



Old FRANKLIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE at Bloomington, Nebraska

FRATERNALISM DISPLAYED IN BLOOMINGTON, NEBRASKA IN 1909

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Today, the County Courthouse of Franklin County, Nebraska, is located within the city limits of the city of Franklin, Nebraska. However, prior to the year 1920, the county-seat of Franklin County was situated at Bloomington, Nebraska. In that year, a vote was taken to move the county seat from Bloomington to the town of Franklin, Nebraska located approximately five and a half miles east of Bloomington on what is today US-136 Highway. In "the Roaring 1920s", the town of Franklin was increasing its clout and prestige --- largely due to the populatity of the automobile and the junction of US-136 and what is the modern-day Nebraska Highway 10 put the town of Franklin in the crosshairs of increased travel, tourism, and population-growth. Meanwhile, Bloomington's population began to dwindle. As of the year 2010 federal census, the population of Bloomington was 103 people; yet, in its heyday Bloomington once boasted a tremendous population of over 5,000 residents.

When Bloomington, Nebraska was first established, just after the Civil War, it went by various names including the government's designation of Antietam Post. For awhile, the town briefly had the name of Brooklyn, Nebraska. Yet, it was the name of Bloomington, Nebraska that stuck. The county-seat was moved to Bloomington in the year 1874 { ironically from the town of Franklin --- the very city which would regain the county-seat status, again in 1920 --- which continues to this day}.

In early 1875, a contract was awarded to King & Son to build a bridge across the Republican River at Bloomington. Then on May 13, 1878, a contract was awarded to A.A. Hathaway to build a county Court House, the building to be completed by September of that same year. It is the same wooden structure as depicted in the painting at the top of this presentation. It served the county well, until the county-seat was moved to the town of Franklin in 1920. The town thrived steadily, and the Burlington Railroad arrived in 1879. The population by then was well over 800 people by 1894. Bloomington had four passenger trains daily, plus a spur that connected it with Hastings. Additionally, numerous freight trains delivered goods to Bloomington every day. Twice a week, the nearly always full stockyards were auctioning livestock which was loaded aboard trains and shipped to the East. The town was humming with activity, including two grain elevators. New businesses meant more residents. And, the cycle of prosperity seemed endless.

Bloomington, Nebraska once had two banks, two newspapers, a bakery, a creamery, and a blacksmith shop. In addition several hardware stores opened for business as did a "Ladies

ready-to-wear" clothing shop, as well as several fine Hotels located near the train Depot. The town also boasted several Saloons and gambling-houses. Professional gamblers from all over the country once flocked to Bloomington, Nebraska, to try their hand at various "games of chance".

Joppa Lodge #79 of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons was organized and received its Charter to operate in the year 1879. It has since consolidated with the Masonic Lodge at Franklin, Nebraska.

A fine spirit of cooperation and friendliness existed in Bloomington during its peak in popularity. Numerous Churches dotted the town, including the Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Christian, Baptist and Mennonite Churches --- each of whom, significantly having its own separate building as its quarters. Looking at the Bloomington, Nebraska of today --- which some might call "a spot in the road" --- it is almost hard to envision such vitality in the small, almost barren village that a person sees today.

It was during its heyday, that Masonic Brother William Jennings Bryan visited Bloomington, Nebraska in the year 1909. Bro.: Bryan was a 3-time candidate for the U.S. Presidency ---losing twice to Bro.: and Sir Knight William McKinley and lastly to Bro.: William Howard Taft. Bro.: William Jennings Bryan was born March 19, 1860 in Salem, Illinois, but moved to the State of Nebraska in 1887. William Jennings Bryan was duly Initiated, Passed and Raised in Lincoln Masonic lodge #19, in Lincoln, Nebraska. Late in life he affiliated with Hiram Lodge #247 in Florida.

Bro.: Bryan mainly traveled in his latter years to the Chautauqua Circuit, giving speeches in attempts to both entertain and educate the adult populace. It was at the invitation of Joppa Masonic Lodge and the Knights of Pythias Lodge {which Bro.: Bryan was also a member of himself} who invited him to speak in Bloomington, Nebraska in 1909.

My own Great Grandparents: George White, 33^o and a Knight Templar (and a fellow Knight of Pythias) and Clarissa Jane (Williams) White, heard Bro.: Bryan speak. They were die-hard supporters of his former for, President William McKinley. In fact, my Great Grandparents named their 5th child "Guy McKinley White" who was born in 1900 in honor of the President. Yet, my Great Grandparents greatly admired Bro.: William Jennings Bryan for his famous "Cross of Gold Speech".

I find it highly interesting that Bro.: William Jennings Bryan was born in 1860 in ILLINOIS...and on St. Patrick's Day in the year 1899, he paid another visit to "another Bloomington" --- this time: Bloomington, Illinois, where he gave a rousing speech. Interestingly enough, he was invited to give that Bloomington, Illinois speech by a different fraternal order, The local chapter of The Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish Roman Catholic fraternal organization brought Bryan to Bloomington, Illinois, where he spoke to a crowd of over 3,000 at the Coliseum. The stage was draped in green, Adlai Stevenson also was present, and both men made appropriate reference to all things Irish.

