

## **Lansing Pioneers**

### **SR 5/18/01**

In the old days the first business house of importance in Lansing was the general store of Bush, Thomas & Lee, built in the spring of 1847 on the east side of the Grand river and on the south side of Main st. Its first head clerk was William Hinman, who came to Lansing from Howell, Mich., while the store was building.

Two days of hard traveing were required for Mr. Hinman to reach Lansing from Howell, a journey which is now made in about an hour and a half. He was obliged to go straight north from Howell into Shiawassee county, and reach the young capital by a round about way. He found the store in which he was to work by far the most prominent building in Lansing, and the general line of goods sold there from this side of Detroit. Across main st from the store was a tiny establishment with the overwhelming title "National Hotel." During the summer of '47 a bridge was built at Main st and soon thereafter another microscopic hostelry appeared on the west side of the river, ycleped the "Michigan House." Work began immediately upon the state house, the site for which had been chosen in a dense forest of beech, maple, oak, ash and elm. All the timber was chopped, none sawed. The capitol grounds had to be cleared, the state was chopping out the line of several streets, and many new settlers were clearing land to build their primitive houses. This circumstance created a boom in axes, and Mr. Hinman says that it was not uncommon for him to sell tree or four boxes a day, each box contained a dozen.

Work was rushed on the new capitol, which would be needed in about 8 months for the secession of the legislature. The state officers lent their assistance, and with axes in their official hands would enter competitive chopping matches. The capitol was made ready for the legislature Jan. 1, 1848, despite the difficulties which obstructive the work. The contractor was a Jackson man named Porter. He purchased a greater part of his material and incidentals from Bush, Thomas & Lee, and by the middle of August his account amounted to nearly \$800. About this time it became apparent to Mr. Hinman that Porter would not fulfill his contract, and none of the firm being in Lansing, Hinman assumed the responsibility of refusing to honor the contractor's orders.

Col. Glenn of Kalamazoo, who was building commissioner, called at the store to ascertain why orders were not filled, and Hinman convinced him that the contract would not be kept. A new arrangement was made whereby Porter gave up the work. Col. Glenn took charge and secured the debt. Then by tall hustling the capitol was nearly enough finished to serve for the secession of 1848. All the stone used in the construction was taken from the river near the present fair grounds, carried in boats to the foot of River st, and hauled to the site.

It was hoped that the Benton House would be completed also in time to accommodate the members. Green lumber was rafted down the river from Eaton Rapids, and placed in a kiln which been built near the hotel site. The night before the day set for its removal from the kiln Mr. Hinman saw from the store a red light through the woods to the west. The

citizens gathered hastily, and in sad helplessness watched their embryo hotel transformed into a heap of feathery ashes.

The hotel was built a year later, and in 1849 Mr. Hinman rented it, its landlady being the daughter of his senior employer, to whom he was married in 1848. The big tavern was the social center of the new city, and the dining room, 30x50, echoed often to the merry scrape of fiddlers and the rhythm of dancing feet. There also were spread the political banquets in which legislative orators, not an extinct species the, says Mr. Hinman , responded to toasts or raised their voices in convivial song. A memorable supper was one which General Cass celebrated his election to the United States senate. The hospitable old gentleman gave Mr. Hinman \$500, and instructed him, after reserving seats fro the legislators and state officials, to “invite everybody.” And everybody came to enjoy the venison, partridge and quail from the surrounding forests, and champagne set out from Detroit.

Some 400 Chippewa Indians lived in this region when Lansing became the capital. Mr. Hinman traded extensively with them, buying their furs and paltries. And be it remembered to the credit of the firm and its head clerk, no firewater entered into the bargains. Chief Okemos came to the store nearly everyday, looking for a new or at least a willing listener to his tales of war and rapine.

To refer again to the oratory of the mid-century, Mr. Hinman says that it was a treat to go to the senate or house when an important measure was to be considered. Among the fine speakers of the old days he recalls Robert McClennan, George W. Peck, Charles Bush, Judge Wipple, A.H. Hanscome, and Senators Littlejohn, McCloud and Crane.