

Alexander Gustave Erickson (1863-1950)

Swedish immigration during the nineteenth century was part of a larger trend occurring in the wake of vast economic and social transformation brought about by the rapid spread of industrialization. Between 1850 and 1950, about fifty million Europeans settled in other parts of the world.¹ As population growth spiked in Sweden, many of its inhabitants felt that the agrarian nation no longer held the economic opportunity offered by places like the United States. Thus, they left home, looking for greener pastures abroad—and this is where the story of A.G. Erickson begins.

Alexander Gustave Erickson was born on July 7, 1863 at Storlaboria, Molela Socken, Kalmar Lan, in the province of Smoland in Sweden.² He was the son of J.P and Christine (Carlson) Erickson. His father came to the United States from Sweden in 1868, settling down on a farm in Henry County, near Kewanee, Illinois. One year later, in 1869, he sent for his wife and children. On August 19, 1872, the family moved to Bloomington, where Alexander's father found employment with the McLean County Coal Company.³

Coal was “the lifeblood of the Industrial Age,” and most machinery could not operate without it. By the 1860s, the City of Bloomington demanded a near constant supply of the sedimentary rock in order to run its electric light plant as well as the boilers at its waterworks.⁴ It was in large part due to the United States Civil War that the city found itself in need of its own independent source of coal; rail disruptions and the loss of the usual sources as a result of the conflict led Bloomington residents (like many cities across the country) to begin the search for a local supply. Coal was found in 1867 on the west side of Bloomington, and the plans to create a mining community within the city truly began to take shape.⁵

Financial backers for the creation of the McLean County Coal Company in 1867 were noteworthy community members Adlai E. Stevenson I, and his brothers James and William. It was located north of Washington Street and just west of the mainline of the Chicago and Alton Railroad (today utilized by Union Pacific and Amtrak). It was the largest and most successful coal mine in the area by far. Operating from 1867 into the late 1920s, the mine produced 69% of the coal hauled out of McLean County.⁶

The demand for workers at the mine was always high—it was a dangerous, low-paying occupation, and strikes were common. James Stevenson, looking to rectify this issue, brought the first sizable number of Swedish immigrants—about 30 families, (one of whom was Erickson's) and some single men—to Bloomington in August 1872 for this very reason. Stevenson traveled to Kewanee and Galva, Illinois and recruited new workers, convincing them to relocate to the growing city. However, these workers were not aware they were brought on as strikebreakers. A written history of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bloomington notes that “they were entirely ignorant of the miners' strike until they arrived, or they would not have come” but

¹ Dag Blanck. “Swedish Immigration to North America,” www.augustana.edu/swenson/academic/history., Date Accessed, February 2022.

² “A.G. Erickson, 82 Years Young, Recalls Days as Miner, Mayor,” *The Pantagraph*, June 18, 1945.

³ Jacob Hasbrouck. *History of McLean County, Illinois, in two volumes*. (Indianapolis: Historical Publishing Company, 1924), Volume 2 906-907.

⁴ Bill Kemp. “Industrial Age's lifeblood was mined on west side,” *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 2007

⁵ Candace Summers, “Biography of Carl Hanner,” <https://mchistory.org/research/biographies/hanner-carl-gustav>, Date Accessed, May 2, 2022.

⁶ Kemp, “Industrial Age's lifeblood was mined on west side.”

“they were here and there was nothing to do but remain, suffer the consequences of strikebreakers, and make the best of it.”⁷

Alexander Erickson received his formal education at the Second and Third Ward schools until the age of 13, at which point he dropped out of school and began working in the coal mine with his father. As Alexander explained in an interview later in his life, “There were no child labor nor school laws then. So it was the custom for the oldest boy in the family to begin early to help his father earn a living for the family.”⁸ Alexander worked in the mines for nine years before becoming a clerk in Christian F. Koch’s grocery store.

Work in the mines was a dark, dirty, and treacherous operation. Ten-to-16-hour days were the norm, with men being expected to work six or seven days per week with “virtually no holidays.” Inside the mines, cave-ins, fires, and the asphyxiating “black damp” were pressing and frequent concerns, as any accident meant time off work without pay, not to mention the risk of serious injury or death. Miners did not receive a set wage, rather they were paid based on the coal they produced. When the mine opened, miners made \$1.50 per ton of coal they collected (worth approximately \$27.00 in 2022).⁹ Some workers were able to make up to \$4.00 per day, about \$72.00 in today’s currency.¹⁰ For most workers, however, mining was not a sufficient source of income year-round, and thus many men were forced to find outside jobs during the summer months to make ends meet.¹¹

Along with the McLean County Coal Co, the Stevenson brothers established a residential “suburb” on the west side of Bloomington for the miners to inhabit, a neighborhood akin to George Pullman’s company town south of Chicago. Stevensonville spanned 46 acres of land and touted one-story, three-room, wood-frame cottages with long lot lines suitable for gardening. Families would make a down payment of \$100 (about \$1,800 in 2020 dollars) and paid 6 years’ worth of monthly \$10 installments before they “could take title to their small piece of the American dream.” However, this dream never became a reality for many miners, who found that the modest wages and the inconsistent work schedule mining offered made home ownership frequently beyond their means. The long lot lines offered by residences in Stevensonville meant that many inhabitants of the neighborhood boasted large vegetable gardens or chicken coops. The homes also included kitchen and dining areas in the basement, where families would gather to cook and eat. Cellar doors saw frequent usage by the working men and boys of the neighborhood—such as J. P. Erickson and his son, Alexander—who would commonly return from a grimy day of work in the mine and enter the home through the basement.¹²

Stevensonville was a vibrant community. There were two Swedish grocery stores (one operated by Erickson, and the other by Louis Wallberg). The neighborhood had their own school (first the Flechman schoolhouse and then later the Raymond School), a feed mill, a cigar shop, and a coal dealer. There were also two churches; the Swedish Methodist located at 1306 West

⁷ Hannah Johnson, Notes on Bloomington’s Swedish Community for Breaking Bread program, 2022.

⁸ “A. G. Erickson, 82 Years Young, Recalls Days as Miner, Mayor.”

⁹ Measuring Worth.com, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/relativevalue.php>, Date Accessed, May 3, 2022.

¹⁰ Ibid,

¹¹ Summers, “Biography of Carl Hanner.”

¹² Bill Kemp. “West side coal company town had strong Swedish heritage,” *The Pantagraph*, January 4, 2009.

Olive Street, and the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church (later renamed St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church).¹³

As Alexander Erickson matured, he built a life for himself in Stevensonville. He first resided at 1108 West Olive Street, where he raised his family. Erickson married Maria (also known as Mary) C. Stahlberg on August 30, 1884. She was born in Sandviken, Sweden in January 27, 1863.¹⁴ Maria immigrated to the United States with her mother and sister in 1880.¹⁵ Alexander and Maria had ten children: Edward, Carl Theodore (who died in infancy), William Alexander, Elvira, Delia, Grace Alice, Lillian, Edna, Lawrence, and Roy.¹⁶ After his wife Maria passed away in 1904, Alexander moved to 1312 West Olive Street where he lived for the rest of his life.¹⁷

Unlike other company towns, Stevensonville did not feature company-run stores to isolate employees and keep them beholden to management.¹⁸ Erickson was one of those independent store owners. He and his brother, Charles A., opened their own grocery store in 1895, located at 1314-1316 West Olive Street.¹⁹ Alexander Erickson's eight years working in Koch's grocery store was a foundation for him going into business for himself. However, Charles died that same year, making Alexander the sole owner.

