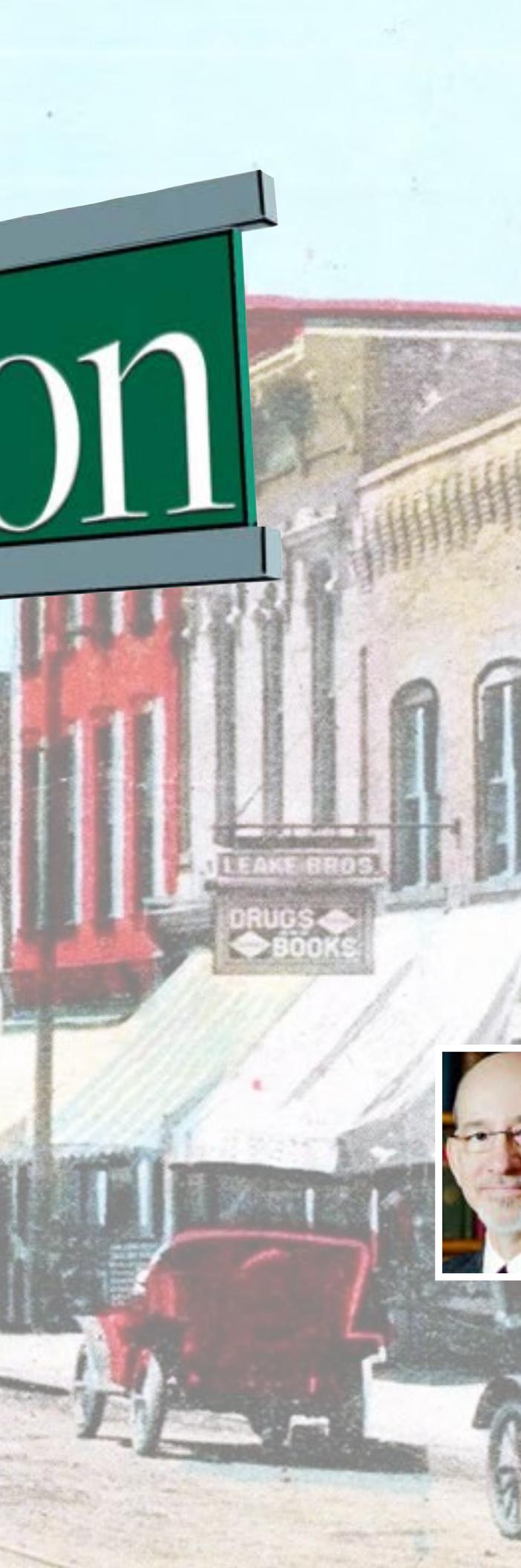


The background illustration shows First Street in downtown Dixon, during the early 1900s, around the time when William Bradford Brinton moved to town.





GUEST COLUMN

William Bradford Brinton



Though few may know the story behind the street, the man Brinton Avenue is named for looms large in Dixon's history — as someone who carved out a career in farm implements, a U.S. Marshal, the city's leader and an 'omnipotent' presence in state politics

He spent only 15 years in Dixon, but he left an impact that has endured for more than a century. He is William Bradford Brinton, who came to Dixon in 1905 at age

55. Only six years later, Dixonites elected him as mayor, and he served with great distinction. On the strength of his political prowess in Illinois, he ran for governor in 1916 and was considered for the U.S. Senate in 1920.

Few would recognize his name today. People only know Brinton Avenue, which the city council named for him in 1922, 100 years ago. But there is so much more to his remarkable story.

Brinton's Beginnings

What brought Brinton to Dixon was the Grand Detour Plow Company, which started in Grand Detour long before Brinton was born. John Deere and Leonard Andrus founded the company in 1837; Brinton wasn't born until 1850, on a farm in Greencastle, Ind., 50 miles west of Indianapolis.

BRINTON cont'd to page 24



Editor's note: This article was written by Dixon resident Tom Wadsworth, a writer, speaker, and a sixth-generation Dixonite.

