

THE LUST FOR LIFE

Even though the last decades of the 19th Century in Stevens Point were marked by sensational rowdiness and shootings, they were at the same time filled with a lust for life. Some of the men who settled in the county in the 1850s and 1860s had, by the 1880s and 1890s, grown moderately wealthy in the logging and lumbering business, or in real estate, or as merchants and hotel keepers. They built imposing residences for themselves and were anxious to display their newly-acquired affluence by taking part in sports events and community activity. They were anxious to be immortalized, too, and paid for personal biographies written in so-called histories of the county which extolled the virtues and deeds of the pioneers.

It was a time when national sports were beginning to be of interest to everyone. After John L. Sullivan won the heavyweight boxing championship in a match that went 75 rounds with Jake Kilrain in Louisiana, people in Stevens Point followed Sullivan's career as if he were a local hero. When James Corbett finally knocked out the world champion in 21 rounds, Sullivan allowed that "whiskey and women did this"¹ but he was still Page One news.

It was the period of the beginning of the emancipation of women, of saloon-smasher Carrie Nation, and window smasher Maria Sweeney, born and raised in Stevens Point, who became famous in the 1890s throughout Wisconsin and Minnesota as the champion window smasher. In 1891, on her way to Antigo from Appleton, she paused long enough in Stevens Point to clobber a plate glass in the general store of Mike Clifford. "People who can

¹ *Stevens Point Journal*, Sept. 8, 1892.

afford to have plate glass can afford to buy more," she said.¹

Faro games and cock fighting were popular forms of gambling in dives around the Public Square, but probably nothing compared to the bets laid on locally-owned horses entered at the Great District Fair every summer. Trotters like Louis Brill's "Maggie Sherman," and Brill & Emmons Burr's "B.B.P." (foaled on Byron B. Park's birthday and named after him), and H. & J. D. Curran's "Pat Downing" competed in races throughout the Midwest and Kentucky.

In the early 1890s bicycling became a popular pastime. The Stevens Point Cycling Club met every Monday evening. A uniform was adopted which included blue knee pants and cap, black stockings and belt, and a light colored shirt. Trips were made to Lake Emily, to Plover and to Wausau, and relay races were organized between competing cyclists in Stevens Point and Wausau. On a ride to Plover in 1897 some 200 persons participated, starting at the Public Square and ending in front of the Hotel Warner in Plover where lemonade was served.

In 1895 a "unique entertainment" was being promised at the Methodist Episcopal church "in shape of a phonograph concert, the instrument being one of Edison's newly improved [and] instead of tubes held to the ears the sounds are reproduced in a large funnel and can be distinctly heard by more than one thousand people at a time."²

The rise of big league baseball in the cities of the East prompted local clubs to be organized and one of the early ball games held in 1876 saw Stevens Point defeat Almond 25-9.

Camping at McKinley Park on the Second Island, Woodland Park on the Third Island, Jesse Martin's Island, and Maple Beach on the Wisconsin River several miles above the city was a favorite summer holiday. Vacationers erected tents and spent two and three weeks enjoying the company of other campers, cooking on primitive stoves, boating and swimming.

¹ *Stevens Point Journal*, June 20, 1896.

² *Ibid.*, Aug. 24, 1895.

Fourth of July was celebrated with fanfare and patriotism. In 1876, on the centennial of the Declaration of Independence, 100 salvoes were fired from an artillery piece at sunrise accompanied by the ringing of bells. A parade formed at 9 a.m. consisting of the Stevens Point Cornet Band, color bearers, members of the Common Council, County Board, fire company and apparatus, civic societies and citizens. The procession probably marched to Warren's Grove (southeast corner of Clark & Division) where the band played, and, after the opening prayer by the Rev. A. A. Joss, the Declaration of Independence was read by D. L. Jones. A male chorus sang the Star Spangled Banner; the Hon. George W. Cate gave an oration; and the German Maennerchor sang *Die Wacht Am Rhein*, followed by the benediction and singing of America.

Political victories by the major parties were often occasions for both public celebration and horseplay. When the Democrats went into office in 1884, after a long absence from the White House, canons were fired in the city and roast ox was served at tables 300 feet long in Warren's Grove. A. E. Morse paid off a political bet by wheeling a bag of flour to A. G. Cate's residence. In the evening a torch light procession was staged followed by fireworks and dancing.

The arrival of the circus every summer was another big event. Before the railroads came to the city, circus troupes arrived in wagon caravans, replaced by circus trains when the railroads were built. Watching the elephants and horses being unloaded from their cars at dawn, and later the big parade of bands and circus wagons driven by six-in-hands or four-in-hands — the horses shining like silver — was a source of never-ceasing wonderment and color. There was the time in 1878 when John Wysocki of Sharon married and took his wife to see the circus in Stevens Point as a sort of honeymoon and after that they rarely missed a single season. When the children came they too were taken to the circus.

Minstrel shows ("Gentlemen — Be seated!") appeared at local halls in the winter months, and home talent plays

were well supported. When the new McCulloch's Hall on Main Street opened in 1873 the Stevens Point Dramatic Association presented "Love in '76" which featured Hattie White, Irving Wyatt, and Paul Weston. In 1884 a chorus of 125 voices gave two performances of the operetta "Red Riding Hood's Rescue." Uncle Tom's Cabin was performed in 1903.

