

A Place Called Bloomingdale: Uncovering Two Hundred Years of History

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for honors course requirements at
the University of Waterloo.

Selected as Waterloo Historical Society
Local History Award Winner.

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[Note from Waterloo Historical Society:

Each year, the Waterloo Historical Society, in co-operation with the history departments at the University of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier University, offers a \$500 award to a student at each university who presents the best paper on a topic relevant to the Region of Waterloo. No winner was selected in 2002 at WLU. The University of Waterloo history department chose “A Place Called Bloomingdale: Uncovering Two Hundred Years of History.” It was written by fourth-year student Angela McLean who was finishing an honors degree in history with a minor in classical studies. In year four she concentrated on local history research and under the supervision of Dr. Gerry Stortz produced this work on Bloomingdale.

Angela McLean has lived in Bloomingdale for over 16 years, in the same house her father grew up in. Two Bloomingdale neighbors, Mrs. Irene Weber and the late Marg Dahmer, provided inspiration and assistance as Ms. McLean researched and discovered her community’s history.

Her theme of public and private community centres providing a continual link between the pioneers and the present day, underlies her work, during which she unearthed many nearly forgotten aspects of Bloomingdale’s past. An edited-for-space version of “A Place Called Bloomingdale.” including photographs, appeared in WHS Annual Volume #90, May 2003 .

The full paper by Angela is also on file in the WHS collection at KPL.]

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A Place Called Bloomingdale:
Uncovering Two Hundred Years of History

You've all heard the song about
the place called Bloomingdale.
I tell you it's a pretty little spot.
For the benefit of people who know nothing
at all about the place,
a lot of information I have got!
All this world is sad and dreary,
other lands are stale,
but this is the home full of mirth and glory,
the place we call Bloomingdale.
There are houses without number,
and lawns so fair and green,
the streets and many alleys for a stroll.
While a pond in the valley
is a place in a thousand
to take your friends for a row.
There's a great big mill in the place called Bloomingdale,
where they make hoops, barrels, boards and chop.
And I'll tell you for a fact that men who can remember,

say, the mill has been never known to stop.

The great King Edward hall was a place for fun and merriment,

to many it brought great fame,

the music was delightful, the speeches were so grand.

It's where the quacks came to heal the sick and lame.¹

This is part of a 1914 song composed by George Osborne McKenzie, a teacher at Bloomingdale public school, who took pride in belonging to a cohesive and self-sufficient community.

Bloomingdale is located along the Grand River about five miles east of Kitchener, on Regional Road # 17.² For years, the population of the village has remained steady at around 350 residents.³

As part of Woolwich Township now, Bloomingdale has been preserved as an agricultural community. One of the original Pennsylvania German barns still stands just north of the village, on the west side of Regional Road # 17. It was built for Moses Bauman in 1843 and became the model for the typical barn in Southern Ontario.⁴

Not only does Bloomingdale have plenty of rich farmland, but also an adequate amount of forest coverage. This combination has provided the ideal conditions for Great Blue Herons, also known as fish cranes, to have established a breeding colony within the area.⁵ No recent studies have been done on Bloomingdale's heronry. However the measures put in place by the Grand Valley Conservation Authority in the 1960s were supposed to protect it from any threats in the foreseeable future.⁶ It is the heronry woods and the many other forms of wildlife and plants that have contributed to the picturesque quality of Bloomingdale. Alfred Schenk, a former resident and owner of Bloomingdale's greenhouses, expressed his fondness for country life in Folk Song Book in the Street-Talk of Berlin, Ontario. The Waterloo Historical Society's review

on Alf's book, commented on how he introduced country life to his readers, preferring Bloomingdale because he "lived closer to nature and the simpler things of life....[where] the bird songs weren't drowned out by the rush of traffic."⁷

There are a few theories on how Bloomingdale got its name, including one that has been accepted by many generations of residents. They believe that Samuel B. Bowman, a Mennonite settler, who came from Pennsylvania in 1826, had named the village. The story is that "Samuel Bauman [also spelled Bowman] was so impressed by the beauty and profusion of wild plum blossoms when he arrived that he exclaimed 'this place should be called Bloomingdale'."⁸

Another possibility is that the name was adapted from an existing hamlet called Bloomingdale in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, by an unknown Pennsylvania German settler.⁹ The last theory is that Bloomingdale received its name from surveyors who wanted to give the settlement a romantic and pleasant name to please the inhabitants, and so they chose Bloomingdale.¹⁰ Any of these theories could be correct. The name was adopted before, or around, the time the village was incorporated, with the opening of the village post office in 1861.¹¹

Fundamentally, Bloomingdale has remained a small village in the centre of a rich farming community. An identity for the community has always been maintained in a way that distinguishes it from nearby Kitchener-Waterloo. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the identity of the community was formed through private and public institutions being established by the first settlers in the area. Even though these private and public institutions have changed over time, they continue to serve as a means for sustaining a united and self-supporting community. At first, Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, established by Jacob (Yoch) Schneider, functioned as the centre of the community. However, as the settlement developed around the mid 1800s the focal point of the community extended to the United Brethren in Christ Church located

on the outskirts of the village.¹² In uncovering Bloomingdale's history, it becomes apparent that when one private or public institution declines, another takes over, therefore replenishing the community's sense of unity and self-sufficiency. Throughout the last 200 years, the focus of the community has often shifted between different private and public institutions. The most notable are the Schneider farms, the Mennonite Church, the United Church, the King Edward Hall, the public school and the Bloomingdale Community Centre.

