

# THE HISTORY OF OSSIAN, IOWA – PAST AND PRESENT

## *A Case Study of Small-Town, Rural America*

By Clyde Cremer

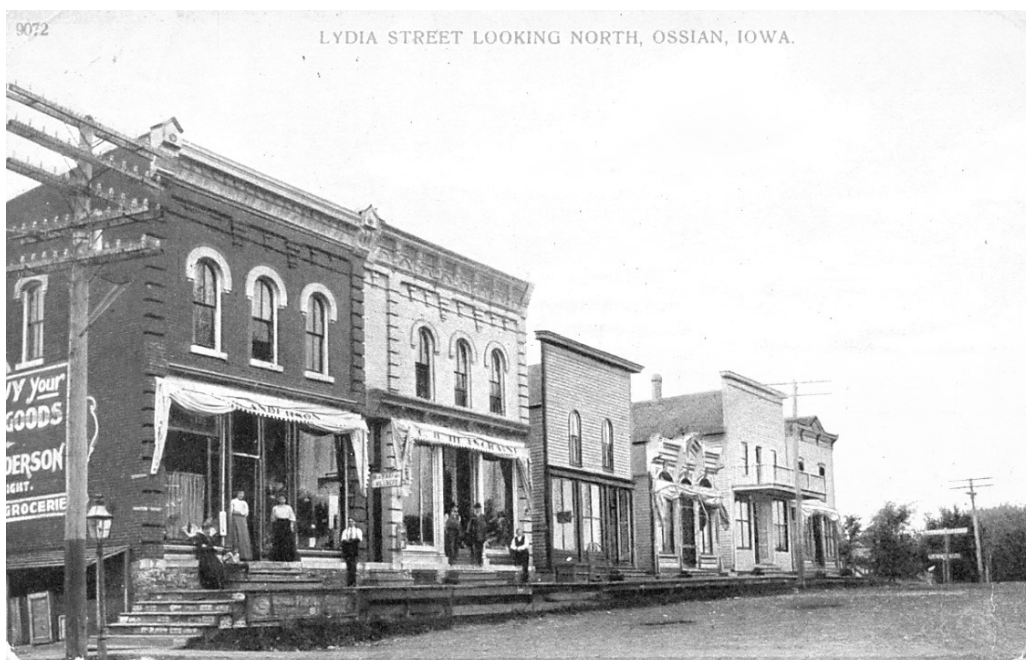
*Edited by Kellie Cremer*

“History is the best introduction, not only to know how we arrived at our current predicament but how we can imagine all possible futures.” -Anonymous

### Reminiscences

In years long since gone by, my family would spend many memorable days visiting our close relatives outside of Ossian. The Lechtenbergs operated a family farm of 160 acres as did so many farm families in the area. They raised a mix of crops and farm animals ranging from dairy cows, hogs, and chickens to corn, oats, and hay. The town of Ossian was less than two miles away from the farm and they depended on the village for groceries, dry goods, fuel, repairs, and livestock supplements, to name a few. The school and church were also located in the town and became an important part of their lives.

My cousin and I would spend many wonderful times enjoying a Saturday night with friends in Ossian (with around 800 people at that point), as well as indulging in ice cream or “pop.” My brother, cousins, and I would go to the Saturday afternoon matinee to watch cowboy movies. There were also carnivals that visited the town, occasional parades celebrating events such as its centennial, Independence Day, Memorial Day, and Christmas. A wedding and later a dance in the evening were times when the community and the rural residents would come together to renew friendships and make new friends. A grandstand was located at the end of main street, ready for an impromptu serenade. Saturday night was a time for shopping and meeting with neighbors to catch up on happenings around the county. Ossian was not only a commercial center but also an important hub for social life. These are my boyhood memories of Ossian and my affinity for it today.



Early photo of Lydia Street in Ossian, looking north.

## The Early Years

They say that every person has a story and that is also true about every city, town, or village, whether large or small. Residents who have lived in a certain domicile for decades know little about its founding, early residents, or how it even got its name.