Roller skating became a fad in the 1880s and is still enjoyed by many. To cater to this new sport, the Central City Roller Rink was built at the corner of Strong's Avenue and Ellis Street (G. A. Gullickson Garage in 1958). When interest in roller skating waned, the Rink was converted to the Rink Opera House where plays were given, lectures heard, and political campaigns advanced, among them, the campaign of Robert M. ("Bob") LaFollette Sr. running for governor the first time in 1900. Later elected a U.S. Senator, he was judged by a special committee of senators in 1957 as one of the five immortals of the United States Senate.

Another entertainment center, the Grand Opera House at 444 Main Street, was built in 1893 by G. F. Andrae. Here traveling stock companies performed and lyceums were given. Here Lyman Howe appeared in the late 1890s with an illustrated stereopticon lecture, and in 1904 returned to present one of the first motion pictures in the city. Attendants hidden behind the wings provided sound effects.

Eugene V. Debs, later a Socialist candidate for President, appeared at the Grand Opera House in 1903. Lecturing on the subject "Labor and Civilization" he predicted depression and panic in a capitalistic society and the end of the competitive system. His prophecy of depression came true, but his analysis of the competitive system was wrong, for instead of losing itself in a socialistic wilderness, the American system of free enterprise brought forth the highest standard of living to the greatest number of people the world has ever known.

Mark Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson" was performed by a visiting stock company at the Grand Opera House in 1898. Lola LaFollette appeared in her own touring

company here and Cecil de Mille was once a visitor to the stage. William Jennings Bryan, thrice a candidate for President on the Democrat ticket, lectured at the Grand in 1905, and in 1908 the silent motion picture, "Montana", featuring Harry Carey, was shown.

The demand for social activity is reflected by the building of numerous local halls before and after the turn of the century. These include, Curtis Hall, Quinn Hall, Chilla's Hall, Adam's Hall, Forester Hall, Glover's Hall, Good Templars Hall, Knights of Pythias Hall, Kuhl's Hall, Loberg's Hall, Masonic Hall, Odd Fellows Hall, Redfield's Hall, Schwebach's Hall, Walsh's Hall, White's Hall, Zimmer's Hall, Bemowski's Hall, Rothman's Hall, Reton's Hall, Lesecki's Hall, *Eintrachts* Hall, and the Empire (originally Sprafka's Roller Rink) where the all-time favorite early motion picture "Birth of a Nation" was presented. Many of these halls were second-story affairs over store buildings.

Evening dinner parties, masquerades, and grand balls at local hotels, sponsored by the firemen as well as by civic and charitable organizations, were highlights of the year for many. One of the popular early hotel ballrooms was at Avery House, north of the Public Square, where men leaving for service in the Civil War were seen off at farewell parties, and those who survived, welcomed back at reunions. Most people walked to these social affairs, but for the more stylish there were public hacks kept in at least three local livery stables which could be hired with a driver who sat high up front. In the 1890s the leading hotels in the city were American House at 301 Water Street, Arlington House, 325 Strongs Avenue; Curran House, 144 Main Street; Hotel McGregor, corner of Clark & South Third Street; and Jacobs House, 441 Clark Street.

The favorite dance in the 1860s and 1870s was the cotillion, a formal square dance by invitation. In the 1880s new forms of the dance were introduced which shocked the oldsters and no doubt pleased the youngsters. One of these was the "Saratoga Walk", but the editor of the *Stevens Point Journal* was quite certain that the

girls of Stevens Point, "being sensible, will not attempt to adopt [it]. . . in which the first requisite is to throw your shoulders back, the chest forward, chin up and stomach in, and then walk, wriggling head, limbs, and especially bustle."¹

It was only the beginning. The emancipation of women continued as both sexes enjoyed a togetherness never experienced in public before, chiefly in new forms of the dance such as the waltz, the fox trot, tango, the schottische, and, after World War I the Charleston, and after World War II, "rock 'n' roll."

Another event which attracted thousands to Stevens Point was the annual fair organized on Dec. 9, 1885 as the "Central Wisconsin Agriculture, Mechanical and Scientific Association," later known as the Great District Fair, which was located on the several acres of ground on the northeast corner of Main Street and Michigan Avenue. This was sponsored in the beginning largely by leading horse fanciers anxious to exhibit the racing skill of their trotters. The fair at Stevens Point continued to be a main attraction down to World War I when interest began to lag as new forms of entertainment, chiefly automobile driving, replaced the love of horseflesh for the combustion engine. The last fair was held in 1927 and two years later the company was dissolved when the city agreed to assume its indebtedness in exchange for the fair ground site.

After the turn of the century lyceums in the outlying districts of the county were supplemented in summer time by Chautauqua, a form of lyceum staged in circus-sized tents. Tickets were sold by business and civic organizations in advance to guarantee a full house and the Chautauqua tent remained in the community three and four days, a change of program each afternoon and evening in one grand splurge of culture and uplift. This filled a need which contemporary Americans can scarcely appreciate because radio and television have brought Broadway theater into the living room and made familiar the voice of the President of the United States.

¹ *Stevens Point Journal*, Sept. 11, 1886.

The lust for life has been the nature of man in all ages, yet the old generation vows that it had more fun in its youth than the new generation. Teen-agers in turn wonder how grandmother ever had any fun. Thus each judges the other by the standards of its own which bears witness to the age-old conflict between what is considered old and what is considered new, when in the final analysis there is nothing old and nothing new. Everything is in the present.