

Owen Lee Cheney (1846-1911) was a quixotic man in his quest for fame, fortune, and new experiences. Born in Bloomington to settler parents, young Lee Cheney almost immediately went about adventuring, beginning with mustering into the Union Army during the United States Civil War on June 10, 1862 at the age of 16. From then on, Cheney continued in all manner of distinguishing and boosting exploits, his name and deeds regularly appeared in the pages of Bloomington's newspapers. Shooting matches, horse racing, and gambling were early hustles, and inventing, entrepreneurship, and ballooning were some of his later ventures. Cheney's extensive public record and bright public life were his ultimate legacy.

Owen Lee Cheney was born on January 19, 1846 in Cheney's Grove (near Ellsworth) Illinois.¹ He was the youngest child born to Owen and Maria (Dawson) Cheney.² Owen Sr. was born in Champaign County, Ohio to Jonathan and Catherine Cheney. The family moved to McLean County around 1825.³ After attending schools taught by itinerant teachers a few weeks each winter, Owen Sr. farmed like his father. He was an energetic man, but died at the age of 38—when his son Lee was just two years old.⁴

Lee's mother, Maria, was from old pioneer stock as well. She was born in 1817 in Clark County, Ohio. Her father, John Dawson, moved the family to Sangamon County in Illinois during the winter of 1821, and then moved to Blooming Grove in McLean County the following spring.⁵ Maria married Owen Cheney Sr. on December 23, 1831.⁶ After his death, she married William Paist, a Bloomington druggist, in 1852.⁷

After Lee's mother's second marriage, the family moved to Bloomington the next year. Paist had purchased a drug store. A short time later, Paist formed a partnership with Dr. William Elder, forming the Paist & Elder Drug Store. In 1856, Dr. Elder was bought out by William Marmon and the store was renamed Paist & Marmon. Paist continued to operate it until his death in 1874.⁸

Little else is known of the early life of Lee Cheney. What is known is that he joined the Union Army during the United States Civil War at the age of 16 on June 10, 1862. For 15 days, he served as a private in Company A with the Camp Butler Guards. Among his duties was guarding Confederate prisoners imprisoned at Camp Butler, which was located outside of Springfield, Illinois.⁹ Cheney later claimed that he was only 13 years old at the time he began his service—a partial truth that later landed him the subject of an advertising campaign for Wolf Griesheim's, a Bloomington clothing store, in 1888.¹⁰

After his short guard enlistment ended, Cheney mustered in again on June 27, 1862 with Company F of the 68th Illinois Volunteer Infantry for three months. The 68th was stationed near

¹ "Lee Cheney Found Dead in Chair," *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 1911, 11.

² Sara Falkinham, *The Cheney Family History* (1994), Section 3.

³ Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County, Illinois* (Bloomington: The Leaders Publishing and Printing House, 1874) 389; ed. Newton Bateman, Paul Selby, Ezra Prince, and John Burnham. *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County Volume 1* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Company, 1908) 687.

⁴ Falkinham, Section 3.

⁵ "With Earliest Settlers," *The Pantagraph*, July 14, 1902, 7; Duis, 146.

⁶ "Mrs. Paist is Dead," *The Pantagraph*, May 5, 1906, 6; Marriage Index for Owen Cheney and Maria Dawson, Illinois Statewide Marriage Index, 1763-1900.

⁷ Falkinham, Section 3.

⁸ "Sudden Death of Mr. Wm. Paist," *The Pantagraph*, January 26, 1874.

⁹ "Owen L. Cheney," Illinois, Database of Illinois Veterans Index, 1775-1995, Ancestry.com, Date Accessed, September 11, 2020.

¹⁰ "Decoration Day Advertisement for Wolf Griesheim's," *The Pantagraph*, May 26, 1888, 1.

Washington D.C., and served guard duty at Alexandria, Virginia. The unit mustered out of service on September 26, 1862.¹¹ These short-term musters were common in the early days of the Civil War when the shared assumption was that the war would be over soon.

Cheney enlisted again two years later with Company F of the 116th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. When he joined that regiment in January 1864, the unit was at winter quarters in Larksville, Alabama.¹² In the spring, the 116th, as part of Army of the Tennessee, marched seeking out Confederate forces at Resaca, Georgia. This was the start of General William T. Sherman's March to the Sea. On May 14, the regiment engaged Confederate forces, taking heavy losses, but was not driven from its position. Soon after, the 116th engaged in several battles at Dallas, Big Shanty, and Kenesaw Mountain. Cheney was wounded early in this campaign. On July 22 *The Pantagraph* reported that he was recovering from an injury in Bloomington and was soon to return to his regiment—at which time he offered to bring letters to other soldiers of the 116th.¹³ After he rejoined his regiment, Company F continued to engage Confederate forces at Jonesboro, Arkansas and later at Atlanta, Georgia.¹⁴ However, Cheney's time as a soldier ended on October 13, 1864, less than one month before the fall of Atlanta and six short months before General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House.¹⁵ While the reason for Cheney's discharge was not stated, it was perhaps due to the previous injuries he suffered in combat.

After leaving the military, Cheney returned to Bloomington and began working as a clerk in his stepfather's pharmacy, Paist and Marmon.¹⁶ In 1867, Cheney married Mary McGraw. McGraw was born in Newark, New Jersey around 1849. When she was young, her family moved to Bloomington. The couple was married for about 34 years until Mary succumbed from complications due to consumption (tuberculosis) and died in 1901.¹⁷ The couple had no children.

