

Owen Lee Cheney (1846-1911) was born on January 19, 1846 in Cheney's Grove, Illinois to settler parents. Lee Cheney almost immediately started his adventuring, beginning with joining the Union Army during the United States Civil War in 1862 at the age of 16. He regularly appeared in Bloomington's newspapers for shooting matches, horse racing, and gambling early on and later inventing, **entrepreneurship**, and ballooning.

After leaving the military in 1864, Cheney returned to Bloomington and began working as a clerk in his stepfather's pharmacy, Paist and Marmon. In 1867, Cheney married Mary McGraw. The couple was married for about 34 years until Mary died from **complications** due to **consumption** (tuberculosis) and died in 1901. The couple had no children.

Cheney became involved with baseball in 1876, and at the start of the new season was named the captain of the Bloomington Baseball Club, along with playing second base. Cheney played with 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**.

By some accounts, Cheney was an average ball player. Others, however, claimed he was not a very good ball player at all. 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.

However, Cheney's short baseball career involved a **scandal**, which would not be his last. 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, including Cheney, were offered **bribes** to purposely play poorly in order to "throw" the game. Perhaps the scandal damaged Cheney's career playing baseball, but not enough to force him to leave the game all together.

In 1877, Cheney was no longer playing second base for the Bloomingtons, but rather took up a position behind the plate as an umpire. 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." 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 Crawfordville owing to the many unfair judgements from the home-field umpires. 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.

Cheney eventually resigned, exiting as manager 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." Cheney continued to serve as an umpire for several more years before leaving baseball altogether. Around this time, Cheney also served as a boxing manager and **promoter**.

Cheney had many run-ins with the McLean County courts and local law enforcement. On multiple occasions in the late 1870s, Cheney faced criminal charges. In 1877, he was ordered by the City Clerk of Bloomington to pay the balance on his liquor license. Two years later in late 1879, Cheney was in court on three separate counts; charges of selling liquor without a license, operating a **tippling house**, and horse stealing. 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. Instead, he continued to be fined for selling liquor after hours and on Sundays, and **gambling**.

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). It appears that Cheney became interested in Emma Coon after seeing her race in Red Wing, Minnesota. After that race, Lyons mortgaged the mare to Cheney. Lyons later changed his mind and reportedly sold the horse to a man named Walley in Crawfordsville, Indiana. When Lyons attempted to locate Cheney and repay the mortgage, Cheney had already left for Indiana to claim Emma Coon and hid her in Chicago. He was brought to trial for horse stealing, but managed to be found not guilty because of a lack of **evidence**.

Cheney pursued many interests. 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 27 devices during his lifetime. His first invention was a chalk holder for **billiard** tables. In 1875 he invented a mechanical device for ringing an alarm on the fire station bells in case of fire. The “alarm ringer” took away the need to have a man physically ring the bells, which was a valuable time saver.

In the 1880s, Cheney “scraped the roof of the sky” with several **aeronauts**. First, he brought **Professor Samuel A. King** to the McLean County courthouse square. King and Cheney lifted off in the coal gas balloon packed with items for a trip to Indiana, but only made it to Mahomet, Illinois (outside of Champaign). Next up, he brought **Professor Lowe**, who he had ascended in Mexico City prior to his balloon launch in Bloomington. Finally, his last flight was with **Professor Samuel Baldwin** in 1898. Cheney and Professor Baldwin ascended to a record height of 18,060 feet before returning to the earth and landing near Colfax, Illinois.

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.

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. *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 the town in which he resided for most of his life, and because of his efforts, the name of Bloomington was spread over the country. Owen Lee Cheney was laid to rest in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his wife Mary.