

Williamsfield Born at Time of Santa Fe; Numerous Fires Have Kept It Modern Village

By MRS. GRACE M. JOHNSON
Scarcely more than 65 years ago, the site where the village of Williamsfield now stands was a stretch of rich farm land belonging to James Mahar and was a part of the Mahar estate which so nearly surrounds the town at present.

In 1886-87 the Santa Fe, wishing to build a railroad between Galesburg and Chicago, made several surveys through this territory and finally decided upon the present right-of-way. In the early spring of 1887 work on the road was begun in earnest and the following November saw the first train between Galesburg and Chicago make its journey over the new rails.

How Town Was Named

Stations were mapped out about five miles apart along the line and a spot in Section 23 of Truro township was chosen for one of these stations. A railroad contractor, whose name was Williams, noticing the large fields of corn on either side of the track, gave the name Williamsfield to our village. A boxcar served the purpose of a depot for the time being. R. H. Cline was the first station agent.

The town was laid out by E. P. Percell, on April 24, 1888, and buildings began to go up rapidly. C. H. Pulver was one of the first contractors and builders, working with his father and another carpenter named Nichols, and later with Van Buren Brothers. Mr. Pulver and his father built the first store building in 1887. It was located near where the Ralph Coe residence now stands, and was operated by Mahar and Welsh. Later the building was moved uptown and used as a harness shop until destroyed by fire. The first residence was built for R. H. Cline and is now owned by Miss Alma Caldwell.

Early Merchants Listed

Some of the first business men were as follows: B. F. Shaffer, postoffice and general store; Parker & Nelson, general store; Woods Bros., clothing; J. W. Powelson, restaurant; Tucker & Drake, hardware; P. R. Needham, blacksmith shop; Woods Bros., drug store; M. C. Spangler, music, furniture, undertaking, and livery barn; Bennett & Cramer, meat market; Charles Knox, lumber, (in a very short time, however, Mr. Knox sold out to J. M. Baird); John Cole and J. A. Morton, doctors; Mrs. Rosa Burt, hotel.

In the winter of 1887-88 the Santa Fe built the depot which still marks our station.

On Oct. 31, 1889, was published the first issue of the Williamsfield Times, a weekly newspaper for this community. The first owner was C. D. Benfield from Maquon. The present publishers are Maher and Clark of Elmwood, who also publish the Elmwood Gazette and Yates City Banner, taking over the Times just before the 60th anniversary number, in October 1949. The paper has changed hands several times, but those owning it the longest were M. Hugh Irish, who operated the plant for 25 years, and his successor, W. G. Johnson, who had it an equal length of time.

Bank Established

A bank, known as Bank of Williamsfield, was established in 1890. In 1908 it was incorporated as First State Bank Co., serving in that capacity until March 1931 when it closed at the beginning of the financial depression which ended the career of so many banking institutions.

The M. E. church was erected in 1890 by Van Buren Brothers of Victoria during the pastorate of Rev. Gimson of Victoria. Since that time the church has had a resident minister. A parsonage was built in 1894 and the church has since been remodeled and enlarged. The St. James church was built in 1891 under the pastorate of Rev. Father Shannon of Brimfield, and has since been supplied from Brimfield with the exception of ten years when it was supplied from Elmwood.

Up to the year 1900 there was as yet no school building in Williamsfield and classes continued to be held in the small schoolhouse which stood south of town on the corner where Tucker's I. H. C. implement building now stands. A building was erected in town that year and school opened in 1891 with Mr. and Mrs. J. M. Momeny as teachers. The old building was later moved to the east end of town and converted into a dwelling house, now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Verne Munts. In September 1901 the school building was arranged to accommodate a class of high school students taking a 3-year course. The first annual commencement of W. H. S. was held May 13, 1904, the members of the graduating class being Harriett Doubet, Joye

Carrigan, Mabel Tucker, Ona Shaffer and Mike Welsh. Later a fourth year was added to the course. In 1916 it was organized as the Williamsfield Community High school, district 181, covering a territory extending over a part of five townships.

School Burns, Rebuilt

The grade school, having to accommodate so many students, became too crowded, so in 1921 a handsome new high school was erected in the new addition in the north part of town. This, how-

ever, was destroyed by fire in August, 1923, but the community, showing a wonderful spirit of pluck and courage, immediately started the work of reconstruction and the following spring saw the high school again established in a well-equipped modern building. In 1925 W. C. H. S. became a fully accredited high school.

The old grade building burned to the ground March 7, 1934. A new building was begun the following June, and by October 1, the pupils and teachers were proudly established in their new quarters. In September, 1948, the schools of Williamsfield opened as unit district No. 210, the boundary lines of the district having been somewhat changed. A sizeable addition is being built on the high school building, to give space for junior high, ag work shop, and gym.

A band was organized in 1890, under the leadership of S. E. Boggess. Among those first players were Arthur Parker, Charles Eastman, Bert Wheeler, Bert Pulver, Sporty Cole, John Powelson, David Cation, H. J. Bennett, Seth Tucker, Wes Galpin, Dr. Oberholtzer, Dave Cramer and Charles Johnson. From that time on there were few summers when the village was without a band until 1936 when the Saturday evening concerts gave over to free movies, sponsored by the local merchants.

Sponsor Softball

Also during the summer the merchants sponsor a softball team. Games are played at the high school campus on one of the best lighted fields in this section. June 29, 1950, on the opening night of the Homecoming, Williamsfield Athletics and Galesburg Moose played the first game under the local athletic field floodlights.

