

Thomas William Van Schoick (1829-1899)

Today most workers in Bloomington/Normal are in the insurance, health care, or education fields. One hundred years ago, industries here were very different. Fortunes were made, and sometimes, lost, in businesses that no longer can be found in Central Illinois. Thomas William Van Schoick was a successful brick maker, pork packing plant owner, and stove maker; all businesses he owned and operated in Bloomington, IL. None of these exist here today.

Thomas William Van Schoick always went by the name William. He was born in New Jersey in August 2, 1829 to a family of nine children. When he was seven, his family moved to Ohio. It was there, in Dayton, Ohio, that William began his working career, learning the printing trade. He didn't like it, so he became an apprentice in brick making and stove moulding (the casting of heating and cooking stoves) instead. While in Dayton, William married Cynthia Anderson. He was 22, she 17. They would have two daughters.

Shortly after their marriage, William and Cynthia moved to Richmond, Indiana. He became a well-known and respected brick maker throughout the entire region. It was documented that he and his workers turned out an astonishing 14,369 bricks in one 13 hour period of time. After setting this record, his men hoisted him on their shoulders and paraded him for miles within the city. He was considered the brick making champion in the United States. His fame even reached Canada. Brick making led him into building and contracting, and he was involved in the construction of several important buildings in Richmond.

In 1858, William, Cynthia, and their two year old daughter, Lillian, moved to Bloomington. They settled into a house on South Lee Street and almost immediately, William started his own brickyard. Two of his brothers joined him here, and eventually this business included three brickyards employing 300 to 400 men. Many of his bricks were used in the construction of important buildings in the growing city of Bloomington.

William was a man of many interests and great energy. In 1864 he was entered politics and was elected Alderman for the Third Ward. In 1868, he opened a successful billiards parlor across from the McLean County Courthouse. A year later, he helped found the Bloomington Stove Company. Initially he was a director of this company, but in 1885 became its president. The stove company was very successful, selling stoves throughout the southern and western United States. He was also a stockholder in the Third National Bank and the Bloomington Furniture Company. One of his few failures occurred when he was involved in setting up a traveling theatrical group of 26 people, a venture which cost him thousands of dollars.

Besides brick making and stove production, William was best known and for his controversial pork packing industry. In 1873 he, along with two other investors, purchased a former vineyard close to today's Home Sweet Home Mission near Evergreen Cemetery. At the intersection of Gridley Street and Oakland Avenue, they established a large pork packing plant. William was senior partner and general manager of the plant until 1890. This was an ideal place for the plant as it was close to the railroad. This meant hogs could be shipped to Bloomington and the finished meat products shipped out easily.

The packing plant was opened before refrigeration was invented so the packing season usually began in late November and lasted until February. The hogs were driven off railcars and kept in feed lots before they were slaughtered. Inside the plant, they were "killed, bled, scalded, gutted and disassembled." The pork was then processed into meat products and shipped on to consumers.

The pork packing factory, originally known as *William Van Schoick and Co.*, was one of several such plants in town. In 1876, McLean County was considered one of the greatest hog producing counties in Illinois and the pork packing industry brought hundreds of thousands of dollars to Bloomington. By 1889, the plant occupied three buildings, employed 75 men and processed between 12,000 and 15,000 hogs annually.

Perhaps being an astute businessman, or perhaps because he was simply losing interest, in 1890 William sold his majority interest in the packing plant to Chicago businessmen. He kept a one-third share of ownership, but gradually withdrew from management. Shortly after the sale, the residents of the area near the packing plant began complaining loudly through *The Pantagraph* about “vile odors” and “having to endure them.” The controversy went on for some time. Legal action was threatened, but none took place.

William was not as lucky in his personal life as he was in business. After 28 years, his first marriage ended in divorce. Cynthia later remarried and moved to Chicago. Interestingly, when she died 18 years later, she was brought back to Bloomington and buried in the Van Schoick family plot. William married again shortly after his divorce, but this marriage too ended unhappily. In about 1892, he married for the third and final time to Addie Seeley.

Besides his business interests, William remained active in community and social affairs. He was instrumental in creating Miller Park and was one of its first commissioners. Writing to the Bloomington City Council in 1886, he promoted the purchase of “Miller’s Pasture” to create the new park. He also gave about \$1,000 for the maintenance of the park after it was created. Later, he was treasurer of the Park Board and “gave much time to its improvement and beautification.” Because of this, a short street near the park is named Van Schoick street.

William also belonged to the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias and the Bloomington Club, an exclusive organization limited to 150 men devoted to the “business interests of Bloomington and the social enjoyment of its members.” This last group met for many years on the second floor of Bloomington’s Withers Public Library.

On July 24, 1899, William died suddenly at the age of 70. *The Pantagraph* reported that during the last few weeks he had suffered greatly (from a kidney disease) and that “death came to him as a happy release.” He was buried in the Van Schoick family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: What would you consider William’s greatest accomplishments...why would you choose these? Knowing what he did accomplish, what personal qualities did he have?

Bullets for William VanSchoick

- *Born in New Jersey 1829 one of nine children. Died in Bloomington at the age of 70.
- *Apprenticed to learn brick making and stove moulding (casting metal for cooking and heating stoves). Both skills bring him success in Bloomington.
- *Married three times. Two marriages end in divorce, the first after 28 years and two children.
- *Moved to Bloomington in 1858. Successful own- operator of both brick and stove manufacturing businesses. He also heads very profitable if controversial pork packing business.