

BACK IN THE DAY

Researched and reported by Jack Keefe

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COME, YE THANKFUL PEOPLE THANKSGIVING IN PRE-CIVIL WAR BLOOMINGTON

Bloomington was a city of 7,075 people in 1860, with Normal taking shape as a railroad junction transitioning to a college town. Abraham Lincoln, the circuit-riding lawyer, had just been elected President of the United States and had already disappeared from Bloomington streets forever. And the city had just seen its biggest growth spurt ever, now 343% larger since the 1850 census. Arrival of the Chicago & Alton and the Illinois Central railroads spurred the young city's growth. With war looming ahead and all those new people in town, this was Thanksgiving.



Thanksgiving was a state-by-state affair before the Civil War. Governors seized the occasion to issue almost sermon-like proclamations to set aside the third or fourth Thursday (states' choice) of November as a day of giving thanks in their states. Then in 1863 President Lincoln set the fourth Thursday of the month as a national day of Thanksgiving.

Bloomington had been marking the occasion since at least the 1840s. On November 20, 1849 Governor Augustus French's proclamation appeared in *The Western Whig*, a predecessor weekly newspaper to the *Pantagraph*. With the stroke of a pen and a little bombast, French set

November 29 as Thanksgiving Day for 1849. In 1850 the Presbyterian church scheduled a service but little else attracted attention of the press.

The late 1850s saw the holiday with a life of its own: parties, big food spreads, and editorial humor about suffering turkeys. The Landon House in Bloomington hosted two occasions in 1857: a Ladies' Festival (no further explanation given) to be followed by a Thanksgiving ball. In addition, the hotel offered Thanksgiving dinner for everyone at one o'clock in the afternoon. The Bloomington Brass Band provided a surprise serenade for the diners.

In 1859 six Bloomington merchants signed a pledge to remain closed until 3 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day.

By 1860, Thanksgiving Day in Bloomington looked like this, according to news accounts and announcements:

The local telegraph office closed at eleven o'clock in the morning for the rest of the day. But the post office would be open for a split shift: 7:30 until 8:30 in the morning, and in the afternoon from three until four.

Four church services were on the docket, held by the Presbyterian, Christian and Methodist churches. A fourth service, apparently non-denominational in nature, was scheduled for Phoenix Hall.

The *Pantagraph* printed a Thanksgiving Day edition, as it had in previous years. But its custom was to give its workers the holiday off. So there was no Friday edition.

The Niccolls House, a downtown hotel, held a Thanksgiving dinner and drew a notable crowd. The landlord apparently invited the newspaper editor to dinner, but the editor said he couldn't be there.

The Ladies' Library Association held its annual festival that night at Phoenix Hall, on the Washington Street side of the square. Admission was fifty cents for adults and twenty-five cents for children. (That would be \$15.61 and \$7.80 in modern-day dollars, adjusted for inflation.) It attracted a full house, featuring several tableaux which drew praise from the paper. A tableau is defined as a historic scene populated by silent, motionless actors. Think of a live nativity scene at Christmas.

Refreshments were served and the Baby String Band – a young people's group – provided entertainment. This was a fund-raiser for the Ladies' Library, which cleared \$177 (\$5,526 these days) after expenses.

On a holiday which would include football, movies and Thanksgiving Day parades in decades to come there still seemed to be plenty to do in growing Bloomington. And in 1860, a lot to be thankful for. But the landscape would change five short months later with the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter and the start of the Civil War.

For a post-script on this story, please see the last page.

This story was prepared from Internet sources, including the Pantagraph archives. The dinner image is from History.com under the doctrine of fair use.

100 years ago

Nov. 20, 1922: The murder trial of Albert Lowe begins today in Greeley, Colorado. Lowe is charged with killing his sister-in-law, Edna Skinner of Bloomington. Lowe's wife insists he's innocent. Two other sisters, both of Bloomington, are hoping for Lowe's conviction.

75 years ago

Nov. 20, 1947: Archie Augustine of Normal, a nationally known expert on trees and shrubs, has died at age 81. He was widely known for varieties of plants he developed and introduced into the nursery field. He once helped pass a law allowing horticulturists to patent plants they develop.

50 years ago

Nov. 20, 1972: Bloomington and Normal got three inches of snow yesterday, but temperatures are warming, so this snow won't be around very long. Bloomington and Normal crews salted streets, and Normal even used its new snowplows for the first time. Bloomington didn't plow.

25 years ago

Nov, 20, 1997: If you're a Twin Cities population-watcher, the chase is over. The Census Bureau estimated Bloomington and Normal have reached 100,020 residents. That includes the universities, as it does with all college towns. Bloomington is still bigger than Normal.

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100 years ago

Nov. 21, 1922: Winnifred Mason Huck, elected congresswoman-at-large from Chicago on Nov. 7, says she will take her children to Washington with her. And, she says, they are going to form a band. This paper wonders if that will be a fit, since members of congress live in apartments.

