

# **TOWN'S BABYHOOD REMEMBERED**

**BY CHARLES F. RABB**

**Aged Man Gives Word Picture of the Town 75 Years Ago.**

**Deep Mud and No Lights**

**Foot Bridges in Existence on the Square When He Was a Boy**

Changes that have taken place in Bloomsburg in the last 25 years are nothing compared to those that have taken place in the past 75 years, according to Charles F. Rabb, aged 81, of West Pine Avenue, who yesterday told of Bloomsburg as he remembered it between 1852 and 1854.

Time has not dulled the memory of this aged man who has resided here since he was a year and half old and who has seen Bloomsburg grow from a population of 2,500 to a fast growing community of 10,000.

The word picture he painted of Bloomsburg in his boyhood days is vastly different from that greeting the eye of the man today as he makes his way through Central Pennsylvania's Parlor City.

## **No Street Lamps**

The broad Main street at that time was a dirt road of none too good a foundation and "when it was inches deep in mud we had to make the best of it," Mr. Rabb said. "There were no street lamps of any kind and people traveling by night either had to carry lanterns or make their way in the dark. There was quite a bit of travel, however, for we didn't have to fear the highwayman and bandits as we do now days."

"The built-up portion of the town was small compared to what it is today. Main street was the center of the town. There were no buildings beyond what Main and Leonard streets or beyond Main and East streets. Rock street, known as First street, and Third street were the only two principal streets with the exception of the Main street.

"I'll describe Main street as I well remember it as a boy of about eight years and in order to do that best we'll start at West street and go up Main street on the north side," he said.

## **West Street Maiden Lane**

"West Street in those days was known as 'Maidens Lane' to us boys for there were a couple of maiden ladies who lived on it. On the corner of Main and West streets was a little story and a half house.

"Going up the street there was a big warehouse where the home of Charles E. Welliver now stands [#1, a town parking lot]. Warehouses were common in those days for with the canal as the one means of transportation merchants had to get enough goods during the summer to last them through the winter or they just didn't have anything to sell. These goods they placed in the warehouses.

Where the Hackett home is John Barton kept just a little ordinary store [#2, an apartment building at 237 W. Main] and then there were no buildings at all until where Frank Bomboy lives [#3, Allstate Insurance Co., 211 W. Main]. Dr. Hill, a physician, lived in a house where the Rutter home stands [#4, Blue Moose, 203 W. Main].

"Then there were two or three ordinary frame houses and then vacant lots to where the K.G.E. [Knights of the Golden Eagle] home is [#5, Clancy's Bistro, 125 W. Main]. There was a big warehouse there and adjoining that was a lumber yard.

### **Hardware Store Same Place**

"On the corner where the Moose home stands was a little hardware store run by Heffley and Mensch [#6, State Liquor Store, 109 W. Main]. They also kept the lumber yard and the chief article they sold there was cord wood. They bought wood then like they do coal now days. They had some fence railings for sale but the lumberyard didn't compare very well with the lumber yard of today.

"The Square was known as the Square just as it is today but there was nothing there, just a big open space. On either side of the Square and running down Market street were ditches to carry off the surface water from North Market street. At each corner of the Square there were small foot bridges over these ditches for the convenience of the pedestrians.

"Where the Pursel store is today McKelvey and Neal kept a Company store [#7, Exclusively You and Secretly Yours, 53 W. Main; it is still known as the Pursel building]. The men also operated the Bloomsburg Furnace and the men employed at the furnace dealt largely at this store.

### **No Bank Buildings**

"The Grotz property adjoining the Pursel store was about the same as it is today only, of course, it has been remodeled [#8, Salvation Army Store, 49 W. Main]. J. K. Grotz kept a saddler shop there then. Dr. M. A. Butler resided where the Farmers National Bank stands [#9, First National Bank, 37 W. Main] and then came the Courthouse [#10] but it was vastly different than it is today.

"Up the street from the Courthouse were a number of little buildings and then the home of a Mr. Struthers. Adjoining M. E. Rupert kept a tin shop and then was the Briggs home. J. M. Chamberlain, a chair maker, had a little shop where E. W. Ritter had his paper store [#11, Fine Arts and Hand Crafts, 33 E. Main, northwest corner at Miller Ave. and E. Main St.].

"Where the Gilmore building stands were a number of little log houses that had been used as machine shops [#12, northeast at corner of Miller Ave. and E. Main St.]. It was in one of those little houses that I first went to school. The building was roughly

finished inside and we sat on the smooth side of a big plank. There were no backs. Miss Martha Wills was our teacher and there were about 30 children in the school.

"Next was the home of Mrs. C. Creveling and then was the home and office of C. Kahler, the justice of the peace [#13, Costume Shop, 55 E. Main]. He didn't have enough business to make a living but as he and the constable were the only two officers elected in those days the position he occupied was one of importance.