Cheney was thought to be a capable marksman, perhaps due in part to his time in the Union Army. In 1865, *The Pantagraph* reported that Cheney tried unsuccessfully to abate a dog attack. Some local boys had “annoyed a dog that was guarding a wagon” and the dog “retaliated” by biting them. Cheney saw what was happening, and thinking the dog was rabid, he sprang into action. However, after shooting the dog several times, he failed to inflict a fatal wound on the dog and got bit in the process. A passer-by, John Baker, ran to their aid and killed the dog, thus ending the attacks.¹⁸ Later that year, Cheney and his friend, Scott Hastings, challenged any other two local, sporting youths under the age of 20 to a chicken shooting match.¹⁹

In 1875, Cheney proved he was more than just a capable marksman—winning \$75 and two pigeon shooting matches in Ellsworth.²⁰ J. Holdren and Bro. procured some 500 wild pigeons

¹¹ John Burnham, George Davis, and Ezra Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I War Record of McLean County with other papers*. (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1899), 84.

¹² “Lee Cheney,” Illinois, Databases of Illinois Veterans Index, 1775-1995, Ancestry.com, Date Accessed September 11, 2020.

¹³ “Going Back,” *The Pantagraph*, July 22, 1864, 4.

The Pantagraph mistakenly reported that Cheney was a member of the 16th Illinois Cavalry, which he never was a member of.

¹⁴ Burnham, Davis, and Prince, 126.

¹⁵ “Lee Cheney,” Illinois, Databases of Illinois Veterans Index, 1775-1995.

¹⁶ *Bloomington City Directory*, 1866.

¹⁷ “Mrs. Lee Cheney,” *The Pantagraph*, July 10, 1901, 5.

¹⁸ “Shooting,” *The Pantagraph*, July 24, 1865, 4.

¹⁹ “Another Challenge,” *The Pantagraph*, August 26, 1865, 4.

²⁰ “Lee Cheney,” *The Pantagraph*, May 27, 1875, 4.

from Indiana for the shooting match.²¹ Cheney soundly defeated his opponent, Samuel Gallagher of Saybrook, Illinois, in the first match. In the second, he narrowly defeated Dr. Britton from Champaign, Illinois.²² Marksmanship was but one feather in Cheney's competitive cap—as his penchant for gambling, gaming, and playing the odds were a constant through-line in his public record.

Another game that Cheney became involved with was baseball. The first time Cheney was mentioned playing baseball was in 1876. At the start of the new season that year, Cheney was named the captain of the Bloomington Baseball Club, along with playing second base.²³ Cheney played alongside an up-and-coming baseball player, Charles “Old Hoss” Radbourn, who at the time, played third base and relief pitcher for Bloomington, and would eventually be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame posthumously.²⁴

By some accounts, Cheney was an average ball player. Others, however, claimed he was “not counted a very good ball player.”²⁵ During a game between the Bloomingtons and the Acmes, Cheney threw out several base hits to first base during the first inning. During the fourth inning, Cheney scored a run for his team. All total during that game, Cheney made two runs and only had one error for his team, helping the Bloomingtons beat the Acmes 12 to 8.²⁶ During a game between the Bloomingtons and the professional ball club the White Stockings, while the Bloomingtons were clobbered 30 to 2, Cheney still managed to get in one out and three assists.²⁷

However, his short baseball career was marred by scandal, which would not be the last scandal he would be involved with during his life. Teammate Charles Radbourn was known as a heavy drinker which led him into trouble when he agreed to a bribe while intoxicated. The night before a Bloomingtons vs. Springfield game on September 1, 1876, Radbourn and several other team members were offered bribes by gamblers Ed Fitfield, Jim Conners, and Ed Stahl to purposely play poorly in order to “throw” the game. These three men had placed large bets for the opposing team, Springfield, which defeated Bloomington 4 to 1. Radbourn claimed that his drunkenness freed him from responsibility over his actions and that he turned down the bribe on the following day. More controversy arose when Stahl and Conners claimed that Radbourn had proposed the bribe. Cheney had been warned by fellow player Sue Allin, who had also been approached by the bribers to throw the game. Allin told Cheney to “watch his [meaning Allin's] playing if he doubted him.” Another of Cheney and Radbourn's team mates, Gleason, accused Cheney of instructing him to “do what he could do” to make the game they played on Thursday a draw.²⁸

Later in life, Cheney enjoyed boasting that he accomplished “one feat which few ball players accomplish;” that he was able to hit the ball over all the bases that he wished. Cheney, in a braggart's boast, claimed that he told Radbourn he could do this while Radbourn was in the

²¹ “Ellsworth,” *The Pantagraph*, May 25, 1875, 3.

²² “Ellsworth,” *The Pantagraph*, May 27, 1875, 3

²³ “What is Being Done by the Bloomington Club,” *The Pantagraph*, June 1, 1876, 4.

²⁴ Local baseball player, Charles “Old Hoss” Radbourn, is one of the most well-known 19th century baseball players. His career in the early days of baseball spanned about ten years, during which he played for a number of different teams, including the Providence Grays. He still holds a record for the most winning games pitched in a single season—59 games in 1884.

²⁵ “What They Say,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, July 28, 1899.