According to Eugene Hanner, a descendent of Carl Hanner (another Swedish immigrant who moved to Bloomington to work in the coal mines), most of the Swedish people who lived in Stevensonville did not speak any English when they arrived in Bloomington. Many of those residents would go to Erickson for items they needed at the English-speaking stores in downtown Bloomington. Erickson phoned in their orders and the driver of his grocery wagon would go downtown to pick up the items.²⁰

Around 1917, Erickson moved the store to 1311 West Olive Street, directly across the street from his house.²¹ He operated the store for over 40 years, retiring in 1937, with ownership of the establishment passing to his son Edward.²² The building still stands today, (now the home of Dreams Are Possible) and "ghost signs" of previous advertisements for Erickson's groceries can still be read on the aged brick.²³ The building's west wall features three separate faded advertisements for "Erickson's Groceries and Meats," two written in block lettering and the third in an elegant, looping script.²⁴

Erickson was proud of the home and business he built for himself in Stevensonville and was proud to be a citizen of Bloomington. In a 1915 interview with *The Pantagraph*, he stated that

¹³ Eugene Hanner, "A History of the Swedish People in the Stevensonville Settlement in Bloomington, Illinois," undated; compiled by Bob Denny and Mary Lou Hedstrom, *A History of Saint John's Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Bloomington: 125th Anniversary Committee, 1997) 5-6.

¹⁴ Olson, Ernst W., ed. *History of the Swedes of Illinois, Part I*. (Chicago: The Engberg-Holmberg Publishing Co., 1908), 213-214

¹⁵ "Death of Mrs. Erickson," *The Pantagraph*, January 14, 1904

¹⁶ Hasbrouck, 906-907.

¹⁷ *Bloomington City Directories 1904-1914*.

¹⁸ Kemp, "West side coal company town had strong Swedish heritage."

¹⁹ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1895*, 179; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1897*, 170.

²⁰ Hanner, "A History of the Swedish People in the Stevensonville Settlement in Bloomington."

²¹ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 239.

²² Hasbrouck, 906-907.

²³ Dreams Are Possible is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping women, and those who identify as women obtain better jobs and improve their family income, <https://dreamsarepossible.org/>, Date Accessed September 9, 2022.

²⁴ Kemp, "'Ghost signs' offer window to past," *The Pantagraph*, January 16, 2011.

“the home is the foundation of our civilization-- a place where peace and happiness should reign supreme. He was quoted as saying:

“Out of the home emanates the influences, and the training that goes to mold good character and makes us useful citizens. We should all be fond of our homes and have pride in our families, and next to our home comes our city and country. I feel that we have one of the most beautiful cities in the great state of Illinois and I feel that in the matter of regulation we have one of the best governed cities in the United States. We should use every influence to make our city more beautiful and to make it bigger and better in every way.”²⁵

Erickson was committed to civic involvement and the growth of his community throughout much of his life. He was a 32nd degree Mason and member of the Bloomington Consistory, the Modern Woodmen of America, the Red Men, and the Scandia Benevolent Association. He and his family were members of the St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, the largest Swedish church in Bloomington.²⁶ The church was founded in 1872 and first located at the Flechman School House on Roosevelt Street on Bloomington’s west side. As the church continued to grow, it was relocated to its present location on the east side of Bloomington at Emerson Street and Towanda Avenue in 1959. Erickson and his family enjoyed services conducted in Swedish, a practice that the church continued in the early 1920s.²⁷

In the early days of the Stevensonville neighborhood, residents fought for and favored annexation into Bloomington so their children could attend the city’s public schools. The working-class residents of the neighborhood were unable to afford the construction and maintenance of a proper schoolhouse.²⁸ In 1883, 75 property owners petitioned the city council for admission into Bloomington. The issue reached a tipping point in 1885 when the city council first voted against, and then in favor of annexation. Republicans on the city council were at first opposed to the unification, owing in part to fears that members of the neighborhood would be loyal to the Democratic Stevensons. However, many Swedish residents became resolutely loyal to the Republican party, and the Swedish John Ericsson Republican League became one of the city’s most active political organizations, of which Alexander Erickson was an active member.²⁹

The Republican League was organized in 1894 to honor the Swedish inventor and engineer Capt. John Ericsson, who designed and built the U.S.S. Monitor, an ironclad warship for the Union Navy during the Civil War.³⁰ The first meeting of the League was organized by a group of prominent Swedish men of Chicago and a few other large northern Illinois cities.³¹ Erickson was

²⁵ “A.G. Erickson Speaks Before Civic League,” *The Pantagraph*, December 1, 1915.

²⁶ Hasbrouck, 906-907

²⁷ Kemp, “West side coal company town had strong Swedish heritage.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bill Kemp, “West Bloomington neighborhood once a coal company town home to Swedes,” *The Pantagraph*, January 3, 2021.

³⁰ The Monitor engaged the Confederate ironclad warship, the C.S.S Virginia (formerly known the U.S.S. Merrimac) at Hampton Road, Virginia in 1862. The two ironclads engaged in several hours, but neither side was able to do significant damage. It was an important Union victory in that the Confederates were unsuccessful in their attempt to break the Union blockade, New York State Library, “The Battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac (Virginia),” <https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/mssc/merrimac/index.html>, Date Accessed May 3, 2022.

³¹ “John Ericsson League Opens State Meeting: 200 at Smorgasbord, Reception, Dance at Illinois Hotel,” *The Pantagraph*, March 13, 1943.

a charter member of the Bloomington and McLean County chapters of the League, the same year that he entered the grocery business—1895.³²

Erickson was a devoted member of the League for more than fifty years and was involved in several different roles throughout the course of his time within the organization. He claimed to have missed only four meetings in all the years that he was a member and attended every state convention. Erickson served as the vice-president of the Bloomington and McLean County organization for more than forty years.³³ He was twice elected the state treasurer and was elected several times sergeant at arms of the organization. He was offered the presidency in the 1940s, but he declined stating that he “was getting a little hard of hearing at that time and I thought they should pick someone else.”³⁴ Regardless, the League named Erickson an honorary president for life in 1945 as a testament to his commitment to the beliefs and work of the organization.³⁵

Though Erickson claimed to hold “no great personal political aspirations,” he was highly motivated to work to improve his community and described his entry into politics as being driven by the urge to “do something for his neighbors.”³⁶ His political career began around 1888, after working at Koch’s grocery store for eight years, Erickson received an appointment as a mail carrier by James Neville, (who was the Postmaster of Bloomington at the time). Erickson recalled later in life that “letter carriers were appointed by the political party that happened to be in power.” He lost that appointment after four years when the administration changed to Democratic controlled, forcing Erickson to go back to the coal mines, this time working as a check weighman.³⁷ Erickson continued to work in the mines until getting into the grocery business in 1895. Later, in 1898, Erickson ran for alderman of the seventh ward, and he remained in this role for three terms. Years later, his grandson Robert was elected to hold the position, acting as alderman of the same ward in the 1950s.³⁸

Following the untimely death of then-mayor James S. Neville in 1906, Erickson was chosen as acting mayor, and he finished Neville’s unexpired term. Erickson was then elected to serve an additional term from 1906-1907 before he took a break from politics until 1915, during which he devoted time to working in his grocery store. Both of these political appointments “ranked higher in civil service than they did in financial gain.” Erickson recalled later in life that he received \$3.00 a week (or \$156 per year) as alderman, and as mayor, he netted only \$1,200 a year (or approximately \$34,000 in 2022) as well as retained a horse and buggy for his personal use.³⁹

In 1914 Bloomington citizens voted by referendum to change from an aldermanic form of government, which was made up of one mayor and 14 men representing the city’s seven wards, to a commission form. More than 300 cities across the nation had already adopted the commission form of government when the citizens of Bloomington had begun to consider the change.⁴⁰ Under the commission form, the ward lines were done away with, and all citizens cast

³² “A. G. Erickson, 82 Years Young, Recalls Days as Miner, Mayor;” “A. G. Erickson Life President of GOP League,” *The Pantagraph*, March 10, 1945.

³³ “John Ericsson League Opens State Meeting: 200 at Smorgasbord, Reception, Dance at Illinois Hotel.”

