

Thomas William Van Schoick (1829-1899)

Thomas William Van Schoick was born on August 2, 1829 in Monmouth County, New Jersey to David and Emily (Williams) Van Schoick. Although his first name was Thomas, he went by his middle name of William throughout most of his life. William came from a large family having five brothers (John, Wesley, Charles, Edward, and Samuel) and three sisters (Sarah Jane, Emily, and Elizabeth). In 1836 when William was about seven years old, his father moved his family west to Franklin County, Ohio where he was a hotel keeper. A short time later, William's father moved his family to Dayton, Ohio where he engaged in farming and milling. While a young man in Ohio, William learned the trade of printing which he did not like. Instead, William became an apprentice in brick making and stove moulding (the casting of heating and cooking stoves).¹ It was in brick making that he would begin his first business venture.

While living in Dayton, he met and married his first wife Cynthia Anderson, the daughter of James Anderson, a laborer in Dayton. William and Cynthia were married on March 27, 1851 when he was 22 and she was 17.² They had two daughters; Edith and Lillian.

Less than a year after his marriage, William and Cynthia moved to Richmond, Indiana where he established himself as a brick maker. He became a well known and well respected brick maker throughout the region. In one instance, it was documented that he turned out an astonishing 14,369 bricks in one 13 hour period of time! It was written that after this amazing fete was completed, he was hoisted up and "carried on the shoulders of his men and students two miles to and fro through the city."³ Because of this, he was considered the champion brick maker of the United States and word of his accomplishment even reached Canada. After becoming an expert in brick making, he began to work as a builder and contractor. Through this work he also supervised the construction of some important buildings in Richmond such as the Friend's College, a Quaker school today known as Earlham College.⁴

William continued his successful brick making business in Bloomington. He, his wife Cynthia, and their two year old daughter Lillian, moved to Bloomington in 1858. William and his family settled in a house on South Lee Street. Almost immediately upon his arrival he established his own brickyard on South Main Street. Two of his brothers, Charles and Wesley, also joined him in Bloomington and worked with him in the brick making trade. His business started out small employing anywhere from 40 to 100 men. Eventually, he increased his brick business to include three brickyards employing between 300-400 men at any given time.⁵ It was noted that "no man in McLean County has set a higher standard of brick making or maintained it with greater insistence" than Van Schoick.⁶ Bricks that were made at William's brickyards were used in the construction of buildings throughout Bloomington. Some of those buildings include the People's Bank building, the Bloomington Stove Works, and the Wesleyan College (known today as Illinois Wesleyan University).⁷

¹ *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County, Illinois* (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1887) p.1177

² Nola Marquardt, Researcher notes on William Van Schoick, February 8, 2010

³ *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County*, p.1177

⁴ Ezra M. Prince and John H. Burnham, ed. *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County*, Volume II. (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Co., 1908) p.1331

⁵ Prince and Burnham, 1331

⁶ Prince and Burnham, 1331

⁷ *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County, IL*, p.1177

William was not just involved in the brick making business in Bloomington. He engaged in several types of business throughout his life in Bloomington. In the spring of 1864, William was elected on the Republican ticket as an Alderman for the Third Ward in Bloomington. In 1868, he opened a successful 8-table billiards parlor at Herman Schroeder's Opera House located across from the McLean County Courthouse on Main Street.⁸ His brother Charlie also sold wine, cigars, and liquor at the billiards parlor and the parlor remained opened for many years. Two years later, he put together an unsuccessful traveling theatrical group of 26 people but lost thousands of dollars of his own money on the venture.⁹ In 1869, he helped to organize the Bloomington Stove Company and was a stockholder and director of the company until 1885 when he was elected president of the company.¹⁰ This company was very successful because the stoves produced there were sold throughout the western and southern United States.¹¹ He was also a stockholder in the Third National Bank and the Bloomington Furniture Company. It would appear that William had a hand in many of the major businesses in Bloomington during his lifetime.

