

Early Depot Town

July 1974 #7

WMP

YPSILANTI GLEANINGS

PAST SCENES and OLD TIMES

YPSILANTI HISTORICAL SOCIETY ~ PUBLICATION ~



Ypsilanti Historical Museum
~ 220 N. Huron Street ~

July 1974

Memories of the "EARLY DEPOT TOWN"

Memories of the "Early Depot Town"

by

Joseph H. Thompson

I have been asked a number of times to give my impression of the Depot section just after 1900.

I was born on Maple Street very close to this area so I think I have a pretty good idea of the business section and some of the merchants and their activities in this part of the city. The east side had many names: The East Side, Depot Town, Cross Street, Down Town as opposed to Up-Town.

I hope that you will pardon me if I begin with the business my parents operated on the corner of River and Cross Streets. It was known as the "Thompson Building". My grandfather, O.E. Thompson, my father, Benjamin Thompson, my uncle, Edward Thompson, and my uncle, John Thompson were very busy in the manufacturing of agricultural implements; root cutters, grass seeders, kraut and slaw cutters, and later, porch swings. They employed about 40 men. They also ran a retail business selling coal, building supplies, carriages and wagons, paint and wall paper - at one time sold over 200 bicycles in one year. They had the agency for the Nichols and Shepherd threshing engines that were made in Battle Creek. I recall that they had a crew of paper hangers and painters that were busy in the city in that line of work.

In the Thompson Building there was also a tailor by the name of Otto Biske that made hand-made clothes for many of the people who could afford it. Right next to Mr. Biske's tailor shop was the city fire department where they operated one horse, and a couple of firemen who slept up-stairs over the fire equipment. During the off hours Tommy Wilkinson operated this horse in picking up the refuse on the Depot streets. (You know they had horses in those days.) And up on the top of the building was a large bell that would ring and the number of strokes on the bell would tell you what location in town the fire was burning or being extinguished.

Across the street was the Michigan Central Depot with all its busy trains coming and going and baggage wagons and hacks calling out for the Hawkins House and Occidental Hotel, a couple of baggage wagons that were handling the baggage and sample trunks that the salesmen used in selling their wares. The Depot at that time was a two-story building and a fire burned off the top of it and they reduced it to one floor. On that Michigan Central they had one train they called the "paper train" that left Detroit at 2 o'clock at night and took the newspapers all the way up the line from the Detroit publishers. Then they had a train they called "the blind baggage" which had one coach on the rear with holes where the guardians could poke their guns out if it was held up. It carried the money from Detroit to Chicago. Then there was a car on that train they called the "silk car" that carried silk in bales that was all made up in fabric. The Depot was so busy that it was really a nice exciting place to go as kids. Madison Parsons called out the trains - "Train going west, Ann Arbor, Jackson, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo" etc. Tommy Thompson in a uniform sold tickets and George Oberst was a baggageman. That was a very big part of the traveling in those days.

Across the tracks was the freight depot where horse-drawn drays hauled all the freight that came in box cars and shipped out all of the manufactured products for Ypsilanti including the Penninsula Paper Company and other factories that were doing pretty well. The train stopped for water there and the gardens next to the depot were something to behold. Mr. John Laidlaw, a Scotch gardener, was known all up and down the line for his display of flowers and he would build huge arrangements out of flowers and plants like the Niagara Falls and the battleship, Maine and the head boys got on the trains and gave the ladies little bouquets when they stopped in Ypsilanti.

Up the tracks a little farther from the greenhouse were the stock-yards where once a week they shipped livestock in cattle cars. The drovers - well, I remember Mr. Farnsby Horner and Dick Spencer would buy this livestock and then

have it brought to the stock yards once a week where they shipped it out.

