

Ad-Express and Daily Iowegian, Centerville, IA

Williams Organ Company in Centerville

By Bill Heusinkveld - correspondent

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John W Williams was Pennsylvania Dutch, born in 1833 near Pittsburgh. His blue-eyed Scotch-Irish wife, Mary Elizabeth Bradley, was born in Belfast, Ireland. They were married in Pittsburgh in 1855 and started “Out West”, trekking from Pittsburgh to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to St. Louis and then up to Burlington, thence overland by stage.

They landed in the little settlement of Centerville, a hundred miles from the nearest railroad. The four-horse stage pulled up with a grand flourish at the hospitable “Travelers’ House” of which George Pratt was the genial landlord. Mary, who had always lived in a city, looked around through the hazel brush, crab apple trees and scrub oak, and anxiously asked John, “Where is the town?” The driver said, “Why, lady, you’re right in the middle of it”.

The couple had come out to help settle up the beautiful prairie state of Iowa and they began the contribution of a large family of small children of which H.B. (Hemerly) Williams was the first, born on July 28, 1856 in a two-room house in the west part of Centerville. His reception committee agreed that he was a fine addition to the sparse population of about 600 settlers, 100 razor back hogs and an assortment of miscellaneous dogs, mostly wolf hounds. H. B. was also the author of these first two paragraphs.

History reveals that subsequent children were Ella V., born in 1859, Charles D. (Carl) born in 1863, Albert, born in 1867, Annie T., born in 1869 and Lena, born in 1970. The family attended the old Methodist Church and was quite musical. One of the members, Mrs. Margaret Needles, wrote, “I attended the prayer meetings with my mother and remember seeing, many times, John W. Williams leading the singing with his tuning fork and Mother Williams with H.B., Carl and Ella close by.

The firm of J.W. Williams commenced as a small tinshop in 1856. In 1860 it occupied an old two-story frame on the north side of the square. One young blacksmith, S. A. Davis wrote that he once worked for H.B. Williams making about two thousand coal picks. In 1876 the new brick block was built, and the firm occupied half and the First National Bank the other half. The old building was then used as a warehouse and iron room.

Shortly after this, H.B. the oldest son, was taken into the firm as a partner, and the infusion of new blood gave the business a fresh start. A large warehouse was built across the alley on the north and filled with goods. The firm advertised "Riverside Stoves" and "Buckeye Reapers and Mowers". In the meantime, Ella Williams married George W. Randle who was a gunsmith and sold sewing machines etc. In her old age, Ella wrote a good article describing her walk around the square in her girlhood days and all the businesses she encountered.

The next change in the firm was taking in Carl S. Williams, the other son, and the sign then read "J.W. Williams & Sons". In 1890 they spread out still more. Tearing out the old buildings on the east, they built a large two-story store with a 60-foot front and basement, probably where Mitchell Floor Covering now stands. In this they put a plate glass front and stocked it with buggies and vehicles of every description, lap robes and carriage goods. They carried an immense line of stoves and general hardware. They have also sold quite a number of steam threshers.

In about 1885 they also organized the Williams Organs Company and Carl, the junior member of the firm, went to Boston and spent one summer in the study of music and the study of the construction of pianos and organs to fit himself for the successful handling of these instruments. The firm advertised the Epworth Organ and sold an enormous number, from Chicago to San Francisco.

Sometime later the firm established their own organ factory, hiring a large number of people to build the organs. Our historical society received a letter from an Ohio man, Nathan Brazytis, who has one of these antique pump organs and has recently made a complete restoration and has taken several pictures of his organ. The words "Williams Organ Co." are printed in gold lettering on the left side of the front panel even with the stops, and the words "Centerville Iowa" are on the right side. He wrote that the word "Epworth" is also displayed in two prominent places. We discovered that we also have one of these organs on display, right in our own museum, but without the printing. It was donated by the family of James W. Houser. Our organ has the same carvings on the sides and the same shape of the legs as the one pictured.

Mr. Brazytis inquired about the wording on the stops since his was worn off. We told him they were as follows from left to right, “Principal, Diapason, Dulcet, Bass Coupler, Diapason Forte, Flute Forte, Treble Coupler, Tuba Horn, Melodia and Celeste.” Perhaps the musicians among my readership will understand these terms.

*******Additional information from:**

Robert Gellerman's International Reed Organ Atlas 1985 Edition

WILLIAMS ORGAN & PIANO CO.: 1427 Carroll Ave., 1257 Fullerton Ave., 57 Washington St., Chicago, IL, founded as J. W. Williams in 1855, then J. W. Williams and Sons in 1884, Williams Organ & Piano Co, in 1889. In 1889 the office was located at 57 Washington St. and the factory at 2622-2626 Shields Ave., Chicago. Officers in 1925: H. B. Williams, President, Carl S. Williams, VP; Bradley P. Williams, Secretary.

Factor capacity in 1899: 1,500 organs per year; made the Epworth and Williams organs, sold through ministers, particularly Methodist.

Serial number: 1908 26056

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