

HISTORY OF WILLIAMSFIELD

One hundred one years ago, in 1887, where Williamsfield now stands was part of a 70 acre tract of prairie land in Section 23, Truro Township, owned by James Mahar. In 1886 surveyors marked a railroad from Kansas City to Chicago, and by 1887 work on the main line of the Santa Fe Railroad System had begun. Work of laying the line was done by men, horses, mules and scrapers with local men and teams available as the road progressed, some of them following a great distance along the line.

Small towns were laid out along the railroad lines. A site in Section 23, Truro Township, was selected and purchased from Mr. Mahar for \$100 per acre. The name for the town was chosen by a railroad official, a Mr. Williams, who noticed the fields of corn which grew on each side of the track and called it Williams Field. Later it became one word—Williamsfield.

The new town was laid out by C. P. Percell on April 24, 1888 and soon building began in earnest. C. H. Pulver and father, Sam Pulver, were among the first contractors and builders, and these men built the first store building located south of the east railroad crossing. A dressmaking and millinery shop was on the same street, the store later being moved to the north side of Gale Street. A house built for the station agent is still standing. Known as The Caldwell Cottage, it was donated to the town by surviving members of the Caldwell family and restored by efforts of the Spoon River Chapter of NSDAR. Today an organization of Friends of Caldwell Cottage are well on the way toward refurbishing and cataloguing the many gifts which have been presented to the Cottage. One block west stands the former Sam Parker residence now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Royce Sargeant. It is the second oldest house in town.



The Caldwell Cottage

In 1888 Pulver & Sons built a hotel for a Mrs. Burt. It was destroyed by fire in 1890 and replaced by the building now occupied by the Ericsons. Mr. & Mrs. Ed Farquer moved into the building in 1921 and named it the Parkview Hotel. It became famous for the fine food and hospitality extended to threshing crews, hay hands, etc. and for Sunday dinners.

C. H. Tucker built a two-room store building where Parker and Nelson ran a general store. Nelson soon sold out to Charles Wilder and at first it was known as Parker and Wilder, succeeded by Zenor and Ryan. Tucker and Drake, who had bought out B. F. Shaffer's Hardware occupied the other part. It was sold to the W. O. Waldwell Co. in 1893. A large room above, known as Tucker's Hall, with office rooms, was occupied by Dr. Cole. E. R. Cadwell built a divided building across the street where Neighbor's Tap now stands. A building known as the Eugene Hall, owned by Sam Tucker, was moved in just north of the Burt Hotel. B. F. Shaffer moved his stock of goods to this place. He was also the first postmaster of Williamsfield. Later he built the store room next to the drug store and moved his goods.

At one time, 1890, there were two elevators in Williamsfield—one a company elevator managed by Charles Johnson and a Farmer's Elevator managed by Anthony Seward. The Williamsfield Farmers Cooperative was organized in 1920 and continued in business until it was sold to the Elmwood Farmers' Coop in 1983.



The Farmers Elevator and Railroad switching yards

One of our long-term businesses has been Weaver's. It was founded in 1921 by John Garfield Weaver. At first it served as a feed store and collection of cream and eggs. In 1935 it included a hatchery. One of the highlights of 1949 was the installation of a large modern incubator. Now owned by Junior and Anna Mae Dudley, it continues as Weaver's with up-to-date hardware.

Wight's Chevrolet, located on Rte. 180 at Laura blacktop, has roots dating back to 1937. Known as Stodgel & Tucker, they were dealers for Chevrolet cars and trucks. First located on Gale Street, Gordon L. Wight, married to Anita Stodgel, joined the firm in 1947. Later they were joined by son Lee

Wight and son-in-law Patrick C. Fulton. It looks promising as a continuing family business as the sons of Leland Wight become involved in the business.

Another three-generation business is the Baird Insurance Agency, founded in 1921 by B. L. Baird, later taken over by Ross Baird and now managed by William D. Baird. Their office has through these years been located on Gale Street.

