Emily Kimbrough

Although her time in Muncie, Indiana wasn't very long, Emily Kimbrough still held Muncie close to her heart. Born October 23rd, 1898, at 715 Washington Street, Kimbrough lived only one block away for most of her childhood. She found companionship from neighbors and loved her family dearly, writing fondly of them in her book, *How Dear to My Heart*, which reflects on her time in Muncie. After her family moved to Chicago when she was eleven years old, Kimbrough found it difficult to transition to the busy world of Chicago from the more casual Muncie. Following her graduation from Bryn Mawr College, Kimbrough and a friend traveled to Europe, writing of their experiences which were later adapted to a movie: *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*. Kimbrough spent many years as the editor for *Ladies Home Journal* and contributed her writing to many more publications.Though she found success away from Muncie during the rest of her life, Kimbrough was still very fond of the Indiana town, as seen here, in her own words: "This is where my roots are very, very deep – this is where I belong" (East Central Neighborhood Association).

Big Wheels Keep on Turning: Transportation and Economics in Muncie, Indiana from 1890-1925

Muncie, Indiana has never been a world-renowned or cosmopolitan metropolis, but when one scratches at the surface of Muncie's history, they may find a well of information about this constantly changing town. After natural gas wells were discovered near Muncie, the quiet agricultural community began to quickly change. Because of cheap and essential fuel in such close proximity to Muncie, many factories were formed or relocated in and around the city in order to have access to this new fuel source. In just 30 years, the number of factories went from 40 factories in 1890 to over 300 in 1920. This industrialization brought many new technologies: household appliances, radios, and, most importantly, the automobile (Connolly).

Horses were the kings of transportation for quite a long time in Muncie. Farmers used them to ride to town, and the upper class used them to pull their buggies. Muncie was traditionally an agricultural community; it wasn't uncommon to raise chickens in the back yard. In the 1880s, an ordinance was passed to prevent livestock from running rampant in the streets as the chickens were fond of escaping their coops and cows and pigs were often brought to town for sale. By the 1920s though, the traditional horse and buggy form of transportation had been almost completely phased out. Horses had gone from being the "wildest flight of a [Muncie] boy's dreams," to being replaced by the automobile (Lynd). The horse fountain built in 1890 fell into disrepair by the 1920s and the general public didn't notice (Lynd). Even farmers were trading in their horses for the quicker automobile (Connolly). It was easier to take the car into town than to use a horse and cart, which would typically take the whole day.

When automobiles were introduced to the small town, not everyone was excited to see this new technology. In *How Dear to My Heart,* Emily Kimbrough describes the neighborhood's reaction to her grandfather's new car:

> When the automobile with Grandfather driving it passed [Mr. Meeks], he was just getting out of his buggy at the house next to Mr. Bernard's little store. The horse went up over the sidewalk into the yard and one of the shafts of the buggy got stuck between the fence palings. Grandfather called out that he was distressed but couldn't stop. People who didn't see it could scarcely believe what Mr. Meeks did. He turned around in the hard and shook his fist after Grandfather. Grandmother had her eyes closed in such angry determination that she didn't see it. (Kimbrough)

Even Charles Kimbrough's wife was apprehensive of the automobile and took much coaxing to even step foot in it. Local farmers were often the ones who were the most vocal about their dislike of the automobile because it would frequently spook the horses.

> But *nobody* got to see – as we Hoosiers say – the bridge site because a farmer shot at us with buckshot and his little boy threw stones.Their team had been scared by an automobile the week before, we found out. The plow had been broken and one of the horses had gone lame. So the little boy was on the lookout, in case it came back. Of course he could hear us coming from quite a long way off – see us well. They had plenty of time to load and get a good aim. (Kimbrough)

Though there were many who were apprehensive of Charles Kimbrough's automobile, his was not the first and would not be anywhere close to the last in Muncie. The first automobile was introduced to Muncie in 1900, and in 1906 there were roughly

twenty cars. In a little under twenty years, over 6,000 cars traveled the Muncie roads. The average household began to change with the advent of the automobile as well. Families sacrificed anything they could just so they could own a car. Many families mortgaged their homes to afford a car. One woman, who was a mother of nine children, said that, "We'd rather do without clothes than give up the car." Another woman even said she would go without food so they could afford their cars. At the time of the Middletown Survey, 26 families with cars were asked about bathroom facilities. It was discovered that, of these 26 families, only five also had a bathtub. The automobile also transformed how people spent their leisure time. Some families were missing church to go on Sunday drives:

