability of building a bridge across the Mississippi River to accommodate the increasing passenger and commodities traffic. Once again hostile disputation emerged between Winona and La Crosse as to location of such a bridge.

All navigable waterways were under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Government, thus construction of a permanent bridge across the Mississippi required congressional approval. There was a loophole, however, in that temporary bridges could be built for winter use only at the cessation of navigation in the fall. Pilings were driven into the ice to form a base for bridge construction. When streams were reopened to navigation in the spring these pilings and all other construction had to be removed.

In 1886 an earnest movement began to build a wagon and foot bridge across the Mississippi and again local turmoil ensued. On October 18, 1888 a public mass meeting was held in La Crosse which resulted in the adoption of a general resolution calling for construction of a bridge. The proposal was presented to the La Crosse Common Council which promptly approved the project.

Financing then became a perplexing problem. This was solved by a special referendum to issue $70,000 in bonds to fund the project. The issue won voter approval, 2,931 to 390.

Then began yet another disputation about location of the bridge. Most citizens opted for the foot of State Street, but after much argument and controversy, it was decided to construct the bridge at the foot of Mt. Vernon Street because this site provided easy access to the downtown area yet was away from the hub of business activity.

Plans were prepared and construction began in 1889 and proceeded with relatively few serious problems. The wagon bridge was completed and a gala dedication was held on July 4, 1891. That day was special for yet another reason — the cornerstone of the new city hall was laid. The new building was ready for occupancy on January 20, 1892 and dedicated on February 10 of the same year. The new city hall had a frontage of 213 feet on State Street, 118 feet extending north on Fifth Street and 115 feet extending north on Sixth Street. The construction cost was $54,181. It was demolished during the summer of 1970 to make way for the new post office building parking lot. The Spanish-American War cannon which is presently in Riverside Park was first placed in the triangle in front of the city hall at Fifth and State streets in 1900 and remained there for 18 years.
To signal these two important events in the history of La Crosse—the wagon bridge and the city hall—a grand festival was held. It was described as a "great day to be talked about with pleasure and pointed to with pride." The day was cloudless and bright, "not too hot and not too cool, a perfect day for a celebration" with temperatures in the mid-70s. People came from the entire area to attend the festive affair by team and wagon, horse and buggy and river craft of all sizes. Trains entering the city fairly bulged with passengers. It was estimated that the celebration was attended by more than 20,000 persons. Church bells in the city rang steadily for two hours, factory whistles blasted all day, boats on the river blew their whistles noisily. Numerous parades, floats, speeches, picnics, games and entertainment were the order of the day. Buildings in the downtown area were decorated lavishly with flags, banners, streamers and bunting. The entire populace was in a state of euphoric bliss. La Crosse had not seen such a gala in its entire half century of existence.

The bridge was built by the Clinton, Iowa Bridge Company at a cost of $83,000. The F. A. Gross Company constructed the approaches for $11,000. Thus the expenditure for the entire structure was less than $100,000, compared with $1.5 million that its replacement cost 48 years later.
The bridge proper was 1,080 feet long, consisting of three spans and two trestles. Including the east and west approaches it was 1,265 feet in length. The roadway was 18 feet wide with narrow wooden sidewalks on either side. A small tollhouse was built on the south sidewalk. The main feature of the wagon bridge was that it could be opened to permit river craft through that could not pass beneath the structure. There were four trusses, two of which could be swung parallel to the river. The swing span was 444 feet long and operated on a steam-generated pivot. It was said to be the longest swing span bridge in the entire country.

A system of whistle signals and flashing lights from a boat alerted the bridge tender and engineer to the approach of vessels that could not pass under the bridge.

Attached to the topmost beam at the east approach to the bridge was a prominent sign that read "The riding or driving on this bridge at a faster gait than a walk is prohibited by law."
The bridge was operated on a toll basis for 28 years, from 1891 to 1919. A single or double team and driver or a horse and buggy with driver and lady cost 25 cents round trip; there was a charge of 5 cents for each additional passenger; a horse and rider paid 15 cents; sheep and hogs on foot cost 5 cents each. Later, when automobiles came into common use, there was no charge for their crossing. The Board of Public Works issued tickets to cross the wagon bridge to Pettibone Island (then known as Barron's Island). Each ticket carried an expiration date and was issued only to individuals or families. If an attempt was made to use the ticket west of Pettibone Park it was forfeited and the full toll fare was charged.

In 1911 a move began to remove the toll charges; this was finally resolved on September 1st, 1919. At this time the state line between Wisconsin and Minnesota was moved from the center of the main channel of the Mississippi river to the center of the west channel of the river, thus placing Pettibone Island legally in Wisconsin territory. In 1919 Congress approved the trade of Pettibone Island from Minnesota's jurisdiction to Wisconsin. In return, Latsch Island near Winona, in Wisconsin territory, was placed under Minnesota's governance. In 1930 the Wisconsin Highway Commission assumed responsibility for operation and maintenance of the wagon bridge.

In 1936 a 7 1/2 ton restriction was placed on vehicles and loads crossing the bridge. This restriction was subsequently used as yet another argument for the need for a new bridge. If a new high bridge were to be built there would no longer be any need for the swing span. On April 11, 1935 the U.S. Army designated the wagon bridge as an important highway of first military priority.

During the building of the bridge in 1889 Henry H. Hoffman, 901 South Front Street, then 24 years old, accepted the job of underwater worker. In a city-owned diving suit he descended to the river bed where he leveled off rocks. He also spent many hours under water working on abutments and piers. Hoffman was considered a fine athlete and at the bridge dedication ceremonies he was one of the prime contenders and winners in the river races.

To William Finn, 629 South 9th Street, La Crosse, went the honor of driving the second team across the old wagon bridge on July 4, 1891. He was 81 years old at the time. A young Minnesota farmer beat Mr. Finn to the bridge and so was the first to cross it officially, but Finn still remained the first La Crosse citizen to cross it.
When talk of the bridge construction arose, William Sorg of Onalaska appeared before the common council and suggested that instead of building a bridge across the river, a tunnel be dug, starting at Third and State streets and emerging in Pettibone Park. His suggestion was given no consideration as it would have been too costly and further it would have meant going down to bed rock, 170 feet below the river bed. Lighting and ventilation would also have presented enormous technological problems, which in 1891 engineers were not yet prepared to solve.

John A. Gordon of Clinton, Iowa was the first man to be employed in 1889 on the bridge project. He and Hoffman descended together below the river surface to install the pilings that had to be driven into the bottom of the river to support the superstructure.

There were four plaques attached to the east end of the old wagon bridge. Each mayor, as he entered office, had a plaque placed on the bridge, carrying his name — David Austin in 1889, John Dengler in 1890 and F. A. Copeland in 1891. The tablets also listed the names of members of the Board of Public Works. Only the first plaque carried the name of the Clinton Bridge Company as the designer and builder of the bridge. When the bridge was demolished these plaques were given to the County Historical Society for safekeeping.
Politics figured prominently in the early history of the old wagon bridge. City elections were strongly partisan and whichever party was in power at the time distributed political plums and other special jobs in return for favors rendered. Among the special jobs eagerly sought were those of bridge tender and bridge engineer. Legally, six regular bridge supervisors were required to be on duty when the Mississippi River was open to traffic. There were three pairs of men on eight-hour shifts, with two men, a tender and an engineer, on each shift.

Matt Spah worked as bridge engineer from 1904 to 1907. On a pleasant spring day in 1904 when he was on duty, he heard the warning whistle signaling an approaching steamer towing a large raft of logs. Spah unlocked the bridge, which in turn was the cue for the tender in the small tollhouse above (called the "coop") on the south walk of the bridge proper to operate the mechanism that controlled the steam-operated trusses that opened the bridge span. But the span failed to open. Spah shouted to the bridge tender in the coop, "Hey, what's the matter up there. Get up and open the bridge. Can't you see that big steamboat and log raft coming downstream?" There was no reply and still the span did not open, while the huge steamboat bore down inexorably on the bridge. The boat's shrill blasting whistles were sounded frantically and repeatedly to signal its nearness. In only a few moments the boat would be upon the bridge. Greatly alarmed, Spah rushed up the ladder to the coop. The toll tender lay unconscious on the floor, the victim of a massive heart attack. Spah later recalled "I tried to swing the bridge open myself, but it opened only about four feet, no farther. There just wasn't a bit of steam." The boat came closer and closer and knowing it could not pass through the four-foot opening, the boat captain ordered his men to cut the raft loose which floated flatly downstream unanchored. The captain and his crew braced themselves for the inevitable collision.

Several men waiting on the east side of the bridge to drive their vehicles across, sensing an emergency, when they saw Spah scrambling up the ladder, rushed to the cabin. They grabbed the emergency ropes and pooling their strength they managed to open the bridge just wide enough for the boat to pass through with only seconds and inches to spare. Tooting its thanks, the boat and crew picked up the
disencumbered raft and proceeded south. "It was a very close call" remembered Spah.

Spah also recalled that as many as four boats an hour often went through the bridge and more than 50 wagons crossed the toll bridge each day. Matt Stark, bridge engineer from 1908 to 1939 said that at the height of the rafting period as many as 3,000 boats passed through the wagon bridge each season.

In summer the wagons frequently carried hay and in the winter loads of wood. The most common commodities were grain, chickens, hogs, cattle and goats. In the summer several small circuses, looking like caravans, crossed the old wagon bridge to perform in La Crosse, Winona and smaller communities near these cities.

Joe Dolle, bridge tender from 1907 to 1913 and 1933 to 1939, remembered one occasion when a circus elephant was led across the bridge. Dolle did not know what fare to charge as elephants were not on his list of livestock. After considering the charge made for horses and cattle, the bridge tender and the elephant's owner compromised and a charge of one dollar was made.

Andrew Seger, bridge engineer from 1905 to 1910, stated that the first automobile to cross the old wagon bridge was the Oldsmobile of R. C. McCaleb.
On one occasion, Wendell Anderson, mayor of La Crosse from 1899 to 1901 and 1907 to 1909, tried to cross the bridge on a summer day in 1908 in his horse and buggy, with his wife beside him, without paying the toll charge. He contended that free crossing was one of the perquisites of his mayoral office. The bridge tender did not recognize the mayor and insisted that he pay the full toll charge.

Vagrants who made nuisances of themselves in La Crosse were often escorted to the tollhouse of the bridge and ushered across the river at no charge and warned not to return to the city under penalty of arrest.

According to Jake Ritter, a bridge tender in the 1930’s, one of the amusing sights for bridge caretakers was to watch men’s flat straw hats go sailing over the bridge fences on windy days.

Telegraphic messages for the captain and crew members on steamboats were delivered to tenders in the toll coop. The tender tied these telegrams to a brick and when the boat on which the addressee was working passed under or through the bridge, the brick was tossed onto the boat deck. If the tender miscalculated and the brick fell into the river, the message was lost or a crew member dove into the river in an attempt to retrieve it. If he was unsuccessful, there was much fist-shaking and cussing at the clumsy bridge tender.

Jake Ritter and Joe Dolle were on duty in the early morning of August 9, 1935 when the dreadful and bizarre accident occurred on the bridge when two persons drowned. This proved to be the catalyst that finally brought to the city its new bridge in 1939.
The evening of August 8, 1935 was pleasantly warm and dry after a hot and sunny day. Rain was needed and the weather forecast calling for thundershowers later that night was welcome.

Fischer Blinn, 33, U.S. Government resident engineer at the Trempealeau dam, and his girl friend, Marcelline Patro, 25, who was visiting in La Crosse from Minneapolis, planned to drive to Winona for dinner. They invited their friends, Francis Landrieu, 32, and his 26-year-old wife, of 2331 Market Street, to join them. Landrieu was the U.S. Government resident engineer at the Genoa dam. Through their work the two men had much in common and were close friends. The two couples left La Crosse in Blinn’s 1932 Auburn sedan about 6:00 p.m., all looking forward to a good dinner and an enjoyable evening together.

After dinner, they spent an hour or two at a Winona road club dancing. There had been thundershowers during the evening, but by the time they left Winona about 12:30 a.m. for the return drive home, the rain had stopped, though distant rumblings of thunder and lightning flashes persisted.

The road was wet and slick. Tragedy lay ahead.

Blinn drove at a reasonable rate of speed, not excessive, and the four people talked of the pleasant evening they had spent together and planned to repeat it soon.

As they entered the west approach to the wagon bridge just southeast of Pettibone Park, the car skidded on the slippery road surface and without a moment’s warning crashed into the westernmost concrete and steel supporting girder, causing the 131-foot span of the bridge to collapse and plunge into the Mississippi River carrying the Blinn auto with it. The time was 1:30 a.m. Friday, August 9, 1935. Blinn later said “It all happened so fast. I missed the curve and lost control of the car and we crashed into the steel girder. The smash didn’t seem so terrific, but we immediately began to fall. When we struck the water, I worked my way through the window and pulled Miss Patro after me.”

Blinn later claimed that he was unfamiliar with the road and as the car skidded on the slippery pavement he lost control. He was not aware that two years before, on July 4, 1933, Phyllis Olson of Winona, had been killed when her car crashed into the same girder.
That impact had thrown the span somewhat askew and the bridge dipped to the south thereafter. A heavy steel plate was used to repair that damage, but when the Blinn car struck the girder, the plate was sheared in half and that section of the bridge twisted away from the pilings that supported it. Blinn’s Auburn sank into 12 feet of water, front end first and all that protruded from the water at a 75 degree angle was the car’s tail light and part of the spare tire attached to the rear of the auto. It was estimated that the car struck the pier with a force equivalent to 750 tons.

After Blinn and Miss Patro escaped through the open car windows, Blinn grabbed the hysterical girl and swam to the nearest shore pier with her where they were later picked up by a small police river boat. They were transported to the St. Francis Hospital, where examinations disclosed no serious injuries other than severe shock.

Mr. and Mrs. Landrieu, who were occupying the back seat of the car, both lost their lives in the crash. At first it was assumed that they could not get out of the submerged vehicle and had drowned. Subsequent autopsies revealed that both had suffered skull fractures that rendered them unconscious, then resulted in drowning. Had they not been knocked insensible they too might have escaped death. Blinn later stated that he was in a state of confusion and unable to even try to look for the Landrieus.
Though there was little traffic at that hour of the morning, several vehicles coming from Minnesota had lined up on the west approach to the bridge and had to turn around and return to Winona and get to their destinations via alternative routes.

Just moments after the Blinn car struck the bridge pier, a bus carrying 32 passengers came along from the Minnesota side of the river. Had it arrived just a moment or two earlier it too might have been involved in the tragedy.

La Crosse police, unable to reach the accident scene across the bridge from the east, crossed in a motor launch. Sheriff William Boma (father-in-law of Sheriff Sylvia Boma) as leader of the rescue team, assisted by two volunteers—Elwood Fraser of 1431 Green Bay Street and Seth Lloyd of 1025 Main Street—dove into the river and succeeded in bringing up the bodies of the Landrieus but all attempts to revive them proved futile.

As a result of this dreadful accident all telephone and electric lines to Pettibone Island and to La Crescent were cut off and power was not restored until nearly 24 hours later. People who lived in Minnesota who worked in La Crosse had to get to their jobs using canoes and other small river craft. Commercial transportation between Minnesota and Wisconsin via the wagon bridge was totally disrupted until other methods of crossing the river were instituted. A temporary ferry service was established at the foot of State Street as an immediate makeshift service.

La Crosse Mayor C. A. Boerner promptly sent telegrams to state and federal authorities reporting the tragedy and requesting immediate assistance. Plans for repair of the bridge were started within 24 hours of the accident and both state and federal officials promised support. Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt pledged assistance.

The year 1935 was not a propitious one for governmental financial help as the country was still in the throes of a deep recession. The Dresbach dam was under construction at the time and workmen and equipment from that project were diverted to the Mississippi River at La Crosse. Three new concrete piers were built in record time and a wooden road was constructed from the planks that had been salvaged from the collapsed portion of the bridge. On August 20, 1935, less than two weeks after the accident, the bridge was reopened to general traffic.

It was readily evident that the substitute bridge could never be
considered for any long-term use. Everyone knew that only a new bridge could replace the 44-year-old wagon bridge with any degree of permanence.

In an emergency meeting of the Common Council, Alderman Sherman J. Lennon presented a proposition for construction of a new bridge, a project promptly accepted by the council. A bridge committee of 15 prominent La Crosse citizens was appointed, with Frank Sisson as chairman.

Jake Ritter and Joe Dolle, who were on duty when the bridge collapsed, declared in an understatement that the incident was the "most exciting" time in their careers as bridge caretakers.
A New Bridge For The City

Death on the broken bridge lay like a pall over the community. Concomitant with the calamitous shock and the compassion evoked, the tragedy became the catalyst that exploded into a vital force that ultimately benefited everyone — a new and better bridge.

Within 24 hours of the August 9, 1935 catastrophe in which two persons lost their lives when their car struck the westernmost pier of the old wagon bridge, committees were already planning a new and modern bridge across the Mississippi River from La Crosse into Minnesota.

In the meantime a number one priority was the repair of the partially shattered old wagon bridge whose destruction had brought commerce between La Crosse and Minnesota almost to a standstill. As a temporary expedient, a ferry service was established from the foot of State Street to Pettibone Park. In the incredibly short time of eleven days, three new piers were constructed at the west end of the bridge, a wooden span was built and traffic resumed. This was an astounding feat. It was generally recognized that this makeshift bridge was only temporary. In the interim the erection of the new bridge was a full-steam-ahead project.

The estimated cost of the new bridge was $1.5 million. (The old wagon bridge 48 years before, had cost about $95,000). The federal government agreed to pay $800,000; the state of Wisconsin $400,000; La Crosse county $200,000; the city of La Crosse $100,000. Funding was obtained through the cooperative efforts of Governor Phillip LaFollette, Senator Robert M. LaFollette, Congressman Gardner Withrow and General Richard Immell.

La Crosse county issued $187,000 in bonds which were promptly subscribed. Though the city agreed to spend a maximum of $100,000 to purchase the right-of-way, only a little more than $85,000 was paid; the difference was turned over to the Wisconsin State Highway Commission. The right-of-way properties that were acquired included most of the real estate on Cass Street between Third Street and the river, as well as some property on Pettibone Island.

The State Highway Commission determined, and the La Crosse Common Council approved, that the east approach to the new bridge was to be within an area bordered by Vine Street on the north, Cameron Avenue on the south, Fourth Street on the east and the river on the west.
Originally, seven locations were sited as the entrance point for the new bridge. The final three contenders were the west ends of State, Pearl and Cass streets. The highway commission selected the foot of Cass Street as the most appropriate, primarily because the right-of-way was least expensive at that point, the excellent grade separation site, and the comparative ease with which an economical high bridge could be erected there.

Contracts for construction were issued to the low bidders — Minneapolis Bridge Company, La Crosse Bridge Company, Klug & Smith of Milwaukee, Bonness Inc. of Wausau, La Crosse Dredging Company and Pacific Bridge Painting Company of San Francisco. Klug & Smith received the most significant job of all, that of fabrication and erection of the superstructure.

The “business end” of the bridge was hidden under the water’s surface. Massive piers, extending many feet under the river bed provided a firm support for the bridge. The largest of these piers was Number 8, which measured 100 feet from the seat of the bridge to the bottom of the footing. This included 2,674 cubic yards of reinforced masonry, 95,080 pounds of reinforced steel and 14,080 feet of timber pilings. Expansion and contraction of the steel, due to seasonal variance in temperatures, was an important consideration. Such divergence could amount to \( \frac{1}{8} \) of an inch with every three degrees in temperature change.
A New Bridge For The City

The bridge was strong enough to support 180 20-ton trucks at one time, amounting to 30,000 pounds of pressure per linear foot. It could also withstand the severest wind stress. 1,750 cubic yards of river soil were excavated and 352 timber pilings were driven into the river bed with a submarine hydraulic hammer before the concrete was poured. The overall size of the footing was 80½ feet by 30½ feet.

Construction of the piers was the most hazardous job on the project. Employment was provided for more than 300 men locally and for several hundred additional persons engaged in allied or related industries such as producing, fabricating and transporting materials. Every piece of fabricated steel was inspected and every rivet was tested. After shop and on-the-job inspections were completed, certified copies of the findings were filed with the State Highway Commission. The commission estimated that 286,853 man hours of labor were expended in this huge bridge project.

Upon completion, the new bridge measured 2,533 feet in length, width varied from 68 feet at its entrance to 45 feet in the middle of the central span, which was 475 feet long. At its highest point the bridge was 154 feet, equal to a 14-story building. Water clearance was 66 feet and clearance between low water and flood stage was 53 feet. The Cass Street approach was 233 feet long; the width of the road proper was 30 feet, not counting the sidewalks on each side. (The width of the old wagon bridge road was 18 feet.)

Electric stop-and-go signals were installed at Third and Cass streets and three concrete safety islands were established at the intersection. Electric dome lights were inserted in each safety island as guidance for night traffic.

The West Channel Interstate Bridge was built with the approval of Governor Phillip LaFollette. It was a joint construction project of Wisconsin and Minnesota and served as the western control point for the Main Channel Bridge. It consisted of five 150-foot spans and was constructed by the Wausau Iron Works at a cost of $134,000. It was opened to traffic in the summer of 1931. At the same time the highway was straightened, the Gundersen trestle bridge was demolished and the lagoon bridge was widened.

The new Mississippi River bridge was officially dedicated on September 29, 1929. It was a cool clear Saturday and thousands of people attended the festivities. Mayor J. J. Verchota issued invitations to various public officials in Wisconsin and bordering states.
Speeches were delivered by La Crosse Mayor Verchota and his predecessor C. A. Boerner, Wisconsin Governor Julius P. Heil and his forerunner Governor Phillip LaFollette, Chief State Highway Commissioner William O'Brien, Wisconsin State Representative Gardner Withrow, Minnesota Governor Floyd Olson and Iowa Governor Clyde Herring. Frank Sisson, La Crosse businessman and civic leader, was chairman of the event.

To inaugurate the exercises a parade of horse-drawn wagons and buggies, driven by citizens in costumes of the 1890s, proceeded across the old wagon bridge, coming from the west. Immediately after the passage of the antique vehicles across the old bridge, the swing span was opened parallel to the river and both approaches to the old bridge, east and west, were barricaded and signs posted "No Crossing" were put into place.

Then another calvacade of motorized passenger automobiles, trucks and tractors drove across the new bridge from La Crosse to the west. The difference between the two vehicular parades emphasized not only the vast bridge changes but the advancement in modes of transportation and dress.

Boat races and a huge water sports show were held on the Mississippi River. Aerial formations and stunts by members of the La Crosse Flyers Association were an important feature of the festival.
Band concerts were given in Riverside and Myrick parks. An extravaganza, called Venetian Night, was presented on the river, consisting of a flotilla of more than 75 beautifully decorated watercraft, accompanied by a magnificent exhibition of fireworks on the river bank in Pettibone Park. The city's downtown area was ornamented with thousands of flags, streamers, and pennants, and nearly every building and home in the city flew an American flag. The largest parade the city had ever seen marched through 24 blocks of the downtown and adjacent environs. There were 16 bands and drum corps in the procession, many of them from surrounding communities. Extravagant floats sponsored by many businesses were also prominent in the parade.

A display of old bridge relics and other antique artifacts, as well as samples of new bridge construction, were exhibited in the windows of the Doerflinger store on Fourth and Main streets. Included also were the plaques taken from the old wagon bridge and portraits of mayors and other officials who were prominently involved in the building of the two bridges.

Demolition of the old wagon bridge began on October 1, 1939, immediately after the new bridge was officially opened to traffic.

The contract for razing the old wagon bridge was awarded to Klug & Smith of Milwaukee, at a cost of $37,000. Klug & Smith was permitted to keep the steel and all other salvage materials, except the timbers in the sheer fences and protection piers and the rock from the piers. The rock from the piers was used as riprap on the east bank of the river on either side of the new structure. The contractors were obligated to remove every remnant of the old bridge down to the river bed, within 120 days.

The first major renovation of the main channel bridge over the Mississippi River in 44 years began on February 14, 1983, when the structure was closed to west bound traffic. It was a $2.5 million project awarded to Shappert Engineering Company of Belvidere, Illinois. Primarily a deck resurfacing job, the old concrete deck was replaced with steel girders. Concrete barriers and steel fences were constructed on both sides of the road. The approaches to both ends of the bridge were repaved with new concrete. The closing of the bridge created considerable inconvenience and economic hardship to La Crosse and to communities on the western side of the river for nearly nine months. East bound traffic coming to La Crosse from Minnesota
was permitted during the construction period, but traffic to the west
was obliged to detour about ten miles over Highway I-90 through
North La Crosse or to take other less desirable alternate routes.

