

COMMERCE STREET OF THE SEVENTIES [1870's]

Mrs. G.S. Rowe [late 1940's]

Memories of Commerce street, its old homes and the dwellers therein, are often in the thoughts of one whose comings and goings along its ways stretch back over a period of seven decades and more. An unpretentious little street in a friendly little town, the extremes of poverty and wealth have ever been lacking. Like people it has always had an individuality of its own and its exact duplicate probably is nowhere to be found. Yet it has shared with other Milford streets and those of many another small American town the mode of life of its period and changed with the progress of the years.

Personal recollections of Commerce street go back to the early seventies and but very few people remain here of those who knew it in those days or in the decades that followed. It was then, as now, on my way to the old school grounds on the hill and it is a pleasure not without its touch of sadness, to repeople the old houses and recall the old faces and figures garbed in the quaint modes of their time. Parenthetically it might be remarked that they might be astounded, if not scandalized, could they have foreseen the scant midsummer costumes in which their feminine descendants are wont to appear on the streets in these modern days.

Doubtless Commerce street received its name from the fact that eastward from Milford it led to the village of Commerce, which in the early days was quite a busy hamlet with several small industries and its county-famous Commerce Lake House as a center of social and political activities. At the east end of Milford village the street turned northward for a short distance and then took a diagonal course to the foot of the Gillick hill, known in those days as the "Harper" hill. An atlas of 1870 shows the short cut to the main Milford-Commerce highway and the change was doubtless made soon after that date to the straight stretch from Commerce to Summit streets. [*Milford Times*, June 12, 1875: Council: petition to vacate highway running north and east from the eastern terminus of Commerce st., and to extend Commerce st. east to a certain line, and thence north, until it intersects Commerce road. The object is to open a new street, so as to avoid the hill near Mr. John Harper's residence.]

As a place to begin we have chosen the intersection of Main and Commerce street. Very early recollections are of the construction on the southeast corner of the present postoffice building in 1871 by Oliver St. John, the jeweler. The rear portion had an entrance on Commerce street and was first fitted for occupancy as a bank. The name of the institution is forgotten, but it seems that its brief existence antedated by several years both the organization of the bank headed by John L. Andrews and the national bank of the Wilhelms.

The store was occupied by Mr. St. John with his jewelry stock, and the second floor had a residence apartment and the third was a public auditorium and so used for several years. Here it was that we saw "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in its initial presentation in Milford by a group of Pontiac amateurs. Here we long ago heard the Swiss Bell Ringers, marveled at the mysteries of the magicians, hypnotists and phrenologists, listened to the lectures and concerts and saw the one-night shows that now and then provided us with thrills and entertainment. A long and narrow stairway outside the north wall of the building led to the second floor where a small hall and inside stairway led to the auditorium. This was before the days of safeguards in public buildings and if we thought of fire hazards or panics on those crowded stairways we kept still about them and trusted to Providence and good luck that no tragedies resulted.

On the north east corner and facing Commerce street stood a large two-story frame building which housed the drug and footwear store of Daniel Morrison. He was not only a dealer in "Boots and shoes"- as the two always went together in those days - but a miller as well, member for years of the local Board of Education, a prominent Catholic layman, a man of good judgment and reputation, and later became the Oakland County Register of Deeds. In the large front room on the second floor, local Catholics held

services during the construction of their first church building atop the Summit street hill.

The Morrison store below handled drugs on one side and "boots and shoes" on the other. Morrison footwear builders there plied their trade, the made-to-measure type being in general use. We girls had calf-skin for every day wear and deemed ourselves fortunate if provided with real store shoes for Sundays. Boots were the proper thing for the men, with copper toed ones for the lads. Philip Vigés, Thorn Pudney and Silas Williams were among the old-time shoemakers with numerous others whose names are forgotten.

The building later became the property of the late Milton C. Williams. There he carried on his extensive footwear business over a period of 25 years or more. Two of his assistants were his brother-in-law, Charles Crawford, and Fred J. Wooten, well known figures in village and country side. Roy E. Williams succeeded his father in a partnership and then as owner. All are now deceased.