For almost its entire existence, Williamsfield has had a resident doctor. Dr. Ben Baird served as an early mayor of the village. After that he moved to Galesburg where he practiced in partnership with Dr. McClennahan and Dr. Wallick. Dr. Loyal Davis joined them until 1908 when he left Galesburg for Northwestern University College of Medicine. Dr. Davis was the father of the present First Lady, Nancy Reagan. Dr. Bronny served the community from 1953 until he recently retired. During that time, he estimates that he delivered 550 babies, almost the same number as the population of Williamsfield.

Williamsfield has had its share of disastrous fires. On September 27, 1897, two entire blocks on the west side of Oak Street, in all 20 businesses, were burned. One building destroyed was the livery stable which housed a brand new fire engine. Following that fire, most of the frame buildings were replaced with brick. A second major fire in 1920 destroyed much of the business district which had been built on Gale Street.

WILLIAMSFIELD TIMES AND SANTA FE RAILROAD



Santa Fe Depot and passenger train

Two names have survived the century. The Santa Fe Railroad preceded the town by several months with the first train running from Galesburg to Chicago in November 1887. There have been many changes in the Santa Fe, beginning with the box car station, the building of a new station, the double tracks laid about 1909-10, the steam engines which gave way to the oil burners and then the diesels, the passing of the Doodlebug and the freights on which local boys hopped a ride home from Galesburg, the demise of the station, as well as changes in the Corporate structure. But the

Santa Fe and the taxes it pays to Tururo Township and the Village of Williamsfield are still a vital part of the community.

The second business, the Williamsfield Times, has changed ownership many times but the masthead of the weekly remains the same. Beginning as an independent weekly in 1889 with C. E. Benfield as founder, the Times was sold in 1889 to Momeny and Benson, in 1892 to S. E. Bogess, and in 1893 to M. Hugh Irish. Irish and his wife were prominent in the community, and Mrs. Irish and the Home Culture Club worked long and hard to establish a library in Williamsfield with taxes to support it. Unfortunately, the tax was voted down before the women even got the right to vote. The Irish family sold the paper in 1918 to a Williamsfield Jeweler, W. G. Johnson, and moved to Washington, D.C. where he had a government post.



Left to right: Williamsfield Bank, Williamsfield Times office, and Spencer's Store.

W. G. Johnson and his wife Grace printed the Times until his death in 1944. After his death, she sold the paper to J. W. Forse, who returned the paper to her after his editorship came to an end. The physical plant was in a bad shape, and while Mrs. Johnson continued as Editor, the papers were printed first in Knoxville and then in Elmwood, where Danny Maher, Editor of the Gazette, took it over. For several years, Maher printed the Yates City Banner, The Elmwood Gazette and the Williamsfield Times as one paper, changing only the Mast Head and the front page.

When Maher sold out to Edmundsen of the Abingdon paper, Grace continued to write the news with the help of her daughter Wilma and Myrtice Coe. Eventually Edmundsen sold out to Jim Carlberg of the Roseville paper. Carlberg printed 12 small town weeklies at that time, and he eventually urged Adrian Swindler to take over the four northern papers—Elmwood Gazette, Yates City Banner, Farmington Bugle and the Williamsfield Times.

At present, Bryan Swindler and his wife Sherry are editor and assistant editor. The papers are pasted up in Elmwood and now printed in Canton.

Myrtice Coe took over the Times when Grace Johnson retired, and she continued as Editor until Bryan and Sherry Swindler took over, and then became a correspondent.

The "Out of the Past" column which draws so much attention was begun by Grace Johnson, who did all the groundwork. Myrtice Coe continues it. Perhaps the most fondly remembered correspondent was Myrtle Waggoner who wrote Salem News in a down to earth manner.

