

“Cartoonist Forgotten Ottawan of Note”
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Through the years, Ottawa has produced a number of men and women who have obtained national recognition for their professional achievements.

In the fields of business, politics, aviation, athletics, photography, religion, architecture and education, Ottawans have received widespread acclaim.

One local boy who “made good,” did so as a nationally syndicated cartoonist, but has been almost completely forgotten by Ottawans and the public at-large. Camillus Kessler and his cartoons will be the subject of a program at tonight’s annual meeting of the Franklin County Historical Society at 7:30 at the Ottawa Youth Center.

Kessler grew up in Ottawa in the 1880s and ‘90s and attended the public schools here. His father, John B. Kessler, and a partner had purchased the Queen City Herald newspaper here in 1883, about the time of Camillus’ birth. The newspaper was published in the then new Zellner Building.

It was the senior Kessler, who, as editor, changed the paper’s name to the Ottawa Herald in the 1890s. He also served for a time as Ottawa’s postmaster.

The family originally lived on Poplar Street, but later resided at 132 and 217 S. Cedar. They apparently moved away from Ottawa about 1900, and later published a paper in Bourbon, Mo.

Details of Camillus Kessler’s cartooning career are even more obscure. His talents presented themselves at an early age, however, for when he was still in his teens he drew a series of excellent caricatures of prominent local businessmen.

By 1923, he was drawing a cartoon entitled “At the Bottom of the Ladder,” which featured events from the childhoods of noted Americans. This was his trademark for the following decades, cartoons based on nostalgia and the “good ol’ days.”

Kessler’s nationally syndicated “Seems Like Yesterday,” and “Home Town Echoes” cartoons were often based on his early days in Ottawa.

One particular cartoon, shown at right, included numerous Ottawans and Ottawa businesses. Drawn in 1941, the cartoon depicts an imaginary Ottawa street scene about 1905. It is imaginary in part because the businesses shown, though real, did not operate next door to each other.

A far left is Dr. Jephthae Davis’ “shingle,” with old Dr. Davis and his horse “Dolly” out front. A long-time Ottawa physician, he also was the father of the late Dr. John Davis.

Next door in the cartoon is the Ottawa Hardware Company run by Charles Voorhis. Kessler had a faulty memory on this point as Voorhis actually owned the Franklin County Hardware Store at 230 S. Main.

That’s Voorhis in the black bowler hat, the “cholly” or kerosene and gasoline vender. He later struck it rich in oil in Oklahoma and eventually was manager of the Nash Automobile Company.

His son, Jerry Voorhis, who also grew up in Ottawa, later was the California congressman who lost his seat to Richard Nixon.

Farther down the street in the cartoon are Dunn's drygood store and Walker Clothing. H.A. Dunn built the Dale Weien home at 531 S. Cedar, and Gardner P. Walker was Kessler's uncle. Louise Walker, formerly of Ottawa, was Kessler's cousin.

The focus of everyone's attention is the new "horseless carriage" driven by Fred Dobson. His father, Adam Dobson, was president of the State Bank of Ottawa, which was located at 207 S. Main.

Old-timers recalled that while the automobile pictured got lots of attention, it also frequently broke down. It was then pulled in from the country by a team of farm horses.

The Rohrbaugh Theatre, of course, was an important Ottawa landmark on Hickory Street across from the Franklin County Courthouse. Sam Hubbard was a relative of the theatre's founder, Samuel Rohrbaugh, and the Rohrbaugh-Hubbard house is now the Lamb-Roberts Funeral Home.

Last of all, the boy on the bicycle is the subject of the cartoon—Paul W. Garrett, who was vice-president of General Motors when the drawing was made. The "standpipe" he refers to was Ottawa's water tower, which stood on the northwest corner of Ninth and Hickory.