



In blue conductor's cloth (above), engine epaulets, and a ticket necklace, Nellie Allison represents the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad for the 1890 Decorah Merchants' Carnival. (Photo by C. A. Hill, Decorah.) Above right: Sponsored by F. Messer Meat Market, this young woman wears sausages and butcher's tools. (Photo by M. D. Baxter, Milton.)

“The Brigade of Beauty in Advertising Costumes”

Merchants' Carnivals in Iowa

by Paul C. Juhl

They waited anxiously outside Coe's Opera House on a dirt street in Osage, Iowa. Sixty-nine young women nervously adjusted their dresses, anticipating the reaction of the overflowing crowd inside. It was half past eight with the sun just beginning to set. In their minds, they were rehearsing the steps in the drill that would allow them to show off their dresses to the best advantage. Standing behind Minnie Richardson, who was to lead the procession, was

Emily Holmes in a pink dress and cap with a butcher knife suspended from her waist and a cow's horn on each of her shoulders. Further down the line was Mrs. George Cole with a necklace of shaving brushes and a razor fastened in her hair.

Even further down the line was Julia Tressider who was attired in red with three rows of dried apples around the bottom of her skirt, a panel of bananas on one side, and lemons and oranges on the other.



Barely visible, glass bottles bedeck the apron and sponges the hem of this costume advertising W. G. Israel, Druggist. (Photo by Birdia E. Warner, Brighton.) Right: Wearing a dress of upholstery fabric and tassels and carrying a banner, this woman promotes an unnamed furniture dealer. (Photo by Cundill, Maquoketa.)

Around her waist was a china tea set, and on her dress, large buttons made of cookies. The floor-length gowns of these 69 Iowa women represented the best that the merchants and service providers of Osage had to offer.

Finally the signal was given by the leader, Mrs. S. B. Roberts. To the music of Mackays' Orchestra, the ladies marched quickly through the crowd. Their dresses were bright splashes of color. But what really attracted the audience's attention were the materials adorning the women—every imaginable item that might in some way represent a business or a service to the farmers and townspeople. Dresses were loaded with everything from shingles to bottles of perfume.

Fathers and mothers, grandparents, and aunts and uncles pointed proudly to the young women, many of them unmarried, who were from their families. Merchants looked with great pleasure at the young women who represented their enterprises. And, of

course, the area's young bachelors looked about for someone to provide some summer romance. The opera house was full of excitement as the 1889 Merchants' Carnival got under way.

Intended to promote individual merchants and the community itself, the Osage Merchants' Carnival was probably similar to those held by other Iowa towns and cities in the late 1880s and 1890s. The photographs on these pages and the front cover are rare evidence of merchants' carnivals in several Iowa communities (though none of these photos appear to match the descriptions in the Osage newspaper). Merchants' carnivals were probably not unique to Iowa. Similar photographs dating to the last decades of the 19th century have been found for communities from Pennsylvania to Montana.

To sponsor young women, merchants would supply them with items from their businesses with which to decorate their gowns. The women, possibly helped



Birdia E. Warner, BRIGHTON,
IOWA.



Bills and coins adorn this representative of the Brighton Bank. (Photo by Birdia E. Warner, Brighton.) Right: With banner set aside, this woman strikes an artful pose in watches and long chains for Smith the Jeweler. (Photo by Buser, Mt. Vernon.)

by mothers or local dressmakers, would create the costume. Once the program began, the women would march around the hall, carrying their banners and showing off their creativity.

The remainder of the evening would vary according to the organizers. Women's church groups often used the events as fund raisers. Musical or literary performances or other drills might round out the entertainment. The evening usually concluded with ice cream and cake—and modest profits for the fund-raising group.

Accounts and evidence of merchants' carnivals are rare. Historians and collectors occasionally happen upon intriguing photos of women bedecked in merchandise but seldom find documentation of where or why these costumes were worn. Fortunately, two reporters for Iowa newspapers, the *Mitchell County Press* in Osage and the *Decorah Republican*, wrote lengthy accounts of merchants' carnivals.