²⁶ “Over the Home Plate,” *The Pantagraph*, July 14, 1876, 4.

²⁷ “White Stockings to Bat,” *The Pantagraph*, August 15, 1876, 4.

²⁸ “Baseball,” *The Pantagraph*, September 4, 1876, 4.

pitcher's box. Cheney claimed that he did as he said, hitting each of the three balls over the three bases.²⁹ Cheney later served as a pallbearer at the funeral of "Old Hoss" on February 8, 1897.³⁰

Perhaps the scandal damaged Cheney's career playing baseball, but not enough to force him to leave the game all together. By 1877, Cheney was no longer playing second base for the Bloomingtons, but rather took up a position behind the plate as an umpire.³¹ By May 1888, he became the manager of the Bloomington club. *The Pantagraph* reported that Cheney had "elements of leadership that would give him command over the members of the club that would give them confidence in themselves and commend them to the confidence of the public."³² During one of his first games as manager, the Bloomingtons played Crawfordsville (Indiana) on May 30 in a double-header. After losing both games, Cheney sent a dispatch to *The Pantagraph* letting local readers know that "it is utterly impossible to make any kind of showing" in Crawfordsville owing to the many unfair judgements from the home-field umpires.³³ After the loss in Indiana, Cheney began shaking up the Bloomington roster, weeding out the weak spots on the team. However, he maintained that unfair rulings, not player performances, were the reason for two notches in the loss column.³⁴

Cheney's roster shake-up replaced some long-standing Bloomington players with well-known hitters from Michigan, Champaign, and Decatur.³⁵ Though, almost as quickly as Cheney managed to improve both roster and win column, he resigned, exiting his post by June 20, 1888. *The Daily Leader* reported that, "Mr. Cheney's many friends regret to see him resign the management." In his short time as manager, he worked "night and day with the club, and brought the club from seventh to fourth place."³⁶ However, Cheney continued to serve as an umpire for several more years before leaving baseball altogether.³⁷

Scandals continued to plague Cheney's life. In February 1875, Cheney claimed a newly filed larceny charge against him was a rehashed robbery charge from the previous month. Cheney claimed that a stranger arrived at the Stickney House "who represented himself as a poker player and 'spiling for a game.'" When Cheney heard about the poker player, he sought the man out, engaged him in seven hours of poker, and left the table after having relieved the stranger of \$47 (an amount exceeding \$1,000 today).³⁸ The stranger became upset over the loss, and claimed that Cheney had robbed him. Cheney was taken to trial but was acquitted of the robbery charge. Cheney maintained that while he had a "weakness for a game of poker," that his games are "on the square," and he only plays those who want to play him.³⁹

Run-ins with the McLean County courts and law enforcement did not end there. On multiple occasions in the late 1870s, Cheney faced criminal charges. In 1877, he was ordered by the City

²⁹ "What They Say."

³⁰ "The Funeral of the late Charles Radbourne," *Daily Leader*, February 8, 1897.

³¹ "Snipping the Daisies," *The Pantagraph*, June 9, 1877, 4.

³² "Want Cheney for Assistant Manager," *The Pantagraph*, May 23, 1888, 4.

³³ "Base Ball," *The Pantagraph*, May 31, 1888, 3.

³⁴ "Base Ball," *The Pantagraph*, June 1, 1884, 4; "Notes," *The Pantagraph*, June 14, 1888, 4.

³⁵ "Notes."

³⁶ "Base Ball," *The Daily Leader*, June 18, 1888; "Cheney Resigns," *Daily Leader*, June 20, 1888.

³⁷ "Base Ball," *Daily Leader*, September 6, 1888; "Base Ball," *The Pantagraph*, June 6, 1889, 4.

³⁸ "Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Dollars of 2018," *Oregon State University*, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2018.pdf>, accessed September 1, 2020.

³⁹ "Mr. Lee Cheney," *The Pantagraph*, February 19, 1875.

Clerk of Bloomington to pay the balance on his liquor license.⁴⁰ Two years later in late 1879, Cheney was in court on three separate counts; charges of operating an after-hours tippling house, selling liquor without a license, and horse stealing.⁴¹ In the case of operating a tippling house (a business establishment where liquor is sold or consumed in violation of the law), Cheney persuaded the judge to move his trial another county. He claimed that popular opinion in McLean County was “so stirred up by temperance orators, temperance societies, ministers, and newspapers” that he had no chance at a fair trial.⁴² The case was settled in court in DeWitt County, with Cheney paying a \$100 fine.⁴³

The next year, in June 1880, Cheney appeared to want to put his life on the “straight and narrow,” and is reported to have said that he planned to “never flip a card, throw a dice or take a hand in any gambling device whatsoever.” He stated that he intended to go into some legitimate business as soon as the opportunity presented itself.⁴⁴ Though it seemed that Cheney was being sincere and that this was not a public performance geared toward engendering sympathy, he was back in the McLean County courts again in October that year; the charge this time was for running a wheel of fortune.⁴⁵ Cheney would be charged on several more occasions in 1881 and 1882 for illegal gaming as well.⁴⁶

Throughout much of 1884, Cheney had multiple run-ins with local law enforcement and the courts over the issue of selling liquor on Sundays and selling liquor after hours (which was against the law in Bloomington). While he was proprietor of the Ashely House, on no less than four occasions, he (and his wife Mary on one occasion) were fined for selling liquor after hours. On May 20, Cheney was fined \$19 for selling liquor on a Sunday.⁴⁷ On May 28, Cheney was arrested for selling liquor after hours, i.e. after eleven o’clock at night. It was reported by *The Pantagraph* that Cheney and the police came to an agreement that “he will be found behind the bars this morning of the city prison if not of the Ashley House.”⁴⁸ For this infraction, he paid a hefty fine of \$107 (which would be about \$2,800 in 2018).⁴⁹ While minor infractions for gaming and after-hours liquor sales kept Cheney’s name a regular feature of *The Pantagraph*, the case of Emma Coon would be one of his most notorious.

