

Leonard Seibert 1831 – 1905

Leonard Seibert was born on August 18, 1831 in Koenig, a borough of Essen, Germany. He came to the United States around 1855 living first in New York City, then in Lexington, IL. He then settled in Bloomington, IL residing at 616 N. Madison Street in a house which he built himself. He had learned the trade of cabinet making early in his life and continued in this trade for the rest of his life. Leonard married Anna Marie Zeeb, also from Germany, on June 19, 1858 in McLean County. The Seiberts had five children: Otto, the mayor of Normal for nine straight years; Otilie, who was one of the first women to enter business life in Bloomington with a confectionery and fruit store; Leonard G, who helped with his father's furniture business; Mary, who worked as bookkeeper for the furniture store; and Louise, who taught for 39 years at Franklin School.

Soon after arriving in Bloomington, Leonard found work as a cabinet maker and carpenter in the coach-making department for the Chicago & Alton Railroad shops. In 1853 the Chicago & Alton Railroad reached Bloomington, IL and became a large employer with the creation of its shops that manufactured and repaired necessary railroad parts. Seibert, like many other Germans, moved to Bloomington to work on the railroad. The Railroad was first known as the Alton & Sangamon Railroad, then the Chicago & Mississippi before it was later named the Chicago & Alton. The Railroad linked Chicago and St. Louis giving Bloomington two major railroads, the other railroad being the Illinois Central. At the height of production, the Chicago & Alton shops took up more than 60 acres on Bloomington's west side and employed more than 2,500 men in a town of less than 17,000. These jobs were union jobs and provided steady employment. The shops' contribution to the city's population resulted from the Railroad going to Europe, most notably Germany, to recruit the skilled craftsmen needed to produce the handmade parts. Training for these highly-skilled jobs was lengthy and apprenticeships of 3 to 4 years were common. But the product of this rigorous training was workers with extensive skills. Leonard's exceptional skills made him one of the most-valued men in his department and led to his promotion to the position of foreman for over 25 years.

During his time as foreman, Leonard helped George Pullman implement his plan to create the first sleeping car for overnight train rides. They worked on developing the sleeping car right after the Panic of 1857. Pullman had to endure a time of universal distrust of new railroad enterprises and hard economic times. The railroads were overbuilt and many had defaulted on debt. Despite Leonard's hesitation to join the operation due to a lack of security that Pullman would actually pay him, he spent most of the summer of 1859 helping George gut and reconstruct coaches 9 and 19 of the Chicago & Alton passenger cars. This was done without the use of blueprints. Leonard also hired a couple of assistants: the Chicago and Alton Railroad's master mechanic, William Cessford, and master car builder, David Shield, supervised construction.

The finished cars took four months to build and were 44 feet long with a roof a little over six feet from the floor of the car. The cars had flat roofs like box cars, single sash windows with glass in each sash that was a little over one square foot with 14 windows on each side. Inside each car were ten, two-tier sleeping sections, a linen locker, and two washrooms, one for men and the other for women. They had cherry woodwork inside and were upholstered in the best grade of plush, lighted by oil lamps, heated with

box stoves, and mounted on 4-wheel trucks with iron wheels. A mattress and a blanket completed the beds but no sheets were used at the time. There were no porters in those days so the brakeman made up the beds.

The sleeping cars were finished in the fall of 1859, and the first trip took place on the night of September 1, 1859 traveling between Chicago and Bloomington, IL. Pullman and his associate spent about \$1,000 on each car which would equal about \$25,750 in 2008. Painted on the Pullman car was simply "Sleeping Car," which was the only thing that distinguished it on the outside from the other railcars. Only men were present for the ride because they thought it was unsuitable for women. Unfortunately, the sleeping car did not have good business because most passengers were used to sitting up when traveling at night and did not want to pay extra to stay in the sleeping car. Years later, the train's conductor J.L. Barnes recalled that the "people of Bloomington, little reckoning that history was being made in their midst, did not come down to the station to see the Pullman car's first trip. There was no crowd, and the car, lighted by candles, moved away in solitary grandeur, if such it might be called."¹ However in 1863, Pullman tried one more time to build a sleeping car. In late 1864 his newly constructed "Pioneer" was ready. This time, the car was longer, wider, higher, done in handsome woods, upholsteries, plate glass, and burnished metals. It had drawing rooms and sections, ample toilet arrangements, comfortable mattresses, blankets, sheets, and lavatory linen. The "Pioneer" was a success and was the finest railroad car built at the time and in the mid-1860s, 23 railroads scheduled sleeper runs.

Leonard was elected alderman from the Second Ward in Bloomington in 1878 and again in 1881. He was also a charter member of the society that maintained what was known as the German Free School which was located on West Street just north of Front Street. Leonard advocated liberal education and this free school was part of the German immigrants' "free Sunday schools" that were created to remove their education from the control of the dominant American culture. The goal of the school was to "demythologize" the teaching of history and biology, preserve ethnic traditions, and encourage the emergence of a proletarian consciousness (an awareness of the working class status and the development of its political organization) at an early age.² Leonard promoted enterprises for the public good and was also an active member of the Wade Barney lodge of the Masons. Leonard loved spending time at his home and especially loved reading. He was actually struck with his fatal illness while reading a Shakespeare play.

After his work with the Chicago & Alton Railroad shops, Leonard and his son Leonard Jr. were owners of the furniture and upholsterers shop "L. Seibert and Son, located at 108 and 110 E. Front St. He ran this shop for roughly four years before returning to work with the Chicago & Alton shops before retiring about one year before his death.

On October 5, 1905 Leonard died in his home after experiencing what was described as an attack of lumbago, an extreme pain in the lower back, earlier that week. This was followed by congestion of the lungs and a nervous chill. His fatal illness was only of a few days' duration. He had been about his usual health up to the first of that

¹ Gene V. Glendinning. *The Chicago & Alton Railroad – The Only Way*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002) 56

² Hartmut Keil and John Jentz. *German Workers in Chicago: A Documentary History of Working-Class Culture from 1850 to World War I*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988)

week. *The Daily Pantagraph* commented that Leonard was “in many ways a notable factor in Bloomington’s growth in his day.”³ Leonard was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

³ “Leonard Seibert Dead,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 6, 1905