The bridge was reopened to traffic traveling in both directions on
October 28, 1983. Mayors Patrick Zielke of La Crosse and Jack Miller
of La Crescent jointly cut the ribbon and delivered speeches officially
reopening the bridge. Wisconsin Department of Transportation offi­
cials were also present for the dedication exercises. All of the officials
together led a gala parade across the newly restored bridge.

During the summer of 1984, the main channel bridge was
renovated and repainted blue to improve safety and enhance its
attractiveness.
Bridges, Inspiring Structures

Bridging navigable waters, though not chronicled in depth in our histories, has played a most significant role in the growth and development, indeed in the civilization, of our country. Without bridges, great segments of our population would have been isolated. Economic and cultural exchange and progress would have been nearly impossible.

Bridges are inspiring sights and magnificent masterpieces — visible testimony to man’s engineering ingenuity. These modern steel structures possess an enduring beauty that pays eloquent tribute to the vision and skill and artistry of the men who plan, design and build them. There must be inherent knowledge and understanding of the strength of these structures, combined with aesthetic beauty that will serve efficiency, economy and eye-appeal simultaneously.

There are many famous bridges throughout the world and one of them is right here in our own community. The 1939 construction of our Main Channel Bridge is a gem of engineering skill. Its 1983 reconstruction refined it even further. Deck plate girders were selected with greatest care and low sidewalls added grace and safety to the superstructure. It was necessary to plan this reconstruction with a minimum of interference to traffic, yet had to meet the exigencies of whatever circumstances might exist. And surely of no little consequence was the need to take into consideration the magnitude and frequency of floods as La Crosse citizens know all too well.

The repair and restorative painting accomplished in the summer of 1984 supplemented immeasurably to the overall safety and beauty of the bridge.

The first bridges were fashioned by nature, such as an arch formed by erosion; a fallen log across a narrow stream; vines grown across a land depression and festooned to trees at either end.

When primitive man felled a tree and dragged it across a stream so that he could more easily expand his hunting grounds, in reality he became the first bridge builder. Later, he placed stones at intervals in the stream and bound logs to connect them. This was in effect the first span bridge attached to piers. The legendary Tarzan braided vines into ropes and swung across valleys — this too was akin to a bridge of sorts. Still later, man would string two parallel ropes across a water-
The need for bridges to replace ferries and fords became evident as time passed. As man's life style changed from the nomadic to community existence, he built bridges with thought for permanence. His bridges had to be constructed to meet the demands of circumstances. Timber pilings were anchored into the beds of streams and trestle bridges were constructed upon them. Wooden planks weighted down with rocks at both ends were used to span rivers. This was really the primitive origin of the cantilever bridge.

Bridges became more than mere appendages stretching across only waterways, but rather man used them to span obstacles of many kinds, such as highways, ravines and valleys, as well as multiple railroad tracks. A highway overpass is often at once graceful yet serves the needs of the public, offering convenience and security.

The majestic sweep of La Crosse's Main Channel Bridge is a marvel of artistry and scientific achievement as it reflects the creativity of function and form, as well as beauty and strength of structure.

From the simplest first beam bridge to the medieval drawbridge, the balancing bascule moving vertically, floating and moving bridges and pontoons of all kinds — to the tremendously complicated bridges that emphasize man's great technological advances — to all these we can today look back in awe at what our engineering scientists have wrought. Even the bridge tender today has moved from his tiny tollhouse shack to a comfortable office where in comfort he operates his bridges by computerized remote control. He enjoys total visual coverage of the rivers through use of a radar display system on closed circuit television.

The mighty Mississippi River, before man's appearance on the scene, successfully divided the eastern and western parts of our land. As the country grew and vast economic and agricultural areas evolved; as civilization moved westward and as roads and transportation became necessary for communicative processes, our federal government wisely assumed responsibility for maintenance of waterways. Because of the unscrupulous maneuverings of a few scoundrels, bridging of important streams and rivers could not be left in private hands and government approval and consent for the construction of bridges became a prime consideration of our lawmakers.
Today most of our important bridges are operated under state or national jurisdiction.

The Mississippi River, one of our country's most significant navigable watercourses, had to be bridged at numerous points along its route. One of the most notable bridges on the Mississippi is at La Crosse, Wisconsin.

The saga of bridging the Mississippi River at La Crosse has been the focus of attention in the last four pieces — the first, the history of the 1891 Wagon Bridge; the second, tales of some of the bridge tenders and their problems; the third, the 1935 accident that became the catalyst that brought a new modern bridge; the fourth, the 1939 main channel bridge and its 1983-1984 restoration.

Today we point with justifiable pride to this splendid local bridge that is a true landmark of our community.
The Old Plank Road

The thousands of motorists who drive daily across the Causeway — officially known as Copeland Avenue — between north and south La Crosse are unaware of the humble, indeed primitive, beginnings of that roadway.

It was originally nothing more than a narrow precarious footpath meandering haphazardly through the marshy area that separated the two sections of the city. It was believed to have originally been an Indian hunting trail. Often turning back upon itself and difficult to traverse during most of the year, it was almost totally impassable during the frigid winters, submerged during the annual spring floods and mostly dangerous muck in the summer.

In those days, prior to the advent of the telephone, the only way that north and south side people could communicate with each other was to travel east to the bluffs and then take a circuitous, lengthy rutted road to their destinations. Since this one-track road could accommodate only a single team and wagon, when two teams met midway, each going in the opposite direction, the encounter often presented unpleasant conditions, provoking vehement vocal disputations and sometimes even violent physical altercations that ultimately decided which team left the road while the other passed by.

Young lads were often employed to carry written messages and parcels between north and south side residents for a penny or two. Those who lived in opposite parts of the city and who needed to communicate personally but were apprehensive about venturing through the marsh had little alternative other than the bluff road.

When La Crosse officially became a city in the spring of 1856, north side residents were reluctant to become a part of the new main city; indeed, many wanted their town to become an independent community. The rivalry between north and south sides continued for many decades and persists even today to some degree.

Early in 1856, W. R. Sill, an industrious and civic-minded pioneer with engineering background and knowledge, conceived of the idea of constructing a solid and dependable roadway through the marsh that separated north and south La Crosse. Many lumber and sawmills were located on the western border of La Crosse and north to Onalaska. A good roadway would provide safe and efficient land transportation facilities.
A wealthy lumberman himself, Sill called together a group of like-minded men in the same industry for serious discussions. It was decided that a wooden road, similar to wooden sidewalks then in vogue, but of sturdier construction, was the solution to the problem. This group of men formed the La Crosse and Onalaska Plank Road Company in May 1856, just a month after La Crosse was incorporated as a city. They chose the following officers: R. M. Rublee, president; George Gale, vice-president; D. D. Cameron, secretary; A. T. Clinton, treasurer; Charles A. Stevens, attorney; and W. R. Sill, engineer. Rublee, Cameron, Clinton and Sill have had streets named after them, while the town of Galesville is named for Gale. These men further concluded that if the new plank road were to be operated as a toll road it would soon pay for itself. Some detractors later claimed that Sill had "waxed rich" from the proceeds of the tolls collected. This seems hardly likely, considering the toll rates: horse and rider, three cents; horse and buggy, team and wagon, yoke of oxen and wagon, each five cents; each additional horse, two and one-half cents; each additional ox, one cent; drivers of cattle, one cent; sheep and swine, each one-half cent. Users of the toll road were required to have the exact change; the half cent rates became the next higher cent.

The first plank road constructed was 20 feet wide; at low spots in the marsh it was elevated some three feet above the low water mark. One-inch pine planks were laid lengthwise on large flat stones and nailed to stringers set in rows. Stringers are long horizontal timbers often used as floor supports. Boards were then laid crosswise and nailed to the planks below. Coal tar was poured on the top to fill spaces and the whole was then covered with sand and gravel. A wooden bridge was constructed at either end of the plank road because at that time a cut-off of the La Crosse River wandered off from the main stream across the north end of the marsh. The tollgate was established at the south end of the road on the bank of the La Crosse river. The narrow wooden bridge at the south end was the hallowed entrance to the new roadway, and no one, neither pedestrian nor teamster, ever ventured to cross without first paying the required toll charge to Gotthelf Herrold, the stern-visaged, burly German custodian of the pike.

From its inception, the plank road became a busy thoroughfare mainly because of the prosperous lumber mills of north La Crosse and Onalaska, so located because of their proximity to the Mississippi and
Black rivers and the pineries. Though it was only 20 feet wide, the plank road was thronged summer and winter with wagons and sleighs. Despite its importance and popularity it was nevertheless a wretched highway and existed as a tollway for only four years; tolls were discontinued in 1860. With maintenance fees thus terminated, the plank road deteriorated and became nearly useless. A trip across the marsh once again became a hazardous adventure. During spring floods water often rose above wheel hubs of wagons and came into the body of the vehicles. Many claimed it was a ford rather than a road.

Travel across the marsh continued to be heavy and maintenance of the plank road was imperative. From time to time the roadway was repaired at particularly bad points. Upkeep was poor yet expensive and toll fees were no longer available to help pay costs. This unfortunate state of affairs continued until 1865, when the city assumed operation of the pike. A particularly serious spring flood occurred in 1880 and the entire road was submerged and communication between north and south La Crosse was completely cut off, and the east bluff road once again became a last resort. For a brief period passengers and vehicles were carried across the marsh on an improvised ferry, essentially a huge and roughly constructed barge which was poled across the flooded area.

As the years progressed and the city grew, traffic between north and south La Crosse increased considerably. Just to the west of the wagon bridge that had been built across the La Crosse River, a trestle bridge was erected by the La Crosse City Railway Company. Horse cars, and then in 1879 electric street cars, used this trestle bridge. On one occasion a horse car jumped the track and plunged into the river; the horse drowned but passengers escaped injury. There may yet be some older residents in the city who remember the electrically powered street cars that traversed the roadway across the marsh. Before Logan High School became a reality, north side students rode the trolleys across the causeway to Sixteenth and Cass Streets to attend La Crosse High School, later called Central High School. There were two sets of tracks, one northbound and the other southbound. The cars traveled up Copeland Avenue to St. Cloud Street, then turned onto Caledonia Street.

With the road across the marsh in city hands, it was raised and widened to 100 feet and paved with limestone macadam. The first macadamized street in La Crosse was Main Street from the river to
The Old Plank Road

Fifth Street, in 1873. Some years later, city engineers decided to macadamize the former plank road. The wooden planks in the previous road had been held together by coal tar; the macadam procedure did not use a binder; this resulted in ruts and holes caused by the heavy traffic that ensued.

In about 1920, people began to call the road between north and south sides the Causeway, a name which it retains to this day. By definition, a causeway is a road raised above the natural level of the ground with stones, earth or timber to serve as a passageway over wet or marsh land. Legally, however, the road is known as Copeland Avenue.

For many years there was much agitation in the city for construction of a new bridge across the La Crosse River, but this did not become a reality until 1927, after council approval. The old macadam road continued to be an expensive maintenance factor, and after much controversy, the common council voted to pave the road with concrete. Today the causeway serves both north and south La Crosse efficiently and is maintained in top condition. Even with the development of Lang Drive which serves as an alternative route, the causeway is one of the busiest thoroughfares in the city.

The marsh area on either side of the causeway remained relatively undeveloped for many years because building in the marshy land was not feasible and those who attempted it found it very costly. But in the 1920s and 1930s some intrepid builders took a chance and a few businesses were erected. Standard Oil Company put up a handsome two-story brick building at 22 Copeland Avenue. Later automobile and truck agencies and trailer sales took residence there. A number of nationally known oil company offices followed suit. Elfman Marine Company constructed a plant on the causeway using "spread footing" with conventional pilings.

In 1946, Max Bemel, who operated an autowrecking business at 726 North Third Street, obtained council approval to conduct a feasibility study for improvement of the marsh area on the west side of the causeway. He borrowed money on his insurance to obtain funding for the development.

In 1948 Piggly Wiggly Market started a store on a portion of the reclaimed land. Some years later Bell Discount Stores opened a large variety store. On the street behind Bell Discount, called Bemel Street, Sears Roebuck established a large warehouse.
A sewage lift station was constructed in order to support the buildings for which the city provided $43,000. Six-inch water mains were installed for nearly 2,000 linear feet. The west side of the marsh was reclaimed by dredging material from the Black River. The area treated consisted of about 30 acres and extended 1,720 feet west from the causeway. Because of ground conditions, none of the construction could support basements despite the deep sinking of concrete pilings.

Causeway Boulevard (not to be confused with the Causeway proper) runs through the center of the addition from west to east terminating at the main roadway. American Photo Studio established its business there and several other small business enterprises followed. The entire area was originally zoned for manufacturing and heavy industry; later the common council voted to permit retail establishments to settle there.
Copeland Avenue's Colorful Past

Copeland Avenue, which once was connected to the Plank Road (today known as the Causeway) through La Crosse's marshy land, has enjoyed a colorful history of its own, though the recently constructed viaduct on the avenue has altered the ambience of the territory. At the turn of the century, and during the next few decades, the area became home for many Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, though it was not exclusively theirs.

North of Monitor Street, the avenue was originally known as Mill Street because of the many sawmills located there. In 1922 its name was officially changed to Copeland Avenue to honor Fred A. Copeland, La Crosse's twenty-third mayor. Copeland served as the city's chief executive from 1891 to 1893. He donated to the city the land where his lumber industry was located, known as Copeland Park.

In 1915 Matthew Monsoor purchased a two-story brick building in the 600 block of Copeland Avenue for $1,700. On its outside wall appeared a large mural reading "Gold Medal Flour — Eventually — Why Not Now?" The building was demolished in 1978. The Monsoor family lived on the second floor and rented the street level to a number of businesses successively.

One of these tenants, John Greider, fried thin slices of potatoes in a large kettle of oil over a wood fire in his back yard and sold them as the first potato chips in the city. At another time, the Salvation Army held its meetings there and homeless men were permitted to sleep on the premises overnight.

Another resident was a Mrs. Spears, who made rugs and told fortunes. Children feared her and spied on her, for she was considered by many to be a witch who could cast evil spells. When radios came into vogue in the 1920s, the Gautch and Zieglenmeir radio repair shop was opened on the avenue.

Harris Slindee owned a second-hand shop at 713 Copeland Avenue in the 1930s. It later became a restaurant and grocery store. Slindee lived above the store. At 709 Mill Street was the Robert Schulze Bakery in the 1880s; this was later converted into a dry goods store and private residence. In 1884, 705 Mill Street housed a cigar factory; it too became a private residence a few years later.

The building located at 701 Mill Street was particularly picturesque. It was first the St. Nicholas Hotel, then the Parker House...
Hotel, the Gorman Hotel, and finally the Crow's Nest Hotel. The owner rented rooms to lumber men and railroad men. Heat was provided by "belly stoves" and the building was equipped with eleven chimneys to accommodate the individual stoves. It also housed a popular saloon which catered to loggers and rivermen.

Livery stables abounded in the area. The Casberg & Erickson Livery Stable was at 713 Mill Street; in 1901 it became a funeral hearse operation. In 1911 it reverted to a livery stable and in 1917 an automobile livery and taxi service was housed there. For a period of time the Yerly Coal Company had its offices in the Crow's Nest Hotel.

The city government for a few years rented a shed behind the buildings in the 700 block of Mill Street, where it stored its sewage equipment. In more recent times the Rippin' Good Cookies Company and the Bessie Comstock Storage Company were located there.

In the early 1900s, before automobiles and street cars became common, a large horse-watering trough was placed on upper Copeland Avenue to accommodate these hard-working animals.

During the spring floods, boys would catch bullheads in the flooded areas which they would sell for a few pennies a piece. After the water subsided, they would dig for swamp potatoes, a tuberous vegetable, which they sold to downtown restaurants. These marsh potatoes are botanically in the arrowhead family, and were called "wapato" by the Indians who used them as a staple food item.
Copeland Avenue's Colorful Past

The Monitor Brewery and Saloon was located on the corner of Copeland Avenue and Monitor Street. Later, the Avalon Ballroom occupied the space for many years and was a popular weekend dancing spot for younger crowds. It was also used for exhibition wrestling and boxing matches. After the era of the Avalon dance hall ended, Nino's Steak House prospered at the same location for several years.

Near the Milwaukee Railroad tracks, the Allen and Foley hotels catered to railroad men on their layover nights in the city. One or two brothels were also in operation in the area. Henry Hahn ran the Milwaukee Restaurant near the tracks and each Thanksgiving and Christmas he invited the homeless men from the nearby hobo jungles for a "big feed." "Mexican Ed" Huererra operated a Mexican food cafe a block away.

Zechariah Moss, a popular black barber, whose family was among the early pioneers of the city, had his shop at 522 Copeland Avenue. In the back he established a gymnasium of sorts where boys of the neighborhood were taught to box and wrestle. Moss also taught them the value of decency and fair play and cautioned them against unnecessary fights and how to stay out of trouble.

Joe Abraham, a prominent Central High School athlete of the 1920s, who later became a semi-professional football player, lived on Copeland Avenue. On the same street there were tinsmith and blacksmith shops in the early days, as well as several grocery and haberdashery stores, a mortuary, two or three livery stables, and two Syrian Orthodox churches. There was even a police precinct substation there at one time.

A milk station existed on upper Copeland Avenue where farmers brought fresh milk in ten-gallon cans, each equipped with a faucet or ladle. Residents came to the station carrying one- or two-quart enamel or tin pails into which the milk was poured; it cost five cents a quart. At home they strained the milk through cheesecloth or a fine sieve, then boiled and cooled it. There were several such milk stations throughout the city of La Crosse. One such station, now inoperative, still stands in the triangle at West Avenue and Pine streets. These small buildings also served as voting booths on election days.

Though a few remnants of the early days may still be found on Copeland Avenue, its face has changed considerably through the years.
The Dream of a La Crosse Union Depot

The front page headline of the La Crosse Tribune on Christmas Day 1916 read: “How about a Union Depot as a Christmas present for La Crosse?”

Concomitant with the disastrous Cameron House-Milwaukee Railroad Depot fire, there was much local agitation about the establishment of a union depot. It was observed by a considerable segment of the citizenry that the conflagration was really a blessing in disguise. They contended that the destruction of the Milwaukee Railroad depot and the Cameron House removed the largest financial obstruction and opposition that various railroads with terminals in La Crosse had for building a union depot.

Wisconsin Statutes of that time, Section 1797-9 (2) stated “In every city, village or town in which two or more railroads enter and maintain depots, it shall be the duty of such railroads to construct and maintain there an adequate union passenger depot, whenever practicable, as required for public convenience and necessity.” The words “whenever practicable” provided an obvious legal loophole for any railroad opposed to establishment of a union depot.

Advocates for a union depot construction project contended that if the Milwaukee Railroad insisted upon building a new depot for its exclusive use, it would render a disservice to the entire community and to the traveling public, and it would probably be a half-century or more before another opportunity arose to establish a union depot in La Crosse. It was desirable, they said, to have “all railroad facilities under one big roof.” According to proponents of such a proposal this was the “first and last chance” for the city to have a union depot and it was the duty of the City Council and the Chamber of Commerce to bring such a project to a successful conclusion. So argued the Union Depot Committee as well as a great many citizens who saw it as a financial boon to the city.

Walter S. Woods, well-known local consulting engineer of that period in La Crosse history, had already drawn up plans for a new union depot. It had been approved by the City Planning Commission and by some railroad officials. This, they said, would effect considerable savings and convenience for the entire community.

Woods said the best location would be on the Causeway as it was
centrally located and also because it would accommodate more and heavier traffic. Another salient feature was the fact that the Causeway was the widest street in La Crosse. (It was 100 feet wide while Main Street the second widest street in the city was only 80 feet across.) This would allow ample space not only for customary traffic but also for streetcars on either or both sides of the street.

Woods recommended that the passenger depot, other train facilities and train sheds be erected about midway on the route, just east of the Causeway in the marsh area. The city, he said, could purchase the marshland at little cost and there would be plenty of space to the east for extensive railroad yards as well. Woods claimed that no serious engineering difficulties would be encountered in filling the marshland nor in building there. Today, in retrospect, it appears that Woods was not too familiar with the problems of dredge-filling, nor did he apparently take into full consideration the matter of the tremendous weight of railroad engines and trains on soft marshy land. Nor did he have the problem of contending with the state official regulations.

For many years La Crosse was known as "the town you have to back into." Arriving trains first had to pull in at a siding, then back into the station before loading and proceeding forward. Building a railroad station on the causeway marsh, according to Woods, would eliminate the necessity of trains backing into and out of stations. There was almost unlimited space so trains could run both ways through the train sheds, stop at the depot and freight houses and continue on. He felt that the Milwaukee Railroad and the Burlington Railroad could both use all the facilities with little inconvenience and expense. The Northwestern Railway and the Green Bay and Western Railroad could also use the area without too much trouble. Even the small La Crosse and Southeastern Railway (which ran between La Crosse and Viroqua and was sometimes facetiously referred to as the Toonerville Trolley) could be accommodated by using the Burlington tracks. Thus, five railroads could use the same facilities.

It was estimated by Woods that the entire project — cost of land, filling the marsh, erecting buildings, laying tracks, and all other improvements would amount to about a half million dollars, with the cost divided proportionately among the five railroads using the facilities. (What a dreamer, even for 1916!) Woods further stated that filling the marsh area would create effective mosquito control which was a problem.
Woods advocated in his great plan that the Causeway be depressed six to eight feet with the railroad tracks elevated, thus eliminating problems of dangerous railroad crossings for road traffic as well as for pedestrians. A union depot, he said, would also be helpful in removing sectional ill will between north- and south-siders who had conflicting views on many civic issues.

One of the conditions necessary to the establishment of a union depot would be that the railroads would be required to cede to the city of La Crosse a separate municipal track passing through the station. In the event that another railroad wished to establish a terminal here, the city could issue such permission without encountering opposition from the railroads already extant. He further advocated that a road be built across the marsh area from Grand Crossing to the Mississippi River, thus helping to develop a municipal harbor to handle water traffic.

Even prior to the great Cameron House-Milwaukee Road Depot fire and before Woods' subsequent proposals, the Milwaukee Road had contemplated abandonment of its north and south side stations and had planned to build its own centrally located depot and train facilities.

As we know today, none of this ever came to pass, but in 1916 the matter of a union depot in La Crosse was a burning issue of the day. Eventually, the Milwaukee Road established temporary barracks-like wooden buildings on the west side of Second Street between State and Vine to serve as its depot. These were later demolished and a new Milwaukee Railroad passenger depot and freight houses were erected on the north side at St. Andrew Street under the Rose Street viaduct, now housing Amtrak facilities. The Northwestern Railroad station was on the northeast corner of Third and Vine streets until it was razed to accommodate Montgomery-Ward buildings in recent years. The Burlington station was for many years at Second and Pearl streets, until new quarters were built at the east end of State Street. Both Burlington stations have long since passed into limbo. To this day, La Crosse has never had a union depot nor does it seem likely that it will ever have one.
Casks overflowing with countless precious coins, golden chains and jewels galore, buried in unknown caves and chasms beneath the earth's surface — what red-blooded American boy has not dreamed of digging for treasure trove and discovering untold fortune. Even more alluring is the prospect of diving for sunken treasure lying at the bottoms of the seas in exotic places, there to discover priceless doubloons, silver pieces of eight, Spanish galleons filled with riches, perhaps even to find some fabulous wealth from the legendary Spanish Main.

In truth, hoards of riches have indeed been found in sunken ships in many places of the world. But for every thousand men who dream of discovering the wealth of Croesus beneath the earth's crust or on the floors of oceans, only a handful have the courage and the means to take the risk of diving and searching, and only a very few of those actually arise from the depths with items of intrinsic value. Indeed, of those who dare to seek, many lose their investments and earthly capital, sometimes even their lives. But the exploration continues undaunted, not always prompted by greed, but more often than not by a spirit of adventure and romance.

There is a difference between the monetary value of sunken treasures and their historic significance. This difference is essentially a function of many variations. In 1950 a piece of eight was worth about $5, or contained about $5 worth of pure silver. A gold doubloon contained about $100 worth of pure gold. Considering the tremendous increase in silver and gold prices in recent years, their value today would be substantially higher. A gold doubloon in mint condition today might be worth up to $20,000. A piece of eight in excellent condition might be worth more than $300. Every piece of sunken treasure recovered must be authenticated and registered according to special state laws. Its historical importance must also be recorded. Often the historical value is greater than the essential value. Without proper authentication, treasure trove may be considered worthless, or at best possess only minimal souvenir value. To authenticate treasure one needs catalogs, logs, archival records, historical documents and considerable background data.

