

ROTARIANS HEAR TALE OF EARLIER WINNETKA

Local Banker Tells Luncheon Club Members of Experiences When Winnetka was Hamlet

BY M. K. MEYER

Editor's Note: The accompanying is comprised of extracts taken from an address on early Winnetka made before the Winnetka Rotary club recently by M. K. Meyer, banker and civic leader, who recently completed 50 years of continuous service to the community as merchant and financial advisor. The reproduction on the opposite page is made from a map of early Winnetka which Mr. Meyer used in illustrating much of his extremely interesting talk.

I thought it would be an easy matter to get data and facts but when I began to rummage around I did not find anything that I wanted, consequently what I shall say will be from memory and may not be entirely accurate as to date. I knew that Frank Windes had old maps and I felt that we could construct one covering the time I wanted to go over. He made a map of Winnetka as it was when I came here. If it is at fault in any particular, the responsibility is mine.

I shall speak of the beginning of projects that are now fully matured and it may not be out of place to say something about myself.

Came as Small Boy

The Gem of the Baltic sea—visited in the summer months by the nobility and merchant class of Europe, known as the Island of Rugen, is where I came from at the age of ten years. That was in 1872.

On June 1, 1872, we arrived in Winnetka where my uncle, John Kratz lived. I can still see myself and my family, standing on the wooden platform, looking at the little frame store just west of us, little dreaming that most of my time would be spent in that corner.

The only available shelter was the log cabin at the corner of Sheridan road and North avenue. Mr. vonHofsten made a painting for me of this log cabin from a description that my mother gave him. My first summer was spent at this cabin.

The people who were here at that time were from the Eastern states, also England, Ireland, and Germany, and among whom one found such names as Wright, Hubbard, Carter, Fales, Reed, Dwyer, Sherlock, Higgins, Friehold, Koese, Conrad, Schaefer, Smith and Schildgen. The oldest resident of New Trier township is Frank Schmitt, I believe, who lives two doors west of Hoffman's store in what was formerly Gross Point, now Wilmette. He came here in 1843 and was then only three years of age.

Some of our people were suburbanites others agriculturalists and some industrialists.

Lumber Mill at Pier

Graves conducted a lumber business on a long pier at the foot of Willow street.

Schroeder had a slaughtering shed at the end of Chestnut street.

Moth conducted the general store. Dwyer grew pickles on the Horace Mann block.

Garland had green houses on the L. M. Johnson property.

Conrad and Higgins farmed, and cut grass out of the Skokie for horse bedding.

Williams and Blum made brick. Joe Blum's brick yard was west of Hibbard road and Williams' was south of George Higgins' place. Of these industries, ponds, only, are left. I worked in the Williams' yard and helped to make the hand-pressed brick that were used in the construction of the store, and in the old Nettleton house, now known as the Oldfather house.

The spiritual and collective activities were looked after in a meager way by

Fifty Years a Winnetka Worker



M. K. Meyer, Banker, Civic Leader

a few Congregationalists Unitarians and Baptists. Others attended Father Nettstraeter's church in what was then Gross Point, and still others worshipped at the Lutheran church, on Green Bay road, north of Glencoe.

I have spoken of Winnetka as a producing town, agriculturally and industrially, and I now want to call your attention to what I consider the most important event that has taken place in the village. That was the organizing and founding of the Congregational church upon such a broad foundation that all the different denominations could attend and were welcome. That institution inculcated ideas and helped the young people to grow into splendid manhood and womanhood, firmly rooting and building character, has continued and is still doing that same work more forcefully today than at any time in its history.

Our collective joys increased after 1874. We had our Sunday school, Wednesday evening prayer meetings and Christian Endeavor society. Our small group dances were held in different houses, the village dances in the village hall.

Store Was Social Center

I wonder how many of you men fully realize the value of the thousands of country stores—the unpainted building at the cross roads, known as the Smith or Jones store, with its huge stove standing in the center, and its sections for drugs, dry goods, groceries, hardware, boots and shoes, Post office and Justice of the Peace. It was such a store that Winnetka had when I began my mercantile career in it on September 1, 1875. This store was a social center for the women in the day time and a meeting place for the men at night. I soon learned not to criticize the various makes of butter, even if it smelled to heaven, nor to enter into the discussion at night. The men would talk about their own peculiar problems, also village affairs, principally schools and council. The schools were then under the control of the council. County, state and national issues also received attention, and even religious matters came under the hammer. About a dozen boys were usually present to hear the arguments, and I feel now that many of those discussions were staged for our benefit.