The land that was to become Ossian and Winneshiek County was inhabited by indigenous Otoe people who for eons shared land with the Omaha and Ponca. The tribal presence changed over time due to tribal warfare, U.S. Government incursions, and land being sold to settlers who wanted to farm. In 1846, Fort Atkinson was built to protect the Winnebago Indians from the depredations of neighboring tribes, such as the Dakota Sioux and the Sac and Fox. The ancient inhabitants of the land were driven from their tribal lands and many farmers took possession of the land as their own for \$1.25 per acre. This is how my great-grandfather (William Cremer) started his farm near Festina. The new farms on the fertile lands of Iowa led to the eventual establishment of towns and villages.

Ossian is in Military Township, named after Military Ridge, located between Ossian and Calmar. The army road that ran between Fort Crawford, Wisconsin, and Fort Atkinson, Iowa, cast a long shadow even after its abandonment by the military prior to the Civil War. This military road became an important byway between some of the early towns in Military Township.

When the first white settlers came to the area the land was covered with tall prairie grasses and a proliferation of native flowers. These plants had an elaborate root system that could survive the periodic droughts and fires that plagued the prairie. Along the water courses, one could find various species of riparian vegetation including oak, wild plum, and cottonwood. These could be used for fuel and shelter and many early dwellings were located nearby for this reason. In addition, there was potable water to use before deep water wells could be constructed.



***Ossian and Malvina.***  
**Johann Peter Krafft, 1810.**

As with all towns and cities, the first step is driving a stake into the ground at the chosen site. This was completed by John Ossian Porter, in the late 1840s or 1850s. The location consisted of three blocks of 14 lots. These lots were located on the edge of the old military trail. Porter was born in New York, then traveled to Pennsylvania before coming to Winneshiek County. His family's first home was a log cabin 18' x 20' in size and served as an early stage stop and lodging for the weary traveler, with hard liquor being served as needed. A log cabin in the early days sold for \$50 to \$70. When the Porters had a son in 1855, he was named Ossian and so the town was born. In 1876, when records for Ossian were first kept, it had a population of 476 people. In 2020, it had 802 people. There are two other U.S. towns with the name Ossian: one in Indiana and one in New York. The name is an Anglicized version of the Gaelic *Oisín*. Pronounced oh-SHEEN and meaning "young deer" or "fawn," Oisín was a legendary poet, known as the greatest Irish warrior-poet of the Fenian cycle of hero tales. Along with St. Patrick, he is also the main character in William Butler Yeats's epic poem, *The Wanderings of Oisín*.

The McGregor & Western railroad came to Ossian in 1865 and breathed new life into the town at the expense of Frankville. Prior to the railroad coming into the area the agricultural goods had to be hauled by horse or ox-drawn wagon to Lansing or Marquette to reach a barge or steamboat for shipment. With the railroad reaching Ossian, the population greatly increased, as did the number of businesses. After 21 years, the first church was established; a Catholic Church erected in 1869. Two years later, a Methodist church was built and in the following decades a few others followed such as the Universalist Church and the Stavanger Lutheran Church. In time, two banks were established as well as a newspaper, the *Ossian Bee*. The town was becoming an oasis for the inhabitants and the surrounding farms. Goods could be shipped in by the railroad and farm products shipped out. In 1856, the wheat harvest was 19,344 bushels, 14,340 bushels of corn, 6,262 bushels of oats, 148 hogs, and 160 cattle. With this symbiosis between the railroad and the farmers/merchants, the community would grow and prosper. The *Northern Iowa Times* of McGregor published a story about Ossian in 1867: "Last year, 28 new buildings were constructed; town lots are in strong demand. Prospects are excellent for business this fall. This is the point where Decorah receives most of her goods and ships much of her produce. The freight charges at this station were over \$200,000 the past year."

