

Abraham Brokaw (1815-1905)

Abraham Brokaw (he preferred to go by Abram), was born November 6, 1815 in Somerset County, New Jersey. He was the son of William and Helen Ditmus Brokaw. The Brokaw family traced their heritage to Protestant French Huguenots who fled France due to religious persecution. The Brokaw family settled in Holland before emigrating to the United States.

Abram attended school until the age of twelve. He remained and worked on his father's farm until he was eighteen years old when he was apprenticed to Darius Gilmore as a wheelwright. He learned that producing wheels requires strength, ingenuity, and the talents of both a carpenter and a blacksmith. In 1836 Gilmore came west and brought Brokaw with him. Abram walked much of the way as the wagons were heavily loaded. Gilmore settled in Springfield where Brokaw finished his apprenticeship under a different master. Abram used this opportunity to develop his skills and soon became a master wheelwright.¹

In October of 1836 Abram formed a partnership with Jacob Leader and they came to Bloomington. At this time there were only about 450 residents in Bloomington.² Brokaw had a letter of introduction to Lewis Bunn. They gave Bunn a fifty dollar deposit to build a wagon shop for them to be located at Front and Madison Streets. Afterwards, they both wanted to back out as hard times were thought to be coming and banks were breaking. Bunn refused and built the shop on his own land. Leader went back to Springfield and Brokaw leased the building from Bunn. It was in that shop that Brokaw manufactured the first wagon in McLean County.³

Soon after that Brokaw realized that it would be more profitable to make plows instead of wagon wheels. Around 1840 he entered into a partnership with Oliver Ellsworth who was a blacksmith and foundry man and they maintained a shop for over thirty years. Their shop was first located at Madison and Front Streets. After a few years they moved their shop to a larger location at the corner of Washington and Center Streets (today the site of Commerce Bank). Finally, in 1858 Brokaw purchased land from Lewis Bunn for about \$1,000 and moved their shop to North Main and Market Streets.⁴ Their goal was to make the very best product and establish a reputation for quality and workmanship. The longevity of their business attested to their success and their philosophy. After Ellsworth died in 1871, Brokaw continued for a number of years employing as many as 30 men and producing as many as 2,500 plows per year.⁵

On October 20, 1847 in Janesville, Wisconsin, Brokaw married Eunice Ellsworth, Oliver's sister. She came to Illinois in the fall of 1838 with her brothers Charles P. and John. The town of Ellsworth was named after the Ellsworth family. Eunice died on January 19, 1902 after a lengthy illness. They had no children but were married for 55 years. By all accounts, they had a very happy marriage and she was his loving and faithful companion.⁶

¹ Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County*. (Bloomington: 2nd Edition McKnight and McKnight Publishing Co. Sesquicentennial Issue 1968) 348-349

² Duis, 13

³ Duis, 349-350

⁴ "A Landmark Leased," *The Daily Pantagraph*, April 30, 1898

⁵ "Browkaw Plow Shop," *The Daily Pantagraph*, April 20, 1898

⁶ "Mrs. Brokaw is Dead," *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 20, 1902

Brokaw invested in Bloomington and McLean County property early on during his life in Bloomington.⁷ He bought land when it was cheap during hard financial times and then sold it again later for a substantial profit. Around 1843 Brokaw bought two lots on the corner of Washington and Center Streets from James Miller for \$125.00. Brokaw gave Miller \$70.00 in cash and \$55.00 in labor for these lots. In 1869, he sold a portion of these lots to the People's Bank Company for between \$23,000 and \$25,000.⁸ Other purchases included ten acres of fine timber for \$10.00 per acre. He purchased 730 acres of land in Old Town Township for seventy cents an acre before land values increased due to railroad development. As Brokaw reflected in an interview years later regarding his investments: "after a time they increased of themselves." The interviewer speculated they were compounding beyond his needs and making him wealthy probably beyond his knowledge.⁹

When not working in his shop, Abram played the clarinet in the Bloomington Band. The band at that time was known as one of the best bands in Illinois and traveled to perform in a variety of venues around the state. It was also said that he had a good singing voice.¹⁰

Abram was involved in politics in one way or another during different parts of his life. He served on the county board, was a township trustee, and an assistant supervisor. He was also a part of many juries; partially to pass the time and partially to get to know the local lawyers. Brokaw was a staunch Democrat and supporter of Stephen A. Douglas.¹¹ He attended the Lincoln-Douglas debates and although he supported Douglas, he knew Lincoln from his days in Springfield serving on juries. Brokaw had an amazingly sharp memory and commented about the many jokes Lincoln told and that there was always a crowd to listen to him talk. One story in particular that Brokaw liked to tell was "when Judge David Davis was going to fine a man for contempt of court on account of a trifling action and Lincoln secured the man's release by telling a good story."¹²

