

Louise Rittenhouse Barber's Early Life

An article from the April 30, 1924 issue of the Monroe Evening Times about Mrs. Louise Barber caught my attention. It stated that she was born on June 19, 1845 in a frame building on the west side of the square on the site of what was later known as the Eugene Hotel. According to the article, she was the oldest resident of Monroe to have been born on the square. This article gave some insight into where people who lived here in the early days came from and how they got here. I did a little more searching and found some information about her family that was not included in the article.

Mrs. Barber's parents were William and Sarah Rittenhouse, having been born in New Jersey in 1794 and 1806. They were married there and had one child before they headed west. The 1850 census shows the family living in Monroe and that four of the children had been born in Indiana. They then moved to Monroe in the late 1830s. Many of the families who lived here at that time were well-educated and some were of the finest families in the East. In fact, the Rittenhouse family here was part of the family for whom the Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia was named. After settling in Monroe, they had four more children, Louise being the youngest of the nine children.

Louise's father served as one of the first county commissioners after the county was formed in 1838. He also served as Register of Deeds in the old court house from 1839 to 1847, county clerk from 1841 to 1843, and clerk of circuit court. As you can see, he held some of these offices at the same time. According to the county history by Helen Bingham he also served as a senator 1851. There are a few more references to Mr. Rittenhouse in *Becoming a Village: Monroe in the 1850s*.

At the age of 78, Mrs. Barber recalled that early "Monroe consisted of a group of houses scattered about the square, with an occasional store set amid the dwellings. Shade trees grew in the green yards, which surrounded the frame homes about the square. Crude street borders were formed by board planks connecting one home with another. A few steps leading to a stoop was the only entrance any of the stores had at that time."

Louise recalled, "Once a girlfriend and I went into a small grocery store where the present [Schultz Hometown Pharmacy] is now situated. No one was in sight and a box of raisins was placed temptingly near. Since we were intimate friends of the proprietor, who often treated us when we went to see him, I saw no harm in taking some. I said, 'if you take a handful I will,' to my friend. We did and then hurried outside, but found that we could not eat the raisins. Our conscience bothered us. We tried to give them away, but no one seemed to care for them, and thus we passed an unhappy afternoon, not realizing that if we threw them away instead of clenching them in our hands, the incident would soon be forgotten."

The Rittenhouse family purchased a piano and had it brought to Monroe when Louise was just a child. Six legs supported the piano that was brought here from Milwaukee on a spring wagon. It was the first piano in Monroe before it was even a village. Louise remembered, "Pianos were a curiosity then. People passing our home while the instrument was being played would stop and gaze at it. However, as the pianos became more common, the legs were protected with red calico pantalets from scratches by the smaller children in the early Monroe homes."

The 1850 census shows that Mr. Rittenhouse was a farmer living in Monroe with real estate valued at \$10,000. That would have been quite a sum of money in those days. The Green County History of 1884 states that Rittenhouse settled in Jefferson Township in 1837 and owned land in Section 7. He may have purchased land there while still living in Monroe and serving the county.

By 1860 William was living in Jefferson township with two sons and three daughters. His wife had already passed away. His real estate was valued at \$25,000 and personal property at \$3,000. The 1861 plat map shows that he owned more than 800 acres in Sections 7, 8, and 9.

Louise received her early education at the seminary located on the northwest corner of 9th Street and 15th Avenue. [This building is shown in the top photo on page 100 of the *Pictorial History of Monroe*.] Only three teachers taught all of the students in the school. Louise is actually

listed in the 1860 census twice, once with her father and then again living in Monroe with E. D. Perkins, his wife and one-year-old daughter. My guess is that she was living there while going to school, but her father had also included her with the family.

Her father met his death in November 1862 by falling from a wagon. According to the 1884 history, his wife fell from the same wagon and was killed with the same team hitched to the wagon a few years previous to his death.

It was probably shortly after this that Louise left to attend the University of Wisconsin during the Civil War. She was one of the first three coeds from Monroe at the University of Wisconsin. She, Lettie Bentley, and Helen Bingham delighted in watching the soldiers who drilled and trained at Camp Randall, located near the university campus.

We will learn more about Louise's life after the University experience in the column next week.