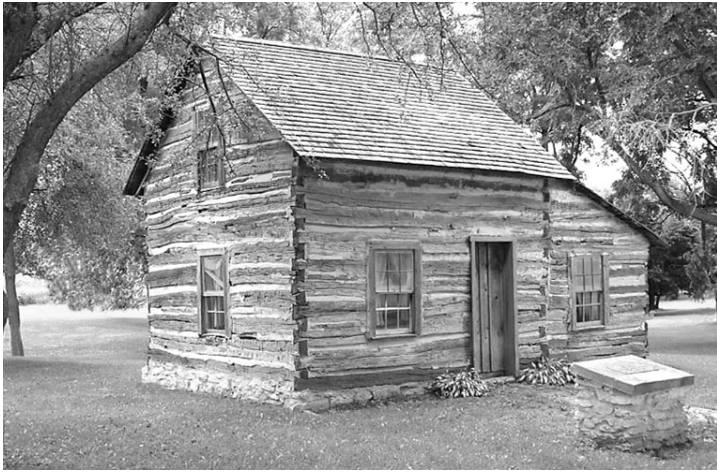


**Ossian business section in the 1920s.**

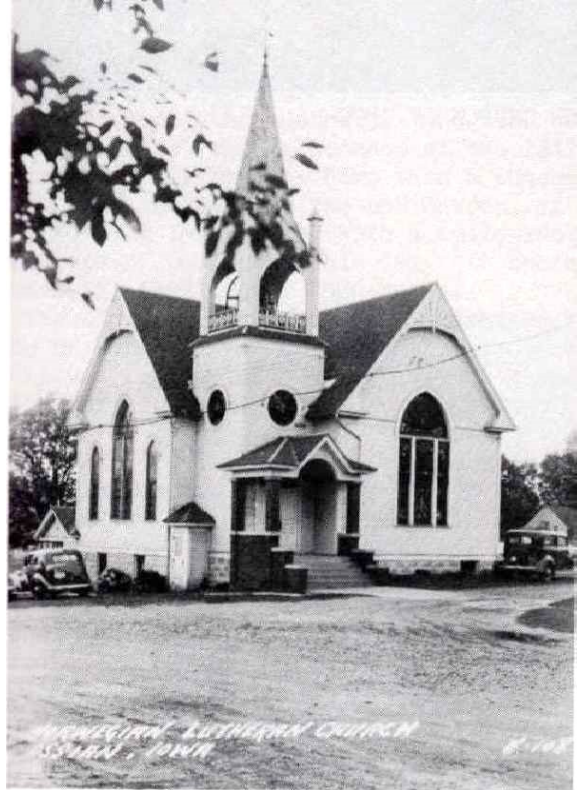
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**Downtown Ossian in the 1930s.**



**Small log cabin built by Norwegian settlers in Ossian.**



**Norwegian Lutheran Church in Ossian.**



**Lorraine Kingry on the Stangeland family's Farmall tractor outside of Ossian in 1952.**

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**De Sales Schoolhouse built in 1902.**



**Nordness Railroad Depot.**

The early years in the town and surrounding area were challenging with hardship being the key word in the farmer's daily existence. Drought, flooding, cold winters, deep snow, insects, crop failures, and brutal physical labor were too often the norm. In 1875, the town rallied to assist Kossuth County residents, who were ravaged by an invasion of grasshoppers. Nineteen years before that, in 1856, a prairie fire rolled across the township from south to north devouring everything in its path. This natural disaster was followed by the winter of 1856-1857, when a blizzard hit a widespread area leaving a four-foot deposit of snow which was followed by rain which created an impenetrable crust to humans and animals of every type. Elk and deer became easy prey at this time and the settlers took advantage of their plight. In 1873, a snowdrift 1,000 feet long and six feet deep blocked the railroad tracks near Ossian. Death stalked the land with disease and accidents. The newspapers told of men freezing to death when caught in a blizzard, killed by a runaway team of horses, a child killed by an exploding kerosene lamp, clothes catching fire near a stove, and all the other myriad injuries associated with work during the pre-antibiotic era. A cholera and diphtheria epidemic almost wiped out a Norwegian settlement north of Ossian at Washington Prairie. The possibility of a raid by tribes of American Indians was also a disquieting factor throughout the early frontier days.

