

Historic Argyle's PAST TIMES

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Argyle History -- The 1890s



Upper left: Argyle's first bank was built in 1895. Lower left: City Hotel was located across the street from Rossings. Above: John Wahler's barbershop is shown on the left. The three brick buildings on the right housed Rossing's store prior to their present day structure on the corner.

Nationally, the mid-1890s was a time of severe recession, which started with the Panic of 1893; however, Argyle weathered this storm fairly well. Indeed, the village prospered with a growing number of businesses and, by 1897, a shortage of housing. In 1895 James S. Waddington and sons opened Argyle's first bank with over \$40,000 (\$1.2m) in assets, which more than quadrupled by the turn of the century. The same year the town replaced the single-lane "wagon bridge" with a much wider and stronger iron bridge. Earlier in the decade, L. A. Rossing doubled the size of his store and M. J. Rude put up a new larger building to house his growing shoe repair business. The grist mill was busier than ever, but the opening of the lumber yard in 1888 put the adjacent lumber mill out of business. Randall and James Buckmaster took over the jewelry store from A. E. Thoreson and expanded into optical and musical goods—and even bicycles. Charles Haldeman opened a meat market next to the City Hotel; J. R. Threadgold and son opened a warehouse next to the train depot and traded in livestock

and farm implements; John Wahler opened a barber shop between Rossing's store and the Saxton house; and the Thompson brothers from Fayette took over the livery stables. In 1898 Dr. C. A. Hansen put up a new brick drugstore with his offices on the second floor.

All this prosperity was mainly due to the arrival of the long-awaited railroad service, which started in 1888 and opened up the Chicago markets for livestock, cheese, butter, eggs, cordwood, and even ice. The local creamery, built by Elgin, Illinois entrepreneur John Newman in 1890, produced butter year-round at a time that most cheese factories closed for the winter. On Mondays, the day livestock was shipped out of the Argyle depot, the town was usually full of farmers from surrounding areas, especially Fayette, Lamont, and Willow Springs bringing their hogs and cattle, and filling up Argyle's three hotels. On a good day, stock dealer A. G. Hawley would ship 15 cars of livestock to the Chicago slaughterhouses. Another reason the local population did not suffer much from the recession was that the farmers

were quite self-sufficient, raising much of their own food and relying on large families for labor. Land was relatively cheap at that time averaging \$45 (\$1,300) per acre—about the same price as a milk cow—and lots in Argyle went for about \$350 (\$10,000).

Argyle's prosperity allowed it to generously support Nebraska farmers in January 1895. When a call came for aid a group of citizens quickly formed an ad hoc committee to organize a door-to-door appeal. This reaped a carload of flour, groceries, and clothes to send to desperate farmers suffering from an epic drought. Former Argyle teacher Elisha Taylor, then a resident of Curtis County Nebraska, visited Argyle in April and "complimented the people of Argyle on their liberality in contributing \$1,000 (\$30,000) of supplies" and left with even more assistance in the form of loans and donations so the farmers could buy seed.

The November 1896 presidential election between Republican William McKinley, who advocated the continuation of laissez-faire economic

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At age 101, we presume Helen to be Argyle High School's oldest living alumna – a graduate of the class of 1938. I first met Helen at a Historic Argyle LaFollette Day event. Accompanied by her two daughters, she was engaging and interesting and enjoyed being back in Argyle. Helen was born April 13, 1920 – as the Spanish flu was coming to an end. Helen was informed her mother had been afflicted by the flu, but fortunately it did not claim her life. Helen's childhood was spent in Wiota. In the 1920's Wiota was a thriving little town that had everything a family needed – no need to drive to a larger town, as there was a grade school, a church close by, several mercantiles, grocery store, lumber yard – even a dance hall for entertainment. Prior to electricity, kerosene lamps were used to light their houses and barns. Food items that needed to be kept cold were kept in the home's root cellar.

Along with the hardships prior to electricity and plumbing, health care was obviously not as advanced as it is today and usually included a house call from the local doctor. When Helen was 9 years old, her sister, Genevieve, contracted lobar pneumonia. With penicillin not yet available, the family was informed nothing could be done to save her. An older brother, Clyde, was staying in Argyle to attend high school and he was brought home to say his goodbye



school office. Part of her duties for that job included selling tickets to the basketball games at Phillipson's Hall. For one of the games, Helen traded her orange sweater in exchange for a couple blouses so her friend (who was a cheerleader) would have something orange to wear.

As was common in that era, before year-books, senior classmates would exchange name cards and write little notes on the backs of them. Helen has saved all those name cards – from 83 years ago. What fun we had reading those notes from her former classmates.

