

Dear Jennifer, As I Remember . . . Love, Gramps
By Howard Jennings Wigen

Sometime ago you asked me if I would tell you what LaCrosse was like when I was a little boy. You must remember some things I saw, while others will be as I remember as they were told to me by my elders.

To me at about age 6, the "town" as it was always called, was really exciting for a country boy. There was so much going on, and it seemed to be such a busy place. My early trips included a ride in a car that took a half hour or more, or a wagon pulled by six mules. The wagon trip was to haul coal as I recall, but I'm sure other things of size and weight were carried in this manner also, up till 1928 when my Dad got his first truck.

The Main Street was the first gravel road I ever saw as it was also the State Highway.

As we came into town past the Mattus house, the first place of business was Clint Dobson's blacksmith shop. Part of the old shop still stands where Luvaas parks his grain truck. This is also the place Dad had his horses shod.

The City Hall was then the Ford garage where Model Ts were sold and serviced. Later came the Model A, and finally the mighty V-8. Sixty horses, no less. We had two garages in town. The other was the Dodge garage where Startin's Repair is now. Their place was a bit special because my father was a part owner, and sold vehicles for a time from this place of business. I don't recall too much about it, but Marley Ryan was a mechanic there. And, I remember stories Dad told how he would sell some farmer his first car and have to teach him how to drive. His favorite trick was to take the farmer back in the stubble field, show him how it worked, be sure he knew how to start it, and leave him there.

There were three grocery stores. One was on the corner where the little park is across from the post office, that had a furniture store on the second floor. I had my first elevator ride there, and the power was furnished by pulling a big rope belt, like a chain hoist. Also potatoes, flour, and other food items were moved to the basement for storage by this same vehicle. Two of the stores, sold dry goods; clothes, shoes, sewing material, etc.

There was a hardware store where it is now, that was owned by about four stockholders. One being your Great-grandfather, J. I. (Jurgen) Wigen.

I remember a harness shop run by a man named Bill Becker. This was a place we seemed to always stop, as all farming was done with horses and mules, and harnesses and halters were always breaking.

Another place we always stopped at was the stockyards. They were over in the place where McGregors' shop now stands. This was a busy place as cattle were loaded on rail cars for shipment to either Spokane or Portland. It was also the place you could park a wagon, water your team, and tie them until it was time to load and head for home.

There was a livery barn on the corner across the street from Jeff Andrus' house, but I don't recall much about that. I do remember a few years later there was a carpenter shop on that spot run by one Ole Moen. A good place to get kite building sticks.

We had a shoemaker, Bill Cobb, who had a shop next to the Ford garage. He was asked to leave town by the local "fathers" and did so without a struggle. Good move.

Our little town was able to supply the local farmers with most of the supplies, and services and a great many of the businesses operated on a loose credit system that required that you pay up "when you sell your wheat." A lot of big deals were made with a handshake and signatures were used more for signing checks and mortgage as the locally owned bank. Your Great-grandfather served over forty years as a director and had stock in the First State Bank, and there was also a bank in the building the Grain Growers now occupy.

There were three different grain buyers in town and I recall a farmer going from one office to another when he was trying to sell some of his crop. You could always tell when a deal had been made. The farmer would emerge puffing on a big cigar. It was when the farmers decided the three dealers were getting together and "price fixing" that our local co-op, the LaCrosse Grain Growers, was formed.

But of all, the thing that is still most clear to me, was going to town on Saturday nights. During harvest time, all the families came in to get their weekly supply of food, and other things that it took to feed and care for themselves and the "crew." There was one mad dash to feed and care for the stock, eat a quick supper (usually cold cuts, potato salad, etc. the cooks wanted to go the town, too) and get there to get a good parking place close to the store. Everything, except the Bank, stayed open until about eleven o'clock, and for a lot of people an entire week's supply of food and other needs were taken care of in a few short hours. The housewives could be found in the stores, like now a great place to meet and chat, while their husbands made the rounds of the supply houses, grain offices, and a great deal of time was spent "lyin' and braggin'" about the week's run, yield, and most anything that had to do with harvest time. I can remember one farmer talking to another with great enthusiasm, "great, by golly I believe she's going make thirty bushels." Thirty bushels seemed to be the magic number in those days.

Two places, I should say businesses, seemed to get most of the action on a Saturday night. The barber shop and the pool halls, as we called them. There were two barber shops and it seemed every man in town was either trying to get a bath or a haircut or both. That was one of the reasons to get to town early as the evening could not progress properly until these were accomplished. The shops were always full and the men hated the long wait. The time could have been better spent out on the street or in one of the pool halls.

The main street was completely jammed with people. It was almost impossible to make your way from one place to the next. Diagonal parking made it possible to get a great number of cars parked on Main Street, and of course all the side streets were full, too.