The story of Emma Coon first appeared in *The Pantagraph* on August 30, 1879. Emma Coon was a racehorse owned by George Lyons, and at one point mortgaged to Cheney for approximately \$250 (approximately \$6,250 in 2018).⁵⁰ It appears that Cheney became interested

⁴⁰ “Domestic Dynamite,” *The Pantagraph*, January 27, 1877.

⁴¹ “McLean Circuit Court Saturday’s Proceedings Before Judge Reeves,” *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1879; “McLean Circuit Court,” *The Pantagraph*, September 22, 1879, 4; “Wants to Leave the County,” *The Pantagraph*, November 25, 1879, 3.

⁴² “Wants to Leave the County,” *The Pantagraph*, November 25, 1879, 3.

⁴³ “People vs. Lee Cheney,” *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 1879, 4.

⁴⁴ “Mr. Lee Cheney’s Change of Base,” *The Pantagraph*, June 22, 1880, 3.

⁴⁵ “Trial Calendar of Criminal Cases,” *The Pantagraph*, October 2, 1880, 3.

⁴⁶ “The Criminal Calendar,” *The Pantagraph*, May 2, 1881, 3; “People’s Case Continued,” *The Pantagraph*, November 8, 1881, 3; “McLean County Court,” *The Pantagraph*, April 12, 1882, 3; “McLean County Court,” *The Pantagraph*, August 15, 1882, 3.

⁴⁷ “Mr. Lee Cheney,” *The Pantagraph*, May 21, 1884, 4.

⁴⁸ “Emphatic, Very,” *The Pantagraph*, May 28, 1884, 4; “Mulcted,” *Daily Leader*, May 28, 1884.

⁴⁹ “Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Dollars of 2018.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

in Emma Coon after seeing her race in Red Wing, Minnesota in June of that year.⁵¹ At some point after that race, Lyons mortgaged the mare to Cheney. Then, according to the report on August 30, Lyons reportedly sold Emma to a man named Walley in Crawfordsville, Indiana, which afterwards Lyons attempted to locate Cheney and repay the mortgage. Cheney, however, was not in Bloomington.⁵² Cheney had in fact left for Indiana to claim Emma Coon as soon as he had received news of the mare's sale, believing his mortgage still valid and ownership still intact. About a week later, on September 5, Lyons again attempted to pay off Cheney's mortgage, but Cheney refused payment and claimed legitimate ownership of the horse. He then took the horse to Chicago in an attempt to hide her.⁵³

Lyons successfully brought a horse-thieving charge against Cheney, with a court date on September 8, 1879. But Cheney's lawyer persuaded Justice Pancake to delay the start of the trial. Meanwhile, Emma Coon's hiding place in Chicago was uncovered, and the trotter was sent on her way back to Bloomington.⁵⁴ Cheney's case finally began in late November that year. Lyons stated that he offered "Cheney all he should have charged" to get the mare back. Cheney, on the other hand, argued that Lyons sold the mare without his consent, and that "he had the right to retake her wherever he could find her." *The Pantagraph's* report of the proceedings noted the "case was tried before the court without a jury," and resulted in Cheney being found not guilty of horse theft. Judge Reeves further claimed that "neither Cheney nor Lyons had acted just right in the matter," but there was not enough evidence to convict Cheney.⁵⁵ Cheney escaped criminal charges and lost possession of Emma Coon, but his dealings with race horses and horse racing were not over yet.

Lee Cheney announced a series of races for the Bloomington Jockey Club at the top of the year 1881—which would occur June 30, July, 1, 2, and 4. His announcement included an appeal to all interested parties to subscribe liberally to the endeavor, and assured them "as fine an outdoor amusement as they would wish to see" in return for their financial faith.⁵⁶ The previous season in 1880 was reported as being well-attended and a boon to Bloomington business owners. Yet, the report went on, "the managers came out a little behind" in the end, but were not discouraged and looked forward to a more profitable coming season.⁵⁷ Cheney's public promotion of the 1881 Jockey Club races ran right up to the event—promising "the greatest crowd ever seen assembled in Central Illinois," and that the races of the Jockey Club would furnish "the grandest sport ever known out of Chicago."⁵⁸ While there was a good deal of promoting done ahead of the 1881 races, the 1882 races saw Cheney sell off his interest to E.C. Wilson, a noted horseman from Cincinnati, Ohio. Wilson's intentions were noted by *The Pantagraph*, along with his purchase of Cheney's interest. He paid Cheney \$700 for the interest in the races (which would be about \$17,000 in 2018).⁵⁹ The exact motivation for Cheney's sale is

⁵¹ "Lee Cheney left the city yesterday," *The Pantagraph*, June 24, 1879, 4.