³⁴ “A. G. Erickson, 82 Years Young, Recalls Days as Miner, Mayor.”

³⁵ “A. G. Erickson Life President of GOP League.”

³⁶ “A. G. Erickson, 82 Years Young, Recalls Days as Miner, Mayor.”

³⁷ A check weighman is a representative elected by coal miners to check the findings of the mine owner’s weighman where miners are paid by the weight of coal mined, Collins Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/checkweighman>, Date Accessed May 3, 2022.

³⁸ “Great West Side,” *The Pantagraph*, May 21, 1950.

³⁹ “A. G. Erickson, 82 Years Young, Recalls Days as Miner, Mayor.”

⁴⁰ Hasbrouck, 130-133.

their votes for five individuals who served as the head of one of five city departments: Mayor and Commissioner of Public Affairs, Commissioner of Public Health and Safety, Commissioner of Public Streets and Improvements, Commissioner of Accounts and Finances, and Commissioner of Public Property.⁴¹

Proponents of the change cited several advantages they saw in the commission form; the first being that it removed much of the influence of partisan politics from city government. Advocates claimed that “national politics should have nothing to do with the municipal government, which ought to be”—they argued—“a business institution,” as the “average city council has no authority to do anything in the way of legislation except to order the muzzling of dogs and restraining chickens.” Additionally, supporters argued that locating responsibility for specific actions was much easier for the citizenry, given the clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, as well as the increased transparency as a result of the requirement that all meetings must be public and action must be pre-announced and approved by the city populace.⁴² Commissioners would be required to hold office hours from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. every weekday, during which time the general public was invited to meet with the commissioners and discuss any business which they believed to be of interest to the city.⁴³ Finally, those in favor of the change praised the financial savings to be found by switching. They cited the fact that in practically every city in which the commission form had been implemented it had increased efficiency without increasing the operating expenses of the city—and in some cases actually reducing costs.⁴⁴

The election to determine whether or not the switch would occur was held on April 6, 1914. Those in favor of the change out voted those again, with 8,970 votes cast in favor and 3,974 against. Over the course of the year, all of the details were worked out to implement the change and determine who would hold the commissioner positions on the newly transformed city council.⁴⁵

The primaries to determine who would be the eight nominees for commissioners and two nominees for mayor were held in the spring of 1915. Out of a sea of 49 candidates (48 men and one woman, Helen Clark McCurdy), ten made it through to the general election (including McCurdy, the first woman to seek municipal office in the City of Bloomington’s history).⁴⁶ Elected to the city commission was Edwin E. Jones, who served as mayor and commissioner of public affairs; John Anderson, commissioner of public streets and improvements; Edward R. Morgan, commissioner of accounts and finance; Richard L. Carlock, commissioner of public property; and Alexander G. Erickson, commissioner of public health and safety. Erickson served as commissioner of public health and safety during the entire eight years the commission form of government lasted until 1923. In 1922, citizens of Bloomington voted to return to the aldermanic form of government.⁴⁷

The election of 1915 was historically notable because one of Erickson’s competitors was the first woman to run for municipal office in the City of Bloomington—Helen Clark McCurdy. Though American women did not gain universal suffrage until the passage of the 19th

⁴¹ Hasbrouck, 131.

⁴² “Commission Form in DesMoines, Iowa,” *The Pantagraph*, February 18, 1914.

⁴³ “We Are Now Under Commission Form,” *The Pantagraph*, May 4, 1915.

⁴⁴ “Commission Rule Objections Answered,” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1914.

⁴⁵ Hasbrouck, 130.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Hasbrouck, 131-133.

Amendment in 1920, white women in Illinois were granted limited voting rights by the landmark Illinois Municipal Voting Act in 1913. This act gave white women in Illinois the right to vote for President of the United States and local offices.⁴⁸ Illinois was the first state east of the Mississippi River to grant white women limited voting rights. McCurdy made it past the primaries, though she was not able to beat Erickson in the general election to serve as the commissioner of public health and safety. McCurdy ultimately came in seventh place, receiving 1,421 votes from men and 1,960 votes from women (a total of 3,381 votes). Erickson received 4,317 votes, defeating McCurdy by 936 votes.⁴⁹

In his 1915 campaign for commissioner of public health and safety, Erickson stressed that he stood for “a clean, moral and economical, active and progressive administration of city affairs,” in conjunction with “strict enforcement of all laws and ordinances.” In regard to city finances, he sought “a fair and square deal for all,” looking to receive “a dollar’s worth for every dollar expanded of the city’s revenue.” He also touted his years of experience in municipal government, citing his previous experience as an alderman and mayor.⁵⁰ And during his re-election campaign in 1919, heavy emphasis on his “long experience in city affairs” and track record as a commissioner were the selling points of his campaign.⁵¹

As Commissioner of Public Health and Safety, Erickson was responsible for supervision of the fire department, food and sanitary inspection, the removal of garbage and sanitary matters, and the maintenance of public health and control of disease within the city. He was also in charge of purchasing materials and apparatus for the department, as well as the appointment of all subordinates within his agency.⁵² One of the chief considerations of Erickson’s department and—as emphasized during his campaign—one of his primary concerns regarding the welfare of Bloomington was the cleanliness of the city. To this end, he was an advocate for both clean air as well as clean streets for the people to enjoy.

Throughout most of his career as commissioner, Erickson sought to abate the smoke nuisance that plagued the air quality of Bloomington. In September 1915 he issued a strict order regarding the practice of the burning of leaves. This order required citizens to refrain from raking leaves together in the “damp” evening and burning them, which left them to smolder and smoke throughout the night. This practice caused a “great annoyance and discomfort” to neighborhoods. Instead, Erickson encouraged people to rake and burn leaves earlier in the day because it caused little trouble and little smoke.⁵³

In September 1916, discussions with local manufacturers “and owners of plants of varied characters in the city” began to occur, as Erickson sought to impose a smoke ordinance requiring businesses to adopt smoke consumers or furnaces to rectify the poor air quality of the city.⁵⁴ Plans for the ordinance stated that it would prohibit the issuance of dense smoke from “any factory, public buildings, residence, or other premises,” requiring that the release of dense smoke from stacks would not be permitted to “exceed a period of six minutes per hour” between midnight and 1:00 a.m., 4:00-7:00 a.m., 12:00-1:00 p.m., and 8:00-7:00 p.m. Discussions began

⁴⁸ “Suffrage Bill Signed,” *The Pantagraph*, June 26, 1913.

⁴⁹ “Election Commission Totals” *The Pantagraph* April 7, 1915.

⁵⁰ “A.G. Erickson for Commissioner,” *The Pantagraph*, January 18, 1915.

⁵¹ “The Five Men The Bloomington Should Elect,” *The Pantagraph*, March 28, 1919; “Local Notices,” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1919.

⁵² Edited by Ned E. Dolan and Richard M. O’Connell. *Revised Ordinances of the City of Bloomington, Illinois Commission Form of Municipal Government*. (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1918) 72.

⁵³ “Commissioner Erickson has given out a strict order...” *The Pantagraph*, September 27, 1915.

