

HOME TOWN

By

Oscar T. Thompson

Chapter 1

Several months ago I was requested by Mrs. Minnie McIntyre Wallace, chairman of the Memoirs committee of the Beloit Historical society, to write my recollections of Beloit.

"You are one of the older residents we have in Beloit and I am sure you have a great many memories of things that have happened here in your life time," she said. "Will you not be kind enough to write a narrative of your personal experiences for the society?"

Late in May she again reiterated her desire that I write my history. I told her I had never aspired to be a historian and furthermore have no special literary ability, but if she thought me competent and would like me to undertake the task, I would do so. This explains how I have become a literary man.

I shall endeavor to clothe what I have to say in a manner so as to make it of interest to the general reader. I will dwell of course on matters of factual history, but there will also be more or less of personal reminiscences and anecdotes — about things that other people will remember as well as I. In short it will be a combination of history and dates as well as a semi-autobiography of my life. With this explanation of purpose I will proceed and try to give the old as well as the young a story that I hope will prove entertaining as well as instructive, broad in scope but not too much in detail.

I have been to some pains to verify facts and dates but if any of them are inaccurate I hope that it will be excused.

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I was born January 23, 1860 in the upper end of Third st., now the 900 block, and have lived here continuously ever since, except for a few temporary absences while away at college and abroad.

My father, John Thompson, was born July 15, 1828, in Norway. He was the youngest of a family of nine children. Education in those days was meager—reading, writing, arithmetic, and catechism were as much as any poor lad could expect to receive. My mother was born June 16, 1837, and she was also the youngest of a family of nine. Her father was a storthing man (same as our congressman) in 1830 to 1842, just one hundred years ago.

Father learned the blacksmith trade working in the shipyards of his native town. In 1850 he decided to emigrate to America. He came over on an old style sailing ship and landed in New York.

From there he came on west by way of the Erie Canal and steamboat from Buffalo to Milwaukee. It was a long and arduous trip. He jokingly used to recall that when he reached Milwaukee he had just 25 cents in his pocket. However, he obtained work immediately. Soon thereafter he decided to go out to the Norwegian settlements

in Dane county, where he was well received. I don't know how he happened to come to Beloit but here he arrived in the summer of 1850, making the trip from White-water to Beloit on foot.

He soon got work at his trade. For a time he worked in a small shop located where the May Booth property now is, between the Bill Tucker home and the Grinnell building. The old Lee stone house was at that time a school house and the children used to come and watch the sparks fly from the anvil. Later he worked in a shop which stood in the rear of the L. C. Hyde house in West Grand avenue, which I believe was later incorporated into the main building.

For several years he worked for C. W. Munger, who ran a blacksmith and wagon shop at the corner of Pleasant street and St. Paul ave. He roomed and boarded with the Munger family and it was there he acquired his ability to speak the English language as perfectly as a native American. He never spoke English with the peculiar brogue or accent of the Scandinavian. Later he went to Rockford and got a job at the Briggs & Enoch Plow Works, where he acquired the art of making American style steel plows.

In 1856 times were getting "hard." The panic and depression of 1857 was coming on and work and money were scarce. He decided to take a trip back to the old country to see his mother and other relatives. That winter he met and courted my mother. They were married May 13, 1857, and a week later started for America on their honeymoon. They went by way of Hamburg, Germany, and came over on a German boat, the "Brusia." On reaching Beloit they were met at the station by Charlie Hansen and were invited to stay at their house for a few days till they

could look around and get settled.

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He and my mother started housekeeping in rooms upstairs in the Benjamin Brown homestead which stood back in a yard at the corner of State and Grand aves., where the McNeany store now is. That had not yet become business property. All this property is still owned by the Brown family.

Later he bought some property on Third st., where he established his own business in 1860. This was the nucleus of the business, which later became the Thompson Plow Works and which continued up to 1918. He bought a house three blocks up on Third st., where most of his family of children were born.

The American way of life in the sixties was somewhat more primitive than it is now in our present era of luxury, but we were comfortable and had plenty to eat. Perhaps our home on Third st., may be taken as fairly typical of the average homes of that period, not of course including the homes of the well-to-do people of that time.

Our house consisted of eight rooms, parlor, living room, five bedrooms and kitchen, and in addition pantry and wood shed. The rooms were not spacious but we got along very nicely. The parlor was opened only for company and was nicely furnished. In the kitchen was a wood range, and wood stoves heated the rest of the house in cold weather.

Just outside the kitchen doors was the well and pump, and at the kitchen sink was the cistern pump. No house in those days was without a cistern. In the yard was usually piled up three or four cords of wood. Oak wood rated \$4.00 to \$5.00 per cord, poplar at \$2.50 to \$3.50.

Chapter 2

Father kept a nice vegetable garden and mother had a bed of "sparagus" which she prized very highly. We also had currant and raspberry bushes, two cherry trees and a plum tree. We raised

some sweet corn, but bought our potatoes, winter vegetables and apples. We did not know anything about vitamins in those days, but had a varied and wholesome diet.