

Journey Into the Heart of a Small Town

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If you went out for a drive through southeastern Wisconsin on a spring or summer day and just happened to pull off of Interstate 43 into the small, rural community of East Troy, you may find yourself driving around the town square. As you proceed clockwise around the Square, you may be surprised to realize that all the children playing there are pointing at you and laughing. If you were to stop and inquire as to what was so funny, you would probably get the response, "Everyone knows that you don't drive that way around the Square." As you take a look around, you do notice that this is not a normal block in the village. In fact, every building is facing the grassy square of land on which stands a brick bandstand. Although the buildings are not new, the front of each is immaculate, as are the streets and sidewalks that separate them from the grass. You wonder why this area is so different from the rest of the village, which seems rather plain.

To fully understand, it would be necessary to travel back in time and to experience the changes that have occurred on and around this piece of land. In many cases, these changes reflect those occurring in the larger community. To a member of the community, the Square is an image of the cohesiveness and tradition that abounds in this small rural town. To an outside observer, the Square is perhaps the best snapshot of this area's history.

The first development on the Square occurred in the early 1800s. A stagecoach trail ran through East Troy and a livery stable was needed at which travelers could keep their horses (Memories Around the..., p. 1). The horses and people that came on this trail probably pushed many of the native animals, such as coyote and deer, away from the Square. As the horses stopped for the night, they grazed on the area's grass and trampled the soil. This led to the presence of dandelions and other weed species we see on the square today. The human travelers stayed at an inn, built in 1836, which no longer stands.

As more people traveled this path, more lodging was needed. Samuel Bradley and his wife decided that they would build a fine inn. Bradley took this mission very seriously and began constructing the three-story inn, which still stands at present. This inn was truly a part of its landscape. Every cobblestone was selected by Bradley from amongst the glacial drift that is strewn over the fields and along the shores of Booth Lake and Lake Beulah, both of which are located within a few miles of the inn. Bradley gathered these rocks with his horse and wagon or in his rowboat and added them to his pile of cobblestones. Finally, in 1846, Bradley hauled the stones into town in his wagon and began construction on the inn, which was to be called the Buena Vista House. As can be imagined, this fine new inn brought quite a few travelers into the area upon its opening and subsequent operation (Memories Around the..., p.1). Although this constant traffic caused a great deal of wear on the land, the inn was a source of pride for all who lived in the area.

Not only was the area experiencing more traffic as a result of the high quality accommodations, a railroad would soon run through East Troy. Two local farmers, Jacob Burgit and Austin McCracken, speculated that this railroad would change East Troy from a settlement into a town. In the settlement, no main street existed, which these men thought was necessary for homes and businesses. To eradicate this situation, both men deeded a parcel of his land in perpetuity to East Troy. The new Main Street circled the Square. On the Square, a wooden bandstand was constructed. The establishment of the Square reflected the establishment of the town around it. At this point, the town was platted and homestead lots were offered to those who would build on and improve them (Memories Around the..., p.1).

As the area grew further, more businesses were constructed around the Square. In fact, most of the buildings on the Square were built between the 1850s and the 1900s. Main Street was a

dirt road, as were all the roads in the area. Continued use of the streets caused many dust problems and the streets were sprayed to keep the amount of dust down. Stone sidewalks abutted the streets to make foot travel around the Square feasible. A split wood fence surrounded the grassy middle of the Square, on which stood many mature trees. It was obvious that timber was in excess in the East Troy area at this time and labor was not from looking at the stacked zigzag construction of the fence. One could look at the physical features of the Square in the early 1900s and tell that it was a place where much happened. Not only was it one of the few places illuminated by electric lights which hung over the street, but dirt footpaths could be seen traversing the grass. If one did not know that the Square was used as a social gathering place, it would have appeared to be a grazing patch where the animals had worn off the grass and had compacted the soil of their favorite paths.

