

Alexander Gustave Erickson (1863-1950)

Alexander Gustave Erickson was born on July 7, 1863 in the province of Smoland, Sweden. He was the son of J.P. and Christine Erickson. His father first came to the United States from Sweden in 1868. One year later, in 1869, he sent for his wife and children. On August 19, 1872, the family moved to Bloomington, where Erickson's father began working for the McLean County Coal Company.

Coal was “the lifeblood of the **Industrial Age**,” and most machinery could not operate without it. By the 1860s, the City of Bloomington demanded a near constant supply of coal in order to run its electric light plant as well as the **boilers** at its waterworks.

The McLean County Coal Company was established in 1867 and remained in operation until the late 1920s. The mine produced 69% of the coal hauled out of McLean County. The demand for workers at the mine was always high—it was a dangerous, low-paying occupation, and strikes were common. Swedish immigrants were **recruited** and brought to Bloomington in August 1872 for this very reason.

Alexander Erickson received his formal education at the Second and Third Ward schools until the age of 13, at which point he dropped out of school and began working in the coal mine with his father. As Erickson explained in an interview later in his life, “There were no child labor nor school laws then. So it was the custom for the oldest boy in the family to begin early to help his father earn a living for the family.” Erickson worked in the mines for nine years before becoming a clerk in a grocery store.

The owners of the coal company (Adlai I, James, and William Stevenson) established a “**company town**” on the west side of Bloomington for the miners and their families to inhabit called **Stevensonville**. The neighborhood spanned 46 acres of land and **boasted** one-story, three-room, wood-frame cottages with long **lot** lines suitable for gardening. Stevensonville was a **vibrant** community. There were two Swedish grocery stores, one of which was operated by Erickson. The neighborhood had its own school (the Sarah E. Raymond School), a **feed mill**, a cigar shop, and a coal dealer. There were also two Swedish churches.

In the early days of the Stevensonville neighborhood, residents fought for and favored annexation into Bloomington so their children could attend the city's public schools. In 1883, 75 property owners petitioned the city council for admission into Bloomington and were admitted after much debate.

As Alexander Erickson matured, he built a life for himself in Stevensonville. He first resided at 1108 West Olive Street, where he raised his family. Erickson married Maria C. Stahlberg in 1884. She was born in Sandviken, Sweden in January 27, 1863. Maria immigrated to the United States with her mother and sister in 1880. Alexander and Maria had ten children.

Alexander and his brother, Charles, opened their own grocery store in 1895, located at 1314-1316 West Olive Street. Alexander Erickson's eight years working in a grocery store was a foundation for him going into business for himself. However, Charles died that same year, making Alexander the sole owner.

Around 1917, Erickson moved the store to 1311 West Olive Street, directly across the street from his house. He operated the store for over 40 years, retiring in 1937, with ownership of the establishment passing to his son Edward. The building still stands today, (now the home of Dreams Are Possible) and “**ghost signs**” of previous advertisements for Erickson's groceries can still be read on the aged brick.

Though Erickson claimed to hold “no great personal political aspirations,” he was highly motivated to work to improve his community and described his entry into politics as being driven by the urge to “do something for his neighbors.” Beginning in 1888, he served as a mail carrier, followed by an **alderman** for the seventh ward. In 1906, when the mayor of Bloomington died while in office, Erickson was chosen as acting mayor. He was then elected to serve an additional term from 1906-1907 before he took a break from politics until 1915, during which he devoted time to working in his grocery store. In his 1915 he ran for one of five spots as a **commissioner** for the City of Bloomington. In his **campaign**, Erickson stressed that he stood for “a clean, moral and economical, active and progressive administration of city affairs,” in **conjunction** with “strict enforcement of all laws and ordinances.”

Erickson won a seat as a commission and was made the Commissioner of Public Health and Safety. In this position, he was responsible for supervision of the fire department, food and **sanitary** inspection, the removal of garbage, and the maintenance of public health and control of disease within the city.

One of the major issues Erickson had to deal with was managing Bloomington’s garbage collection. For years garbage collection in the city of Bloomington was a topic of **contention** and debate. On April 28, 1915, Commissioner Erickson announced that the “private contract system of hauling garbage” would be **abolished**, and the city was taking over garbage collection by hiring **Teamsters** to do the work. In the new system, every city garbage wagon would be covered and numbered so that any citizen making a complaint could report the number of the wagon. By May of that year, it was reported that the city was hauling forty tons of garbage per day, with eight teams working to haul the **refuse** to the three dumping grounds available at the time. Erickson also urged residents to help the city with making garbage collection more efficient by separating their garbage into three places or **receptacles**: ashes should be kept by themselves, tin cans in another place, and finally **combustible** or vegetable garbage in a third place. Erickson felt this would help facilitate the handling of trash more efficiently.