In 1890 more than a hundred women participated

in the two-day merchants' carnival in Decorah, Iowa. The two-page article in the *Decorah Republican* (much of it in verse) hints at the purpose, and calls to mind civic pride and the desire to promote one's own town:

What shall we do, our wise ones said,
To give the town a boom?
We'll show the world that we're not dead,
For all we need is room
And chance to show what we can do
In setting all its charms on view.

So they called a public meeting,
You know men always do.
They had a President and Vice,
Secretary and Treasurer too,
Attorney and committees full,
And worked by parliamentary rule.

Then they had a grand procession,
With pomp and music loud;



Spoons, keys, and scissors advertise J. S. Nye Hardware. (Photo by McElhose, Primghar.) "How do you like me?" appears on the back. Right: A. Holland Dry Goods provided buttons and handkerchiefs. (Photo by Bolstad & Bakken, Northwood.)

The growlers made concession,
And all alike were proud
Of Nature's beauties, man's emprise,
Combined to charm the travelers eyes.

The business men wished to display
Their wares and trades and gold,
So next they asked the ladies
A carnival to hold,
To represent each trade and store
That pays its way, and something more.

The ladies gathered in a bunch,
They had no rule or order, true,
With twenty talking all at once,—
But that's the way they do.
The scheme was started in a minute
And pushed along for all that's in it.

The Decorah reporter also gave detailed descriptions of the costumes and then repeated the lengthy

verses that were read as each young woman stepped forward. Imagine, if you will, a few of the participants in the Decorah Merchants' Carnival. Consider, for example, Dora Peterson, representing C. Goltz's furniture store. According to the *Republican*, she wears a "black dress, ornamented with bits of fine mouldings, toy furniture and undertaker's implements" and carries a banner of "blue and white satin, decorated with toy chairs." The narrator reads:

Who started the first furniture store
And always kept the best of stock?
Why! Goltz, of course, from days of yore.
He never has been known to shirk.
We've known him many years gone past,
We all must come to him at last.

Then there's Tilda Ambly, for C. Jennish, the blacksmith. Her black dress is adorned "with silver plated horseshoes for trimming and hair ornaments, necklace of small chains" and she carries a "banner of wire net,



Small sacks of grain and bales of hay bedeck this flour-sack costume, sponsored by a mill. (Photo by Reynolds, Jefferson.)

decorated with shoe nails, yellow ribbon, and horse shoe on top." From the narrator:

Charley Jennisch is the man
To set a shoe or tire a wheel.
Always go to him when you can.
You'll find him fair in every deal.
For honest work and quickly done
He's not excelled by any one.

Josie Brorby, sponsored by J. E. Morton, the carriage painter, models a "dress ornamented with endless variety of paint sample tags." The narrator says:

I want to sell my buggy
But it is so scratched and shabby
That it looks as if it wasn't worth a cent.
Joe Morton is the dandy
Who can paint it up so handy,
And surely that's the man to whom I went.

Representing Spurr, the local photographer, Kate Protheroe is in "black lace over velvet, trimmings of photographs and girdle of same, black tam O' Shanter

hat trimmed with photographs" and holds a banner of "pink and black satin pallet, name one side and artist on reverse." As she steps forward, we hear:

The artist, Spurr, is busy each day,
But though busy has room for you;
He'll make you look sweet,
Handsome and neat,
If your looks will allow you to;
So fix yourself up all pretty and nice
And he will take you just in a trice.

Refusing responsibility for fine verse, the poet admits: "Though rhyme and metre both are rough/The sense is here and that's enough." For 95 verses the poem continues. Such detailed descriptions, along with photographs, give us glimpses of the variety of local businesses and services in small towns. In Decorah, for instance, businesses ranged from insurance agents and harness shops, to greenhouses and Chinese laundries. The descriptions also tell us what businesses sold or used (for example, wallpaper, poker chips, and opera glasses at the bookstore; fly nets and sleigh bells at the harness shop; butter tubs and butter tryers at the creamery).

