

# The Blue Earth County HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# NEWSPAPER

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## URBAN RENEWAL—A FLEETING GLANCE AT THREE 1890'S FACADES ON FRONT STREET

The face of downtown Mankato is changing with the gradual disappearance of the old buildings which, seemingly in a day, are converted into smooth graveled lots awaiting the growth of the new structures that will be an organic part of the projected Front Street Mall. And although progress is slow, all too soon the memories of the buildings that had once occupied those spaces fade from the public mind. Contradictory as it may seem, one part of our American tradition is a commitment to change and a belief in progress that grows out of obsolescence. But in architecture of the Victorian era an edifice was intended to emanate an aura of monumental permanence akin to Plymouth Rock.

In the last decades of the 19th Century the appearance of a merchant's place of business was a declaration of his prestige in the community and of his faith in the community's future, as it is today, but a larger percentage of his expenditures for building was devoted to the outside of his establishment rather than for hidden efficiencies. "In that period, however, almost any construction which required the investment of a substantial amount of money was taken as praiseworthy"<sup>1</sup>. by local newspapers, and such praise was not necessarily based on purely aesthetic grounds.

Still, even the most modest Mankato-brick parapet could boast fanciful patterns in the laying of header-courses and arches above the windows, with the top cornice corbelled out in rhythmic little blind arcades reminiscent of Romanesque churches in sunny Italy. Such local inventiveness can still be seen on the S & S Tavern (formerly the William Hutt Building) at 329 North Front, where a brick sunburst surrounds the date (1892) emblazoned under a triangular pediment, or on any of dozens of storefronts in Mankato or the surrounding cities. Above the Brown Mug and the G & O Cafe, the brick fancies of the Anderson Block Building at 625-627 South Front Street are augmented with Mankato's first example of cast-iron ornamental sheathing. (1892) And as frame business buildings were replaced with more fireproof structures, almost every one could boast at least sills and decorative transoms of fine local limestone in buff or pink or blue.

A prospective owner selected ornament and facade detail from pattern books of engravings shown him by his architect or contractor for these designs. But occasionally a businessman with strong convictions and unwavering taste put his personal stamp on his place of business, creating through Yankee individualism a unique art form that could be called as much his as the craftsman's who made it for him.

Mankato is fortunate to have an example of this kind of aesthetic and unusual building in the Mankato Mercantile Company at 209 North Front Street, now occupied by Meyer & Sons Inc., but destined to go with the Key City Urban Renewal Project. Built at a cost of \$6,000, the building was designed by local architect H.C. Gerlach and constructed by Jacob Flaschenhar, a local contractor. Like many of Mankato's doomed 19th century buildings which have not been constantly updated to meet city building codes, it has wood beams for support throughout and walls of relatively soft Mankato brick.

A skylight down its entire length and an unusual amount of plate glass window space made it the best illuminated and most modern business in town in 1890, but it was the facade that was, and still is, the distinguishing feature of the Mankato Mercantile.

Unlike contemporary businesses on Front Street in 1890, this building boasts an entire front decorated with intricately carved buff limestone. The stonecarving was all executed locally at the Fred Widdell quarry and may have been designed by Fred Widdell himself, though the carving of special order work was sometimes done by itinerant sculptors who made rounds to various quarries to take work on commission. This front portion alone cost \$1,500, or one-fourth of the total building cost, and showed to Mankato for the first time what could be done with Mankato stone on a large scale in commercial architecture.<sup>2</sup>



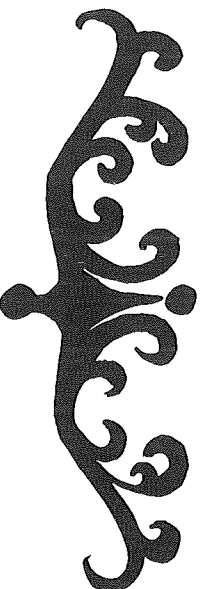
*The eclectic Victorian fashion of patchworking together decorative motifs into a visually rich composition was used here by first dividing the facade vertically with fluted pilasters with foliate capitals tapered to make the two-story building look more imposing. Above the windows, the parapet continued with other classical quotations -- a temple pediment, Greek acanthus frieses and Roman garland swags -- but the most unusual features were the starkly contemporary notes. In the crowning pediment was carved a relief of a clipper ship -- a symbol of speed and efficiency in the retailing trade -- and below, in block letters arched between colonnettes, "Mankato Mercantile Co. Block." Enscenced between, and undoubtedly there on the owner's insistence, is the carved portrait of the owner himself, with handlebar mustache and the brim of his derby hat extending off to right and left to finish the horizontal molding across the facade.*

*Headlined in the August 15, 1890, Mankato Review as "A Handsome and Complete Business Block," the enterprise shown in building such a costly establishment was praised as an indicator of the firm's prosperity. Today, more than 80 years later, the all-limestone facade and the carved portrait have greater significance to our architectural history. Nowhere else in Minnesota than in our limestone-quarry city can you find an equal demonstration of early solid-stone commercial stone-front; combined with an assertive and unique design, this property is even more remarkable.*