The garbage problem continued to grow in importance as Bloomington grew in size. It became increasingly difficult to find dumping grounds within a reasonable distance of the set collection routes. Erickson felt a **feasible** solution to the city’s garbage problem would be to install an **incinerator** plant, which would burn any garbage that was combustible. He requested the construction of a city incinerator as early as 1915. Discussions continued throughout his entire eight years in office, but by 1923 when Erickson left office, there was still no establishment of an incinerator.

Perhaps the largest focus of Erickson’s time as Commissioner of Public Health and Safety was handling outbreaks of disease and maintaining a healthy population. 1918 was by far the most challenging year of Erickson’s career as public health and safety commissioner. The entire world was **fundamentally** transformed following the outbreak of an **influenza epidemic** which took the lives of an estimated 15 to 50 million worldwide, with about 675,000 deaths attributed to the virus in the U.S. Bloomington was hit hardest in October 1918, the worst month of the **pandemic**, bringing the city to a near standstill.

The first Bloomington resident to succumb to the epidemic was Fred I. Meyers, a 27-year-old employee of the Bloomington Canning Company, who died on September 29. Just five days later, on October 4, Commissioner Erickson and the city health board released a statement with mandatory new rules and regulations to be followed by the citizens in order to slow the rate of infection. Everyone in the city was expected and **obligated** to report knowledge of cases or

suspected cases to Commissioner Erickson and the other city health authorities under his oversight.

On October 11 it was announced that influenza had been found in every township in McLean County, with an estimated 1,500 cases at the time. Commissioner Erickson announced that all places of public gatherings were to be canceled for the **foreseeable** future. This included all theaters, movies, clubs and associations, churches, schools, and all other public gatherings. Area doctors were working day and night, a situation complicated by the **dire** shortage of trained nurses. Two emergency hospitals (one at the Bloomington Country Club and the other at the home of Mrs. Matthew T. Scott at 701 East Taylor Street) were set up because Brokaw Hospital and St. Joseph's hospital were filled to **capacity**. The situation was getting desperate when the local Red Cross announced that more volunteer nurses, with no prior medical experience required, were "desperately needed" on October 17. Erickson and his family were not **immune** to the influenza epidemic either. According to newspaper accounts, Erickson and several members of his family all became ill. One of his sons died of the virus too. Fortunately, by October 25, cases of the flu began to subside, with schools and churches being allowed to reopen on November 1. By December, the two temporary hospitals were closed because cases were dwindling. McLean County was free from any large outbreak of the disease until a short and final wave that occurred in February and March 1919, which was largely contained to the rural areas of the county.

Voters in Bloomington voted to return to the **aldermanic** form of government in 1922. Erickson tried to run for mayor in 1923 but did not receive enough votes in the primary to move on to the general election. However, that did not end his career in politics. He was elected to the Bloomington Board of Education in 1930 and served four terms as a school board member until 1942.

His time on the school board was one of deep financial troubles for the district since the nation was suffering from the Great Depression and the district was receiving less tax revenue. In 1932, a **tax levy** increase failed for the school district, which forced the schools to close for two weeks in April that year. The school district was forced to limit supplies of books provided to pupils, of **incidental** supplies, and the salaries of all employees were cut between 17% to 28%. It would not be until 1942 (Erickson's last year on the school board) that the school district would see an increase in funding, thanks to the passage of an increase in the tax levy by a margin of less than 900 votes. This meant that district teachers would see a pay increase and the school district would receive additional funds to support district operations and building maintenance.

Erickson was beloved by the people who lived on the west side because of his **devotion** to his neighborhood. A letter to the editor published in *The Pantagraph* in 1947 urged the city council to consider renaming West Olive Street to Erickson Avenue to honor Erickson's contributions to the city. Three years later, *Pantagraph* reporter Wilma Tolley stated that no story about the west side "could be expected to carry any weight without the OK of A.G. Erickson, king of the Swedes."

On December 2, 1950, Alexander Gustav Erickson passed away at the age of 87. He had been a patient at St. Joseph's Hospital in Bloomington for a little over a week. It was noted in his obituary that he had been suffering from poor health the last few years of his life, but prior to that "had been **hale** and hearty." Funeral services were held both at his home on West Olive Street and at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, of which he had been a member of most of his life. Erickson was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his wife, Maria, in the family plot.