

'Highholders,' 'Lowlanders' Feud Combatants

The kids hollered my-dad-can-lick-your-dad in German dialect during the old days on the south side of Oshkosh. The "highholders" and the "lowlanders" feuded regularly, with the youngsters working up to a huge fight on Oregon Street every fall.

The street was blocked off for the fight, which became a sort of annual tradition. Adding to the zest, one side was predominantly Lutheran, while the other was Catholic.

Only the census takers dared lump together all the Oshkoshians of German descent, who

comprised more than a third of the local population. Immigrants themselves nursed the same distinctions of dialect and custom that separated feudal areas in the homeland. Bohemians, who were one of the largest local segments, mistrusted "Plattdeuschers" in much the same way as the Scots viewed the English in Great Britain.

Bohemians were called highholders. According to one explanation, the Bohemian women had a custom of going with wheelbarrows to collect hay from pasture land in the vicinity of South Park Avenue

and 14th Street. A friendly engineer, on a train passing by, shouted "Where are you going?" "Hoi holden," they replied in German — "collecting hay." The phrase was repeated until it became a name which clung to the whole neighborhood.

The Bohemians located south of the marshland, in the 8th to 13th Street area, west of what is now Michigan Street. They were considered Germanic, though Austria ruled their native land. The term highholders may also have referred to their origin in the highlands of the Bohmerwald

forests. It was natural for the Bohemians, who were foresters in Europe, to settle in Oshkosh, the hub of a vast logging industry.

"Plattdeuschers" was the name which the highholders gave to immigrants from the lowlands and valleys of Germany. It meant "low Germans" and implied a lower social class. Plattdeuschers on the south side of Oshkosh lived to the east in the 6th to 18th Street area. (There was also a sizeable German community on the north side, in the parish of St. Mary's Catholic Church,

on Merritt Street).

Oregon Street had limited commercial importance until the end of the last century. The south side's chief thoroughfare in those days was Kansas Street, now South Main. An open waterway, Stringham Creek, extended from South Park to the river. In the 1890's, the creek served as a drainage system when the lagoons of South Park were created by pumping in water from abandoned stone quarries in the vicinity. The creek was later covered with cement and converted for use as a sewer.