

Abraham Brokaw (1815-1905)

Abraham Brokaw, who preferred to be called Abram, was born on November 6, 1815, in Somerset County, New Jersey. He was the son of William and Helen (Ditmus) Brokaw. His family had roots in France, where they were Protestant Huguenots who fled to Holland before coming to the United States.

Abram went to school until he was twelve, then worked on his father's farm until he was eighteen. After that, he trained with Darius Gilmore to become a wheelwright, which involved making wheels for wagons. In 1836, Gilmore moved west and brought Abram along. They traveled mostly on foot, since the wagons were heavily loaded. They ended up in Springfield, where Abram finished his training under a different master. Soon, he became a skilled wheelwright.

In October 1836, Abram partnered with Jacob Leader and moved to Bloomington, which only had about 450 people at the time. They paid \$50 to Lewis Bunn to build a wagon shop for them. Though times were tough, they went ahead with the plan. Abram eventually took over the shop after Leader returned to Springfield, and he made the first wagon in McLean County.

By around 1840, Abram realized making plows was more profitable than making wagon wheels, so he started a new partnership with Oliver Ellsworth, a blacksmith. They ran a successful shop for over 30 years, first on Madison and Front Streets, then on Washington and Center Streets. In 1858, Abram bought land from Lewis Bunn for \$1,000 and moved their shop to North Main and Market Streets. They built a great reputation for the quality of their products. After Ellsworth died in 1871, Abram kept the business going, employing up to 30 people and making up to 2,500 plows a year.

Abram married Eunice Ellsworth, Oliver's sister, on October 20, 1847, in Janesville, Wisconsin. They were married for 55 years and had no children. Eunice passed away in 1902. Abram and Eunice had a happy marriage, and she was his loving partner.

Early on, Abram made smart investments in Bloomington and McLean County. He bought land when prices were low and sold it for a big profit later. For example, in 1843, he bought two lots for \$125 and later sold them for around \$25,000. He also bought timberland and farmland for cheap, and by the time railroads expanded, those lands became very valuable.

When he wasn't working, Abram played the clarinet in the Bloomington Band, which was one of the best in Illinois. He also had a good singing voice. In addition to his business work, he got involved in local politics, serving on the county board, as a township trustee, and as an assistant supervisor. He was a strong supporter of Democrat Stephen A. Douglas and attended the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates. He also remembered Lincoln for his jokes and stories, like the time Lincoln helped a man avoid a fine by telling a good story.

In the community, Abram was known as a successful businessman with a strong sense of honesty and justice. He often helped people in need and would lend money at 7% interest. When giving advice to young men, he said: "Get a plan and stick to it, keep good company, avoid bad habits, help yourself, and study common sense." If someone wanted to do business with him, they had to visit his plow factory. He was known for being a man of few words—when he didn't want to talk about a deal, he'd just say "Umph" and keep working.

In 1896, Abram loaned \$3,000 to help build Deaconess Memorial Hospital between Bloomington and Normal. While the loan wasn't a gift, he didn't expect it to be repaid. Later, when the hospital needed more space, he gave a \$10,000 donation on the condition that the hospital would be renamed Brokaw Hospital. In 1903, when Abram sold his factory, he set up a

\$30,000 endowment fund for the hospital. Brokaw Hospital still exists today, having merged with Mennonite Hospital in 2001, joined the Advocate network in 2010, and merged with Carle Health System to become Carle BroMenn in 2020.

By the time he died, Abram's fortune was around \$2 million (about \$48 million in 2008). He owned over 10,000 acres of land in Illinois but lived simply. He woke up early, dressed plainly, and gave most of his money quietly to charity or people in need. He was a lenient landlord and often allowed people more time to pay off debts. He wasn't part of any specific church but regularly donated money to the First Presbyterian Church to buy candy and gifts for the children's choir.

Abram Brokaw died on March 22, 1905, after a short illness. He was 89 years old. Local newspapers praised him as one of Bloomington's most well-known citizens, calling him a unique, honest, and frugal man. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his wife, Eunice.