Along about 1878 we added a number of suburbanites and not long after that Rev. Q. L. Dowd came into our

midst and became a leader in village affairs. The store was no longer large enough for meetings, consequently the town meetings was started and met quite regularly where every man and woman could express his or her opinion. Although at times we differed widely we respected the position taken by everyone.

One of the many results of the town meetings was the establishment of a Trust fund towards a public library, by H. A. DeWindt. We wanted to own everything, as was well stated by... of the Illinois Bell Telephone Co., at the Men's club dinner last January.

The schools we had. We wanted to own lake front, gas, water, light, telephone, fire insurance, library and loan association. Some of us did not discriminate, nor take into account the human element. Today, I think we would not only be called Socialists, but rank Bolsheviks.

To start the Park district was easy, because we had a central object upon which we could concentrate public opinion. This was the triangular piece of property across from the railroad station, used as a blacksmith shop. H. A. DeWindt and Father Haarth took a very prominent part in the early history of the Park board.

To acquire the Horace Mann site for a new public school, was a difficult proposition. Our opposition came largely from men who lived in small houses and had large families and who would benefit more than anyone else.

Begin Loan Association

To make this a home-owning community we started the Winnetka Building & Loan association, which is with us today and has had a successful career of forty years.

The movement for the establishment of our water and light properties took concrete form at the house of Arthur B. Jones. After the usual discussion a vote was taken on the question, shall it become public property or private property. The vote said public property—no franchise. I believe it was Judge Windes who stated that we might have some difficulty in establishing it as a public property. He was right in more ways than one. Our next meeting was held at the house of H. A. DeWindt and a definite working plan developed and was put into practice.

SERVES WINNETKA OVER PERIOD OF 50 YEARS

M. K. Meyer Has Been Delivery Boy, Merchant, Banker and Ardent Civic Worker

By E. W. WEBER

M. K. Meyer, Winnetka's pioneer banker, missed, by a few brief years, the big celebration that must have marked the official incorporation of our fair village.

But "M. K.", as he has been familiarly known among business associates and neighbors for many years, came along in time to witness and participate in the work of building a community that followed the celebration; the arduous pioneer tasks that established the firm foundation of our now thoroughly modern municipality, which, "M. K." declares, represents the highest type of suburban life.

All of which leads up to the pertinent fact that Mr. Meyer has served his community continuously for half a century at the same corner; and he's still quite a young man.

Winnetka His Life

True, he does a good bit of "commuting" to Houston, Texas, where his daughter makes her home—he's been there four times since last October, for instance. But, he thinks primarily in terms of Winnetka. And why not?

Didn't he serve the early pioneers as delivery boy for the revered Robert S. Moth, our first storekeeper? And didn't he serve their children as merchant and owner of that same store, which he purchased at the age of 21 years—when he also won the hand of the fair and brilliant daughter in the Moth household? And hasn't he been some 32 years the financial advisor for pioneers, children and children's children well into the fourth generation? That is his enviable record, and that is his one outstanding reason for having Winnetka right close to his heart in every waking moment.

Everybody Had a Cow

In those early days the principal evidence of prosperity was the possession of a cow, two pigs and a horse, as against the motor car of this bustling era. In those days the Johnson boys provided the fish for the entire community—fish taken from the lake near-by. And down on Mrs. Schaefer's 40 acres—just south of Willow street—were the stockyards (no Zoning regulations then.) And over on the lake shore, at the foot of Willow road, were the lumber mills and docks; a busy place abounding in exchange of timber, grain, hay, feed and straw from the farms round-about. And up in Hubbard Woods on the lake shore was the Picnic Grove, and just a bit to the south, on the hill, the Episcopal church. Many of the homes were log cabins, duck ponds were numerous—and everybody, we're told, enjoyed life to the utmost.

Foresaw Development

The memory of all this is dear to the heart of M. K. Meyer. But, he, like other pioneers, was not content that Winnetka should remain thus, a sleepy hamlet. There must be progress, they said, and, so saying, suited action to words, with what results our present ideal community hears unmistakable and positive testimony. Over the span of half a century Winnetka has grown from a scattering farm community of less than 200 inhabitants to a model suburban municipality of near 10,000 souls—and these forward-looking pioneers sensed the possibilities, for out of their work has developed our village government, excellent schools, fine churches and all the other benefits and advantages of Twentieth Century life.