There are truly vast treasures yet to be found at the bottoms of our
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

seas, lakes and rivers that have gone down with their ships. Often their precise location is known, but yet they lie just beyond the reach of man.

Just a stone's throw away from us in La Crosse there lies a steamboat, the War Eagle, well-known by name, and its resting place pinpointed in locale, a sunken vessel which reputedly contains considerable wealth, yet divers through the decades have come up with only a few paltry souvenirs.

Sidewheeler War Eagle, 1867

A little known fact is that there were eight vessels named the War Eagle that plied the Mississippi River between St. Louis and St. Paul during the second half of the 19th century. The boat that burned and sank and now lies at the mouth of the Black River was built at Fulton, Ohio, near Cincinnati, in 1853-1854. Its regular run was between Galena, Illinois and St. Paul, Minnesota, a trip that took about 44 hours which included time to pick up and discharge passengers and freight at various points enroute. The War Eagle was a side-wheeler packet boat that weighed 296 tons; its hull, constructed of solid oak, was 219 by 27 feet, while its overall length was 225 feet with a 29-foot beam. The boat was equipped with three boilers, each 14 feet long. It held 46 staterooms for passengers with additional accommodations for its crew. It was described as one of the finest boats afloat on the Mississippi, a “queen of the waters.”
The War Eagle was first owned by the Minnesota Packet Company and later by the Galena Boat Line which was reorganized as the Northwestern Packet Company in 1863. It was operated by a group of ruthless men, headed by Captain Daniel S. Harris. They brooked no competition and attempted to drive every boat off the Mississippi so they could have complete control of all river traffic. They were particularly antagonistic toward the "wild boats" which were the small independent boat operators. They all indulged in a frantic rate-cutting practice that finally brought the combined steamboat and railroad fare from St. Paul to Chicago down to the ridiculous price of 50 cents. Most of the small independents eventually went out of business because they were not sufficiently strong to survive such cut-throat rivalry.

In 1861 the La Crosse & St. Paul Packet Company was launched by the Davidson brothers. William F. Davidson was known as the "Commodore;" he had started his steamboating days on the Ohio River in 1845. His brother, Peyton Davidson, called "Captain Pate," joined the Commodore in 1852. Their boat line was popularly known as the "White Collar Line" because their smoke stacks had wide white bands painted on them.

The Davidsons acquired the War Eagle in 1866. When they first organized the White Collar Line they also purchased a sawmill in North La Crosse which they converted into a shipyard where they built new boats and restored old ones. The Davidson brothers also engaged in several other business ventures as well and became prominent in the economic growth of the city.

In March 1862, the War Eagle made a run to the Tennessee River with army supplies during the Civil War. One stack was shot through and it was returned to the shipyard in St. Louis for repairs.

The La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad that came to La Crosse in 1858 depended upon the packet boats to transport passengers and freight to northern points. The Milwaukee Railroad depot in La Crosse was an important transfer point.

At about 6:00 o'clock on Saturday evening, May 14, 1870, the War Eagle, under the direction of Captain Thomas Cushing, docked at the Milwaukee Railroad depot on the Black River wharf to unload freight ticketed for La Crosse, and to take on freight carried by the railroad destined for St. Paul. The War Eagle was scheduled to remain dockside for about six hours, to await the midnight train from Milwaukee.
Railroad passengers were to be transferred to the boat to continue their journey to St. Paul and points in between.

Diagram prepared by an illustrator in 1870 showing placement of War Eagle and other boats and buildings surrounding it at time of the fire.

A - Main warehouse and railroad depot  I - Barges
X - Dining Hall and Baggage Room  P - Platforms
O - Express Freight Building  H - Steamer Mollie Mohler
B - Elevator  L - Dock Sheds
D - Dock Warehouses  W - Main Passenger Track
E - Steamer Keokuk  M - Road Leading to City
F - War Eagle

Passengers who had arrived on the War Eagle from points further south along the Mississippi and whose terminus was La Crosse, collected their luggage, left the boat and proceeded to their local destinations. Other passengers who planned to travel on to St. Paul remained on the boat for their evening meal and then went to their staterooms to read or write or rest. Others went into town to have their supper as a change from boat fare and to look about.
It was well past midnight when the stevedores on board began the process of loading and unloading freight, primarily barrels of coal oil. Captain Cushing was supervising the job when he noticed that one of the barrels was leaking. Realizing this as a potential danger, he sent a watchman to fetch the ship’s carpenter, William T. Bennett, to make repairs. Bennett later said, “The night watchman came to my room to tell me that the captain wanted me to tighten up some leaking oil barrels.” Bennett picked up his cooperage tools and a lantern and promptly obeyed the captain’s order. Captain Cushing pointed out the leaking barrel and told Bennett to tighten the bands on about a dozen other barrels as well, standing in an area about three by eight feet.

Bennett said later, “I took a hammer and a piece of iron out of my shop kit and commenced tightening hoops. The watchman held the lantern for me until I was about through. Someone then called the watchman away, so he handed me the lantern which I held in one hand and my hammer in the other hand, when all of a sudden the lantern was ablaze inside and in a minute it burst and the kerosene on the floor caught fire. In an instant the entire dock was in flames and the cabin was on fire and my pantaloons caught fire too. A man standing nearby said “Jump in the river” and I did so. Everything was in a commotion. I got ashore alright and then I came back to get my things, but everything was on fire and I had to jump off the boat again and into the river.”

There were about 100 tons of freight on board, as well as about 35 cabin passengers and several deck passengers plus the regular crew. A yawl was lowered into the water but not all of the passengers could get in. The blaze spread very rapidly and before anyone could act to contain the fire, the main depot, the railroad warehouses, sheds, and elevators were engulfed in flames. Many of the passengers who had gone into town for supper and a stroll had returned earlier and were already abed. Some were rescued, others jumped into the river between the boat and the wharf, but that too was afire. At least five persons who jumped were known to have drowned.

It was one of the worst conflagrations La Crosse had ever witnessed. A passenger later said “Words are utterly inadequate to describe the terrible scene in the conflagration, the consternation and the dismay.” The entire boat and everything around it blazed up like a lighted torch and in less time than it takes to tell, everything was in
flames. The passenger went on to say “It was a scene to appall the timid and awe the brave.”

Another version of the origin of the fire, and there were several, was that the cooper placed his lantern on top of one of the oil barrels that was standing on end, and while driving a hoop with his hammer accidentally struck and broke the lantern. A spark which emanated from hammer contact with the iron band ignited oil leakage, and in a split second — fire!

A rumor persisted that one of the barrels contained gasoline and it was this which caused the rapidity of the spreading fire. Another report said that some boxes of gunpowder aggravated matters. This does not seem likely as no massive explosions were reported which surely would have occurred had this been true. It was verified however that gunpowder was frequently shipped in plain boxes marked as ordinary freight in order to take advantage of lower freight rates. An observer said “A person found guilty of such fraud should be made acquainted with a hempen necktie,” (that is, hanged). Some persons accused the ship’s carpenter of “gross carelessness” and blamed him for the tragedy.

All of the Milwaukee Railroad’s buildings at the site were totally destroyed — the depot, three freight warehouses, a freight train consisting of six cars, one passenger car, one baggage car, as well as the elevator and its contents. The dimensions of the passenger depot was 45 by 250 feet; the elevator was 75 by 140 feet and 80 feet high; the dock warehouses were each 50 by 250 feet; the dock sheds 40 by 175 feet; the dining hall, baggage room and express freight room were each 40 by 60 feet in size. Fortunately, 80,000 bushels of wheat had just been shipped out of the elevators so this was counted as a saving. Also destroyed were platforms, pilings and several acres of tracks.

The boat’s fire alarm was sounded and those passengers who were still awake and dressed left the boat via the gangway to safety. The sleeping passengers were awakened by crew members and were taken ashore in auxiliary boats. Those who had jumped into the river were picked up by crew members in lifeboats. As soon as the fire broke out several crewmen tried to roll the first burning barrel off the deck into the river, but a small barge lying alongside the War Eagle prevented it from falling into the water. This barrel reportedly contained “Danforth’s Fluid,” a highly flammable material, probably naphtha.
La Crosse’s Sunken Treasure, The War Eagle

Among the passengers who suffered material losses, but were fortunate enough to save their lives, were Andrew Botten, his wife and two small children who had a stateroom on the lower deck. They were on their way to Reeds Landing, Minnesota where they planned to settle. They bemoaned the fact that they lost all of their belongings in the fire, including a cow that cost 50 dollars.

Oscar Topliff, assistant baggage master, said he saved every bit of baggage entrusted to his care, but Topliff’s claim was later refuted. All of the baggage checks were destroyed so it was difficult to determine who owned what and some later claims were falsified or exaggerated. It was declared that there was sufficient time between the burning of the boat and the depot to save the baggage stored in the warehouses, but in the excitement, serious errors in judgment were made. Otto Eive claimed that he lost 1,200 sacks of wheat stored on the lowest deck, destined for St. Paul. Captain I. Moulton lost a huge shipment of salt.

The loss was estimated to be $265,000 and included 225 tons of assorted freight. An observer declared in fanciful language, “It was one of the most terrible fires that has ever startled the people of the northwest. The sky was cloudless yet the fire was so brilliant that it cast a shadow for miles toward the moon. The Mississippi River presented the appearance of an immense sea of blood. The opposite shore and the island seemed to have clothed themselves in ghostly garments and the trees and shrubbery danced in the changing lights like the imaginary spectre of the graveyard. Dogs, cattle and poultry gave vent to those peculiar cries that indicate distress, showing that even the dumb creatures realized the peril of the hour.”

The War Eagle’s mail agent, Sam Bugh, had time only to grab the money packets and escape. He turned the funds over to authorities for safekeeping. Frank Hubbard who had to jump overboard claimed that there were 48 kegs of powder in the ship’s magazine under the forecastle, but the boat burned amidship and sank so the powder fortunately did not explode. The boat’s log was totally destroyed so it was impossible to obtain full and accurate data on the passengers and cargo. Five lives were lost though exaggerated accounts claimed there were many more.

Several people were seriously injured as they ran to save their lives or jumped overboard. One elderly lady, weighing more than 200 pounds, climbed over the boat’s side and hung on the rudder; she was
rescued but suffered serious burns and was taken to the International Hotel at the corner of Front and Pearl Streets, and medical assistance was summoned to attend to her injuries. Another lady who had boarded at Prairie du Chien jumped into the water and injured her back very severely; she too was taken to the hotel.

One of the great tragedies of the fire was the death of 18-year-old Mary Ulrich, a pretty blue-eyed blonde girl. She was the niece of John Ulrich, publisher of the Nordstern (a German language newspaper in La Crosse). Mary was on her way to attend her sister's wedding in Alma, Wisconsin where she was to be a bridesmaid. Felix Spiller, the boat's black barber had been handsomely tipped to keep his eye on Mary and act as her protector on the trip. Spiller did indeed try his utmost to save Mary and assisted her in a tandem jump overboard. Unhappily, both of them drowned. Mary's body was recovered the next day and turned over to her uncle. Spiller too was found dead. In the eulogy delivered at Mary's funeral, the minister said "She was kindly and affectionate by nature, she had grace of manner and a degree of culture exceeding that of most of her companions, and possessed excellence in vocal music and amateur acting."

Several barges which were lying near the elevator were hauled out into the river and saved. The steamer Keokuk was lying alongside the War Eagle and had just about enough steam to enable her to move out of the way with only slight damage. The steamer Mollie Mohler nearby was also saved. The La Crosse fire department responded promptly to a call, but the fire had spread so rapidly and so extensively there was little they could do. Access to the widespread conflagration was very difficult, but firemen managed to partially save two passenger cars and two freight cars that were later restored.

The only items that were saved from the depot were two iron safes that contained railroad books and a small amount of money. All railroad tickets, including a large number to California and other domestic points were destroyed.

Mrs. Isaac Gullickson and her seven children who had recently arrived from Norway, came to La Crosse aboard the War Eagle on May 14, 1870. They had gone to the International Hotel for supper and were abed there when the fire broke out. They were awaiting the arrival of Mr. Gullickson who was to join them here at a later date. They planned to pick up their luggage and household belongings the following day at the railroad baggage room. Unbeknownst to them,
Mr. Gullickson had died 20 days earlier in Norway as a result of eating poisonous parsnips which he mistook for an edible variety. His family was enroute to America when he died and they did not learn of his death until a friend, Gilbert Gilbertson of Mindoro, brought the sad news to them the day after the fire. They were now alone in a strange land where they could not speak the English language, with no baggage and very little money. Several kind Norwegian families from Mindoro took them in and helped them to become settled in their new home. Later Mrs. Gullickson married Mr. Gilbertson. She died in 1915 leaving 32 grandchildren in the La Crosse area.

The day after the fire, it was reported that "What was once a hive of industry and a receptacle of wealth is now a mass of charred and blackened ruins, strewn with the debris of the great conflagration. It seems curious to note that the scene of this triumph of the fire fiend is entirely surrounded by water and it is a matter for the devout to ponder that so few fatal results followed."
Officials of the railroad and of the boat line stated that they planned immediate reconstruction of a temporary warehouse and passenger depot on the same site. The War Eagle was a total loss after sinking in 30 to 35 feet of water and to this day still rests there.

The boat's whistle was salvaged and since 1897 sounded the call to work, noon lunch, and quitting time for La Crosse Rubber Mills employees. Carl Zube, one of the War Eagle's loaders, said that a souvenir hunter tore off the whistle and disappeared with it. Charles Fay, a Rubber Mills engineer for many years, acquired the whistle and installed it when a new Rubber Mills plant was built in 1897.

Interest in the War Eagle has never dimmed and many divers have descended into the murky waters of the Black River to seek the treasure that reportedly remained behind. According to original laws of salvage of sunken treasure, it was "finders-keepers." Since 1979, federal and state regulations make it illegal for personal search and confiscation of sunken or buried treasure without official permission.

Diving for the War Eagle trove remains difficult as there is practically no visibility in the water due to silt deposits, so divers must work in the dark and rely upon touch. One of the chief attractions is the report that the boat's vault containing a substantial amount of cash and a great deal of passengers' jewelry is still intact. Another beguiling draw is the belief that seven barrels of rare old bourbon and rye whiskey are in the War Eagle's hold. This report may have been triggered when one diver did indeed bring up a full quart of bourbon with the cork still intact.

In 1931, the Mississippi River reached a low of minus 1.9 feet. Charred ends of the War Eagle's ribs poked several inches above the water level, the bow covered with mud. Barefooted boys and men in rubber boots swarmed over the exposed portion of the boat seeking treasures, but the larger part of the boat slanted downward beneath the water's surface.

Two La Crosse men, Albert Tadewald and George Voight, were intense in their salvage efforts. They panned the muck and mud through sieves and retrieved knives, forks and spoons, some dishes, a few coins, and the door plate of cabin number 26. They also found pieces of melted metal with markings on them which appeared to be...
part of the eagle insignia that was engraved on the boat's bell. Other
divers brought up new white dinner plates in mint condition.
Tadewald also found several glass-stoppered bottles of perfume
which when opened still retained their original fragrance.

In 1961 Lewis I. Younger, president of the Winona County Histor­
ical Society sponsored exploratory diving. He hoped to raise the
entire boat and tow it to Winona for display there. He also sought War
Eagle relics for display in the Winona museum. Winona's special
interest in the boat was that it had carried Winona militia to the
south during the Civil War. A report was resurrected in 1963 that the
ship's safe contained valuables amounting to $50,000.

James E. Tucker of Onalaska and John Russell of French Island
suggested that the War Eagle be "coffer dammed" and the water
pumped out, after which one could walk all over the boat. Tucker said
he had found several lead ingots during his diving expedition, but
they were too heavy to lift out of the water. Tucker was resentful that
Winona people were diving for War Eagle trove, all of which he felt
belonged to La Crosse.

Charles Murphy of La Crescent offered to dive if someone would
pay his expenses — he got no takers. Later, Murphy dove for the
Winona Historical Society and sold his findings to them. Inasmuch as
the War Eagle sported a few slot machines for which coins were
needed, divers felt coins should be found.

The boat's bell was found melted into one solid chunk of brass
which was sold to a scrap metal dealer. That the huge metal bell could
be melted was indication of the tremendous heat and fierceness of the
fire. The Winona museum obtained the War Eagle's flagmast and
offered to buy its socket from whoever might bring it up. Other items
that Winona acquired were a crockery cuspidor, "iron china" crock­
ery, a hose nozzle, and a hand-made vase upon which the potter's
fingerprints could still be seen. Additional items included shafting
and hubs of the paddle, a bottle of German bitters, a "tonic with a kick
like a mule," a bottle of cream, a pewter water pitcher, a porcelain
pitcher and basin, a pocket flask, and a hip bone which was probably
from a beef roast, not from a human. In fact, many bones were found
which probably came from the boat's "dollar hole," which was a hole
in the kitchen into which the cook dumped refuse into the river.

In 1963, Robert Christianson, a descendant of Mrs. Gullickson-
Gilbertson, teamed up with Roger Hauser, Ray Flynn and Gary
Christianson to bring up whatever they could. They retrieved silverware, dishes, lamps, bottles, shot glasses and parts of the boat itself. They even found a dish with the name Gullickson inprinted on the back, apparently part of Mrs. Gullickson's ill-fated luggage.

Edward Moore, 18th century dramatist wrote of “riches beyond the dreams of avarice.” The miserly Midas and the worldly adventurer alike, still envision sifting between their fingers coins of gold without number, bars of silver, diamonds and pearls, rubies and emeralds. Such are the fantasies of the greedy man as well as the romanticist. Both dream of wealth untold lying at the bottoms of the seas and beneath the earth's surface, awaiting their grasping hands to make them rich and famous beyond imagination.

Treasure trove, a universal and timeless lure, is often thought of as a synonym for happiness. But does it indeed bring true joy? Beowulf, the heroic warrior of the Dark Ages, sang “Bring me ancient silver, precious jewels, shining armour and gems.” The War Eagle will never bring us such treasures, but even modest trove piques the adventurous spirit. Perhaps some day we may yet find the treasures that are so near and yet so far away.
The Hirshheimer Saga, Part One

Foreword

When I began the research for my book on Jews and Judaism in La Crosse, the first name of consequence that I encountered was Hirshheimer. For over a century this name appeared over and over again in every facet of the city’s history — industrial, cultural, social. I traced the genealogy of the Hirshheimer family back to the 18th century and sent it to Mrs. Henry G. Burke (nee Alberta Louise Hirshheimer) of Baltimore for correction. This was the start of a memorable correspondence that lasted for five years, until the death of that gracious lady on May 22, 1975.

Each of her letters is notable for its literary quality; each evidences a keen and intelligent erudition, articulately expressed. Best of all, they reveal nuggets of early unwritten La Crosse history that can be found nowhere else.

Though many descendants of the Hirshheimer clan are today scattered throughout the country, with the death of Mrs. Alberta Hirshheimer Burke, the door closed on one of the most distinguished families in our city’s history. In 1930 she married Henry Gershon Burke, who became the dean of Baltimore attorneys, and in the intervening years she retained a lively interest in the fortunes and misfortunes of this, the city of her birth in 1906. Though La Crosse has been the recipient of many gifts of substance from this outstanding family, far more significant were their contributions to the founding, building, development and advancement of the city of La Crosse in every area of activity. In January 1975 the Wisconsin Genealogical Society conferred one of its rare Century Certificates on the Hirshheimer family for more than a hundred years of productive contributions to the state.

What greater eulogy can be offered as a tribute to their passing than to relate the saga of this remarkable family.

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On a crisp and chilly spring day, April 17, 1856, two “prairie schooners,” each pulled by a yoke of oxen, rumbled into La Crosse by way of the primitive ridge road (approximating today’s Highway 61) from Prairie du Chien. The previous night’s rain had made the rutted road muddy and nearly impassable. It had taken them four days to cover the 60-mile distance, but this was considered rapid when com-
pared to the six days it had taken John M. Levy to blaze the trail a
decade earlier.

The driver of the first ox cart was a strong, intelligent, stocky man
of 44; this was Louis Hirshheimer, progenitor of a clan that was
destined to become one of the most important and best known
families, not only in La Crosse, but in all Wisconsin, Iowa, Min­
nesota, and the Dakota Territory as well. Certainly, they were the
most prominent Jewish family in this entire area’s history. The other
covered wagon was occupied by the Isaac Tuteur family, friends of the
Hirshheimers.

The prairie schooner was a lumber wagon, basically a long box, in
which was carried the family’s household furnishings and other be­
longings. This was covered with a canvas tarpaulin or oil cloth and
atop this nestled the women and smaller children. Louis walked
alongside the wagon, leading the oxen, occasionally relieved by his
two teen-age sons, Julius and Albert. With Louis were his 38-year-old
wife, Fannie Hart, whom he had married in Germany 20 years before,
four sons and one daughter, and his aged mother. Three more daugh­
ters were born to Fannie and Louis in La Crosse.

His mother, Mrs. Sarah Hindel Hirshheimer, was a frail but
hardy woman of 88 years who had seen and lived through much
trouble in her long life in Germany. She lived only two years after
their arrival in La Crosse and died here at the age of 90 in June, 1858.
Hers was the first burial in the Jewish cemetery. Her husband, Yosef
Hirshheimer, Louis’ father, had been the chief rabbi of his district in
Germany, a fine linguist and a learned Hebraic scholar. He had made
several retreats to Jerusalem and had died many years before in the
service of the synagogue.

Louis Hirshheimer, like thousands of other Jews, left Germany to
escape persecution and emigrated to the United States, in the after­
math of the Revolution of 1848. In their fatherland, the “Deutsche
Yehudim,” the German Jews, lived in poverty; political oppression
and ordinary day-to-day living were unbearable. There was nothing
for Jews in their German homeland; they had no choice but misery or
flight. So they fled. Between 1848 and 1850 more than 50,000 Ger­
man Jews had reached American shores and thousands more were on
the way. These Jews naturally came to New York first and most of
them stayed there or in other large eastern cities. The more adven­
turous, after earning sufficient funds to travel, came west to seek
their fortunes and establish their homes.
Most of those who eventually settled in La Crosse arrived between 1855 and 1875. They came by way of Cincinnati and Chicago and were on their way to St. Paul, but finding this area to their liking, decided to remain here. The first wave of German-Jewish immigration to La Crosse brought 22 families who settled here permanently. They found in La Crosse only two Jews, John and Fredericka Levy, who arrived in 1845. The Levy’s young son, Willie, died in an accident in 1849. Louis Hirshheimer was the first of the large group of German-Jewish immigrants that followed.

Louis was born in Wurtemmburg, Germany on December 13, 1812. He and his mother had managed to raise adequate funds for the voyage to America by selling most of their household belongings in Germany. It took them two months to cross the Atlantic in a small sailing vessel. Louis, then 33 years old, had the responsibility of supporting his family. After a brief stay in New York, they crossed the Hudson River to Newark, New Jersey, and then traveled by canal boat to Blairsville, Pennsylvania. When they reached the Allegheny Mountains, the canal boats, including passengers and freight, were hauled bodily up over the mountains with ropes.

The Hirshheimer family remained in Blairsville for nearly six years where Louis operated a small clothing manufacturing shop. Another son and daughter were born there to Fannie and Louis. Late in 1855, when they had accumulated sufficient money, they decided to seek their fortune in the west where opportunities seemed to be greater. His son, Albert, was later to say, “Father had caught the western fever.”

From Blairsville, the Hirshheimer and Tuteur families traveled by canal to Pittsburgh and from there by rail to Cincinnati. Louis’ grandson, Harry J. Hirshheimer, later related that while the families were in Cincinnati, “most of their hand baggage was stolen in the railroad depot while one of the party sat by, supposedly watching it!” This was a devastating loss, but it did not deter them from pressing on. They boarded another train in Cincinnati which brought them to Chicago and then to Prairie du Chien. From that frontier town they came overland to La Crosse by oxcart, though why they did not come by steamboat as most travelers did, we can only surmise. Perhaps the cost was more than they could afford, or maybe it was because Louis’ 88-year-old mother or six-month-old daughter Emma could not sail comfortably.
 Upon their arrival in La Crosse, Louis took his family to a boardinghouse on Mt. Vernon Street just east of Front. At first he opened a small clothing shop and put his 16-year-old son Albert in charge of it, while he and two other men built a small grist and sawmill near Front and State streets. The clothing shop failed the following year during the nationwide panic of 1857 and the small lumber business also teetered on the brink of failure. Lumber that had sold for $25 per 1,000 feet in 1856 dropped to $5 per 1,000 feet in 1858, and prices remained low until after the Civil War. The mill was operated only in the summer and in 1860 it burned down. During the lean years that followed, Louis and his two oldest sons, Julius and Albert, worked in the forests as timber choppers.