With a hard life being the norm, many of the farmers and workers needed to "let off steam." This excess energy was usually dissipated with an infusion of alcohol. Ossian had numerous taverns that served as watering holes in the evening and late into the night. Heavy drinking usually ended in a brawl that would expel any hostilities harbored by the combatants with the resulting destruction of some of the furnishings within the establishment. The next morning the perpetrators would return to the scene of the mischief and pay the proprietor for the damages. In his book on Winneshiek County, Alexander wrote: "Almost from its inception...from the time that the proprietor kept his jug well filled, down to the present (1882), Ossian has been celebrated for its traffic in intoxicating liquor and street brawls were not infrequent occurrences in its history." Even Iowa prohibition laws couldn't hinder the residents of the county. One man, in a Letter to the Editor in the *Ossian Bee*, stated: "After all that has been done in this county for the suppression of the illegal traffic [of whiskey], it still holds its hydra-head above it all and defies law, injunctions and all restraint whatever. In less than ten days, two debauches of the lowest order have occurred in as many places, to say nothing of the drunkenness that is seen every day on our streets." A story in the *Ossian Bee's* centennial issue reported: "The Ossian pioneers were rugged chaps, hard drinkers, hard fighters, and hard gamblers." In one episode that signifies this hard life and bad behavior, a young man came into town riding a mule. Another man came out of the tavern and shot the animal dead. He then gave the man \$10.00 and said, "Get yourself a good horse!"

## **Ossian and the Civil War**

The shadow of the Civil War came to Ossian in 1861 but was short lived. The *Decorah Republican's* issue on June 13, 1861, publishes a story of an insurrectionist raising the secessionist flag on his property. A band of 150 concerned Unionists from Moneek and Castalia confronted the man who said that it was his right. After a bit of streetside debate, he lowered the flag and raised Old Glory. The crowd dispersed, feeling that the matter was over. However, the next day, one of the Union men, Mr. White, was badly beaten by two of the secessionists and his barn and stable were burned. The story has several murky sides to it, but in the final analysis Ossian remained 100% for the Union. In 1862, a military quota of 48 was ordered and 31 men volunteered. By the end of the year, the quota for the township increased to 73. Thus ended the great insurrection of 1862.

## The Great Railroad War: June 1884

The morning on this early June day was broken by bells ringing from the schoolhouse, signifying an important event was unfolding. Shouts rang out that a force of 1,000 men were tearing up the Chicago, Decorah & Minnesota railroad (C. D. & M) tracks outside of town. The actual number was more like 400, but the damage and errant behavior was real. The investigation found that men from the Milwaukee Railroad had decided to lay their tracks where the C. D. & M tracks were located. The Milwaukee Company claimed to own 50 feet from the center of the track and that they were at work on their own grounds. The Mayor of Ossian ordered the crew to stop their supposed depredations but to no avail. The foreman of the Milwaukee crew was arrested but was released without bond when he said that he was new and did not know of the significance of the work being undertaken. To cool the passions on both sides, all eight saloons were closed until further notice and the restaurants did not serve the interlopers any food. Foreman Collins went into a local hotel demanding food for the crew, but as the argument increased in intensity, the foreman was felled by a blow from the proprietor. End of demand. According to C.C. Cornell: Friday afternoon, "the town council met and passed an ordinance giving the C. D. & M. company right-of-way over the disputed territory... Notice was served on Saturday that an injunction would be sought from Judge Hatch, restraining the Milwaukee company from occupying the ground." Through the decision of the courts, "the controversy ended with the Milwaukee Road leasing usage of their right of way for trackage in this location." Later, the town granted right of way to the C. D. & M with the adoption of ordinances 33 and 34, solidifying the railroad's right to lay tracks in Ossian. Per the *Decorah Republican*, C. D. & M wanted to name the depot between Decorah and Ossian "Cartersville," after the attorney who litigated the compromise, but he objected. The Reverend Johnson of Springfield Township was then chosen to name the depot and he selected the name Nordness, after the nearby town of Nordness, Iowa. After the compromise, it was not over until the drinking of liquor began and all hell broke loose in the finest Ossian fashion. Attorney Carter recalled: "There was a hot time in the old town that night as dozens of fights broke out when hungry, thirsty section hands were refused service." Finally, the railroad war ended and was relegated to a snippet in history.