⁵⁴ “To Talk Smoke Consumers,” *The Pantagraph*, September 15, 1916

in the fall and continued into November, at which point still no final decision was made regarding the passage of the ordinance.⁵⁵

To make matters more complicated, factory owners and businessmen (such as Paul F. Beich who owned the Paul F. Beich Candy Company) provided examples of instances “where it might not be practicable and in some instances impossible to install furnaces or consumers.” Plans to construct a central heating and power plant on the east side were cited by Commissioner Erickson as a possible aid to the smoke nuisance, but believes that an insufficient number of factories, residences, and public buildings would connect to the plant meant that the smoke abatement question remained unanswered. Additionally, it was pointed out that “no provision had been made to compel the railroad companies to take care of the dense smoke which often issues from the engines.” Additionally, there was a general fear that an ordinance such as this, would stifle industry by creating drastic restrictions to reduce the smoke plaguing the city.⁵⁶

Progress had yet to be made by August 1919. Notices were sent out to the worst offenders “whose chimneys [had] raised most of the complaints,” and Fire Chief Henry Mayer reported that the issue could be properly managed through the use of suitable firing and fuel. Commissioner Erickson officially reported as well that the industrial plants had “agreed to install any equipment which is guaranteed to consume the smoke,” so things looked to be taking a turn for the better.⁵⁷ However, a report published in the *Pantagraph* in March 1920 stated that no action was taken “on the part of the offenders toward abating the nuisance.”⁵⁸

The issue of enacting a smoke ordinance was brought up several more times throughout 1920. However, the Bloomington city commission voted unanimously once and for all to disregard the proposed legislation to regulate the amount of smoke produced in the city. All of the commissioners (including Erickson who had championed the ordinance) agreed that if the law had been enacted, “the smoke ordinance would be no respecter of persons” and “with the ordinance on the city statute books, antagonistic neighbors would have one more thing to fight about.”⁵⁹

Erickson was additionally responsible for managing Bloomington’s garbage collection—which had been a major issue of the 1915 election. For years garbage collection in the city of Bloomington was a topic of contention and debate, particularly in the spring and summer as the snow melts and temperatures increased. Many municipalities struggled to keep up with garbage, ash, and manure accumulation and collection. This, in combination with the rise of labor strikes in the early twentieth century, meant that the methods of disposal of city garbage were a pressing consideration for the commissioner. Seeking a solution, Erickson and the other commissioners traveled to other Illinois cities like Danville, Aurora, Hyde Park, Springfield, Peoria, and Elgin to learn how they managed their garbage. Following their observations, both the “hog method” as well as the trailer system of disposal were considered. Peoria had established a system in which the city’s garbage was fed to hogs, and the pigs were then sold to help pay the expenses of the garbage system. As observed in several northern Illinois cities, the trailer system entailed the use

⁵⁵ “City to Defer Action,” *The Pantagraph*, November 29, 1916.

⁵⁶ “Erickson Will Test Ordinance,” *The Pantagraph*, December 11, 1920.

⁵⁷ “Smoke Nuisance Again to the Debated Friday,” *The Pantagraph*, August 21, 1919

⁵⁸ “Council Passes New Roof Law,” *The Pantagraph*, March 27, 1920

⁵⁹ “Smoking Ordinance Is A Dead Issue,” *The Pantagraph*, December 25, 1920.

of several carts that individually collected garbage before being assembled at a central point, hitched together, and hauled by tractor together to the dump.⁶⁰

While both of these systems were strong contenders, on April 28, 1915, Commissioner Erickson announced that the “private contract system of hauling garbage” would be abolished, and the city was taking over garbage collection by hiring Teamsters to do the work. Prior to this, garbage was carted off in small dump carts which proved insufficient for the handling of the refuse of the growing city.⁶¹ In the new system, every city garbage wagon would be covered and numbered so that any citizen making a complaint could report the number of the wagon, allowing complaints to be traced to their source.⁶² By May 6 that year, it was reported that the city was hauling forty tons of garbage per day, with eight teams working to haul the refuse to the three dumping grounds available at the time.⁶³

In the spring of 1916, Erickson looked at purchasing new garbage cans to place around the downtown Bloomington business district. It was hoped that the installation of new garbage cans would better manage “wastepaper,” which up until that point had been “too often thrown upon the street or at convenient places near store entrances.”⁶⁴ The old cans in the uptown district were, as Erickson described, not only “unsightly,” but also unsatisfactory in design. The new cans were equipped with a “receiving tower” which would prevent the wind from carrying wastepaper from the bin. Additionally, large sacks were placed inside the bins, and then they were full, the city would replace them.⁶⁵ Eight garbage cans were ordered and installed around the courthouse square by July that year.⁶⁶

Erickson also urged residents to help the city with making garbage collection more efficient by separating their garbage into three places or receptacles: ashes should be kept by themselves, tin cans in another place, and finally combustible or vegetable garbage in a third place. Erickson felt this would help facilitate the handling of trash more efficiently.⁶⁷ By April 1917, to make it easier for city garbage collectors to do their job and aid in helping keep the city clean, members of the city’s board of health (which Erickson oversaw) presented a report to the commission recommending that “every householder should provide themselves with tight covered” garbage receptacles.⁶⁸

However, it was necessary for the board of health and Commissioner Erickson to issue an appeal to citizens just a few weeks later to co-operate with city officials to help make Bloomington a clean city. On May 1, it was stated that citizens were required by ordinance “to keep [their] premises in a clean and sanitary condition at all times.” It was expected that ash and garbage would be deposited either in front of the resident’s lawn or within alleyways and not in the streets or gutters, and it was required by ordinance—by the enforcement of the city garbage inspector—that said refuse be placed in either a garbage can or other tight receptacle.⁶⁹ Manure

⁶⁰ Erickson, “Topics of the Day: Some Solution is Due for the Long Standing Garbage Disposal Problem in the City,” *The Pantagraph*, May 5, 1915.

⁶¹ “Garbage and Fire Department,” *The Pantagraph*, April 29, 1915; Alex G. Erickson, “Topics of the Day: Some Solution is Due for the Long Standing Garbage Disposal Problem in the City.”

⁶² “Garbage and Fire Department.”

⁶³ “Hauling Forty Tons of Garbage Per Day,” *The Pantagraph*, May 6, 1915.

⁶⁴ “City May Purchase New Garbage Cans,” *The Pantagraph*, March 7, 1916.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ “New Garbage Cans Arrive,” *The Pantagraph*, June 30, 1916.

⁶⁷ “Garbage and Fire Department.”

⁶⁸ “Discuss Sanitary Affairs,” *The Pantagraph*, April 21, 1917.

⁶⁹ “Garbage Can Ultimatum,” *The Pantagraph*, May 10, 1917.

was to be removed weekly and “treated with some strong disinfectant to prevent the breeding of flies.”⁷⁰ Additionally, every household was required to provide a garbage can or other tight receptacle for garbage disposal by June 1 of that year.⁷¹

The garbage problem continued to grow in importance as Bloomington grew in size. It became increasingly difficult to find dumping grounds within a reasonable distance of the set collection routes, meaning that the cost of hauling garbage became more expensive as the city expanded. In 1915, waste had initially been taken to three dumping grounds: the old Walker pasture (located north of Emerson Street between Fell Avenue and Clinton Boulevard), to a sandbank on the west side, or to another final dump on the far southeastern side of the city.⁷² However, by 1920, there was only one dumping ground available for use (the sandbank west of the city).⁷³ Additionally, the challenges of managing city garbage were also amplified during the winter and summer months, when the weather was the most extreme. The snow and freezing temperatures caused increases in the amount of ash to be disposed of, as well as difficulty in performing the work itself. As the heat rose in the summertime, the stench caused as a result meant that collections needed to be performed more frequently. All-in-all the problem was made serious by the “perishable and often offensive nature of the material handled” for both the men who handled it as well as those citizens who lived anywhere near the dumping grounds.⁷⁴

Erickson felt a viable solution to the city’s garbage problem would be to install an incinerator plant, which would burn any garbage that was combustible.⁷⁵ He requested the construction of a city incinerator as early as 1915, though his idea was shot down due to the expense of the project, as well as resistance from citizens. As Erickson explained, “no one wants a crematory in their part of the city.” Additionally, the incinerator would not be able to dispose of tin cans, wire, or other metallic rubbish the city was responsible for disposing of.⁷⁶ Considerations were renewed in 1919 following the establishment of an incinerator in Danville, and while the City of Bloomington was in the midst of a strike by the Teamsters who collected garbage for the city. Erickson spoke out in support of the plan, but again nothing came of the discussions.⁷⁷ By 1923, as Erickson left office, there was still no establishment of an incinerator.