In the early days, much of the news was purchased, and the early copies contain serial stories, which kept the reader coming back for more. The oldest columnist at present is Erma Farquer Nodeen with her "Days Off" column. Myrtice Coe, who writes "Notes," has been doing so for 12 years. Other columnists readers have enjoyed included Dick Kimbrough, Opal Self and Fran Anderson who continues to write on a once a month basis.

Helping the Times to be the number one is Joan Smith, who writes personal items for Dahinda, Elmore and Williamsfield as well as contributing personal comments of interest to the readers.

The Times's present circulation includes 383 paid subscriptions and 110 newspapers each week sold at Ladd's Grocery in Williamsfield.

by Myrtice Coe

CITY GOVERNMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

The village of Williamsfield was not incorporated until 1896 when an election was held to decide whether to incorporate. The results were 73 for and 20 against the proposition.

The first village officers elected were: Pres. J. M. Baird; Clerk S. M. Parker. Board members were: J. A. Tucker, C. B. Raymond, H. H. Caldwell, J. D. Doubet, A. J. Wesner and G. W. Thomas.

After becoming a real town, improvements and growth came quickly. Several oil street lights were purchased. Later in 1898, these were replaced with gasoline lights. Later in 1912, these were replaced by electricity after the building of an electrical plant by E. J. LeHew. The lights went on at dusk and were turned off at 11 p.m. after a warning of three blinks—a silent curfew of that day! Today we are served by Central Illinois Light Company out of Peoria, IL. Full service includes electrical heat and air conditioning, corn drying, etc. More recently, Cable T.V. has become available.

Our present Village Board consists of Gene Yelm, Mayor; James Ross; Randy Fritz; Pat Fulton; Larry Mattson; Joe Murdock and Scott Smith. Paul R. Kimler, who served from 1939 to 1968, served longer than any other mayor.

WILLIAMSFIELD SCHOOLS

The first schoolhouse that served the Williamsfield village was a small building which stood on the corner just west of the house now owned by Mr. & Mrs. Jack Stodgel. A school building was begun in 1890, and the next year the school opened with Mr. & Mrs. J. M. Momeny as teachers. Among the first pupils were Charles and Al Doubet, Bertha and Tom Shaffer, Leto and Seth Tucker, Eddie (Doc) Oberholtzer, Rosa Powers, Jim Kimler, Wesley Egan, David Morton, Frank and Mary Welsh, P. Kimler, Josie Shugrue, Ed and Fred Moon and probably others.

In September of 1901, the school was made to accommodate a class of High School students taking a three-year course. The first annual commencement of W.H.S. was held May 13, 1904, the

members of the graduating class being Harriett Doubet, Joye Carrigan, Mable Tucker, Ona Shaffer and M. C. Welsh. Later a fourth year was added to the High School courses, and in May 1916 it was organized as Williamsfield Community High School, District 181, which covered a territory extending over parts of five townships.

In 1921, a new high school building was built in the new addition in the north part of town. This was destroyed by fire in August 1923, but was immediately rebuilt, and the following spring the High School was again established in a well-equipped modern building.

In 1934, the fall term began with a new blue school bus to transport pupils from the outlying districts. Tom Collopy, Sr. was hired as bus driver. It traveled only on the hard roads, and students walked or were taken to meet it.



The old Grade School Building

The old Grade School Building, with a few alterations, continued to supply the needs of the community until March 7, 1934 when it burned to the ground. Plans were immediately made for a new building which was begun early in June of the same year, and by October, the pupils and teachers were settled in their new building.

The enrollment in the country schools decreased, and economics made it impossible for a small district to supply the kind of education and extracurricular activities that were beginning to be demanded by the State of Illinois. So, on July 1, 1948, a petition was submitted and approved to reorganize the small districts surrounding the village of Williamsfield, and Unit District #210 was formed. Seventeen complete districts, parts of fourteen districts, from Knox, Peoria and Stark Counties, were involved.

To accommodate the increased enrollment, a Junior High Addition and Gym were added to the High School in 1952.

