

Willie Johnson Memory

WILLIE JOHNSON RECALLS WHITEHALL

When the Green Bay & Western was building the railroad it is said the original plan was to go directly west from Blair over the ridge to Arcadia. The survey was changed and instead the valley route was chosen. At that time, the hamlet of Whitehall was situated about two miles east in the Pigeon Valley.

Not to be isolated, citizens moved to a new townsite. The terrain provided a level area well above danger of floodwater from the Trempealeau River, bounded on the north and south with timbered hills, which not only provided scenic views but a source of fuel and lumber.

My first brief visit to Whitehall was in the winter of 1913-14. Population of the village was about 700. Nationalities were mixed but those of Scandinavian descent predominated. Citizens were, as a group, conservative but favored progress to the extent that they could afford it as taxpayers. Federal government handouts were unknown at that time. Within a reasonable time after the village was founded sewer and water systems were established. The main sewer emptied into the Trempealeau River. Water was pumped from the mill pond to the water tank on the Speerstra hill. The water could not be used for human consumption so it was necessary for citizens to have individual wells to provide water for family use.

The village owned the electric utility system. Current was produced by one direct current dynamo. The plant was operated from shortly before dusk to 11:00 PM. Five minutes before the hour lights were dimmed, warning nightlarks to get home and others to bed. On Tuesday, current was provided during the day for specified hours to accommodate women who possessed electric irons, to accomplish the weekly task in comfort instead of laboring near a hot kitchen stove necessary to heat iron flatirons. (Monday was washday, Tuesday was ironing) Street lights were few to accommodate to night life. The Lincoln Farmers Telephone Co. provided a means of communication within a limited area.

Whitehall was laid out with two principal streets, Main and Dewey. Trees on either side of Main Street had sufficient growth to provide shade. Main Street, including the entire business section, had cement sidewalks. Dewey Street also had trees but they were of younger growth. Walks were provided only part of the way. No favoritism was shown in the surfacing of streets: all were paved with Mother Earth.

South Main Street was principally residential. The first building other than a residence was Lincoln Town Hall. Following several elections to decide on a permanent location for the county seat, Whitehall was chosen. It is said that a few courthouse promoters drove to Arcadia one night, located the county records and whatever equipment was had at the time and hauled it to Whitehall. The property was put in the Lincoln Town Hall, which became the first court house in Whitehall.

The Methodist church was on the corner of Main and Kelley street. On the opposite corner was the Whitehall Times office. At the rear of the Times on Kelley Street was the A.P. Tallman blacksmith shop. The village hall was built a few years earlier. On the first floor was a space for the fire-fighting equipment of the Voluntary Firemen. A two-wheeled cart carried the hose. Another cart transported

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ladders and other equipment. If a dray team was not on the street when the siren blared from the belfry, volunteer firemen and others pulled and pushed the carts to the scene of the fire. At the rear was a room for the village board to hold its meetings. Next was a one-cell village jail. A pleasant room accommodated the village library. A rest room for the convenience of the public was at the rear. The auditorium on the second floor was frequently used for various forms of entertainment.

A group of women organized the Women's Civic Club, interested in the social betterment of the village. The Chautauqua, N.Y. organization offered to provide rural entertainment. A guarantee was required which businessmen supported. The Club signed a contract. Programs were held in a tent on the school ground. Professional entertainers provide the programs which were well received and financially successful. This enabled the Club to erect the bandstand situated next to the village hall.

The only warning at the railroad crossings were crossarms—no gate, no flashing light, no alarm. On a sidetrack stood a grain elevator. On the corner of Main and Dodge Street was the Gilbert Rice Ford Agency and garage. Ford Model T's were shipped by rail, disassembled. When readied to operate it was Gilbert's job to find a prospect and convince him he should join the motoring public.

A group of local investors built the two story brick building on the corner of Main and Dodge. It was named the Model. On the first floor was a store. On the second floor the Masons had lodge rooms and in the front were offices. At the rear of the Model on Dodge Street was the Luke Quackenbush barbershop.

The John O Melby Bank was well established. The institution had extended financial support in the development of the village and surrounding community. Memory of Melby was revered by many for his willingness to personally extend modest loans to relieve distress without tangible security—only a promise to pay, backed by character of the individual.

The one-story frame building in the center of the block on Main Street was erected by the father of E.C. Getts. It was one of the first buildings in the village. Getts operated a general store for many years. At the time the building was vacant.

The large two-story brick building extending to the corner of Main and Scranton streets was owned by Adams and Taylor and L.L. Solsrud. C.A. Adams and John Taylor had a hardware and furniture store. Adams was head clerk and Taylor was the tinsmith. L.L. Solsrud, associated with his nephew, Ludwig Solsrud—conducted a large general store and served the community for many years.