A particularly challenging time for Erickson and his constant battle with trash management occurred during his second term as commissioner in May 1919. On the eve of the “Health Promotion Week” (during which time a city-wide cleanup had been planned), the garbage collectors for the City of Bloomington went on strike.⁷⁸ For three weeks garbage “piled up unmolested” in Bloomington’s streets and alleyways. The striking Teamsters met with city officials and requested that wages be raised to the rate of \$7.00 per day.⁷⁹ The city, facing serious consequences to public health were garbage allowed to continue to pile up, caved to demands, compromising and offered a pay rate of \$6.60 per day (or about \$103.00 in 2022) if teams went

⁷⁰ “\$6,694 Left in Park Fund,” *The Pantagraph*, May 1, 1917.

⁷¹ “Garbage Can Ultimatum.”

⁷² “Hauling Forty Tons of Garbage Per Day.”

⁷³ “Garbage Crisis Faces the City,” *The Pantagraph*, June 19, 1920.

⁷⁴ Erickson, “Topics of the Day: Some Solution is Due for the Long Standing Garbage Disposal Problem in the City.”

⁷⁵ “City Renews Consideration of Garbage Incinerator,” *The Pantagraph*, May 27, 1919.

⁷⁶ “A.G. Erickson Speaks Before Civic League,” *The Pantagraph*, December 1, 1915.

⁷⁷ “City Renews Consideration of Garbage Incineration,” *The Pantagraph*, May 27, 1919.

⁷⁸ “Clean-Up Work is Delayed by Strike,” *The Pantagraph*, May 13, 1919.

⁷⁹ “The Garbage Situation,” *The Pantagraph*, May 29, 1919; “Ray of Hope Shows Through Garbage Piles-- City Starts to Move to Clean Alleys and Relieve the Situation,” *The Pantagraph*, May 30, 1919.

back to work immediately. The Teamsters agreed to those terms and garbage collection resumed on Monday, June 1.⁸⁰

Despite the ups and downs Erickson experienced in the battle for managing garbage collection, his work to keep the city clean was generally viewed in a favorable light by many in Bloomington. After his term ended in 1923, a *Pantagraph* article reflected on the work of the five commissioners during their time in office. On Erickson's work managing the city's garbage disposal, the *Pantagraph* proclaimed that the "the garbage situation in Bloomington is today as well cleaned up as ever in the city's history."⁸¹

Another important part of Erickson's duties at Commissioner of Public Health and Safety was management of the city's fire department, which saw considerable change and improvement during his time in office. One of Erickson's key accomplishments was the centralizing and motorizing the entire fire department. Following the sale of the engine houses on North Center and South Madison streets and renting out those on South Main and West Chestnut streets, all firefighting equipment was located and managed from the Central Fire Station at 220-228 East Front Street. Additionally, wages in the fire department were increased greatly under Erickson's management, rising from an average of \$65 per month to \$120 (or from \$1,030 to \$1,900 in 2022).⁸²

Not long after the commission was sworn into office in 1915, Erickson, along with fire chief Henry Mayer, and Mayor E.E. Jones began considering the purchase of updated fire equipment. In September that year, Erickson, along with Jones and Commissioner Edward Morgan, attended the national convention of fire chiefs in Cincinnati, Ohio and saw a great deal of modern firefighting equipment, which gave them insight into what equipment would best suit the needs of Bloomington.⁸³ After learning about what other cities of similar size had in terms of modern fire apparatuses, Erickson felt it was urgent for Bloomington to invest in new, modern equipment. He felt that Bloomington was "far behind a number of other towns in our class in the state" with regard to how equipped the fire departments were.⁸⁴ After months of debate, the commission finally approved the purchase of new motor-driven fire equipment in December 1916. *The Pantagraph* announced the arrival of the new motor-driven aerial hook and ladder Ford truck on December 6, which would be housed at the Central Fire Station. The truck boasted a maximum speed of 25 miles per hour and a 15-gallon gasoline capacity. It also had two, three-gallon Babcock fire extinguishers, four lanterns, four axes, two wall picks, two crowbars, two shovels, one wire cutter, one door opener, one tine roof cutter, two pitchforks, one battering ram, four rubber buckets, ropes, tackles, and blocks.⁸⁵ One year later, a gasoline storage tank and pump was installed at the Central Fire Station to accommodate the needs of the new apparatus.⁸⁶

Improvements were also made to methods of firefighting. Following the massive blaze that destroyed the Illinois Stove and Furnace Company on East Empire Street on July 3, 1920, an investigation was held after the disaster to determine whether the firemen worked as effectively and efficiently as possible following criticism of the manner in which the blaze was fought.

⁸⁰ "Garbage Wagons Start Collections Yesterday," *The Pantagraph*, June 3, 1919; Measuring Worth, <https://www.measuringworth.com/>, Date Accessed, September 12, 2022.

⁸¹ "Commission Form Era Was Eight Years of Progress," *The Pantagraph*, April 28, 1923.

⁸² Ibid; Measuring Worth, <https://www.measuringworth.com/>, Date Accessed, September 12, 2022.

⁸³ "Much Equipment Seen," *The Pantagraph*, September 4, 1915.

⁸⁴ "Commission Dubious on Early Purchase," *The Pantagraph*, October 23, 1915.

⁸⁵ "City's New Motor Driven Aerial Fire Truck," *The Pantagraph*, December 6, 1916.

⁸⁶ "Inspect the Paving Work," *The Pantagraph*, September 6, 1917.

Following discussions with Fire Chief Mayer and Captain Lou Browning, Commissioner Erickson stated that he believed “the only charges which could be made against the firemen was possibly one of misjudgment of some features in the fight against the stove factory blaze on the whole”—thus, “there was not sufficient evidence to warrant a shake-up in the fire department.” The chief criticism levied against the firemen was the choice to fight the blaze from the rear rather than from the front, but Chief Mayer and Captain Browning both stressed that “to have done the latter would have placed the men in extreme danger.”⁸⁷

Changes were made eventually, however, in the methods of firefighting employed by the city. At the beginning of the new year in 1922, Erickson introduced the use of the “double platoon” system, in which men were available 24/7 to provide assistance, but given more personal freedom than under the previous arrangement.⁸⁸ Previously, there were a total of thirty-two men in the department, with six of them rotating off duty every day. Twenty-six men, then, were on duty on any given day, and there would be nine to eleven of those men off duty for their meal hours during those days, leaving only thirteen to fifteen men on duty at mealtime. Under the new double platoon system, there would be an additional ten men added to the firefighting force, and the workforce was split into two shifts. The first shift would be on-duty for the first twenty-four hours and have the succeeding twenty-four hours off, while the second shift took their place. The second shift then enjoyed their day off on the following day as the first shift took up work again. Meal hours were also eliminated, as men on duty were expected to eat at the engine houses.⁸⁹

Perhaps the largest focus of Erickson’s time as Commissioner of Public Health and Safety was handling outbreaks of disease and maintaining a healthy populace. At the beginning of Erickson’s first term in 1915, fears surfaced about the possibility of an outbreak of diphtheria, an often-deadly respiratory disease.⁹⁰ George Dearth, a 14-year-old resident of Bloomington, died of the disease in May that year. Because Dearth was a resident of a rooming house, there was the possibility that at least fifteen other people staying there were exposed—people who had been “going and coming as they pleased.”⁹¹ However, the contagion did not spread following a mandatory quarantine imposed upon the residents of the property. The following month of June, it was reported to be a healthy one for the people of Bloomington, with “only a few cases of quarantine, and these were in a modified form,” as well as “only a few cases of contagion.”⁹² 1915 was, on the whole, a satisfactorily healthy year for the people of the city, and by December Commissioner Erickson reported only a single case of typhoid and scarlet fever, and only eleven cases of chickenpox for the month.⁹³

Despite the exemplary health conditions reported the previous year, things took a turn for the worse in 1916, for the health of not only the citizens of Bloomington, but for the people of the nation. An epidemic of infantile paralysis—today known as polio—broke out, killing about

⁸⁷ “Opinions Vary on Stopping Fire,” *The Pantagraph*, July 9, 1920.