Almost two hundred years ago, Jacob Schneider settled on land he purchased near the Grand River and he became "the forerunner of seven generations...to settle on the lands which he accumulated and cleared."¹³ From 1806 until 1826, the settlement was referred to as Schneider's Corner because the Schneiders were the only occupants in the Bloomingdale area.¹⁴ It should be noted that third generation descendants changed the spelling of Schneider to Snider/Snyder. A few local historians speculate this was done to distinguish "the Pennsylvania[n] German families from incoming continental German families with the same surname or that the spelling of the name was anglicized to further affirm their allegiance to the British crown."¹⁵ Nevertheless, the identity of the community has always been associated with the Schneiders because they were the first to transform an uncultivated area into a prosperous agricultural community.

When Jacob Schneider arrived there were no roads, only dense tree growth and thick underbrush that restricted his heavily loaded conestoga wagons from getting to his land.¹⁶ Before Jacob attempted to transport his family to an unfamiliar country, he went along with two other parties to see for himself the land being offered in Upper Canada.¹⁷ Jacob was so impressed with what he saw in Canada that he purchased 424 acres of land located on the east side of the Grand River, known as the Oxbow, near the future site for the village of Bloomingdale. In spring, 1806,

Jacob with his wife Mary, and their nine children left behind their life in Franklin County, Pennsylvania for a new beginning in Upper Canada.

Accompanying Jacob and his family on the 450 mile trek to Canada were thirty-seven Mennonite emigrants from Franklin County, including his brother Christian Schneider, who settled west of Doon.¹⁸ For a number of reasons, it had become common in the early nineteenth century for the Pennsylvania Germans to emigrate northward to Canada. Many, like fathers with large families, felt a pull to Canada because they found it impossible to provide farms in Pennsylvania for their children. Also, those seeking to make a profit had sold their land in Pennsylvania at high prices and purchased cheaper land in Canada. To remain under the protection of the British crown was one other reason why many Mennonites made the trek to Canada. After the American Revolution, the American government refused to grant the Mennonites exemption from war activities, while on the other hand, the British government in Canada promised them freedom of religion and economic opportunity.¹⁹

Alfred Schenk acknowledged that the pioneers in Canada possessed certain characteristics that enabled them to survive under the hardships they first endured. According to Schenk, the pioneers exhibited “a deep respect for the land and its flora and fauna, dedication to hard work, a willingness to work together and to help one another in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and a steadfast faith in God.”²⁰ If the first settlers had not possessed these characteristics they would not have survived the “Cold Summer” of 1816. The local history books for Waterloo County refer to 1816 as the year without a summer:

There was frost every month and in June and July there were seven heavy frosts.

On the morning of the first of June it was frozen so hard that men and wagons

could cross the mud puddles on the newly formed ice without breaking through. On the 21st of June quite a lot of snow fell, trees looked as though they had been scorched after the frost killed the budding leaves...practically everything rotted on the ground. People lived for twelve months on fish and meat — venison, porcupine and groundhog (woodchuck) being varied with the thin meat of cattle slaughtered because there was no vegetation to sustain them.²¹

To get through these tough times, the first settlers not only used their knowledge of how to make do with what they had, but they also relied on support from the natives. Most of the land along the Grand River, which included the future site for Bloomingdale, had been owned, since the late 1700s, by the Six Nations. Small bands of Mississauga natives also lived in the area. There were strong relations between the first settlers and the natives. For example, the settlers could count on the natives for venison and speckled trout in exchange for bread and milk.²² An early sense of community had formed allowing each group to draw support from the other in those primitive times. On many occasions the aboriginal families extended their concern to the well-being of the settlers' children. To show their gratitude, the pioneers invited the natives into their homes on cold nights, so they could keep warm next to the fireplace.²³

Before the first settlers arrived in the area later known as Bloomingdale, natives were using the land as their hunting and fishing grounds.²⁴ The dense tree-growth made it impossible for the natives to use the land for cultivation. However, the settlers, using skills they acquired on their farms in Pennsylvania, transformed the area into a prosperous agricultural community. These first Mennonites used the widely practiced New England method: cutting down of trees, removing the underbrush and digging up the smaller stumps. This cleared enough land to use for

planting the first crops, although there would still be large tree stumps to work around.²⁵ Jacob Schneider, in addition to clearing the land, had to act as his own tanner, shoemaker, carpenter and harness-maker, while his wife Mary had to be the housekeeper, spinner of wool and flax, weaver of cloth and dressmaker.²⁶

Preston was the nearest well-established settlement, but since it took days of extensive travel to get there, the Schneiders hardly ever made the trek. In order to survive the first few years, the Schneiders had to remain self-sufficient and make do with what resources they had around them. They did have an advantage over most other settlers because several children were old enough to assist in constructing a cabin, clearing land and preparing the crops.

