



TRENTON IN BYGONE DAYS

By John J. Cleary

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There are interesting particulars about the career of Frank H. Smith, the veteran newsdealer, which do not come to light in ordinary conversation. Mr. Smith is not given to talking about himself. I learned from him the other day after some cross-questioning, however, that his memory of the local newspapers goes clear back to the time when the old True American was published at the southwest corner of Warren and Front Streets, and that means slightly over sixty years ago. William H. Smith, his father, had a monopoly of the True American and State Gazette delivery north of the Assunpink, while the late George Fitzgeorge, with the aid of a corps of newsboys, served the South Trenton district. The papers were only four-page sheets at the time and, of course, the circulation was small, compared with the delivery of today. Where a boy could handily carry his bundle under his arm in those days, he pretty nearly needs a wheelbarrow nowadays.

An odd circumstance, in the light of present conditions, is that the few residents of Greenwood Avenue west of Clinton had to file a protest with the local publishers because they had no morning service. None of the young carriers wanted a route "so far out in the country," but Frank Smith, although only about ten years of age, volunteered and thereafter Judge Van Syckel and his neighbors of Greenwood Avenue had the Gazette or True American on the breakfast table daily.

Another of the incidents of newspaper carrying in those times was that, there being no folder attachment on the flat-bed presses, the newsboys had to fold every paper by hand before starting on their routes. Frank Smith made a reputation as the fastest folder in town. Besides his work on the daily, he was one of several boys employed to fold the "weekly" each Thursday. Both the American and Gazette circulated their weekly edition by mail throughout the State. The boys received eight cents a hundred for folding the weekly, which consisted of eight pages, and at this rate earned a good day's pay. Thursday made a long day for Frank, since his duties on the daily called him out at 4 o'clock in the morning and it was after several hours on the road that he began folding the weeklies.

Frank's father, like the elder Fitzgeorge, accumulated a good deal of money from their monopoly of the morning newspaper delivery over a long course of years. Smith, Sr., invested his savings in the building up of Cooper and Lamberton Streets. Frank Smith is still active in his duties as a newspaper dealer and despite one or two bumps from automobiles which sent him to the hospital, he travels about with the agility and alertness of many a man his junior.

Bane L. Temple, engineer at the city pumping station, had his memory stirred by the announcement of the death of Dr. Fred Woodward about ten days ago in Arkansas. Only our older citizens will remember the close association of the two youths in the days when roller skating was all the rage in Trenton. That will take us back to the eighties and nineties with pleasant recollections of the Capitol Rink on Stockton Street just before Academy. So great was the popularity of the sport that a firm from out of town put up a building specially for the new form of recreation, and crowds flocked there every afternoon and night while the craze lasted. Skating space, 140 feet by 48, afforded abundant room, and when gas-light flooded the place each evening, Peterman's orchestra discoursed lively music, and the young men and women of town indulged in their clever maneuvers on the floor with a large crowd of spectators seated outside the lines, the spectacle was a gay one indeed, in what was then a rather sleepy old town. There were prize contests by skaters of national reputation and as a result a number of local boys and girls developed the art sufficiently to give exhibitions also.

It was about this time that Temple and Woodward became noted in a double skating act which always brought them rounds of applause. Temple was only a schoolboy, but Woodward was already in active practice as a dentist. Fred, however, was of a somewhat restless disposition, and soon afterwards traveled through various parts of the country, to the regret of numerous Trenton friends, who found him one of the most talented and agreeable of our younger citizenship. He had been in Arkansas since 1916, and was several times elected as Mayor of Batesville in that State.

Temple, on the contrary, found Trenton to his liking and has prospered here through the years.

What of the old rink? It had several successful seasons and eventually was operated by Al Winkler and Charles Furman, the livery man. In course of time it was razed to make way for dwellings.

In one of those trolley-car conversations in which the venerable Federal Court Clerk George T. Cranmer and I have an opportunity to indulge from time to time, mention was made of the recent Trenton Bankers' dinner. The fact that Harold E. Cranmer was the toastmaster led Senator Cranmer to claim Harold as one of the Ocean county family of that name. His father, it appears, had charge of the Barnegat lighthouse for some years.

"The Cranmers seem to have quite a footing in that neck of the woods," I commented.

“I’ll tell you a story that will make you think so,” said the Senator, and this was the story:

Away back in the early 80’s, George Cranmer was running for Assembly in his home county of Ocean and the late J. Hart Brewer, of Trenton, was running for Congress. One day Cranmer undertook to do a little campaigning with Brewer, and the first man they called upon was introduced to the Trentonian as “My friend, Mr. Cranmer.” Brewer, who possessed all the qualities of a good campaigner, extended his hand and there was a cordial greeting.

A little farther down the road they met another citizen.

“Permit me to introduce my friend, Mr. Cranmer!” said the future Senator.

Again there was a smile and a handshake with Brewer, who, however, looked as if he had something on his mind.

The campaigners proceeded on their way after the usual interval of pleasant words and after a while another voter was encountered.

“Allow me to present a dear old friend of mine, Mr. Cranmer!” said George.

But this was too much for Brewer who was a good deal of a wag. “Say, George,” he remarked with a somewhat incredulous, “if you get the solid Cranmer vote, Ocean County ought to be good for a thousand Republican majority!”

“Well,” said the Senator concluding his story, “I got a big majority for the House of Assembly anyway, and Brewer carried the district handsomely, too.”

“Do you remember that fine grandstand on the Perrine baseball field years ago?” asked William Korn, the tall, well-built man you are apt to see keeping a close eye on all comers and goers – and in particular on mischievous-looking boys – in the Post Office corridors.

I remember it very well, as do thousands of other Trentonians who used to patronize the Trenton Baseball Club in the days of the Tri-State League with Wilmington, Lancaster, Harrisburg and other cities as formidable competitors with this city. The grounds were located on West State Street, just beyond the site of Junior High School No. 3. It was probably the best setup ever provided for a local field and the late Colonel Lewis Perrine was responsible for the good taste shown.

But what William Korn, who was grounds manager, had in mind relates to the fate of the grandstand after the West State Street grounds were abandoned. I couldn’t throw any light on that question.

“It was sold to Elmira, New York,” said Korn, “and is doing service there yet.”

That will probably be news to a good many Trentonians and any of us who journey through Elmira this summer are pretty sure to look for the old grandstand that once sheltered local baseball fans.

Talking of old-time amusements, the quotations from the files of the State Gazette, printed last week, mentioned a theatrical performance given in the Atheneum in 1857.

There must be a great number of people who cannot tell where the Atheneum was located. Just to freshen up local traditions a bit, I may state that this first of Trenton playhouses (if we except the old City Hall salon) stood where the Ribsam stores are now located, on East Front Street. Later it was Bechtel Hall.