Albert Hirshheimer, Louis' second son, was the most notable member of the family during the subsequent decades when they flourished and prospered. Albert was born in Wurtemburg, Germany on August 14, 1840, a year after his brother Julius. He had to leave school at the age of 13 and go to work to help support the family. Albert did not like working in the woods cutting timber, so in 1858, at the age of 18, he began steamboating in the south during the winters. He started as a third cook and worked his way up to being a pilot on the Mississippi River between St. Louis and New Orleans.

When the Civil War broke out, Albert returned to La Crosse, intending to visit with his family briefly before enlisting in the Union Army. He found that his brothers, Julius and Henry, had already joined the army and were gone from home. Thus he was the only grown-up son left to help support the family, so he remained at home and got a job working as a blacksmith in a small plow shop on Third Street near Vine. During the summers of 1862 and 1863 he operated a small steamboat, the "Elipse," on the Root River, and in 1864 he returned to work in the Bantam and Barclay plow shop.

The primitive shops of the blacksmith, the wagonmaker, the carpenter and the tinsmith could no longer supply the needs of the pioneers and soon plow-makers and foundries appeared on the scene. In May 1865 Albert bought the company from his employers for $1,530. That was the beginning of the La Crosse Plow Company which eventually became the largest manufacturing firm in the entire area until it was acquired by Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company nearly 65 years later. Albert Hirshheimer must receive credit for the phenomenal growth of the agricultural implement industry in this area during that period.
The Hirshheimer Plow Works had its real beginning in a small frame building, 20 by 30 feet, on the east side of Front Street between State and Vine. Its complete equipment consisted of two forges, two anvils, a small horizontal hand-operated bench drill, an emery wheel, and some hand tools. With this scant machinery Albert Hirshheimer began to manufacture the horse-drawn walking plow.

By 1870 Albert had acquired five lots on the west side of Third Street between La Crosse and Badger streets, where he erected a new plow shop of stone and brick, 40 by 110 feet. In 1871 a three-story building, 40 by 150 feet, was built adjacent to the original shop. Atop this structure, in October 1872, there was placed the distinctive red, white and blue "Big Plowman" sign. This was a larger-than-life representation of a red-shirted, blue-trousered, double-fisted man, holding a plow, presumably obeying the captioned divine injunction to "put thy hand to the plow." For over a quarter of a century this sign was a well-known landmark throughout the entire area. It was removed in the fall of 1898 when the building was demolished to make way for new construction.
The year 1890 saw additional construction and four years later more buildings were erected. By 1895 the La Crosse Plow Company covered 75,000 square feet, more than 125 times larger than the space it had started with 30 years earlier. A news report of the day said “Every department of the building is lighted with electricity generated by the company’s own dynamo. And it has three elevators: a belt elevator, a hand elevator, and a steam elevator.” Two additional five-story brick buildings and a smaller two-story structure were erected on Third Street by 1898. By 1907, the La Crosse Plow Company employed 300 skilled workers and had a capital of $200,000 which was considered a very large sum at that time.

Progress and prosperity continued for the next 15 years and Albert Hirshheimer manufactured, in addition to agricultural implements of all kinds, iron fences, railings, shutters, cornices, pillars, door frames and safes. And he produced hundreds of thousands of “drift bolts” which were used in building log dams, cribs, piers, and
railroad ties. These bolts were made of iron, about 5\%-inch in diameter and 10 to 18 inches long. They could be driven directly into logs or timbers to fasten two pieces together without requiring that holes be bored first to accommodate them.

In 1877 Hirshheimer built the largest plow ever produced anywhere. It was called the "Monster Plow," weighed 2,500 pounds and had an 18-foot beam. The Milwaukee Railroad had it built to order, to be used in Minnesota and the Dakota Territory in constructing their road which was expanding to the west. This huge plow removed as much earth within a specified time as would have taken 2,000 men to dig by hand in the same period of time.
The firm was incorporated in 1893 with Albert Hirshheimer as president, and his 22-year-old son, Harry J., as vice-president. His second son, Louis C., became secretary-treasurer in 1900. During the last decade of the 19th century, the complex of five-story brick buildings which became familiar landmarks to later generations in La Crosse was completed on Third Street between La Crosse and Pine. The summer of 1971 witnessed the final stages of razing these significant industrial landmarks in order to provide new construction sites for the city's urban renewal project.

In the meantime, Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company of Milwaukee had grown very large and diversified in its production and had acquired many firms across the nation. By 1914 they had developed an electric-power-driven tractor to replace the horse-drawn vehicles. In expanding its tractor division, Allis-Chalmers began a search to procure a firm which had already established reliability in the manufacture of first-class tillage implements. The La Crosse Plow Company with its enviable reputation was the logical choice. Allis-Chalmers purchased the company in 1929, five years after Albert's death. During that five-year period Harry J. Hirshheimer was the president of the firm. In 1947 Allis-Chalmers bought
the Hirshheimer Foundry on the north side which had been owned and operated by Louis C. Hirshheimer and his son Robert.

The Hirshheimer empire had come to an end, but its impact upon the industrial and economic development of La Crosse was immeasurable, and Albert Hirshheimer is to this day considered the most important individual business tycoon in La Crosse history.
The Hirshheimer Saga, Part Two

One of Albert Hirshheimer's biographers, a man who had almost daily contact with him for more than 30 years, said, "Men invariably held him in the highest esteem as a man of strict integrity, rare business ability, and loyalty to those with whom he came into contact." His civic spirit was demonstrated when Hirshheimer said, "This country cannot be run successfully if its good citizens shirk their responsibilities and service to their communities."

In addition to his phenomenal success in building the La Crosse Plow Company from a tiny one-room shack into a huge industrial complex, Hirshheimer was involved in many other business ventures as well. He was one of the founders of the La Crosse Rubber Mills in 1894 and its first president; indeed it was mostly his money that started the company. He was also president for several years of the Batavian National Bank (today First Bank), president of the La Crosse Board of Trade (precursor of the Chamber of Commerce), president of the Manufacturers and Jobbers Association, president of the Board of Education, and he was on the boards of several insurance companies, as well as vice-president of the Pioneer Implement Company of Council Bluffs, Iowa. He started the La Crosse Tin Can Company and the Sta-Right Engine Company, both of which flourished in this city for many years, and he was active in numerous other business and civic organizations. In addition, he had investments in business enterprises as far south as Missouri and as far west as Oregon. His granddaughter, Mrs. Alberta Burke, in one of her letters wrote, "Grandfather was often accused of being a millionaire, a fact which he vehemently denied." Then she added wryly, "But I'm afraid it was true."

Hirshheimer even ran for mayor one term at the insistence of friends, but he refused to campaign seriously or personally and so did not win the election. One of the charges aimed against him by his opponent was that he wore "silk socks," a charge he passionately contradicted, saying he wore only wool socks knitted by his wife. Though he was never mayor, he exercised civic influence by being an alderman and supervisor for several years. He belonged to the Democratic party, but usually voted for the man he felt was best suited for the office. In 1901 he explained that on two occasions he voted Republican—for Abraham Lincoln because he stood for equality of all men,
The Hirshheimer Saga, Part Two

and for William McKinley because he offered economic stability to
the country.

He was especially well-known for his fairness in all matters and
was always ready to listen to the other side even when his own
opinion was markedly different. His attitude in this regard was
summed up in his own words, “Always do what is the square thing.”

One day late in the autumn of 1903, Albert Hirshheimer, then 63
years old, drove his horse and buggy to a hovel in a poor part of town,
where an old man of 85, too proud to accept charity, was selling part of
his household belongings to obtain money to buy coal for the ap­
proaching winter. Hirshheimer came away from the sale with an
armful of books in which he had no interest whatever, yet he had
insisted upon paying an exorbitant price for them, maintaining that
they were very valuable to him. Later, when his wife asked him why
on earth he had purchased books for which he had no use, he exp­
ained that when he was a youngster nearly a half century before, he
had helped himself to a watermelon from the old man’s melon patch.
Through all the ensuing decades Hirshheimer had been seeking an
opportunity to quietly repay the man for that purloined melon and at
last his chance had come. Albert Hirshheimer did what was the
“square thing.” He also sent two large loads of coal to the old man,
anonymously.

A deeply religious man, Hirshheimer exemplified and practiced
in his daily life the ethical teachings of his Jewish faith. Though some
of the family did not adhere strictly to the rigorous symbolism of their
religion, all of them complied scrupulously to the moral tenets of
Judaism. Never did even a whisper of scandal taint their name.
Albert Hirshheimer was one of the early presidents of Anshe Chesed
Congregation Synagogue (Hebrew for People of Kindness) and even
acted as cantor on some occasions. He was also president of the La
Crosse Jewish Cemetery Association for several years, which he was
instrumental in establishing.

Hirshheimer was especially solicitous of the welfare of his em­
ployees and treated them with consideration and kindness. He was
described by them as "the best of bosses.” He formed the La Crosse
Plow Company Mutual Relief Association long before such organiza­
tions became popular. It was composed of and operated by the factory
workers, but Hirshheimer’s contributions to this cause were far
beyond those paid by present-day industries. There were no labor
unions in those days, yet Plow Company employees received practically the same benefits enjoyed by today's organized labor. Albert inaugurated compensation laws within his own domain a generation before it became the law of the land.

Because of his integrity and scrupulous honesty, Hirshheimer earned and retained the confidence not only of his employees, but of everyone with whom he transacted business. He created good will and prosperity for the entire La Crosse community as well as for his company and himself. He was described as "a leading figure in the commercial and industrial life of La Crosse and permanently identified with the development and growth of the city."

An interesting sidelight on the character of this remarkable man is related by his granddaughter, Alberta Burke. On his birthday, August 14th, each year, instead of receiving gifts, he gave gifts to all the members of his family. Usually these took for the form of round-trip railroad fares to Chicago and tickets to the opera or theatre there. For his employees he closed his factory that day and gave a huge picnic for them and their families, furnishing food and drink in great quantities and arranging fine recreation and games.

Albert married Dora Fox on June 27, 1869; she was one of the five daughters of Henry Fox, a Jewish shoe merchant in La Crosse. He was then 28 and his bride 21. The ceremony was performed by Rabbi Lipmansohn of Cincinnati and the wedding was a great social event. A report at the time described it as a "perfect match." They had four
children: two sons, Louis C. and Harry J., and two daughters, Bertha and Miriam; a fifth child died in infancy. An adopted orphaned niece of Mrs. Hirshheimer, Dora Marshall, lived with them and was raised as their own child.

In 1895 Dora Fox Hirshheimer died and two years later Albert married her younger sister, Sara Fox, with whom he lived until his death in 1924. Late in life he said he was the only man he knew who had celebrated two silver wedding anniversaries with two sisters, which indeed he had — with Dora Fox in 1894 and with Sara Fox in 1922.

The Hirshheimer home on the southeast corner of Sixth and Vine streets was known within the family as "The House." It was built in 1878 by F. H. Weston from whom Hirshheimer bought it in 1880. In 1890 he enlarged and remodeled it and it became one of the residential showplaces of La Crosse. It remained in the Hirshheimer family for over half a century, until 1932, when Mrs. Hirshheimer sold it to the Blaschke Funeral Home. It is anachronistic that when she died at the age of 77 in 1937, her own funeral was held from the Blaschke northwest parlor which had for so many years been her private sitting room.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Though many members of the Hirshheimer family lived in fine homes in various parts of La Crosse, they always gathered at The House for family celebrations, holidays, and for funerals as well. Mrs. Burke reports that frequently on chilly autumn and winter evenings Grandfather Albert would gather his grandchildren about him in his library in front of the fireplace. There, ensconced in his big leather chair while the children sat on cushions on the floor, he would read to them from the classics and poetry. Often he would read Shakespeare to them and then the children would take the roles of various characters in the plays and read the parts aloud. In their youthful years, Hirshheimer instilled in his children and grandchildren a love for good music and great literature.

Hirshheimer House, 6th & Vine Streets, about 1910

Albert Hirshheimer’s interest in bettering the standard of living of La Crosse’s citizens lay not only in improving the educational system but in raising health standards as well. He fought and won the battle to increase the size of the city’s first real high school on Eighth and Main streets and the improvement of its curriculum.

He was responsible too for the sinking of deep sand wells to bring pure water to the city. At the time, the city was pumping its water directly from the Mississippi River and when Hirshheimer found that
"indescribable filth" was being drawn into the inlet to the city's water pipes, he waxed indignant and publicly expressed his feelings with vehemence. To appease him the city installed a small filtering system which Hirshheimer considered inadequate and unsatisfactory. It was nothing more than a wire mesh placed over the water pipe outlet. He then instituted an investigation, at his personal expense, to study how other cities handled similar problems. When he discovered that sinking of deep sand wells would be the most effective solution to the city's water problem, he promptly supervised and installed such wells, at his own expense, a system which to this day provides us with pure water. Against great odds and the opposition of some of the city's leaders he once again had fought and won the "lone-hand fight."

Hirshheimer's two sons went into the Plow Company business with their father. One of them, Harry J. Hirshheimer, in addition to being an astute businessman, has always been recognized as one of La Crosse's foremost historians, and was an important member and officer of the La Crosse County Historical Society, which published a number of his papers. He was co-author with Professor Albert H. Sanford of "A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1841-1900." One of the most valuable history research tools to be found in the city was part of
Harry Hirshheimer's legacy to the city — his detailed informational card index of every newspaper published in La Crosse between 1853 and 1935, now part of the La Crosse Public Library's archives. His fine collection of Indian artifacts was given to the Wisconsin State College (now University of Wisconsin-La Crosse) after his death in 1952, where they have served a dual purpose as research materials and display items.

Harry J. Hirshheimer married Azalia West in 1894; they produced three sons and one daughter. The daughter, Mrs. Frank T. Hodgdon, Jr. (nee Dora J. Hirshheimer) of Cleveland was the women's page editor of The La Crosse Tribune in the mid-1920's. A son, also named Albert, became a well-known physician in Dayton, Ohio.

Albert's second son, Louis C., a graduate in mechanical engineering from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, was likewise successful in the plow company's ministrations and later in his own foundry on the North Side. Louis C. was considered a leading authority on Indian history and lore of the La Crosse area and had what was probably the largest and finest collection of artifacts of the Plains Indians in this part of the country. These accumulations of Indian basketry, unusual beadwork, feathers, and leather are of special interest to students of American Indian life. They were given to the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison after his death and have been on almost constant display there. Louis C. married Joanna Schwerin in 1905 and they had two children: a daughter, Alberta Louise, and a son, Robert. Albert and Louis were preferred names in the Hirshheimer families and when the first-born of Louis C. and Joanna was a girl, she was given the female counterparts of these names, Alberta Louise. Alberta, a graduate of Goucher College in Baltimore and a graduate student of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, was an avid collector of rare literary works and a recognized authority on Jane Austen. Indeed, her collections of early and first editions of Austen is considered the finest in the country. Her collection of original Austen manuscripts was given to the J. Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City after her death, while her rare Austen first editions and other literary treasures were willed to her alma mater.

Robert was a graduate mechanical engineer from Carnegie Tech and a Phi Beta Kappa. At the time of his death in 1967, he was an oil research engineer for Mobil Oil Co.
There was another Louis Hirshheimer, who was the son of Morris, Albert's younger brother. Both Louis C. and Louis, first cousins, were born in 1879; the former died in 1933 and the latter in 1965. The Morris Hirshheimer branch of the family did not enter the agricultural implement manufacturing business, but became producers of canvas goods. Many people today still remember the Hirshheimer Tent and Awning Company on Third Street between Main and State. And they remember too the genial, white-haired gentleman so well-liked by everyone, who owned and operated the company.

Among other illustrious Hirshheimers, one in particular must be mentioned — Julius. He was a year older than Albert, born in 1839. He fought in the Union Army throughout the Civil War. While in New Orleans he was imprisoned for his candidly expressed opinions and public speeches in favor of the North — a courageous, but perhaps foolhardy, action. After living in several cities after the Civil War, Julius returned to La Crosse in 1878 with his wife, Amelia, where he practiced law until 1901. When his wife died at the turn-of-the-century, Julius was already past 60, but he left La Crosse and traveled to Oregon where he remarried and sought further fortune and adventure.

There can be no doubt that the Hirshheimer family was one of the most notable and distinguished families in La Crosse, and Albert was the titan of them all.

C. W. Dickinson, one of Albert's closest friends and business associates, spoke of him as "one of the great men of the city, state, and nation." The Hirshheimer clan played a most significant role in La Crosse's industrial development, in improving its economy, in giving secure employment to thousands of citizens, in raising the people's standard of living, and in increasing the city's educational, cultural, and social values.

With the passing of this family there ended an important era in the city's history, a city built in no small part upon the solid foundation laid by the first Louis Hirshheimer when he rumbled in an oxcart into the day-old city of La Crosse on April 17, 1856.
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

Mr. Levy and the Indians

The American Indians, like the blacks, have been maligned, mistreated and regarded with supercilious condescension at the hands of white Americans. Since the invasion of Indian ancestral homelands, white men have dispossessed their red brothers of their land, tricking them into selling much of it for a mere pittance. Their status since has been steadily and ruthlessly diminished. Only within the recent past have forceful Indian leaders come forth to assert their rightful standing in this country and are now contesting their mistreatment and demanding full equality in the community.

In all fairness, however, it must be admitted that the Indians have not been entirely blameless. As far back as 1845 when the La Crosse area was little more than an arid treeless prairie, the white men's prejudice against their red neighbors was prevalent. The Indians were keenly aware of this bias and resented it. They were convinced that prior treaties were unfair and that they had been ousted from their native lands and often bilked of their property. It was only natural that they should respond in kind and whenever the opportunity presented itself they struck back at the whites, stealing from them, cheating them, often harming them physically and sometimes even killing them. They showed no remorse for their murderous actions because they felt justified in their actions.

The intransigence of some of the Indians was evidenced by the wily tactics they employed in revenging themselves against their white neighbors. On one occasion a group of Indian fur trappers had amassed an unusually large accumulation of valuable furs which they held at their encampment at the foot of the bluffs outside the prairie village limits. They made known their wish to negotiate a sale of these pelts.

John M. Levy, a prominent businessman who had come to La Crosse in 1845 and established a trading post and inn at Front and Main streets, advised the Indian representatives that he would arrive at their camp the following day to barter for the furs. Early the next morning, on a cold February day, Levy and his young assistant, Isaac Marks, left with a sleigh and a team of horses for the Indian encampment, arriving there in the late afternoon. They proposed that the fur trade negotiations be postponed until the following day, but the Indians were insistent that it take place promptly, as it was
still daylight. By nightfall the trade had been negotiated and the pelts packed on the Levy sleigh. Levy and Marks then left for their own camp to spend the night.

While the sale was in progress, Marks, who understood the Indian dialect, overheard them conspiring to visit the Levy camp during the night, to steal back the furs. They planned to kill the two white men and dispose of their bodies, thus they would have obtained both the furs, which they could sell a second time, and the money as well. Marks informed Levy of this plot and instead of following their original plan to spend the night in their camp and leave for La Crosse in the morning, they took a different route and drove through the bitterly cold night. They arrived in La Crosse at daylight the following morning. When the Indians arrived at the Levy camp at midnight to carry out their nefarious scheme and found their quarry gone, they were furious with rage at having been foiled.

Fredericka Levy's encounter with an Indian squaw which illustrates the possible treachery of which the Indians were capable is told in the story of this intrepid lady later in this book.

The Treaty of 1846, under the aegis of President James Polk, ordained that the Indians were to be removed west of the Mississippi River within a period of eight months. The Indians bitterly opposed this action and refused to leave. This was their ancestral home and many of their ceremonies and superstitions were based on their belief in the Mississippi River as a deity.

In the spring of 1848 an executive order was issued through the Commission for Indian Affairs setting June 30, 1848 as the final date for full evacuation of the Indians. The Indians had established an excellent rapport with John Levy whom they addressed as Squire Levy. Despite some unfortunate incidents with the Indians, Levy had shown compassion and understanding of their problems, so they naturally gravitated to him for help when the matter of their imminent removal arose.

In May 1848 the Indian chiefs asked Levy for permission to visit him in his home to discuss the matter. Levy acquiesced on one condition — that the Indians remain sober and restrained during the conference. The following day the river was filled with canoes bearing Indians painted and decorated with feathers, all in a warlike mood. They landed at La Crosse at the foot of Main Street and proceeded to march in a body to Levy's house. Levy had left his home
to take care of a business matter and had neglected to tell Mrs. Levy of the planned conference. That good lady seeing the horde of approaching Indians in full war regalia through the window, locked the doors and barricaded herself in the bedroom for safety. Finding the doors and windows locked, they pounded on the walls and demanded admittance. John Levy had in the meantime returned home and told his wife that he had invited them, and they were then allowed to enter the house. For more than two hours they remained in the Levy dining room, conducting their powwow, smoking and spitting everywhere, but they kept their promise and refrained from drinking. Their vile manners did not endear them to Mrs. Levy. At last they left peacefully and returned in a body to the river, entered their canoes and rowed back to their camps.

John Levy agreed to enter a plea to the federal authorities in Washington on behalf of his Indian friends. He addressed his letter to President Polk urging him to rescind the executive order. He explained the traumatic effect removal of the Indians would have, not only on the redmen but on the white settlers as well. William Medill, Commissioner of Indian Affairs replied to Levy in the strictest terms and advised him not to meddle in government matters. He said that if Levy in any way impeded the Indian removal, the government would deal very harshly with him.

Levy being a law-abiding citizen, arranged for the departure of the Indians, and assigned Isaac Marks and two others to accompany them across the Mississippi into Dakota territory. Levy had complied with the law. The Treaty of 1846 stated that the removal was to be permanent, but the Indians did not take this seriously. Some six months later a few of them crossed the river and returned to their former camps. As time progressed, more and more of them trickled back to their original haunts; indeed this return continued until nearly 1880.

John Levy made no attempt to dissuade or prevent the Indians from returning, nor did he communicate further with the authorities in Washington. Once the law about their removal had been obeyed, the Indian Affairs office apparently made no further inspections or surveillance to determine whether the Indians remained in their new territory. John Levy remained the best friend the Indians had in the La Crosse area.

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The Intrepid Fredericka A. Levy

One blustery February day in 1848, with the temperature hovering at zero after a heavy snowfall, an Indian woman came to the Levy home to make what she pretended to be a sociable call on Fredericka. She held out her hand to Mrs. Levy who was not fooled by this friendly gesture. She knew that too often these outward manifestations of good will were suspect and obscured an ulterior motive. She knew also that some Indians had a penchant for thievery, often very open. Fredericka was wearing an opal ring, a prized gift from her husband, and she surmised that the Indian woman would try to pull it off while holding her hand. Mrs. Levy shook her head no and tried to enter the store in the next room, but the squaw planted herself in the doorway and would not let her pass. Fredericka did what came naturally — she screamed. This brought several men running from the far end of the store and they promptly ejected the Indian woman. Finding her Indian brave waiting outside convinced them that he had sent his wife to call upon Mrs. Levy in order to steal something of value.

A little later, while the Levys were having their noonday meal, they heard a woman screaming outside. When they ran outside to determine the cause of the commotion, they saw the tall Indian brave leaning with his face toward the house with his blanket draped around his figure. His squaw could not be seen but her shrieking continued from beneath the blanket. John Levy knew immediately what had transpired and went to the Indian woman’s assistance. As he saw Levy approaching, the Indian turned and spit something into the snow and ran off. It was his wife’s nose that he had spit out! He was angry with her, apparently because she had come out of the Levy house empty-handed and he had bitten off her nose as punishment. Many Indians were known to “fight dirty” and one of their favorite fighting tricks was to bite off an adversary’s ear or nose. Deep scratching, pulling out handfuls of hair, breaking fingers and gouging out eyes were also frequently employed in fights.

Levy ran into the house and got his plug of chewed tobacco which he had laid aside while having his meal. He pushed this piece of saliva-soaked tobacco into the squaw’s gaping and bleeding wound to arrest the flow of blood and tied it in place with a rag. Strangely, the nose healed without infection, though the squaw was disfigured for life. After that, John Levy and his famous “chaw of tobaccy” were
often called upon to render medical assistance and he never lost a patient. Mrs. Levy tended the Indian woman during her recovery, then engaged her to help with the housework and she turned out to be a faithful servant and remained with the Levys until the federal government forcefully removed the Indians from the area.