⁵² "The Sale of Emma Coon," *The Pantagraph*, August 30, 1879, 4.

⁵³ "Emma Coon," *The Pantagraph*, September 5, 1879, 3; "The Emma Coon Trouble," *The Pantagraph*, September 9, 1879, 4.

⁵⁴ "The Emma Coon Trouble."

⁵⁵ "McLean Circuit Court: End Of A Horse-Stealing Indictment," *The Pantagraph*, November 27, 1879, 3.

⁵⁶ "Bloomington Jockey Club Races," *The Pantagraph*, January 28, 1881, 3.

⁵⁷ "Bloomington Jockey Club," *The Pantagraph*, February 24, 1881, 4.

⁵⁸ "The Jockey Club Races," *The Pantagraph*, June 21, 1881, 4.

⁵⁹ "Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Dollars of 2018."

not known—perhaps due to another empty purse at the end of 1881 season, or he was made an offer that was too good to refuse.⁶⁰

The 1882 races, as managed by Wilson, were a complete and utter failure. The first two days of racing were conducted in the rain and mud, with few spectators in attendance. The third and fourth days saw greater attendance, as well as greater sums wagered, but the circumstances and results raised suspicions and tempers. Wilson quickly absconded from Bloomington, likely with the betting purse, via train on July 4 at the conclusion of the last race. Cheney was immediately brought in to clear up the messy aftermath and suffered claims of collusion and conspiracy. *The Pantagraph* reported that some attendees claimed “that the whole thing was a put-up job to skin the town.” The paper’s article concluded by condemning the races as “a fraud and disgrace” which has landed Bloomington on the “black list among horse owners” until such time that a “square and upright man, known and respected in sporting circles, is at the head of the concern.”⁶¹ After the disastrous end to the 1882 races, no more public connection existed between Cheney and the Bloomington Jockey Club.

Cheney’s affinity for horses and horse racing were not curbed by lawsuits or libelous claims. In mid-June 1883 he completed his purchase of “a controlling interest in the McLean County Fair Grounds,” and within about four weeks, organized the first of many equine events there.⁶² From the mid-1850s to the mid-1880s, the fair grounds were located one-half mile west of the Chicago & Alton Railroad mainline (now Amtrak and Union Pacific), and between Market and Washington streets (today, the Secretary of State’s DMV office is located on what was once the north end of the fairgrounds).⁶³ Cheney’s purchase, like many of his schemes, had its publicly-outspoken detractors—the McLean County fair board was not pleased with the new landowner and they quickly cancelled the 1883 fair.⁶⁴ Ever the wily inventor, Cheney just as quickly cooked up a series of horse races to take place at the fairgrounds.⁶⁵ At the end of the season a brand-new fence was constructed around the fairgrounds, and the *Pantagraph* quipped it was done in anticipation of “a big harvest next summer.”⁶⁶

But before next summer’s festivities at the fairgrounds could begin, the validity of Cheney’s controlling ownership of the fairgrounds was called into question. When the McLean County Agricultural Association held a meeting to elect new officers, Cheney was elected both president and treasurer. However, the *Pantagraph* reported there was a certain amount of dissatisfaction within the association with the election results. Several members of the association believed that Cheney was ineligible to be elected because the validity of his ownership of 59 shares was in question. According to the other candidate for president that evening, John Ewins (who was also the former president of the association), Cheney did not own any stock and that a man named Matthew Henebery (a Peoria liquor dealer) actually owned the stock.⁶⁷ Cheney denied this, stating that he gathered those shares on behalf of Charles Lewin, with Lewin’s money, and that ownership of stock was signed over to Lewin before the election meeting.⁶⁸ The decision was

⁶⁰ “On yesterday, Mr. Lee Cheney,” *The Pantagraph*, April 28, 1882, 4.

⁶¹ “He Has Gone,” *The Pantagraph*, July 6, 1882, 4.

⁶² “Agricultural,” *The Pantagraph*, June 15, 1883, 3; “Saturday’s Races,” *The Pantagraph*, July 23, 1883, 3.

⁶³ Bill Kemp. “Bloomington’s west side first site for county fairgrounds,” *The Pantagraph*, July 29, 2012.

⁶⁴ “Agricultural.”

⁶⁵ “Saturday’s Races;” “Mr. Lee Cheney,” *The Pantagraph*, July 25, 1883, 3.

⁶⁶ “The Fair Ground Fence,” *The Pantagraph*, October 16, 1883, 3.

⁶⁷ “Who Is Who,” *The Pantagraph*, September 6, 1883, 3.

⁶⁸ “The McLean County Agricultural Association,” *The Pantagraph*, September 7, 1883, 4.

taken to court, where it was ultimately decided that Charles Lewin was entitled to the stock.⁶⁹ Despite this, Cheney retained the office of the presidency of the fair board, and his association with the fairgrounds continued for many more years.⁷⁰

Cheney's interests and pursuits were many and varied—while some seemed to occupy all of his attention for a moment, he often engaged his many schemes simultaneously. This included inventing useful items, several of which he received patents for. In a 1902 interview with the *Daily Leader*, Cheney stated that “anything invented must not be complicated...It must be so simple that any one can readily see and understand all about the thing invented. Simplicity is the keynote to success.” All total, Cheney reportedly invented an astonishing 27 odd-ball devices during his lifetime.⁷¹ His first invention was a chalk holder for billiard tables (which was reported to be used throughout Bloomington and the surrounding area).⁷² Next up, he created springs for the feet, which were made to order of the roller skate and were used by anybody of ordinary agility. However, it was found that one spring did not fit all, so it was not practical to continue making them.⁷³

