

Milwaukie's First Mayor

The turn-of-the-century Milwaukie that Louis Shindler knew as a boy was a town that was experiencing its own expansion and growing pains.

From his parents' house at about 33rd and Harrison streets, Shindler could see a multitude of changes. The east edge of town was sprouting new subdivisions, many of them developed by his father, William Shindler, and a business partner, Cap Kerr. Downtown, the two remaining blacksmith shops had become curiosities that entertained Louis and many other young visitors on their way home from the eight-room schoolhouse located on the present site of City Hall.

But the horses the smithy shoed had not been totally vanquished from the street. When William Shindler purchased a Studebaker-Flanders automobile with a four-cylinder block and a canvas top, it was only the seventh car in the city. Streets were still unlevelled, and filled with chuckholes and paved with mud.

It wasn't until 1917, in fact, that Harrison Street was macadamized. Crushed rock was put down and rolled in, and the surface sprinkled with oil.

Louis Shindler earned \$5 that month for conducting the street repairmen over all the city streets. It was his job before signing with the Army for an active role in World War I.

There was perhaps no other young man in Milwaukie who could have done as well at the job, for Louis Shindler had traveled Milwaukie streets over and over again as a deliveryman for several local businesses.

As a small boy, he had even traveled the mail route east of Milwaukie with the postman, who was paid \$600 a year but had to furnish his own horse and buggy.

It was an all-day trip, Shindler remembers, as the mailman traveled east on Harrison to the city limits (around 42nd), out King Road to Fuller Road, south to Harmony, then back to Milwaukie over Lake Road.

There were only minor side trips, for the whole area was yet sparsely settled and still very rural. The tree stumps had not yet been gouged out of the path of King Road, Shindler remembers, so the horse and buggy wound about them.

Tree stumps and muddy roads were but two of the drawbacks to owning an automobile during the first few years of the century. Louis Shindler's father, William, could not drive when he bought his first car in 1911. Another man, hired as a driver, apparently had no greater skill and the car got only a few miles of Portland before its gears were stripped or some similar calamity occurred. The car had to be towed back to the dealer for repairs.

Once he learned the fundamentals of driving, William Shindler took his family for rides every Sunday, driving out as far as Estacada and Oregon City. There was as yet only one gas pump in Milwaukie – at the Chrysler dealership – and few places to fill the tank along the way.

The main source of transportation in those years was not the automobile but the electric car line, which ran into Milwaukie on River Road, east of Jackson Street for a block and then straight south on Main Street. A tressel supported the tracks as the cars passed over Kellogg Lake, then a true body of water. (Louis Shindler recalls seeing the remains of the original mill on Kellogg Lake, which had been created by backing up Kellogg Creek so that its water power could be used.)

On the north end of town, at the corner of Harrison and River Road (now McLoughlin Boulevard), an expansive car barn had been built. It became a hub of activity for the car line company.

The location of that barn brought many new people, mostly the families of electric car conductors, into Milwaukie to settle, says Louis Shindler.

He remembers the first decade of the 20th Century as boom years for Milwaukie, when many new housing projects began and the area east of the downtown business core began to fill up.

The Shindler family was an important part of that growth. William turned to construction and real estate development, with Kerr as his partner. A business ledger still held by the family tells the story of the days when the builder had to finance many of his own mortgages.

Still, a comfortable house could be erected for as little as \$3,000 – the cost of Louis Shindler's first home when he married in 1924. It was built next door to his parents. (Most lots sold for less than \$200.)

The land William was developing was part of an original 18-acre farm that covered the ground from Harrison to Railroad Avenue between 28th and 36th streets. Shindler bought the land in 1887, when most of it was covered with orchards.

Later, newspaper accounts suggest that Shindler's good fortunes in farming did not last beyond the first year, when prices and the harvest was good. One later year Shindler took 500 pounds of dried prunes to Portland to sell – and received only one cent per pound for them.

