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Happy Birthday, Bowling Green!



Bowling Green has found many reasons to celebrate in its 175 years. The street banner at left flew during the second annual Tomato Festival in 1939, when the city was just over a century old.

When Elisha Martindale chose the location for his home in 1833, few people would have expected a city of nearly 30,000 to grow up on the site. Perrysburg, founded during the War of 1812, was several miles to the north, and access to the Martindale home was through an area notorious as the Great Black Swamp.

Heavily forested and often mucky with standing water, it was an unlikely site even for a farm. Pioneers vividly remembered summer-long bouts of malaria as a normal part of life.

It is fitting that the earliest known photograph taken of the Great Black Swamp is this view of a field of tree stumps. Besides farming, early industries included barrel-making and drain tile manufacturing.

By the time of the Civil War, Bowling Green had grown into a settlement of respectable size and sent many of her sons to fight for the Union cause. The **21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry** (MS 562), recruited principally from local citizens, saw a great deal of action, including at the Battle of Chickamauga, and several members were part of the famed Andrews Raiders, among the first in the nation to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Following the war, city fathers saw an opportunity for further growth. Arguing that its central location in Wood County made it the best site for the county seat, the city won that distinction away from Perrysburg. Booster organizations founded newspapers, brought rail service, and generally promoted the village as a good location for business.

With the rise of heavy industry in the United States, northwest Ohio found itself with a valuable resource—oil. Wood County was the center of a Gas and Oil Boom which led to a greater increase in population, improvements in housing, industry (particularly the glass industry), and commerce. The prosperity it brought to the city can be seen in a newspaper promotional pull-out of 1900, excerpted in **Northwest Ohio Historical Perspectives**. The December 1993 **Archival Chronicle** details this time in Ohio history.

However, it didn't take long—some twenty years—for the gas and oil boom to play out. New discoveries in the United States south and southwest drew the major drilling activity to those areas, and northwest Ohio's economy suffered. Once again, concerned citizens began looking for a way to attract business to the city, something with long-term prospects and less likely to be affected by fluctuations in the economy. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, the state of Ohio began looking for locations for two teacher training colleges. The northeast location went to Kent, Ohio, and Bowling Green won the contest for the northwest site. A promotional booklet prepared at the time provides a snapshot view of the city and its features.



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Local history reflects national events, and despite the presence of the college, northwest Ohio felt the effects of the Great Depression. With the coming of the Second World War, local industries adapted to the needs of the war effort and the university provided a place for training Navy and Marine pilots. There was a post-war boom in education resulting in tremendous growth for BGSU, both in terms of enrollment and campus building. As a college education became more important, the university grew to fill the need, and its importance as a local employer of all kinds of workers and a consultant to new industries has helped to keep the local economy on an even keel.

Looking west on Wooster Street from Prospect, during the 1930s.

Always looking forward toward new opportunities, local citizens more recently have promoted civic and cultural activities such as the Black Swamp Arts Festival, as well as moving forward with developing new sources of energy. Bowling Green is the site of the first wind turbines in the state of Ohio, and heavily promotes efforts to make "Bowling Green." With these lively activities, the city looks forward to another 175 years of success.

--Lee N. McLaird

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