The Levys were known throughout the area for their exceptional hospitality and kindness. Anyone coming to La Crosse who needed food and shelter or even clothing, were given whatever was required whether they could pay for it or not. The Levys never questioned anyone's honesty and those who accepted their hospitality were expected to make reimbursement whenever they could, if not to the Levys then to someone else. Needless to say, many unscrupulous people took advantage of them. This never troubled the Levys because they knew what they had done what was right. Levy extended credit unstintingly to both white men and Indians and sometimes was never repaid, but he never worried about that; his natural humanitarian instincts repaid him tenfold.

While her husband was away, Mrs. Levy not only tended the store, warehouse, inn and tavern, but prepared meals and rooms at all hours of the day and night. She also cooked and cleaned and mended clothing for the scores of rivermen and others who came through La Crosse. And all the while she had to deal with Indians, many of whom, like the rivermen, were often drunk and troublesome, and some of whom stole anything they could lay their hands on. It was their custom to often enter a home without knocking and to help themselves to whatever they wanted. Though Fredericka was often afraid, she never showed her fear outwardly. She was indeed an intrepid and courageous woman. And with all of her innumerable duties, she still found time to take care of her five-year-old son and taught him his alphabet and sums. Fredericka Augusta Levy was the first truly liberated woman of La Crosse, accepting and fulfilling what was considered a man's work as well as what she considered her womanly duties.

Fredericka, a strong woman of medium size, had a ruddy skin, high cheekbones and piercing black eyes. She wore her dark hair as most women of her time did, parted in the center and drawn smoothly down the sides of her head and fastened at the nape of her neck in a bun. Her middle name was Augusta and she was called "Gussie" by her close friends. Her duties, besides being wife and mother, along
with the strenuous housekeeping chores of those early days, were to work alongside her husband in almost everything he did. Nearly every day in their pioneering lives they had to deal with horse thieves, murderers, drunken Indians, and pugnacious traders bent upon mischief, as well as scheming neighbors and other unsavory characters. Some of the incidents in their lives would make many of today's TV-westerns pale in comparison. Despite these undesirable, though frequent, occurrences in their lives, John and Fredericka had many happy times with friendly, helpful neighbors as well.

It must be added parenthetically that until this date, historians have referred to Mrs. Levy only as Augusta, perhaps because her husband called his hotel the Augusta House and because of her nickname Gussie. The inscription on her tombstone is clear evidence that her name was Fredericka, and who would know her real name better than her husband, who set up the stone.

Throughout history there have been strong-minded, indeed strong-armed, women who brooked no nonsense and demanded and often fought physically for what they thought was theirs. Mrs. George Fetterlein, a neighbor of the Levys, was such a woman. Mrs. John Levy, too, was no mollycoddle person, though she was more ladylike in her actions than her neighbor.
The Fetterleins were among La Crosse's earliest settlers, arriving here shortly after Nathan Myrick. They lived in a log cabin on Front Street between State and Main streets, though at that time streets had not yet been named.

John Levy issued considerable credit to George Fetterlein at the trading post he operated with Samuel Snaugh. Later, when Levy and Snaugh dissolved their partnership, Levy paid Snaugh his fair share and assumed the debits as his own burden. Levy assured Fetterlein he would not press him for the money owed, and that he could repay his debt whenever and in whatever amounts he could afford.

One day Fetterlein asked Levy if he would accept a cow in full payment of the amount he owed. Levy agreed and the debt was canceled. When Fetterlein delivered the cow he informed Levy it had given birth to a calf, which he offered to sell to Levy. Levy accepted the offer and paid for the calf. The following morning Levy appeared at the Fetterlein home with a rope and proceeded to tether the calf prior to leading it to his own house.

At that moment Mrs. Fetterlein came out of her house, approached Levy in a terrible rage, and shouted that he could not take the calf. She screamed that it was hers and demanded that he leave the premises immediately without the calf or she would have his head on a platter. Levy attempted to tell Mrs. Fetterlein that her husband had sold him the calf and that it was paid for. But in her fury, the lady heard not a word that Mr. Levy uttered and she continued to castigate him in the most unladylike terms. In the word battle that ensued, poor Mr. Levy was definitely the loser.

To make certain that he understood her intent, she grabbed a stout straw broom leaning against the back door of her house and proceeded to pummel Levy over the head and shoulders, all the while screaming epithets at him. He fled her wrath and her premises and ran across the prairie toward his own home, with the enraged Mrs. Fetterlein in hot pursuit. Just when he thought he had outdistanced her and was safe, he stumbled and lost one of his shoes. Mrs. Fetterlein caught up with him and began once more to beat him over the head and shoulders and back. Being handicapped running with only one shoe he kicked the other one off and once more outran her. Soon he arrived breathless at his own home, in his stocking feet, and ran into the house and bolted the door.

Mrs. Levy, no weakling herself, came out and confronted the irate
Mrs. Fetterlein and told her in the strongest terms to be gone or she
would find herself the victim she had tried to make of John. Mrs.
Fetterlein recognizing that she had met her match, left, fearful of an
encounter with Mrs. Levy.

After Mrs. Fetterlein was out of sight, Mrs. Levy retraced her
husband’s flight across the prairie and found his shoes and brought
them triumphantly back to him.

Late that afternoon, George Fetterlein arrived at the Levy house
shamefacedly leading the calf that John had purchased and paid for
and apologized for his wife’s behavior. Later in his life John Levy
confessed “That happened many years ago, but I shall never forget it.
I was really afraid that crazy woman would have my head.”

In 1849, a great tragedy visited John and Fredericka Levy. Their
seven-year-old son, Willie, their only son, was killed. It was the first
accidental death in La Crosse. While leading his horse down the steep
rocky embankment to the river for watering, the horse stumbled and
Willie fell with him. The horse stepped on Willie’s head and crushed
his skull; the boy died in his mother’s arms two days later on August
5, 1849. Fredericka was inconsolable about the loss of her child. Her
husband took her on a trip by boat to St. Louis hoping that it might
help to divert her grief. But within a week she became ill and very
despondent and when they reached Galena, Illinois, she begged John
to take her back home. The return boat made no stop at La Crosse so
they had to travel all the way to St. Paul and then took another boat
back to La Crosse.

When they returned home Fredericka threw herself strenuously
into her work trying to forget her sorrow. Some 20 years later, in
1869, the Levys adopted two children, a boy and a girl. When the
adopted son, Theodore, reached manhood he worked with his father
briefly, then moved to Burlington, Iowa where he was employed by
the Burlington Railroad. Theodore’s son, William, named after little
Willie, later came to La Crosse and lived and worked with his grand­
father until the latter’s death. Nothing is known of the adopted
daughter except that she became a Mrs. Cox and moved to Winona
and later to Waterloo, Iowa.

Fredericka Levy embodied the hardiest and most admirable qual­
ities of the pioneer woman and contributed tremendously to the
development of the city and to the status of women therein.
In 1830, Thomas Carlyle, the eminent British historian and essayist, wrote: "The history of the world is but the biography of great men." La Crosse has had its share of great men whose lives have surely shaped it into the city it is today, and their biographies would indeed recount the history of our community. One of the most prominent of these pioneers was John M. Levy, yet today his name is scarcely known locally. Nearly everyone has heard of Nathan Myrick, Thomas Stoddard, Mons Anderson, and others, but Mr. Levy's name has faded almost into obscurity. Lesser men than he have had schools, parks, and streets named after them, and they have deserved the honors and remembrances. But Levy, one of the titans who helped to carve the city's destiny, has been all but forgotten.

John Levy was descended from the tribe of the Levites of the Old Testament, from which his name was derived. The Levites were the attendants upon the high priests in King Solomon's Temple, surely an ancient and distinguished ancestry. My own lineage reaches in a direct line to Aaron of the Old Testament, the first of the Kohanim, the high priests of the Temple. And so Mr. Levy and I join hands in our genealogical descent.

Though Levy lived and died long before I was born, I knew him personally; he was my good friend. There are hardly enough panegyric adjectives to describe this avuncular man: kind and compassionate, a man of impeccable honesty with an abundance of integrity, and altruistic almost to a fault. I have meticulously studied and analyzed nearly every word ever written about this remarkable man and nowhere have I found adverse criticism of him by his contemporaries or by those who came later. Yet, he was after all a human being, so he surely possessed some undesirable traits. I can think of but one or two: he chewed tobacco which displeased his good wife, Fredericka, and his appetite was perhaps a bit too hearty as is evidenced by his photographs. But these were faults of the flesh, not of the spirit or soul.

As one delves into early La Crosse history, the name of John Levy recurs in nearly every facet of the community's growth and development. La Crosse is indeed fortunate that Levy chose this locale in which to plant his roots.

John M. Levy arrived in Prairie Lacrosse (as it was then known)
in the fall of 1845, a scant three years after the arrival of Nathan Myrick. Though Myrick was our first white settler, he moved to St. Paul in 1849. Levy became the first permanent settler in La Crosse, living here continuously for 65 years, until his death in 1910 at the age of 90.

When Levy came here La Crosse was little more than a rough dirt road that ran parallel to the Mississippi River along the old Front Street. He found five log cabins occupied by eighteen persons—thirteen men and five women. Front Street was fifty precipitous rocky feet above the river level and there were only two foot paths leading to the river, one at the foot of State Street and the other at the foot of Pearl Street. Thence east to the bluffs for about two and one-half miles there was nothing but prairie land covered with sand-burs and sparsely scattered scrawny scrub oaks. On this prairie the Winnebago and Sioux Indians played the rough game of la crocée from which the city derived its name. The land at the foot of the bluffs and around the La Crosse and Black rivers was lush and fertile and timbered and here the Indian tribes camped, and here too was born the lumbering industry.

John Levy was born in London in February 1820, the son of a synagogue cantor. He was educated in London and Amsterdam. He graduated from Hammersmith University in London and from the Jewish Literary College in Amsterdam, both at a very early age. He then spent six years with an older sister in Paris. He came to America in 1837 and went almost directly to St. Louis where he worked in a general store for four years. His wife, Fredericka Gottlieb, was born in Germany in May 1820. She came to St. Louis in 1840 to live with an aunt and uncle. She met Levy when she came into his store to buy some dress goods. John was greatly attracted to the dark-haired girl and friendship soon blossomed into love. They married the following year when both were 21, and in 1842 they had a baby boy whom they named Willie.

Levy had heard tales from traders and salesmen about the great opportunities that were available to ambitious young men and that fortunes could be made farther north. So in 1844, with his wife and son he traveled up the Mississippi River to Prairie du Chien, which was then an important and thriving river town and the earliest trading post in the upper midwest. While in Prairie du Chien, Levy became ill and thus met Dr. Samuel Snaugh (pronounced Snow), an
early pioneer and associate of Nathan Myrick. Snaugh induced Levy to come to La Crosse with him, with the assurance that "no one could ever get sick in La Crosse." Leaving his family behind, Levy traveled overland with Snaugh to La Crosse with a team of oxen. They carried a supply of store goods with the intention of establishing a trading post in the new location. Levy and Snaugh were the first white men to make the trip overland; everyone else traveled by boat. It took the two men six days to cover the 60-mile distance. It was a difficult trip as there were no well-defined roads, only some Indian trails and a few deserted trappers' campsites along the way. Levy and Snaugh literally blazed the first road between Prairie du Chien and La Crosse and it was used for many years thereafter.

Shortly after his arrival, Levy bought Jacob Spaulding's land claim and shanty near the northwest corner of Front and Pearl Streets for $100 and with Snaugh as a partner, put up a store just north of the shanty, and began a brisk trade with the Indians. Levy spent the winter of 1845-1846 in La Crosse. In the spring he returned to Prairie du Chien for his family and brought them to La Crosse, this time journeying by boat. They arrived here on Fredericka's 26th birthday, May 28, 1846. Mrs. Levy later described their entourage as consisting of "my husband, myself, our four-year-old son, a horse, a cow, a dog, two cats, and a 'zipcoon' hitched onto a box of chickens, most of which he ate up on the voyage."

John Levy was a versatile man. During his lifetime of 90 years, 65 of which he lived in La Crosse, he was an Indian trader, storekeeper, hotelkeeper, warehouse owner, storage and forwarding commission merchant, grain dealer, Indian agent, banker, grocer, real estate operator, mail carrier, weed commissioner, circuit court doorkeeper, eight times alderman, city supervisor, three times mayor of La Crosse, and synagogue cantor. A strong, stocky, robust man, Levy had a florid complexion and a shock of light brown hair with long bushy sideburns. Always friendly and outgoing, benevolently inclined and peace-loving, he tried to avoid a fight when he thought it would serve no purpose, but when goaded beyond endurance, he became a formidable combatant and invariably emerged the victor.

John Levy, as Indian agent, felt great compassion for the plight of the Indians when the federal government issued an edict ordering their removal west of the Mississippi River. This incident is related in the article on the evacuation of the Indians in 1848, in chapter 69.
In 1847 Levy and Harmon Miller, Nathan Myrick's partner, went to the Democratic convention at Liberty Pole in Crawford County to nominate a representative for the state legislature. They were scheduled to begin their return trip to La Crosse the day after the convention. For some unknown reason, Miller, who apparently was somewhat of a scoundrel, got up at 4:00 a.m. and left by himself. When Levy arose two hours later and found Miller gone, he started for La Crosse alone on horseback. After a few hours, when he stopped to rest, his horse ran off, leaving Levy stranded alone in the middle of the forest with no transportation, no food, water, blankets — nothing. He was completely disoriented and without his compass did not even know in which direction to turn. He wandered about for three days, living on acorns and wild berries. His not inconsiderable knowledge of native plants stood him in good stead. On the third day he heard a steamboat whistle and knew he was near the river. He followed the sound of the whistle and soon came to the river, which he followed and eventually came to La Crosse. He arrived home starved and nearly naked as the underbrush had torn most of his clothing off during the 40-mile walk. Fredericka, was certain that her husband was dead, until little Willie, who had been playing outside saw his father
staggering up the road. He ran into the house shouting “Papa’s home! Papa’s home!” It was a warm and happy reunion indeed for the Levy family.

John, Fredericka and Willie were the only Jews in the small La Crosse community, but they did their best to observe the tenets of their forebears. The first religious services held in La Crosse were in June 1847, in the Levy home. But they were not Jewish services; they were Christian services conducted by Episcopal and Methodist itinerant preachers. Thus the first Christian ministrations in La Crosse were conducted in a Jewish home. John and Fredericka Levy had undoubtedly never heard of the word “ecumenism,” yet they were responsible for the first truly ecumenical act in La Crosse.

There were no churches in La Crosse at that time, but Levy, though Jewish, opened his home to all faiths for religious meetings and for secular gatherings as well. In the very early days in La Crosse, up until about 1900, people were not divided by their religious denominations. They were accepted or rejected for what they were in their daily relationships with their fellow man, not for the manner in which they worshipped God, nor for the religious rituals they practiced. In her reminiscences in 1888, Mrs. Levy wrote “Sociables and donation parties were given every week and were attended by members of all faiths. No differences existed among the different church members and different religions.”

In 1847, Levy made a contract with the federal government to carry the first U.S. mail between Prairie du Chien and Fort Snelling, Minnesota. Levy carried it between Prairie du Chien and La Crosse and his partner, Samuel Snaugh, made the northern end of the route from La Crosse to Fort Snelling. Each round trip took two weeks or more and each man was paid something less than $15. From this he had to provide his own transportation — horse, canoe, sled, or wagon, depending upon the season — and pay for lodging, meals and all other expenses incurred during the run.

In 1851 John Levy sold his property to Simeon Kellogg and on a lot just north erected the first frame building between Prairie du Chien and Red Wing, Minnesota. He helped to cut the timber for it himself and assisted in its construction. This served as their home and place of business.

During the first few years after Levy’s arrival, the city’s population grew slowly. But Levy continued a brisk trade with the Indians,
white fur traders and rivermen who came through the town. La Crosse was a natural stopping point for steamboats traveling from St. Louis to St. Paul and the Levy home became an inn, restaurant and tavern for those visitors.

The kind of man John Levy was is reflected in the fact that he could have been the first mayor of La Crosse in 1856, but instead let the office go to Thomas Stoddard. Levy lost the election by one vote because he had cast his vote for Stoddard. Had he voted for himself, the outcome would have been exactly reversed. Levy is reputed to have said, "How could I possibly not have voted for my friend Tom Stoddard." This story is recounted more fully in the article on the mayors of La Crosse, in chapter 11.

In accepting the mayoralty on April 10, 1860, Levy said: "In assuming the important duties of Mayor of the City of La Crosse, I can not but feel the weight of responsibility resting upon me. But, gentlemen, I shirk from no duty, turn my back to no undertaking, which will, in my judgment, promote the best interests of our city. This shall be my aim, for this object will I labor — Let not personal feeling or party spirit cause any of you for one moment to be unmindful of our great objective: the best interests of our city." Levy then proceeded to make recommendations for improving the city of La Crosse. Included were street grading, fire protection, taking care of the poor and needy, establishment of a dog pound, tree planting for city beautification, and other civic betterment projects.

Though he had never head of the word "ecology," Levy nevertheless was responsible for the first ecological regulation in the young city when he required the La Crosse Gas and Coke Company to move its gas works north of the city limits, to correct an air pollution problem which was at that time classified merely as a "nuisance."

What Levy said about the need for schools may be remembered by Americans everywhere in any period of time: "There is nothing better calculated to promote the best interests of our city than a good system of schools . . . To close the school houses is to open the jails and poor houses."

In the late 1850s La Crosse was a rough pioneer town with few laws and regulations. Visited by many transients most of whom were uncouth rivermen, fur traders, and the like, Front Street was the site of many saloons, brothels, and gambling houses.

In 1857, a group of men and women decided to clean up the river
area of what they considered undesirable elements. They formed a Vigilante Committee which was especially determined to remove the bawdy houses. The ladies therein were threatened that unless they left the city forthwith, they would be tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail. The committee invited John Levy to join their group in accomplishing their aim. Their opponents termed it a "dastardly deed." Levy told the vigilantes: "In a civilized society we do not tar and feather people, we do not run them out of town on a rail, no matter how distasteful we find their activities. No, my friends, we must speak to these ladies and advise them that we find their presence in our midst undesirable and invite them politely to leave the city. I will assume the responsibility of speaking to the ladies; I will appeal to their better instincts and ask them courteously to leave us."

Levy then proceeded to call upon the ladies and requested them affably and nicely to pack their belongings and to be out of the city by the following evening. If they did not comply, he told them, they might very well be seriously injured by angry citizens, perhaps some of them might even lose their lives. The "scarlet women" took Mr. Levy at his word, thanked him for his mannerly way of speaking, packed up their possessions, and promptly left La Crosse. They moved south of the city to Green Island (just behind the present site of Gundersen Clinic and Lutheran Hospital) where they proceeded to set up business as usual in tents. The following evening a long procession of local gentlemen were observed traveling south on horseback, in buggies, in rough wagons, and some even afoot, to visit their favorite ladies.

Perhaps as a result of the portent of evil inherent in the establishment of vigilantism in the pioneer city, Levy realized the need for law and order. Thus he helped to form the Light Guards in October 1858 and became one of its charter members. In the next few years the Light Guards, though they participated in some military drilling, seemed to give more attention to social functions, aided and abetted by the local dowagers and younger ladies as well. Levy disapproved of this attitude and his interest in the Guards languished. In all fairness, it must be added that when the Civil War started, the La Crosse Light Guards, now formed into Company B of the Wisconsin Infantry, acquitted themselves with distinction and bravery on the battlefields and many local men gave their lives in the cause of freedom.

Levy was deeply involved in every phase of the city’s growth —
economically, politically, militarily, religiously, culturally, socially. He was indeed a man for all people and for all worthy causes.

In addition to his many accomplishments, Levy built the first dock and the first wharfboat, a project which benefited the entire city for many years thereafter. He built one of the first, and certainly the largest, hotel in La Crosse in 1857, which he named the Augusta House, using his wife’s middle name. The hotel was on the northeast corner of Front and Pearl Streets; it was four stories high and contained 100 rooms. During the same year Levy established his own bank which failed within a few months during the nationwide Panic of 1857. Though the federal government issued an edict absolving all banks of financial responsibility to their creditors in case of failure, Levy repaid his customers and depositors dollar for dollar from his own savings and by selling all of his personal property and other assets. No one lost even a penny in Levy’s bank, but he himself was left penniless.

Along with his numerous civic duties and business interests, John Levy found time for his religion of Judaism of which he was justly proud and which he observed carefully. He was active in synagogue
affairs and on many Jewish holidays acted as cantor for his congregation. Besides being president of Congregation Anshe Chessed (Hebrew for People of Kindness), he worked for the erection of a new house of worship. He was also one of the first presidents of B’nai Brith, the nationwide Jewish men’s benevolent organization, a chapter of which still exists in La Crosse. He also helped to found the Hebrew Indigent, Sick and Burial Society and to establish the Jewish cemetery.

In his declining years Levy was appointed weed commissioner. He had always been something of an amateur botanist, a talent that kept him alive when he was lost in the forest after his first political jaunt to Liberty Pole. He was later appointed doorkeeper of the Circuit Court. Both were honorary posts given him to compensate for his many years of public service and to provide a small income for him in his old age. Characteristically, John Levy turned these honorary jobs into real working duties. In the twilight years of his life he was seen almost daily walking on the downtown streets of La Crosse wearing his tall, silk stovepipe hat (called a “tile” hat) and carrying his gold-headed cane.
John M. Levy, A Noble Man

And despite the many civic activities in his public life, his private life with his beloved Fredericka was exemplary. When she died at the age of 69 in 1890, an obituarist wrote: "Mr. Levy is very much overcome by his bereavement. The affection existing between this couple was deep and abiding. It was a pleasure to enter their home and note how sufficient to each other they were, how cheerful and contented through the long evenings alone. Their golden wedding jubilee to which he looked forward is not for this life; there remains only a tender memory." After his wife's death, Levy could not bear to return to their home on Fourth and Ferry streets which they had shared for so many happy years. It was sold and he lived his remaining twenty years in hotels.

When John Levy died on April 20, 1910, at the age of 90, Acting Mayor Joseph Houska issued a proclamation which read in part: "As a mark of respect to this venerable and distinguished citizen who was held in the highest esteem by all who knew him, it is decreed that the flag on City Hall be displayed at half mast, and all city offices be closed on the day of the funeral." His funeral was attended by nearly everyone in La Crosse; his pallbearers were twelve of the most prominent men in the city. Everyone left the cemetery after the funeral orations and services, and this great man was forgotten.

When Fredericka was interred, John erected an obelisk engraved only with the name of "Levy." At her grave he placed a small ground marker inscribed "Fredericka A. Levy, Beloved Wife of John M. Levy." followed by the dates of her birth and death. But for the next 66 years after his own interment, John Levy lay in an unmarked grave.

This troubled me, so as my personal Bicentennial project, I had the disintegrating marker for Fredericka removed, and three new matching marble markers placed beneath the Levy obelisk, one for John M. Levy, one for Fredericka A. Levy, and one for little Willie, their only son. And I had a Star of David engraved on the front of the Levy obelisk.

John Levy had earned and lost several fortunes during his lifetime in La Crosse; at his death he left practically no estate, but he owed no one. He left La Crosse far richer than he found it, rich not only in growth and development because of his efforts and drive, but rich because of his altruism and the spirit of love and dedication he gave to the city of his choice. He brought honor and distinction not
only to his Jewish compatriots, who were naturally very proud of him, but to the entire city of La Crosse to which he had given so unstintingly and generously of his means, his knowledge, but above all his love and caring for its people.
I never looked into his eyes;  
I never touched his hand;  
I never heard his voice;  
But I gazed into his soul  
And saw Nobility.

Excerpt from "Ode to Mr. Levy" by Myer Katz, 1976.
At first glance, it might appear somewhat anachronistic to present a historical chronology as the closing chapter of a series of vignettes of the past. Yet, upon reflection, it is really quite appropriate as each entry listed in this sequential compendium is in itself an event of historical significance.

Countries perish and governments succumb, but the life of man moves on inexorably, and each occurrence in his existence adds to the sum total of our history. Even the physiography of our area has been affected through natural causes over millions of years. On a local level, our ancestors in no small sense have changed the treeless, arid prairie that was La Crosse into the verdant, viable community in which we now live. Each of the events in their lives has importantly affected us today. We may be assured that these changes will continue ad infinitum through the combined actions of nature and man.

The listings in this chronology are admittedly arbitrary. They will not, indeed should not, always conform with the opinions of others. Readers will, to be sure, discover omissions and commissions in my sequences. These inclusions and exclusions are mine alone and I assume full responsibility for them.

A valiant attempt has been made to achieve totality and accuracy, both of which are nigh impossible in this kind of report. It should be remembered that it is virtually insuperable to include every happening during a three-century period that will meet with universal approval. To achieve ultimate accuracy and absolute completeness is a goal only to be dreamed of, but hardly ever attained.