*But what is to become of Mankato's stone portrait facade? The Mankato Housing and Redevelopment Authority has already authorized the sale of the property, the first step toward its eventual demolition. Paul Meyer, who owns the property, has indicated some interest in salvaging at least part of the stonework to incorporate in a new building his firm intends to build a block away, but I know of no definite decision on this possibility. Should Mr. Meyer's plan materialize, Blue Earth County will benefit from the farsightedness of another enterprising individualist in the Mankato mercantile business who cares enough to preserve a significant part of Minnesota's history. If not, another of our tangible links with the past will crumble as the walls fall.*

by Nancy Luomala

1. Drew Larson, Stylistic and Structural Trends in Selected Mankato Commercial and Public Architecture from 1890 to 1920, Mankato State College thesis, 1971, p. 27.
2. Drew Larson, op. cit., pp. 27-8.



#### NOMINATIONS FOR HISTORIC REGISTRY

In August Dr. Charles Nelson visited Blue Earth County. He was representing the Historic Site Survey, whose offices are located at Fort Snelling. While here, he received nominations for historic registry for the First National Bank Building and the Judge Cray home (the Y. W. C. A.). Those nominations were prepared by Twila Shubert and Nancy Luomala. Dr. Nelson was interested in the architectural history of the downtown core of Good Thunder also, and the documentation for its nomination is being prepared by Bill Zastrow at Mankato State College.

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#### WANTED FOR DECEMBER

The museum will be displaying old Christmas cards and Christmas gifts (circa 1880-1920) during the month of December. If you have any cards from that period or any items that could have been given as presents, Betty Corde and her staff would appreciate your loaning them temporarily to the museum. You can either call Betty during her office hours or drop in to see her.

Does anyone have Christmas wreaths with electric candles in them? They are to be hung in the windows of the Hubbard House during the holiday season and will be returned to you in good condition after the new year begins.

## "A CUP OF CHEER AND MORE"

We had heard that Miss Anna Wiecking had in her possession a recipe for punch that was served around the turn of the century. When we asked her to share it with us, she sent along the following:

"Here it is. My librarian sister remembered what book had it. Cooks, Gluttons and Gourmets, A History of Cooking, by Betty Mason, (Doubleday) p. 297. Speaking of the colorful decorations on cakes, etc, in the 1890's, the author says:

'Such pretty-pretty combinations were appropriate for the evening parties where young ladies played Verdi or Offenbach on the piano after dinner, and gentlemen kept slipping back to the punch bowl for refills. These punches were not mere pink-tea combinations. One popular blend of the period known as Wabash Punch called for: 3 gallons of green tea, 1 gallon of whiskey, one quart rum, 1 jug curacao, 1 gallon sweet catawba, 1 quart lemon juice, 2 pounds of sugar, and 6 bottles of champagne!"

Will the above punch be served to guests at the museum's Christmas party? Remember that displays and decorations will be from the turn of the century. If so, members will be well advised to come in appropriate transportation: a horse and buggy. This potent grog could be responsible not only for a large dent in the society's pocketbook, but also for one in the guest's car as he weaves home after the party.

# REPORTS

## RECENT MUSEUM EVENTS

The First District Historical Assembly took place on September 8th.

One hundred and eight people attended the meeting; that's eleven more than the number who registered at last year's meeting in Faribault. Thanks should be given to the women of St. John's Episcopal Church. They served a fine luncheon to assembly participants. We also wish to thank the church, always a good neighbor, for donating its facilities. Carol Williams and Marcia Richards would like to mention the names of the women who helped them by baking for the afternoon coffee hour. They are as follows: Mrs. Jon Frost, Mrs. Clayton Schulte, Mrs. John Rogosch, Sandy Smith, Myrtle Wigley, Mildred Jones, Margaret Sturm, Vivian Jensen, Mary Jane Blethen, Marian Lutes, Judy Lokensgard, Marion Harten, and Nancy Girouard. Also, special thanks to Sue Towner and Jessica Richards for helping to serve the coffee.

Stone Sunday: For once the weather was co-operative. Approximately 275 people enjoyed the presentations and exhibits on a recent sunny October Sunday. Darrell Aplitz, with some help from Bert Burns, discussed the geology of this region. They used two screens simultaneously, one for slides and one for maps, in their presentation. Afterwards, there were speeches by three men well-known for their work in the region's stone industry: Steve Babcock, Tom Coughlan, Sr., and Willard Vetter. At the end of the day Mr. Babcock invited everyone to the Mankato Stone Quarry for a tour and refreshments. Refreshments, by the way, were furnished by Marion Harten.

In conjunction with Stone Sunday, there is still an exhibit of photos and old tools at the museum. Professor Donald Byrum and his students from Mankato State Collere did an outstanding job of setting up the display. Marcia Schuster deserves commendation for all her hard work organizing the event as do Evelyn Schramski, Earle Wigley, Anna Wiecking, Betty Cords, and THE PHOTOGRAPHERS.