⁸⁸ “Twenty-Four Hour Shift for Firemen,” *The Pantagraph*, January 10, 1922.

⁸⁹ “Ministers Read Firemen’s Letter,” *The Pantagraph*, March 22, 1920.

⁹⁰ Though largely controlled today due to the advent of effective vaccination methods, diphtheria was a frightening disease for the people of Erickson’s time. A deadly respiratory sickness, it caused a thick gray substance—called pseudo membrane—to spread over the nasal tissues, tonsils, larynx, and pharynx of the infected individual, and could be lethal to all ages, but was much more dangerous for young children, “Diphtheria,” Center for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/diphtheria/about/symptoms.html>, Date Accessed June 4, 2022.

⁹¹ “Fifteen Persons are Under Quarantine,” *The Pantagraph*, May 8, 1915.

⁹² “City Council Holds a Busy Session,” *The Pantagraph*, July 10, 1915.

⁹³ “Sanitary Conditions Are Satisfactory,” *The Pantagraph*, December 21, 1915; “Issues 1915 Report as to Public Health,” *The Pantagraph*, January 3, 1916.

6,000 people across the United States and rendering thousands more paralyzed. Though the disease mainly affected young people, “no ages were absolutely free of danger from the infection;” and if older adults became infected, the illness usually proved fatal. To make matters worse, at the time, it was not understood how the disease spread. Some “blamed summer fruits, ice creams, candy, maggots in the colon, insects, raw sewage, garbage, dust, poisonous caterpillars, moldy flour, contaminated milk bottles or even bananas infected by tarantula spiders.” Additionally, parents were recommended to avoid other children who were sick, believing the disease was transmitted through sneezing, coughing, spitting, and kissing. Early guesses as to the method of contagion blamed the housefly, given that scientists had discovered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that mosquitoes, fleas, and lice transmitted diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, and typhus, this was hardly an illogical conclusion. Additionally, the housefly was an ever-present guest in the lives of 20th century Americans, “buzzing on the piles of horse dung in the streets, swarming in the garbage cans, then alighting on babies or infecting food.”⁹⁴ As a result, battles against the housefly began—Bloomington’s health department under Erickson announced the commencement in January of 1916 of an “anti-fly crusade” in which all manure piles were to be removed and the receptacles for it were to be covered and emptied every two weeks. Garbage cans were expected to be covered as well.⁹⁵

As the fall season began, Bloomington saw its first infections. The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Black, age 13, was first thought to be suffering from a nervous attack. However, she began to exhibit symptoms of polio a few weeks later, so the family was quarantined. A second child, Nyle Washburn, a 10 year old boy who lived at 204 North South School Street, was diagnosed with a mild case in September, and his home was subsequently quarantined.⁹⁶ In response to anxieties from the public, Commissioner Erickson stated “that the city health board...will take every proper precaution to prevent the spread of the disease and it is thought that there will be no epidemic of this character here.” The entire Normal public school system was fumigated, and it was decided that children would be given an examination every morning at the beginning of the school day—any student showing any symptoms of illness was to be sent home immediately and required to obtain a certificate of examination from a physician before they could return to school. Parents of all school-aged children in the city were instructed by the city health board to keep children at home when they were not attending school and “away from all public gatherings and entertainments,” as well as out of contact with “families who [were] visiting Bloomington and who [resided] in infected parts of our country.”⁹⁷

1918 was by far the most significant year of Erickson’s career as public health and safety commissioner. The entire world was fundamentally transformed following the outbreak of an influenza epidemic which took the lives of an estimated 15 to 50 million worldwide, with about 675,000 deaths attributed to the virus in the U.S.⁹⁸ Bloomington was hit hardest in October 1918, the worst month of the pandemic, bringing the city to a near standstill.⁹⁹ The 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic had three waves. The first wave was fairly mild in the spring and summer of

⁹⁴ Trenton City Museum, “1916 Infantile Paralysis (Polio) Epidemic,” <https://ellarslie.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Infantile-Paralysis.pdf> Date Accessed June 4, 2022.

⁹⁵ “Issues 1915 Report As to Public Health.”

⁹⁶ “Take Precautionary Steps: Two Cases of Infantile Paralysis,” *The Pantagraph*, 22 September 1916.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ “History of the 1918 Flu Pandemic,” The Center for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm>, Date Accessed, September 13, 2022.

⁹⁹ Bill Kemp, “Flu epidemic hit Bloomington hard,” *The Pantagraph*, March 26, 2006.

1918. The second, and most severe, wave was from September to November of 1918. During this wave the mortality rate was high, especially among young, often previously healthy people between the ages of twenty and forty. Mortality patterns continued in this manner into the third, and final wave that spanned January to March of 1919—though deaths were fewer in this final spike.¹⁰⁰

The first Bloomington resident to succumb to the epidemic was Fred I. Meyers, a 27-year-old employee of the Bloomington Canning Company. After contracting the disease, it quickly turned into pneumonia (which this strain of influenza often turned into). After 11 days, Meyers died on September 29.¹⁰¹ That same day, James Carroll, a 26-year-old soldier from Arrowsmith, Illinois, died of the flu while stationed at Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois.¹⁰² Just five days later, on October 4, Commissioner Erickson and the city health board released a statement with mandatory new rules and regulations to be followed by the citizens in order to slow the rate of infection. Influenza was officially declared to be a “contagious, infectious, and communicable disease and dangerous to the public health.” Everyone in the city was expected and obligated to report knowledge of cases or suspected cases to Commissioner Erickson and the other city health authorities under his oversight.¹⁰³

Once a person was declared infected, they were to be immediately put in isolation in a large, well-ventilated room. Infected patients were not to be released until their temperature had been normal for at least three consecutive days and symptoms had resolved. It was also strongly recommended that “none other than the necessary attendants enter the sick room and they should wear face masks of gauze or other approved designs when attending the patient.” Additionally, it was required that all “discharges from the respiratory tract” of the patient were to be caught in cloth and either burned or decontaminated in disinfecting solution and spitting in public was expressly forbidden. Others who lived alongside the infected—but showed no symptoms—were told they “need not be confined to the premises but should as far as possible refrain from attending public gatherings.”

Funeral proceedings were also altered. The health department required that those who passed away from influenza be properly embalmed. And if they were not, the casket was to remain firmly closed and not removed in the presence of the public. Glass coverings, however, were allowed to permit the viewing of the body.¹⁰⁴

By October 7, there were 100 cases of influenza in Bloomington. This explosion of cases caused Erickson and other health officials to cancel the band concert that was scheduled to be held at Miller Park on October 6. Erickson and other health officials stated they took this action to avoid crowds on streetcars traveling to the concert and the crowds that would gather for the concert, thus hoping to slow the spread.¹⁰⁵ On October 11, it was announced that influenza had been found in every township in McLean County, with an estimated 1,500 cases at the time.¹⁰⁶

In response to the crowing crisis, the McLean County chapter of the Red Cross began to take action to help fight the epidemic. The local chapter made a call for volunteer nurses to serve as

¹⁰⁰ “History of the 1918 Flu Pandemic.”

¹⁰¹ Karen A. Walters, “McLean County and the Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919,” April 11, 1980, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives, 6.

¹⁰² Kemp, “Flu epidemic hit Bloomington hard.”

¹⁰³ “Wage War Against Spanish Influenza,” *The Pantagraph*, October 4, 1918.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ “Forty-seven cases in City,” *The Pantagraph*, October 7, 1918.