75 years ago

Nov. 21, 1947: The Freedom Train, due to stop in Bloomington later, is having a rough time in the South. Memphis, Tennessee and Hattiesburg, Mississippi have both barred the train. The reason: crowds visiting the train must not be racially segregated, and the two cities won't allow desegregation.

50 years ago

Nov. 21, 1972: It took two months of deliberation, but Normal City Council decided in favor of the College-Mulberry couple. The plan will have the two

streets splitting off at School Street on the ISU campus, and rejoining at Beech Street. Traffic flow through campus will improve.

25 years ago

Nov. 21, 1997: The Double Nickel, a throwback drive-in with a fifties and sixties theme, will close for good. Its owners, Dave and Nancy Gieselman, have decided to retire from the food service business. (A Starbuck's went into the Double Nickel site at Morrissey and Veterans.)

100 years ago

Nov. 22, 1922: There is something of a boom in electric signs on downtown businesses. The city has approved four new ones, at 419, 425 and 605 North Main, and at 112 North Center. Main Street, it is speculated, may soon take on the look of a miniature Broadway before long.

75 years ago

Nov. 22, 1947: Charles Albert Innis, the blind poet of Bellflower, has died at age 67. A bout with measles at age 14 left him blind for life. Yet he graduated from U of I and earned a master's degree from Harvard. Innis was well published and known as an accomplished blind writer.

50 years ago

Nov. 22, 1972: The weekend snow storm and other poor weather have left Unit 5 with almost no construction schedule. It's unclear when anything will be finished. For example, Parkside Junior High is supposed to be ready for 1973-74 school year, but now it doesn't look that way.

25 years ago

Nov. 22, 1997: A new auction house has opened in the old Hammer's Market building in Downs. Gene Rutledge, an amateur auctioneer from Bloomington, is the owner. Rutledge said he did a close-out sale in Downs and his friends encouraged him to start the auction house.

100 years ago

Nov. 23, 1922: Scarlet fever is at a four-year high in Bloomington, with the health department reporting 27 cases. Most of the patients are children, and the cases are said to be mild. Mumps and whooping cough are down, and right now there is only one case of diphtheria reported.

75 years ago

Nov. 23, 1947: At 2:45 in the morning, a young man came into the Hamilton Hotel lobby and asked for a room. As night relief clerk Jacob Schlemmer prepared to check him in, the man pulled a pistol and demanded money. Schlemmer handed over \$25 and the robber fled.

50 years ago

Nov. 23, 1972: An informal poll of Mclean County Board members shows all agree that a new jail should be built. But some don't favor building a jail now, and they don't agree on where. Meanwhile the building commission is preparing plans for the new complex on Front Street.

25 years ago

Nov. 23, 1997: Wiping away moss from old tombstones in Evergreen Cemetery is the project of Eric Bogdonas, 17, of Bloomington. He is pursuing an Eagle Scout badge. Eric took two months to organize the work, which involves other Boy Scouts. He says the stones are "coming pretty clean."

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 100 years ago

Nov. 24, 1922: The streetcar line will switch to one-man car operations in January. The motorman will stay, but the conductor will be dropped. Car line officials say this is a necessary move to keep the car line operating at a profit. Opposition is expected from streetcar workers.

75 years ago

Nov. 24, 1947: Bloomington saw its second hotel robbery in two nights. Two men robbed the Tilden Hall Hotel, rifling the safe and forcing employees to lie on the floor. Decatur police arrested two suspects and cops here drove a witness to Decatur to ID the men. But they weren't the culprits.

50 years ago

Nov. 24, 1972: Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Beecher lost their home, garage and business to fire on Thanksgiving Eve. They live near Colfax, and loss is set at \$40,000. In the garage, Beecher repairs and sells TV sets, and had a tractor business. All are gone. The Beechers weren't hurt.

25 years ago

Nov. 24, 1997: Angie Roberts of Bloomington was crowned homecoming queen at Murray State University in Kentucky. She's a senior, majoring in

psychology. Miss Roberts belongs to Alpha Gamma Delta sorority, and is the daughter of Don and Cathy Roberts of Bloomington.

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100 years ago

Nov. 25, 1922: There's a discrepancy in the cost of the planned Main Street viaduct, which will bridge the railroad tracks just north of Oakland Avenue. The city's estimate is \$201,000; but the state's figures \$175,000. Once the bridge is finished, fire engines will have an easier run to the south side.

75 years ago

Nov. 25, 1947: Excitement is building toward Thanksgiving and the Corn Bowl. It's one of the first college bowl games of the season, to be played at BHS' Fred Carlton field. Around town, people are busily working on floats for the parade, which is expected to be several miles long.