The Milford Times had its office in the rear upstairs room on the Main Street side from 1883 to 1887, then moved to the east section of the first floor. It was followed there by the Milford Home Telephone Company. The building was torn down in 1925 to make way for the Standard Oil station. At that time the Times made an unsuccessful effort to learn the name of the builder and date of construction.

Where now stands the Cape building, Joseph Vowles soon after coming home from the war in 1865 erected a large frame structure wherein he began making vehicles and his famous cultivators. A.C. Orvis, a retired farmer, became his partner in 1876 and they developed an extensive business in the making of various farm implements under the Vowles patents. These implements were used by farmers in a wide Michigan area. The industry was an important one in the local picture and occasionally some of these implements are listed at farm auctions and speak well for their enduring qualities. The Vowles and Orvis factory was enlarged from time to time and did not long survive the deaths of its owners. The building was finally demolished after being used for various purposes, including residential. It was best known as the repair shop of the late Frank Vogtli.

The block from Main to Union street, on the north side, contained two dwellings, one the home of the Daniel Trump family, which included the parents, the daughter Eliza and two sons, John and William D. Eliza became an experienced teacher and talented artist, a woman of rare culture and capability and as Eliza Trump Reed is revered in the hearts of her surviving friends. The sons had careers in railroad service.

On the corner of Union and Commerce streets lived Mr. and Mrs. John Luce and the two foster daughters. Mrs. Luce pioneered in the florist business and added one after another to her green houses until they filled the lot to its north boundary, except for a small section devoted to the quarters of "Lion" the gray dray horse of local fame.

In the block eastward to Hickory street, the home of O.W. Lamphier was the first and only dwelling. It is now the property of St. Mary's parish, having been moved from its site on the corner to the next lot north to make way for St. Mary's church edifice when the building enterprise was begun.

In the block from Hickory to East streets stood two houses, one the home of Ambrose C. Orvis, and the other that of Dr. Robert Johnston, built in 1871, to which he brought his bride, Minnie Jacobs, following their marriage at Penn Yan, N.Y., Dec. 27, 1871. Across the way on Commerce street was the home of Dr. (dentist) and Mrs. W.D. Baughn and eastward the Joseph Vowles home (now owned by the Paul Sinclairs) and beyond that the VanLeuven place, the home of three generations of Van Leuven - Hiram H., the pioneer merchant, his son, Adelman and family, and his grandson and namesake, Hiram H. Acreage owners to the east end of Commerce street were A.P. Grow, Trumbull and Lydia Tenny and

comprised the hills of Commerce street and Summit streets.

Returning to the present postoffice building, on the south side of Commerce street the next dwelling was that of the Edwin Hubbells and the childhood home of Frank S. Hubbell and his sister Carrie, deceased. After the remodeling process early in this century the dwelling was altered to face Commerce street and later became the home of Dr. and Mrs. S.L. Weisbrod.

One of the first residences to be constructed in the decade of the seventies was that of Samuel B. Ferguson (sic), who coming from his farm on "The Bluffs" (as we called them in those days) selected for his new home the lot on the southeast corner of Commerce and Union streets, moving to another site the pioneer house then standing there. This new house in 1872 was quite a pretentious one and the Times commented "that it was to cost \$2500.00" which would build quite a house when labor and materials were low in price and so-valued modern improvements did not figure in the estimate. Those features were added later in the ownership of Solon H. Wilhelm and M.C. Williams. The house is now the property of Dr. Gibson who recently purchased it for his home.

Charles Riley, the hardware dealer, in the seventies built the house that later became the homes of A.B. Kinney the Roy Hoisingtons and Wm. Knapp. Other houses on the south side of Commerce street were those of Geo. W. Downs on the First street corner, Gardner and Milo Lamphear, George O. Cutting, Philip and D. Webster Wells and M. R. Fletcher. In 1948 the owners of these properties are Robert Gamble, Mrs. Henry Diehl, Mr. Myers, Robert and Myrtle Rowe. The G.O. Cutting house has become the home of Miss Lydia Bachert. J.A. Barthel and Robert Joerin have acquired the D.W. Wells and Fletcher homes. Few houses were then standing on Commerce street, where yards were large and corner lots the choice of first-comers. The Moore and Cherry Hill subdivisions are developments of recent years.