The High School building deteriorated until it seemed more practical to rebuild than make the extensive repairs needed. On December 8, 1979, voters in the District approved the construction of

a new high school and a new elementary building. Verla Scheeler gave the district ten acres of farmland lying adjacent to the school property. This made possible adequate space for the new construction of ball fields plus land for a new bus garage.

Dedication and Open House of the new building was held May 23, 1982 and today all school activities are housed in a \$2.8 million dollar complex. Included on a 16 acre site are two athletic fields, a transportation building and a natural grass and wild flower prairie setting.

by Betty Doubet

ORGANIZATIONS

Williamsfield Home Culture Club, organized in 1912, has been and continues to be a force for community improvement. Its first president was Mrs. G. M. Rice. Today its activities include the Nettie Caldwell Scholarship for art and leadership, school volunteers and city beautification. President for 1987-88 is Dorothy Martzluf. A full history of the club has been compiled and is on file at Caldwell Cottage.

Organizations based at Caldwell Cottage include: Friends of Caldwell Cottage; Spoon River Chapter NSDAR, organized in 1983; Prairie Quilt Guild and a TOPS group.

American Legion Post 371 and American Legion Auxiliary are active in community projects and veterans affairs, as well as providing a community hall used for many meetings.

We have a first class volunteer fire department and Rescue Squad. Williamsfield Fire District was organized in 1942 with E. L. Norman as Chief. Prior to that time, we were served by a Township Department. On Mr. Norman's retirement, his son Ralph became Chief. He has served since 1955 and continues to be our Fire Chief. The present Trustees are Gerald Weaver, Floyd McClellan, and Rolland Tucker. The Rescue Squad came into being in 1978.

CHURCHES

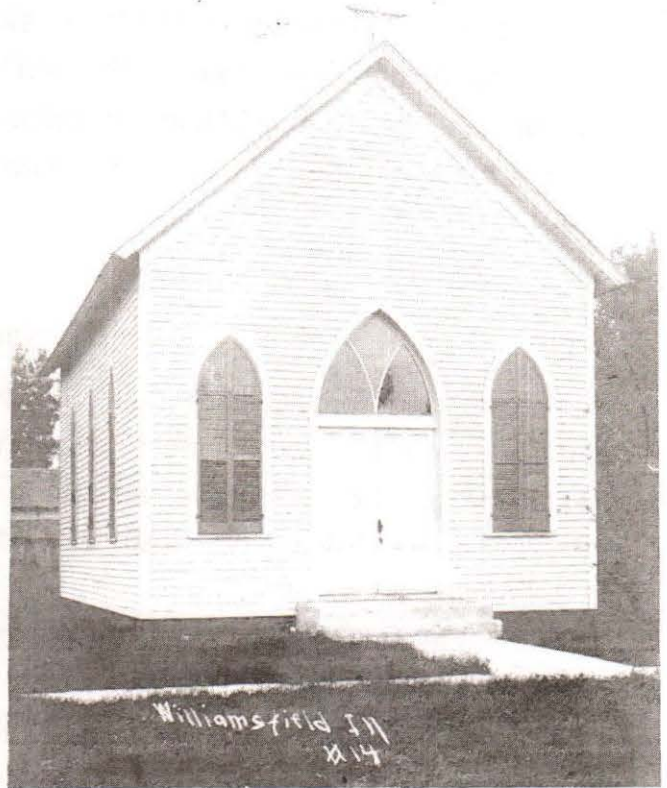
The Williamsfield Methodist Episcopal Church was built in 1890 on Olive Street at a cost of \$1,600 with Rev. John Gimson as the first pastor. Additions were made in 1894 and 1905, and the basement was enlarged in 1918. In 1927, a kitchen was dug out, and the main part of the basement divided into classrooms by means of canvas curtains.

The parsonage was located on lots directly across the street from the church and still is used as a residence today. In 1929, the parsonage was remodeled with the addition of an upper story, kitchen and porch, using material from an old barn on the lot.

