Although it is not known if Dr. William Hill appears in this undated image of a surgery, this scene speaks to the often crude state of surgical practice during his career.

Bloomington’s Dr. William Hill once scared the living daylights out of visitors to his office building—not with skeletons in his closet mind you, but rather a pickled cadaver in his basement.

Born in Butler County, Ohio in 1829, Hill’s circuitous path to practicing physician and accomplished surgeon speaks to the informality of antebellum medical education. Upon reaching young adulthood, Hill “read medicine” under Dr. J.W. Merritt of Indianapolis, and over several winters attended lectures in Ann Arbor, Mich., and elsewhere before receiving a degree from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia.

That same year, 1856, he set up shop in Salem, Ill., remaining there until relocating to Bloomington shortly after the Civil War (in which he had two short stints as an Army surgeon). It was in Salem that he married Frances Roach (or Roache with an “e”), and they would go on to have a daughter Daisy who would marry Arthur L. Pillsbury, the celebrated Bloomington architect.

In Salem, Hill was the attending physician for the 1860 birth of William Jennings Bryan, who ran (and lost) three times as the Democratic candidate for president (1896, 1900 and 1908). The “Great Commoner’s” running mate in 1900 was Bloomington’s own Adlai E.
Stevenson I. Bryan was a not-infrequent guest to this city, whether as candidate or chautauqua lecturer, and when visiting he was sure to look up both Stevenson and Hill.

Once in Bloomington, Hill built a three-story residence, noted for its attractive blending of Second Empire and Italianate architectural styles. Located on the 100 block of East Olive Street, it was torn down in 1961 to make way for the present City Hall, sparking one of the city’s early historic preservation battles.

Hill worked out of his own commercial building, located at the southeast corner of East and Front streets (today the site of CII East) several blocks from his home. The building was called “the greatest loafing place for physicians in the city,” while Hill played the role of “the Nestor of them all” (a Greek mythological character known for giving advice in Homer’s Odyssey).

Though he received his share of good-natured ribbing, Hill was generally recognized as one of the finest—if not the finest—surgeons in Bloomington. “Surgery was a natural to him. It was a gift,” eulogized the local press upon his death. “He worked with a sure hand and a clear brain and performed many delicate and very fine feats with the surgeon’s knife in a day when modern surgery was but little known.”

He also maintained a general practice, and helped lead the McLean County Medical Society’s drive toward professionalism and its opposition to patent medicine manufacturers and irregular physicians such as homeopaths.

Yet Hill, an outspoken, rock-ribbed Democrat who served one term in the lower house of the state legislature, might’ve loved politics as much as medicine. He liked to point out that he was outnumbered and outgunned in a solid Republican district, once recalling an incident when the belligerent brother of a congressional candidate vowed to “whip” him. Falling short of that declaration, the individual pulled out a gun and fired at Hill, though he missed and instead hit another man in the foot.

Hill’s health began to fail in late 1905, and the end came for the 76-year-old on the afternoon of March 1, 1906. Services were held at his Olive Street residence, with the McLean County Medical Society attending as a body.

During his years of active practice, Hill helped train some three dozen young physicians, running at times what was little more than a one-man residency program. “Having so many students I naturally had on hand always one or more subjects [cadavers] in the dissecting rooms,” he noted.

In the spring of 1891, The Pantagraph related the recent attempt by the superintendent and manager/attorney of the electric company to retrieve an arc lamp from the basement of Hill’s building. In the “dim twilight of the cellar,” the light from a struck match illuminated “the hideous corpse of a man within a foot of the attorney’s face. The arms of the gruesome object were lifted and extended as if to grasp the barrister. The body had been pickled and carbolized … and the anatomist who had procured it had dissected the
flesh from one side of the face and from the neck and throat.” The frightened men, it was said, “fled for daylight and a tonic at the nearest wet goods prescription parlor.”

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