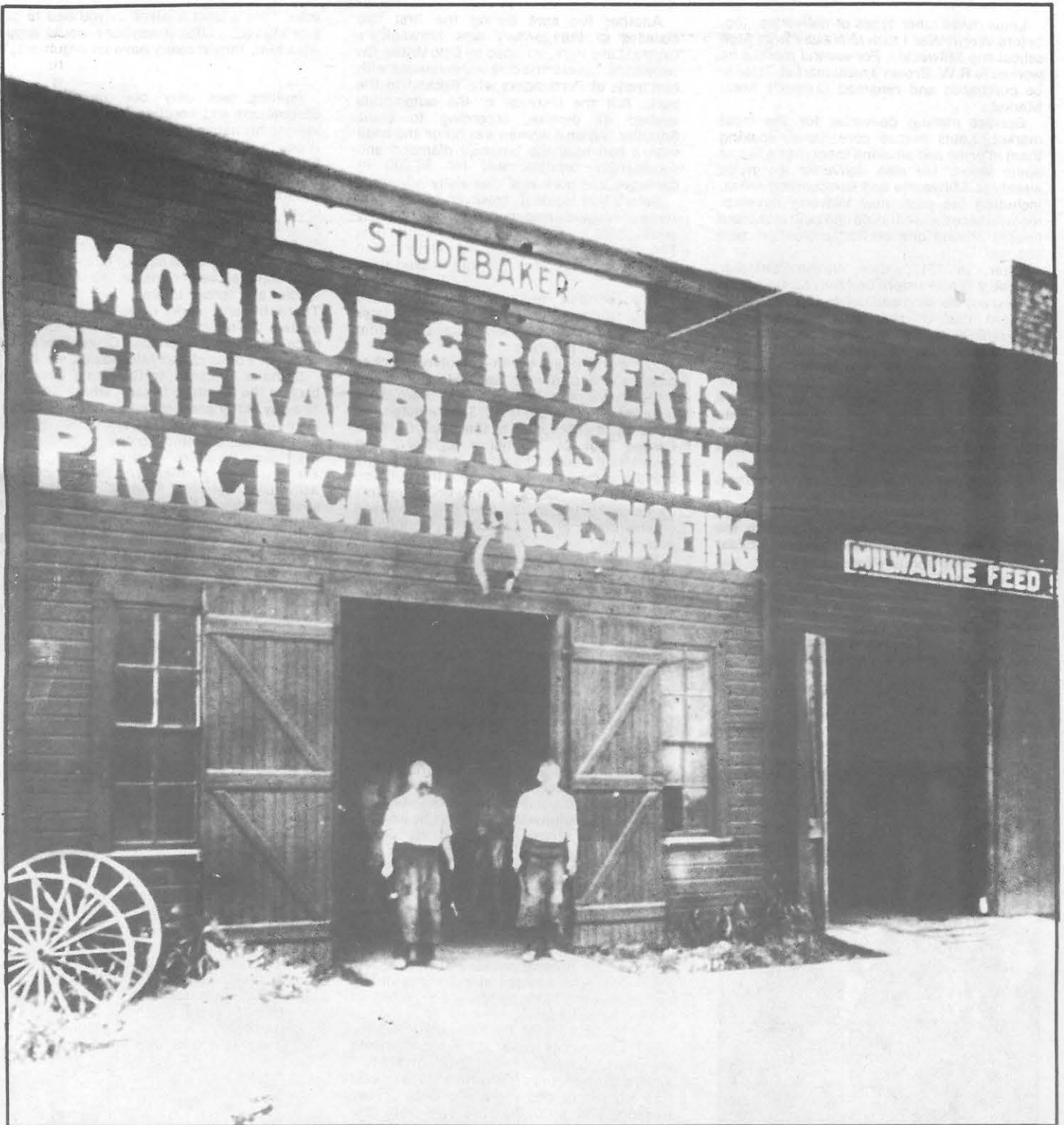
Unable to make a living from his orchards, William remembered his boyhood in Wisconsin, when his family had operated a dairy and turned out roll after roll of cheese. Shindler bought a dozen cows, which ran free over the acreage surrounding the family's home.