One of our favorite things to do, was to find a car that was parked between the railroad tracks and the back of the business houses. If one of our cars was parked back there, a couple of friends and I would get some candy, sit in the car, talk, eat candy, and watch the fights. As the night wore on, the beer flowed and the men talked; sooner or later it would reach the point where it could only be settled "outside." The rear door to one of the pool halls would bang open, thirty or forty men would spill out, form a circle with the two combatants in the center. These differences were usually finished very quickly, and most were badly mismatched. After a lot of shouting, name calling, and shoving, one of the two would get lucky, the other would get the seat of his pants dusted, and the entire mob would file back in for another round. On a good night this would repeat a half dozen times or more, and

occasionally two evenly matched toughs would give us our money's worth. We would huddle wide-eyed, and all candy eating came to a stop, as we watched and listened.

The only other entertainment for the younger people was the "show house." Every Saturday afternoon Wayne Talkington would bring a film, projector, and treats and set up for the Saturday night movie. The film was shown twice (about 7:30 and 9:30) and after the last showing everything was loaded up and moved to another small town (Endicott, St. John, etc.) for the Sunday night show. I wasn't allowed to go, until I was confirmed, and most of the films that were shown were westerns. Lots of horses, shootin', chases, cattle, and for added excitement they would throw in a train or two. The films were entertaining and really family oriented. The only four letter words you ever heard were "help," "nope," etc., and I think every chase was preceded by the phrase "they went that-a-way!" The show house would seat about 200 people. It was a big two-story structure, and was on the corner where Andrus has a shed where they keep their trucks. An outside stairway led upstairs where the Masonic Lodge held forth. We never got to go up there, and spent a great deal of time trying to imagine what went on in such a secret place. The show house also had a stage up front and the High School used it for their plays, operetta, etc. I was allowed to go there as my older siblings were always involved. I still remember the first "live" orchestra I ever heard. La Crosse High's finest, playing, "Drifting and Dreaming."

We had a doctor, Doc Lukins, who set broken limbs, delivered babies, gave powders and pills for the flu, and during prohibition was the only one who could dispense alcohol in any form. I understand he had a lot of steady customers, I mean patients.

Because we had a doctor, we also had a drug store. This was the place to "hang out" for the younger set. It had a real soda fountain, and this is where you took your date before or after the show. This was the best job in town for a teenaged girl, and was always pursued with great vigor. Lucky was the girl who got to spend her summer making ice cream sodas, sundaes, milk shakes, fresh cokes, and all sorts of tall cool drinks, and lucky was the boy whose girl friend got the job.

LaCrosse was pretty much the same as all small towns were in those days. They were spaced about a day's drive apart for a team and wagon, and also were spaced so the steam locomotives could stop and take on water for their boilers. Thus they were called "tank towns," for the water tanks stood next to the depot. The railroads were the life-lines for all rural areas, as well as the larger cities. Everything was shipped via rail, and truck freight didn't appear until hard surface roads and diesel trucks made it possible, in the late '30s or early '40s, I think. All farm crops and livestock made their exit by boxcar and specially built cattle cars. Most grain, cattle, hogs and sheep were sent to the Portland markets, an excellent trip for live animals, as the trip to Portland was pretty much an uninterrupted run.

The local passenger train bore the title of the "milk run," as farmers who milked a lot of cows would place their milk cans on the depot loading platform and be loaded aboard a baggage car for quick delivery to the nearest creamery.

The train that came through LaCrosse at 9:30 P.M. every day, originated in Moscow and made contact with the "main line" at Wallula, on the Snake River. The cars were coupled to the main line train, the crew and locomotive spent the night there, and arrived back at LaCrosse at 6 A.M. the next morning with travelers, empty milk cans, fresh bread, green vegetables, and other supplies that were needed at the start of a new day. The train also carried the mail (including the daily out-of-town newspaper).

The size of our sleepy little town wasn't much different than it is today and everything seemed to run quite smoothly. There was a power generator on the corner where the Masonic Temple is now that furnished power for the needs of the "city," and a water wagon that wet down the dust on the streets in the summer time. In the winter the streets didn't get plowed after a snowstorm, which made for great coasting, and spring time was when we tried to find a place to try out the roller skates we got for Christmas.

We had a Rodeo in the fall with local stock and contestants, a "Turkey Day" before Thanksgiving (real live turkeys were given as prizes), Santa came in a few days before Christmas, and they used any excuse they could to get together for a good time.

Of course home town pride was expressed by backing our high school ball games, and everyone was on hand for summertime town team baseball, and basketball league in the long winter months.

So for a little "whistle stop," that was named by a section hand from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, when the railroad was being built, it didn't turn out all that bad. It's a good place to be from.

~ From *Writ in Remembrance: 100 Years of LaCrosse Area History* by Don Dorman, Ruth Dorman, and Dorothy Smith ~