Early records are imperfect and scant, often non-existent. Even when available, they are frequently self-serving, exaggerated and sometimes purchased for publication and thus not always reliable. Confusion prevails and differences of opinion exist even among competent and conscientious historians, when applied to the same terms of reference.
Errors occur, yet with the expenditure of time and effort, can be obviated. For example, throughout our own history, Mrs. John Levy was always referred to as Augusta, when indeed her name was Fredericka. This error was revealed when I visited the Levy plot in Oak Grove Cemetery and found the following inscription on her tombstone: “Fredericka Beloved Wife of John Levy.” Who would better know her first name than her husband who prepared the epitaph.

Each event in this compilation has been presented with brevity; in some cases one terse statement without embellishment seemed sufficient. In other inclusions, some detail is given, yet is stated concisely without gratuitous corollary. To spare the reader the effort of perusing the entire chronology to piece together the history of one fact, I have instead combined the entire past of that occurrence briefly under the first date when it occurred. For example, the history of the Mons Anderson house covers the period of 1854 to 1984, with several significant happenings during that time. Rather than report each occurrence under the year when it happened, I have incorporated all the events under the first year when it appears in our history.

Dates, though of utmost importance to the chronologist, can often be perplexing. I have, however, made the greatest effort possible to present dates meticulously insofar as they are properly recorded in available references.

Here, then, is a chronology of La Crosse over the 300-year period, 1680 to 1980. I trust that it will serve the interests and needs of my readers.
The Chronology

"Without a trustworthy chronology, history would be but a darksome chaos."

 Francois Clément, 18th century French historical chronologist.

1680 -
A group of Frenchmen, under the leadership of Father Louis Hennepin, a Catholic missionary, were the first white persons to view the mouth of the Black River and the site which later became La Crosse.

1685 -
Nicholas Perrot explored the upper Mississippi River, settling near Trempealeau.

1787 -
Winnebago Chief Decorah was the first resident on the site of La Crosse.

1805 -
Major Zebulon Pike was the first white man to visit the La Crosse area. In 1817 Major Stephen H. Long visited here; and in 1823 Lieut. Martin Scott also visited the area, however none of these men settled here.

1823 -
The small sternwheeler Virginia was the first commercial boat to ascend the Mississippi from St. Louis to Fort Snelling, carrying a load of army supplies. It covered 800 miles in 20 days, a remarkable feat considering the many natural obstacles along its course.

1834 -
General Sibley, H. L. Dousman of Prairie du Chien and Francois La Bache visited this area intending to settle here, but later decided against it.

1841 -
Nathan Myrick came from New York and settled on Barron's Island (Pettibone Park).

A small group of Mormons began lumbering activities in this area. By 1848 there were a dozen lumber mills along the Black River, three of which were owned by La Crosse businessmen.
Mormons settled in the area later known as Mormon Coulee, under the direction of George Miller and Lyman Wight. They called themselves Trustees of the Nauvoo House and Elders of the Church.

1842 - Nathan Myrick moved across the river and settled on the eastern shore of the Mississippi. He built the first log house in La Crosse; later he added an extension as a trading post. The first survey of the town site was made by Ira Brunson of Prairie du Chien.

1843 - Nathan Myrick was the first man to bring a bride to La Crosse. He returned to his native home in Westport, N.Y., where he married Rebecca Ismon and brought her back to La Crosse with her friend Louisa Pierson. Within the year, Myrick's partner, Harmon "Scoots" Miller, married Miss Pierson. They were the first white women to settle here.

1844 - Scoots Miller became the first justice of the peace and later "judge." This was strange because Miller himself was often considered somewhat of a "scoundrel."

Peter and Emma Cameron were the first two people in La Crosse to get married. Justice Scoots Miller performed the ceremony. Peter was Emma's fourth husband; in all she had ten husbands.

The first stand of wheat in La Crosse county area was raised by Scoots Miller.

Myrick and Miller floated the first raft of logs down the Mississippi to St. Louis.

1845 - The first death in La Crosse was that of a raftsman who was enroute from St. Louis to St. Paul. He died of a "consuming fever." His was the first burial in the first cemetery established at Third and Badger streets.

The son of Nathan and Rebecca Myrick died. After Wautonga Cemetery (Oak Grove) cemetery was established the remains were transferred there. "Wautonga" is Indian for "stand of oak trees."

The first physician in La Crosse was Dr. Samuel Snaugh (pronounced Snow) who came from Prairie du Chien. He treated John Levy in Prairie du Chien and induced him to come to La Crosse where "no one ever got sick." Snaugh was known as the "Dutch doctor."
The first road was laid out between La Crosse and Prairie du Chien. It was really nothing more than an Indian trail. It took Levy and Snaugh six days to cover the distance of about 60 miles. The trail was roughly that of Highway 61.

Robert D. Lester, sheriff of Crawford County, was the first man to be murdered in La Crosse. He was shot with an arrow by an Indian to whom he refused to give his lunch.

John Levy and his wife, Fredericka, and three-year-old son, Willie, came to La Crosse from St. Louis. Levy was La Crosse's first permanent settler. He remained here until his death in 1910.

Levy erected the first frame building at the corner of Front and Main streets.

1845 -

Peter Cameron and Asa White brought the first team of horses and wagon overland from Prairie du Chien to La Crosse.

North La Crosse gradually began to grow into an entity and became the center for many saw mills. Was incorporated as a village in 1868 and annexed to the main area of La Crosse in 1871.

1846 -

The post office was established with Nathan Myrick as the first postmaster. He was followed in office by Major E.A.C. Hatch in 1847 and then by Scoots Miller in 1850. Miller carried the mail in his hat or inside his shirt. From 1850 to 1851 the total amount of mail revenue collected was $7.50. Simeon Kellogg became postmaster after Miller and his first mail delivery consisted of 15 letters.

L.L. Lewis settled in the Town of Farmington. The first white child was born in that town.

The first Fourth of July celebration was held in La Crosse. There was much revelry and great quantities of liquor were consumed. Captain Nichols of Black River Falls was the main orator. The celebration was held at the river's edge, at the foot of Pearl Street. During his speech the stage broke and the speaker and all the dignitaries fell into the water. Hordes of mosquitoes and hostile Indians livened the festivities.

1847 -

The first child born in La Crosse was Martha, daughter of Harmon and Louisa Miller.

First Episcopal services were held in La Crosse in the home of
John Levy, a Jew — this was surely the first ecumenical act in the city.

A large Mormon clan in Mormon Coulee considered themselves superior to the rest of the people and were very clannish. On one occasion Elder Lyman Wight gave a lengthy discourse on the evils of drinking, then consumed a pint of whiskey. He left La Crosse shortly thereafter saying La Crosse was "too damn cold for his constitution."

1848 -

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington issued an edict that all Indians were to be removed west of the Mississippi River by June 1848. John Levy intervened on their behalf but the government made no compromises. Levy saw to it that the law was obeyed, but made no objection when the Indians began to trickle back to their former habitations.

The U.S. Land Office was at Mineral Point and land claims had to be registered there. The first claimants were Nathan Myrick, Asa White, Peter Cameron, John Levy and Samuel Snaugh. Cost of the land was $1.25 per acre. In 1854 the land office for the La Crosse area was moved to the town of La Crosse.

1849 -

The seven-year-old son of John and Fredericka Levy, Willie, was killed as he was leading his horse down a steep embankment to the river for watering. The horse stumbled and stepped on little Willie's head, crushing his skull. The boy died a few days later.

Nathan Myrick, who settled in La Crosse in 1842, moved to St. Paul, Minnesota.

1850 -

Martin Bostwick was the first settler in the Town of Barre. The first child born in the town was Mary Ann Tillotson.

M. Manville opened the first hardware store and tinshop in La Crosse.

The first elopement in La Crosse was that of a wealthy eastern ne'er-do-well named "Wild Cat Jack." He married the daughter of the postmaster of Richmond, Minn. Justice Levy was importuned to perform the civil ceremony.

La Crosse County was established. The Town of La Crosse was designated the county seat. County officers chosen were Timothy Burns, chairman and judge; A. Eldred, sheriff; F. M. Rublee, treas-
ECHOES OF OUR PAST

urer; William Price, register of deeds; Robert Looney, clerk. An act of the Wisconsin Legislature approved organization of La Crosse County.

Timothy Burns came to La Crosse, purchased a great deal of land and went into politics. He became lieutenant-governor of Wisconsin and was known as the "second founder of La Crosse." He died in 1853 at the age of 33. His legacy to La Crosse is Burns Park on Main Street.

Piracy on the Mississippi River flourished during the next few decades.

La Crosse became a stopping point for stage coaches and wagon trains, and became known as the "Gateway City."

1851 -

The first county court house, a frame structure, at Fourth and State streets, was built by public subscription.

The first county court session was held. The only transaction was drinking a bottle of brandy presented by John Levy to toast the occasion. Judge Wyram Knowlton presided.

The first school was opened in the basement of the county court­house. Abner Stoddard was the only teacher, at $25 a month. Lorenzo Lewis was elected town superintendent of schools and he proclaimed it School District No. One of the Town of La Crosse. The first school board was formed with Timothy Burns as director; Edwin Flint, clerk; Harmon Miller, treasurer. The amount of $75 was voted to pay the teacher's salary and to buy books and keep records. There were 109 students in all classes.

The first newspaper in La Crosse was established, called the Spirit of the Times, edited by Albert La Due. Its first issue was dated April 10, 1851.

A homicide in Onalaska occurred when Samuel Richardson was stabbed by Sheriff Andrew Grover. Richardson was accused of stealing logs.

The first fancy dress ball and reception in La Crosse was held on Christmas night 1851.

Edwin Flint was the first attorney to settle in La Crosse.

Two log houses were constructed at the corner of Front and State streets by Harmon Miller.

Simeon Kellogg opened the Western Enterprise hotel at the corner of Front and Pearl streets.

George Chester, a Methodist itinerant preacher, officiated at a
The Chronology

religious service on the present site of Spence Park.

People of La Crosse voted for a banking law which was enacted a year later. This was the beginning of real banking here.

The first town election was held. There was only one precinct which included all of La Crosse and Monroe counties. The number of votes polled was 36.

Hon. George Gale, after whom Galesville was named, became the first county judge.

Town of Bangor was settled, with John Bosshard, J. Simms, M. Duran, and Flora and Christ Reudy as the first settlers.

Town of Holland was established. G. Gordon was the first settler; their twins, Carl and Johanna were the first children born in the town.

Thomas Leonard and Julius Segar were the first settlers in the Town of Hamilton. The first male child born there was Emerson Leonard in February 1852.

The first settlers in the Town of Burns were L. A. Viets, John Green, B. F. Coburn, and a Mr. Birnbaum.

Thomas G. Rowe of New York settled in Onalaska and became the founder of that community.

Harmon Scoots Miller built a frame hotel, two stories high at Front and State streets and called it the La Crosse House.

William Hood surveyed the town's first plat from the La Crosse River to Mt. Vernon Street.

First meeting of the County Board of Supervisors was held, with Judge Wyram Knowlton presiding.

Mons Anderson came to La Crosse from Norway. He later became known as the “Merchant Prince” of La Crosse. His establishment was on the northwest corner of Second and Main streets. A year later he established a retail dry goods and clothing shop on his property. Later it became the manufacturing headquarters of Anderson’s “Lion” brand clothing. He built additions to the building in 1865 and 1870. Still later it became the Martin Clothing Manufactory. Anderson died in 1905.

The first order of the County Board of Commissioners was to pay R. M. Rublee $2.50 for two blank books in which to keep county records.

1852 -

Congregational Church started with John Sherwin as pastor.
Baptist Church was organized. 26 people met on second floor of Deacon S. T. Smith's store on Front Street. Rev. William Card was named pastor. Baptists dedicated their church building in July 1852 on State Street.

The first road was laid out from La Crosse north for 27 miles to what is today Sparta.

The first brick building was erected on Front Street, two doors south of Main on the west side of the street.

J. S. Simonton, F. M. Rublee and S. T. Smith built the first saw mill at the mouth of the La Crosse River.

The first saw mill in Onalaska was owned by C. N. Nichols.

Timothy Burns and three other La Crosse businessmen built the first lumber mill in La Crosse on the southwest corner of Second and Badger streets.

David Darst was murdered on June 3rd, 1852 by his "friend" William Watts. There was a move to lynch Watts, but Rev. Sherwin persuaded the mob to let justice take its course. Watts was locked up in McSpadden's basement which served as a jail, from which he escaped.

Clementine Bowe was hired as the first woman teacher. She was paid $14 a month. In the winter Robert Whelpley was also hired at $30 a month and then Mary Bagley at $14 a month. (ERA, where were you then?)

During the winter of 1852-1853 the Lyceum was formed for educational purposes. It offered lectures and debates for the public on various subjects.

During the period of 1852-1858, the La Crosse & Milwaukee Railroad was organized and chartered through the efforts of Thomas B. Stoddard, A. D. LaDue and Timothy Burns. By 1855 the Milwaukee road reached Hartford, 35 miles from Milwaukee. By December 1856 it reached Portage and the next year it came into New Lisbon. In 1858 the railroad came into La Crosse for the first time. There was an elaborate celebration for this momentous event.

1853 -

The La Crosse Democrat was established, published and owned by Chase Stevens and William Rogers.

The Masonic Lodge, Frontier chapter, was organized.

In May the first census was taken and reported a population of about 600.
The Town of Greensfield was settled by W. Symes and D. Raymond. The Catholic Church was established as St. Mary's. $500 was subscribed for a building along with land and lumber. Rev. Henry Tappert was its first pastor.

In September, the Methodist church was formed with Rev. George Tasker as pastor. Its building was on the east side of Fourth Street between King and Cass.

Rev. Spencer Carr and his wife opened an elementary school. They organized classes in astronomy, chemistry, philosophy, mathematics, Greek and Latin.

La Crosse Library Company was formed. It was originally the La Crosse Athenæum made up of a group of young men, later known as the Young Men's Library Association.

1854 -

The first census was reported by Rev. Spencer Carr. He showed a total population of 745, consisting of 301 families.

The first load of produce was brought down the Root River in a scow in the fall of 1854; it was made up mostly of cabbages and potatoes.

The Town of Washington was settled, with J. P. Schaeffer and John Riley as the first men there.

The Independent Republican was established with William Rogers as editor. This came almost immediately after the formation of the National Republican party.

John Gund started his first brewery at Second and Division streets. He later merged with G. Heileman to form the City Brewery at Third and Mississippi streets. The partnership was dissolved in 1871.

Two public ferries were started on the Mississippi River, the "Wild Kate" and the "Honeoye." The Wild Kate was run by one-mule power; the Honeoye ran from the foot of State Street to the Minnesota shore.

Rev. John Sherwin planted the first trees around his home on the southwest corner of Fifth and State streets.

The U.S. Land Office which had heretofore been located at Mineral Point moved its operation for the La Crosse area to this city. Land speculation was rife and said often to be unfair and even corrupt.

Abner Gile came to La Crosse and made a fortune in lumbering
and other businesses. He built the mansion known as "Pasadena" on the southwest corner of West Avenue and Main streets. He also built the structure at the southeast corner of 4th and Main streets, which housed the post office and mercantile shops. It was destroyed by fire in 1903 and replaced by the Doerflinger "Park Store."

The National Democrat was organized by Theodore Rodolf and Cyrus Lord in July 1854.

Common Council held its first official meeting on April 8th.

1855 -

The first stone dwelling was erected by A. W. Shepard at Fourth and Cass streets. In 1864 it became the home of Mons Anderson.

A group of La Crosse Germans organized the Turnverein, devoted to physical education. Ten years later, in 1865, they built Turner's Hall on Fifth Street between Ferry and Market. They planted trees on their lot and in summer it became a social center with music, dancing, beer and refreshments.

A school building program was inaugurated. In 1855 the Third Ward school at Eighth and Division was established, with a new building in 1872. The First Ward school was established at Sixth and Vine streets, with a new building in 1883. The Second Ward school came in 1870. The Fifth District school was organized at St. James and Caledonia streets, with a new building in 1877. The Fourth District school at 8th and Main streets was formed; it later became La Crosse High School. The Sixth District school was formed at Eighth and Johnson streets.

About 40 million linear feet of logs were cut along the Black River.

1856 -

On March 7 the "Committee of Seven" was formed and introduced a bill into the State Legislature for a charter to form the City of La Crosse. It was approved by the governor on March 14 and on March 21st became law.

The village of La Crosse was incorporated as a city, with a mayor-council type of government.

The first city election was held for city officials. Thomas B. Stoddard (Republican) and J. M. Levy (Democrat) were the candidates for mayor. The election was rife with recriminations and violent criticism, mainly on the part of the voters rather than by the candidates,
who were polite in rhetoric, but they still indulged in sarcasm and barbs were plentiful. The final vote was 216 to 215; Stoddard won by one vote. Levy had voted for Stoddard; if he had voted for himself as Stoddard did, Levy would have won by one vote. Levy was later elected as mayor three times, during the Civil War period.

A group of the Turners organization formed a musical society called Maennerchor; later the name was changed to Liederkranz. In 1861 they built Singer Hall on King Street between Third and Fourth, on the south side of the street.

1856 -

Steamboat traffic averaged more than 200 boats a month that stopped at La Crosse.

C. Halbwachs established the Nord Stern (North Star), the only German-language newspaper in La Crosse. In 1857 John Ulrich became its owner and editor. First issue appeared in December, 1856.

Barron's Hall, at Main and Front streets, was opened with a Grand Ball, 150 couples attended. They danced the waltz, reel, galop, quadrille, and cotillion.

The first steamer with a calliope came through La Crosse; it was called the Denmark.

On May 31, 1856, the La Crosse and Onalaska Plank Road and Bridge Company was formed. Today this is the Causeway connecting the north and south sides.

The police department developed between 1856 and 1870, and first consisted of a police marshall and one constable for each ward. By 1870 there was a chief of police who had an assistant, six patrolmen and three detectives.

Two banks merged — the Bank of the City of La Crosse, owned by John Levy, with capital of $25,000, and the Kantanyan Bank, with Wilson Colwell as president, with capital of $25,000.

In Feb. 1856 a move was made to organize a fire department. J. G. Adams was foreman, with J. Turner and S. Hobart as his assistants, and C. K. Spafford as hose master.

The north side became officially known as North La Crosse. It merged with the south side in 1871.

The La Crosse Atheneum later known as the Young Men's Library Association established a reading room for its members.

John Levy built the Augusta House (his wife's middle name) on the northeast corner of Front and Pearl streets. It was four stories
high, 80 by 80 feet and had 100 rooms. It was destroyed by fire in March 1862 and rebuilt by John Gund in 1866 as the International Hotel.

1857 -

Vigilante Committee was formed to combat crime and debauchery. Two brothels were burned. John Levy argued that lawful procedure should be followed to rid the city of undesirable elements. He claimed that vigilantism was wrong.

La Crosse Music Association was formed and sponsored concerts of various kinds for the public.

Money was raised to erect the First Ward school at the northwest corner of Sixth and Vine streets (present location of WWTI). The school opened formally in 1859 and in 1871 the first high school department was opened in this building.

A military company of La Crosse Germans was organized calling itself La Crosse Jaegers. It changed its name the following year to German Rifles and still later to La Crosse Rifles. Theodore Rodolf, who became mayor in 1868, was commander of the group.

In February 1857, $8,000 in bonds was subscribed to build a new jail. The building, at Fourth and Vine streets, was completed in 1858. It was 45 by 67 feet. The jail proper was 39 by 45 feet and had 16 cells, each 6 by 9 feet in two tiers. It had 3 rooms for women prisoners. The building also contained living quarters for the sheriff and his family.

The Hebrew Indigent Sick and Burial Society was formed, with John Levy in charge. It later became a part of the Jewish synagogue, known as Anshe Chessed (Hebrew for People of Kindness). Its first building was on the east side of Fourth Street between King and Cass. Later, the Orthodox Jews who came to La Crosse from Europe in the 1880s and 1890s, opened their own synagogue at 414 North Eleventh Street, and called themselves Congregation Sons of Abraham. Today the Jewish synagogue is at 1820 Main, dedicated in 1948.

The Major Brown and Nixon and Kemp circus came to La Crosse. The following year the Spaulding and Rogers circus performed here. These circuses traveled by boat and gave their shows on deck.

In March 1857 a devastating fire occurred on Front Street, destroying 16 buildings.

In March 1857 the Volunteer Rescue Hose Company was organized to fight fires. It purchased the city's first fire engine. It was a
tank and pump mounted on wheels. Attached to the front end was a long rope which the firemen used to drag their equipment to fires. In later years, several other fire companies were formed.

The Panic of 1857 was nationwide but did not affect La Crosse as much as it did eastern banks. John Levy sold everything he owned and repaid his depositors every penny they had deposited in his bank, but left himself penniless.

1858 -

The first through passenger train over the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad arrived in La Crosse on October 14, 1858. It consisted of 14 coaches loaded with excursionists who came to attend the great gala and celebration.

The first telegraph office was established by the Northwestern Telegraph Company. Mark Kellogg was the first operator.

The city's first Catholic parochial school was started in connection with St. Mary's church.

A group of Germans opened a school where subjects were taught in the German language. In 1867 this school became part of the city's public school system.

The La Crosse County Agricultural Society was organized to hold county fairs. The first one was held in West Salem in 1872.

Twilight Lodge of the Good Templars organized in La Crosse to "use every motive which God has placed within reach to restrain vice and advance virtue."

The La Crosse Light Guard was formed. Until 1860 it was primarily social rather than military in character. On April 30, 1861 the group left La Crosse for Madison to train for Civil War duty. In Madison this group was the first to enter the fair grounds (now Camp Randall Stadium, named after Wisconsin Governor Alexander Randall.) Their uniforms were gray trimmed with black. Before leaving La Crosse they drilled on a vacant lot at Sixth and Pine streets. The following year they organized a band.

La Crosse Battery of Light Artillery was founded. They were popularly known as the Rough and Ready Company. The group was very social in character rather than military. They drilled in the area now Cameron Park in summer, and in winter they drilled in Barron's Hall. Their uniforms were dark blue with crimson trim.

The German Methodist Church was founded. During the Civil War period they built their church on Jay Street; later they built a new church on Ferry Street.
The La Crosse County Medical Society was formed. Its main function was to perform dissections. They also organized the ill-fated La Crosse Medical College which lasted 17 years but accomplished nothing. At meetings they discussed medical ethics and hospitals, but their prime objective was how much to charge patients. The medical college ceased to exist in 1884, but the medical society was re-organized in 1897.

Marcus "Brick" Pomeroy came to La Crosse. He became editor of the La Crosse Democrat and was an avowed enemy of Abraham Lincoln. Previously he had been editor of the Horicon, Wisconsin Argus.

St. Joseph's Mutual Benevolent Society and the Hebrew Mutual Benevolent Society were both formed to aid the members of their respective congregations.

The La Crosse Gas Works was established. This was the beginning of gas lighting in La Crosse homes. Gas lighting for street lamps was not inaugurated until nine years later.

The La Crosse Board of Trade was organized to further business interests in the city. Eight years later it was reorganized. In later years this organization became the Chamber of Commerce.

Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church was formed with Rev. H. Stuber as pastor.

Cadwallader C. Washburn organized Company B of the Second Wisconsin Cavalry. The following year Washburn was promoted to Major General. He was considered the most significant La Crosse man in Civil War service.

Several banks were formed during the next two decades: Batavian in 1861; National in 1876; State in 1879; Exchange in 1884; Security in 1884.

First street lights were installed. Kerosene and oil lamps were placed on posts at corners of State, Main and Pearl where they intersected with Front, Second and Third streets. A lamp was also placed at the east end of the bridge leading to the Milwaukee Railroad station, near the mouth of the Black River. Until then, people who had to be out after dark carried lanterns with candles in them or equipped with receptacles containing oil.

A disastrous fire destroyed 13 buildings along the river front.
The Chronology

1862 -
First conscription act was enacted to draft men for military service. A man could be exempted from service if he could find and pay a substitute. The going price was $300. Soldiers were paid $13 a month; this was later raised to $16 a month. The drafting process was so badly handled that it was soon abandoned.

Batavian National Bank was opened with Gysbert Van Steenwyk as president and founder. This is today the First Bank.
The Bank of La Crosse was re-established with W. D. Bannister as president.

Beef was 7 cents a pound; eggs were 12 cents a dozen; flour was 3 dollars a barrel; apples were one dollar a barrel.

Andrew Myrick, brother of Nathan Myrick, La Crosse’s founder, was killed during the Sioux uprising because of his cruelty to the Indians.