His background includes careers in ministry, broadcasting, corporate communications, and 20 years as the editor of a national trade magazine. He holds a PhD in New Testament.

BRINTON cont'd from page 23

By the time Brinton was born, John Deere had already withdrawn from the firm (in 1848), choosing to start his own plow company in Moline. In 1869 the Grand Detour Plow Company moved to Dement Town to get closer to the railroad. The plow company and John Deere play a role in our story, but we'll return to them later.

The Brinton family moved to Illinois in 1860 and soon settled in the Tuscola area, about 30 miles south of Champaign. In school, the young Brinton exhibited an inventive and strategic mind, as he would deliberately get himself suspended in April or May, thus giving him an extra month of summer vacation. (Schooling reveals various kinds of intelligence.)

In 1867, the 17-year-old Brinton became a hotel clerk and soon added a second job at a retail implement store, both in Tuscola. Six years later, he married Rhoda Wyeth there in 1873.

A Star is Born

By 1876, William Brinton had established himself as an enterprising and hard-working young man of keen intellect in this small town of 1,500. Fate smiled on the 26-year-old one day, when Charles H. Deere, the son of John Deere and the VP and general manager of Deere & Company,

visited the Tuscola hotel.

For some reason, the young Brinton greatly impressed the successful executive from Moline. Deere, who was known for his "judgment of men," his "selection of men of large caliber," and his Republican politics, offered Brinton a job as a traveling salesman for Deere's Moline Wagon Company.

Brinton jumped at the opportunity. In the next 17 years with Deere, his inspiring personality and direct communication skills would vault him into substantial wealth and status, not only in business but in politics as well.

Unlike Charles Deere, Brinton was a Democrat. But like Deere, he developed close relationships with party leaders in Illinois and nationally.

Political Prowess

For Brinton, business and politics went together. In his sales job, he travelled by train "to almost every city and town" in Illinois, which also allowed him to become politically connected throughout the state.

By the late 1880s, Brinton was serving a powerful role on the Democratic State Central Committee, orchestrating the moves of the Democratic party throughout the state. But ever the sales professional, he also became friends with leading Republicans wherever he went.



Col. Brinton, circa 1900.

BRINTON cont'd to page 25

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BRINTON cont'd from page 24

By 1889, at age 39, he began to be known as "Colonel Brinton." Since there is no evidence that he served with the military, his "Colonel" title was probably an honorary title granted to him by the Illinois governor, who was a Republican. Even though Brinton was devoted to the Democratic party, he was also highly regarded by high-ranking Illinois Republicans.

In the early 1890s, Brinton was frequently quoted in Illinois newspapers as a dominant mover and shaker in state politics. In 1890, the Mattoon Gazette described Col. Brinton as "omnipotent, all-prevailing, everywhere" in his political dealings and influence.

The paper also said, "There are some big men in Illinois, but Brinton has overshadowed all and stands alone."

A Presidential Appointment

By 1893, Brinton was ready to leave the Moline Wagon Company and cash in on his political connections. When Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, became president for the second time, he appointed Brinton as U.S. Marshal for southern Illinois, a federal law enforcement position.

BRINTON cont'd to page 26



A rare photo of the Brinton family, probably taken on the front lawn of the Brinton mansion or next door. The occasion was son Bradford's leave from the military. Bradford served under General Pershing in Mexico in 1916 and in France during World War I in 1918-19. From left: Rhoda, William, Bradford, and Helen ("Nellie"). Nellie never married and died in 1960 at age 85. Her \$2 million estate created the William B. and Rhoda Wyeth Brinton Memorial Foundation, which funded medical research and created The Brinton Museum in Big Horn, Wyoming, between Devil's Tower and Yellowstone National Park. *Read more about the museum on page 30.*



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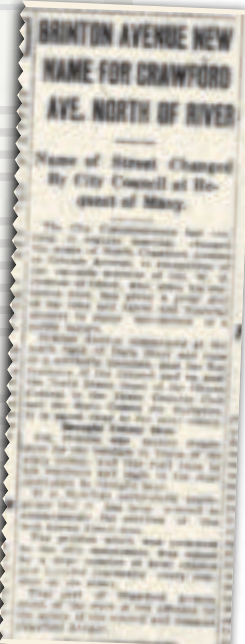
READ ALL ABOUT IT ...