Occasionally, a cow would be hit by the Southern Pacific Railroad train, but otherwise the arrangement was a good one, since the cows ate for free.

Louis remembers taking the cows out to pasture and curdling the milk with rennet (an extract of a calf's stomach). He also remembers following his father around in the basement storage area, salting the cheese while it aged.

But milking the cows was the responsibility of his older brothers; Louis never got old enough to help out with that task before the dairy cows were sold and the property subdivided.

The brick cheese that came from the Shindler cellars was a delicate golden yellow halfway between Swiss and Tillamook cheese in color, Louis recalls. He also recalls the cheese making frequent appearances in the lunch box he carried to grade school.



Smithing still was a viable occupation when Louis Shindler was a boy, and a visit to a blacksmith shop such as this one in downtown Milwaukee frequently was one of his after-school stops. Photo courtesy of Milwaukee Historical Society.

When he became old enough to drive a horse and buggy, Louis Shindler was assigned the task of selling to Portland and Milwaukie taverns the cheese, which was served free along with other lunch items as an inducement to come in and buy liquor or beer.

Louis made other types of deliveries, too, before World War I took him away from high school and Milwaukie. For several months he worked in R. W. Brown's meat market, later to be purchased and renamed Cooper's Meat Market.

Besides making deliveries for the meat market, Louis helped cure hams, soaking them in brine and smoking them over a fire of apple wood. He also delivered ice twice weekly to Milwaukie and surrounding areas, including the posh new Waverly development, where the well-to-do had built elaborate houses around one of Portland's first golf courses.

Later, in 1912, after William Shindler opened a grocery store on Main Street, Louis helped out clerking and delivering. The store boasted one of the first telephones in Milwaukie, used mainly for business functions like placing orders with a wholesale grocer who provided delivery service from Portland to Oregon City.

But Louis remembers more than just work as he was growing up in Milwaukie. He frequently enjoyed fishing from the pontoon bridge that connects Milwaukie to Elk Island in the Willamette.

Bobsledding was a popular sport in those years, when the weather seemed to be colder and the snow more abundant. Shindler likes to tell of the winter of 1929-30, when both the Willamette and Columbia rivers froze fast during a long January cold spell.

Louis remembers, too, the silent pictures at Oaks Park, where he saw his first movie. Actually, it was a nickelodeon, where the audience was seated in a simulated train car and travel scenes moved across the windows. "It sure fooled me a couple of times," he chuckles today.

In high school he played basketball, baseball and football. At Oaks Park, he might choose the "Shoot the Chute," an exciting ride in a boat down into a small pond.

Another fun spot during the first two decades of the century was Milwaukie's Crystal Lake Park, founded by Otto Witte. On weekends, the electric cars were crowded with hundreds of Portlanders who flocked to the park. But the increase of the automobile spelled its demise, according to Louis Shindler. When a woman was hit on the head with a ball near the baseball diamond and successfully brought suit for \$8,000 in damages, the park was financially ruined.

Before the incident, however, Louis made some of his spending money at age 10-13 by setting pins in the Crystal Park bowling alley. The pay was 15¢ a game and a pinsetter had to be alert to dodge the balls that missed their targets.

The Shindler grocery store prospered during those years. According to later newspaper reports, sales increased from \$7.50 to \$150 per day.

William Shindler became involved in other business ventures, as well. He purchased three shares of stock when First State Bank incorporated in 1909. In 1913, he erected the building, later occupied by the P. and C. Hand Forged Tool Co., to house an alarm and advertising clock company. But the company failed and for a number of years the building sat vacant. Shindler worked to bring the tool company to the town, where it increased employment and the city's residential population.

