

## HOUSES ON MAIN STREET

A Talk Made by Earl Gebhart Hedden at a Meeting of Toastmasters

Recently, what had probably been the finest residence in all our country, was given over to a wrecking company to be razed. And the head of that wrecking company, in lamenting his assignment to destroy the beautiful building that had once been the home of one of our important citizens, Charles W. Schwab, said he foresaw the time when there would be no more beautiful residences in this country. As we pondered on this thought it brought to mind the fate of some of the fine old residences in our own midst.

The **Woodward** home that at one time occupied a half-block surrounded on all sides by a beautiful lawn that set off its stateliness. Today it has a bustle tacked on in a way that distracts your attention from the old house and destroys its dignity. It houses the Masonic Temple.

The **Bradley** home occupied the other half of the same block. Today, hemmed in by a mass of mediocre buildings, its beauty is smothered, much as the beauty of a swan is lost when surrounded by a bevy of ugly ducklings. A fine example of the art of the architect, its charm is wholly unnoticed by the passer-by.

We think of the **Gebhart** house. Today we know it as the Catholic Community Center; a fine old home – in the old days we climbed the iron steps and entered a high hallway where a leisurely stairway led to the second floor. To the left of this hallway stood the twin parlors with their long windows – to the right the large drawing room, beyond we entered the library, its walls lined with fine old walnut book cases; and those book shelves held innumerable volumes of the best in literature, and those volumes were used. Today those rooms are stripped to make way for game tables, and the cultured atmosphere has departed with the vanished years.

We think of the **First National Bank** building at Bank and Main streets – built in 1837 – from sandstone quarried in the hills surrounding our city – the columns of its façade stand there today as an example of the best in classic architecture – but see what the “Moderns” have done to it! They have covered the natural sandstone with a bilious-colored paint – they have [sealed] off its high rotunda in order to make a powder room for the ladies – “and so we come to where sits Reflection – that old woman who with chin cupped in her hand and one elbow always on her knee, steals

light from the past to illumine the future” – and we realize that not all of the fine old homes have been misused – we think of the houses on Main Street that today are graceful reminders of the past, and of what they have meant to the town. You ask why this is of interest to us who live in the “Today”? It is because the genteel cultured people – the bankers – the merchants – who built these houses, are the ones who built our city and gave to it an individuality that still lingers about it. Vision, courage and action were born in these houses, and the houses vibrated to the overtones of those high thoughts and deeds. They felt the thrill of life that still re-echoes through their lonely rooms.

The first houses were built on High Street – the street that we know today as Main Street. It still stands on the Records books as High Street. One of the oldest houses still stands near the corner of Main and State. Built by the **Scribner Family**, the original founders of the town, it has been restored by the devoted labors of the local chapter Daughters of the American Revolution. Much of its furnishings have been placed there by descendents of the original family, and under their supervision. It carries the atmosphere that pervaded it more than a century and a quarter ago. A house that they built a little earlier was turned into a public hostelry. It stood at West First and Main streets and was known as **The Hale Tavern**. Many of our people remember the building, as it was removed only within the last decade. During the stagecoach days “[Mein] Host Hale” in his ruffled shirt and post-colonial costume greeted at its portals many of the great men of that day – Daniel Webster, Andrew Jackson, Martin VanBuren and many others of equal note stopped there on their way to and from the Capital of the Northwest Territory at Vincennes and the capital of Indiana at Corydon. What excitement those two houses must have felt as the founding of a city was being planned within their walls. The Scribner Family in planning the city had always the thought of a dwelling place of cultured and righteous people, people of intelligence, and they built in order to attract that type of people. In platting the city they donated a lot on each of many city blocks to be used for school purposes. Scribner High School stands on one such parcel of ground. One fourth of all down payments on original sales was turned over to a committee to establish schools. Our County Courthouse, City Hall and Jail stand on lots deeded to the city, and what we know as “The Plaza” was given to the city, for market-house purposes, as was also Scribner Park for recreation purposes. The First Presbyterian Church was started in one of the Scribner Houses. Can we say that the Houses did not feel keenly the birth pangs as the new town was born within them?

The town originally extended from East Fifth Street to West Fifth Street and from Oak Street to the riverfront, and in the earlier days when steamboat

building brought renown to our town, the western end was more thickly settled. Near lower Third Street a **Mr. John B. Anderson** opened a private school – first a Seminary for young ladies and later built a wing to accommodate young men. He later moved to Pittsburgh and Allegheny. Near his home there, a young telegraph operator by the name of Andrew Carnegie lived and worked, and in his leisure time was encouraged by Mr. Anderson to use the Anderson library. Mr. Carnegie appreciated what that opportunity did for him and later he said he then resolved that if he should ever have the means he would establish libraries wherever they could be used. Our own Carnegie Library is the gift of one who caught his inspiration from a dweller in our own city.