On the opposite corner of Main and Scranton streets was a one-story frame building, unoccupied at the time. F.A. Caswell, dealer in farm implements, occupied in a large frame building approaching the corner on Blair Street. In the block reaching to the village limit there were two residences on the east side of Main Street and one residence on the west side. A turnpike lead from the end of Main Street to the iron bridge that spanned the Trempealeau River.

On the west side of Main Street, at the corner of Blair Street, was the Lars Lyngdahl hotel. A small frame building accommodated Frank Larson, local jeweler. At the corner of Main and Scranton was the

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American House, a popular hotel operated by Henry Hundt. Passenger trains were met by Hundt, who with a two-wheel cart, would transport salesmen's baggage to the hotel.

On the corner opposite to the hotel was the Scott building, one of the first in the village. Fuller & Hanson had a men's furnishing store on the first floor. The second floor was a hall where public gatherings were held before the village hall was built. At the rear of the Scott Building on Scranton Street was the Hugh Cooley one-lane bowling alley, a popular hangout during the winter months.

The large two-story brick building accommodated several business firms. At an earlier date, the main portion of the structure was the Best Hotel. The second floor provided office space and living quarters. The first business was a meat market-Oscar Lebakken, the proprietor. E.J. Kidder owned a small corner of the floor space where he operated his barbershop. The main part of that section of the building accommodated the City Café. Arthur Wright was the proprietor and head coffee server at five cents a cup. A wholesome meal was served for 25 cents, 30 cents with dessert. Harvey Kongsgaard's drug store was next, followed by a bakery. A small farm building that once served as Whitehall's first post office stood as a sentinel of the past.

The two-story brick building on the corner was the C F Hulett Hardware Store. Hulett also provided funeral service. On the curb in front of the store was the first street fuel pump. One complete turn of the crank produced a gallon of kerosene.

The Pigeon Grain & Livestock Co. building stood on the corner of Main and Dodge Streets. The GB&Western freight building was on a sidetrack. Adjacent to the main track was the practically new brick depot, said to be the nicest on the line. Two passenger trains were operated daily, east and west. Passenger trains were usually met by men and occasionally by women to see who was coming and going. Most trainmen were known by first name. A native didn't have to be at the depot to know when Engineer "Jerky John" pulled a freight train into the yard. He would switch box cars with such force that the crash could be heard in Blair or Independence, depending on direction of the wind.

A two-story frame building accommodated the Lincoln Farmers Telephone Company exchange. The law office of Attorney Ole J Eggum stood near the corner of Main and Dewey streets. Earlier the firm was H.L. Ekern and O J. Eggum. While in Whitehall, Ekern established the first library in the village, providing space in the law office.

An entire block, facing Main Street, was provided for the permanent courthouse. The two-story brick building with basement was erected in the center of the block. At the rear was the residence for the sheriff and the county jail. Many elm trees provided shade on the lawn, presenting a slightly scene. Officers were E C Higbee, La Crosse, circuit judge; Eugene Kidder, clerk of circuit court; H A Anderson, county judge; Morris Hanson, register of deeds; P K Risberg, county clerk; F D Hopkins, treasurer; John Markham, District Attorney; Ed Torgerson, sheriff; D P Gibson, county superintendent of schools; and C J VanTassel, surveyor. Han Haugh was custodian and bailiff. Ed Matchett, Osseo, was highway commissioner, a comparatively new office. Neither the state nor the county provided maintenance of roads at that time. Duties of the highway commissioner, however, were not burdensome. Bridges were inspected and repair made when needed to withstand the weight of farm loads, culverts were built

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where necessary and when complaint was received of treacherous sinkholes and stretches of hub-deep sand, they were made passable, usually with a few loads of shale, properly spread.

West of Main and on the south of Hobson Street was the school playground and Melby Park. The park was given to the village by John O Melby. The grove of trees was small but provided shade for picnics and other gatherings. The large portion of the area was a baseball diamond. Baseball was a popular sport and games were well attended. Every village in the count supported a team and rivalry was strong. When a referee gave a decision that fans did not accept, a heated argument usually followed. Fortunately, tempers cooled and no blemishes resulted.

Dewey Street was a residential area. There were two exceptions. The two story brick structure housed the village grade and high schools. A frame building was the Norwegian Lutheran church. The congregation did not have a resident pastor but a minister from Pigeon Falls held Sunday afternoon service each week.