## The First World War and Ossian

The European War eventually involved the United States as President Woodrow Wilson searched for a *casus belli* (Latin for "cause for war") so that he could come to the aid of the struggling allies. This call to arms in April 1917 became a classic case of military unpreparedness with the mostly drafted army being the victims. Poorly armed and poorly trained, they faced the German Army, with its ability to wage war with modern weapons and its Prussian instinct to engage a foe in modern warfare. Winston Churchill said that "No one knows war until they have fought the Germans!" Without getting bogged down in the many facets of this war, it will suffice to say that two men from Ossian died during it: Sergeant Theodore Brockman was first listed as having died by a sniper's bullet. Later this was changed to death by an exploding bag of grenades two days before the end of hostilities. So much for forensic science in World War I! The other man killed in action was Solomon Elias Johan Hammersland, who was slain in Épieds, France, at age 29. Several other men from Ossian died of natural causes while serving during the war. The Influenza pandemic contributed largely to many deaths in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) as well as on the home front. The flu became a big day for the snake oil salesmen and the *Ossian Bee* ran many advertisements on bogus potions. The local theatre helped fan the flames of patriotism with a 1918 movie entitled *The Beast of Berlin*, which featured an unflattering portrait of German Kaiser Wilhelm II.

## Interesting Dates in Ossian's History

- 1896: Gilbert G. Oyløe lays the first cement sidewalk in front of his photo gallery.
- 1893: The railroads report that 404 Ossian residents took advantage of the "excursion rates" to attend the World's Fair in Chicago.
- 1901: The Nordness Telephone Company extends its line to Ossian. F. W. Dessel and M. J. Carter are the first Ossian residents to put in phones. By the end of that year, it has 91 subscribers.
- 1913: On April 17, The Majestic Theatre opens with silent motion pictures accompanied by a Decker Brothers piano. The grand reopening of The Majestic (turned Princess Theatre) occurs on September 29, 1917, with new Power's Cameragraph Projectors. L.E. Palmer closes the Princess Theatre permanently in 1929, citing competition just about ten miles away where the Postville Theatre had "talkies."
- 1919: An oil well is drilled near Ossian. It was considered a "dry hole" after reaching a depth of 3,037 feet, and was abandoned. In 1926, a large charge of dynamite is detonated in the hole but still no oil. Was this Ossian's answer to fracking?
- 1921: The first airplane lands near Ossian.
- 1922: First radio comes to Figge Garage.
- Early 1920s: Henry Dessel opens a Ford auto dealership. In the early 1960s, a Model B Ford is sold off the floor of the dealership as a curio and the business closes.
- Mid-1920s: Ben Bear, a Decorah clothing merchant, installs equipment for radio station KDCA. His first program featured fiddle player Happy Knight, an entertainer of questionable musical ability - unless you talked to his mother!
- 1929: A major fall in stock prices in the United States leads to The Great Depression. "The Hard Times," as my father called this period, descends upon the nation, the world, and Ossian. To promote shopping in town and to help keep local businesses afloat, tickets are issued for each dollar spent in town. These are placed in a barrel for a periodic drawing. Herman Funke is the first beneficiary and drives home a new car. Some 8,000 people flood the streets of Ossian for the event.

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Advertisement in the *Ossian Bee*,  
published on Thursday, 11/08/1923.

## World War II

This was a cataclysm that rocked the town as well as the world. As a prelude to the total mobilization of the country, 179 men from Ossian signed up for the draft. During the war, a total of 223 men served, seven dying in service to their nation and one passing from his wounds in 1947. I remember a wooden façade on main street in the early 1950s listing the names of all who served during the war.

## Korean Conflict

On June 25, 1950, the Korean conflict embroiled America in another fight as the North Koreans stormed across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel to subjugate the free nation of South Korea. President Truman called up the U.S. troops to defend South Korea and an undeclared war began. My recollections of the conflict were observing a restaurant in Ossian turning the chairs in reverse to form a makeshift pew and praying the Rosary for peace. There were also stories circulating of “draft evaders” having their mailboxes painted red. During the conflict, 74 men served from Ossian. Two died during service from non-combat related causes.

## The Metamorphosis of Small Town, Rural America

The following discussion does not in any way disparage Ossian or any of the towns that I refer to. It is merely a reflection of what life once was in small town America and what now eclipses this once bucolic scene.

A few years ago, I drove through Ossian. It was quiet except for one bustling convenience store. A lonely cat observes me from the maw of an alley, curious as I go down the quiet main street. I turn around and drive back through town, thinking about how the “Big Box Stores” have replaced the locally owned businesses that once thrived. Huge numbers of people now sit in the comfort of their homes and order a wide range of products online. When the doorbell rings, it could mean that the steaks have arrived from Omaha or a Christmas present shipped from a computer-controlled warehouse in Georgia. It could even mean that a refrigerated truck is in the driveway selling high quality meat and seafood.