50 years ago

Nov. 25, 1972: Notable obituaries include actress Marie Wilson, who starred in the "My Friend Irma" series. Locally, Retired Army Col. Angelo Bollero has died at age 64. He taught school in civilian life; while in the service he spent three years on the NATO staff at Naples, Italy.

25 years ago

Nov. 25, 1997: Five people who helped a mom save three kids in a Front Street house fire received plaques from the city. Honorees were Bill and Kellie Hendricks, Ray Grimwood, Mike Green and Robert Fleming. Fire Chief Otto said without their aid there would have been loss of life.

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100 years ago

Nov. 26, 1922: Second Christian Church will celebrate its twentieth anniversary with a harvest homecoming celebration. The church, at Mulberry and Evans, was founded in 1902 as an eastward extension of First Christian Church. (The church is defunct but the building still stands.)

75 years ago

Nov. 26, 1947: Of all the students enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan, the school reports that 247 of them are from Bloomington. That's more than any other city including Chicago, which is second with 80. Normal is third with 40. Hawaii, with six students, was shown as a foreign country.

50 years ago

Nov. 26, 1972: ABC Television is making program changes. "Streets of San Francisco" gets a new time slot; "Kung Fu" is new, and has a chance at being memorable. But if you hadn't yet watched "Alias Smith and Jones" and "The Sixth Sense," forget it. They've been cancelled.

25 years ago

Nov. 26, 1997: Bloomington City Council approved the addition of Famous-Barr to Eastland Mall. But the project is still stalled because of an objection from Kohl's, which claims its lease gives Kohl's veto power over mall expansion. Eastland officials say it doesn't. This may go to court.

100 years ago

Nov, 27, 1922: An upbeat cartoon appears in today's Pantagraph, heralding a big Thanksgiving this year for the city. Old Man Bloomington is shown carrying a harvest of the year's civic improvements. Among them are hard roads, the new YWCA and IWU gym, and the city golf links.

75 years ago

Nov. 27, 1947: The Chenoa Milling Co. has been in business for twenty years. To celebrate, the firm has invited 400 area farmers to a chicken dinner in the high school gym. The company was started by Ray Morris in 1927. Morris, from Panola, has added to the original mill since then.

50 years ago

Nov. 27, 1972: Margaret Chasson, Bloomington's first and only female on the city council, announced she will run for Mayor in 1973. Her opposition will be incumbent Mayor Walter Bittner. Chasson came out verbally swinging at a press conference; Bittner only said he'd seek another term.

25 years ago

Nov. 27, 1997: This is Thanksgiving Day and Lucky the turkey has much to be thankful for. The Shaffer family of McLean was going to eat him today. But he ended up being a family pet so he'll be a guest at dinner instead. Lucky appears to be appropriately named.

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100 years ago

Nov. 28, 1922: Fifteen tramps came in from the cold, seeking shelter from the snow. That's the most for any night this winter (and it's still autumn). They were given warm shelter for the night. But today they'll have to go job-hunting or find another city. They can't return to the shelter,

75 years ago

Nov. 28, 1947: An estimated 30,000 people lined the streets for the miles-long Corn Bowl parade. The route stretched from the IWU campus, through downtown and east to the BHS football field. There, Southern Illinois University beat North Central College in a close game.

50 years ago

Nov. 28, 1972: Once again an Illinois kid has shown the grand champion steer at the International Live Stock Exposition in Chicago. Kris Lindskog of Prophetstown raised Bold Move, a Simmetal Hereford yearling. It's now a family matter: her brother showed the grand champion in 1969.

25 years ago

Nov. 28, 1997: Snippets from Thanksgiving weekend: Douglas and Jane Ambrose of Lexington have now celebrated 69 Thanksgivings together. Also, The Front Street Café is going to close. And from MTV comes word that Beavis and Butt-head, two cartoon characters, are out.

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COME, YE THANKFUL PEOPLE: A P.S.

Some holidays come with certain mythology. Perhaps not Labor Day or Memorial Day but consider Christmas with Santa Claus and Easter with the bunny. Thanksgiving comes with its own perpetuated myth, apparently: that of the friendly Indians throwing the first Thanksgiving feast for the Pilgrims in 1621.

Search the Internet for five minutes or more, and you can find any number of items decrying the alleged mistreatment of American Indians by the Pilgrims almost from the time the *Mayflower* dropped anchor. Re-read what you heard in school, and then read these alternative offerings, and you can come away confused.

In my experience, some people will believe what they want to believe. And changing their beliefs is a real challenge. But I'm prone to think there's some truth in these conflicting accounts. Maybe not a lot but at least some. But like a lot of other Americans who love Thanksgiving, I don't know where the line is.

I have avoided delving into this issue because it has no direct bearing on what early-day Bloomingtonians did to celebrate Thanksgiving. Right or wrong, critics are free to disagree with me and to write their own versions of what happened, both in 1860 and the seventeenth century. And they can use their own platform to get the word out, just as I used mine.

JK