BRINTON cont'd from page 25



Though the paper didn't always see eye to eye with Brinton, The Telegraph still gave great acclaim to the mayor at the height of his term, April 9, 1914.

March 29, 1922: North Crawford becomes Brinton Avenue.



The Telegraph announced the sale of the plow factory on June 11, 1919.

In 1896, state Democrats considered him to be their first choice to run for State Auditor. But he declined the nomination, choosing instead to complete his 4-year obligation to President Cleveland as U.S. Marshal.

Cleveland declined to run in 1896, and the Democrats lost the White House to McKinley. So, with the change of U.S. president, Brinton left the U.S. Marshal's office in 1897 and purchased an interest in the Peru Plow and Wheel Company in LaSalle-Peru, becoming its president. The Peru company was no small concern; it had around 400 employees and was considered one of the largest of its kind in the U.S.



Back to the Plow

He and Rhoda moved to LaSalle that year with their two children, Helen (Nellie), 22, and Bradford, 17. Since Brinton was a self-confident decision-maker, he was well suited to lead a business, and the company prospered. By 1902, he was said to have a worth of \$100,000 (about \$3 million in today's dollars) and command a "princely salary."

With his re-entry to the business world, he became involved in organizations of a non-political kind, being elected vice president of the Illinois Manufacturers Association and president of the National Association of Manufacturers of Implements and Vehicles.

Still, Brinton continued his influential role on the Democratic State Central Committee, retaining his post as treasurer, a position he had held since 1887. He also accepted political appointments — from Republican governors — to short-term commissions.

BRINTON cont'd to page 27



When Brinton donated his home, it was front page news on Dec. 29, 1927.

BRINTON cont'd from page 26

In 1903, he floated the idea that the Democrats could not win the governor's seat unless they nominated a businessman. He added, "If the business of the state of Illinois was run as a plow factory is, things would be better."

It was an obvious reference to himself. The idea of his candidacy initially gained some traction in the state, but he would not be the gubernatorial nominee in 1904, which was won handily by the Republicans.

Coming to Dixon

In 1905, Brinton's fame and fate finally merged with the city of Dixon. On Aug. 1, 55-year-old William Bradford Brinton expanded his plow empire by purchasing a controlling interest in the Grand Detour Plow Company and the Grand Detour Wagon Company of Dixon, which then employed "several hundred men" at its sprawling 5-acre site in Dement Town, just north of the railroad station.

At the time, the venerable O. B. Dodge had been a principal owner of the plow and wagon firm for 30 years. Dodge retired, and Col. Brinton became company president. William's son, 25-year-old Bradford, who had just graduated from Yale in 1904, became corporation secretary.

When the Dixon Evening Telegraph reported the news of a new executive in the city, the newspaper described the elder Brinton as "full of pluck, energy, and push."

Leading Citizen

Brinton quickly became one of Dixon's leading residents in

civic and political circles. In less than a year, he was elected chairman of the Lee County Democratic Central Committee, and he would later become a delegate to Democratic national conventions. He was also soon elected president of Dixon's Citizen's Association, which sought to promote the business of the city.

In 1906, he bought the majestic Greek Revival mansion of Leonard Andrus Jr. at 217 E. Everett St. (later known as the Masonic Temple). The impressive residence, one of the finest in northwestern Illinois, had been built in 1860 by Andrus's father-in-law, Phillip M. Alexander.

In addition to its signature huge Greek columns on the exterior, the home's interior featured wide hallways of terrazzo flooring, marble stairs, marble drinking fountains, a mahogany room, a club room, a ladies' parlor, and a huge dining hall with a copper-backed music shell, a sprung floor for dancing, and an organ loft.