Part of downtown Ossian today.

In the book, *Reflections of a Golden Era: Ossian, Iowa*, published by the Ossian Historical Society, it lists 74 businesses that once served the area during the Golden Era. One of the businesses that has survived is Becker Hardware, which started in 1885! Today, the face-to-face purchasing of items from local stores has been replaced by the computer chip. What a sad feeling to see this transition in marketing. Farming has also evolved from the idyllic family farm to large farms (many run by large, out-of-state corporations) with expensive equipment and vast amounts of agrochemicals. The farms of today are primarily involved in corn for ethanol and feed grains for the factory farms which raise thousands of hogs, cattle, poultry, and dairy cattle. It is not only the merchants that are left out of this

matrix, but the population has decreased across rural America as well. Allamakee County, to the north, had 23 towns in the late 1890s but has dwindled to 12. I have seen a town in Kansas where a half dozen



homes are steadily going back to nature to become habitat for small mammals and bird life. A concrete block silo in western Kansas has gone to seed, so to speak, and a tree has grown up through its center. It presents its canopy to the sun from the now-roofless structure, a testament to a small dairy farm gone extinct. I saw a Victorian mansion in a small midwestern town that now sits as a shadow to its former glory; the laughter that resonated from its rooms in an earlier era have been replaced by the creaking of its walls in a winter storm. The town has followed this desolate home into one of empty stores and businesses. Windows have been replaced by plywood.

Let us go back to my opening paragraphs of this treatise. It speaks of a town that was bonded by a spirit of God, country, and friendship. This has now been replaced by a life of modern living where the residents don't know their neighbors or community members as they once did. Mass communication, mass entertainment, and ever-changing technological marketing, have relegated the old ways of community spirit and friendship to people living more solitary existences. I visited a friend in small town Nebraska some years ago. Even though his family lived just outside of the town for generations and a town 10 miles away is named after his great-grandfather, no one knew him. It took five stops asking directions before I tracked him down a few miles outside of town. People are detached from the community as a whole and this has led to more self-imposed isolation. For many years, I have made it a point to talk to people in stores, in barber shops, during walks, and with the homebound elderly. Strangers have even thanked me for having extended conversations with them. How miserable is that!

Across America, a feeling of hollowness and despondency has been recorded at unacceptable levels. Current U.S. Surgeon General. Dr. Vivek H. Murthy recently reported that about half of U.S. adults say they have experienced loneliness. He also reported that loneliness is more deadly than smoking: "There's really no substitute for in-person interaction. As we shifted to use technology more and more for our communication, we lost out on a lot of that in-person interaction. How do we design technology that strengthens our relationships as opposed to weaken them?"

Prince Charles (now King Charles III) has noticed this trend in England and has partnered with a well-known architect to design and construct a modern, small town that is self-sufficient and sustainable. Named Poundbury ([poundbury.co.uk](http://poundbury.co.uk)) and located in the county of Dorset in England, it has a population of only 5,000 residents. No big box stores, no reliance on fast-paced technology, just the baker, the butcher, the candlestick maker! The residents of this community know their neighbors. On any given day, they can traverse the parks and sidewalks and connect with one another. King Charles has essentially replicated the bygone era of small-town America. I will leave further analysis to sociologists.

As I depart Ossian, I travel past the Greg Lechtenberg home, perched above the county road that takes one to Festina. The house sits lonely and deserted and I can't help but think of the wonderful times that were had in another time long since relegated to one's memory. The barn and the various farm buildings are moldering in disuse.