All the family's hard work was acknowledged by Benjamin Eby, who unexpectedly came across the settlement one day in 1807. Over supper, these old friends discussed the recent events in Pennsylvania and stories of their adventures in Canada.²⁷ When Benjamin Eby returned to Pennsylvania, he gave a glowing report of the fine settlement the Schneiders had established in Canada. On hearing these accounts, many more Pennsylvania Germans were persuaded to emigrate northward to settle near the community begun by Jacob Schneider.

Even as more and more settlers came to Bloomingdale, the influence of the Schneider family within the community continued in various ways. For example, the farm of Mary and Jacob Schneider functioned as a refuge for newly-arrived families experiencing hardships, especially for children who had lost their parents after settling in the area.²⁸ Through many generations, the Schneiders were always well-known in the community for their hospitality. In fact, the Schneider family's private concerts and public picnics were legendary within the community. New Pennsylvania German settlers quickly got over their homesickness after hearing German folksongs being played at the Schneider's private concerts. Furthermore, these

concerts maintained the German culture within the community.²⁹ Another community event was the Sunday social visiting at the Schneider farms. Almost every Sunday afternoon, locals would gather together at one of the Schneider farms to talk about topics of interest to the community.³⁰ Therefore, when the village of Bloomingdale was taking shape, the centre for the community was the Schneider farms.

By 1818, Jacob Schneider had acquired additional lands that encompassed approximately 2,500 acres. These were situated on the “east side of the Grand River, extending eastward to Township Road 11 and northward from the village of Bloomingdale to the Waterloo-Woolwich Township line.”³¹ In acquiring all this land, Jacob could provide a large farm for each of his nine married children, all within close proximity to one another. His purpose for doing this was to keep the Schneider family unit strong in Bloomingdale. Jacob’s farm on the Oxbow Lot was inherited by his son-in-law Levi Bechtel, who was the husband of Magdalena.³² The birth of Magdalena Schneider on December 6, 1806 was a monumental event for Bloomingdale because she was the first child to be born in the area. Mary and Jacob were successful in bringing their youngest daughter into the world on their own, for there was no physician in the area.³³

Not all of Jacob’s land was divided up among his family. A portion was donated to the Bloomingdale Mennonite Church and cemetery. Before the first meeting house was constructed in 1826 on Jacob’s donated land, services had been conducted in his home.³⁴ As more Pennsylvania German settlers arrived, Bloomingdale became classified as a solid Mennonite community. As a result of an increasing congregation, the Schneiders no longer had room to hold services in their log cabin. So, a little white meeting house, located northwest of Bloomingdale, was constructed to meet the needs of an increasing Mennonite community.³⁵

After the establishment of the first public institution, the focal point of the community

had switched from the Schneider family farm to the Mennonite Church. However, Schneider tradition within the community was maintained with the naming of the church after these first settlers. It was a common practice of the pioneers to honour the family who either donated or purchased the land that the church was built on. Throughout most of its presence in the community, the church has been called Schneider Mennonite Church, even though the congregation has diversified over time to include members not related to the original Schneider family. Eventually, the congregation consisted of members with such surnames as Bauman, Erb, Cressman, Weber, Bingeman and Detwiler.³⁶ These names among other non-Mennonite names are inscribed on tombstones in the church cemetery.

The land donated by Jacob Schneider to the Mennonite Church also was used as the site for the community's cemetery. Most of the Schneider family is buried in this cemetery, including Jacob, his wife Mary, and their ten children, along with forty-two grandchildren.³⁷ Olive and Vera Schweitzer have created a complete history on Bloomingdale and they recognize the cemetery as a community, rather than a Mennonite, burial ground. "In the cemetery there are former members of the community who have lived, worked and now lie together in their last sleep."³⁸

Taking account of the early deaths of locals in Bloomingdale can determine certain epidemics the community has faced throughout the past two hundred years. In doing this, it has been uncovered that Bloomingdale was directly affected by Galt's cholera epidemic of 1834. Joel Snyder, a grandson of Jacob Schneider, died of the disease on July 31, 1834, at a very young age and is buried among members of his family in the church cemetery.³⁹ Both the Mennonite Church and cemetery have provided a foundation and an identity for the community.

In these early years, Bloomingdale was identified solely as a Mennonite community.

Many of the church leaders were residents of the community, including Jacob Schneider who was appointed deacon. The meeting house and congregation had become integral parts of the community and served to bring together the residents of Bloomingdale. A few days before the bi-monthly church services, all the women in the congregation would get together and prepare enough food for the community's meal that occurred afterwards.⁴⁰

The original meeting house, built in 1826, no longer exists; it was assumed the building was destroyed by fire.⁴¹ According to a subscription list, members of the congregation funded the new church which was built in 1878 on approximately the same site as the original. In 1951, Schneider was removed from the church name, further dissociating the Schneider family from the church. Renovations to the church occurred in 1985, when an addition provided more Sunday School rooms and more foyer space.⁴² In order to meet the needs of the community, the Mennonite Church has continued to develop throughout its many years in Bloomingdale.

