

In 1955, downtown Bloomington 'dressed in holiday style'

Back in 1955, Bloomington was less than half its current size, toys were still made in America, stores offered free home delivery of everything from women's hats to men's slippers, and any serious holiday shopping had to be done downtown.

Bloomington residents have always loved to buy and sell things, a likely measure of the city's German-influenced mercantilist sensibility. As early as 1865, The Pantagraph reported that downtown stores "were full of happy people, most of them buying Christmas gifts and anticipating a merry Christmas."

Things were much the same 90 years later, as area residents flocked downtown for the 1955 holiday season. "Women buy neckties or cufflinks, men buy perfume and frilly nightgowns. Everybody buys toys for the little ones," remarked Pantagraph reporter Tom Gumbrell, who surveyed the downtown scene two weeks before Christmas. "Santa Claus is everybody with a dime in his pocket."

In 1955, the three largest local retailers, Klemm's, Livingston's, and Rolands, were located on the courthouse square, holding their own against national department stores Montgomery Ward, J.C. Penney and Sears, Roebuck and Co. All six competitors were within three blocks of each other, which made for crowded downtown sidewalks come December.

This was the era of postwar consumer affluence. By the mid-1950s, middle and upper-middle class shoppers were snapping up televisions for their dens and "rec" rooms. Livingston's offered the new "swivel base" 21-inch General Electric TV for \$249.95 (or the equivalent of around \$2,300 in inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars). "Easy weekly or monthly payments!" noted the holiday advertisement

The Bloomington Association of Commerce reminded area shoppers that downtown stores were open until 9 p.m. the week before Christmas. The Stern Furniture Co. on the 500 block of North Main Street advertised a 5-piece TV "trayette" set for \$9.95; Biasi's Drug Store on the square's east side had Remington Duchess lady electric shavers for \$21.50; and City Sales and Service at 115 E. Front St. sold the new Zenith Royal-500 all-transistor pocket radio for \$75 (equal to about \$690 today).

From the late 1940s until the mid-1970s, Livingston's, on the south side of the square, hoisted two giant Santas (pictured here) onto its overhang. The two identical Santas measured some 13 or so feet in height and were probably made of some early plastic or fiberglass material.

Clothing has long been a popular choice during the gift-giving season. Roland's, located on the north side of the square, offered Barbizon quilted rayon satin loungers carrying names like "Pretty Puff" and "Lady-at-Ease." For little girls there were Cinderella party frocks, "exquisite as the tinkle of silver bells," with names like "Upsy-Daisy" and "Goody-Goody." The Woolen Mill Store on the 400 block of North Main Street sold a wide range of menswear, including Campus-brand sport shirts, Essley dress shirts, Pleetway pajamas and Wembley ties.

With the increasing popularity of the automobile came increasing complaints about the parking situation downtown. The Pantagraph reported that city officials faced "mounting ire" over strict enforcement of the one- and two-hour time limits for parking.

For years, Klemm's "toyland" was a favorite destination for area children. The department store on the square's north side featured dolls, carriages, gun-and-holster sets, Lincoln Logs, tricycles, pull toys and other "happy gifts." Murray's Hobbyland on the 100 block of North Main Street sold the wildly popular Betsy Wetsy doll. "She drinks! She sleeps! She weeps! She wets!" proclaimed a December advertisement. There was also the "Pall-Eey Meno Rider," one of those wooden horses suspended by springs. At \$9.95, it was called a "rockin', sockin' value." Carl's Tire Store on the 300 block of South Main even got into the toy business by offering 20 complete Lionel train sets at a 25 percent discount.

All this holiday spending sometimes stretched family budgets past the breaking point. "Don't let the lack of ready cash stop you from giving that unusual Christmas gift!" suggested Peer Loan Co. Inc., located above Walgreen's on the square. "Loans to fit your needs," was the promise. "Payments to fit your budget,"

From a holiday entertainment standpoint, much has remained the same in the intervening 62 years between then and now. During the week before Christmas 1955, for instance, the Castle Theatre showed "White Christmas" with Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye (This classic musical is playing at the Normal Theater this weekend!). And on Dec. 24, WJBC AM 1230 programming included a dramatization of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," sponsored by Bloomington Federal Savings and Loan Association, and the 11 p.m. airing of Second Presbyterian Church's Christmas Eve service.

And what would the holidays be without a good stiff drink (or two or more) under the belt? "Say merry Christmas with a gift of fine whiskey," suggested National Wine & Liquor, with three locations in Bloomington-Normal. A fifth of Schenley's was \$3.75, while Old Stitzel went for \$4.75. Duncan Liquors on the corner of Front and Center streets sold 7-, 9- and 12-year-old imported Irish whiskey for \$5.98 a fifth. Better yet, the store offered free delivery in "no-name" trucks so your busybody neighbor wouldn't know about your boozy proclivities come Christmastime.

Sadly, the glory days of downtown Bloomington were numbered. In 1962, Kmart became the first major retail store on the Route 66 “Beltline” (today Veterans Parkway), and five years later Eastland Mall opened, taking with it Sears and Penney’s.

Back in 1955, even world-weary Pantagraph newsman Tom Gumbrell had to admit that, just like the song “Silver Bells,” Bloomington’s bustling sidewalks were “dressed in holiday style,” with “children laughing, and people passing, meeting smile after smile.”

It was “Christmas time in the city,” with the historic brick buildings of downtown serving as splendid backdrop for all the good cheer. As Gumbrell stood downtown and looked about, his newsman’s heart softened with the sights and sounds of the season. “Christmas isn’t all commercial like some folks say,” he wrote. “At least, that’s the way it appears in this corner.”