"J. J. Brower, a grandfather of W. H. Brower, kept a store on the corner of Main and Iron streets where the store of J. L. Sharpless now stands [#14, Boomin' Bagels, 63 E. Main].

"On the other corner was the Episcopal burying ground [#15] and farther up at a place about where the rectory now stands was the church [#16]. It was a small brick building, one of the few brick buildings here then.

### **Tannery on Corner**

"Up at the corner was the Snyder tannery. It was located where the Eshelman service station is now (#17, Bloomsburg Diner) and you'll remember that when they were placing the service station they struck a tannery vat. [Daniel Snyder owned the tannery and the Forks Hotel.]

"On up from there was farm land. There were no buildings at all. At the end of the street stood the Forks Hotel [#18]. The old town pump that passed a number of years ago was at the back door of the hotel so you can see that building stood where the street runs now [up to Bloomsburg University]. It was a brick building two stories high and had a dozen or so rooms.

"Now we'll start down the street. On the corner Miss Snyder had her home [#19, now Dr. Kile's Dental Office, 204 East St.]. Where the store of Hoover and Weller stands Elias Mendenhall had a store in which he kept groceries and dry goods [#20, Berrigan's Sub Shop, 150 E. Main]. Then there was a vacant lot, a frame house and then a small brick house.

### **Shoe Making Trade Important**

"Mr. Solledder then had a shoe shop and shoe making was quite a trade in those days [#21, Van Dyke Goldsmith, 120 E. Main]. You couldn't buy shoes at the store then. You had to go to the shoemaker and have him make you a pair. David Stroup's home was next [#22, Bill Hess' Tavern] and adjoining it was a little building in which he kept a store. Then there was a vacant lot.

"There were two or three buildings where the Evans building stands [#23, southeast corner of Iron and Main Sts.] and in one of these my father moved when we first came to Bloomsburg. I was a year and a half old then.

### **Wouldn't Buy Corner at \$600**

"My father, Frederick Rabb, kept sort of a restaurant there. The place was owned by a man named Bidleman. It had a 66 foot frontage and extended back to Pine alley. Mr.

Bidleman offered the house and lot to my father for \$600 and would give him his own time to pay, and what do you think? My father didn't take it. My, what a price that place would bring today.

"On the other corner was a house in which the father of the late Stephen Boone lived [#24, southwest corner of Iron and Main Sts.] and then was the place of S. C. Shives. It was sort of a foundry for they made shoes last and different patterns. Louis Mars had a machine shop adjoining and where the Lowenberg store stands were a number of frame buildings belonging to Fred Dresher [#25, West Coast Video, 34 E. Main].

"Next to them was the frame house of J. A. Fetterman [#26, near Country Charm, 26 E. Main]. He was a boss at the Irondale Furnace and was therefore quite a man in the town.

### **Hotel on Same Site**

"Just above [east of] the Fetterman home was the old American House. It was run by an old man named Dobler and was located where the Central Hotel now stands (#27, Bittersweet and Candy Barrel, 22-24 E. Main]. Below [west of] the Fetterman home was a blacksmith shop run by a man named Silverthorne. There were a number of blacksmith shops around in those days and they all were busy.

"On the [southeast] corner [of Center and Main Sts.] where the Gelb and Mayer building stands was the store and home of Philip Unangst, the postmaster (#28, Dollar Store, 6 E. Main). Along with his postoffice duties he was a shoemaker. That was quite a busy place for everybody had to call for their mail. There was no free delivery.

"Across the [Center] street where the restaurant is, H. C. and I. W. Hartman kept a dry goods store [#29, a vacant lot]. Later they moved H. C. & I. W. Hartman Store down to where the Bloomsburg Hardware Company has its store now [#6, State Liquor Store]. Then came the Exchange block [#30, Millers, Walker's Jewelers, and Hill & Hill Law Offices, 6, 14, & 16 E. Main]. The building was about the same as today and then was the Exchange Hotel [#31, Magee's Main Street Inn, 20 W. Main].

### **Bank Site Was Home**

"Below the hotel was a little frame house where a woman kept a millinery shop. I can't recall her name now and then there was a vacant lot until where the First National Bank building now stands [#32, PNC Bank, southeast side of the square]. William McKelvey, one of the proprietors of the Bloomsburg Furnace, lived there then.

"Down below the Square where the Rishton building is a man by the name of Anthony Wilman kept a marble shop (#33, Dr. Johnson Optometrist, 102 W. Main) and below him a man kept a saddler shop. L. B. Rupert kept store, carrying dry goods and groceries, where Stecker's store is now (#34, Remit Corporation, 114 W. Main).