Over almost two hundred years of history within the community of Bloomingdale the church has dealt with a number of difficulties. The most devastating event was when the congregation decided in 1874 to align itself with the Reforming Mennonites. Organized by Solomon Eby, the Reforming Mennonites were excommunicated from the Mennonite Church for discussing the "lack of vitality in the Church."⁴³ The Bloomingdale Mennonite Church played a critical part in the church division, with lasting effects for years to come. From 1875 until 1879, Schneider Mennonite Church was not listed in the Calendar of Appointments because the Reformed Mennonites had exclusive use of the meeting house. Eventually, the schism began to fade away when the more conservative Mennonites in the congregation once again regained ownership of the Bloomingdale meeting house.⁴⁴ Although control was given back, there would still be devastating effects on the Bloomingdale congregation. These were felt in the declining

membership recorded by Samuel Bowman's membership list. Compiled after the division, these lists show membership at the Bloomingdale Mennonite Church dropping to just twenty-three.⁴⁵ Despite all the difficulties the church underwent, it still remained united and has continued to survive into the twenty-first century.

Activities have continually been organized by the church to bring the congregation and community together. The summer Bible school has been most successful in doing just that. For a few days, children of the congregation and the neighborhood attend Bible school to learn games, crafts and hear Bible stories.⁴⁶ In 1965, there was a record enrolment of 140 children at the week-long event.⁴⁷ Furthermore, this Bible camp has brought together other public institutions within Bloomingdale. The United Church in the village has cooperated with the Mennonite Church in providing teachers for the Bible school and since 1963 classes were held in both churches as well as in Bloomingdale Public School.⁴⁸ While Orland Gingerich was minister of the Mennonite Church from 1974 until 1984, "Bloomingdale saw increased cooperation in work with the United Church in Bloomingdale", and this collaboration lasted until the mid 1990s.⁴⁹

In uncovering Bloomingdale's history, it would be difficult not to write about the Schneider Mennonite Church. Its presence is almost as old as the community itself. Throughout the church's almost-two-hundred-year history, its membership has both increased and declined. The sharp decline as a result of the Mennonite division has already been mentioned. When comparing attendance in the beginning with more recent figures, a notable decline is detected. In 1873, before the division took place, the average attendance on the registry was 103. Thirty years later, there was a significant drop, for the registry indicates an average attendance of only 72.⁵⁰ During this decline, the Mennonite Church no longer functioned as the sole focal point for the community.

The centre for the community divided between the Bloomingdale Mennonite Church (the older established institution) and the United Brethren in Christ Church (the newer institution). In the 1860s a separate religious denomination, the United Brethren in Christ, began to emerge in Bloomingdale. When the new church was constructed in Bloomingdale, there was a decline in membership at the Mennonite Church. Elizabeth Bloomfield indicates in her work on Waterloo Township that “a good many old Bloomingdale families that had been Mennonite turned to the United Brethren in Christ.”⁵¹ No longer was Bloomingdale purely a Mennonite community. There were locals who still attended the Schneider Mennonite Church, but then there were those who had converted to the United Brethren in Christ.

Somewhere between sixty and seventy members of the community were converted to the United Brethren in Christ Church by Rev. S. L. Downey a missionary circuit-rider who possessed the power to influence those with whom he came into contact.⁵² When Rev. Downey visited Bloomingdale, he received little opposition from the locals. Those who did cause trouble were taught a lesson:

In 1862 Rev. Downey was holding revival meetings at the Bloomingdale school house and was rudely interrupted by a group of young men intent upon breaking up the meeting. Mr. Downey ignored them and when the group created loud noise, he asked for silence and respect. After a few moments of silence, one of the boys gave a mocking laugh. Rev. Downey stopped in the middle of a sentence, strode from the platform, and took a firm hold of the culprit’s coat collar, throwing him into a deep snow bank outside. He then came back, finished his sentence and proceeded with the meeting in peace.⁵³

The newly converted members of the United Brethren in Christ built a church called the Ebenezer Chapel where the Winterbourne Road, Town Line Road and Conestogo Road meet at the corner known as the “Crowsfoot”.⁵⁴ Like the Mennonite congregation, the Brethren congregation rapidly increased and within a few years a more spacious building was required to hold the expanding congregation. A board of trustees, consisting of residents of the area, was handed the responsibility of purchasing the land and constructing the new church. In 1878, William Erb, Owen Oberholtzer and Samuel S. Bowman, decided, as members of the board, that the land on Lot 6 of the James Wilson Tract was an ideal spot to erect the United Brethren in Christ Church. By the fall, 1879, a plain white brick church was built in collaboration with the community, right in the centre of the village.⁵⁵

Improvements were made to the building in 1904 to keep the structure up-to-date and operational for the community. When the building reopened in a dedication service, the congregation celebrated the completion of the forty-foot tower, along with renovations done to the interior.⁵⁶ Other changes occurred after there was a split in the United Brethren in Christ Church in 1889.⁵⁷ Both groups retained the UBC name. Some of the congregation, who were also residents of Bloomingdale, left the Bloomingdale church and associated with the United Brethren in Christ Church of Berlin. Others remained in the Bloomingdale church: later they joined the Congregational Church in 1906. Finally, on June 10, 1925, they joined with other faiths and became Bloomingdale United Church and so remain in the twenty-first century.⁵⁸