¹⁰⁶ “Spanish Influenza All Over County,” *The Pantagraph*, October 11, 1918.

home nurses, and formed an influenza committee, with its' headquarters established at Withers Public Library. The committee was responsible for finding volunteers to assist with caring for sick individuals, making face masks and nightgowns, collecting supplies (such as iron beds, rocking chairs, and jams and jellies) and assisting with the necessary plans and actions to slow the spread of influenza in the community. The committee also worked on setting up emergency hospitals since Brokaw and St. Joseph's Hospitals were overwhelmed with influenza patients.¹⁰⁷ The Bloomington Country Club clubhouse, as well as the residence of Mrs. Matthew T. Scott at 701 East Taylor Street (today known as the Vrooman Mansion), were converted into emergency hospitals to cope with the massive swell of patients. The Country Club was filled to capacity (60 patients total) as well as the Scott residence with 36 patients by October 17.¹⁰⁸

Additionally, on October 11, Commissioner Erickson announced that all places of public gatherings were to be canceled for the foreseeable future. This included all theaters, moving picture shows, clubs and associations, churches, schools, and all other public gatherings.¹⁰⁹ The Town of Normal took similar action soon thereafter. And Judge James Riley suspended county court cases, unless in the case of extreme emergency.¹¹⁰ Area doctors were "literally working day and night," a situation complicated by the dire shortage of trained nurses. Undertakers too were "working almost to the limit," circumstances exacerbated by the fact that several area gravediggers were sent to Rockford to help bury the hundreds of dead at Camp Grant.¹¹¹

The situation was getting desperate when the local Red Cross announced that more volunteer nurses, with no prior medical experience required, were "desperately needed" on October 17. Volunteers were requested to "give a few hours a day or night," and everyone employed within the city was implored to ask their boss to "let [them] off a few hours a day for this great cause."¹¹² In response to the request for help made upon the employers of the city, it was reported that "a number of men and women were released from their employment to aid the Red Cross in the battle against influenza."¹¹³ Gauze masks were provided to those who showed up to help, and attendants stressed that "there is absolutely no danger of nurses catching influenza from patients if masks are worn."¹¹⁴

Erickson and his family were not immune to the influenza epidemic either. According to newspaper accounts, Erickson and several members of his family all became ill around October 6. Alexander, sons William and Edward, along with two other unnamed family members of the family, all contracted the virus.¹¹⁵ Alexander, Edward, and the other two members of the family recovered from their bout with the flu after about two weeks.¹¹⁶ However, son William, succumbed to the virus on October 15, just nine days after becoming sick. William was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁷ Walters, 14; "Red Cross to Aid Fight on Influenza," *The Pantagraph*, October 11, 1918.

¹⁰⁸ "Flu Cases Increase, Disease Spreading," *The Pantagraph*, October 17, 1918.

¹⁰⁹ "Board of Health Stops Public Gatherings," *The Pantagraph*, October 11, 1918.

¹¹⁰ Kemp, "Flu epidemic hit Bloomington hard."

¹¹¹ Bill Kemp, "Influenza pandemic brought Twin Cities to standstill," *The Pantagraph*, March 15, 2020.

¹¹² "More Volunteer Nurses are Desperately Needed," *The Pantagraph*, October 17, 1918.

¹¹³ "Flu Cases Increase, Disease Spreading."

¹¹⁴ "More Volunteer Nurses are Desperately Needed."

¹¹⁵ "Commissioner Erickson," *The Pantagraph*, October 22, 1918.

¹¹⁶ "City Hits H.C.L. For All Its Employees," *The Pantagraph*, October 26, 1918.

¹¹⁷ "Funeral of William Erickson," *The Pantagraph*, October 19, 1918.

By October 25, local health officials noted a marked decline of cases, stating that “the feeling that the climax has passed is unanimous.”¹¹⁸ Commissioner Erickson announced that the ban on public gatherings, church services, and school sessions would be lifted on November 1. And because cases were continuing to drop, the emergency hospital at the Scott residence was closed to the admittance of new patients on November 2 and would ultimately shut down permanently once those patients had recovered.¹¹⁹ Health officials were happy to report that conditions were “rapidly returning to normal.”¹²⁰ Unfortunately, the city health board reported that the influenza epidemic had caused the death rate in the city to double during the month of October. Prior to the pandemic, the average monthly death rate was about 45. From September 29 to October 31, 1918, the health board reported 120 deaths (69 of them from influenza and pneumonia). This also did not include bodies shipped to Bloomington for burial from other points of the state.¹²¹

Because cases were nowhere near epidemic proportions any longer, by December 23 the local Red Cross announced that the influenza committee at the Withers library would close.¹²² McLean County was free from any large outbreak of the disease until a short and final wave that occurred in February and March 1919, which was largely contained to the rural areas of the county.¹²³

Although the citizens of Bloomington in 1914 welcomed the change to the commission form, the experiment was short-lived. By 1922, calls to return to the former aldermanic form and abolish the board of commissioners began to take root due to economic downturn, widespread unemployment, and accusations that commission was not using municipals funds in the best interests of residents in Bloomington. Thus, a petition calling for a return to the former aldermanic form began circulating and was met with eventual success.¹²⁴ The petition was not without controversy, however. Several criticisms were posed on various technicalities of form, those being that dates or addresses were omitted, signers were posing as others different than themselves, and those circulating the petition were not present upon its being signed.¹²⁵ However, enough signatures were gathered to allow a special election to be held on July 11 that year. Voter turnout was especially low, with only 5,000 of the 14,000 qualified voters of the city participating. The verdict, however, bid the commission form of government adieu in Bloomington. In a close call, 2,846 votes were cast for the aldermanic form, contrasted by 2,149 for the commission form, a 697-vote majority in favor of returning to the old structure of municipal government.¹²⁶

Despite the fact the commission form of government in Bloomington only lasted eight years, there were many notable achievements made by the commissioners, including: the acreage of city parks was doubled, an added water system almost doubled the city’s facilities, garbage collection was made “the most efficient in many years,” health officers of the city were placed under a full time officer, three subways and two viaducts were constructed (which abolished grad crossings of railroads), the double platoon system of firefighting was introduced, tax resources of

¹¹⁸ “The Epidemic Hits Rapid Decline,” *The Pantagraph*, October 25, 1918.

¹¹⁹ “To Discontinue Hospital,” *The Pantagraph*, November 2, 1918.

¹²⁰ “Tomorrow Last Day of Scott Hospital,” *The Pantagraph*, November 11, 1918.

¹²¹ “Flu Ban to Lift Friday Morning,” *The Pantagraph*, October 31, 1918.

¹²² “Red Cross Roll Call Ends Tonight,” *The Pantagraph*, December 23, 1918.

¹²³ Walters, 23.

¹²⁴ Hasbrouck, 131-132.

¹²⁵ “Order Election Issue to Court,” *The Pantagraph*, May 25, 1922.