During the Civil War, Company E, Third Wisconsin Infantry, was made up of 13 men. The Ninth Wisconsin Infantry was made up largely of Germans from La Crosse, about 44 men. Company D, Fourteenth Wisconsin Infantry, was made up of 129 men from La Crosse.

1863 -
German speaking Catholics formed St. Joseph’s Parish.

Batavian Bank was devastated by fire.

1864 -
La Crosse County Bar Association was founded. Hugh Cameron was its first president.

The Franciscan Sisters transferred their mother house from Milwaukee to Jefferson, Wis. and to La Crosse in 1868. In 1878 they started St. Rose de Viterbo Convent and the Chapel of Perpetual Adoration. In 1883 they started St. Francis of Assissi Hospital.

Norwegian newspaper Faedrelandt (Fatherland) was founded and edited by Frederick Fleischer and Johann Schroeder. In 1868 this newspaper merged with Emigranten (Immigrants) which had been published in Janesville, Wisconsin since 1852.

Mons Anderson purchased the stone house on 4th and Cass streets. He remodeled it and it became one of La Crosse’s best known landmarks. In 1905 it was purchased by the YWCA and in 1922 by George Lassig. Lassig died in 1982 and in 1983 the house was purchased by businessman Robert Poehling who restored it. Cache of
gold coins found under kitchen floor during restoration of the house in 1984.

1865 -

The La Crosse Plow Company was started by Albert Hirshheimer. It was the most important industry in La Crosse for many years. It was sold to Allis-Chalmers in 1927.

A group of 20 Germans and Swiss formed St. John's Reformed Church with Rev. H. Hanhardt as pastor.

A branch of the post office was opened on the north side.

1866 -

CB&Q Railroad came through La Crosse on its way to Prescott, Minnesota.

First Presbyterian Church was founded.

First boatyard was established at the foot of Main Street. It built, repaired and sold boats.

1867 -

Segelke-Kohlhaus was organized, they made sash and doors. It was destroyed by fire in 1897 and rebuilt in 1900.

The first steam fire engine was purchased by the city. It was named the T. B. Stoddard, in honor of the city's first mayor. In 1873 a second steam fire engine was purchased and called the Gateway City.

Organized baseball came into favor. The Gateway City Club played on an empty lot on Seventh Street near Badger. Baseball became a very popular local sport and many additional teams were formed in the years that followed.

The first meeting of the Board of Education was held in April.

La Crosse Classical and Commercial Academy was started, with J. H. Nourse as principal.

On March 12 the Wisconsin Legislature enacted a School Code (chapter 96). The La Crosse City Council elected a school commissioner and later formed a Board of Education.

Dr. Dugald Cameron committed suicide by drowning. His reason for doing so was never revealed.

1868 -

John A. Salzer Seed Company was started and became one of the largest seed distributors in the country.

Catholic Diocese of La Crosse was founded with Rev. M. Heiss as its first bishop.
The Chronology

Young Men's Library Association was organized. Was the predecessor of the La Crosse Public Library.
Female Seminary was started with Mrs. A. Johnson in charge.
B. D. Atwell opened the first business college in the city.
In February, the Board of Trade was reorganized.

1869 -
Scandinavian Baptist Church was organized.
Normann Saengerkor, a men's choral group, was formed. Was headed by Carl Jackwitz and Emil Berg.
Pomeroy Opera House was started on southwest corner of Fourth and Main streets. Was owned by Marcus Pomeroy, editor of the Democrat. He brought travel troupes to the city to entertain the citizens. The building was 80 by 100 feet and four stories high. There were stores on the ground level and the opera house was on third and fourth floors. It burned in 1877 and in 1879 was rebuilt as McMillan Opera House.

1870 -
Mendelssohn Society gave musical concerts, especially singing entertainment.
Reynolds Debating Society was formed and became very active. It was followed by the Hamilton Club in 1887. Its membership was restricted to men only.
Dramatic presentations were offered by Germans in Turner Hall. Norwegian drama was given in Scandinavian Hall of the Solberg Building.
La Crosse County Pioneers Association was organized. In 1881 this became the Old Settlers Association. It was followed by the La Crosse County Historical Society formed in 1898 by Ellis B. Usher, editor of the Chronicle. The historical society was reorganized in 1925, and in 1939 it was incorporated embodying the charter of 1898.
St. Paul's Norwegian Lutheran Church was organized. In 1875 the North La Crosse Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church was started. In 1885 the Trinity Lutheran Church was started at Charles and Sills streets.
Wooden sidewalks were laid on State Street from Fourth to Seventh.
The War Eagle was burned and sank at the mouth of the Black River. Many railroad buildings were also burned during this conflagration.
A company was formed to provide horse-drawn street cars.

There were two banks in La Crosse. The Batavian with Gysbert Van Steenwyk as president and the First National with Daniel Wells of Milwaukee as president. The Batavian was at 319 Main Street from 1888 to 1983 when it moved to its new 10-story building at Second and Main streets as First Bank. The First National Bank failed in 1876 but was reorganized as the La Crosse National Bank in 1877 with G. C. Hixon as president, on the southwest corner of Second and Main streets. It later built a new bank on the southeast corner of Third and Main streets which was destroyed by an arsonist in 1979. In 1905 the First National moved to its new building on the east side of Fourth between Main and State, and to its present location at Fifth and King streets in 1976.

Three prominent businessmen erected a fine building on the northeast corner of 3rd and Main streets. It flourished for more than a century, then was declared unsafe and demolished in 1981. In its later years it was known as the Valentino Building.

1871 -

Liederkranz, a German musical group, merged with the Turner Society and called themselves Deutscher Verein. They had a hall on Fifth Street between Ferry and Market. In 1876 they built a new hall, which burned in 1891. In 1893 they built Germania Hall which became a center for German activities — musical, dramatic, etc. In 1885 a group of German singers formed the Frohsinn Society and sang German folk songs and performed in German choruses.

The first public high school opened in the Second Ward school building at Fourth and King streets. In 1878 the Fourth Ward school at Eighth and Main streets became the city high school. Admission was by examination and graduates were given certificates.

Mons Anderson planted more than 7,000 trees on land from Main to Cass streets and from West Avenue to 17th Street.

1872 -

Milwaukee Railroad tracks between La Crosse and St. Paul were completed.

La Crosse Silver Cornet Band gave public free concerts and played in parades.

Wautonga Burying Ground became Oak Grove Cemetery. The name Wautonga is Indian meaning a stand of oak trees.
1873 -
The city council ordered macadam roads and gutters to be built on Main Street from the river to Fifth Street. The project was a failure.

St. Wenceslaus Parish was founded for Bohemian immigrants.

A group of 90 businessmen subscribed $1,200 to purchase 20 acres of land for a fair grounds on the site which is today Myrick Park.

The Wisconsin Legislature authorized construction of a railroad bridge from the mouth of the Black River to French Island, then across the main channel of the Mississippi River to the Minnesota shore.

1874 -
A series of cisterns, each holding about 1,000 gallons of water were built so that an adequate supply of water would be available within two to three blocks of any fire. By 1876 there were 15 such cisterns in the city.

An ordinance was passed designating market places where farmers could bring their produce. One was on Fourth Street between Main and Jay; another was on Jay between Third and Fourth; a third was on Pearl near Fourth Street.

Norwegian Workingman's Society was organized for mutual benefit of a cultural nature. Card playing and liquor were prohibited at meetings. Membership was limited to males only, 16 years old and over.

1875 -
A petition was circulated demanding Sunday closing of saloons. It was strongly supported by citizens, but later was repealed. Cost of a license to sell liquor was placed at $100.

A new flour store was opened in the basement of the Blumer Building at Third and Main streets. Flour came from mills in Mormon Coulee. Prices ranged from $2 to $6 a barrel.

La Crosse County Fair was held in West Salem.

1876 -
Torrance & Sons Foundry and Stove Manufactury was established. Manufactured stoves, iron work and steel framework for buildings.

First train of Chicago & Northwestern Railway came to the city. The railroad used the tracks of the Green Bay and Minnesota Railway from Onalaska to La Crosse.
Augustus Abbott was the first graduate of La Crosse High School. Wooden sidewalks were laid on east side of Tenth Street from Main to Cass.

Private water works were established by the La Crosse Lumber Company to supply its mills. The city paid $600 a year to the Colman and Paul lumber mills to pump water into the city water mains.

The railroad bridge across the Mississippi River cost a half million dollars to build.

1877 -

A women's club, called the Coterie, was organized as a reading society.

Ten gasoline-burning street lamps were installed downtown.

A leather tanning business was started by David, Medary and Platz at the foot of the Badger Street.

1878 -

First street railway was chartered. Cost was $12,000. Construction began in May 1879 and in July three horse cars arrived in the city. The La Crosse Street Car Company and the City Street Car Company merged in 1882 under the name of La Crosse Street Railway Company.

An aboriginal cave was discovered in Barre Mills. Drawings on the cave walls led to the belief that the area was inhabited by Indians more than 800 years ago.

First private telephone line was installed between the homes of the S. P. Powers and E. H. McMillan families, on Fifth Street and Eighth Street respectively. Shortly thereafter several business houses installed phones. By 1880 there were 42 telephone lines in the city. In 1886 the first long distance telephone call was placed from La Crosse to Milwaukee from a second floor room of the Stirneman Building on the southeast corner of Fifth and Main streets.

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration began their century-long vigil at St. Rose Convent.

La Crosse Shooting Club was organized. They had target practice and pigeon shoots. Live passenger pigeons were released from traps and shot on the wing. These birds became extinct in 1912.

1879 -

On May 8th the first street railway cars tracks were laid and on July 4, 1879 the first cars ran from Main to Windsor streets, a distance of 1¾ miles.
La Crosse Rubber Mills was organized, but did not begin to manufacture rubber footwear until 1901. Albert Hirshheimer was the prime investor and founder. The Funk family did not enter the business until 1911.

Macadam was laid on Main Street from Sixth to Ninth. The street was 25 feet wide.

State Bank was formed by J. M. Holley and Emil Borresen. In 1883 it was incorporated with D. D. McMillan as president.

1880 -

Interstate Fair Association was organized.

W. W. Cargill began construction of grain elevators in La Crosse. Croquet became a favorite game and was played by many people on their own lawns.

Lumbering accounted for 80 percent of the city's total payroll. By 1885 it declined to 47 percent; by 1895 it declined further to 39 percent, by 1900 to 16 percent and by 1905 to \( \frac{1}{2} \) of one percent.

Yeo and Clark Company produced 75 barrels of wheat flour per day; later this increased to 2,000 pounds a day, producing both wheat and graham flour.

La Crosse Daily News was established by J. J. Stuart and Alex Nevins.

Joseph Clarke, 17th mayor of La Crosse, was responsible for the establishment of the water pumping station at the foot of King Street. In 1884 a second pump was added and by 1900 the city had 39 miles of water pipes.

Population increased from 14,505 to 25,090 between 1880 and 1890, an increase of 73 percent. From 1890 to 1900 it increased 15 percent to 28,800; from 1900 to 1910 it increased only 5 percent to 30,416; in 1920 it was 30,421, a standstill.

Lumbering was the first ranking industry; flour milling was second, beer brewing was third and manufacture of agricultural implements was fourth.

Average annual payroll in lumbering and allied industries was a little less than one million dollars. By 1899 this had declined by 50 percent. By 1900 it was $180,000 and by 1904 it was only $16,000. Lumbering was on the way out.

1881 -

Branch of Wisconsin Humane Society was formed in La Crosse.

E. Hackner Company was established. Manufactured church interiors, altars and pews.
Ella Doty was the first music teacher in the public schools. Manufacturing in La Crosse totaled $2.5 million; by 1890 it had increased to $5.5 million; in 1900 more than $9 million and in 1905 to about $14.5 million.

The Doerflinger "Park Store" was started on south 4th street. By 1898 it was on the corner of 4th and Main streets in the Gile Building. It was destroyed by fire in 1903 and rebuilt the following year. It prospered for more than a century, but in 1984, the Doerflinger Department Store went out of business because of financial difficulties.

1882 -

Nineteenth Century Club was organized for women; they studied many subjects of current interest.

City purchased one-half square block between Jay and King and to alley between Fourth and Fifth. Was used as a market place for many years where farmers brought produce. City scales were placed on east side next to alley. In the 1850's it was used as a "bull-pen" for prisoners. Today this entire site is a parking ramp.

Electric light system was started in La Crosse. Brush Electric Light and Power Company contracted with the city to install electric arc light system on street corners. These were placed on iron posts 150 feet high; each light consisted of 2,000 candle power. The first four posts were placed at Eighth and Vine, Fifth and King, Tenth and Cass, and Seventh and Jackson.

The La Crosse Club for men was organized. In 1900 it was reorganized as a young men's club.

The Common Council forbade the planting of cottonwood trees in the city as they were considered undesirable.

Mark Twain visited La Crosse while he was a passenger on a steamer bound for Minneapolis.

1883 -

First hospital in city was established by St. Francis sisters. The main building at Eleventh and Market streets was 120 by 24 feet. The west addition in 1886 was 40 by 80 feet; the east addition in 1891 was 40 by 56 feet. The La Crosse Methodist Hospital was started in 1901; the Lutheran Hospital in 1902; the Grandview Hospital in 1914. Several decades earlier there was a Marine Hospital on lower State Street, a short-lived venture.

YMCA was started by E. E. Bentley and J. M. Holley as its leaders
on lower Main Street. In 1875 they purchased Scandia Hall. In 1909 built headquarters on Seventh and Main streets; it was dedicated by President Taft in 1909. The north side branch of the YMCA was started in 1885 primarily to accommodate railroad men.

La Crosse Art School was started; drawing, painting and needlework were taught.

Young Ladies Mission Band helped to start a home for dependent old ladies. In 1891 they bought a house on Badger Street and founded the La Crosse Home for Friendless.

Echo Club presented singing concerts of many kinds. It had an excellent double male quartet which was very popular.

The first patient was admitted to St. Francis Hospital on December 31, 1883.

1884 -

Exchange Bank was started on the north side.

Cigar makers went on strike; 125 of them struck for increase in pay and decrease in number of working hours. They won an increase from $4 per 1,000 cigars to $7 per 1,000. Hours were reduced from 10 to 8 hours per day.

On October 15, 1884, Frank A. Burton, a prominent La Crosse businessman, was gunned down on Fourth and Main streets by “Scotty” Mitchell, a drifter, on the occasion of a political rally. Mitchell was promptly lynched by the crowd by hanging him from a tree on the court house lawn, later called the “Hanging Tree.”

La Crosse Bicycle Club was formed. Members rode on high-wheeled bikes, as the low-wheeled bikes were considered unsafe. In 1890 the La Crosse County Wheelmen was organized.

1885 -

Library Board was formed with Mayor D. Frank Powell as president. C. C. Washburn subscribed $50,000 for a new library building.

CB&Q and C&NW railways were regularly scheduled through La Crosse. The Burlington ran along the east bank of the Mississippi River from Savannah, Illinois through La Crosse to St. Paul.

Mrs. A. J. Hanscome and Miss Lillie Robinson started an exclusive private school for young ladies of prominent families.

1886 -

First Methodist Church, later Wesley Methodist Church, built new edifice on Eighth and King Streets.
Ladies Art Class Society was organized. Engaged in home studies of famous paintings, etc.

1887 -

Edison Light and Power Company was started. They installed incandescent lights in homes and businesses. At first people were skeptical and considered them dangerous, so the company installed the first 5,000 of them free of cost, as a promotional scheme.

Bernard "Barney" Strouse and Joseph Losey laid out Losey Boulevard.

President Grover Cleveland visited La Crosse.

John C. Smith, prominent merchant, planted trees, shrubs and flowers in profusion around his home, on present site of clubhouse of La Crosse Country Club.

An attempt was made to introduce professional baseball with paid players. La Crosse Baseball Association was formed, with George Gund as president. The La Crosse group became a member of the Northwest Baseball League; remained a member for only two years.

1888 -

New La Crosse Public Library on southeast corner of Eighth and Main streets was dedicated. It had 8,000 books and the city council appropriated $1,500 a year to assist in costs of operation. Miss Annie Hanscome was the first public librarian. The east wing of the library was added in 1909, as a gift of the Colman family. The original building was a gift of C. C. Washburn, along with a gift of $50,000, the interest of which was to be used for maintenance. North Side branch of Public Library was opened in 1905 and the South Side branch was opened in 1915.

The La Crosse Theatre was built on Fifth Street between Main and Jay on east side of street. It brought high-quality productions to the city, including Shakespearean actors.

West Salem hospital for the chronically insane was opened.

1889 -

August Miller started the Miller Broom Company. Handles were made of maple hardwood and the sweepers of broomcorn.

The Kickapoo Valley & Northern Railroad was incorporated.

1890 -

A. W. Pettibone, prominent lumberman, gave Barron's Island to the city along with $50,000, interest from which was to be used for maintenance. It was then named Pettibone Park.
The Chronology

In April, on Arbor Day, 147 trees were planted along wagon bridge road to La Crescent. 132 trees were planted along each of La Crosse and Market streets. 90 trees were planted along the Causeway and 90 around school building grounds.

The first annual Charity Ball was held in Germania Hall. Guests danced to music of Langstadt's "full orchestra." They raised a considerable sum of money for charity. This became the social event of the year for many years thereafter.

La Crosse Interstate Fair Association rented the grounds at Campbell Road to La Crosse Streets for its annual fair.

The North Side Bottling Works was started. It was the first plant to produce carbonated beverages, in four flavors, lemon, strawberry, ginger ale, and root beer.

La Crosse Lutheran Hospital was incorporated. Was built mainly with gifts from churches. Main building was 114 by 42 feet with a wing at the northwest, 57 by 36 feet. An X-ray laboratory was installed in November 1904.

Women's clubs were organized: Women's Christian Temperance Union, Women's Suffrage Club, Women's Industrial Exchange, and the Ibsen Club. In 1895 the women's edition of the La Crosse Sunday Press appeared; had a staff of 51 women headed by Mrs. Angus Cameron.

The lumbering industry was seriously declining because of indiscriminate and unwise cutting in the pineries. Average year's cut of lumber was 178 million linear feet. By 1903 this had been reduced to 40 million linear feet annually.

Leading agricultural crop in the La Crosse area was wheat; this led to establishment of many grain and flour mills.

1891 -

The Wagon Bridge over the Mississippi River was completed. It was a toll bridge until 1919.

On July 4th, the new city hall and the new wagon bridge were both dedicated. Tremendous crowds from the entire area attended.

Butter was 24 cents a pound; chickens were 10 cents a pound; apples were $4 a barrel.

There were four breweries in La Crosse: Gund, Heileman, Monitor, and Bartl. This helped to fill the void left in unemployment as the lumbering industry declined.

The first three trials took place in a controversy over ownership of
Cameron Park on King Street to which both the city and the Cameron family claimed ownership. Eventually the city paid $6,000 plus legal fees for the park.

1893 -  
German Baptist Church was organized and built its sanctuary on Seventh and Winnebago streets.

1894 -  
First Church of Christ Scientist was organized.  
Basketball was a "new game." Two first teams were formed by the YMCA and the Gateway City Guards. In 1896 the WBU formed its own team.  
New City Hall was officially opened on State Street between Fifth and Sixth. Cost $12,000.

1895 -  
La Crosse Women's Club was organized on the North Side.

1896 -  
The La Crosse Fire Department became established as a city entity with paid employees. Until that time it was operated on a volunteer basis.  
Daughters of the American Revolution, DAR, was formed.  
Most sawmills had gone out of business by this time.

1897 -  
Gund Brewery was almost totally destroyed by fire.

1898 -  
Three persons, a man, woman and child were found shot to death in Pettibone Park. The tragedy of Mamie Cummings' demise has never been satisfactorily explained.  
Two companies of La Crosse men left to fight in the Spanish-American War.

1899 -  
First brick-paved streets in city appeared. Prior to that streets were macadamized in the downtown area.  
A destructive flood at Holmen destroyed the bridge, dam and five barns.

1900 -  
Eggs were 13 cents a dzoen; by 1915 they cost 20 cents.  
There were three classes of workers in the city: unskilled; crafts;
salaried workers. Crafts were the only group that were organized and included such trades as bricklayers, brewery workers, railroad workers, etc. Average earnings of unskilled workers was $360 a year; by 1909 this had increased to $460 a year. Skilled workers earned $1,100 a year and salaried workers, such as office people, earned $1,000 a year. There were no unions and no strikes.

There were eight foundries and machine shops in the city; they employed 108 men.

La Crosse Golf Club was laid out at base of bluffs. Was located on the farm of Harmon "Scoots" Miller and was called Schagticoke Country Club in honor of the New York county from which Miller came. Was later renamed La Crosse Country Club.

There were four railroads serving La Crosse, making it the largest railroad center between Chicago and the Twin Cities.

Mons Anderson's factory was the oldest and largest of the 12 clothing manufacturers in La Crosse.

A worker could support his family of four on $400 a year. He usually maintained a large garden in the summer and also raised poultry and kept a cow in his yard.

1901 -

La Crosse Hospital opened and advertised "a bath on every floor."

Twentieth Century Club was organized; it was a continuation of the Nineteenth Century Club.

A. W. Pettibone gave park land to the city with a fund of $50,000, interest to be used for maintenance. The Pettibone pavilion was dedicated in 1903. It was made of Minnesota red sandstone. City Council appointed a committee of five citizens to appear before the Minnesota Legislature asking that Minnesota cede Barron's Island to Wisconsin. The measure was dropped and revived in 1913. Bills were reintroduced in 1915 and 1917 offering Latsch Island, near Winona, which belonged to Wisconsin, in exchange for Barron's Island. It took an act of Congress to finally resolve the matter in 1919.

1902 -

Lutheran Hospital opened a new building. It had five floors and 104 rooms.

The square block bounded by Cass, Madison, Fifteenth and Sixteenth was purchased for $25,000 to be used to build a new high school.
Joseph Losey gave the Losey Memorial arch to Oak Grove Cemetery to grace its entrance.

Heileman Brewery organized and planned to increase its capacity to 175,000 barrels of beer annually. They also introduced Old Style Lager.

La Crosse Gas & Electric Company was organized by merging three competing firms. Rates jumped from 14 cents a kwh to 22 cents a kwh.

1903 -

The first compulsory school attendance law was passed by the State Legislature. All children between 7 and 14 had to attend school at least 32 weeks a year.

President Theodore Roosevelt visited La Crosse and gave a speech at the Market Square. This attracted a very large crowd.

1904 -

Knights of Columbus was established.

New County Court House was built at a cost of $150,000.

Public Library was reorganized and a children's department was opened.

A public bath was opened in Pettibone Park. Became very popular. It contained cribs which could be raised or lowered to required depths which client wanted.

In May 1904 the La Crosse Tribune was organized with $10,000 capital stock. W. E. Barber was president, W. V. Kidder, vice-president, A. M. Brayton, secretary-treasurer. Stockholders were 65 prominent businessmen. First Tribune office was at 121 Main Street. In February 1907 Tribune was sold to Lee Newspaper syndicate for $15,000. Frank Burgess became publisher and W. V. Kidder, managing editor.

Police department consisted of 26 officers, exclusive of supervisors. By 1920 there were 40 officers.

The new and elegant Stoddard Hotel at the southeast corner of Fourth and State streets was opened. After 80 years of first-class service, it was purchased by the State Bank and demolished in 1982.

The historic Liberty Bell was on exhibit in the city in June.

1905 -

La Crosse had only one automobile dealer and two automobile repair shops.
Bond issue for $100,000 was authorized for erection of a new high school. It was completed in 1907 at cost of $125,000.

Courses in manual training were introduced into the high school curriculum.

First state-wide mandatory primary legislation was adopted. The first municipal election was held under this law.

The public library opened its north side branch in the Brakke drug store on Caledonia Street. The building it occupies today was dedicated in 1942.

1906 -

Lumbering industry had come to an end; this was the demise of the lumber mills that had sponsored the growth of the city.

La Crosse Hospital was established on Thirteenth and Oakland streets. It was four stories high and 40 by 105 feet. Cost $40,000.

1907 -

Thomas Morris, La Crosse attorney and regent on the Board of Normal schools appealed to the board to establish a normal school in La Crosse. This was accepted and the normal school opened in 1909 at Seventeenth and State streets. It is today University of Wisconsin, La Crosse.

Michel Brewery had assets of more than one million dollars, an annual payroll of $75,000 and spent more than $600,000 annually on supplies.

The La Crosse City Street Railway Company had 14 miles of track and four street cars in service in the city.

1908 -

St. Francis Hospital added a building for contagious diseases. It was called St. Camillas Hospital; on the street it was known as the "pest house."