Many of the Square's features still remained into the 1930s but the East Troy area and, subsequently, the Square were changing. An electric railroad now connected East Troy to Milwaukee, Racine, and Kenosha (Olson). This railroad brought more business, visitors, and inhabitants to East Troy. As a result, more businesses and buildings started to spring up around the Square and the existing businesses were constantly being improved to accommodate the influx of people. More celebrations were also held on the Square and people came from miles around to participate in them. As the community thrived, a sense of permanency and stability was created. This was seen in the willingness of the townspeople to invest in a more modern brick bandstand, which still stands today (*Memories Around the...*, p.1). The use of brick also reflects the greater degree to which East Troy was connected to other places. The first bandstand had been made of wood because wood grew in the area and transportation of other materials to rural areas was neither cheap nor easy. By the 1930s, transportation of materials was much

easier, especially with the new railroad, and bricks could be imported from other places and used in the bandstand's construction. In this way, places other than East Troy were quickly making their way into East Troy's structure and tradition.

As the Square of the 1930s reflected the changes of that era, the Square of today reflects the town of today as well as the town of the past. One can see some semblance of what the Square once looked like on a lot vacated in 1983, when the building standing there went up in flames in a horrible, Christmas Eve fire (*The Story of...*, p 10). Since the fire, brush and small trees have gradually grown up and one can see a glimmer of what the land may have once looked like.

It seems that the townspeople also want the land to look as it once did. Since many of the buildings have been demolished or partially demolished by fire or other causes and then rebuilt, an interesting mosaic of buildings, many connected, exists in this place. An attempt has been made to restore many of the buildings on the Square to their original appearance. An example is the old opera house. This building received its facelift in 1990 (*Memories Around the...*, p. 9). Lights, specially designed to look like the old gas lamps that illuminated the Square, have been installed. These gas lamps may look like the old ones but one must not be tricked. They are loaded with modern technology. This is the case in many instances of Square restoration. Appearances are much the same as they were many years ago, but the uses of the buildings and the technology that those uses represent has changed drastically.

Although the buildings may have changed, the grassy area in the middle looks much like it has for many years. Many watermelons have been consumed on this Square as residents and visitors alike have attended the annual Lions Club Memorial Day Picnic. As one watches a small boy dropping seeds as he walks around the edge of the Square, it solves the mystery of where the watermelon plants come from that grow along the Square's edge at the Fourth of July.

These plants are short lived, however, because those that are not trampled by the spectators of the Fourth of July Parade are killed when the parade horses step up onto the edge of the Square as they wait impatiently for the parade to move. As one watches these docile horses trampling the plants it is obvious that, many years ago the horses pulling wagons did the same. The bare edge of dirt around the Square is nothing new and will probably be there as long as people consider this the center of town. Although dogs rather than coyotes now run on the Square, to the people of this town this piece of land seems to fit in with their image of a rural, natural place.

It seems rather ironic that the Square, the ultimate symbol of the small town cohesiveness that presides here, was sparked almost completely by forces from outside the town. It began as a stop on a horse trail and remained popular because it was on the electric railroad line. Still today, many of its traditional celebrations are attended by or held primarily for visitors that travel to the area via Interstate 43.

As you are driving out of town after your day in East Troy, you ponder the role this small, historic plot of land plays in this town. As you drive through the landscape of the rural areas of the Kettle Moraine State Park and the agricultural land that surrounds that park, and then move into the urban areas of Milwaukee, you realize that the Square, like East Troy itself, is a juxtaposition of urban and rural influences. The Square is the center of a community and yet it is a park, different from the buildings which surround it. In the past, it was the pasture of European immigrant grazing animals and then the livery stable, blacksmith shop, and leather goods shop that sustained the keeping of domestic animals. It is a historic stamp on the land of all these things.

Works Cited

- Olson, T.(1994). The Three Worlds. Unpublished paper, University of Wisconsin at Madison.
- East Troy Area Historical Society. (1991, June). Memories Around the Square—2nd edition. (East Troy)
- East Troy Volunteer Fire Department. (1984). The Story of Fire and Ice: Christmas Eve 1983, East Troy, WI. (EastTroy)

Background Resources

Photographs from the Wisconsin Historical Society's Iconographic Collection. All were from the place file for East Troy, Wisconsin. They were the photos from the following dates: 1895 (Copy negative no. WHI (X3) 2946), 1900-1905, 1909 (Copy negative no. WHI (C7) 6516), May 16, 1932, 1940 (Copy negative no. WHI (X3) 21531).