Recorded on the financial records still held by the Shindler family is the sale for \$4,130 of the factory and one-half acre of ground. Evidently Shindler financed the purchase himself for the 1925 records show a \$2,800 loan to the P & C Hand Forged Tool Co., to be repaid in installments of \$100 plus interest.

Securing the tool company as a major industry was just one of the contributions that William Shindler made to the city of Milwaukie, which he served as the first mayor from 1903-1908. Among his accomplishments as mayor was the reduction of the street car fare from 10¢ to 5¢ for a ride to Portland. Shindler and the rest of the city councilmen forced that decision from the state utilities commission by walking the distance from Milwaukie to Grove Junction to prove that it was no greater than the distance to Ardenwald, which passengers had always paid for 5¢ fare.

The first City Hall was built during his administration, in 1908. Located on the southeast corner of Harrison Avenue and 21st Street, it later was moved to the corner opposite the present Willamette Savings & Loan (21st and Jackson Streets) and finally replaced in the 1930s by today's structure on the old school site.

A 1929 account in the Milwaukie Review reports that while mayor, Shindler "induced the Hawley people to establish the mill here" and "when he retired from office the town was free from debt and there was \$400 in the treasury and \$500 due the city from the telephone company ... Very few administration can make any better claims to having served the city well (sic) than Mr. Shindler ..."

Milwaukie's first mayor, who never liked to be called by his full name (Balthasar William Shindler), is remembered by his son as a strong Democrat and a politically oriented man. "He wasn't a talker... you had to get him started... But if anybody would argue with him, they'd really have an argument!"



William Shindler and his family of five children. Photo courtesy of Richard Shindler.

Politics was only one of the many occupations and vocations he pursued after leaving his native Wisconsin at the age of 17. It was in 1878 that he traveled to Sacramento, Calif. over the Union Pacific Railroad. He worked for a time as a farm laborer in California, then moved on to the Portland area, where he toiled briefly at Lake Oswego, breaking up ore with a sledgehammer for \$1.50 a day. Board was \$4.50 a week.

But after only a few days of that well-paying job, Shindler was replaced by a returning worker and forced to walk back to Portland. There, the only work he could find was in his uncle's furniture factory in Wilsburg (a once-was town on Johnson Creek Boulevard between Portland Milwaukie).

Shindler returned to California and then back to the furniture factory, where he made \$2 a day. After another year with the Portland Furniture Factory (at \$3 a day), he decided the business was a promising one, so he founded his own furniture factory with Gustof Frederick as a partner. The factory stood in Milwaukie between Monroe and Harrison streets, where M. B. Fisch later built a pumping plant and water works.

For four years, the business was a profitable one. (A three-piece white bedroom suite could be sold from \$30). But then, the Northwestern Pacific Railroad built its line into Portland and brought a great influx of custom-made furniture from the East. The price of the same set dropped to \$11, yet the costs of production were \$14. So many local furniture makers went out of business. Shindler sold his factory in 1887 and moved on to the pursuit of farming and cheesemaking.

A year earlier, he had married Agnes Kruttner of Portland, who had emigrated from German Austria with her sister. The couple bought their farm and home on Harrison Avenue in 1887 and added the east wing in 1920.

Louis was the youngest of the family of five children. Eldest brother Leo, who himself became a City Council member in the late 1920s, was followed by Otto, Otillie and Rose.

The big old Shindler house stands today but its famous landmark – the towering tree that became Milwaukie's official Dogwood – is gone, blown down in the Columbus Day storm of 1964.

"That Dogwood was there when Dad bought the place (in 1887)," muses Louis Shindler. "It was a wonderful tree. How well I can remember swinging on its branches when I was a boy.

"That was a long time ago."



The merchant went to the customer in early retail marketing in downtown Milwaukee. Wissinger's general store was among the first and best established of Milwaukee's business community.



Milwaukee's first mayor, William Shindler [center, with mustache], surrounded by members of the first and second city councils. Photos courtesy of Milwaukee Historical Society.