To come back to East Cross Street - on the corner across the tracks was a hotel called the Neat House, as I remember the first name on it. Then it was changed to the Lewis House. Then a fellow came down from Michigan Center named Dad Yates who opened a tavern and did a thriving business. Oliver Westfall afterwards had the hotel and it had a bar downstairs and sleeping rooms upstairs for maybe 15 or 20 people. Next to this hotel was a drug store that was operated by Robert Kilian and in the drug store was a jewelry repair outfit run by Mr. E.N. Colby, where they cleaned watches and sold small articles of jewelry. Kilian had a wonderful soda fountain and the kids all went in there when they had the money to buy one. Next door was Clark and House's grocery and later the store was operated by Mr. H.A. Palmer as a hardware store. The next store, going west, was a meat market run by Mr. Charlie Fairchilds and his wife, Lilly, and next to that was the Robert's House, another bar with rooms upstairs. Just beyond that was the Ypsilanti Reed Furniture Company that moved out from Detroit where it was known as the Phoenix Reed Furniture Company. They employed probably 35 to 40 men making reed furniture which was very popular in those days and they stayed for a number of years and finally moved to Jackson, Michigan where they got prison labor for 50¢ a day. That was the end of the Ypsilanti Reed Furniture. On the corner west of there was a hardware store operated by Whitford and Simmons; Theodore Whitford and Mr. Cal Simmons. They had a tin shop in the back room and in their spare time they made all sorts of tin utensils and eaves-troughs and down-spouts and all that stuff that was made by hand in those days.

That Follett House had quite a history but I never recall when it was a hotel. It was a factory from the time that I remember.

Across the street west of the hardware was the Deubel Mill where they ground up wheat and made flour. It was run by water power from the Huron River with a race that ran north to the dam near Forest Avenue. Up the race a little

ways was a saw mill that Mr. H.R. Scovill operated with his partner, George Follmor. The farmers brought in their logs and they were dumped into the race and floated down until the mill was ready to saw them up into lumber. Frog Island across from the race was just full of lumber piles of all different kinds and descriptions. Of course, it was all delivered by horses with immense drays. Up the race a little farther was a sash and door mill that was operated by Scovill and across the river was the Hay and Todd Manufacturing Company or the Ypsilanti Underwear Company that was also run by water power. Just think - that dam operated water power for the woolen mill, for the sash and door, for the Scovill log mill, and for the Deubel Flour Mill. Quite a lot of power came from the Huron River.

On Forest Avenue across from the woolen mill, was a tannery that Mr. Holland ran. He would buy hides from the farmers and tan them into leather. This was quite an operation. He also bought junk. Us kids used to sell him all the metal we could find around and he was a very nice old man as I can remember.

On Forest Avenue, up a little farther on River Street was a malt house run by Mr. Fred Swain. They converted barley into malt that was sold to extensive brewery operations around like Forrester's and like the ones in Ann Arbor and Manchester. That seemed to be a part of the brewing that was very essential in making beer.

Let's go back across the river now on the South side of Cross Street. The first building that I remember there was a law office where lawyer Lee M. Brown held forth. He has the attorney for all the Depot people that needed to go to law. Next to that law office, George W. Hayes had a grocery. And East of that grocery was John Engel Cartage and Coal office behind which he had an extensive barn and owned a number of teams of horses and drays that did the hauling around the Depot section. A junk dealer, Mr. Louie Cramer, was quite an operator. He had a little store and bought all the junk that was available at that time.

Next to Mr. Cramer's place of business was a cigar store that was operated by Mr. Chris Duress. They called him "Doc", for he concocted a remedy that he claimed would restore lost manhood. He filled his window one day with this remedy and the sun came through the window pretty bright and the bottles exploded and blew out the front windows so I guess he did away with his remedy after that experience. Tommy Duffy had a shoe repair shop right next door and took care of all the people's wants repairing their shoes.

Now we'll go up Cross Street a little bit farther east. A man by the name of Fremont Paterson had a store which was a bakery and candy store. He was also an inventor. He invented what they called a unicycle. It was a big, tall wheel and he was suspended in the center of it. I saw him come down Cross Street hill and wreck it one day and that was the last we ever heard of the unicycle. Charley Smith had a meat market next door. I guess in those days they called it a butcher shop, and outside of the city they had a slaughter house where the cattle were killed and then brought in and sold at retail. Joel Grieve had a bakery next door and I used to deliver for him on Saturdays. When we came back at night what bread we had left we fed the horse. Davis and Company had a grocery and drygoods store which did an extensive business. Across the alley A.A. Bedell had a shoe store and next was the Justice of the Peace office where they held trials and Squire Beach was, as I remember, the judge and following him was Frank Joslin. Upstairs over these two stores was the Maccabee Hall and it used to be called the Masonic Hall but they moved up town and the Maccabees took it over. Peter Cranson had a barber shop next door and Clyde Roe a restaurant next to him. There was next door what the people called a "horse exchange". It was where a bunch of gamblers came out from Detroit every day on the Michigan Central and it was what they called "off-track betting". Large black-boards lined the halls and the race results came in from around the country by wire and these men would bet the same as they do today at the horse races only there weren't any horses in sight. That

place was run by Warren Lewis and it was very thriving for number of years until George Burke was elected prosecutor and he closed it up. Upstairs over the horse exchange was a house of ill-repute. "Ma" Bush was the landlady and of course that completed the business section in that neighborhood.

