

Merna

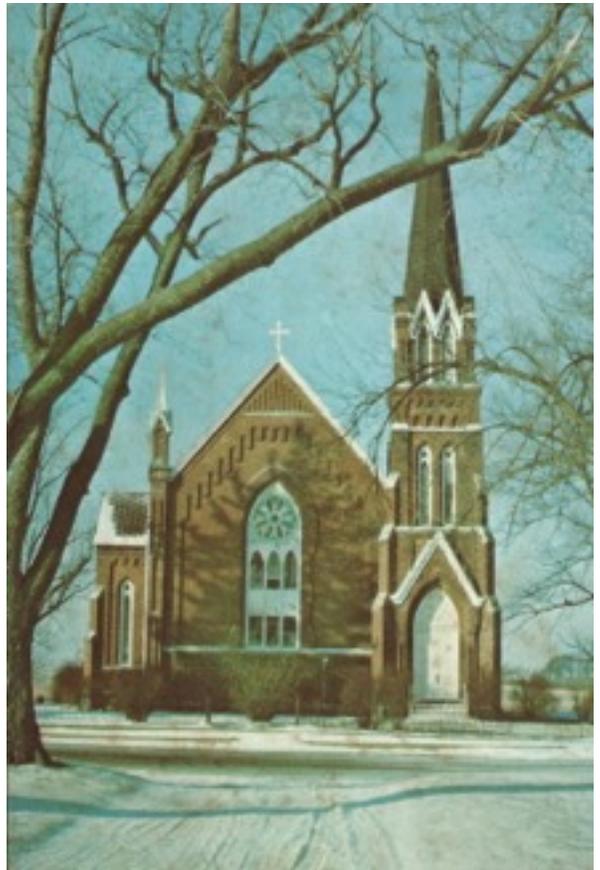
The town of Merna was founded by primarily Irish and German farmers. Their faith and families were an integral part of who they were. There was and still is today a strong sense of community.

Most of them were of the Catholic faith. A large Catholic church was one of the main focal points of the community. There was also a large church hall that held many activities.

This photo of the St.

Patrick's church was the Christmas card for State Farm Insurance one year. George Mecherle, the founder of State Farm Insurance, was one of Merna's most famous citizens.

James and Roseanna (Costello)Merna, along with their four children, emigrated to the United States from Killanerin, County Wexford, Ireland in the 1850's. They lived in New York and from there they moved to LaSalle County, Illinois. The Merna family eventually arrived in McLean County, in the mid 1850's. They had seven children. According to his obituary, William was born one week after his parents had



immigrated to New Amsterdam, New York. Rita Merna McCarthy recently visited Ireland. They saw replicas of the ships they would have come over on. They packed 200 people on a ship that was not very large. It took 52 days to get to the US. An average of 50 people would not survive the trip.

The Merna family eventually settled in McLean County. They purchased about 265 acres of land and built a home on the hill, just north of what is now the town of Merna. There they joined other immigrants of Irish and German descent in breaking ground in some of the most fertile land in the world.

The three brothers, James, Patrick and William chose to marry and continue their lives in Merna. James lived in the farmhouse on the hill just north of Merna. Patrick built a house across the road, on the other side of Money Creek (where Jane Merna currently resides) and William lived in a home which was next to the Post Office.

In 1850, Congress passed a law donating two and one half million acres to the State of Illinois for the use of the Illinois Central Rail Road.

According to information compiled by Mrs. Patricia Kelley, in 1877, a branch line, known as the Kankakee and Southwestern Railway, was started from Kankakee to Bloomington by the Illinois Central Rail Road. However, it was completed only as far as Colfax due to the fact that people beyond that point refused to raise the \$25,000 in private subscriptions requested by the Illinois Central railroad. The

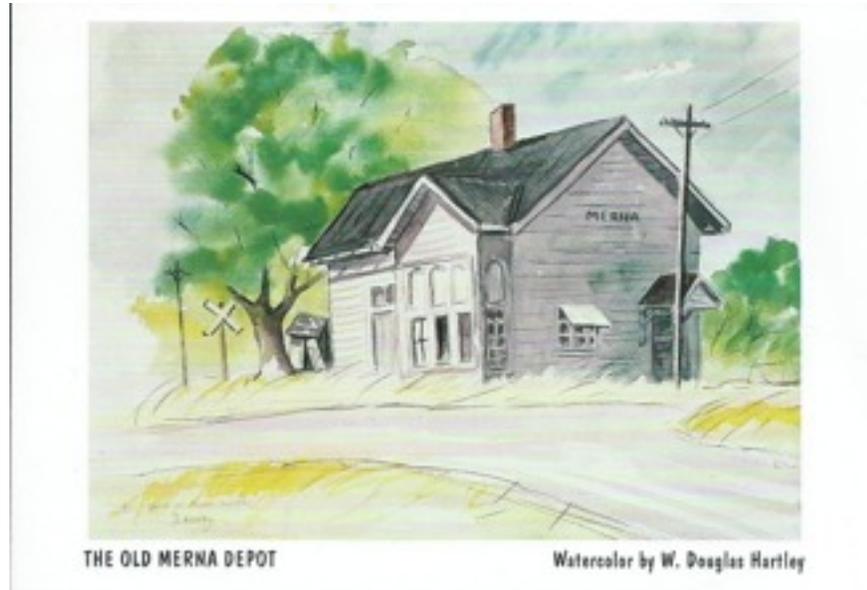
differences were finally resolved, and in 1882 the railroad was continued to Bloomington.

