

Curation Notes

A new exhibit, entitled "Front Street Store Fronts" will soon be ready for viewing in the Museum. The exhibit, which features photographs of Front Street building facades from the 1860's to the 1970's, is especially timely since the name of "North Front Street" will soon cease to exist. We are pleased that the Mankato Street Department will be placing one of the last "North Front Street" signs in our collection when they are replaced with "Riverfront Drive" signs next spring. Our county's urban and rural environment has changed dramatically over the years and we appreciate it when you, our members, help us document those changes through the contribution of artifacts and photographs to our collection.

Landscape Award

The City of Mankato has awarded the Blue Earth County Historical Society with the 1987 City of Mankato Landscape and Beautification Award. This first place award was given for the most outstanding example of Business-Non Profit Landscaping. The staff and board of directors of the Society thank both the Twilight Garden Club and the City of Mankato parks department for the hundreds of hours spent on the formal gardens.

Happy
Thanksgiving

Leon Thomas Jefferson and Lydia F. Jefferson Memorial

The Historical Society is pleased to announce that interest from the generous endowment given by Grace Jefferson in 1986, honoring her parents, has been designated for educational programs for children. In this way, Ms. Jefferson has guaranteed both the present and the future of children's educational programs at the Blue Earth County Historical Society.

Gift Shop

The Historical Society Gift Shop has stocked shelves full of items ready for Holiday gift giving. These include Betsy-Tacy books, Sandon plates, Minnesota Historical Society publications, handmade craft items as well as dried baby's breath for Christmas tree decorating.

Ethnic Tastes

An open house is scheduled for Sunday, December 13, from 4-6 pm at the Historical Society, 606 S. Broad Street in Mankato. This event called "ETHNIC TASTES" will be a Holiday celebration, time to enjoy decorations, and splendor of twinkle lights outside of the Historical Society buildings, as well as taste ethnic foods. In preparation for this celebration we are asking our members to bake and donate an ethnic treat of their choice along with a copy of their recipe, to give to tasters. Please contact the Historical Society before December 1 if you wish to help out. In conjunction with this tasting event we will be honoring volunteers who have made this past year so successful for the Historical Society and its membership. This event is part of the Festival of Lights 1987.

New Members

Welcome to new Member, Sandra Bohlke, Annual, Mankato.

Blue Earth County
Historical Society

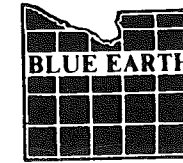
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BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

November 1987

Calendar of Events

- Nov. 4-7 **"Setting Pretty"** at the YWCA. Be sure to stop by and see the Historical Society's table, titled "Give us this day our Daily Bread."
- Nov. 11 **Veterans Day**
- Nov. 12 **Deep Valley Quilters Meeting**, at the Historical Society, 7 pm. The quilters will be viewing quilts from the museum collection as shown by archivist Audrey Burmeister-Hicks.
- Nov. 19 **Mankato Norsklaget**, Audrey speaks on "Norwegian Immigration to Blue Earth County."
- Nov. 26 **Thanksgiving**

Notes from the Director

October was quite a hectic month for the Historical Society staff. Visitation was high again, we're averaging over 600 visitors per month. School tours are underway and our group of tour guides are getting set for an exciting fall season. November is kindergarten tour month at the Society and we all look forward to hundreds of smiling young faces. Other events last month included the Young Historians program called "Before Refrigerators" which was about natural preservation of foods and the Halloween program called "Ghosts from the Past". On top of all of that, the Historical Society was awarded the 1987 City of Mankato Landscape Beautification Award for our flower gardens. All in all, October was a good month. November and December also look like they'll be busy with "Ethnic Tastes" happening on Sunday, December 13. Best wishes to Historical Society Board member Susan Stevens Chambers who is running for the 5th Judicial District Judgeship.

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The General Store: A Popular Place for Pioneers and for Speculators in Good Thunder

Part II

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, other men were drawn to Good Thunder to try their hand at a general store business. One was Robert F. Malzahn. His general store is listed in the Business Directory of the *R.L. Polk and Company Mankato City and Blue Earth County Directory for 1892*. In the *Good Thunder Herald* for December 28, 1893, Malzahn has a sizeable front page ad. It lists clothing, underwear, coats, boots and shoes, hats and caps, groceries, jewelry, novelties and fancy goods.