Besides brick making, William was most well known for his involvement in the pork packing industry. In August of 1873, William, George Tryner, and U.A. Andrus purchased a lot from the vineyard of Dr. Herman Schroeder, south of the Indianapolis, Bloomington and Western Railroad line at the intersection of Oakland Avenue and Gridley Street (close to the present site of Home Sweet Home Mission). It was on this lot that they established a large pork packing plant.¹² William was a senior partner and general manager of the plant until 1890. The location they selected was ideal because of its close proximity to the railroad making it easy to ship hogs into the city and ship the finished product out of the city. The process of slaughtering hogs was a brutal system. The hogs were driven off the railcars and were kept in feed lots before they were slaughtered. Once inside the plant "they were killed, bled, scalded, gutted and disassembled." The packing plant opened before refrigeration was invented so the packing season usually began in late November (when the weather became cold enough) and lasted until February (or when the weather began to warm).¹³

William's pork packing plant, first known as *William Van Schoick and Co.*, opened for business on November 20, 1873. When the plant first opened, forty head of hogs were killed every forty minutes. His factory was not the only pork packing plant in town. There were several other plants as well in Bloomington in the 1870s. Most were located near the railroad depots and the area was nicknamed "Blood Alley" by residents. After the plant had only been in operation for about two months, Van Schoick and Co. had packed about 1,500 head of hogs.¹⁴ An article in *The Daily Pantagraph* reported that the pork packing industry was a great asset to Bloomington and hog raisers. During the 1873-74 season of packing, 3,000 hogs has been packed earning hog raisers \$36,000. The author of the article stated this was just the beginning and this number would be eclipsed in the future.¹⁵ By 1876, McLean County was considered one of the greatest hog producing counties in Illinois and the pork packing industry (which many

⁸ "Letter to the Editor by Dr. Herman Schroeder," *The Daily Bulletin*, January 12, 1875

⁹ *History of McLean County, Illinois*. (Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. and Co., 1879) p.767

¹⁰ Prince and Burnham, 1331

¹¹ *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County*, p.1178

¹² *Weekly Pantagraph*, August 29, 1873

¹³ Bill Kemp, "Porkers Wail of Anguish Once Heard Near South Hill," *The Pantagraph*, February 2, 2008

¹⁴ "Pork Packing," *The Weekly Pantagraph*, January 9, 1874

¹⁵ "Pork Packing."

thought would fail), did \$125,000 during the 1875-76 packing season.¹⁶ The Bloomington pork packing industry shipped sugar cured ham throughout the Midwest, preserved meats to the South, and lard to the East Coast.¹⁷

In 1877, U.A. Andrus retired from Van Schoick's pork packing plant and N.N. Wilson took over his share of the business for a short time. Eventually, Van Schoick and Tryner became the sole owners and the name of the plant was changed to the *Bloomington Pork Packing Co.* and was killing 115 head of hog an hour. By 1879 the plant occupied three buildings. The main building had two stories and a basement where hogs were slaughtered, pickled, and their meat was sold. A second two story building was for canvassing and putting meats up for market. The third building was an office near the other two buildings and also housed the scales to weigh hogs as they came in off of the trains.¹⁸ By 1889 the company employed 75 men (including several young boys) for a three month season with each man earning about \$1.75 per day. The plant was also slaughtering between 12,000 and 15,000 hogs per year (at a rate of 400 per day) and "employed a capital from \$300,000 to \$350, 000," (which would be worth over \$8,000,000 today).¹⁹

Even though William was enjoying a great deal of success in the business world, his life at home was falling apart. On September 9, 1878, William sued his wife Cynthia (whom he had been married to for 28 years), for divorce. At first, William was ordered by the court to pay her legal fees and pay her \$5.00 a month in maintenance. However on March 6, 1879 Judge Owen T. Reeves issued his final decision and dissolved their marriage. The reason listed on the divorce decree was the fact that Cynthia had been "a habitual drunkard for more than two years," which was a fact verified by eye witness accounts. William still had to pay the court costs for both of them.²⁰ Cynthia remarried in 1899 to a Chicago man by the name of Giacomo Uccillo (Usello) and continued living in Chicago until she passed away in 1917. Oddly enough, her body was brought back to Bloomington where she was buried in the Van Schoick family plot.²¹

In 1880, shortly after his divorce from Cynthia was finalized, William met and married an English woman by the name of Sarah. She was 41 years old at the time and was born in England. This marriage too would end in divorce and be filled with violence and troubles for the short time they were married. After only five years, William filed for divorce in 1885 and moved out of their home located at 410 W. Wood Street in Bloomington. The divorce was contentious with many motions filed by both parties. Sarah was first awarded a monthly maintenance fee of \$25.00 and that William would have to also pay her legal fees. She was allowed to remain in their house as long as she gave him a bed, clothes, some furniture, and all of his business books. The divorce proceedings began in October of 1885 with Judge Owen T. Reeves presiding. Reeves was the same judge who granted William's first divorce six years before. Sarah requested a change of venue because of this, stating that she felt she would not get a fair trial from Judge Reeves. The relationship between William and Sarah must have continued to spiral downward because on May 3, 1886 Judge Reeves granted William a divorce. William stated he feared for his life. In the divorce record it was recorded that the cause of their five year marriage ending was evidence of "frequent assaults and menaces towards" William which

¹⁶ "Pork Packing"

¹⁷ Kemp, "Porkers Wail of Anguish Once Heard Near South Hill."