Another Commerce street home built in the latter sixties was that of Joseph Vowles and now owned by the Paul Sinclairs. Some attempts at landscaped grounds were made and the "chicken stone" on the lawn has been there for not less than 65 years. Some of us old-timers remember when Mr. Vowles acquired a brown bear and tethered it to a stout pole on the east side of the yard. At the top was a platform to which Bruin would climb to the delight of the interested youngsters who gathered around. Once in a while the bear would break loose and the owner would have to round up the men of the neighborhood for a tame bear hunt (so says Art Wells, one of the small boys of those good old days). The bear never seemed to object seriously to captivity and apparently preferred his comfortable quarters to freedom.

Returning to the Main street intersection, on the corner now occupied by the Puckett shop, stood a frame building wherein Fred, the Baker, held forth. If he had a surname we did not know it, and that title sufficed for the scanty stock of bread, possibly rolls and a few cookies. The bakeries then had neither the quality nor the quantity that make up their wares today and the average housekeeper baked her own except in cases of dire necessity.

To complete the four buildings at the street intersection, the one on the northwest corner really faced Main street and was known as the Cutting building erected in 1881 by the late George O. Cutting who used the south half for his blacksmithing quarters. The north section was for years the village headquarters where the fire-fighting equipment was sheltered and the Council held their fort-nightly deliberations, village elections and an occasional law suit. In the rear on the Commerce street lot stood the village pound or hoosegow wherein knights of the road were confined as guests of the village, or wrong-doers confined for lack of a better place. These buildings disappeared from the landscape in 19__ when that site passed from Nathan Eugene to the Ford interests to become an attractive part of its landscaped grounds.

The beautiful fieldstone edifice of St. Mary's parish was dedicated in 1907 during the pastorate of Rev. Thomas Hally. The commodious rectory adjoining, also of fieldstone, was begun in 1924 during the incumbency of Rev. C.T. Dolan.

The D. Webster Wells house - the present Barthel place - was the childhood home of Will C. Wells and his sister, Mrs. J.T. Watkins, and as such has an abiding place in their memories and affections. In 1868 Philip Franklin Wells built and his family occupied the house and grounds at 800 East Commerce Street. [Kingsley-Minor house] Ten years later the property passed into the hands of the late Henry A. Kipp of Highland and after nearly sixty years of ownership by this one family was bought in 1944 by Robert and Myrtle Rowe. The Wells Bros. were both mechanically inclined and the output of their plants, though not extensive as we now figure such things, added materially to the local implement ? products.

West Commerce street from Main made its way under the long trestle (not the concrete viaduct we have to-day) to the farms out Pleasant Valley way. At the foot of the hill stood the blacksmith shop with Robert Greer, the smith, and his numerous family living in the little house nearby. Seems as if this was the last abode here of "Uncle Inness", a village character who wrote "pomes" by the yard. One of his classic efforts was entitled "The Locomotive" doubtless inspired by his proximity to the railroad tracks. Before the coming of the railroad in 1871 only one other dwelling can be recalled on this part of Commerce street, this being the home of the Daniel Morrison family [Dr. Greydon Hicks], but now that of B.M. Diver. Part of this house is said to date back 100 years. The atlas of 1870, however, indicates other houses as belonging to Matthew Lovejoy and Dr. Starr _____. An era of building came with the railroad _____ other houses on this section of the street. One of the first and surely the most pretentious was that of Dodge Levanseler which later became the property of John Thornhill, Marshall L. Stringer and Oliver Tobias. Along in the seventies John Perkins built what is now the W.C. Brown house and to it he brought his bride, then a local teacher, Miss _____ from Toledo. Some time in the eighties or thereabouts this section of west Commerce and adjacent streets acquired the designation of "Baby Town". Why we know not, unless justified by the number of infant population with surname of Lovejoy, Minihan, and Levanseler. We remember our effort to rechristen it "the tenth ward" but "Baby Town" refused to be discarded. West of the Morrison home on the southern slope of Prospect Hill was a pretty grove which we knew as "Morrison's Woods", the scene of many a picnic or community gathering as well as the center of attraction when Milford and Mt. Morris staged their exchange of visits.