In 1892 Dr. J. A. Morton and Dr. Vesper Shaffer erected a National Institute to effect a cure for the drug and liquor habit. The build-

Thursday, March 13, 1952

ing stood just south of Spencer's store. It was a large 3-story structure, the upper floor of which was used as a public hall or opera house. In the course of three years' time both doctors had sold their interest in the building and though the upper floor continued to be used as a hall, the lower part was rented for office and living rooms. The building was destroyed by fire in 1903.

In May 1894, M. C. Spangler purchased a 5-acre tract of land one-half mile north of town where he started the Williamsfield cemetery. He continued to own it until about 1923 when he sold it to Churchill Construction Co. of Bushnell, who built a fine mausoleum there containing 100 crypts. Three years later a local cemetery association was formed and the burial ground became local property. Since that time many improvements have been made.

Williamsfield became an incorporated village in 1896. J. M. Baird was first mayor, serving as president 12 years. Other citizens who have served as mayor of the village are B. D. Baird, H. J. Bennett, E. E. German, John B. Gale, J. D. Doubet, O. J. Oberholzer, E. S. Willard, F. O. Gustafson, L. L. Nelson, William Cation, John Mackie and at present, P. R. Kimler, who has served since May, 1932, a period of nearly 20 years.

For years efforts were made to secure additional building lots either north or south of town, but the owners of the land were unwilling to sell at any price. Finally, however, in 1916, a 40-acre tract just north was bought from James Lambley by the Walton & Taylor firm of Kentucky. This was platted into town lots, streets and alleys and sold at auction on December 13. A prize offered the person suggesting the most appropriate name for the new addition, was won by Mrs. Ona Hendricks, who gave it the name of Parkview addition.

Lighting Evolved

At first the town was dimly lighted with a few oil street lamps. In 1898 these were replaced with gasoline lights, and in 1912 an electric plant was built, with E. J. LeHew manager, later owner, and furnished lights for the village from dusk until 11 o'clock each night until in 1920 Waibel Electric Co. of Elmwood built a high power line from Elmwood here, and 24-hour service was realized. This was later taken over

by Suburban Utilities Co. of Dunlap, which built a booster plant here. On September 15, 1938, the power line came into possession of Central Illinois Light Co., and the booster plant building, no longer needed as such, was converted into an office and sales room for A. G. Friedrichs, assistant manager.

Rural mail delivery out of Williamsfield was established in 1902.

The first concrete walks were built in 1904. The town is now well supplied with good cement sidewalks, macadamized or well gravelled streets, and is located on State Route 180, which a mile south of the village limits, joins U. S. Route 150. A subway was built under the railroad tracks, and a pedestrian subway under Route 180.

One of the most appreciated civic improvements, is the city waterworks, installed a little over ten years ago.

Our village has the distinction of being the first town of anywhere in the surrounding country to have an automobile. In 1902 C. W. Elliott became the owner and possessor of a new, red, one-seated, one-cylinder high-wheeled Glide auto. This car not only was the object of the envy and pride of our other citizens, who hastened to their windows to view its pass-

ing or gathered about it when parked, but also caused our neighboring towns to sit up and take notice as is shown by the following article which appeared in the Brimfield News: "Ho! all ye little cross roads towns like Brimfield, Elmwood, Farmington and Princeville. Take off your hat and go way back and double up while Williamsfield's brand new automobile goes sailing by. For Williamsfield, that much talked of, lied about and otherwise maligned Spoon river hamlet, has an auto, a road-devil, a regular up-to-date automobile and is the first town between Peoria and Galesburg to attain that dignity." The succeeding year N. N. Tucker followed Mr. Elliott's worthy venture, and even went him one better, purchasing a two-seated, two-cylinder Glide. The event of the auto made it advisable for the village lawmakers to fix adequate traffic

regulations, as is told by the following item: "At the last meeting of the Village Board, the speed limit allowed automobiles within the village limits, was fixed at 4 miles per hour."

Besides those already mentioned, Williamsfield has suffered a number of bad fires, two of which proved to be very disastrous. The first of these was in September, 1897, when twenty buildings in the business district were burned. While this proved a great calamity to the business men themselves, the village emerged from the catastrophe with better business houses, better equipped to serve the public. Twenty-three years later, in September, 1920, were another 20 or more business houses destroyed by fire, and as before, out of the ruins there soon emerged a new business district. These buildings are mostly of brick and such as

would do credit to any town.

In the early fall of 1903 a livestock show was held, the big feature of the day being a parade and judging of horses. The next and succeeding years it was called a Horse Show, until 1919 it was renamed Homecoming, and the horse show feature was dropped. In 1925 the local American Legion post took charge of the day's celebration, making it one of the most successful in history.

Many lodges have been quite active at various times during the history of the village. The Odd Fellows, Rebekahs, Eastern Star, Mystic Workers, Knights of Pythias and Modern Woodmen of America all have had organizations here, although none have chapters here at present. An American Legion post was organized in 1924, and an auxiliary was started. We also have a Royal Neighbors lodge. Another organization, one which has been of

considerable service to the community, putting into practice its motto, "To Make Our Town a Better Place in Which to Live," is the Home Culture club, organized in 1912 with Mrs. G. M. Rice, president. In 1914 the club was federated. An active junior department, known as the J. D. club, has just recently been organized.

During the summer of 1938 was purchased a long-coveted 150-acre tract of land along the old Santa Fe right-of-way west of town, for a lake and club grounds. An organization was incorporated under the name of Happy Hollow Lake association. Spillways were completed for a small, and later a large lake, both of which were stocked with fish. Eighteen or more cottages have been built there, and large numbers of people from this and nearby communities gather to enjoy the facilities of the resort, which include fishing, swimming, boating and picnicking.