

A TOWN THAT MAY NEVER HAVE BEEN

By Nichole Odijk DeMario, *Values Magazine Contributor*
History provided by *Wanatah Historical Society*
President Norman Grieger.

EARLY DAYS

In 1853, a small town sprang up named Rozelle. It was built up around a north-south railroad originally known as the New Albany and Salem, better known as the Monon Railroad. Four years later, an east-west railroad (which later became part of the Pennsylvania Railroad) was completed just north of Rozelle. The town's founder, Joseph Unruh, saw the advantages of north-south, east-west transportation and so picked up the buildings of Rozelle and relocated to where the railroads intersected. That new town became Wanatah named after the Pottawattomie Native American Indian chief who had a village near the area in the early 1800s.

SETTLING IN

Settlers began moving to Wanatah in the 1850s. The town wasn't officially platted until 1865. The first settlers were primarily Englishmen or their descendants from Virginia. They were soon outnumbered by droves of German immigrants.

Settlers saw the potential in Wanatah's marshy land that would later become suitable for farming after drainage ditches were created. After the railroads came through, the first industry settlers created was the cutting and shipping of marsh hay to cities to feed horses. The area was also bountiful with wild game.

GHOST TOWNS

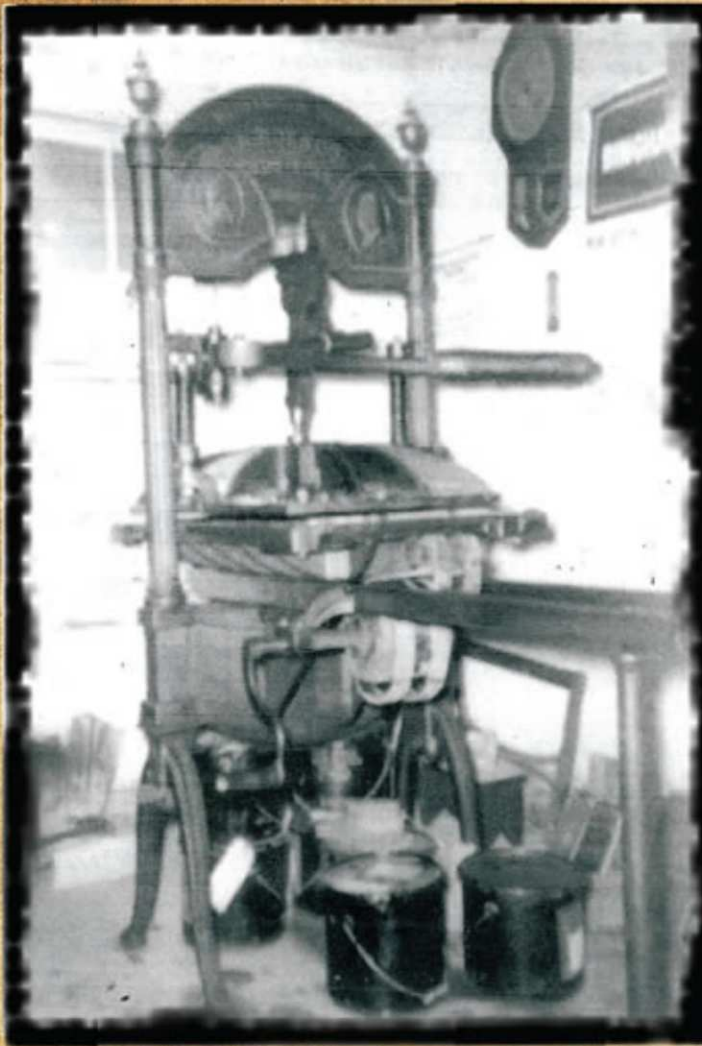
As Wanatah continued to grow, several nearby towns disbanded and moved to Wanatah. Rozelle was the first to go with Morgan Station, Callao and Bigelow Mills following suit.

BUTCHER, BAKER & CANDLESTICK MAKER

Wanatah was booming by 1898. The town had several thriving offerings for its townspeople from a doctor, attorney, photographer, harness maker, wagon maker, grocery, clothing shop, barber, shoemaker and more.

To accommodate the large German immigrant population, shopkeepers spoke German as well as English to stay in business.





TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

As the nation turned to automobiles as its means of travel, road construction was needed. The Yellowstone Trail stretched from coast to coast and ran through the heart of Wanatah's business district.

Travelers stopped in Wanatah to patronize its business and utilize its main garage for gas and car services since it was nearby hotels, restaurants, stores and saloons.

In 1926, Lincoln Highway ran through the north edge of Wanatah. Shortly after Lincoln Highway came to town, businesses started to be built alongside the new highway.

By the 1950s, Wanatah was known as "Gasoline Alley" because of its nine gas stations along its short piece of highway where every major brand of gasoline was represented.

HAPPENINGS

On May 1, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln's funeral train passed through Wanatah on the Monon Railroad. It was not scheduled to stop, but slow down to five miles per hour and toll its bells as it passed through.



EXTRA, EXTRA READ ALL ABOUT IT

In 1895, a local newspaper known as the Wanatah Times was established. Shortly thereafter, its name changed to the Wanatah Mirror and was purchased by a William F. Hunt whose first issue was put out on December 7, 1899. Hunt's new bride, Sadie Thompson was an experienced typesetter. Hunt made the paper a family affair. When his daughters Goldie and Hazel, a teacher in Wanatah, were old enough they worked for the paper as well. In 1955, Hazel and her husband Lucien purchased a linotype machine to alleviate the burden of setting all the newspaper type by hand. The family continued to put out the weekly paper until Hunt's death in 1963. It was sold to Judson Publishers and ran until 1969.

The Hunt family kept one copy of each paper throughout the years. The papers are bound and available for study at the Wanatah library to this day.



In December 1932, Wanatah State Bank was robbed by armed bandits with Tommy guns. Witnesses identified one bandit as the infamous, Pretty Boy Floyd. When the bandit was later caught, he never admitted to the Wanatah holdup.