



historically speaking

THE WAY IT WAS

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The Cass City Historical Society met on Monday night, October 15, at the library for the annual soup supper. Several kinds of soups, breads and desserts were enjoyed by those who attended. The program was about phone calls in the days of telephone switch boards. Barb Hutchinson, a former switch board operator, led a fun-filled story telling time with a panel of former operators and phone and line repairmen. Those on the panel were Myrtle Rabideau, Chris Forester, Linda Helwig, Linda Heron, Dick Hendrick, Keith Mitchell and Bill Erlich. The program was concluded with a video of comedienne Ernestine taking a switch board call.

Bigelow's was the place of The Creative Hardware Man

In 1888 an Englishman named Nolton Bigelow from New York and a Mr. Howe purchased the hardware stock of Weydemeyer & Kane, and opened their own store. Mr. Howe sold his share of the business in 1895 and the business was then named N. Bigelow & Son Hardware. In 1901 a new impressive store was built and faced with orange



Cass City bricks, which were fired at the brick yard south of town at the fork of the river. Nolton and his son, Samuel Bigelow, adopted the slogan "Up To Date Since 88",

and until fairly recent years it was painted on the side of the building. The business was successful from the start and eventually Nolton was succeeded by his son, Samuel, and Samuel's son, Andrew Bigelow. Both Samuel and Andrew were well known businessmen and active community leaders for many years. Andrew didn't have a son to work with him in the business when Samuel retired so he hired a young man named Lloyd Vyse to assist him and to learn the business.

Lloyd was born in the Flint area and went to the Winton Country School near Gagetown, and then went on to graduate from Cass City High School in 1947. Lloyd took to the hardware business and learned it well from Andy. When Andy retired in 1963 he sold the business and building to Lloyd who became its sole



proprietor. Lloyd retained the name of Bigelow Hardware although Vyse would have made a good hardware name. He also retained the slogan "Up To Date Since 88". His product line was up to date, but the layout of the store and some of his inventory reflected earlier times. If you went

into his store you might still be able to buy a large crock for making your sauerkraut or maybe a damper control for your stove pipe.

Lloyd loved his business, he loved his community, and he loved to square dance. For a big man he could do-si-do around the store and retrieve whatever you needed with ease. He might have it on a counter, under a counter, on a shelf, in a bin, in a drawer or hanging on the wall. He had garden seeds in the bulk and his sweet corn was guaranteed to



be the sweetest you could buy anywhere. He knew the prices of everything and he would write up your bill on a little pad with a carbon copy for himself and announce the total cost to you. He would then add the sales tax and always say, "And so much for the governor". Then he would ring it up on his vintage cash register.

In the 1950s, while still working for Andy, Lloyd decided to make a Christmas display for the front of his home on east Main Street to celebrate the holiday season. It was



an elaborate display of Santa, Mrs. Claus and Santa's elves making Christmas gifts. The characters and props were made of wood, chicken wire and paper mache all colorfully painted and lighted. This created a lot of attention in the community.

In following years he made new displays with new themes such as Santa in his sleigh with all the reindeer, animated snow men and others. The idea caught on and Lucille "Grandma" Champion Bauer set up an elaborate manger scene display beside her home on Main Street with live animals including a donkey and sheep. Soon other people were also making displays for their homes, and some buying Lloyd's previous year's displays. The Chamber of Commerce sponsored a contest for the best Christmas displays with prizes for the winners.

People from all over came at night to tour "Christmas Town" Cass City. An elaborate Christmas pageant production was developed and performed on a hill on the north side of town for a few years, which drew even more people to visit "Christmas Town".

It was decided that there should be Christmas decorations hanging from the light poles along Main Street and Lloyd was made chairman of the committee. Various lighted decorations of Santa Faces and Christmas Trees, and snowmen were made of paper mache and other materials. This tradition has been adopted by most towns, but today the displays are usually commercially made.

In 1965 for Cass City's Centennial Celebration Lloyd led a team in designing and constructing displays for the light poles on Main Street. The upper floor of his store became a display factory with several volunteers assisting in the project. This was during the time when the space exploration program was capturing all the headlines in the nation. Our theme was "Pace Setters of the Thumb". The globes were made of beach balls covered with paper mache. Assembling these displays for each light pole was quite a task.

Special help was received from



Mary Leeson on the painting, and JD Tuckey in welding up the brackets for hanging them on the light poles.

Although the work to maintain the glory of Christmas Town couldn't continue to be maintained and also grow in scope year after year, it along with the centennial celebration brought much excitement, involvement and unity within the community. It was a time when there were no empty retail stores, and businesses were all doing well even though the people coming into town came mostly at night when the stores were closed. One newspaper reported that cars were backed up to M-53 trying to come to Christmas Town. It was a time when we had three successful hardware stores: Bigelow, Albee and Bishop Hardwares. Fortunately we still have a fine, up-to-date hardware store, the Cass City Hardware, today.

Lloyd with his low-key manner was an important spark plug to the community. He understood the more you contribute - the more valuable your community is to you. The Chamber of Commerce named him "Citizen of the Year" in 1989. Although Lloyd never married and had a family, his creativity and love for his community helped it to become a family in an important time of our history.

(Lloyd Hall Vyse 1926 -1993)