In 1875, Cheney's third invention was a mechanical device for ringing an alarm on the fire station bells in case of fire. This “alarm ringer” was a simple device. It was an “arrangement of wheels operated by a weight, which can be set in motion by a lever in the engine room.” This system took away the need to have a man physically ring the bells. In Cheney's opinion, when a fire alarm came in “no man has any time to spend in ringing bells or in anything else than in getting the engine under way,” which will save valuable time that can be used to extinguish a fire.⁷⁴

According to Cheney “an inventor must take a deep interest in all he sees. His eye must be trained to take in the minute details of everything. He must be a person who observes closely and as he does this, think about it.”⁷⁵ Some of his other inventions included a low-cost device to clean out stove pipes (which any man or woman could use), a machine for sifting or screening sand that is used for building purposes, a type of sad iron (used to iron clothing), an aerial tower, the double corkscrew, a double screw driver, a closet cushion, a three ounce alcohol stove, an eye glass protector, a shoe fastener, and a rat trap.⁷⁶ To Cheney, the life of an inventor was “replete with successes, failures, difficulties, triumphs, disappointments, and joys.”⁷⁷ But that is what made it so exciting for him.

As if life was not exciting enough for Cheney, having engaged in playing baseball, running a saloon, and racing horses, among other pursuits, he also dabbled in boxing for a short time.

In the late 1880s, Cheney became a boxing manager and promoter.⁷⁸ Cheney's most famous pugilistic client was that of light-weight champion Billy Myer, also known as the “Streator

⁶⁹ “Mr. H.T. Lewin Wins,” *The Pantagraph*, October 2, 1883, 4.

⁷⁰ “Scooped In,” *The Pantagraph*, January 8, 1884, 4.

⁷¹ “To Lessen Losses By Head-On Collisions,” *The Pantagraph*, February 4, 1911, 5.

⁷² “Of An Inventive Turn,” *The Pantagraph*, June 14, 1902.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ “Mr. Henry Eldridge,” *The Pantagraph*, February 11, 1875, 3.

⁷⁵ “Of An Inventive Turn.”

⁷⁶ “Cheney as an Inventor,” *The Daily Leader*, June 30, 1891; “A Valuable Patent,” *The Daily Leader*, February 12, 1895; “Of An Inventive Turn;” “To Lessen Losses By Head-On Collisions.”

⁷⁷ “Of An Inventive Turn.”

⁷⁸ Mark Dunn. “Unpublished manuscript on Billy Myers, the ‘Streator Cyclone,’” McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives, 3.

Cyclone.” Cheney began managing Myer in the fall of 1889, effectively the second act of the boxer’s career. Cheney had interacted with Myer before, having promoted several of Myer’s matches in 1885 (though Cheney usually bet against Myer).⁷⁹ Their debut in Bloomington came courtesy of a variety show at Schroeder’s Opera House in downtown Bloomington. During the program, Myer demonstrated some of the many skills that made him a champion boxer. *The Pantagraph* reported that Myer was as “quick on his feet as a cat and was all over the stage in a minute.”⁸⁰ Cheney and Myer then travelled to Chicago for further exhibition and promotion, with the hope of drumming up a big-time match or two.⁸¹ While in Chicago, Cheney was interviewed by the *Sporting Journal*. Over the course of the interview, Cheney stated that Myer was “prepared to make a match with any lightweight, breathing any style and for any amount.” The opponent Cheney really desired Myer to fight was the current lightweight champion of the world, Jack McAuliffe from New York. However, Cheney resigned to the fact that they would “go where we can get the most lucre [money].”⁸² Cheney managed to secure a money match in New Orleans against local pugilist Andy Bowen, but the desired match against McAuliffe remained out of Cheney’s grasp as he and the opposing manager could not agree on terms.⁸³

Myer and Cheney spent the next few months traveling out east—Buffalo, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Washington D.C.—setting up possible matches and generally enlarging Myer’s national reputation.⁸⁴ Prior to his fight with Bowen, Myer had a rematch with Jack Hooper in Alexandria, Virginia. During that match, Myer injured or broke his right arm. This was bad news for Myer and Cheney, as Cheney had booked him for a match against Bowen just three weeks later in New Orleans.

However, despite being injured and sick (apparently Myer had also picked up some digestive issues on his travels), the fight went on as planned on May 19.⁸⁵ Myer and Bowen went 28 rounds, with both men being beaten and bloodied. Before the 29th round began, Cheney “threw in the sponge,” causing Myer to lose the match. Cheney claimed “Myer’s hand gave out in the tenth round” and he was worried that Myer would not be able to finish the fight.⁸⁶ However, when Myer and Cheney returned to Bloomington, Myer’s brother stated that Cheney did not consult Myer before ending the fight.⁸⁷

A few weeks later, Cheney furnished the Bloomington *Daily Leader* with an issue of the *Police Gazette* and stated that “it contained the only correct account of the fight that had yet been published.” The *Police Gazette* article, as quoted in the *Leader*, painted a picture of profligate mob violence and one-sided refereeing directed squarely at Billy Myer. The *Police Gazette* author concluded Myer’s loss directly resulted from those factors. Cheney went on to tell the *Leader* that no boxer could expect a fair fight against Bowen while in New Orleans. He then

⁷⁹ Dunn, 2-3; “The fight between Billy Myers and Charlie Daly,” *The Pantagraph*, November 17, 1886, 4; “Billy Myer’s New Manager,” *The Pantagraph*, November 22, 1889, 3.