West Street extended north from Dewey Street to the village limits. There were few residences and only one industrial building, the Holtan & Sorenson tobacco warehouse. Richard Holtan and Eugene Sorrenson, (his brother-in-law) came to Whitehall from Stoughton. Both were experiences in growing and processing tobacco. They interested farmers in growing tobacco and it became a valuable cash crop. Holtan and Sorrenson would visit farmers shortly before harvest season and inspect crops. A price would be offered and after bargaining usually was accepted. The tobacco was shed-cured and later delivered at the warehouse. A large number of men and women were employed during the winter months stripping and baling the tobacco for shipment to processors. Following years of growing tobacco, the quality of the crop produced in this area lost its market and it soon became a crop of the past.

The Farmers Cooperative Creamery was situated just west of the northwest corner of the village limit. Theodore Johnson, native of the Disco community, wanted to learn buttermaking. He came to Whitehall and approached Grant Winner who was in charge of the creamery. Ted, as he became know, was hired. He learned buttermaking and later was manager of the creamery. Besides making butter it was necessary to secure a dependable and profitable market. Ted went to Chicago, saw tall buildings for the first time and called at commission houses dealing in dairy products. One commission man won his confidence. He agreed to buy Whitehall butter. The two became friends. Ted received top price for his butter, which enabled the Co-op to pay farmers top price for their cream. Word spread. The number of patrons grew and for years the Whitehall Creamery produced as much or better than any similar institution in the country.

On the south side of Dodge Street extending west from Main Street was the E C Getts poultry house, the Pigeon Grain & Livestock Company elevator and the Cargill Grain Co. elevator.

At the corner of Dodge and Ellis streets stood the Jardahl building. It was a saloon before Whitehall outlawed the sale of alcoholic beverages in the village. The building was vacant except when occupied by Civil War veterans and others who gathered there to play cards and spin yarns. It was said the storied became more thrilling each time they were retold.

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A feed barn stood on the east side of Ellis Street where farmers fed and rested their horses after hauling a load to market. On the west of Ellis Street, between Scranton and Blair Streets, was Grandma Allen's boarding house. She provided room and board for \$2.50 per week. On the corner of the block was Simon Pedarson's blacksmith shop.

On the south of Scranton Street, east on Main, were two frame buildings; one was vacant and the other was a millinery store. The two-story brick building on the corner was the Ludwig Hammestad shoe store. Hammestad was the President of the village. On the corner on the north side of Scranton Street was a brick building with basement which was the Charley Harnden and John Ingalls livery---horses only. At the east end of Scranton was the flour and grist mill, then known as the Whitehall Mill & Power Co. Ricahrd Mattson and John Wagstad were the proprietors. At the rear of the mill was the village electric utility and pumping station, using water power supplied by the mill.

William Mason and Ed Scott owned the dray and ice business. The large ice house was on the bank of the mill pond. Hundreds of cakes of ice were harvested and stored each winter to supply summer demand. Ice was delivered to business and residential customers. The ice man didn't always have a pleasant day. A lady called customer called the dray office, Mason answered the phone. She was very disturbed and complained to Mason that the inept iceman had carelessly stopped his team so that one of the horses got a hoof in her flower bed. Mason was sympathetic and asked "Is the horse's foot still in your flower bed?"

"No", she answered.

"Then what can I do?" was Mason's reply.

On Abrams Street extending south from Scranton Street was the Scandinavian House. Across the street on the east was a small grocery store. The WJ Webb lumber office and yard was adjacent to the railroad siding. At the corner of Abrams and Hobson Street was the Baptist Church. Abrams was a dead end street.

The area where the valley road let into the village from the east was sparsely settled. East of Ervin Creek and south of the road was the Lou Frederickson farm. North of the road a man named Sherwood had a residence and cultivated a small nursery. Nearby was the F. D Hopkins residence. The area which is now east Whitehall, was a pasture. Some families kept a cow to supply family dairy needs. Then, or shortly after, Fred Lowe established Fair Oaks Dairy and supplied bottled milk and cream to village customers. Lincoln Cemetery, a slightly area situated at the southwest corner of the village limit was then, as now, the resting place of many former residents of the village and surrounding area.

RS Cowie who practiced law at Whitehall a number of years, moved his family to La Crosse. Later he was elected circuit judge. Cowie enjoyed an occasional visit to his former home. During a friendly chat he mused" Every town has its characters but there never was a town anywhere, at any time, that had as many characters as Whitehall once harbored." People then, as now, were much the same. Mode of travel was such that few strayed far from home. When small groups assembled and larger gatherings were held, the principal entertainment was visiting with neighbors and friends. In such instances, if an

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individual possessed dormant wit or wisdom, or both, it was revealed. It is within reason to assume that conditions and circumstances had a part in creating characters.