Just prior to the War Between the States, the town had begun to move eastward on Main Street beyond upper Fifth Street. **Captain Montgomery** (Cannon House) built the brick building at east Sixth and Main in the days when the highly skilled steamboat builders were available.

Across from him on the southeast corner of Sixth stood the **Sloan house**, built by Doctor Sloan. Today it is being preserved by the Paris family. Most of us however think of it as "**The Bicknell House**." The daughter of the family, Miss Annie Sloan, married a young naval officer who served with some distinction during the Civil War, George A. Bicknell. His was also a New Albany family and during all the years that he served in the United States Navy they maintained their residence in the house at Sixth and Main streets. As was customary in those days, the wives of ranking naval officers traveled over the world in order to be near their husbands when the fleet was stationed at a foreign base, partly for personal reasons but partly also for social and diplomatic purposes. Many of their furloughs were spent in opening up the old house and fitting into it the many beautiful and unusual treasures that were collected from the Orient and the Indies. When the time for his retirement came they returned to their early home to spend their last days. "Rear Admiral George A. Bicknell, U.S.N., Retired" as he rode down Main Street attired in his white linen suit and carrying an enormous white umbrella was quite a sight for the townspeople to gawk at. The life they had led in the service necessarily called for a different demeanor than that led by the staid homefolk, yet they probably rightly could be called eccentric. Many of the stories told of their oddities the writer personally knows to be true. The admiral obeyed the scriptural injunction and insisted on his help being payed before sundown every evening, and that with money fresh from the mint. They did things in the "Grand Manner" and when we had the privilege of being entertained in their home, while we were greeted with a friendly warmth, it yet was a very dignified hour. The house was lit by ships' lanterns and heated by ships' stoves; the walls were adorned with hangings brought from Nippon, the

Land of the Rising Sun; on mantelpiece and on teak wood tables we saw cloissonaise and delicate ivory carvings wrought by Chinese hands skilled by centuries of teaching; richly embroidered silks; paisley shawls from India and wonderfully delicate laces from Egypt; many of the articles having been wrought while the Admiral's wife watched the patient workers completing the task, and we realized that she had visited these countries in the early days before general intercourse with the Occident had modernized them. And the old house must have felt the importance of it all – must have felt an international dignity in its “shivering timbers” as the Admiral trod its “decks”.

A little farther up, at Seventh and Main, the house that Mrs. Oscar Barth now owns was built by **Washington C. DePauw** – a man who did much for the community. The war years brought opportunity for the accumulation of wealth to many of our business men. Some was used well and some was used ill-ly. Mr. Depauw built industries that employed hundreds of our people; he built the largest plate glass works in the country on our river bank in our town; he was the financial genius back of an iron works – a rail mill – a machine-manufacturing company, and with others in operating here the largest woolen mills west of the Alleghenies. He made **DePauw College**, that formerly stood at the corner of East Ninth and Main, possible (DePauw Apartments today stand on the site). He provided the original building that housed DePauw Memorial M. E. Church – then a small frame church building on Vincennes street first named **Jennie DePauw Memorial Church**; later he was to endow DePauw University at Greencastle with upwards of a million dollars as a Christian university of learning; he left an endowment for charities in New Albany that through the years has provided at times a free medical dispensary and hospital and today provides a free kindergarten for underprivileged children. Certainly that old house on Main street still reflects a glow of pride as it ponders on the generous deeds and princely gifts that had their “borning” in its spacious rooms.

A little way east on the north side of the street, where the Catholic Community Center now holds forth, the fine old house was built shortly after the Civil War by **Will Culbertson, Jr.**

Next door to the Bicknell House stands what is known today as the “Howk” house, for years the residence of Judge Howk, but built and occupied originally by **Elias Ayres**. Mr. Ayers amassed a fortune as a merchant and the money was used largely for philanthropic purposes. The family must have lived in rich dignity if we may judge by the beautiful pieces of furniture which adorned their home and which still are treasured by some of their legatees in our town. The piano which brought over the mountains

and down the river was probably the first piano in New Albany. It is now the proud possession of one of our residents, and as a beautiful specimen of master instrument craftsmanship, its rosewood case is worthy of a place in a most discriminating museum. As Mr. Ayers and his wife sat in the old house they planned a Seminary for the training of Presbyterian ministers and missionaries, from whence the Gospel might be spread abroad. The seminary they built and endowed here in New Albany late grew to be "The McCormick Theological Seminary of Chicago" – one of the most influential Presbyterian seminaries in our nation. "I wonder if ever the house remembers the days gone by?"