A June 1889 account of the Tipton merchants' carnival in the *Tipton Advertiser* reports that 50 women participated. "The next round of music heralded the advent of the brigade of beauty in advertising costumes," the newspaper noted. "The ladies marched in two ranks, and keeping time to the music, executed some quite difficult and very effective evolutions, which were exceedingly well done, especially considering the small opportunity for practice. There was too much to see; and the effect, though pleasing, was confusing. The ladies, therefore, responded to a unanimous call for a repetition of the march, for which, as before, they were enthusiastically applauded."

Small-town Iowans looked to their own communities for both commerce and entertainment. Iowa historian Dorothy Schwieder writes, "The presence of numerous diverse businesses in Iowa's towns reflected the fact . . . that for the tens of thousands of Iowans who lived there, life was local in character. Though Iowans certainly read newspapers and magazines covering events elsewhere, most interests and activities centered on or took place in one's own community."

"Accordingly," Schwieder continues, "town residents traded locally for groceries, clothing, and other

necessities; the major exception was merchandise ordered through mail-order houses." The popularity of mail-order houses became a serious threat to small-town businesses. First, Montgomery Ward and then, in 1886, Sears, Roebuck and Company courted consumers who had long relied on local merchants. Mail-order houses "selected goods with the rural market in mind, and by purchasing in volume obtained reduced prices from manufacturers," writes historian Lewis Atherton. Attractively displayed in catalogs and delivered by train, mail-order merchandise bypassed local merchants, cutting into their business so much that merchants soon would oppose rural free delivery and especially parcel post laws, arguing that the government was subsidizing mail-order houses while ruining local businesses.

Were merchants' carnivals an effort to fight off consumer changes or economic downswings, by reminding the community of local businesses? Were they simply booster pageants with large casts? Or local entertainment until the next circus or stock company came to town? Perhaps they fulfilled all these roles.

By the turn of the century, interest in these local extravaganzas had begun to wane. "The Merchant's Carnival given at the Opera House last Saturday evening, was not very extensively patronized by our citizens," the *Howard County Times* of Cresco, Iowa, commented on November 30, 1899. "Some thirty or forty business people were represented, making the program too long for particular mention. The ladies of the Congregational Church realized about \$30, and the fellow who worked up the entertainment carried off the lion's share, as usual."

The phenomena of merchants' carnivals may have been lost to time, if not for the fact that after the carnival, the women sometimes took their costumes to the town photographer to "save" them. In 1889, the *Mitchell County Press* reported that "our artists (photographers), Samson & Corning and J. A. Douglas are busy this week photographing the costumes worn at the carnival."

The sepia-toned cabinet cards showcased here could not capture the costumes' bright colors and fabrics—black brilliantine and white surah, rose brocade and garnet plush, Nile green and mauve satin. Nor do they show how the footlights of the opera house must have reflected off the shiny spoons and buckles and pie pans that hung from the dresses. And they lack examples of the perishable and ephemeral items that



Wearing a necklace of cigars, this woman represents a tobacco enterprise. More cigars and artificial leaves adorn her dress. (Photo by Floral Studio, Columbus Junction.)

some women wore—ruffles of prunes, bonnets of shavings, panels of gingersnaps. But they do explain why one reporter called the costumes "wonderfully ingenious," and why another called a merchants' carnival "a beautiful and bewildering scene." ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

Mary Noble, Shan Thomas, and Jamie Beranek provided useful reference material. Other sources were these Iowa newspapers: *Decorah Republican* (June 12, 1890); *Osage's Mitchell County Press* (May 30, 1889); *Cresco's Howard County Times* (Nov. 30, 1899, p. 5); *Tipton Advertiser* (June 27, 1889, p. 2); and *Vinton Eagle* (Aug. 18, 25, 1899). For more on late 19th-century small-town life, see Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Iowa State University Press, 1996); and Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Indiana University Press, 1984).