At that time, Dixon's most renowned resident may have been State Sen. Charles H. Hughes, a Republican who had served as Dixon mayor, Lee County treasurer, state representative, and state senator. In 1907, when Hughes died, at his bedside was the ardent Democrat, Col. Brinton, who took charge of the funeral proceedings, ensuring that his Republican friend was given a proper send-off.

Finally, on a Ballot

In 1911, after 30 years of intense political involvement, William Brinton finally allowed his name to be placed on a ballot in a public election. It was the election for mayor of Dixon — and it was no cakewalk. Brinton ran against Hiram Brooks, a well-liked and well-connected Lee County native and long-time successful Dixon attorney.

BRINTON cont'd to page 28



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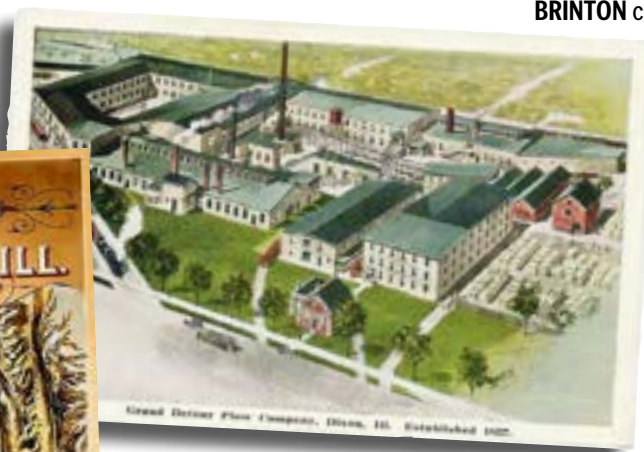
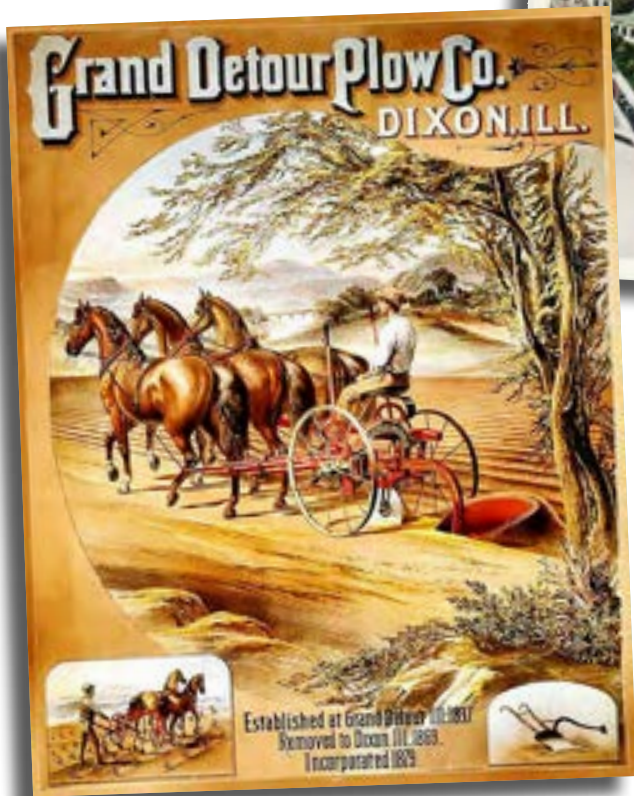
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In 1905, Brinton bought a controlling interest in the Grand Detour Plow Company and the Grand Detour Wagon Company of Dixon. **Above:** An illustration of the Grand Detour Plow Company in Dement Town, ca. 1900. **Left:** A company brochure, ca. 1900-1920.

In what the Ashton Gazette described as “one of the biggest city fights ever” in Dixon’s history, Brinton emerged victorious with 54% of the vote. He became Dixon’s first mayor in the commission form of government.

At the time, Dixon featured the Interurban railway that connected the railroad station in Dement Town with downtown Dixon, the north side, Assembly Park on the east end, and the city of Sterling to the west. Electricity was expanding, and the number of automobiles was increasing, replacing horse and buggy traffic.

