

## **Leonard Seibert (1831 – 1905)**

Leonard Seibert was born on August 18, 1831, in Koenig, a part of Essen, Germany. He moved to the United States around 1855, first living in New York City and later in Lexington, IL. Eventually, he settled in Bloomington, IL, where he built his own house at 616 N. Madison Street. Leonard learned how to make furniture when he was young and worked as a cabinet maker for the rest of his life. He married Anna Marie Zeeb, who was also from Germany, on June 19, 1858, in McLean County. They had five children: Otto, who served as the mayor of Normal for nine years; Otilie, who started a candy and fruit store in Bloomington; Leonard G, who helped his father with the furniture business; Mary, who worked as a bookkeeper for the store; and Louise, who taught at Franklin School for 39 years.

After moving to Bloomington, Leonard found a job as a cabinet maker and carpenter for the Chicago & Alton Railroad. In 1853, the Chicago & Alton Railroad came to Bloomington and became a major employer, with a large shop that made and repaired railroad parts. Many German immigrants, like Leonard, moved to Bloomington for work at the railroad. The railroad connected Chicago and St. Louis, and the Chicago & Alton shops were a big part of the town's economy. These shops took up over 60 acres and employed more than 2,500 workers in a town with fewer than 17,000 people. Many workers, including Leonard, had special skills learned through long apprenticeships. Leonard was highly skilled and became a foreman for over 25 years.

During his time as foreman, Leonard helped George Pullman create the first sleeping car for overnight train trips. This project started after the Panic of 1857, a time when many people were worried about money and new businesses. Despite some doubts about whether Pullman could pay him, Leonard worked through the summer of 1859 to help gut and rebuild two passenger cars for the sleeping car. The project did not use blueprints, and Leonard also hired some assistants. The work took four months, and the new cars were 44 feet long, with sleeping sections and a linen locker. They were heated by box stoves, lit with oil lamps, and had mattresses and blankets for sleeping.

The first trip for the sleeping car was on September 1, 1859, traveling between Chicago and Bloomington. The car was not very popular at first because passengers were used to sitting up during their trips and did not want to pay extra to lie down. However, in 1864, Pullman created a better sleeping car called the "Pioneer," which was a success. By the mid-1860s, 23 railroads used sleeping cars on their trains.

In 1878 and 1881, Leonard was elected alderman of Bloomington, representing the Second Ward. He was also part of a group that helped maintain a German "free school," where German immigrants could teach their children history and biology without following American educational traditions. Leonard believed in supporting the community and was an active member of the Masons. He loved spending time at home, especially reading, and it was while reading a Shakespeare play that he became seriously ill.

After working at the railroad shops, Leonard and his son Leonard Jr. ran a furniture and upholstery shop called "L. Seibert and Son" on East Front Street. They ran the shop for about four years before Leonard returned to work at the railroad again. He retired about a year before his death.

Leonard passed away on October 5, 1905, after experiencing a painful back condition, followed by lung congestion and chills. His illness only lasted a few days, and he had been

healthy up until that time. *The Daily Pantagraph* newspaper said that Leonard had been an important part of Bloomington's growth. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.