Death has stopped many a time at Commerce street homes, occasionally with a tragic touch as when Dr. and Mrs. Baughn lost their only child, Thurman, just graduated from high school in the class of 1893. This was the result of a gunshot wound received in a hunting accident and all Milford mourned with them as they did with the Kellogg family when Miss Rosie, a high school student, was killed in a runaway accident on the Highland road; and when Dr. Fred, one of the sons of Dr. and Mrs. Robert Johnston, failed to survive an appendectomy at the outset of a promising medical career.

As the years slipped along new houses came to the Commerce street vacant lots and old ones have been made to conform to twentieth century standards. The Commerce street homes of the seventies were modest but comfortable according to the modes of that time. The street was probably just a dirt road in the early days, destitute of even a coat of gravel until the village got around to that improvement after incorporation. Each house and its grounds were fenced to keep out the roving livestock - maybe an ornamental or picket fence in front and a plain one between lots. Many a villager kept a driving horse, perhaps a cow, pig or poultry so that a barn was quite a necessary feature of the home grounds. Not many places lacked a "horseblock" near the front gate to facilitate getting in or out of the buggies that were the popular vehicles of that time although the favored few might ride in a top carriage or phaeton. Vegetable gardens and the small fruits antedated the victory gardens and helped out the family budget. Flower beds and shrubbery appeared here and there but blooms to the extent and beauty that we have today were rarely

to be seen. Furnaces were few, if any, bathrooms non-existent. Wells and cisterns sufficed as a water supply. Houses were mostly heated with wood and the first hard coal stoves were a decided innovation. The kerosene lamp was the common illuminant following the tallow candle and the first street lamps were lighted one at a time by the village marshal. Very few people attempted to have a well-kept lawn and when and if the grass grew too long it was cut, if at all, with a sickle or scythe. One of our neighbors over on Hickory street, Alva T. Phillips, brought home the first lawn mower in town and his lawn, the present C.C. Mitchell home --- became thereafter an object of admiration. The mowers soon became procurable from the local dealers and well-kept lawns soon became the rule rather than the exception. The first door and window screens were frames covered with coarse netting and flies and mosquitoes abounded even in the best regulated homes. We remember those dome-shaped things covered with wire which were used to cover the plates of provisions on the dining tables. They certainly answered the purpose well, but were anything but articles of beauty. In those far-off days, too, everyone living on the street knew everyone else and they were not only neighbors but friends, sharing with each other their joys and sorrows.

We like to recall some of the individuals who have gone out from Commerce street homes to make for themselves successful careers in business and professional lines. One of the first to come to mind is Frank Schuyler Hubbell whose varied enterprises through many, many years have contributed much to the industry and progress of his home town. It is probably due to him more than to any one other person that we have today one of the Ford plants in Milford. Pioneering in electric illumination Milford had electric lights when other small towns were still using kerosene lamps. The tales he could tell of those days with their difficulties and experiences make an interesting chapter in Milford history. He has traveled extensively, not only circumnavigating the globe, but seeing much of European, Oriental and African countries and peoples. Now he is finding in California the leisurely life to which his activities entitle him, but we like to think that his preference and his memories center around the old home town of Milford, Michigan. He has had three homes on Commerce street, now owned by Dr. Weisbrod, Mrs. G.S. Rowe and

Another outstanding example is that of William Daniel Trump who left the Milford school at the age of 14 to earn his living by doing odd jobs when and where he could get them. Activities at the local depot had an especial attraction for him and at the age of 18 he became night operator at this station at the munificent salary of \$35.00 per month, 18 hours per day and every day in the month. From this position his promotion up from the ranks was rapid, but step by step, to the general superintendency of the Pere Marquette system with its 2300 miles of tracks and thousands of employees. His wife, Minnie L. Grow, was a Milford girl and both are sleeping at Oak Grove, only a short distance from the tracks over which Pere Marquette trains rumble in continuous traffic.