In 1912, twenty women began an organization called the Missionary Society with Anna Nelson, Minnie Swartz, Grace Johnson and Nellie Wolfe being instrumental in its founding. This group sponsored clothing drives for the needy people overseas. In 1914, the Missionary Society became the Enterprise Society, which later divided into groups or circles according to age and was called the Methodist Ladies Aid. These hard working ladies cooked and served dinners for the public during the Williamsfield Horse Show (later known as the Homecoming). Meals were cooked on a coal stove in the church basement, and patrons paid 35¢ to 50¢ for "all you could eat."



Former Methodist Church on Olive Street



St. James' Catholic Church

In the early 1940's, the Ladies Aid became the Women's Society for Christian Service with its first president's responsibilities shared by two women, Maud (Bennett) Nelson and Nellie Johnston.

During the late 1960's, building fund drives were held to finance the building of a new Williamsfield Methodist Church, and in 1967, the old church on Olive Street was torn down and the new United Methodist Church was completed in the north part of town. Rev. Phillip Snider was minister at that time and served the church until 1975. At the same time, the parsonage interior was remodeled at a cost of \$4,000, with the new church costing \$200,000.

A brick parsonage, purchased in 1974, is located near the new church and the old parsonage was sold.

In 1973, the WSCS became the United Methodist Women and eventually included five circles of women. Over the years, the UMW has sponsored: sale of cookbooks, birthday calendars and church plates; served wedding rehearsal dinners, receptions and farm sales; assisted with the annual steak supper, bazaar, turkey supper and "Come As You Are" dinner. Proceeds from these endeavors were used for the church equipment, drapes for the Fellowship Hall, contributions to the church budget, building fund, parsonage fund and Methodist institutions.

United Methodist Men's organization sponsor many activities including the annual steak supper, ice cream social, pork chop sandwich sale, Mother-Daughter Banquet and annual church auction.

Today the United Methodist Church has a membership of 300 with Rev. Joel Cattin serving as pastor. Mrs. Lois (Caldwell) German has the distinction of being a member of the church for 73

years, having joined the church on January 31, 1915. She continues to attend worship services and church activities.

In 1892, St. James House of Worship was built. At that time, the Rev. Father Shannon of Brimfield was pastor. Today the church is administered by Father Brennen.

by Gloria German, Lois German & Evelyn Coe

CONCLUSION

Changes are a certainty of history. Businesses and organizations have come and gone, but with good times and bad, our town has been a survivor. We no longer have the "Switchboard" for personalized telephone service, but are served by Mid-Century Telephone Cooperative with automated equipment, some of it housed in a small switch building north of the old telephone office along Route 180. The depot is gone, heavy traffic of freight flows over the rails but few trains stop here, and there is no passenger service. However, our transportation needs are well taken care of by the automobile. Interstate Route 74, just south of town, is close enough to give us added mobility, and most of us have become two-car families.

The local Doctor's office where Dr. Cole, Dr. Oberholtzer and Dr. Bronny among others practiced is now a subsidiary of St. Mary's Hospital in Galesburg. Locally in charge is nurse practitioner Janet Collopy. Seriously ill or injured patients are transported to hospitals by an efficient Williamsfield Rescue Squad.

Lyon's Addition, to the north of the business district, has in the last few years provided an area for new housing. The "Over 21 Club" provides an example of the newer concept of retirement living. The building on Gale Street built for a school bus garage is now the Village Garage, housing all of the equipment used in maintaining city property.

This is but a summary of the growth of Williamsfield. Much material is from "History of Williamsfield" by Nettie Pulver Caldwell and Lois Caldwell German, published in 1953. Items from Williamsfield Times, D.A.R. publications, along with bits and pieces from Billtown residents, have made this possible. To all we say "Thank you." Happy 100th Anniversary, Billtown!

compiled by Friends of Caldwell Cottage



Gale Street looking east

*Photos
courtesy
of
Clifford
Ensley*