

## **Judith Ann Major Allin Bradner (1814-1922)**

Judith Major Allin Bradner was born on May 9, 1814 in Bourbon County, Kentucky to Mr. and Mrs. William T. Major. In 1834 her father and his brothers decided to sell their Kentucky plantation and move north after having visited central Illinois. During that visit William had purchased 30 acres and a house in Bloomington, Illinois. By 1835 William and his family of eleven, several milk cows, and what would be the first piano in McLean County, set out on a sixteen day journey to their new home. The furnishings were sent by water to Pekin, Illinois. Most of the family rode in covered wagons. Judith and two of her brothers rode the whole way on horseback.

Judith's observation of the wild fruit and nut trees growing "abundant and in every variety," as well as the experience of riding her horse over the prairie to return with its "feet stained and dripping with the juice of wild strawberries," make one aware of a very different and lush world from the one we see today.

Her father, William T. Major, became an important and active member of the new community of Bloomington, which had a population of just 450 when the family arrived. He was instrumental in organizing First Christian Church which he started at his own home in 1837. He founded Major's College School for Girls which was open from 1856 to 1879. He was also responsible for building Major's Hall which housed the first classes of Illinois State Normal University and was also a meeting place for various social, educational, and political interests. Lincoln's famous "Lost Speech" was delivered at Major's Hall during a convention in May of 1856. The speech attacked the expansion of slavery, the results of which would lead to the formation of the Republican Party.

In 1838, two years after coming to Bloomington, Judith married William H. Allin, son of James Allin, who is considered to be the founder of Bloomington. Judith and her husband often entertained guests in their home in particular the lawyers who met in Bloomington while court was in session. Abraham Lincoln was one of the well-known lawyers who were present in their home for dinner. "Lincoln was so full of life and fun all the time," Judith commented in a later interview. In the same article she tells of the pleasure she took from her involvement in community and church social activities.

Her husband William was a land owner and operated a store for nineteen years. He first ran a general store and ended with selling dry goods. He was a supporter of both Illinois State Normal University and Illinois Wesleyan University. Her husband, along with Judge David Davis and William Flagg, was also instrumental in establishing Franklin Park. Judith and William had five children, three daughters and two sons. After only 21 years of marriage, her husband William died in 1857.

After remaining a widow for twenty years, Judith married George Bradner in 1876. He was also a local merchant and his business was selling hardware. Judith had known George and his first wife for a number of years before his first wife's death. Judith was a good friend to George's first wife. She and George went to the Philadelphia Exposition in 1876 for their honeymoon. The Philadelphia Exposition was the centennial celebration of the founding of the United States. After twenty years of marriage, George died on December 31, 1896. Judith lived the remainder of her years with her son, Edwin, at the family's home located at 807 W, Jefferson Street.

Judith was described as public spirited and never idle. She sold a block of ground to build the county jail as well as erecting a store building on North Main Street. She was

also often seen at sewing bees and kept busy knitting and quilting. In her later years, Judith was the subject of several articles featured in *The Pantagraph* where she reminisced about her family's pioneer experiences and early life in Bloomington. These interviews are valuable contributions to the community's history.

She remained alert and active until shortly before her death on February 28, 1912 at the age of ninety-eight. A special memorial service was held in her honor at First Christian Church, as she was the last of the charter members of the church. Books from her library were also donated to the McLean County Historical Society. Some of these books included a copy of *Homer* published in 1766 and a copy of *The New York Exposition of 1814*.

Her home on the corner of Roosevelt Avenue and Jefferson Street, which had been built by James Allin, her first husband's father, was sold two years after her death to George Gildner for \$7,000. It was described as "one of the oldest of the better buildings of this city. The house stands on a quarter of a block and was for many years a type of the best of McLean county homes."

Compiled by: Mary Alice Wills  
April 5, 2007

Revised by: Candace Summers  
May 1, 2007