Any record of Commerce street is not complete without mention of a frail, pathetic little figure who long ago limped her way to and from the shack she called home, but now modernized and comfortable as it never was in her day. Born in Milford February 6, 1881 and crippled by a fall in early childhood hers was a life of ill health and suffering, altho a cheery smile was one of her characteristics. Her name was Blanche Van Leuven Browne, daughter of Jared and Etta Van Leuven Browne, the latter the eldest daughter of Milford's pioneer merchant, H.H. Van Leuven. She attended school as precarious health permitted and with her parents would disappear from Milford for months at a time, when it was understood that Blanche was undergoing hospital treatment. Then the family, usually in summer, would reappear accompanied by several youngsters handicapped by deformities similar to her own. Little did we think in those days that Blanche Browne had a dream project of a hospital-school for children deprived of an education by their physical incapacities and that it would some day come true far beyond her imaginings. The family landed finally in Detroit, and items in the Times files from time to time told of the little school she established for crippled children on Kenilworth Avenue. The Times files (sic) has many a reference to the little school, its difficulties and discouragements and Blanche Browne's brave efforts to keep the concern afloat and her

little proteges fed and sheltered. The sale of the little magazine which she sold from door to door was one of her methods of raising funds and her story commanded national attention when it was written for publication in the World's Work of May, 1913. Would that I could find that copy of that magazine carefully preserved for many years and then to disappear when most wanted. Coming to the attention of the late Senator James Couzens, it has been authoritatively stated that this little institution was the forerunner of the one at Farmington and the inspiration for the munificent gift that has made possible the far-flung work in behalf of crippled children through the Couzens Foundation.

The inside story of her release from the institution she founded was not without its heartbreak and its kindest interpretation is that the work had expanded beyond her strength and ability to administer. Blanche was next heard of at Lancaster, Pa., with a small group of unfortunates in her care. Here she died in November, 1930 and in accordance with her oft-expressed wish her body was returned to Milford for burial beside her parents. It was a distinguished group of Detroit's notable citizens who were in the funeral party on that gray autumn day and took part in a most impressive service for one who "had done what she could".

Blanche Browne sleeps in an unmarked grave down by the Huron in Oak Grove. This is not the first time it has been suggested that some local organization might finance the erection of a stone, even if but an inexpensive marker, in commemoration of her pioneer work for unfortunate children. So far the suggestion has fallen on unresponsive ears but it may some time be otherwise. If not, there is that great monument she built for herself that is more imperishable than one of stone.

Just Notes

In the early years of the eighties, if memory is not at fault, A.D. Webb and his two sisters coming here to reside built the commodious house at the corner of Union and East Commerce streets. After their removal from here and several changes of ownership, it is now a two-family dwelling owned by R.C. Sherwood. The Fletcher property at the east end of Commerce street finally passed into the hands of Reuben Swann and wife and here they reared a fine family and lived until their removal to Detroit. Mr. Swann was a master carpenter and contractor from England and many a farm and village building in this area are of his handiwork.

The place we have known as Orson Kellogg's once faced First Street and was turned about to face Commerce street during the remodeling during the ownership of Mrs. Hannah Thurber. Now it is the property of Joseph Sanders.

Fortunate it is for the Commerce street residents of today that their predecessors of long-ago visioned a tree-lined highway and leafy branches now arch the streets. It is quite possible that some of the oaks and elms were spared (sic) from the original forest but we have heard old-timers say that they remember when the maples were planted and tended with watchful care. How casually we accept these trees as part of our heritage without even a thought of gratitude for their lacy loveliness (sic) in the springtime, their deep shade from the midsummer sun and the glory of their autumnal colorings.

[Copied by Barbara Young from a typescript of Mrs. G.S. Rowe (Carrie Jackson Rowe) given to Mrs. Young in 1996 by Myrtle Finningsdorf Rowe, Mrs. G.S. Rowe's daughter-in-law.]