"There was a two-story building where Bart Pursel's building is a tin shop on the first floor and his brother Barney had a tailor shop upstairs [#35, now law offices of Derr, Pursel, Luschas, & Norton, 120 W. Main]. There was nothing down the street for quite a space. About where Snyder's confectionery store is (#36, Gehrig & Johnson CPA, 140 W. Main) a man named Weaver kept a store and lived in the brick house adjoining .

## **Several Newspapers**

"On the corner of what is now Jefferson street, John Stiner, a carpenter lived. Across the street in a house William Jacoby printed a weekly paper, *The Star of the North* [#37, Lynwood Real Estate Appraisal, 202 W. Main].

Mr. Rabb paused a little in his description of Main street to tell of the newspapers of that time. "Up in Court House Alley [#38, behind the First Columbia Bank] a man named [Col. Levi] Tate printed the *Columbia Democrat* and there was another paper, the *Columbia County Republican*, that was also printed at that time. It was printed in different locations but about that time I think it was quartered in the second story of the Exchange building (#30) and a Dr. [Palemon] John had charge of the paper."

Continuing his description of Main street, Mr. Rabb said: "Joseph Sharpless, grandfather of Charles and Joseph Sharpless, lived where Dr. John's home is now [#39, 114 W. Main] and he had a foundry located at the corner of Third and Center streets. Dr. Ramsey lived where the John lawn is [#40, lot east of Oyers Ave. and Main].

"On the other side of the [Oyers Ave.] alley was a hotel kept by a man named Bomboy. I don't believe that hotel had a name and it often changed proprietors. From there down to [Samuel] Papania store (#41, Into the Light, 260 W. Main) there were no buildings. And now we're back to where we started from.

## **Poor Walk over Stream**

"There were scarcely any walks in those days. Up where Snyder's run crosses Main street there was a stone arch bridge over the streets but on the pavement there were only boards laid across the run. It was safer to walk in the street at that point.

"There wasn't much amusement in those days as they think of it now. The chief thing was the circuses and when they came to town and the surrounding community went to see them. The circus lot used to be back of the Shuman Hardware store, between there and Pine avenue.

"All the stores kept open nights and we used to gather around there and talk. I remember many a store where tobacco juice had dried on the floor until it was about a half an inch thick.

## **Stage from Pottsville**

"The stage used to come through then from Pottsville. I don't remember how often it came or where it went to from here. That used to be quite an event. The stage was pulled by four horses with the teams changed every so far. The stage had heavy leather springs. What do you think of that?

"Some traveled by stage but it was a great deal nicer to go by canal. It was pretty fine to sit up on the deck of a pocket boat and travel.

"The Bloomsburg Furnace and the Bloomsburg Railroad Iron Company were the town's chief industries then. A laborer out at the furnace used to get \$7 a week, a good wage then, and those in charge of the work got \$15 a week. That was considered a good

salary. There was plenty of farm work to be had and a good cradler got 75 cents a day. A man who could gather with a good cradler got 62 ½ cents a day but if he had to have a helper he only got a 50 cents wage.

## To Church in Bare Feet

"The Lutheran and Reformed church was up where the new [high] school building is [#42, east corner of Center St. and First St.] and the Presbyterian church was down where the Yorks' home stands [#43, Dr. & Mrs. Yost's home, northeast corner of Third and Market Streets]. People didn't dress up so much to go to church then. Men often went in their shirt sleeves and sometimes they went barefooted.

"Little boys wore long pants in those days. I used to go to Sunday School in a pair of check cloth pants, a muslin shirt and a chip hat. A chip hat was a little straw hat that cost six cents. I didn't wear any shoes in the summer.

"The town was more independent of other communities than it is now. Just about everybody had their pigs and cows. Many wove their own cloth.

"Of course these conveniences are nice but in those days there was a great deal more freedom. There wasn't any thing like a hunting or fishing license and you could go out and pick berries and gather other things. Now days if you look over the fence somebody yells at you."

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**Editor's Note:** *The Morning Press* on March 1, 1927, published an interview of Charles F. Rabb. He was eighty-one years, a long-time Bloomsburg resident, who recalled what the town was like in the mid-1800s. He remarks centered on describing the town's Main Street by beginning along the north side from West Street up to East Street and then back down along the south side to West Street.

In order to help the reader better understand Rabb's account, the original article has been edited by inserting brackets with information to show the locations where they are today. At the beginning of each bracket there will be a number that identifies the specific place on the Main St. map, below, that he mentioned. Remember, in Bloomsburg an alley is called an avenue.

The article is a verbatim reprint as it appeared in the newspaper. Collectively, Molly Harter, Pat Parker, and George A. Turner identified the locations on the map that Rabb discussed.