According to the Pantagraph on July 25, 1883, There was an article in which the headline read: "A Pitched Battle at Merna" The article stated: The little town of Merna, on the new branch of the Illinois Central Railroad while yet in it's infancy, experienced a pitched battle which would do justice to a city! One of the adjacent farmers, who has not been on good terms with the railroad company has inaugurated a war on the construction hands. The company claims the right of way through the farmers land and the right of a switch for 3,000 feet, and he contends that the company's privilege expires at 2,500 feet. Monday, the men at work putting in the switch proceeded past the 2,500 feet point. When the farmer objected and, armed with a pitchfork he made an attack on the men, and a battle ensued in which the farmer was struck a severe blow with a club. Yesterday he came to the city and swore out a warrant for the arrest of the men who comprise of the gang.

The case went to court and on October 9, 1882, the Pantagraph reported that the jury agreed that the farmer would be given a little over \$2,500. They gave him \$50 an acre for the 17 acres actually taken and \$7 an acre for the remainder of the tract damaged, 243 acres.

As supervisors planned and surveyed through what is now Merna, they became friendly with the Merna family. As lodging was scarce, they spent days at the home of James Merna II. In 1883 a small depot was built bearing the name "Merna".

An article in the Pantagraph on April 17, 1883 stated that a plat was filed in the recorder's office laying out a new town on the new branch of the Illinois Central railroad ten miles



east of this city. The town is laid out by Patrick Merna and James Merna. The name of the new town has been christened "Merna".

The town contained two blocks of twenty-eight lots. It had two streets running east and west. Running north and south, there are three streets. There was one building, a store on the site and it was owned by William Merna and Michael Gould. "Mr. William Merna had been appointed postmaster at this place and the place already began to take on the air of a town."

Merna was once a thriving community being one of many stops on the original line of the Illinois Central Railroad

stretching from Chicago to New Orleans. The steam engines had to fill up with water every 6 miles. That is why there are so many small towns along the railroad.

The railroad built a fenced pen near the tracks with feed bunks and water troughs to hold 200 or more head of cattle



until shipped to Chicago. The livestock owner or owner's son or representative would ride the train up, sell the cattle, and ride back in the evening. Sometimes the son stayed in Chicago; obtained work and didn't come back to the farm. Farmers from Merna took livestock to

Chicago by train in the late 1940's or early 50's. Cattle were tall and filled the car, but they double decked the train car for sheep.

In 1928 Route 165 was paved and in addition to a store, a post office and a tavern, Merna had a telegraph office in

the Train Depot, two grain elevators and a garage for machine repair. There was a Catholic church with a Parish Hall and the People's Hall was across the street. Functions, which often were competitively sponsored at the same time, drew crowds of over 200 people from throughout the territory, with the Illinois Central Railroad often running special trains for the festivities.



Trish Pestka Thursday, 7:49 PM

Merna had it's own Post Office. For many years there was a general store on one side and the Post office on the other side. Margaret Merna was the postmaster for many years.



The Merna Tap has been a gather place for people from far and wide. A tornado passed through the town of Merna in 1982. The St. Patricks church was destroyed. The insurance money was used to build the St. Patrick's church of Merna that now resides in Bloomington.

Merna and other small towns along the railroad played a significant role in the development of our nation, enabling passenger travel, mail delivery and transportation of livestock to the large cities. Merna also has been a meeting spot where memories have been made for many decades.

Through the years

Milestones in the life of St. Patrick Church of Merna:

- ▶ **1875** – Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Bloomington, sets up a mission church in Merna, east of Bloomington. The first church cost \$1,625.
- ▶ **1883** – With 100 families, St. Patrick Church of Merna becomes a parish.
- ▶ **1891** – A bigger church is completed for \$13,500.
- ▶ **1902** – A tornado damages the church. Mass is celebrated on the lawn during repair work.
- ▶ **Aug. 24, 1982** – A tornado levels the church. The diocese decides to rebuild closer to Bloomington, at the intersection of Towanda-Barnes Road and Illinois 9. It correctly noted what appeared to be inevitable Twin City growth to the east. Cost of the church: \$950,000. Seating capacity: 400.
- ▶ **1998** – The church dedicates a \$1.3 million addition. It includes a library, multipurpose rooms, class space, offices and a nursery.
- ▶ **Nov. 5, 2006** – The church will open its \$8 million addition. It includes a sanctuary, adjoining chapel, larger nursery and a music room. An exterior accent is a bell tower, which rings with digital music but also contains the functional bell salvaged from the Merna church. Seating: 1,100. With 1,425 parish families, the church is the third-largest Catholic congregation in the Twin Cities, behind Epiphany and Trinity. St. Pat's has 2,100 weekly attendance.