⁸⁰ “Last Evenings Entertainment,” *The Pantagraph*, October 5, 1889, 4.

⁸¹ “To Spar in Chicago,” *The Pantagraph*, November 29, 1889, 4.

⁸² “Not in it For Fun,” *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 1889, 4.

⁸³ “Looks Like a Go,” *The Pantagraph*, December 30, 1889, 4; “Cannot Agree on the Weight,” *The Pantagraph*, January 10, 1890, 4.

⁸⁴ “Start for Buffalo,” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1890, 3. *Pantagraph*, Tuesday, April 15, 1890, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Dunn, 9-10.

⁸⁶ “The Approaching Contest,” *The Pantagraph*, May 20, 1890, 1. “Cheney Gives up the Fight,” *The Pantagraph*, May 23, 1890, 1.

⁸⁷ Dunn, 10.

concluded his interview with the *Leader* by announcing his retirement from boxing management—“I can’t stand the abuse which I have received from the papers. I got a good chance to get out and I shall do it and stay out.” Cheney maintained that he and Myer had a profitable run, and that the fighter always walked away with “the lion’s share of the profits.”⁸⁸

Boxing and baseball certainly got Lee Cheney’s name into a number of newspapers, but nothing elevated it to quite the same heights as his amateur ballooning escapades. Cheney “scraped the roof of the sky” with no less than three world-renowned aeronauts on multiple occasions.

Professor Samuel A. King was an aeronaut of some renown, having made his first balloon ascension in 1851 in Philadelphia. His ascension from Bloomington—Bloomington’s first professional balloon ascension—met with abundant local excitement and news coverage. Cheney played a pivotal role in bringing King to the city where King’s balloon, the “Eagle Eyrie,” lifted off from the north side of the McLean County courthouse square in downtown Bloomington on July 18, 1884. Cheney accompanied King as a representative for the *Daily Leader* newspaper.⁸⁹ The Eagle Eyrie was a coal gas balloon, and was filled with about 30,000 cubic feet of gas from the city’s mains along Jefferson Street.⁹⁰ The balloon was constructed of oiled linen or cotton, which held the gas. It was yellow and black in color, between 50 and 60 feet high and about 35 feet in diameter.⁹¹ As the balloon was filling with gas, Cheney and King packed the basket with needed items such as overcoats, gossamers (lightweight rubber raincoats), a thermometer, a barometer, pocket compass, opera glasses, and a basket of refreshments for a three day trip to either Indiana or Kentucky. The balloon, with Cheney and King on board, ascended just after 3:30 p.m. that Friday afternoon. As they began their ascent, the band began to play, and the crowd began to cheer.⁹² According to an article from the *Daily Leader*, King and Cheney planned to take six pigeons with them. The pigeons had ribbons around their necks with a note that said “From Prof. King’s Bloomington, Eagle Eyrie, which ascended from Bloomington, Ill., July 18.h 1884.” King and Cheney would then let them out at intervals as they ascended. Professor King asked that farmers look out for the birds when the birds came down to earth.⁹³ Reports and rumored balloon sightings arrived from all over Central Illinois. King and Cheney’s account had the balloon on a generally southeast course from Bloomington, claiming an ascension to 10,000 feet (nearly two miles), and traveling a distance of 47 miles. They finally landed about 12 miles southwest of Urbana in Mahomet on Friday night.⁹⁴

Cheney’s balloon enthusiasm relocated to the fairgrounds later that summer, where he advertised Professor King would inflate a captive balloon attraction capable of taking large groups of spectators 1,000 feet in the air. Cheney aimed to fund this attraction with advanced sales of season tickets.⁹⁵ More large-scale aerial ballooning found Cheney in 1886 when it was reported he was in Arkansas with the aeronaut Professor Lowe. The two had previously recorded

⁸⁸ “Threw Up The Sponge,” *The Daily Leader*, June 10, 1890, 8.

⁸⁹ “They Want To Go,” *The Daily Leader*, July 15, 1884, 7.

⁹⁰ “The Balloon Ascension,” *The Daily Leader*, July 17, 1884, 7; “The Eagle Eyrie,” *The Pantagraph*, July 19, 1884, 4.

⁹¹ “The Balloon,” *The Daily Leader*, July 17, 1884, 6; “Eagle Eyrie.”

⁹² “Eagle Eyrie;” “Up In A Balloon,” *The Weekly Leader*, July 24, 1884.

⁹³ “The Balloon Ascension.”

⁹⁴ “Up In A Balloon.”

⁹⁵ “A Fine Fair,” *The Daily Leader*, July 26, 1884, 8.

a balloon flight of 160 miles at a max elevation of 15,000 feet (or three miles) in February 1885 when they ascended from Mexico City.⁹⁶

Cheney began to drum up local support for another Bloomington balloon ascension at the top of 1898. He planned to engage Professor Samuel Baldwin (another leading aeronaut in the United States), to make the ascension in Baldwin's mammoth hydrogen balloon, "The Mars." Cheney planned to finance the whole endeavor with subscriptions from local Bloomington businessmen.⁹⁷ After some advertisements in *The Pantagraph*, and presumably a whole lot of hand shaking, Cheney secured the financing for Bloomington's next headline-making balloon ascension.