Under "Groceries," Malzahn points out that in his store a specialty was, "Foreign and Domestic Fancy Cheese," and also states, "I sell teas. Prices on tea same as everywhere else, but somehow my trade keeps increasing. My customers know why."

Mr. Malzahn remained in business here for only two years. His grandniece, Muriel Hiller of Good Thunder, says that he left here to operate a clothing store in Mankato.

However, another general store took the place of his. The 1895 Directory has a sizeable ad for the one owned by William H. Graf, "Brightest and Best General Store in town . . . Dry goods, Clothing, Boots and Shoes, Hats and Caps, Groceries, Crockery, etc. All kinds of Farm Produce Taken in Exchange."

Later the firm became known as Graf Bros. General Store according to the Business Directory for 1897. Then late in the following year, Charles Sohre purchased one half interest in the firm of Graf Bros. The *Good Thunder Herald*, December 8, 1898, reported, "He (Charles Sohre) is an excellent business man and will greatly help to increase the business."

However, Mr. Sohre must not have taken an active part in the firm, for it was listed under the name of A.T. Graf and Company General Store for the ensuing years.

At the close of the nineteenth century, "only" three general stores are listed for Good Thunder: Graham's, Wiedenheft's, and Graf's.

By 1902, Graf's had disappeared from the list and one belonging to L.F. Mertens was added. Mr. Mertens had been operating a grocery store in Good Thunder for about eight years so he was well acquainted with the townspeople. However, he did not remain in the general store business very long.

On January 7, 1904, the Wolf Mercantile Co. of St. Paul announced an auction sale of the L.F. Mertens stock. "The entire stock consisting of \$6000 worth of Dry Goods, Notions, Shoes, Groceries, Crockery . . . will be sold . . . regardless of price." An interesting note in the advertisement is that the sponsors ". . . will entertain you with Edison's Wonderful Phonograph" before the sale.

Over a year and a half later, the Herald reported on August 31, 1905, that, "Invoice has been taken this week of the large general stock of the L.F. Mertens general store and a deal consummated in which T.G. Weber of Sleepy Eye and R.J. Whitman of Mankato become the sole possessors." The article continues with information that Mr. Whitman had been associated with the Hayes Lucas Lumber Co. and planned to locate here with his wife and child."

In a review of the various businesses several years later, the *Good Thunder Herald* of December 12, 1913, stated that A.J. Whitman (note different initials) ". . . is the popular manager of the Blue Earth County Cooperative Store . . . who having bought out the L.F. Mertens business . . . merged the business into a stock corporation and has since been its head. Miss Clara Billet assists in the store and she is well known as an exceptionally good and painstaking clerk." According to the obituary of A.J. Whitman in the *Mankato Free Press*, he left here to go to Mankato ". . . to operate a shirt factory."

A year after the closing of the Mertens general store, two enterprising brothers established one, Edward and William Ulrich, calling their store, Ulrich Bros. General Store. In the *Good Thunder Herald*, August 16, 1906, Ulrichs had a quarter page ad announcing their "Grand Opening Sale," although they had already been in business for three weeks.

Many bargains are listed for this sale. Random examples include, "Calico at 56¢ a yard, large white bedspreads for 89¢ each, men's spring ties for 10¢ each, 10 pounds of sugar for \$1.00, and Climax or Spear-head tobacco at 40¢ a pound."

Edward Ulrich and his family lived in the upper quarters of the building on the north side of Main Street. Later, the family moved to the "Graf" house on the east side of Front Street.

Ulrich Bros. remained in business here for ten years. On October 19, 1916, they announced in the local newspaper:

The time has come when we are giving up business. After years of successful merchandising, we are now sacrificing a \$25,000 stock of the most reliable merchandise ever introduced in Good Thunder . . . We have endeavored to avoid placing before a critical public any cheap, shoddy, or antique goods.

After the sale under the management of L.J. Miller of Minneapolis, the Ulrichs moved to Mankato. Ruth Welsh, daughter of Edward Ulrich, lives in Mankato. She says that she recalls very few things about the operation of the store. She does remember though, that as little girls, she and Helen Wiedenheft used to make doll hats and displayed them in the Ulrichs' window.