Bloomingdale United Church has provided much of the social life for the community. In the early twentieth century there were annual picnics, lawn socials and sleigh rides. An unknown member added a comment to the church’s annual report regarding the community picnic on July 1, 1904:

We had our annual picnic at Fernando Snyder's Oxbow farm when a large number congregated and we had a real good time. Special music by the string band and various sports for the young people to which was added a sumptuous feast, making all feel delighted and satisfied with their outing.⁵⁹

Most of these community activities not only brought the locals together but also attracted "Berlin bigwigs" to Bloomingdale. In a taped interview with Olive Schweitzer and her sister Dorothy Elliot, both women remember the anticipation the community felt for the Shepherd's lawn socials. Around mid summer, the Shepherds, who owned a farm on the outskirts of Bloomingdale, hosted lawn socials to raise money for the church.⁶⁰ Important families, such as the Breithaupts, traveled from Berlin to the Shepherds for the entertainment and food.⁶¹ Mrs. J. H. Shepherd acknowledged the success of the community's social events:

We promised \$100 to help refix the church and by the sale of ice cream on a Saturday night and a few socials, we are glad that we have been successful in raising the amount promised in such a short time. Our socials have not only been a success financially but socially. The members are trying to keep faithful to the society and feel greatly encouraged to do more for the future work of the church.⁶²

Other fundraising socials were put on by church organizations, like the Young People's Society. With the support of George Osborne McKenzie, the Society was able to raise enough

money to purchase an Estey organ for the church in 1914.⁶³ In addition, these socials functioned as a way to gather all the adolescents in the area, providing opportunities for courtship and giving a young man “the chance of seeing his lady love home.”⁶⁴ Along with the Young People’s Society, other organizations prospered within the church, like the Women’s Missionary Society, and the Boys and Girls Club (later changed to Boy Scouts and Girl Guides). These organizations became a strong link for the community and the church. Women in the community who were not members of the United Church often attended meetings of the Missionary Society. The Society was admired for establishing “a wholesome community spirit” while at the same time providing support to those in need.⁶⁵ Both the Boys and Girls Club meetings were held in the United and Mennonite churches for the children in the community and surrounding localities.⁶⁶

When the King Edward Hall was constructed in 1903, the community had a central place outside of the local churches to host their social activities. Located in a former furniture factory, the King Edward Hall had a platform built as a stage and was fitted with church seats that had been disposed of by the United Brethren in Christ Church. King Edward Hall was used mostly for entertainment. However, political and other meetings were also held at the hall.⁶⁷ Local residents and neighboring villagers always looked forward eagerly to concerts. According to Olive and Vera Schweitzer, “Bloomingdale enjoyed a reputation for first class entertainment.”⁶⁸ Music for the community was provided by a group of musicians from Bloomingdale, calling themselves the Maple Leaf Orchestra and brass band.⁶⁹

Bloomingdale maintained its self-sufficiency by relying on the local population for its entertainment and not having to travel into nearby Kitchener-Waterloo. When visitors came to Bloomingdale to give speeches or lectures, the locals all gathered at the King Edward Hall to be

entertained and to discover what was occurring outside the village. Medical companies provided entertainment for locals with free one week lectures at the hall. These medicine companies “were Indian medicine men selling a miraculous cure for any disease with a guarantee it would help man or beast.”⁷⁰

Sometimes, fundraising concerts or plays were staged in the King Edward Hall to raise money for the needs of the community. Several plays were produced by students who went to Bloomingdale public school in order to raise money to purchase a piano for the school.⁷¹ The production was successful, for it attracted a large crowd and enough money was raised to buy the piano. On some occasions, when social events drew such large crowds, the locals feared that the hall would collapse, but this never happened. The building caught fire in 1925 and was completely destroyed before fire engines from Kitchener could reach Bloomingdale.⁷²

Concerts were also given at the Bloomingdale public school at which many local villagers were in attendance. Throughout the month of December, teachers worked to prepare their students for the annual Christmas concert. The old-fashioned Christmas concert consisted of drills, music and humorous plays. For parents and the community an invitation to the concert in the well-decorated school was a highlight of the year.⁷³ Another social activity that took place in the first half of the twentieth century was the fall school fair. Usually held in the second week of September, the fair promoted the rural tradition within the community. For example, livestock competitions took place at the fair and students were judged on how well they could handle a horse and buggy.⁷⁴

Located right in the centre of the village, on the corner of St. Charles St. West and Sawmill Road, the school has long been the focal point for the community. The school was classified as the smallest in Waterloo Region and most of its student population came from the

village and immediate surrounding rural area.⁷⁵ Janet Wintermeyer was a grade 7 student of Bloomingdale public school when she wrote a poem called My Home Town. Her poem represents the identifiable connection the school had with the village:

My home town is a very interesting place.