The city park system was set up under administration of Mayor Wendell Anderson. John Nolen, a landscape architect, was brought here from Massachusetts to assist and supervise the project.

1909 -

Normal School was established with two-year courses for elementary and rural teacher training. In 1920's it became a state teacher's college with courses in elementary, secondary and physical education courses leading to a degree.

Frederick Copeland gave land on north side for park, later named in his honor.
The YMCA was dedicated on the northwest corner of Seventh and Main streets. President William H. Taft was the main speaker and guest of honor, invited by his Yale classmate, George W. Burton, president of the First National Bank.

1910 -

La Crosse Plow Company was one of the leading manufacturers in the city; employed more than 200 people.

Heileman Brewery had an investment of $1½ million and employed 285 men with an annual payroll of $200,000. They shipped more than 14,000 carloads of beer a year and brewed over 100,000 barrels of beer annually.

La Crosse Normal School graduated its first class in June.

The sternwheeler packet boat J. S. burned and sank at Victory, Wisconsin.

Census showed 2,723 Germans, 1,428 Norwegians and 564 Austrians in La Crosse. These were the three largest foreign-born groups in the city.

Potatoes were 35 cents a bushel; coffee was 20 cents a pound; a man's good-quality suit cost $16; a cheap one cost $7. A woman's tailor-made suit cost $10; a man's work shirt cost 29 cents.

There was only one gas filling station in the city, located on the east side of the Causeway. It was surrounded by a picket fence.

Board of Health was organized, consisting of three citizens. The Commissioner of Public Health was installed. Dr. James Furstman was the prime mover of this project. Backyard outdoor privies were outlawed.

The first public school kindergartens were established in Franklin, Washington, Lincoln and Webster schools.

Gund Brewery was the largest in the city with 450 employees and an annual payroll of $500,000.

Listman Mills employed about 200 men.

C. L. Colman Lumber Company and John Paul Lumber Company gave Isle La Plume to the city as a gift.

1911 -

Infant death rate in La Crosse was 71 out of 1,000. Through proper health methods this was reduced to 30 in 1915 and 18 in 1921.

The first airmail letter was received in La Crosse in October. It was delivered by flyer Hugh Robinson.
The Chronology

Ordinance was passed making the speed limit on city streets, six miles per hour downtown and 15 miles per hour on other streets.

A bond issue was suggested to install a system of wells for pure water. The sites were to be north of Myrick Park and east of Green Bay Street.

Albert Hirshheimer accepted Albert Funk into partnership in the Rubber Mills. They produced 1,200 pairs of shoes a day and employed 160 people. Within a year they were manufacturing 6,000 pairs of shoes daily.

1912 -

Frank Hixon provided $50,000 to build a manual training addition to the high school. It actually contained a gymnasium, locker rooms and swimming pool and cost $90,000. It was named the Hixon Annex and was dedicated in 1913.

The foundry of the La Crosse Tractor Company went on strike. They wanted 7½ cents per hour. The company refused and closed the shop.

Visiting nurses were added to health department personnel.

Social Service Society was organized. Was formerly called Associated Charities.

There were 4,098 telephones in service in La Crosse.

Police department acquired its first cruising automobile. It also had a man on a motorcycle to police the streets.

L. C. Colman gave a Knox Runabout to the fire department for use of the fire chief while on official duty.

Vocational school was started by renting a few rooms. By the 1920s it had its own building. Today it is WWTI with a complex that is one of the best in the state.

1913 -

A new water system was installed in the city, provided by wells.

1914 -

Grandview Hospital opened; could accommodate 106 patients.

Registration of men for military service in World War One began.

22 men immediately enlisted.

Agitation began to change the type of city government from mayor-council type to a board of commissioners. The measure was defeated.
1915 -

La Crosse Tribune was located on the southeast corner of Fifth and Jay streets and remained there for 31 years, then moved to its new building on northeast corner of Fourth and Cass streets. They moved into their present quarters on North Third Street in 1973.

There were only ten cases of scarlet fever in the city. This was a drop from 23 cases in 1913. Diphtheria cases dropped from 82 cases in 1913 to 19 in 1915.

First motorized equipment for the fire department was authorized by the council. By 1926 it was fully motorized.

The south branch of the public library was opened in the Bethany Center of the Congregational Church. The building it occupies today was dedicated in 1952.

1916 -

Companies B and M of the National Guard were called out for border patrol.

South wing was added to St. Francis Hospital.

A devastating fire occurred on Christmas Day which destroyed the Milwaukee Railroad depot and the Cameron House hotel on Second and Vine streets.

1917 -

Chamber of Commerce was organized. It had previously been the Board of Trade.

First Liberty Loan drive was oversubscribed by one million dollars. In all there were five drives which raised $6½ million.

Men between 21 and 31 were required to register for the draft. 2,735 men registered. There were no arrests or punishments for failure to register.

Local chapter of Red Cross was asked to prepare for war service by making hospital supplies, especially rolling bandages.

The La Crosse Tribune purchased the La Crosse Leader Press for $100,000 and the city thus became a one-newspaper town.

The first municipal dance was held on August 1917 on the platform in front of the band shell in Myrick Park. 4,000 people attended. The charge was five cents per dance.

1918 -

War gardens were found on nearly every vacant lot in the city and in the backyards of most homes. There were wheatless and meatless days, also eggless and sugarless days.
La Crosse had war contracts amounting to $18 million.
Collection of garbage, rubbish and ashes was placed under the supervision of the Board of Public Works.
A large contingent of World War One troops left La Crosse.
On November 11th, 1918, a newspaper extra appeared announcing the end of World War One. The populace nearly went wild with excitement. The paper appeared on the streets at 5:00 a.m.

1919 -
There were five breweries operating in the city. The tax of $1.50 per barrel of beer in 1917 was raised to $6 a barrel in 1919.
A new school supervisor was hired.
There was general protest of the high cost of living. Eggs were 37¢ a dozen; bread was 10¢ a loaf; bacon was 27¢ a pound, and a can of peas cost 13¢.
P. Lorillard Tobacco Company built its plant on the north side. Other plants built in the post-war period were the Tri-State Ice Cream Company, Marinello Cosmetics; National Gauge and Equipment Company, and Wisconsin-Minnesota Light and Power Company.
La Crosse took official possession of Pettibone Park in Minnesota territory. It was traded for Latsch Island in Wisconsin territory. The trade was completed by an act of Congress.
Women's suffrage was enacted.
The Common Council was reorganized.

1920 -
Illiteracy in La Crosse was 1.7 percent of the total population; it had decreased from 2.3 percent in 1900.
National Transportation Act was passed allowing the federal government to enter Mississippi River traffic business.

1921 -
Winter carnivals were started on an annual basis and were popular social events. A king and queen were chosen and parades were held, as well as other entertainment.
The decade starting in 1921 saw new school building programs: Hogan and Roosevelt in 1921; Washburn in 1922; Lincoln in 1923; vocational school in 1923. The following schools were remodeled: Hamilton in 1927; Jefferson in 1930; Franklin in 1931; Washington in 1932.
1922 -
More than three million dollars were spent on building and construction work in the city.
The first attempt was made to help children who needed "special attention."

1923 -
Ben Ott started the Ott Radio Company, one of the first radio broadcasting stations in the city. It was called WABN. The company was purchased in 1926 by Joseph Calloway.
175 private homes were built during this year.

1924 -
The Tivoli Summer Gardens and Entertainment Hall on South Avenue (present site of Gundersen Clinic and Lutheran Hospital) was demolished. A nurses' home was built there. Until this time, the Tivoli Gardens had been one of the most popular recreational spots in the city.

Inland Waterways Corporation was organized and operated a vast fleet of towboats and barges on the Mississippi River.
La Crosse County School of Agriculture and Domestic Economy graduated its last class in June.
More than 2,000 guests dined at the formal opening of the Bodega Lunch Club at Fourth and Pearl streets.

1926 -
The Normal School became a State Teachers College.
The National Gauge and Equipment Company became the Moto-Meter and Equipment Company. They manufactured gauges for automobiles and trucks.
The Wisconsin Light and Power Company changed its name to the Mississippi Valley Public Service Company.
Air mail service was started. Beginning June 7th, airplanes on regular mail routes between Chicago and Twin Cities made their first landings at Salzer Field. Citizens were encouraged to mail a letter to their friends on that day via air mail. They were to write "By Air Mail" on the envelope. The cost was ten cents extra besides the regular postage.

1927 -
La Crosse's first probation officer was hired.
In September 1927, Herbert Staats, who operated a north side
filling station, was killed by a local police officer when he was mis-
taken for a man who was trying to apprehend a police prisoner.

There were 112 manufacturing concerns in the city with more
than 6,000 employees. Value of manufactured goods was over $23
million. There were 464 retail firms with annual business of $6½
million. There were 84 wholesale concerns with annual business of
about $5 million. Most employees worked a 60-hour week, 10 hours a
day for 6 days each week.

Aquinas High School was dedicated.

First sound-recorded movie in the city was shown at the Rivoli
Theatre. It was "The Jazz Singer" starring Al Jolson. The first all-
talking movie was shown the following year, also at the Rivoli. It was
"Lights of New York."

Thomas Rooney, Post No. 1530, of the Veterans of Foreign Wars,
was organized, named in honor of Rooney who was killed in action
during World War One.

1928 -

There were accusations of bribery and fraud in connection with
street paving construction contracts.

1929 -

This was the beginning of the depression years. There were now
97 manufacturing concerns in the city with 5,523 employees. Man-
ufactured goods was valued at $24½ million. Wholesale business
remained static.

Trane Company erected a new building at 16th and Bennett
streets.

St. Francis Hospital built a new eight-story addition.

Allis-Chalmers of Milwaukee purchased the La Crosse Plow
Company.

Police department began to enact rigid enforcement of traffic and
parking ordinances, which had been abused before this time.

First buses for public transportation were put into operation to
replace streets cars.

1930 -

The La Crosse Trust Fund was established.

Tax rate was 32 mills, the highest in the city's history. By 1932
this was cut to 28 mills and to 24 mills in 1933; the latter rate was the
lowest in 12 years.
La Crosse’s population was 39,614, but by 1940 had increased 7.8 percent to 42,707.

Anderson Memorial Bandshell was built in Riverside Park.

There was a heavy burden on social service agencies to supply needy families with food, fuel, rent and clothing. City council appropriated $5,500 to assist this project. The city also raised $1,800 from a charity Thanksgiving Day football game, and the County Board gave $800.

1931 -

A Little Theatre group was organized.

La Crosse Concert Band was organized and subsidized by the City Council.

Police department had six cars for patrol purposes, and one car each for plain clothes officers, large armed car, ambulance, patrol wagon and four motorcycles.

To provide employment, the Monegan Overhead on Highway 16 was started. Men worked in two shifts of six hours each. 400 men registered for the 60 jobs available.

It was estimated that more than 10,000 transients were cared for by the social service agencies. Transients had to register and were allowed to remain in the city for only one day, then were escorted to the city limits by the police.

As a relief measure for unemployment, it was proposed to construct a second causeway between the north and south sides. Crews were to be changed every two weeks so it would give work to more men.

1932 -

There were 1,500 unemployed people in the city in September.

La Crosse Plugs were organized to promote and advance the city. They took their name from the tall stovepipe hats they wore. They sponsored the fireworks display at the top of Grandad Bluff each New Years Eve.

An addition to the post office was built to the north and the old post office was remodeled.

The first La Crosse Symphony Orchestra gave a well-attended public concert.
1933 -
Wisconsin Governor Schmedeman declared a bank holiday for 14 days, starting March 3rd. On March 6th, 1933 President Roosevelt declared a national bank holiday. La Crosse banks conducted business on a limited basis until March 14th, then reopened on a regular basis.

Gateway City Bank moved in with Security Savings Bank to reduce overhead, but they conducted their businesses separately.

An uptrend in business was reported by Trane, Moto-Meter, Rubber Mills, Allis-Chalmers and Northern Engraving. This uptrend lasted only about four months and then unemployment again increased.

Heileman Brewery started a $5½ million construction and remodeling project, to include a brewhouse and a bottling equipment building. Several other breweries began brewing beer and gave work to 150 men. As a result nearly 150 new taverns were opened.

Civil Works Administration gave unemployment relief when 125 men were hired to work on a CWA road-building project on Highway 35.

1934 -
Nearly 2,000 school children were immunized against diphtheria.
More than 1,000 employees went on strike at the Rubber Mills in April 1934. They wanted collective bargaining and a ten percent increase in wages.

The city airport was constructed on French Island; the job employed 60 men.

An automobile accident occurred on August 9, 1935 on the old wagon bridge across the Mississippi River. A car struck and destroyed the westernmost bridge span and plunged into the river, killing two people. La Crosse was cut off from Minnesota and a ferry service was established. Repairs were made and the bridge was reopened on August 20, 1935. This accident was the catalyst that resulted in the new Main Channel Bridge which was opened in 1939.

1935 -
Allis-Chalmers went on two shifts because of increased work orders. The company employed 400 people.

The Burlington and Milwaukee railroads introduced diesel engine passenger train service. The Burlington established the Zephyr
service between Chicago and the Twin Cities, through La Crosse. The Milwaukee Road introduced the Hiawatha route.

The local radio broadcasting station, WABN, was reorganized as WKBH.

A devastating fire occurred at the Listman Mills on Front Street.

Local hospitals could accommodate more than 600 patients at the same time. St. Francis was the largest with 315 beds; Lutheran had 150 beds; Grandview had 106 beds and La Crosse Hospital about 50 beds. The local hospitals had an investment of about $2½ million and their annual business in medical fees was over $250 million. About half of the patients came from the area surrounding La Crosse.

Retail sales increased to more than $14½ million annually and by 1939 had reached more than $20 million.

1936 -

There were 272 cases of scarlet fever in the city; by 1937 this had decreased to 162 cases.

In July $1½ million was allocated to construct a new bridge over the Mississippi. The federal government was to provide $800,000, the state $400,000, the county $200,000 and the city $100,000. Plans were formulated to build the new bridge at the foot of Cass Street to replace the Old Wagon Bridge destroyed in an accident in 1935. The plans were to meet traffic needs until the year 2014. Construction began in June 1937 and the bridge was dedicated in September 1939.

Trane Company built an addition to meet increased orders, especially to supply air conditioning equipment.

Hollywood Theatre at Fifth and Jay streets opened.

Local chapter of Disabled War Veterans was organized with 15 members.

1937 -

There were 5,100 production workers in the city, but by the end of the year there were still 3,000 unemployed. It was the worst economic slump since the depression of 1932.

A new one million dollar addition was built by Allis-Chalmers.

City disposal plant on Isle La Plume was completed. Alderman Joseph Houska began a drive to surround the area with trees and other plantings. The result was a beautiful park named Houska Park in 1947.

An expert was hired to prepare a comprehensive city plan and zoning procedure. Such an ordinance was passed in 1938. Zoning was
to include seven classes, from single dwelling residences to heavy industry.

The Snow Bowl was opened for skiing and a warming house was built.

Five white-painted police patrol cars were purchased. Each was equipped with a two-way radio.

A serious fire occurred at the Avalon Ballroom, causing a loss of one million dollars.

Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided work for unemployed in such areas as street paving and erection of buildings on the fair grounds. The federal government paid 45 percent of the cost and the city paid the rest.

1938 -

A nine-foot channel was built between La Crosse and St. Paul. This gave impetus to river transportation.

Trane Company introduced the first hermetic centrifugal compressor.

The city gave an option of 626 acres of city-owned land on the west side of the Causeway to Wadham Oil Company.

The number of fire alarms averaged about 450 annually, most of them minor.

Schools at all levels were overcrowded and a new school building program was initiated.

Dr. Adolf Gundersen died in Norway at age 73. He started the Gundersen Clinic.

1939 -

A new addition was built at the vocational school at a cost of one-half million dollars. Federal government paid 45 percent of the cost. The new building included a municipal auditorium that seated 1,229 persons.

Burlington Railroad built a new passenger depot at Twenty-Seventh and State streets, despite strenuous objection of residents in the area. The new facility was dedicated in 1940.

Losses from fires were about $16,000 as compared with $400,000 in 1935.

The zoo in Myrick Park was completed and presented to the city by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. It consisted of a monkey house, a bird sanctuary and a raccoon pit.
Regular band concerts were initiated at Riverside, Myrick and Copeland parks. They were well attended.

There were 3,873 production workers in manufacturing in La Crosse, as compared with 5,523 in 1929. Value of manufactured goods in 1939 was only $13 million.

Circulation at the public library was 356,000; this was due to the large number of unemployed who had idle time.

The new Main Channel Bridge over the Mississippi River was dedicated with much fanfare and celebration. It cost $1.5 million as compared with $95,000 that the old wagon bridge had cost. The new bridge was totally repaired in 1983 at a cost of $2.5 million. In 1984 it was refurbished and painted blue, a new trend.

Crown Prince Olav and Crown Princess Martha of Norway visited La Crosse. They were house guests of Mrs. Adolf Gundersen at Fifteenth and King Streets.

1940 -

In November the first men called for selective service reported. By the end of the year more than 500 men had enlisted for military duty in World War Two.

Defense contracts awarded to local industrial plants greatly helped the city's economy. Orders poured into Trane, Moto-Meter, Northern Engraving, La Crosse Trailer, and Hirshheimer Foundry.

A new modern training school was built in connection with the Teachers College. Before that it was called the Model School and was operated more or less as a private school for children whose parents could afford to send them there.

An area survey revealed that there was an increase in juvenile delinquency in La Crosse. One-half of the delinquents came from families receiving public assistance.

1941 -

Several contingents of local men entered military service for World War Two.

USO programs were started for service men. There was tremendous local cooperation and success in this venture. The center was established in the former R. C. Cheney automobile agency on south Fourth Street, between King and Cass.

Mary E. Sawyer left a bequest of a half million dollars to build a city auditorium. Ground was broken in 1954. The auditorium was dedicated in 1955.

New fire station on the north side was completed.
1942 -
Moto-Meter and Equipment became the Electric Auto-Lite Company.
A serious fire occurred at Scotten-Dillon Tobacco warehouse. It destroyed a million pounds of leaf tobacco and the total damage amounted to about three million dollars.

1943 -
La Crosse was in the midst of every phase of World War Two.

1944 -
Numbers of employees in production work were: 1940, 4,660; 1941, 5,670; 1942, 5,190; 1943, 6,220; 1944, 6,330; 1945, 5,970.
On December 23 the ship SS La Crosse, the Victory, was launched in New York in honor of La Crosse service men and women.
Evans Cartage warehouse had a serious fire; damage to furniture and other stocks was about $328,000.
Grading operations began on the new one million dollar French Island airport.

1945 -
Average wage of La Crosse workers was $18.50 weekly in 1935 or $963 annually. Ten years later in 1945 it was $2,085 a year.
La Crosse went wild with excitement as World War Two ended in both Europe and Japan.
Ground was broken for a new 5,000-watt transmitter radio station for WKBH.

1946 -
Statistics showed that 6,749 men and women from La Crosse were in military armed forces. 151 men and women lost their lives in the service of our country.

1947 -
A new Class IV municipal airport was dedicated in La Crosse.
A new modern store building was erected at the northeast corner of Fifth and King streets, occupied by Sears Company.
Allis-Chalmers purchased the Hirshheimer Foundry.

1948 -
Ziegler Old Fashioned Brewery was started with 21 employees. By 1950 there were only two breweries left in the city as compared with six at the turn of the century.
In June 1,000 industrial workers went on strike at the Trane Company’s four plants. They wanted six paid holidays and a 13 cent
per hour increase. The strike ended on July 25, 1948. The workers got six paid holidays and a 12 cent raise.

Referendum for an $850,000 bond issue to construct a new auditorium was defeated.

La Crosse Telephone Company started conversion of city telephones to the dial system.

There were 90 wholesale firms in the city with net sales of $39 million annually.

1949 -

A controversy began about quality of city water which was said to be impure. The entire issue was described as "disgraceful."

Trane Company, Heileman Brewery and Northern Engraving all expanded their plants.

Median income for La Crosse families was $3,000 a year.

A decision was made to install parking meters on downtown streets and parking lots because of overcrowding and insufficient parking space.

A bequest of $680,000 from the Mary E. Sawyer estate was turned over to the city, to be used for an auditorium as a memorial to Mary E. Sawyer. The ground breaking took place in July 1954 and auditorium was dedicated in September 1955.

1950 -

Census showed La Crosse had a population of 47,535, an increase of 11.3 percent, up from 42,707 in 1940.

The city had many social, cultural and recreational groups: DAR, garden clubs, Kiwanis, Lions, Masons, Elks, Optimists, Rotary, Toastmasters, League of Women Voters, American Legion, Sketch Club, Twentieth Century Club, Little Theatre, City Symphony and others.

Construction began on an eight-story apartment building at the southeast corner of Eighth and Cass streets.

State Board of Regents approved granting B.A. and M.S. degrees at the State Teachers College.

First group of local men left for military service in the Korean War.

1953 -

Veterans of World War One organized locally. The national group had formed in 1949.
Evelyn Hartley, 15-year-old daughter of Prof. Richard Hartley, was abducted from a baby-sitting job. She has never been found.

St. Francis Hospital dedicated its $5.2 million addition. It was the largest construction project in the city until this time.

1954 -
Trane Company dedicated its House of Weather Magic engineering laboratory. It received national recognition for its accomplishments.

WKBT television station telecast its first test pattern signal. It also became associated with national television programming.

1956 -
La Crosse Tribune circulation increased to 33,931, as compared with 17,665 in 1941.

1959 -
The Electric Auto-Lite Company closed its La Crosse operation. 1,300 people lost their jobs.

La Crosse experienced an all-time record snowfall of 22 inches in March.

1961 -
Oktoberfest celebration was established and became an annual event. It was patterned after the German festival. It became a very popular event with younger people.

A serious fire at Lutheran Hospital destroyed upper floors. 121 patients were evacuated.

1962 -
The new U.S. Fish Control Laboratory in Riverside Park was dedicated. Its construction cost was $225,000.

1964 -
First group of men became involved in the Vietnam War. There was a great deal of protest and agitation about this war.

1965 -
Devastating flood occurred in La Crosse; one of the worst in the city's history. Flood waters crested in 17.7 feet.

Television and radio stations WKBH and WKBT at Sixth and King streets were destroyed by fire. New and modern offices were opened at the same location the following year.
1966 -
Onalaska dedicated its new swimming pool and bathhouse.
Area Research Center at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, was dedicated.
La Crosse was chosen All-American City by the National Municipal League and Look magazine.

1967 -
The Redevelopment Authority accepted bids to demolish 45 structures in order to build the proposed Civic Center.

1968 -
The new Central High School on south Losey Boulevard was dedicated.
Percy Bentley, well-known La Crosse architect died. He was advocate of "prairie architecture" like Frank Lloyd Wright.

1969 -
The new YMCA-YWCA building at West Avenue and Main Street was opened for many activities. It cost $1.6 million.
Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company announced that it was closing its La Crosse plant.
Harborview Plaza urban renewal project was approved by the common council.

1972 -
Ground was broken for the National Fishery Research Laboratory on French Island.

1973 -
West Salem Historical Society dedicated the Hamlin Garland homestead. It was placed on the National Register of Historical Sites and restored in 1975.

1975 -
The Midwest Research Institute named La Crosse the No. One small city for quality of life.
Cargill House on the northeast corner of West Avenue and Cass Street was razed for use by Presbyterian Church.

1976 -
Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter visited La Crosse.
President Gerald Ford visited La Crosse. He was the fifth U.S. president to visit the city.
The Chronology

1977 -
Ground was broken for the Valley View Mall project. The first two stores were opened in 1980.
The first performance of the Great River Festival was given. It became an annual event.
The old post office at Fourth and State streets was razed. The new post office at the same site was dedicated in 1978.

1978 -
Onalaska Middle School was destroyed by fire.
The Martindale House at the northeast corner of Tenth and Cass streets was named to the National Register of Historic Sites.

1979 -
The old National Bank building on the southeast corner of 3rd and Main streets, built in 1881, was destroyed by an arsonist.
The Mississippi Queen steam paddler wheeler made its first appearance in La Crosse.
Logan High School on the north side was razed.

1980 -
There was strong protest against military draft registration of 18-year-olds.
The old Smith Valley School was restored and dedicated.
The mayor's term of office was extended to four years. From 1856 to 1887, the mayor was elected for one year, from 1887 to 1980 for two year terms, and in 1980 changed to four years.

"The past is our cradle . . . it is for inspiration, not imitation; for continuation, not repetition."

Israel Zangwill, 1919

M.K.
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