He and Baldwin would ascend on the evening of Monday, July 18, 1898 and aimed to break the height record, which, at the time, was nearly 3.5 miles.⁹⁸ Trains from throughout the region brought people to watch Baldwin and Cheney attempt to break that record. Tickets were 50 cents, \$1.00, and \$1.50 each for people to "get a good comfortable seat" to enjoy the show (or about \$15, \$30, and \$45 respectively today).⁹⁹ A large telescope was mounted on the roof of the McLean County courthouse in downtown Bloomington to watch the course of the duo for as long as could be maintained.¹⁰⁰ Spectators assembled on the north side of the McLean County courthouse early that morning, and the DeMolay band began to serenade the group before the launch. Even the tops of buildings and the courthouse dome were covered with onlookers. After a delay due to problems filling the balloon (as Baldwin made his own hydrogen gas), the duo lifted off around 6:42 p.m. heading northeast.¹⁰¹

Once in the air, spotters began tracking the duo as they made their way up and away from downtown Bloomington.¹⁰² While the day was hot and sultry on the earth below, as Baldwin and Cheney climbed higher and higher, the temperature began to quickly plummet. According to Baldwin and Cheney, when they reached a height of 18,060 feet, the temperature had dropped to 12 degrees above zero. They descended the same day, wanting to avoid a cold, overnight trip to Chicago, landing near Colfax, Illinois at about 8:00 p.m. that evening (approximately 26 miles away from the point of their ascension).¹⁰³

When back in Bloomington, Baldwin also reported that he cut the trip short due to the fact that the gas valve on the balloon had frozen so hard, that it took both men to release it to allow them to descend, and that Cheney's nose began to bleed at such a high altitude.¹⁰⁴ Cheney was proud of the ascension, noting that he and Baldwin broke the height record, as well as saw their

⁹⁶ "Lee Cheney as an Aeronaut," *The Pantagraph*, March 30, 1886, 3; Remarkable Record," *The Daily Leader*, May 23, 1898.

⁹⁷ "Remarkable Record;" "Expenses of Ballooning," *The Pantagraph*, June 6, 1898; "Scraping The Roof Of The Sky," *The Daily Leader*, July 18, 1898.

⁹⁸ "Prof. Baldwin Coming," *The Daily Leader*, June 14, 1898; "The Great Ascension," *The Pantagraph*, June 22, 1898.

⁹⁹ "America's Greatest Balloon Ascension," *The Daily Leader*, July 14, 1898; Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Estimated Dollars of 2018, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2018.pdf>, Date Accessed September 14, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ "The Great Ascension," *The Pantagraph*, July 12, 1898.

¹⁰¹ "Scraping The Roof Of The Sky;" "Flying Through Space," *The Bulletin*, July 18, 1898; "Landed Near Anchor," *The Weekly Pantagraph*, July 22, 1898.

¹⁰² "The Balloon Ascension," *The Daily Leader*, July 17, 1898.

¹⁰³ "Cheney Gets Above Clouds," *The Daily Leader*, July 19, 1898, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

thermometer drop “fifty-eight degrees in thirty minutes,” which Baldwin exclaimed he had never seen happen before. Cheney further claimed that the “ascension was a success in every manner except financially.”¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately, a few short months later, *The Pantagraph* reported that the duo’s record had been shattered. Stanley Spencer and Dr. Berson reached the astonishing height of 27,500 feet on their balloon ascension in England.¹⁰⁶

For someone who seemed to always have lived “life in the fast lane,” Owen Lee Cheney’s life came to a relatively quiet end. Cheney had been in failing health for several years, having suffered from heart disease. A few months before his death, his physician notified him that he had “but a short time to live.” During one of Cheney’s daily visits to the Central Fire Station that was near his home at 106 N. Prairie Street, he arranged with his friend and firefighter, Maurice Luby, to come check on him if he ever failed to make his usual 4:00 p.m. visit. When that day arrived on Thursday, November 2, 1911, Luby found that his friend had passed away while sitting in his chair with the night lamp still burning.¹⁰⁷

Cheney’s funeral was held at his home on North Prairie Street on Saturday, November 4. Reverend George Pickard, pastor at First M.E. Church in Bloomington, officiated the services.¹⁰⁸ *The Pantagraph* reported that with the passing of Lee Cheney, there was “removed from Bloomington affairs a man who was for years a character, seeking to do thing[s] which no one else had succeeded in accomplishing.” Cheney was always a friend of Bloomington in which he resided for most of his life, and because of his efforts, Bloomington’s name was spread over the country.¹⁰⁹ Owen Lee Cheney was laid to rest in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his wife Mary.

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¹⁰⁵ “Mr. Cheney’s Account,” *The Pantagraph*, July 19, 1898.

¹⁰⁶ “Reached a High Altitude,” *The Pantagraph*, September 20, 1898.

¹⁰⁷ “Lee Cheney Found Dead In Chair.”

¹⁰⁸ “The Last of Earth,” *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 1911, 6.

¹⁰⁹ “Lee Cheney Found Dead In Chair.”