

A Holiday Memory of Oldenburg circa 1951

by Joe Adams from an newspaper article in the 50's

Every once in a while we uncover a gem in the archives department. Here is one of them describing the town of Oldenburg, IN in 1951. Although Oldenburg has moved into the 21st century the exterior of the town and convent look much the same today. We thought you might enjoy this article from a newspaper in the fifties by Joe Adams.

With a simple flip of the wheel you leave Road 46 and virtually the world and all its clamor and cares. For in one magic moment you are on a winding road, rolling through snow-mantled, serene and silent hills that stand as eternal sentinels above the story-book town of Oldenburg.

The throb of your motor, hitherto lost in the roar of traffic on the main road, now offends the brooding silences of the peaceful countryside. A redbird flutters away in alarm, its scarlet cloak flashing against the patches of snow on the hillsides. You drive along in the eerie hush of twilight and you wonder if this planet, whereon men – good and evil – struggle for survival, has suddenly and unaccountably stood still.

Then as you make a final turn, you look down into a snug, little valley and behold the “village of spires.” The waning light of a relentlessly bitter December illumines the gilded spires of the churches, the convent of the Immaculate Conception and the Franciscan monastery. And the bells of Oldenburg, which seem always to be ringing, are now peeling forth a special message, and the words come spontaneously to the cadence of the chimes:

Ring out the old! Ring in the new!
For this is in truth a time for decision –
Time to be earnest and honest and true
As the world's way of life cries aloud for revision!
Ring in the new! And let the bells sing
Of faith and of hope and of regeneration!
Hail to the new! And, oh, may it bring
To a fear-darkened world the light of salvation!

As you enter a community whose antiquity of 113 years is written in the fading bricks of many homes and institutions the bells, ancient and modern, fairly drench the place with melody. The triumphant tones gladden the heart and shut off the clamor and contentions of these troubled times from this Shrangri-La of the Old World simplicity.

Inevitably you come upon a walled-in brick building on the front of which is chiseled the legend: “Sisters of St. Francis. Immaculate Conception Convent. Founded 1851.” Now it is 1951 and though the world beyond might be in turmoil you find within these walls, as it has been down the hallowed years, peace unutterable. In the words of Sister Paschal, teacher, editor and librarian: “The convent is truly a happy place. For whoever has found God has found peace.”

Especially has it been happy since, on Christmas eve, the Sisters decorated the chapel, the dining hall and corridors and launched the yuletide program of services, carols and other events. And always some of the Sisters have kept vigil – as it is kept the clock around – in the beautiful Adoration Chapel. And you can be sure that on this night their supplications will be for world peace.

At this season of the year there is even a little gaiety at the convent, beginning with the Christmas tree ceremonies at which each Sister receives a small gift. And on Christmas Day and New Year's Day, as on all great feasts, the rule of silence is relaxed. But there is a full liturgical program with masses, Vespers and Compline, Matins and Lauds, the rosary and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. And during this period there are visits to the crib in chapel where some of the Nativity figures were fashioned by one of the Sisters, long since deceased.

You find no ornate Neon signs flashing on New Year's eve here in Oldenburg and you hear no blaring horns as in the big cities, even though there were occasions in earlier days when the exuberance of the German settlers was fully expressed.

Notably there was the spectacular demonstration which marked the completion of the new brick steeple on the church. On the afternoon of July 4, 1892, villagers heard some eerie yodeling which seemed to be floating down from the heavens. Looking up, they saw one of the workmen standing on the right arm of the church cross, 187 feet above the ground, dancing a jig and yodeling.

There are two taverns in the little town now but you would scarcely know they were in operation. One even proclaims, through the lettering on the ancient stone above the portals, that it is a saloon.

Down the same street you come upon a sturdy stone building above the entrance of which is a slab bearing the date, 1845, and a crude carving of a sickle moon and a blazing sun. It probably is symbolic of something much more lofty but a facetious interpretation is that the moon represents a tired, thirsty traveler just arriving and the blazing sun stands for the same traveler as he departed, "all lit up."

But on this New Year's eve there is little hilarity in Oldenburg. You hear only the ever-vocal bells sending a message of peace and hope deep into the old and understanding hills.

Joe Adams