¹²⁶ Hasbrouck, 132.

the city were greatly increased, capacity of the city electric light plant was practically doubled via the addition of a new unit, the entire business district was repaved, and floating indebtedness was cleared so that no debt would go over to the new administration, among many other accomplishments.¹²⁷

As Erickson's time as commissioner came to an end, with the city reverting to the aldermanic form of government, he chose to try to remain in politics and in his role as a civil servant. He took up a mayoral campaign in 1923 but did not receive the nomination.¹²⁸ He then returned to full time work in his west side grocery store until 1930 when he entered the race for a seat on the Bloomington Board of Education.¹²⁹ He was one of two new school board members elected in April 1930.¹³⁰ He served several years as chairman of buildings and grounds, and later was appointed treasure of the school board.¹³¹ He was re-elected several times and humbly served the people of Bloomington and students of the public schools in this role for four terms until 1942.¹³²

One of Erickson's first tasks in his new role as chairman of buildings and grounds on the board was finalizing the location for the new Sarah E. Raymond School building. The Raymond School was located at 121 West Stevenson Street in Stevensonville where Erickson resided.¹³³ Residents of Stevensonville had been requesting a new school building for the Raymond School for many years.¹³⁴ The current building was constructed in 1887, so the 43-year-old building was showing its age and could no longer meet the demands of the growing district. At a June 1930 school board meeting, Erickson reported to the entire board about the possible sites for the new school in Stevensonville.¹³⁵ By September, a site had been chosen on the 1400 block of West Olive Street for the new school building. And thanks to federal funding the district received through the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), the new, modern building for the Raymond School was completed in 1933. The new building had eight rooms, a domestic science and a shop room, (which were later converted into regular classrooms as student numbers increased at the school).¹³⁶ W.P.A. funding also allowed the district to construct two brand new schools—Abraham Lincoln School (1935) and Sheridan School (1935)—and the high school building (located on East Washington Street) was expanded to its final configuration with the addition of ten rooms.¹³⁷

Throughout the first ten years of Erickson's tenure on the school board, the district was plagued with serious budgetary issues. Thanks to the wide-spread effects of the Great Depression, declining tax revenue, and a poor economic outlook, the school district experienced one financial crisis after another.¹³⁸ In 1932, the school board began to implore voters to vote "YES" on plans to increase the tax levies on educational funding, for without an increase in funds, it was declared that schools would be forced to close early. The educational fund of the

¹²⁷ "Commission Form Era Was Eight Years of Progress."

¹²⁸ "The City Election," *The Pantagraph*, April 4, 1923.

¹²⁹ "Elected to School Board," *The Pantagraph*, April 8, 1930.

¹³⁰ "New School Board Members," *The Pantagraph*, April 8, 1930.

¹³¹ "Kennedy Tries to Resign Post," *The Pantagraph*, April 26, 1930.

¹³² "Roy Ramseyer Again Heads School Board," *The Pantagraph*, April 4, 1938.

¹³³ *1920 Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 72.

¹³⁴ "School Site To Be Chosen," *The Pantagraph*, September 21, 1930.

¹³⁵ "Board to See School Site," *The Pantagraph*, June 3, 1930.

¹³⁶ "Raymond to Contrast Old, New Buildings," *The Pantagraph*, February 24, 1957.

¹³⁷ Dan Leifel, Sandra Holt, Linda Aschenbrener. *Our Proud History: Bloomington Public Schools, District 87 Sesquicentennial, 1857-2007*. (Bloomington: StarNet Digital Publishing, 2007), 75.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 78.

board—which included the payment of teachers, janitors, and engineers, “salaries of officers, purchase of coal, water, janitors’ supplies, furniture and fixture, laboratory supplies, books, telephones, lights and all similar incidentals”—suffered greatly when Bloomington’s property valuation was cut in 1926 by \$1.25 million. The school district was forced to curtail supplies of books provided to pupils, of incidental supplies, and whatever else short of cutting employees. And even if the levy were approved, a 17% to 28% cut to all employees’ salaries was expected to still be necessary.¹³⁹

Perhaps the most urgent part of the issue was when the school board announced that if the levy was not approved, the schools would be forced to close on April 1. This also meant that “the high school would be cut from the accredited list, the state distributive fund would be cut off, and the cut courses would...cause large numbers of children to be sent home, or at least away from school.”¹⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the levy was shot down by the taxpayers of Bloomington, and the city schools closed on the first of April, “putting 187 employees of the board of education out of work and releasing 6,000 students” for two weeks.¹⁴¹ In order for the schools to continue operating in the new school year that September, schools were forced to cut expenses by \$85,501, (or the equivalent of \$1.79 million in 2022) which was reported to have been taken nearly all from the teachers’ salaries.¹⁴² Teachers also donated an additional \$19,000 (or \$397,000 in 2022) of their salaries to help keep the schools open.¹⁴³ This, combined with issuing employees “Scrip” or “IOUs” for pay and a referendum to allow the issuance of bonds for operating purposes, allowed the school district to operate during the depths of the Great Depression.¹⁴⁴ It would not be until 1942 that the school district would see an increase in funding, thanks to the passage of a 50 cent increase in the tax levy (from \$1.35 to \$1.85 per \$100 assessed value) by a margin of less than 900 votes. This meant that district teachers would see a pay increase and the school district would receive additional funds to support district operations and building maintenance.¹⁴⁵

That same year the school levy passed; Erickson announced that he would not seek another term on the school board. He stated that his four terms (12 years total) on the school board “had been hectic, but enjoyable.”¹⁴⁶

Erickson never forgot his roots, and he was an unwavering advocate for the good of the people of his neighborhood and for the wellbeing of the people of Bloomington. When *The Pantagraph* interviewed him in 1945, he shared fond memories of the time he spent serving the citizens of Bloomington, and the life he built here for himself and his family on the west side. Erickson expressed that he believed “that the years have improved the nation and the people. We’ve made long strides in helping one another...the people are all good people,” he said.¹⁴⁷ He also remained a champion for the west side of Bloomington and his home neighborhood in

¹³⁹ “Schools Must Economize Rigidly Even if Special Levy Succeeds,” *The Pantagraph*, February 16, 1932; “Voters to Decide Tax Issue Tuesday,” *The Pantagraph*, March 25, 1940.

¹⁴⁰ “Warm Battle Comes to End,” *The Pantagraph*, March 6, 1932.

¹⁴¹ “Leading Events of Last Year in Bloomington Are Listed,” *The Pantagraph*, January 11, 1933.

¹⁴² “\$85,501 Cut in School Expenses Nearly All Taken From Salaries,” *The Pantagraph*, April 15, 1933; Measure of Worth, <https://measuringworth.com>, Date Accessed, September 13, 2022.

¹⁴³ “Voters to Decide Tax Issue Tuesday.”

¹⁴⁴ Leifel, Holt, and Aschenbrener, 78.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 80; “School Levy Boost Passes with Vote of 2,870 to 1,991,” *The Pantagraph*, March 27, 1942.

¹⁴⁶ “Five Men Enter Race For School Board,” *The Pantagraph*, March 11, 1942.

¹⁴⁷ “A. G. Erickson, 82 Years Young, Recalls Days as Miner, Mayor.”

Stevensonville for the rest of his life. In a 1950 *Pantagraph* article, Erickson unabashedly declared that Stevensonville was the prettiest part of town. He stated that he “wouldn’t live anywhere else. Nearly everybody’s got fruit trees and room for a garden.”¹⁴⁸

Erickson was also beloved by the people who lived on the west side. A letter to the editor published in *The Pantagraph* in 1947 urged the city council to consider renaming West Olive Street to Erickson Avenue to honor Erickson’s contributions to the city as a “Christmas gift” to the former mayor and highly respected resident of Bloomington.¹⁴⁹ Three years later, *Pantagraph* reporter Wilma Tolley stated that no story about the west side “could be expected to carry any weight without the OK of A.G. Erickson, king of the Swedes.”¹⁵⁰

On December 2, 1950, Alexander Gustav Erickson passed away at the age of 87. He had been a patient at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Bloomington for a little over a week. It was noted in his obituary that he had been suffering from poor health the last few years of his life, but prior to that “had been hale and hearty.” Funeral services were held both at his home on West Olive Street and at St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, of which he had been a member of most of his life.¹⁵¹ Erickson was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his wife, Maria, in the family plot.

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¹⁴⁸ Wilma Tolley, “Great West Side,” *The Pantagraph*, May 21, 1950

¹⁴⁹ “Would Rename Olive St.” *The Pantagraph*, November 28, 1947.

¹⁵⁰ Tolley, “Great West Side.”

¹⁵¹ “Erickson Funeral, *The Pantagraph*, December 6, 1950.