In the year 1912, Bro.: William Jennings Bryan was on a cross country train trip when he saw the magnificent steeples of The St. Fidelis Catholic Church, in Victoria, Kansas. He was so intrigued by it that he departed the train and personally visited the inside of the Church. It was Bro.: William Jennings Bryan who nicknamed that Church "The Cathedral of The Plains" and just this year (2014), The Vatican has named St. Fidelis a "minor basilica." I have also personally visited this church on several occasions with my late mother. Bro.: Bryan was

himself raised a Baptist and Methodist as a youth, but was Presbyterian into adulthood. Yet, he had a special trait of promoting unity, harmony and cooperation which endeared him to Roman Catholics and others.

Bro.: Bryan was sympathetic toward the cause of farmers and the average working-man. Some of his views are consistent with today's American beliefs; while other beliefs of Bryan's would be hotly debated in our modern age. He was a staunch believer in Jesus Christ. And, in 1925, he was most notably remembered as one of the lead attorneys in the so-called "Scopes Monkey Trial" which deliberated the stance on Evolution versus Creation. Bro.: Bryan believed firmly in Creation...and just five days after that trial, he suddenly died on July 26, 1925.

Bryan LGH Medical Center in Lincoln, Nebraska is named after him; as is the County of Bryan County, Oklahoma. Also, an elementary school in Mission, Texas, is named for him. Bro.: William Jennings Bryan is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Bro.: Bryan is an example whereby one individual CAN make a difference. And, just because he failed in some endeavors, didn't deter him from "trying again." He was a walking example of courage and perseverance. Furthermore, his actions prove that he paid attention to all people regardless of their prominence upon the social-ladder. He was just as comfortable speaking to crowds in Bloomington, Illinois as he was speaking to the crowds at Bloomington, Nebraska.

Bro.: William Jennings Bryan often quoted the same words used by the eminent Masonic scholar Robert Macoy, 33rd and a Knight Templar: "In six days God created the heavens and the earth, and rested on the seventh day; the seventh, therefore, our ancient brethren consecrated as a day of rest from their labors, thereby enjoying frequent opportunities to contemplate the glorious works of the Creation, and to adore their great Creator." Bro.: Bryan was a man of faith --- and his speeches inspired many people to think beyond themselves by lifting up the downtrodden and giving all Glory and reverence to Almighty God for the Blessings we receive.

Although Bloomington, Nebraska, is largely forgotten ---- its place in history is not. It may be a town that 'lost its county-seat status' ---- but its heritage is remembered here in this presentation article. Bloomington is a place where Fraternalism was once displayed proudly, and through the efforts of Lodge-men: their efforts even drew a 3-time Presidential candidate to the town. Few places in Nebraska can tout such a distinction.

Sources / References / Recommended Readings:

- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry by Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33rd and a Knight Templar.
- Archives: Grand Lodge of Nebraska.
- Archives: Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon.
- Oral History handed down from Clarissa Jane (Williams) White to her youngest son Ray White, Sr. (1903-1996); then handed-down to Ray's nephew : Bro.: John William Marples, Sr 1910-1997; thence handed-down to his youngest son Frater James A. Marples, VIIIth. *** I might add that my Great Grandmother Clarissa J. White was one of the few people at the event in Bloomington, Nebraska, who had a camera there at the time (1909). She hired the cameraman. Clarissa White was a member of the ladies Rebekah Lodge at Bloomington, NE; eventually transferring to the Rebekah Lodge at Agra, Kansas, circa 1920.

- Archives: McLean County, Museum of History, 200 N. Main Street. Bloomington, Illinois.

- Macoy's Masonic Manual by Robert Macoy, 33° and a Knight Templar. Fifteenth Edition. New York. Published in New York, Year 1861 by Clark, Austin, Maynard & Company located at 3 Park Row & 3 Ann Street, New York, New York. "A Pocket Companion for the Initiated".

About the Author:

Frater James A. Marples, VIII° is a Perpetual Life Member of Mulvane Masonic Lodge #201 A.F. & A.M. in Mulvane, Kansas. He is a Life Member of The International Peace Gardens Lodge of Freemasons (Canada-USA) and also an Honorary Member of Golden Rule Masonic Lodge #562 in Willard, Ohio; as well as an Honorary Member of Nelson Masonic Lodge #77, in Nelson, Nebraska, which has recently consolidated with the Superior Masonic Lodge at Superior, Nebraska.

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Old Settlers Picnic in 1909. Schobel Store in background. William Jennings Bryan on the podium, making a speech. Patrick J. Schobel was the store proprietor from 1905 to 1936.