Nick Max had a saloon adjacent and Dick Wilbur operated a cigar store on the corner which is now removed. It was hit by a train and it still shows the scars of where the train struck the building. Later, on that corner, there was a food counter and I remember Mr. Bicraft, where you could go to get a sandwich and a cup of coffee. Down River Street, a ways south, was a foundry and machine shop where they made flour mill machinery. Mr. Charles Ferrier and Mr. George Walterhouse operated this. Next to them was a blacksmith shop run by Otto Rohn. Of course, all the horses had to be shod in those days and this was one place they could take them. Now, on the southeast corner of River and Michigan was the Ypsilanti Electric Company that furnished electric lights for the city in their homes and business, only there was no power generated at that time. It only ran at night because there wasn't any use of electricity in the day time. There were two plants in Ypsilanti - one that furnished the city lights and the water works and the other building furnished the lights for the homes. I remember our home at 108 Maple Street was the first one that was wired in Ypsilanti because it was the closest one to the plant. George Essinger came in with his wire. None of the wires were concealed. They just ran up the walls and across the ceilings except that they took the gas fixtures and rewired them for electric which were quite ornamental. Later this electric plant was sold to Edison Company.

I've been told by two interesting people of those days about a couple of sales that were made at the Depot. One was when Denny Doyle sold the Follett House. It seems that business had fallen off quite a lot. Denny wanted to sell the place so he heard about a fellow by the name of Mathias who was looking for a tavern so he invited him to Ypsilanti to take a look at the Follett House.

Denny was a little bit unscrupulous in his business actions but he got a group of fellows to go to Ann Arbor with suit cases and another group to go down to Wayne and when the Michigan Central train came in these fellows flocked into the Follett House to register and stay over night. Mathias was sitting in the lobby and he looked over the crowd and just then the train came in from the other way and these fellows he had sent to Wayne came in. Well, the bar was doing business and the barber shop was doing business and Mathias was mesmerized by the amount of business he anticipated so he bought the place; and didn't they sell him another place up in the Thompson Building for an overflow of his patrons. Well, he paid his money and he owned the hotel and Doyle was gone.

Another incident that happened that had a little humor to it was when they had the fiftieth anniversary and the celebration was held at the Depot. They had an arch over the road that was made of lattice and up on the top of the arch they had a figure of the Goddess of Liberty, which was a manikin bust that they borrowed from some milliner. Well, they had a speaker - I don't know, a congressman or somebody, come here to make the speech for the fiftieth anniversary. They had this bust up on top of the arch with a shroud over it and at a critical time in his speech they were to pull the rope and that would take the shroud off the bust. But, in the night some wag crawled up on there and with his jackknife cut a hole in the mouth of the Goddess of Liberty and inserted about a 7-inch cigar so at the critical moment they pulled off the shroud and there was the Goddess of Liberty, instead of looking fresh and sweet as she should, she had this great big cigar in her mouth and it brought down the house. Well - so much for that.

There was quite an interesting thing that happened at the Depot. Mr. Shelly B. Hutchinson had a shoe store there at one time and in visiting a friend of his over in Jackson he noticed that he had a sales gimmick where he gave each customer a coupon and on Saturday night they would have a drawing and somebody would get a nice piece of jewelry. Well, that started Mr. Hutchinson thinking

about trading stamps and he developed the whole thing in the Depot section of Ypsilanti. And that is the Hutchinson of the S & H Trading Stamps. He built a beautiful home on River Street that still stands, which is kind of a monument of his great success in the trading stamp business. Other things that Mr. Hutchinson got into didn't pan out so well. He started a newspaper in Detroit called the United States Daily that failed and he started a cereal factory something like the Battle Creek cereal over at the Depot and that didn't do too well.

Did you know a horse-drawn street car operated between Depot Town and Up Town? It was driven by Ruben Cole and went west on Cross Street to Washington and then south to Harriett Street. I recall my mother placing me on a seat with a quantity of sewing material and patterns, and Mrs. Frank Showerman removing me, at her home on South Washington Street. They never turned the car around, simply changed the horse to the other end.

Well, I hope I haven't made too many mistakes in this little discourse and I hope some of you people find it interesting about the early days of Depot Town.