As we have strolled up Main Street, we have already passed, just east of Fourth Street, the house in which **Joseph Clokey** was born, and in which he lived as a boy. As the Presbyterian Manse, the house listened to the boyish fingers first drum out on the piano the melodies that the world was later to recognize as the compositions of one of the nation's foremost musical composers.

Up near Twelfth Street, a large old brick residence has been preserved and we know it now as the **St. Paul's Episcopal Manse**. In an earlier day it housed the family of one whom New Albany sent up to the councils of state in the person of Michael Kerr. He served as Speaker of the national House of Representatives at Washington in post-civil war days. Who can doubt that many many decisions important to the nation were made in this old house on Main Street.

Recently I came upon the following autographed copy of the following beautiful quatrain: "The road winds up the hill to meet the height; Beyond the locust hedge it curves from sight; And yet no man would foolishly contend That where he sees it not, it makes an end." It was titled "Faith" and surely the old house near Tenth Street that sheltered the **Nunemacher** family for so many years could be pardoned its pride in laying claim to some of the inspiration that Emma Nunemacher Carleton wrote into such poems as this.

Probably the era of greatest industrial prosperity and growth came to New Albany in the two decades from 1870 to 1890. This was made possible by a rare combination of capital interests and executive genius, developed during war days in preparation for opportunities to come. During the "sixties" **John F. Gebhart** came to New Albany and demonstrated his ability as an organizer and industrial builder. At the same time fortunes were developed in the hands of **R. G. McCord**, whose handsome residence still stands at east Twelfth and Main streets, Lawrence Bradley, and Washington C. DePauw. The fine old building that we know as the

**Catholic Community Club** was built and occupied a short time by Will Culbertson, Jr. For many years, however, it was the home of J. F. Gebhart, and in its well-appointed library many of the plans were laid that were to make a modern city out of the sedate leisurely town that had here-to-fore strolled leisurely along. Mr. Gebhart was the planner and the executive. McCord, Bradley and DePauw were the financial backers. With this financial backing, Mr. Gebhart, who was a genius in the manufacture of woolen goods, built and operated the largest woolen mill west of the Alleghenies. It attracted German workmen from Pennsylvania and many English woolen mill families from the east. The mill occupied a ten-acre plat at Vincennes and Woolen Mill lane (now known as Locust Street) and with the advent of the many workmen the town in that vicinity grew. Operatives from the lower end of town needed transportation to the mill so Mr. Gebhart acquired an interest in the **street railway**, which originally came only as far east as Ninth Street, and extended the line as far north as the woolen mills. The car line at that time operated mule-drawn cars on a narrow gauge track. Early in the seventies **Mr. W. A. Hedden** who did the selling for the woolen mills kept complaining that an Ohio concern was making better scarlet flannels than our mills and Mr. Gebhart replied that the only way he could get a better scarlet color was to get a supply of soft water. Everybody in those days wore "red flannels" and it meant big business; so Mr. Gebhart organized the **New Albany Water Works**. It would be unthinkable today that a city of twenty thousand people should depend entirely on street-corner pumps for a water supply. Mr. Gebhart, as president of the company, brought **Frank Sheffold** here, and our present water works system, still using one of the original reservoirs on Silver Hills, was built by him in 1875. The woolen mills operated an office and "Woolen Mill Store" on Main just below Pearl. That original building, which was remodeled some years ago, to house the **Kerrigan Theatre** is just now being razed. Some means of communication was necessary between the "mill" and the "store" and shortly after Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated his new telephone at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Mr. Gebhart installed a system – the first telephones probably to be brought to New Albany. The system consisted of five phones; Mr. Gebhart in the meantime had backed up W. A. Hedden in starting a woolen hosiery mills and during the process acquired Mr. Hedden as a son-in-law. So the new telephone system was sort of a family affair also. One ring called the woolen mills – two rings called the woolen mill store – three rings called the hosiery mills – four rings called Mr. Gebhart's house on Main Street – and five rings called Mr. Hedden's home on Vincennes Street. It was later incorporated in the public system that has grown to what we know today as the Bell Telephone System. As the woolen mills grew to be large shippers they realized the necessity for better shipping facilities. The **Southern "Air Line"** stopped at West First Street; the **Monon** at Pearl and