I leave the treasured memories of this farm, of my boyhood visits, and journey to Festina to find a quiet scene devoid of the businesses of the early years. My maternal grandparents' home has been demolished and replaced by a large, verdant lawn. The lives of many generations that were born, lived, and died here have been erased. I remember all the photos of special events taken on the front lawn in years gone by. During the good ol' days in Festina, if you needed hardware supplies, you went to Etteldorf's, if you wanted to play cards or drink beer you went to Schneberger's, and if you needed groceries, you went to Schupanitz's. Active back then, the Schupanitz store has now all but deteriorated. Not already having

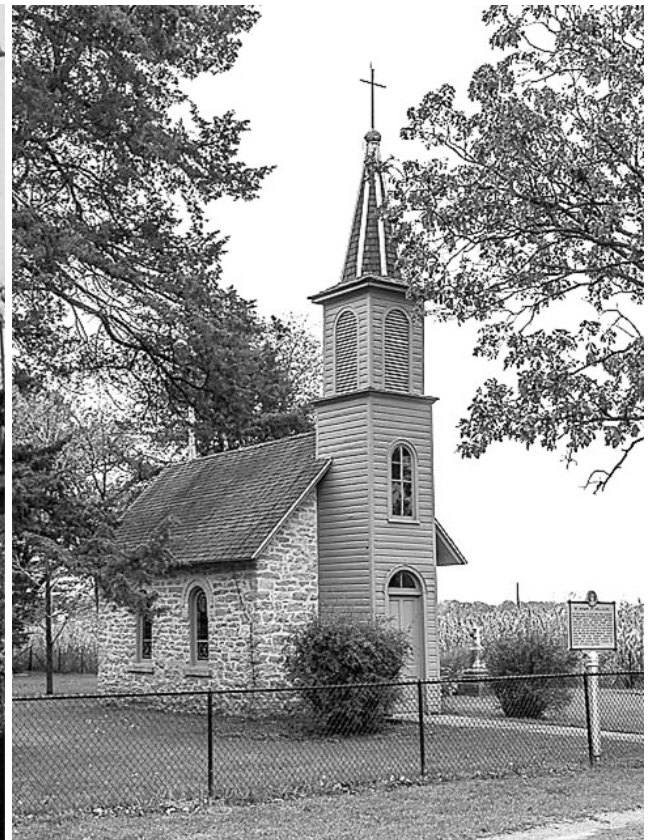
enough angst in my heart, I travel to the Cremer family farm that was settled in the early 1850s. That, too, is erased from the face of the earth, first by a violent multi-vortex tornado in April 2017, then by the new owners who razed some of the damaged buildings, feeling that reconstruction would be a financial black hole. All the memories of the Cremer family for some 150 years gobbled up by one ferocious meteorological event.



**Left: Cremer family farm in Festina, prior to the tornado of 2017. Right: The farm in 2022.**



**Festina in its early years.**



**St. Anthony of Padua Chapel aka "The Smallest Church in the World." Outside of Festina.**

I move on through other parts of northeast Iowa and see the changing face of previous Norman Rockwell America. Numerous small towns fade in my rearview mirror as I see them bereft of basic venues such as grocery stores, dry goods stores, repair shops, and hardware stores. Two miles south of New Albin, under Black Hawk's Bluff, I stop at the former homesite where my family lived for four years. The house and farm building were demolished decades ago by wrecking crews and aided by a bulldozer. The State of Iowa purchased a large tract of land for a public hunting area and consequently the farm buildings that had fallen into disrepair were removed permanently. The only vestiges of my home are the artesian well and a large lilac bush which used to waft its intoxicating scent through my bedroom window. Yes, this is the same bush on which a Whip-poor-will used to sing its haunting song on an idyllic summer evening. For this young boy, life was simple...and life was good. A thousand memories ricochet through my mind in a bewildering kaleidoscope of a past that once was.

On a Saturday evening, I finally arrive in my hometown of New Albin. It is dark except for the lights shining through the front window of the two remaining taverns. It is quiet; no hustle and bustle on the streets as during my adolescent years in the 1950s and 1960s. The current residents are curled up in the family cocoon streaming a movie or texting on a smartphone. Most of the stores that once served the area are now gone; the town's business sector only a shadow of its former glory. All my recollections of a friendly oasis in farm country are now encapsulated in dark, silent streets. So many friends and acquaintances from my formative years are gone; some forever. As I finish my sentimental visit, I am filled with melancholy and nostalgia from the transformations I have witnessed in these rural areas since my youth.

In my final analysis, I must agree with John Steinbeck who stated in his novel, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, you reach a point in your life when "You can't go home again because home has ceased to exist except in the mothballs of memory."



**Present day downtown Ossian.**

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Thank you to Linus Cremer for providing many of the historical photos!

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