In addition to the popular Opera House on South Galena Avenue (later replaced by the Dixon Theatre), the dome at Assembly Park was a major attraction, which regularly featured nationally known speakers and entertainers that delighted massive crowds.

BRINTON cont'd to page 29

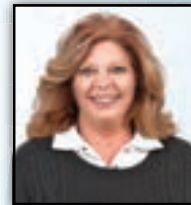
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Major Accomplishments

His accomplishments in office were many. Some old-timers remarked that Brinton accomplished more in those 4 years than in Dixon's previous 50 years.

His administration enacted a flurry of projects that upgraded the city's infrastructure. Seven miles of brick streets were built, along with one mile of concrete streets, two miles of sewers, and an extension of the Interurban streetcar line.

In his years, Dixon also changed from a dry town to a wet town, which attracted more visitors. Throughout it all, the city budget stayed in the black with no increase in taxes. Under Brinton, Dixon was hailed as "one of the most hustling up-to-date little cities in the Mississippi valley."

The crowning achievement of his leadership was his adept use of political connections to bring the State Epileptic Colony to Dixon (aka the "State School") in 1914. The move brought \$1.5 million in immediate state funds to build the facilities and infrastructure on more than 1,000 acres, with much more funding and economic activity for many years to come.

The Fire Truck Squabble

Even though Mayor Brinton was widely praised for his strong leadership, there were a few cases where he found himself on the wrong side of history. In 1914, the city council was faced with a decision on whether to purchase the city's first fire truck, a red one, to replace horse-drawn fire wagons, a proposal that had been openly supported by the Telegraph.

Brinton staunchly opposed the fire truck, saying that the Telegraph was "as crazy for that red wagon as ever a boy was for a pair of red-topped boots." The Telegraph responded that "if Brinton's house in North Dixon was a-fire," and Brinton had to choose the response of a fire truck or the old horse-drawn wagon, he would've chosen the red wagon that he so ridiculed. Ignoring Brinton's opposition, the council approved the fire truck anyway.

The Drinking Fountain Controversy

Also in 1914, when the famous nationwide Lincoln Highway was proposed to go through Dixon, the route was to go north on Galena Avenue and turn west at Fellows Street. If the city would rename West Fellows as "Lincoln Way," the Lincoln Highway Association offered to give the city a blue drinking fountain on the new Lincoln Way. This proposal was also supported by the Telegraph.

Mayor Brinton opposed the offer, saying he was "not in favor of rubbing out early history for the price of a drinking fountain." He even offered to pay for the fountain himself, but his respect for the city's history prevented him from changing "Fellows" to "Lincoln Way."

Fellows Street had been named for Michael Fellows, one of the earliest pioneers who had come to the area in 1834. Fellows served as the first Lee County Recorder in 1839, and he had worked with other notables such as Father John Dixon, John Eustace, Col. John Dement, and Dr. Oliver Everett to develop the city's dam and bridge.

BRINTON cont'd to page 30

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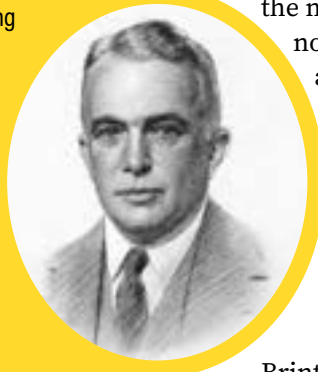
Bradford Brinton

Like his father, Brinton's son, Bradford, made a name for himself, one that lives on today at a Wyoming museum named in his honor. Bradford went to Yale University and later graduated from the Sheffield School of Engineering. He joined his father in the farm implement business and later became a director and manager of the J.I. Case Threshing Machine Company. He served under Gen. Pershing in Mexico and in World War I in France. He would later move to Wyoming, where he became known as an avid supporter of the arts. He died in 1936, but today his legacy lives on at The Brinton Museum in Big Horn, Wyoming, where he lived.

According to the Wyoming Office of Tourism ...