Bloomingdale has two churches;

a United and a Mennonite church..

When travelling through the village,

you can see the old Georgian hotel,

which is now an apartment house.

There is, too, a school,

which has recently had

a new addition built on to it.

For a great sport try boating.

Across from the school, you will find a garage,

which has all different kinds, sizes and shapes

of boats to suit your enjoyment.

Yes, and don't forget to visit the old general store.

Believe it or not, they sell anything

from nuts to corn plasters.

If it's beauty you're after, just call on Alf Schenk

and he'll show you his delightful variety

of flowers in his greenhouse.

If it weren't for the beauty parlour,
many women in the village would be very disappointed.
Yes, Marge Dahmer provides much of the beauty in my home town.
So now you see why I think Bloomingdale
is the most marvellous village there is.⁷⁶

In 1826, when the first Mennonite meeting house was built, it also served as the community's first school. At this time, it was the only institution available to be used as a school. Mostly boys attended this first school and only when their labor was not needed on the family farm. Each student was charged \$2 every three months and was required to contribute firewood to heat the classroom.⁷⁷ Since these first settlers only spoke the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect and were often unwilling to learn English, teachers found it difficult to communicate with their students.⁷⁸

As more pioneers settled in the area the school became overcrowded and in 1862 the trustees and ratepayers decided that a new one was necessary. A one room structure was built on the site where the school would remain for the next one hundred and twenty years. Beginning in the late 1800s, many teachers with "Model School" diplomas were attracted to rural communities like Bloomingdale. As teachers, they expected to get respect from their students and they did, along with respect from the community. Bloomingdale's teachers set a good example by volunteering their time in the churches and community.⁷⁹

According to Mrs. McAllister, a former teacher and resident of Bloomingdale, "she discovered that being a teacher in Bloomingdale meant being very much part of the community."⁸⁰ Mrs. McAllister, like so many other Bloomingdale school teachers, boarded at the

Moyer home with sister and brother, Ben and Maggie Moyer. Coming to a village like Bloomingdale, where German was spoken by most, was sometimes regarded as a strange experience for the teachers. To make them more feel at home, the Moyers would organize an evening of entertainment in their home and invite all the eligible bachelors in the area. Many of the relationships that developed in Bloomingdale began in the Moyer home. Ben and Maggie earned the reputation as “Matchmakers of Bloomingdale”, after three teachers who boarded with them married local men and settled in the area. This was the case with Mabel Calvert, Edna Dickson and Evelyn Byers, each of whom married a member of the Cook family.⁸¹

Maggie Moyer also earned another reputation: daredevil. She decided to build a barrel boat called “Grand Sport” and pilot it down the Grand River. A bet of \$10 from Stanley Hodgins, at that time principal of Bloomingdale public school, motivated Maggie to take her small boat the 2 1/2 miles from Bloomingdale to Bridgeport. A large crowd gathered in Bridgeport to celebrate her accomplishment and she collected an extra \$17 from the onlookers.⁸²

Further development in the early twentieth century resulted in overcrowded conditions at Bloomingdale public school, so in 1919 a second room was added. Several members of the village, along with trustees and teachers, gathered on July 7, 1919 to see the first cornerstone laid down for the new school.⁸³ Any progress the public school underwent attracted the interest of the surrounding community.

An even larger crowd gathered at the school three years later when William Lyon Mackenzie King, then Prime Minister of Canada, visited the school. A description of the events that took place on that day, September 14, 1922 still survives:

An address of welcome was then read. A boquet [sic] of flowers was presented to

the Prime Minister by a winsome lassie, Jean Snyder, who has the distinction of being the only girl in Bloomingdale to be kissed by a prime minister of Canada. Mr. King replied to the welcome in a suitable address to the children who responded by singing “O Canada”. After shaking hands with those present and renewing old acquaintances, Mr. King departed, leaving behind him many loyal and devoted friends who voted for “Billy” for forty one years.⁸⁴

At the time of King’s visit, Bloomingdale public school was the key institution for the village and farming community and as other public institutions declined, the school became all the more important as the focal point for the community. Since Bloomingdale had its own educational facility, local children did not have to travel outside the community to receive their education until they reached grades seven and eight. School enrolment remained minimal with an average attendance of 85 children throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Remaining small was beneficial for both the students and staff, who thought of their school as one big happy family.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, some did not see it this way, but viewed “centralization and consolidation of rural schools... [as] desirable and inevitable ... if rural children were to get as good an education as city pupils.”⁸⁶ Beginning in the late 1960s, small rural schools were no longer viewed positively under the new county educational system.⁸⁷

As a consequence of the new educational system and the gradual decline in student enrolment, Bloomingdale public school went under review in 1979 for possible closure. For four more years, a continual decline in enrolment meant the school was running with less than fifty per cent of its 113 student capacity.⁸⁸ To avoid closing the school, the only practical recommendation was to combine three grades into one classroom. After long drawn-out

discussions, parents and school board officials “reluctantly came to the conclusion to close the school because of strong opposition to putting three grades into one classroom.”⁸⁹ It was also decided that local children would be bused out to Breslau, Winterbourne or Conestogo public schools. Many Bloomingdale residents were upset to hear about the closing of the school, such as Mrs. Bessie Horne, a former teacher and long time resident of Bloomingdale who said, “they [parents] think the quality of education will go down [with triple grading] but I disagree. The school is the heart of the community here. I don’t think the parents are being farsighted.”⁹⁰ The closing of the public school had a great effect on Bloomingdale residents, many former students or teachers, who saw the closing of the “little red schoolhouse” as the closing of a chapter in their own lives. It was traumatic for residents who regarded this public institution as the focal point of their community and as a symbol of their rural way of life. This would be the first time in 150 years that the locals would be without a school in their community.