> Yes, I did [miss church] but you can't do both. I never missed church or Sunday school for thirteen years and I kind of feel as if I'd done my share. The ministers ought not to rail against people's driving on Sunday. They ought just to realize that they won't be there every Sunday during the summer and make church interesting enough so they'll want to come. (Lynd)

Besides extra spending money, food and new clothes, many families gave up their yard once they had a car so they could build garages (Smith). Many families were willing to sacrifice so much because it gave their family status. Having an automobile meant your family was wealthy enough to afford exciting new things. However, many saw the automobile as a luxury and a leisure activity more than a practical tool (Connolly). Kimbrough stated that even her grandfather, who was enthusiastic about the automobile, only used it for special occasions (Kimbrough). Those who did own this new luxury

didn't utilize it the way that modern people would. Many who had cars, for example, didn't always drive them to work. They instead saw cars as a "once-in-a-while" event.

People still needed a way to get to and from work though, even if they weren't willing to use their automobiles daily. As it is now known, the Emily Kimbrough district had many different types of people living there: from the upper class citizens who employed drivers to those who took other means of transportation on a daily basis. One very common mode of transportation was the streetcar.

Muncie's streetcar, introduced in the 1890s, was the preferred way to get to and from the factories on the outer edges of town. It was also an easy way for children to easily get to and from school. The fares were kept low because the workers were most frequent passengers (Connolly). The streetcars also allowed workers to have a job in a different neighborhood than where they lived. Instead of having to live within walking distance to go to work, the streetcar allowed them to move to nicer neighborhoods. The streetcars didn't always take the workers right up to the factory but it took them within walking distance. The streetcar routes followed a "hub and spoke" layout. They traveled around downtown Muncie and then went down the more popular streets to where people lived or where they worked (Connolly).

After the automobile was introduced, the roads became even more crowded than they were before. There were streetcars, pedestrians, bicyclists, the occasional horse and now the automobiles. There was a constant struggle for dominance on the roads.The horses were being frightened by automobiles. Buggies were getting caught in the streetcar tracks. Kimbrough describes her grandfather's first outing in the car: "…He didn't get caught in the trolley track nor have any difficulty about the trolley. The trolley

wasn’t even in sight.” The automobile eventually won out and roads were paved to cater to the dominant transportation.

The trains never had to fight for their space in Muncie. The gangster John Dillinger supposedly said that he would never rob a bank in Muncie because of all the trains. It is very easy to get stuck at a train and not be able to leave town, something that the infamous bank robber needed to keep in mind. More often than not, the only time people used trains were to go on long trips such as to Indianapolis or Saint Louis.The average working class person wouldn’t use a train daily. The daily trips were still made either on foot or by streetcar in many cases.The train system was used more often for shipping materials to the plants and factories that populated Muncie. The Ball brothers found the railroads so important that they bought a train and then had tracks built right to the factory (Connolly).

With the advancement in transportation, the streets of Muncie were forever changed. If not for the gas boom enabling the transition from an agriculture economy to an industrial economy, this advancement wouldn’t have been possible. The gas boom not only shaped transportation in Muncie, but the whole economic landscape.

In the 1880’s the second industrial revolution was well under way. Many countries were experiencing large economic growth due to the mass production of railroads and the continuingly expanding options for travel. Thomas Edison was establishing his commercial lighting company, allowing the first modern cities to come together. The first skyscrapers began rising toward the heavens in a triumphant display of the prosperity of the Western world. Muncie was no exception to the boom of growth experienced by the country and the world.

With the Indiana gas boom Muncie was able to maintain pace with the economic growth experienced across the world. The boom began in the early 1880's and lasted into the early twentieth century. It facilitated economic growth in Muncie, across Indiana, and throughout the Midwest. Natural gas was first discovered in 1876 by coal miners from the town of Eaton who were looking for a new source of coal. They drilled into the top of a large deposit of natural gas. Fearing they had drilled into the roof of Hell the miners plugged the hole and discontinued drilling in the area (Gray, 187). When natural gas was discovered in Ohio in 1884 the news was publicized in Indiana newspapers. Residents of Eaton remembered the experience they had years before drilling into the "roof of Hell," and realized the gravity of the discovery they had made. A company went back to the site and reopened the hole (Glass, 11). The gas field covered an area of 2,500 square miles and became known as the Trenton Gas Field. The drillers additionally found large amounts of oil in addition to the natural gas (Gray, 187).