Ed Southworth, buyer for the Cargill Grain Co., was not regarded as a character but was distinguished as a story teller and for his wit. One of his stories described a man riding a mule and coming to a stream the mule refused to cross. Ed's tirade directed at the mule, emphasized with gestures, would have blistered the hide of the toughest mule. Following a brief illness, Ed was questioned regarding his health. His answer "If I felt any better I never could stand it!"

Dr Smythe, dentist, came to Whitehall when the village was young. His physique, neat appearance and polite manner won him distinction. He was regarded as the community's most eligible bachelor. Smythe wore a ring set with a diamond as large as a well-developed hazelnut. The gem sparkled and gleamed and was admired by all and was considered to be very valuable. Smythe lived to an advanced age. Following his death, the ring was taken to jewelers for appraisal. Without consultation, each of the two jewelers placed the value of the diamond at \$125.00. The reason the diamond had a flaw, not seen by the naked eye but revealed by a microscope.

Russell "Russ Morden was a painter and paperhanger by trade. He owned a small farm east of the mill pond. Russ was of slight build, agile and possessed a vocabulary of modest bywords. A foot bridge over the dam provided a short cut to town. One day he came hobbling along with the aid of a cane and favoring one leg with a limp. When asked what happened Russ thus explained: "This morning I milked the cow and when I was getting off the stool, consarn, that ornery critter kicked, spilled the milk and struck me on the leg. Fact is, she kicked me three times and I hadn't been do damn quick she would have kicked me again."

Rev. Chalfant was pastor of the Methodist church. He suggested improvements to the edifice which were approved. CF Hulett, hardware merchant, was a pillar in the congregation and a liberal contributor. When Chalfant needed hardware he patronized Adams & Taylor, hardware merchants, both non-members. A list of businessmen was made, indicating a suggested cash contribution. The list was handed to Adam, who saw the firm's name followed by \$10. Pointing to the figure and looking Chalfant in the eye asked "Who wrote that" "I did" the pastor answered. "Then, by God, you pay it," Adams replied.

When few automobiles were owned in the county, Charles Melby and Robert Cowie each owned White Steamers, luxury cars. Melby represented the village on the county board. During intermission he frequently was asked about his steam car. Finally, Charlie suggested that a few members accompany him and he would demonstrate the power of steam. The road up the hill north of the bishop farm was rough and steep. It was a test for a draft team to haul a wagon, driver and basket of groceries up the hill. Charlie, with his passengers, drove to the hill and stopped a short distance up the incline. He suggested that it be observed how the steamer would increase in speed as it climbed the hill. All set, the throttle was opened unintentionally in reverse. The car shot down the hill, off the trail and was stopped in a clump of brush. No one was hurt and the car was not damaged but the incident ended the demonstration of steam power.

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Motorists eventually became quite numerous and the village board thought it best to establish parking regulations. Marshal Joe Ellison was instructed. Later a woman drove to Whitehall to shop and parked her Model T at the curb. Marshall Ellison happened to be walking up the street and observed the car was not parked according to his instructions. He threw up his arms and yelled, "Ha ha Old Girl, I got ya now." There is no record whether a ticket was issued or a fine paid, but the shopper immediately drove out of town and did not return to Whitehall for a number of years.

Dr. C. L. Storey practiced medicine in Whitehall a number of years. He was well trained in his profession and well informed on many subjects. In a small gathering he would interestingly, one of the group. By nature, Storey had an aristocratic personality. Most acquaintances when meeting him on the street respected his reserve. Frank Caswell, implement dealer, had a Model T runabout. One day he called on farmers on the north river road. On his way home, Frank stopped at the Roy Rebarchek farm. Driving out the lane and approaching the road, instead of idling the motor, it was fed gas. The runabout shot across the road and crashed into a fence. A barbed wire cut a severe gash on Frank's throat. Reaching town he asked bystanders to get Doc Storey. Search was made but he could not be found. Later as Storey walked past the Kidder barbershop Gene yelled "Doc—where in h.... have you been? They have been looking all over for you!"

"I was on a call, why?"

"Haven't you heard that Frank Caswell nearly severed his jugular when he ran into a wire fence out at the Rebarchek farm?" Kidder asked.

Dr. Storey replied "Where is he now?" and was told Caswell was up at Doc Berg's office. "What do they want me for?" the doctor then asked.

"They want you to go out and fix the fence!" the barber replied.

The description of Whitehall, as viewed in the winter of 1913-14 was written from memory. The incidents of local history, humorous or otherwise, were passed on by tradition. They occurred during a period when an era was approaching an end. In the meantime, the characters just faded away.