When the school finally shut its doors in June, 1983, the community was concerned about finding another facility in which to hold their card parties, strawberry socials, community meetings and Women’s Institute events. Before its closing, the residents of Bloomingdale had already made both a personal and financial investment in the public school.⁹¹ For example, the baseball diamond on the school property was used by the Bloomingdale baseball teams, and the Women’s Institute had invested in putting cupboards, a sink and stove into the school.⁹² The Bloomingdale school was an important recreational area for the locals. A creative playground was available for the community to use, along with the outdoor basketball and volleyball courts.⁹³ Negotiations took place between Waterloo County School Board officials and the Bloomingdale and District Recreation and Community Club executive, which led to an agreement for the continuing use of the school for community activities until June 1984.⁹⁴

Therefore, for one more year the Bloomingdale public school would remain the focal point of the community.

Possession of the school property did not remain in the hands of the Waterloo County School Board for much longer. Shortly after the school closure, the school board began negotiations with the Koinonia Christian Fellowship to purchase the property. When the locals received word of these negotiations, a great debate arose in the village. Strong opposition was raised by a group of villagers, who were concerned over what would happen to the community if the Koinonia

Church ever decided to move in. If the church were to take possession of the school, the community would no longer have a common ground where they could all gather for events. Also, residents were concerned that Bloomingdale would not be able to distinguish itself as an independent hamlet if more people from outside the community came to attend the church. Protests were heard throughout the community. The leader of this opposition, Joe Williams, was a graduate student of theology at Wilfrid Laurier University and a resident of Bloomingdale.⁹⁵ Williams expressed his views over the matter by spreading exaggerated facts about the Koinonia Church. For example, he believed that if the church established itself in Bloomingdale this would cause traffic congestion, devalue surrounding land, hurt the village's drinking water (if they constructed a cemetery), slow development and open the door to a religious cult.⁹⁶ All these facts were proven to be untrue by the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), who concluded that "the church... [would] not pollute local wells, devalue surrounding properties or slow further development in Bloomingdale."⁹⁷ However, before the OMB had reached these conclusions, thirty-three locals had already signed their names to a petition, begun by Williams, to state their stand against the church. At this time, emotions were running high within the community. The

community's reaction to this matter was based on their desire to preserve the village as it had been 150 years ago.

As the debate continued, residents became better informed and discovered that a private church would actually be a benefit because the building would not be demolished and the historical value of it would be maintained.⁹⁸ At this time, few residents attended the OMB meeting to oppose the Koinonia Church from moving into the village. A new perception of the church, led all but eight residents to withdraw their names from the petition they had signed earlier.⁹⁹ In July, 1986, the OMB dismissed the appeal made by Joe Williams and ruled that the former Bloomingdale school could be used as a private church.

This outside institution was eventually welcomed into the community and remains part of Bloomingdale today. Robert Weber, a resident of Bloomingdale and a member of the Bloomingdale United Church, spoke on behalf of his congregation when he declared that "his congregation is most happy to have the new church in the community and that we are willing to work with the Koinonia Church members."¹⁰⁰ Recently, the Koinonia Christian Fellowship increased its membership quite significantly and has just finished adding a new building to their lot. The church has remained a part of the community, however very few of its members are actually from the Bloomingdale area.

A new focal point was now needed in Bloomingdale, and it became the duty of the Bloomingdale and District Recreation and Community Club to develop a centre that would bring together all local residents. Established in 1974, the club was "formed by residents of the village of Bloomingdale to represent and work for the betterment of the village and its community needs."¹⁰¹ Also, the club was organized so the community could qualify for government grants to help in financing community projects.¹⁰² Some of these included the buying of property to be

used for the construction of a community hall, picnic shelter, playground and two baseball diamonds. The village was brought back to life when an agreement was reached in 1985, with Woolwich Township council, to construct a new Bloomingdale park and community centre. Residents came together on the initiative to construct a park and community centre that would service the community. Since local tradesmen volunteered their labor, costs for the new park and community centre were kept low. Part of the funding for this project came from local residents who donated their time to fundraising events. Some of these fundraising events are still held annually. On June 20, 2001, more than 500 people came out to the Bloomingdale Community Centre to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Bloomingdale Strawberry Social.¹⁰³ At this event, the community gathers together for the socializing, entertainment...and especially for the strawberry shortcake!