Iron and metal manufacturers flocked to Indiana for cheap fuel. The low fuel costs were the primary reason so many companies moved to Indiana. Flambeaus were used as visually stunning displays to attract companies to the area showing how much gas was stored. The flambeaus could sometimes be seen from miles away, and the pressure of the gas fields in some areas was 300 pounds per square inch. Indiana Natural Gas and Oil was formed, hiring Elwood Haynes, an inventor and industrialist, to oversee the laying of the first long distance natural gas pipeline in the United States. A major use of the gas was to provide cities with gas lighting and power streetcars (Gray, 187). Many cities in the area saw huge population growth. For example, in 1892 Gas City had a population of 150, but in just two years its population grew to over 20,000. Muncie's population

experienced similar growth, expanding from 5,219 people in 1880 to 20,942 by 1900.

As cities grew in the northern part of the state, scientists began to speculate as to how long the gas wells would last. It was theorized at one point that more gas was being wasted than was being used by the industries bringing people to the area. Flambeaus were the most common source of waste. The Indiana General Assembly attempted to stop the practice by limiting open burning, but the law was met with opposition. The Indiana General Assembly even went so far as to conduct an investigation as to how much money was lost due to the lighting of flambeaus, which found that $10,000 in gas was wasted daily. Elwood Haynes filed suit after laws regulating the use of the gas passed into effect. In the suit, Haynes claimed that the Indiana General Assembly had no authority to regulate the industry, and in 1896 the Indiana Supreme Court declared the laws unconstitutional (Glass, 188).

The discovery drew business and entrepreneurs. Among them were industry investors, like Elwood Haynes, who provided additional capital to the region. The Ball Corporation, one of the largest and most well known businesses of the time, set up operations in Muncie to capitalize on the gas boom.They began construction of their Muncie plant in September 1887. By March 1888, the plant's furnaces were stoked and production was under way. The first products made in the Muncie facility were coal oil

containers and lamp chimneys. Another well-known glass manufacturer from Muncie was Hemingray Glass Company. They produced both home and industrial glassware.

In addition to glass manufacturing companies, many other large companies found Muncie an ideal location to grow. Indiana Steel and Wire, Westinghouse, General Motors, Warner Gear, and Durant Motors all established manufacturing facilities in Muncie spurred by the low energy costs. Durant Motors in particular produced many of the popular cars of the early 1900's in Muncie.

With so much industry in Muncie, there was a vast diversity of incomes and position status from street to street, and the Emily Kimbrough district was no exception. The minimum cost of living for a typical family of five in Middletown in 1924 was $1,920.87 (Lynd, 84). Incomes varied widely, ranging from $344.50 to $3,460.00, with a median of families making $1,494.75—still $400 away from a living wage for the time (Lynd, 85). A leading cause of families not making a living wage was the vast difference in wages earned between men and women, and the large increase in the cost of living from 1891 to 1924.

> A detailed calculation of a cost of living index for Middletown in 1924 on the basis of cost of living in 1891 reveals an increase of 117 per cent. A comparison of the average yearly earnings of the 100 heads of families in 1924 with available figures for 439 glass, wood, and iron and steel workers in Middletown in 1891 reveals an average of $1469.61 in the former case and $505.65 in the latter, or an increase of 191 per cent today. (Lynd, 86)

Manufacturing jobs were not alone in the drastic changes in the cost of living. Doctors and teachers also saw their wages lag behind the increasing costs of everyday living. From the doctors or plant managers, who were making a comfortable living, to the factory worker a block over, who would often sacrifice in some areas of his family's life to have the appearance of success as those around him, the Kimbrough neighborhood encompassed all of these wild differences.

The leading factor of the large increase in cost of living at the beginning of the 1920's was that the gas boom had finally come to a halt. The wasteful practices rapidly depleted gas fields, and by the turn of the century output began to sharply decline. Modern experts estimate that as much as 90% of the natural gas was wasted in flambeau displays (Gray, 189). By 1903 factories were turning to companies such as Westinghouse Electric for their power needs. The oil production from the wells also stopped by 1910, just a few years after the natural gas was depleted, because there was no longer sufficient pressure to pump oil to the surface. However, the area's economy was already well underway and remained strong until the Great Depression. The effect of the gas boom enabled Muncie to grow and allowed for a great divergence of prosperity to shape Muncie street by street.

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