Oak. The **B&O** (O&M as it was known then) main line went into Jeffersonville and only a branch line ended here at New Albany. The O&M considered discontinuing their New Albany line and talked of building a bridge from Jeffersonville to give them access to Louisville and the southern connections. It was really a crisis in the life of our town and so Mr. Gebhart, always a man of action, personally acquired options on rights of way on our riverfront for a terminal trunk line; he enlisted the interest of **Bennett H. Young**, a Louisville financier, and they were the moving force backing the building of the **K&I Bridge**, a move which gave the northern railroads access to Louisville terminals through New Albany. We know the system today as the K&I terminal Railroad, and today makes New Albany one of the best-served railroad crossroads in the middle west. Mr. Gebhart with Colonel Tuley developed Silver Hills; Ridgeway Avenue was named in his drawing room; they laid the hexagon-shaped tiles that still serves in some places as a sidewalk; they built and operated "**The Highland Railway**" that served Silver Hills' residents and the throngs that attended the Camp Ground services for many years. He was the Father of the "Song Service", adopted by most of the Protestant Churches in the decades immediately before and after the turn of the century. These song services did much to give New Albany the reputation that still clings to it of being an unusually musical community. Much of this constructive activity was certainly planned in the old house at Eighth and Main as its master meditated in the calm dignity of his home.

In its decadence, more sentimental probably than physical, it still retains some reminders of its former dignity. The library shelves still stand, albeit with a very much different collection of printed thought; and the remnant of the beautiful frescoes that still adorn the ceiling of the drawing room, as it gazes in the long pier mirror that stands at the room's end, must still catch a beautiful reflection of a gallant past. Would that it might have been treated as the American Legion has treated the Culbertson House at Tenth and Main. The Culbertson House was built shortly after the Civil War by W. S. Culbertson. Later he was to build, during the early seventies, the Old Ladies Home at Seventh and Main. He endowed that institution and it carries on today, one of the finest philanthropic works of our city. About 1882 or 1883 he built the **Cornelia Memorial Childrens' Home** that cared for the orphans and dependant children of five surrounding counties for a half century and today serves the county as a health center. I like to think that my father helped the "old man" build his home. My father, a half-grown boy, worked for Mr. Culbertson for the years leading up to the erection of the house. He went to work Monday mornings and returned home Saturday nights; all the help slept in the upper story of the "**W.S. Culbertson and Son**" store near the corner of Pearl and Main. For a weeks' work my father was paid one dollar and other good and valuable considerations.

Father later felt that the other considerations were valuable, as the business training he gained there and learned to practice, gave Mr. Culbertson a confidence in him that in later years stood him in good stead when, as a manager of the hosiery mills, he was given the financial support of the Culbertson banking interests.

Mr. Culbertson built his home in 1868 because of his love and respect for New Albany and it still forms one of the few links with the past glory that was New Albany. The old house was an animated part of his life, and through the years it has been not just a mass of brick and lumber – it was almost a life in itself. The workmen who fashioned it were artisans – they took pride in their work – New Albany, at the time the house was created, was the center of some of the finest steamboat building in the west, and the highly skilled workmen have left us a memorial of their craftsmanship in the Culbertson home. As it was recently restored practically no “pointing-up” of the brick work was necessary – some of the original enamel still covered the interior woodwork – the beautiful doors throughout the interior swung on the original hinges as freely as on the day they first swung open to welcome the first family, and the fresco on the ceiling is still as fresh a work of art as it was those eighty year ago. Through those windows of curved plate glass the old house looked out to see the master walk down the wide curving stone walk and beyond the handsome iron fence that still stands straight and tall – it saw him on the Sabbath day, dressed in his Prince Albert coat with gold-headed cane and silk hat, hand his ladies into the carriage – on their way to the church – it saw his children rush out through its doorway to school and to play – it throbbed to the rhythm of the dance as the young people danced and wooed and loved – it shared in their joy as they were joined in marriage in the long drawing room – it wept as the old man himself lay cold in death in the ample bay window of that same room.

And so I think the American Legion has done an honorable thing in restoring a house such as this. It not only gives the city a monument that it can be proud of, but it demonstrates that the present generation has a fine respect for those who have labored in the past to make for us a city beautiful. It should inspire us to emulate them – to build more stately mansions and to fill, with broader visions and greater deeds, the HOUSES ON MAIN STREET.

- Earl Hedden

[Source: VF BUILDINGS – MAIN STREET]