Brokaw was thought of in the community as being one of the most able, progressive, and successful businessmen. It was said of him that "he has the strictest sense of honesty and justice." He had been known to help deserving people in need as well as make personal loans—always at 7 percent interest. When asked for advice to young men, he replied: "get a plan in your head and stick with it, keep in good company, indulge in no bad habits—avoid those who do, cultivate your own abilities, help yourself, rely on yourself, and study common sense."¹³ If people wanted to do business with him, they would have to go to his plow factory to speak with him. If Abram no longer wished to speak about a potential business transaction, he simply replied "Umph" and continued to work at his bench.¹⁴

⁷ "Bloomington's Earliest and Best Known Plow Maker Talks About His Past Life," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 9, 1902

⁸ Duis, 350

⁹ "Bloomington's Earliest and Best Known Plow Maker Talks About His Past Life."

¹⁰ *The Biographical Record of McLean County, Illinois, Illustrated*. (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1899). 620

¹¹ *The Biographical Record of McLean County, Illinois*, 620

¹² "Bloomington's Earliest and Best Known Plow Maker Talks About His Past Life."

¹³ Interview with Abram Brokaw, unknown author, Mclean County Museum of History Archives

¹⁴ "One of the Good Old Kind," *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 21, 1888

Around 1896 Brokaw loaned \$3,000.00 to purchase ground mid-way between Bloomington and Normal to build a hospital named Deaconess Memorial Hospital. While the original money was not extended as a gift, it became apparent that he did not expect to collect principal or interest. After several years, the hospital needed additional facilities and appealed to Brokaw for help. He gave a \$10,000.00 donation as a memorial to his wife and himself on the condition that the hospital would be renamed Brokaw Hospital.¹⁵ Another source indicated that Mrs. Brokaw gave the money from an inheritance and the name change came with the following donation. When he sold his plow factory in 1903, Brokaw set up the Brokaw Hospital Endowment Fund with \$30,000.00. He named the trustees and conditions, namely to provide more beds for sick people and to assist with the operating costs. It was expected that \$20,000.00 more would be raised.¹⁶ Brokaw Hospital still operates today having merged with Mennonite Hospital in 2001. It then joined the Advocate network in 2010 and is now known as Advocate BroMenn Hospital.

By the time he died, Brokaw's fortune was estimated at \$2,000,000 (equivalent to \$48,051,448 in 2008). He owned over 10,000 acres of fertile farmland throughout Illinois. However, one would never know it from the way he lived. He lived a simple lifestyle waking up early and going to bed in the early evening. Brokaw dressed plainly and often wore clothes that had been in style 50 years ago. A friend remembered a grey shawl that he used to wear often¹⁷. The shawl is a prized item in the collection of the McLean County Museum of History. He gave most of his money discreetly to charities or privately to people in need. He was also known as a lenient landlord. He often times would allow a "mortgage to run after it was past due, giving the borrower every opportunity to redeem, and a foreclosure was the last resort." He often times would loan more money on land than other lenders of the time would.¹⁸ Brokaw was not a member of any particular church. However, he faithfully attended the First Presbyterian Church and annually donated a sum of money to be used to buy candy and Christmas presents for the children's choir.¹⁹

After a short illness, on March 22, 1905 Abram Brokaw died of pneumonia at his home located on 213 East Washington Street where he had lived for over fifty years. Captain Lewis J. Ijams took care of him in his old age. Lengthy articles in local and regional newspapers lamented the loss of one of Bloomington's oldest and most well-known citizens. *The Daily Pantagraph* quoted Colonel Dudley Chase Smith, a member of the Brokaw Hospital board of directors, as stating that Abram was "a unique, honest, and frugal man...He was a man who never changed his demeanor to his friends...and kept his simple tastes to the end of his days."²⁰ He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington next to his wife, Eunice.

By: Laurie Peterson, 2008

¹⁵ Charles E. Chapin. "Commencement address for the Brokaw Hospital Training School for Nurses," May 12, 1922

¹⁶ "Brokaw Hospital," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 22, 1905

¹⁷ Interview with Abram Brokaw

¹⁸ "Bloomington's Eccentric Multimillionaire Has Just Died and Places He Created," *The Chicago Chronicle*, March 19, 1905

¹⁹ Interview with Abram Brokaw

²⁰ "Held in Loved Memory," *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 31, 1906.