

# Merger

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Green Bay Mayor Jim Schmitt calls the Preble merger among the most significant events in local history, noting that it brought improved services to town residents while clearing the way for development of what today is the city's east side.

"That's a model of success," Schmitt said. "Some people back then had a lot of vision."

But the merger did not occur without years of bickering between the city and town, followed by a bruising political campaign that was a hot-button issue in 1964.

Even half a century later, some former Preble residents remember the pain of watching their beloved town virtually vanish from the landscape.

Bill Dessart, who fondly recalls growing up in Preble, was a high school student when his parents actively opposed the merger referendum. The town had cultivated its own identity, he said, and many people wanted to maintain that independence.

"The ties were real strong," he said, adding that the merger "was kind of hard to swallow."

The decision to consolidate came after a period of 100 years during which the two liked-sized communities co-existed on opposite sides of the East River.

Preble was chartered in 1859 — five years after Green Bay — and enjoyed decades of steady growth and development. Named after war hero Edward Preble, the town eventually had its own fire department, water department, three parks, numerous churches, a VFW post, six elementary schools and one high school that remains known today as Preble High School.

Although much of the town was farmland, residents could buy groceries at Renier's Market, do their banking at Preble State Bank, grab lunch at Kroll's restaurant and enjoy dinner at the Zuider Zee Supper Club or Stratosphere Supper Club.

"We liked it here," recalled longtime resident Marion Kipp. "We thought it was a nice place."

Green Bay, meanwhile, had successfully merged in 1895 with Fort Howard to the west. And the city soon began eyeing annexation of Preble to the east.

Records of the Brown County Historical Society indicate that as Green Bay pursued annexation,

Preble town leaders moved against annexation by trying to incorporate as a village or city. Town residents voiced mixed feelings, however, and they narrowly rejected a 1952 ballot measure to form a city.

Years of debate culminated in the merger referendum held simultaneously in both Preble and Green Bay on Nov. 3, 1964.

Proponents argued that a merger would mean better government services for Preble and more orderly development of the town's sprawling farm fields. Opponents feared that townsfolk would face higher taxes and lose their sense of identity.

One campaign flier warned Preble residents: "Green Bay wants to marry you only for your money."

Gary Tilkens, who graduated from Preble High School in 1964, said he and other opponents feared losing the small-town atmosphere that they enjoyed while growing up in Preble.

"To us, the city was taking over," he said.

But local farmer Ed Holschuh said he supported the merger and looked forward to the accelerated development that would follow. As builders transformed the countryside, property values increased and the family prospered.

Holschuh recalled that opposition to the merger

seemed to come largely from Preble political leaders who worried about losing their clout.

"You're talking about giving all the power to Green Bay, and you don't know how it's going to go," he said. "But it turned out good."

When all the votes were counted on Election Day, the merger was approved by wide margins in both communities.

Merger opponents immediately sounded a conciliatory tone, and the municipalities consolidated quickly under the Green Bay name. Green Bay's City Council grew from 24 aldermen to 30 aldermen, with new representatives from the former town.

Schmitt said the city has welcomed Preble's families, schools and neighborhoods for many years. Any acrimony that existed between the two municipalities, the mayor said, has long since been overcome.

While acknowledging that people in the 1950s and '60s wanted to save the town, the mayor said the Preble name endures to this day and the town has not been forgotten.

"What did they want to save?" the mayor said. "They wanted to save the identity, they wanted to save the name. And they have all that."

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