¹⁸ Marquardt, Researcher notes on William Van Schoick

¹⁹ "Our Manufactures," *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 12, 1889

²⁰ Divorce Record of William and Cynthia Van Schoick #3844, McLean Co. Chancery Record Book 43, p. 205-206

²¹ Marquardt, Researcher notes on William Van Schoick

caused him to file for divorce in the first place. The records also stated that there was evidence that on more than one occasion Sarah “maliciously, passionately, and violently made attacks upon [William] with lethal weapons.”²² William was awarded their home on West Wood Street and Sarah was ordered to vacate the property by June 28 of that year.²³

Even though William’s luck in love seemed to have run out, his luck in the business world continued to flourish though, his interest in the pork packing industry appeared to dwindle. In January of 1890 William’s partner in the *Bloomington Pork Packing Co.*, George Tryner, passed away after a short illness. In August of that year William sold two thirds of the interest in the company to a group of business men from Chicago associated with the International Packing Co. of Chicago. He retained the other third of the interest in the company for himself while splitting the profits from the sale of the majority of the company with the estate of Tryner, his former partner. According to *The Pantagraph*, Mr. C.E. Wells became the president while William became the vice president. It was also reported that the new owners of the company planned to increase the number of hogs killed per year from 12,000 to 16,000 to 50,000 to 60,000 hogs per season.²⁴

Shortly after the sale of the plant some residents of Bloomington began to voice their displeasure of living near the pork packing plants (even though they had been living near the plant for over seventeen years). The citizens living in the South Hill Section of Bloomington near the packing plants were not happy with the packing plants located near their homes. On November 19, 1890 a number of residents who lived near the Van Schoick’s packing plant came to *The Pantagraph* office to “make complaints regarding the vile odors emanating from the packing house and enter their protest against being compelled to endure them.” They also complained that there were city ordinances in place which prohibited individual butchers from killing hogs, or from citizens from keeping hogs within the city limits, but none to prohibit “a rich corporation” of carrying on the same activities. One woman even stated that she had opened her bedroom window to air out the room and when she came back a few hours later, the room was saturated with such a foul odor that she had to change the pillows and bed linens!²⁵ Other residents also stated that the stench permeated the neighborhood so much that some of their homes had become unlivable and therefore unsellable.²⁶

The very next day an article was printed to rebuke the citizen’s claim. A *Pantagraph* reporter visited the *Bloomington Pork Packing Co.* to get the real story behind the neighbors’ complaints. The reporter made a thorough inspection of every department. He admitted that there was a slight odor but attributed it to the fact that it was an unseasonably warm day the day he visited. However, 500 hogs had just been killed the day of their inspection and the reporter commented there was very little odor to be found. William himself spoke to the reporters and explained the process by which they disposed of the animals’ remains. William explained that “after each days killing, the establishment is thoroughly cleaned and ventilated and the odorous particles are taken care of.” They then pressed all of the remains of the hogs (called offal) and loaded it into railcars where it is shipped to an “eastern established where it is dried for fertilizer.”²⁷ Residents had accused the plant of drying or burning the remains which they stated

²² McLean Co. Chancery Record Book 56, p.156-157

²³ Marquardt, Researcher notes on William Van Schoick

²⁴ “A Big Deal,” *The Pantagraph*, August 8, 1890

²⁵ “They are Up in Arms,” *The Pantagraph*, November 20, 1890

²⁶ “They are Up in Arms”

²⁷ “The Packing House,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 21, 1890

was the cause of the offensive odors. The reporters did note that the cause of the smell may have been caused by the sewers in which the plant emptied their scalding tanks. They did offer a suggestion for the city to trap the manholes throughout town and periodically flush the sewers as well. This would not only help to reduce the odor from the packing plant, but also to reduce sewer odors in general.²⁸

A reporter also visited the stockyards where the hogs were kept before being slaughtered. He stated that the pens were very well kept because several men were employed by the company whose only job was to clean the pens. Based on these observations the reporters declared to their readers that the *Bloomington Pork Packing Co.* was doing everything within their means to “prevent sufficient cause of complaint.”²⁹ They also stated that it was “impossible to carry on a business of this kind without there being some odor.” The reporters concluded the article by stating the company supplied the city with a fair number of jobs (140 at the time with that number expected to increase) and was a valuable enterprise to the local economy producing pepsin (an enzyme that breaks down protein), glue from the hogs feet, hides, and of course meats, all of which were shipped to many parts of the country. The reporters also noted that the City Council had appointed a committee of physicians several years prior to investigate if the plants in their current location were a cause for concern to the health of the citizens of Bloomington. The committee found that the small amount of odors present were not harmful to the health of anyone in the vicinity.

