

"Main Street Life" Essay from *The Goldfinch*, 1997

Main Street Life by Julie Seidler

The Goldfinch explores the archives at the State Historical Society of Iowa for details about the sights, sounds, and smells of main street!

Old photographs tell us how main street has looked throughout Iowa history, but photos can't reveal how main street felt, smelled, and sounded. We must look to other historical documents - written by those who lived at the time - for these details.

In a 1976 writing contest, senior citizens across Iowa wrote about the main streets in their childhood towns. These essays take us back to Iowa in the early 1900s when main street was a vital economic and social center.

Horses added to the sounds of main street. Hooves made clapping noises as horses walked on dirt, brick, or cobblestone roads. As they waited at hitching posts, horses whinnied and neighed. After taking a refreshing drink from the water trough, they snorted, shaking their bridles while their reins made heavy, rustling sounds.

Wooden wagon wheels "thunk thunked" through town, sending up little clouds of dust and making far different sounds than today's rubber wheels on concrete. When it rained, wagon wheels cut huge ruts in dirt roads that filled with water, making main street a muddy mess. Mary Bentley fondly remembered riding down Sioux City's main street in 1913. "The thrill of my life was to sit on the lofty seat beside the driver and help drive the team down Main Street." These open wagons were comfortable in spring, summer, and fall, but Mary and others bundled up for winter trips.

Elevated wooden sidewalks, like the one pictured on the cover, helped keep people out of the sloshy mud and dirt. But townspeople wore heavy boots and shoes, just in case. As women went about their shopping, you would have heard the faint brushing sound of their skirts trailing on the sidewalks.

Sounds from the blacksmith shop rang down main street as the smithy made horseshoes and other metal items. The bellows whipped up a hot fire with a gusty "whoosh." The "clank clank" of the hammer hitting the anvil could be heard across town. Arlene Dutton wrote that in her hometown, "the sound made you put your fingers in your ears!"

Just like the ring of the blacksmith's hammer, the smells of main street drifted through the community. The piles of horse droppings, mixed with mud, gave off a distinct, unpleasant odor. Most lowans in the early 1900s were accustomed to this smell, but they still watched for horse droppings when they crossed the street.

Main street had pleasant smells, too. When the bakery door opened, people on the sidewalk smelled fresh bread, cakes, pies, and candies.

Ruth Barkley, whose father owned a general store in 1910, remembered that in the family store "the first smell to meet the nostrils was the sauerkraut [sower-KROWT]. It was kept in a large wooden barrel with a loose lid." Tubs of fish, barrels of pickles, sacks of coffee, and a large wheel of cheese all added to odors that greeted customers when they entered the general store.

Barkley also remembered the smell of fresh sawdust from the lumber mill just down the street. "I used to love that smell," she wrote. "Occasionally in the meat market I would get a faint whiff of wood when the meat man had covered the floor around the meat blocks with fresh sawdust." In many Iowa towns, the railroad tracks ran parallel to the nearby main street. Evelyn Williams remembered that the railroad depot in her hometown of Leeds was across from the movie theater. "We loved to watch the trains come in and if we were daring enough we stood on the platform when the 5:00 Flyer came in," she wrote. "How it shook the whole place and almost took our breath away."

Most movies in the early 1900s were silent flicks accompanied by a piano player. Some were shown outside on main street. Ellen Graham Lemke remembered that in her hometown "the piano player made the most wonderful sound effects. She knew just exactly the right mood music to play. How she would thump that old piano when the rustlers were running from the sheriff, or play that sneaky music when the bad guy was sneaking up on our hero. That music would make our hair stand on end."

As main street changed, so too have its sights, sounds, and smells. Now we see electric signs overhead and yellow stripes on the pavement below. We smell gasoline and diesel fumes and listen to the sounds of car horns and radios, motorcycles, and in-line skates zipping over concrete sidewalks. In many Iowa towns, much of the hustle and bustle has moved to the mall, but main street in some places is still where folks come to buy, sell, and socialize.