Helen's graduating class of 26 students were attired in new graduation gowns, just purchased by the school district. As class president, she gave the address to the class "Happiness is to Love One's Duty", as reported in the June 2, 1938 edition of the Argyle Atlas.

Post High School Work Experience

After graduating from high school, Helen enrolled in business courses at the Vocational School in Madison. Her former Latin teacher, Pete Morgan, suggested she should go to the UW in Madison instead because she certainly had the intelligence to do so. However, Helen knew her family could not afford to send her to the UW, so she enrolled at the Vocational

Meet Helen Gilbertson Johnson

by Kristine O'connor

to Genevieve. Unfortunately, he also succumbed to the same type of pneumonia. They died a week apart and are both buried at the West Wiota Cemetery. Helen also had three other brothers.

Helen's School Years

Helen completed grade school in Wiota – at the Hawley School. When it was time to attend high school and with no school buses at that time, it was up to the individual families to find transportation for the children. For Helen, a neighbor girl was attending school in Darlington so she rode with her every day to complete her freshman year there. When Helen's neighbor graduated, Helen found a ride to Argyle and completed her high school years at AHS.

Helen has many good memories from her years in the beautiful brick building that was home to Argyle High School. Their principal was the beloved C. F. Thompson – all the students called him "prof". Helen's favorite subjects included English and history. She remembers her favorite teacher as Delores Hendrickson, who taught English and was also the forensics coach. Helen's senior year was quite memorable as she was elected class president, which also entitled her to be named queen of the prom. Helen remembers wearing a long pink dress and her date was Robert Rossing. Another honor her senior year was being selected to be the office girl in the



School. In the middle of the 2nd semester, the L.A. Rossing store was in need of a bookkeeper and Viola Rossing approached Helen's mother, asking if Helen would come back to work at Rossing's Store. So Helen did, living at Viola's house for a while and later in one of the apartments in the Rossing building. From Rossing's, Helen took a job at the REA office in Darlington. While there, she had an opportunity to work at Philgas in Madison. She worked there until the fall of 1942 when she had saved enough money to enroll at the UW. But

she still needed a part-time job to cover expenses so she worked at the UW History Dept. She attended the UW for one year – then took a full time job with the First National Bank in Madison. While employed there, her old boss from Philgas offered her a good salary to work for them again, and she stayed with Philgas until her marriage in 1945.

Helen's First Vote

Helen cast her first vote for a U.S. President for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940. Newspapers and radio were her source for current and up-to-date information. Helen remembers that even though her family didn't have much money, they always subscribed to The Capital Times. She remembers fighting with her siblings as to who would get to read the comic section first. To this day, Helen still reads a daily paper.

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Argyle Schools 1851-1922

Submitted by Greg Rossing

Argyle's first public school, established in 1851, was housed in a wooden building that stood on the site of the present day Lutheran Church. In 1857 the district bought a half interest in the Baptist church, a large stone structure that stood on the southeast corner of what we now call the old school block. A year later the Baptist church sold its remaining interest in the building to the school district and moved into a smaller wood frame building across the street. The school was organized much like a traditional rural school, containing all grades in one large room, usually taught by just one teacher.

During the spring and summer of 1876 the district tore down the stone building and put up a 36x60 foot wood frame structure—similar to Partridge's Hall, which was built two years later. The new school's two lower rooms were finished but the upper story, later used for the high school, was left unfinished and a grade school of two departments was established. The school was run in this way for two years, after which the upper room was finished and a third teacher was employed to teach the older students. In 1883 the district established a three-year high school course, and in 1886 the first Argyle High School graduates received their diplomas—they were Nellie Partridge, Belle Pickett, and Alice Robertson. In that year there were 63 primary level students, 45 intermediate, and 32 in the high school. In 1889 a large addition to the school house was built and the high school was changed to a four-year course, which meant it could be accredited for university entrance.

In 1919 the Atlas publisher, George G. Gaskill, had been drumming up support for a new school for months before the annual school meeting in July. A large number of local citizen attended and a motion to proceed with a new building was carried by a vote of 71 to 16. Ground was broken the first week of September 1920 and a handsome red brick building was completed in time for the beginning of school in the fall of 1921. It had floors of polished crushed granite, an upper floor for the high school with an auditorium and stage, and rooms for the lower grades on the first floor. The basement contained lockers and shower stalls for



Above: Image of the "Argyle School Building" was taken in 1889, shortly after the addition was constructed. Below: Both grade school, and high school, students received their education in this memorable brick structure. The building was torn down in 2019.



the athletic program and a coal-burning furnace to provide steam heat to the building. On June 8, 1922, thirteen graduates received their diplomas in the auditorium of the new school building,

with Herbert Muenich giving the valedictory address. Prior to this graduation exercises were held in the Methodist Church, Partridge's Hall or in the Philipson Opera House.