The issue did not go away with the findings of *The Pantagraph*. The very next day, a resident of the South Hill area wrote a letter to the editor explaining that the plant’s cleanliness was not what it appeared to be. That if the reporter would have come on any other day, the hog pens would not have been as clean, the smell would have been overpowering, and the noise from the 1000 head of hog would have been deafening. The writer also suggested that *The Pantagraph* should send reporters to every house south and east of the stockyard’s and ask the people to explain what they are protesting against and see for themselves what conditions were really like in the affected neighborhoods. The writer closed in stating that the residents in the South Hill neighborhood “did not wish to abolish the pork packing house, but [did] wish to put it where [it] belongs, outside of the limits of the city.”³⁰ Those same citizens planned to “file a petition with the city council” to move the plant, but there is no evidence that one was ever filed.

A few years after this “controversy,” William seems to have lost interest in pork packing altogether. In 1891 William was listed as the vice president of the Bloomington Pork Packing Co. By 1893, William was no longer in the packing business and the only occupation that was listed under him in the Bloomington City Directory was brick making. He returned to brick making, his original trade, and moved his office next to his new home located at 302 West Wood Street (built by Paul Moratz). His home still stands to this day. He would continue making bricks for paving and constructing the rest of his life.

The *Bloomington Pork Packing Company* also remained in business after William was no longer involved. In 1897, the owners of the plant changed the name to the *Continental Packing Co.*, but only remained in business for about another ten years when it went out of business between 1907 and 1909. This was most likely because of stiff competition from much larger packing businesses in Chicago.³¹

²⁸ “The Packing House”

²⁹ “The Packing House”

³⁰ “The Packing House Matter,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 22, 1890

³¹ Kemp, “Porkers Wail of Anguish Once Heard Near South Hill.”

Aside from all of these different business ventures and his failed marriages, William remained active in the Bloomington –Normal community. He was one of the first commissioners of Miller Park and instrumental in the creation of the park. At the July 30, 1886 meeting of the Bloomington City Council a letter written by William was presented to the council. In the letter he promoted the purchase of the “Miller Pasture” to create a new park which the city was considering.³² He also gave about \$1,000 for the maintenance of the park after it was created and gave much of his time to its improvement and beautification. In 1899 he also served as the treasurer of the Park Board of Commissioners.³³ Because of his contributions to Miller Park, a short street near the southeast end of Miller Park was named Van Schoick Street.

William also belonged to the Bloomington Club. Founded in 1886 the club was an exclusive organization whose “primary object [was] to promote the business interest of Bloomington and the social enjoyment of its members.” The membership was limited to 150 and was made up of merchants, manufacturers, bankers, livestock dealers, judges, clergymen, and even nursery men. The club was located on the second floor of Withers Public Library on Washington and East Streets.

In about 1892 William married for a third and final time. He married Addie Seeley. There is no record of their marriage and little is known about her but she did sign the papers for his estate after his death. William and Addie were married for only about 7 years before his death in 1899.

On July 24, 1899, William died suddenly at the age of 70. In the spring of that year he had begun suffering from a kidney disease which had left him weak but he was expected to fully recover. His daughter Lillian had been attending him at his bedside for the two weeks leading up to his death. It was reported in his obituary that during those last few weeks, he had suffered greatly and that “death came to him as a happy release.”³⁴ His funeral was held at his home on West Wood Street with many friends and family in attendance. Local members of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias, both of which he was probably a member, also attended his funeral. In a testament to his wealth, he was laid to rest in a mahogany and copper casket which cost \$350.00 (over \$9,000 today). He was buried in the Van Schoick family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. At the time of his death he had no will so his estate was divided between his wife, Addie, and his two daughters, Lillian and Edith.

By: Emily Swartz, 2010

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³² Marquardt, Researcher notes on William Van Schoick

³³ Prince and Burnham, 1331

³⁴ “William Van Schoick Is Dead,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 24, 1899