"The Brinton Museum, located on the 620-acre historic Quarter Circle A Ranch in Big Horn, offers an authentic view into the life and lifestyle of a Western gentleman and art collector, Bradford Brinton, who was a patron and friend of many of the most celebrated 19th- and 20th-century Western artists and avid collector of American Indian art and artifacts. Opened to the public in 1961, the museum today includes the historic Brinton Ranch House, built in 1892 and expanded by Bradford Brinton in 1927-28 to accommodate his extensive collections, the well-kept grounds, gardens and outbuildings such as a carriage barn, saddle barn, milk house, Little Goose Creek Lodge, and a traditional leather workshop. The Brinton Museum's 24,000-square-foot, eco-conscious building houses one of the most significant and extensive Western and American Indian Art collections in the Rocky Mountain West. The Forrest E. Mars Jr. Building includes three floors featuring four galleries, a museum store, and the Brinton Bistro, which offers indoor and outdoor dining with picturesque, 180-degree views of the Bighorn Mountains."

Go to thebrintonmuseum.org for more information.



BRINTON cont'd from page 29

The drinking fountain controversy lingered for five months. Finally, at a meeting when Brinton was absent, the city council approved changing the street name. But its history wasn't entirely "rubbed out," since East Fellows Street retained its name. (Note that the major route to Sterling from Galena Avenue in 1914 was not Everett, but West Fellows or Lincoln Way, which was also the route of the Interurban railway.)

These incidents were small aberrations when compared to the major advances that Brinton brought to the city. Nonetheless, when his 4-year term concluded in 1915, the Colonel, now 65, chose not to seek reelection, citing growing business commitments.

Brinton's Gubernatorial Bid

However, his business commitments didn't dissuade Brinton from seeking another office the very next year. On July 25, 1916, Brinton announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for Illinois governor. Brinton's candidacy made sense. Few were as politically connected in Illinois as the colonel, and as Mayor of Dixon, he now had demonstrated his competence as the elected leader of a municipality.

His announcement, carried exclusively by the Dixon Evening Telegraph and the Peoria Journal, noted his background as a successful businessman. (Nearly every Illinois governor since the Civil War had been a lawyer.)

BRINTON cont'd to page 31

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BRINTON cont'd from page 30

The Telegraph, which was “on the other side of the fence politically,” wholeheartedly supported Brinton’s candidacy, citing his “great ability” and being “one of the best mayors the city ever had.”

Brinton’s announcement touted his support for better wages and working conditions as well as his support for Woodrow Wilson’s “progressive, sane legislation.” He supported “the budget system” to eliminate waste, keep taxes down, and operate the state on a businesslike basis.

An Uphill Battle

Brinton’s candidacy faced the uphill battle of opposing the incumbent Democrat, Gov. Edward Dunne of Chicago. Yet, the Chicago Tribune thought that Brinton was a substantial opponent who could successfully attract Chicago Democrats away from Dunne.

Avoiding vicious slanderous politics, Brinton kindly introduced Gov. Dunne at a gathering at Dixon’s Assembly Park in August. The entire park was abuzz with compliments for Brinton’s graciousness. The Chicago Tribune later quoted Brinton as graciously wanting to give Dunne “a fair chance.”

By September, Col. Brinton said he expected to carry 85 of the state’s 102 counties, adding that “Cook County will probably

decide the contest.” On Sept. 9, just before the Sept. 13 primary election, he received the positive news that the Chicago Democratic machine was endorsing Brinton and opposing Gov. Dunne.

However, when all the ballots were finally counted, Brinton commanded only 28% of the statewide vote, losing to the incumbent Chicago Democrat. The loss was attributed to Dunne’s strong support among labor unions, as the president of the Illinois Federation of Labor had launched a “bitter attack” on Brinton.

Some pundits also cited Brinton’s late entry into the contest (only 7 weeks before the election) and his lack of name recognition among voters. While party officials knew Brinton, voters didn’t.