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CCC Camp

Helen remembers the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corp) Camp that was built west of Argyle on what is now County Trunk N. By 1935, the camp consisted of 13 buildings – 4 barracks housing 108 men, a mess hall, kitchen, garages, warehouses and even a hospital. An influx of 108 men to the Argyle community prompted a few marriages to local women. The men performed a variety of projects from clearing snow from the railroad tracks during the vicious winter of 1935-36 to planting trees the following spring. After a short life, the camp was closed and all that remains of the former camp are the limestone pillars that once marked the entrance to the camp.

WW II

Helen's memory of the start of America's involvement in WW II includes the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Helen and her husband-to-be, Lester, were taking Lester's sister to the train station in Chicago. Lester's sister had planned to attend the Barry Institute in California (a treatment facility for those afflicted with polio). Lester didn't want his sister to go, fearing that California would be bombed soon after Pearl Harbor. However, Lester's sister insisted and she went on to lead a successful life as an accordion player with a band. Lester served in the Army for 1 ½ years in the south Pacific. When the war ended, Helen remembers everyone ran out into the streets yelling, "it's over".

Marriage

Helen first met her future husband at a dance at Phillipson's Hall. Helen was 17 and her husband-to-be was 33 – quite

an age difference. They did not marry until December of 1945, after Lester returned from the South Pacific. Their pink, flowered wedding china was purchased at Berget's Jewelry in Argyle and their honeymoon was spent in Florida. Lester could never pass up a "good deal", so when he had a chance to sell his car while in Florida, he did, and they took the train back home.

Helen and Lester spent their entire married life in Monroe where Lester sold cars and then entered into real estate. They were married for 45 years, raising three lovely daughters together.

Helen always remained active in community service, being involved with her church, Questers, Girl Scouts, PTA, Eastern Star, AFS, and the Monroe Women's Club. She quite often served as secretary for the organizations she joined. Helen stays healthy by eating grapefruit each morning but her preferred diet is pie and black coffee! She also enjoys walking, doing crossword puzzles, reading (especially biographies), playing Bridge, and following the Brewers and the Packers. She held a driver's license until the age of 97.

When asked "Who made a difference in your life?" Helen answered that it was her older brother, Bernard. He graduated from Argyle High School at the age of 16, took a job in Beloit and moved to Seattle, WA. Helen said she loved his sense of adventure when he was a young man and also that he was smart, thoughtful, caring and a hard worker. The other major influence in Helen's life was her daily newspaper, books, and magazines that her uncle, Floyd Olson, would share with Helen's family.

One of Helen's dreams was to live in New York City, work at the New York Times and live in Greenwich Village. That dream never materialized but Helen still says, "It's been an interesting life."



INVITATION

Historic Argyle invites all alumni to visit the old Red Front Building and the Saxton House, boyhood home of Robert M. LaFollette during Homecoming festivities on Oct. 9th. Visit us at 204 N. State Street -- take a step back in time, revisit your roots and reminisce with old friends. Buildings will be open from 11 am until 4 pm.

Bricks from the old school and alumni books will be available for purchase.

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policies, and the populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan, who wanted to rein in big business and the railroads, was hotly debated in the Argyle area. After McKinley won in a landslide, the Argyle Atlas reported on enthusiastic celebrations in Argyle and Blanchardville which drew many people into the streets, and included local brass bands, glee clubs, fireworks, speeches, a dance, and a parade with many lively floats and thirty white horses. The recurring issue that dominated the local April elections was whether the town would be wet or dry—"license or no license." Argyle remained dry throughout the decade, except for 1894 and 1895. This trend continued into the next century, sustained by an amazing number of temperance groups, often associated with the local churches—even the local Catholic church, led by the active involvement of the young Father Sylvester J. Dowling, organized a local temperance society.



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Membership

Individual: \$20 per year
Family: \$25 per year
Business: \$30 per year
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New Members are Welcome

Be sure to visit our website:

historicargyle.org
also our Facebook page

Historic Argyle is a non-profit organization created to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage and architectural history of the people and places of the Argyle, Wisconsin area. Incorporated in 2000, for the primary purpose of acquiring and restoring Argyle's "Saxton House", the boyhood home of Robert M. La Follette from 1862-1870.