Throughout the twentieth century, there was a “spectacular growth of organized rural sports... [which reflected the]...rivalry between communities...as well as a deliberate attempt to stabilize rural society.”¹⁰⁴ Bloomingdale residents participated heavily in rural sports by establishing their own football, hockey and baseball teams. Even today, baseball is still frequently played at the Bloomingdale park. When the park was constructed in the mid 1980s it became the new centre for the community’s sporting activities. Before the park was built, most sporting events were held at the school. Softball was the major rural sport in Bloomingdale and attracted large crowds: it was not unusual to have two hundred spectators watching regular rural softball games and five hundred or more attending playoff games.¹⁰⁵ Bloomingdale’s softball team was one of five that participated in the North Waterloo Rural Softball League which began in 1931 and lasted more than sixty years to become “the oldest continuously organized softball league in Canada.”¹⁰⁶ Bloomingdale did quite well, winning the league championship in 1948,

1974 through 1977, and 1979. Rural softball always was more successful than industrial-sponsored city leagues in the cities because “they developed a faithful group of followers who cheered on their players and created more rivalry, enthusiasm and local patriotism in the hamlets they represented.”¹⁰⁷ In summer, 1994, construction began on a second baseball diamond at the Bloomingdale park. It was proposed that the second diamond would increase revenues for the Recreation Club and would also encourage baseball to continue in Bloomingdale.¹⁰⁸

When Bloomingdale school closed its doors to the community, the identity for the community shifted to a new public institution, the Bloomingdale Community Centre. It became the new focal point by which the community could be brought together. One of the advantages of living in a small village is the close relationships residents develop with their neighbors. Furthermore, if residents are ever going through a difficult time, they can always count on neighbors for support. This was the case for Carl Schmidt and Ursula Paterson, who turned to their neighbors when the village store they owned was destroyed by fire in August of 1990.¹⁰⁹ A fundraiser for Carl and Ursula brought the community together and with support from residents and the Recreation Club, the couple were able to replace some of the personal items they had lost.¹¹⁰ The Recreation Club supported the fundraising event by giving its own donation, along with free use of the Community Centre.¹¹¹ Carl and Ursula could rely on their neighbors’ support to help get them through such a difficult period.

Throughout the last fifty years, Bloomingdale has maintained its identity as a small village surrounded by an agricultural community. Only after much discussion and debate, have any major changes been made to the area. For example, only after much consultation with locals were streetlights installed within the village.¹¹² Essentially, area planners have always preserved Bloomingdale as a small village in the centre of a rich farming community. These planners have

stuck to the general principle that “farmland and areas of environmental and recreational value should be conserved and protected from developers and that growth might be concentrated in or close to the existing village nuclei.”¹¹³ The result is that housing was constructed only around selected areas and no more extensive development occurred along township roads.¹¹⁴

Bloomingtondale has always maintained an identity separate from nearby Kitchener-Waterloo. By deciding to become part of Woolwich Township in 1972, the community had taken the proper measures to prevent its village and surrounding farms from being developed into an urbanized area of Kitchener. The community’s identity has come from its own private and public institutions. Some of the institutions which are mentioned in this essay include the Schneider farms, the Mennonite Church, the United Church, the King Edward Hall, the public school and the Bloomingtondale Community Centre. Even though these institutions have changed over time, they still provide a means for sustaining a united and self-sufficient community. Furthermore, it has been revealed that when one institution declines, another takes over as the centre for the community.

Throughout its existence, Bloomingtondale has been identified closely with the many farms still owned by descendants of Jacob Schneider. Today, these farms are marked with special signs recognizing them as “Century Farms”. Even after almost two hundred years, that family continues to cultivate most of Bloomingtondale’s rich farmland environs.¹¹⁵ The Schneiders’ origins in Bloomingtondale originated with the first settler in the area, Jacob Yoch Schneider. Jacob cultivated the land using his knowledge of farming, his ability to work hard, and the assistance of natives already living in the area. At first, the centre for the community was the Schneider farms because they were places where locals went to socialize. In addition, they provided an outlet where residents could receive education, obtain assistance and perform religious worship.

All the public institutions within Bloomingdale have at one time or another over the last two hundred years functioned as the centre for the community. Basically, these institutions have served as a means of bringing together the residents of Bloomingdale. The Mennonite Church and the United Brethren in Christ Church (later, United Church) were two distinct faiths that arranged services and organizations to benefit the entire local community. The facilities at both churches were also used to gather locals together for community events. Besides the two churches, there were other public institutions holding community events. For example, the King Edward Hall was available to exhibit local talent and to update local residents about the news taking place outside Bloomingdale. Other social activities for the community were held at the Bloomingdale public school. Teachers volunteered their time to organize community events which allowed them to feel apart of the community. When the school switched owners after much debate, a new focal point was needed for the community. This was why the Bloomingdale and District Recreation and Community Club came into existence. The Recreation Club's first initiative was to construct a park and community centre that would service the residents of Bloomingdale. Only after receiving support from residents and local businesses, were Bloomingdale's park and community centre completed. Today, the park and community centre in Bloomingdale still function as the centre for the community.

All aspects of Bloomingdale's two hundred years of history have not yet been uncovered by this essay, therefore more can still be discovered about this place called Bloomingdale.

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