Next year's program on industry in Blue Earth County will focus on the foundry industry. Cecil Jones has been appointed chairman.

#### YOUR BOARD

The Board of Directors is sorry to announce the resignation of Mr. Bruce McGregor of Mapleton. His unexpired term will be filled by the end of November. We also regret the resignation of our Treasurer, Mr. George Sugden. His position has been filled by Mr. Ben Jones, who is already a member of the Board of Directors. Mrs. Emy Frenztz has been elected to fill the position on the Board of Directors that Mr. Jones vacated when he became Treasurer.

#### MUSEUM STAFF

Betty Cords is the new Director of the Museum. Her hours are from 1 to 5 P. M., Tuesday through Friday. Evelyn Schmanski is the Assistant Director. Ruth Ann Engstrom is the new Librarian. Her hours are Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 1 to 5 P. M. You can arrange an appointment with her by calling the Museum. Margaret Kleinschmidt will continue to guide tours and work on weekends.

These ladies are really busy! Mrs. Engstrom is just starting the immense task of cataloging the Museum's library. At the same time she does genealogical research for anyone requesting it. School tours are a daily occurrence. Sometimes there are two a day. On a recent week-day afternoon 46 people from a Minneapolis Friendship Club arrived unexpectedly on a charter bus. Just as the museum staff members were welcoming them, 75 children showed up for a school tour. One group was guided around the upstairs while the other viewed the displays downstairs. Then they switched. As the last visitor stepped out of the door and the staff was catching its collective breath, in walked a group of Girl Scouts. If, after reading the above, you feel compassion in your heart for our overworked staff, please refer to the want-ads. WE NEED YOU!!

#### MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Emy Frenztz and her membership committee are hard at work compiling lists, phoning, and mailing as they strive to give our already vital organization more members. They do urge all present members to renew their yearly membership in time for the members-only Christmas party on December 3. Janet Goff heads the renewal committee, Marion Harten is in charge of new prospects, and Marcia Coonce is taking care of publicity. Kathryn Hanson is assisting Emy as co-chairman. If you have suggestions about possible new members, please contact any of the above. The committee is heading letters to new prospects with the following quotation from Edmund Burke: "People will not look forward to posterity who never looked back to their ancestors."

#### NEWS ANYONE?

If you have an item which you think might be of interest to this newsletter's readers, won't you please contact one of your editors? We are:

Nancy Girouard 387-3608  
and  
Marcia Confer 387-3761

A special thank you to Mr. C. W. Pennington and Mr. Loren Swenson of KATOLIGHT CORPORATION, for help in the publication of this newsletter.

#### DONATIONS

C.O. Anderson of R.F.D.#1, Eagle Lake, and his Auto Restorers Club had a surplus in their treasury, which they donated to the Blue Earth County Historical Society. Many thanks Mr. Anderson and club members.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS IN STORE

On December 3 at 7:30 P. M. there will be a Christmas party at the Hubbard House for society members and their guests. Mrs. Elmer Lippmann is making arrangements. More on this at a later date.

On January 22, Dave Nystuen of the State Historical Society will speak on the possibilities of new historic sites in Minnesota. Members will be invited to come to the Y. W. C. A. annex to listen to Mr. Nystuen and to see his slides. Please bring your ideas too. Do you have any suggestions about places of historical interest in our area?

The date of the Annual Meeting has been changed to the third Wednesday in April.

WANTED: Volunteers to work at the museum on Sunday afternoons from 1 to 4 o'clock. We need someone to be there who can keep an eye on the displays and answer any questions visitors may have.

WANTED: Receptionist for up front in the museum. It would help us immensely if you had even one day a week to volunteer. The times are Tuesday through Friday, 1 to 5 P. M.

Please call Betty Cords at the museum if you feel you can help us out with either of the above. The number is 345-4154.

WANTED: An old wardrobe in good condition to be used in the director's office for additional storage space. Anyone wishing to donate this item please call 345-4154 (1 to 5 P. M.) or 726-2744.

WANTED: We would like to have a complete collection of Maude Hart Lovelace's books for our library. Anyone wishing to donate copies of these books may call 345-4153 (1 to 5 P. M.) or stop in at the museum.

WANTED: We still have some period dresses that need mending and repairs before they go to the dry cleaners. Anyone interested in helping with this project please call the museum or stop in. We'd appreciate it.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS?

Thanks to Marcia Schuster and volunteer help at the Y.W.C.A., all future mailings will be labeled by an addressograph machine. If you wish your address changed in any way, please contact Marcia after 6:00 P.M. at 388-6314. A special note of thanks to Mrs. Murry Ewalt of the Y.W.C.A. Board for her help in typing up the plates.

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SOCIETY OFFICERS

President	Bert Burns
Vice President	Kathryn Hanson
Secretary	Betty Cords
Treasurer	Ben Jones

NEWSLETTER EDITORS

Nancy Girouard and Marcia Confer

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