

A History of Argyle: A New Century
by Gregory Rossing
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Argyle's prosperity of the 1890s continued into the new century with increased optimism for future growth and innovation. During Argyle High School's 1900 commencement program, Valedictorian Hjalmar Rossing gave a speech in which he proclaimed that the end of the nineteenth century "marks the close of the grandest epoch in the history of the world . . . each year brings forth important inventions and it is impossible to realize what many of us will live to see." He lived to see man walk on the moon.

Many others shared his optimism. One of them was the indefatigable Atlas publisher and editor George G. Gaskill. In various articles since taking over the paper in 1885 he had been advocating for many village improvement, such as good schools, more housing, local telephone service, electric street lighting, a waterworks system, village incorporation, and a new cemetery. All of these, and more, came into being over the next sixteen years leading up to World War I.

In fact, by the end of 1916 things were going so well that Gaskill penned the following words in an essay he titled "Progress and Prosperity"—and prominently displayed it "above the fold" in the October 6 Atlas:

Argyle never was as prosperous as at the present time, business was never better and there never was such a building boom within our borders . . . The demand for residences cannot be supplied by the building contractors . . . and residence property is bringing better prices than ever before . . . Houses are not allowed to go vacant for any length of time . . . and rents are higher than ever before and yet in . . . most instances reasonable . . . Laboring men are getting better wages and there are more jobs than men . . . and the women and children are all well dressed and apparently happy.

Many things had happened in the previous years to inspire his proclamation. In 1900, a group of civic-minded citizens put up their own money to establish the Woodlawn Cemetery on a beautiful hilltop-site just north of the village, and a year later the St. Joseph's congregation added Calvary Cemetery just across the road. At the same time, another group of business-minded residents established the Argyle Telephone Company—that eventually connected up to thirteen rural farmer lines and several long-distance toll lines.

In 1903, after an incorporation referendum passed, Frank A. Waddington, was elected the first village mayor. This allowed the newly formed village council to implement many needed improvements—the first being the leveling of main street and replacing the old uneven boardwalks with cements walks throughout the business district and into some of the residential areas. Two years later, the village council, raised \$15,000 to install a power plant and waterworks. Work started immediately on a new two-story hydroelectric power plant next to the grist mill, and, in November 1906, mayor John Powell ceremoniously switched on the long-awaited street lights. Several buildings were already wired, and, as Gaskill wrote, "It won't be long before we all have them. People driving in from the west at night are struck by the beauty of

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the scene and think we are having a carnival.” Argyle now had an excellent and reliable source of power that over the long run paid for itself. However, no funds were left for the waterworks. For that the village would have to wait another seven years.

In July 1913, the village tested its newly installed waterworks system by hooking up hoses to various fire hydrants placed around the village. The water pressure from the 14,000-gallon water tower, located at the highest point in the village, was enough to easily send a stream of water over the Lutheran Church steeple, and, when they tested the hydrants in the business district, “the boys got their shirts wet . . . started a water fight and made things interesting . . . everyone on the street had to be ready to dodge.” A month later, twenty-one local men organized a volunteer fire department with C.A. Lavassor picked to be the first chief and Charles Perrigo as foreman. Argyle now had excellent fire protection and a waterworks that Gaskill crowed was “second to none.”

This era also saw the addition of many substantial buildings, most of which still stand today. In 1898, the same year Dr. Hansen built his two-story brick drugstore, L.A. Rossing was planning to build a millinery shop attached to the east side of his double-store. However, events forced him to delay this until 1903. Two years later, J.J. Uren, who had earlier moved his hardware business to Argyle from Blanchardville started construction on a large solid brick store just east of the Hansen drugstore. Five years after that, at his sons’ urging, L.A. Rossing built a “grand new store on the corner,” which necessitated moving the Saxton house two blocks north. It opened in September 1911—four years before the Phillipson brothers put up an equally impressive garage with a large hall on the second floor: The “Opera House” took over from Partridge’s Hall and housed dances, graduations, wrestling matches, plays, movies, and even served as the basketball court for the Argyle schools.

They didn’t waste any time in getting good use out of the Opera House. The November 1915 slate of events included the following: A dance, a moving picture show, the Thanksgiving Ball, a home talent play, Leona Lamar (“the girl with 1,000 eyes”) and the Shannon Stock Company. Below in the garage, the Phillipson brothers were doing very good business selling Model T touring car for \$490 and Ford tractors to the local farmers. And when the handsome new Masonic Temple was dedicated in December 1916, Gaskill wrote, “Again the village of Argyle makes a perfect score . . . its excellent municipal electric light and water system, together with extensive street improvements are among the best in the county . . . and [now] the Argyle Lodge is the most imposing example of architecture in the county.” Additionally, in 1903, St. Joseph’s built a large prominent rectory just north of the church and the Lutheran church put up an equally impressive parsonage in 1910.

This was also good times for farmers. Farm commodity prices had been rising since the turn of the century. The prosperous 5-10 year period before 1914 is often referred to as the Golden Age of Agriculture. In the summer of 1906, Green County had over 200 cheese factories and 28 butter creameries in operation, supported by 30,000 milk cows. Within a few mile radius of Argyle

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alone there were over 40 cheese factories that shipped their brick, Limburger, Swiss, and American varieties out of the local train depot.

1915 was a very eventful and prosperous year for Argyle. In addition to the placement of a large ornamental water fountain in the main crossroads, the village started all-day electrical service, cement walks were extended to many parts of the village, the new Commercial Bank announced a quadrupling of its assets, the L.A. Rossing Company opened branch stores in Lamont and Fayette, and Phillipsons tripled their sales of cars from a year earlier—contributing to a doubling of cars registered within the village. In July, a week-long Chautauqua program was held in what would become Grandview Park, and, just two weeks later, the village held a grand “Homecoming and Booster Day” with a large parade, three bands, much entertainment, and field events (which included a three-legged race and a tug of war billed as “Argyle against the world”). That summer, villagers could also attend a tented vaudeville show, and stock company plays and “moving pictures” in the Opera House. Sixty-two students were enrolled in the high school that fall—the largest enrollment in four years—attracting many students from surrounding rural school districts.

Nonetheless, the year was not without its mishaps and tragedies. In addition to a devastating flood and fire that destroyed the train depot, Gunderson’s cheese factory burned to the ground, a local cheesemaker was killed by lightning, there was a murder in Mineral Point, and the Atlas recorded the usual high number of infant deaths, suicides, and many lives cut short by the tuberculosis epidemic. The local prohibition of alcohol sales didn’t stop the Covey Hotel (and other “blind pigs”) from surreptitiously serving liquor in its basement, and three rotten eggs struck a temperance lecturer on Main Street. At the national level, the Atlas reported on the sinking of the Lusitania, a harbinger of darker times to come.

The Atlas also reported on the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in the summer of 1914 and the brutal German advances through Belgium into northern France; however, after the war settled into a stalemate of trench warfare, the local people seemed to lose interest. Indeed, in September 1916, Gaskill wrote, “The European war has had little significance to the American people of late, compare to the railroad strikes.” Prior to the war, Argyle high school students would often choose to follow a rigorous German course of study which included German language instruction in all four years, and, in September 1915, a popular German-language teacher got the entire junior class to sign up. All this, and much, much more, changed after Congress declared war on Germany in April 1917.