

Merchants of 1907 worried about mail-order sales

At 9 p.m. a crowd of men milled around the lobby of the Bowles Hotel before they were ushered into a dining room. Though there were no females present, it was not exactly a stag party 1907-style.

The purpose of the meeting was serious business, since all of the participants were members of the Merchants' Association of Bloomington. There were 75 present, and it took 16 waiters to serve the six-course meal.

The *Bloomington Weekly Courier* of Feb. 19, 1907, described the gathering as the first annual Merchants' Association Stag. Prior to dinner "There was a pleasant greeting all round, the right hand of fellowship was in evidence and good feelings prevailed."

It was almost 1 a.m. before the last course had been served and cigars were passed around. Then the participants got down to the serious business of making toasts and listening to speeches. W.T. Breeden was toastmaster and introduced the speakers.

The most prominent one was Ralph B. Clark of Anderson, president of the Indiana Merchants' Association. At the beginning of his speech he indulged in some rather odd behavior. According to the *Weekly Courier*, Clark told the audience that the president of the association is "required to wear a crown." Having said that, he pulled off his wig to display a head with not a hair on it.

A polished public speaker, Clark complimented the Bloomington merchants on their



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

"business-like appearance" and began boasting about what the state association had already accomplished. The first thing was a transient merchant's law, which stipulated that transient peddlers could be taxed at the rate of \$10 per day. The point was that the law cut down on the number of fly-by-night vendors.

"The Association is now endeavoring to have a law passed giving a basis of credit to each householder of 20 percent of his total income," said Clark. His next remarks were at the heart of what was bothering merchants in 1907 — the rise of mail order businesses.

"Our policy is to allow a customer to spend his money where he can get the best value for his money, but he cannot do so when trading with mail-order houses. They misrepresent their goods, and the customer gets better bargains when trading with the home merchants," said Clark.

He recommended that home merchants quit advertising "fake schemes" and utilize local newspapers to let the buying public know about special bargain days. Clark con-

cluded by saying that every merchant in Bloomington should be in the association.

Next up at the podium was Judge Wilson who recommended three things to the merchants — mutuality, courtesy and kindness among themselves. But the judge's strongest statement was in regard to the flow of money through the society. Said the *Weekly Courier*, "He spoke of the tendency of organized wealth to control the necessities of life, and the merchants must combat the encroachments of the trust as a protection to their customers."

Mayor Claude Malott, the next speaker, bragged about the new creosoteing plant. "The creosoteing plant will add 200 to our population, and other industries should be encouraged to locate here. Our water works now can furnish one million gallons per day, and new factories should locate here and increase our population to 20,000," said Malott. A speech by W.J. von Behren, a hardware merchant, was considered the best by the *Weekly Courier* reporter and others. He went back to the theme of opposition to mail order businesses. He said that "30 percent of Monroe County's trade went to them."

All of the participants at the dinner had reason to be optimistic about the future of business in Bloomington. On Jan. 1 the *Weekly Courier* had published the 1906 building statistics, courtesy of Nichols & Son, Bloomington architects. Although 76 fewer buildings

had been erected in 1906 than in 1905, the total cost of building was higher by \$187,480.

The roster of the Merchants' Association was a "who's who" of Bloomington. In addition to Cravens, Karsell, Breeden and von Behren, the members were Elmer Bender, E.B. Neeld, F.H. Rose, A.L. von Behren, J.G. McPheeters, C.E. Wylie, Norvie E. Weimer, Theodore Treadway, William S. Sharp, David Hughes, E.M. Tapp, J. Otto May, James L. Griffin, George C. Poolitsan, C.J. S. Neeld, H.C. McNeely, George P. Campbell, R.S. Brake, Edward Whetsell, J.E. Fish, Harley Baker, Frank Yelch, S.W. Collins, W.H. Dinsmore, H.H. Jeffers, F.B. VanValzah, J.A. Speer, S.K. Rhorer, Jr., L.R. Thompson, Lee Rogers, J.B. Martin, Everett McKnight, J.G. Urmev, William Graham, Walter Bradfute, F. M. Allen, Logan Coombs, Ben S. Rogers, G.M. Whitaker and James Cirgin.

Also Orrin Jones, Jasper McDaniel, R.L. Treadway, C.A. Breeden, William McMillan, Charles C. Bender, Homer Carpenter, Randall Mathers, Clarence Hillerman, A.H. Cutrell, Edward F. Hall, Alex F. Hirsch, W.O. Blakely, C.J. Tourner, J.B. Wilson, C.G. Malott, A.H. Beldon, G.C. Davis, W.P. Easton, M.C. Carter, J.M. Robertson, C.H. Marxson, H. T. Kitson, T.A. Todd, F.R. Woodward, T.W. Mefford, L.W. O'Harrow, Moses Kahn, A.H. Wilson and Walter Faris.

Then men promised to invite their wives next year.

H-T 1/13/97