In the meantime, another general store which lasted for several decades started up in the village. Charles T. Sohre had been in and out of several businesses, but the year following the opening of Ulrich Bros. Store, he opened his general store, in 1907. It, too, was located on the north side of Main Street. His two Sons, Carl and Art, assumed charge in 1913. Rose, their sister, did the bookkeeping and clerked. In 1920 the brothers added a complete line of hardware, including floor coverings, ranges, heaters, paints, etc.

On March 28, 1960 the *Free Press* published an article by Anna Jefferson about the Sohre store. Carl and Otto had decided to retire, but had not made any definite arrangements. Jefferson wrote:

People coming from out of town are immediately told to go to a counter where they may help themselves to crackers, cheese, sliced sausage, and a bottle of a cold soft drink . . . Here is a place where you can gather and talk about crops, weather, and baseball . . . Entering the store you will find rows



Interior of Sohre Bros. General Store, courtesy of Charles Barnard. L to R: Rose Sohre, Carl Sohre, Gustave Malzahn, Art Sohre, Frieda Darge Ludtke.

upon rows of clothing, some piled high on shelves, others on tables and still others draped on long hangers. There are shoes, straw hats, winter caps, mittens, gloves, and scarves. There are jewelry and notions for the women and baptismal gowns for the babies . . . However, groceries . . . are the biggest item with smoked sausages topping the list.

For a time Esther Gnadke of Good Thunder clerked at Sohre's Store. She recalls that sheepskin coats were popular purchases by the men. She also remembers that in the grocery department, ". . . about twelve varieties of chewing tobacco" were displayed and sold by the bulk. Clerks cut off a chunk of tobacco with a cutter designed for that purpose. Customers purchased coffee beans by the pound and clerks ground them for the customer in the big coffee grinder. Items that clerks scooped from bins and sold by bulk were rice, flour, oatmeal, and sugar, both brown and white. They scooped marshmallows from large tin cans and sold them by the pound. Esther remembers selling black crepe mourning veils, kitchen utensils, hair pins, and a famous tonic, "Alpenkreuter."

The slogan for Sohre Bros. was, "Give everyone a little treat each time you make a sale to keep customers friends." That advice was given by Charles to his sons when they took over the business. And, Anna Jefferson wrote, "They never forgot that advice."

By May of 1960, Carl and Art retired and went to a rest home. On October 13 of that year, the local paper stated, "As we understand it, the store was a gift from the Sohre family" to Gustavus Adolphus College. Later, Robert Laabs bought all the stock and it was sold at his father's auction house near Madelia.

And so there was only one general store left in Good Thunder—Wiedenheft's—and that was not as "general" as it had been. It specialized in groceries. Gone were the dresses, coats, lingerie items, fabrics and patterns. They still carried some notions, such as thread,

needles, bias tape and ric-rac. Overalls, overshoes, denim caps and work gloves so popular with the farmers, could be purchased there, too. By 1964, though, when Robert died, the customer was using a cart to push around and do his shopping there.

Surely the general store served a vital purpose in its day. It provided not only mundane, yet needed products for the pioneers and the residents of growing communities, but also merchandise that appealed to those who took a fancy to trinkets, jewelry, lace and pretty things.

The general store also provided a place for one to find out what was happening to those who lived on the other side of the village. This very integral "institution" of the early days was a meeting place, in a way: for the meeting of farmers with townspeople, for the meeting of friends, and for the meeting of minds.

And, incidentally, the general stores provided opportunities for men to test their talent in the business world.

Lucille A. FitzSimmons

Sources

Esther Gnadke, Karl Bruscke, Muriel Hiller all of Good Thunder.

Ruth Welsh, Mankato.

R.L. Polk and Company, *Mankato City and Blue Earth County Directory*, 1892-1911.

Good Thunder Herald, December 8, 1898, January 7, 1904, August 31, 1905, April 27, 1905, December 8, 1913, May 1, 1916, October 19, 1916, October 13, 1960.

Mankato Free Press, April 5, 1937, August 21, 1939, March 23, 1960.

Office of Vital Statistics, Blue Earth County.

Photo, courtesy Charles Barnard, Good Thunder.

Special thanks to Alma Severson of Mankato for research assistance.

Correction for Part I: Henry C. Wiedenheft was born in 1837.