For Democrats, it was all for naught. In November, Dunne was ousted as governor, losing to Republican Frank Lowden by 53% to Dunne’s 42%. (Yes, Lowden is the same as in “Lowden State Park” and the Boy Scouts’ “Camp Lowden” near Oregon.)



William B. Brinton, in his later years.

Back to the Plow, Again

Col. Brinton returned to his Dixon estate, the home that would have been “the governor’s mansion” had he won. Back at the helm of the Grand Detour Plow factory, his company continued to grow and prosper.

BRINTON cont'd to page 32

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William B. Brinton's home as seen today. | PHOTO: CODY CUTTER/CCUTTER@SAUKVALLEY.COM

BRINTON cont'd from page 31

In 1919, it was time for another mayoral contest in Dixon. The Telegraph published a front-page story urging Col. Brinton to run again for mayor. The paper had surveyed many residents from all walks of life and found “virtually unanimous demand” for Brinton to return as mayor.

The paper cited his “fearless championship of the city’s interests regardless of his personal interests ... his wide acquaintanceship among men of statewide and nationwide prominence ... his ability to get what he goes after ... and his splendid business and executive ability.” Brinton graciously declined, but he did serve as president of the Dixon Chamber of Commerce.

A couple of months later, Brinton sold the Grand Detour Plow Company to the J. I. Case Company of Racine, Wis., which had been buying Grand Detour Plows for use with Case tractors. At the time, Brinton’s company was said to sell “more tractor plows than any other organization in the world.”

Retirement

Brinton, 69, soon retired, while his son, Bradford, stayed on as vice president and general manager of the firm. In retirement, Col. Brinton said that he planned to spend 4 to 6 months every year in a warmer climate, but spend his summers fishing on the Rock River.

In 1920, he was considered as a possible Democratic nominee for U.S. senator in Illinois. But at age 70, he did not run. After 1920, the esteemed executive was rarely seen in Dixon,

spending much time traveling, eventually moving to Arizona.

Remembering Dixon

But Dixon did not forget Brinton. In 1922, the Dixon City Council voted to change the name of North Crawford Avenue to “Brinton Avenue” in his honor. Ironically, only 8 years earlier, Brinton had opposed “rubbing out” history by changing the name of West Fellows Street. Now, the city embraced the idea of rubbing out the historic “Crawford” name to replace it with “Brinton.”

Appropriately, the new Brinton Avenue extended from the Rock River, past his stately home on Everett, all the way to the State Colony for Epileptics, which he brought to Dixon. The petition, approved 100 years ago, was signed by a large number of people and “practically every resident on the street.”

And Brinton did not forget Dixon. In 1927, the Brintons graciously donated their impressive Dixon mansion to the Dixon Masonic Lodge where he was one of its 650 members. The home then became known as the “Brinton Memorial Masonic Temple.” That December, more than a thousand people attended the dedication ceremony, which included a dance in the home’s spacious ballroom.

At the event the 77-year-old icon explained his donation, saying, “There comes a time in the life of any man who has been reasonably successful when he should do something to show his appreciation for the things which that community has done for him.”

BRINTON cont'd to page 33

Dies at 87

The Brintons lived to a good old age. In 1932 Rhoda died in Arizona at age 81. Five years later, her husband died on Dec. 19, 1937, at age 87. Even though he had lived in Tucson for more than a decade, in Tuscola for 30 years, and only 15 years in Dixon, he never lost his fondness for his beloved hometown on the Rock River.

Funeral services were conducted in Dixon at the Brinton Masonic Temple, as former employees of the Grand Detour Plow factory carried his casket. His body was then entombed at the private Brinton mausoleum, the only one of its kind at Oakwood Cemetery in Dixon.

His burial was 85 years ago. The donation of his mansion was 95 years ago. The naming of Brinton Avenue was 100 years ago, and he served as Dixon's mayor 110 years ago.

While no one in Dixon today remembers William Brinton, we would all do well to remember that, at one time, "There were some big men in Illinois, but Brinton overshadowed them all and stood alone." ■



The Brinton family mausoleum, the only private mausoleum at Oakwood Cemetery.

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