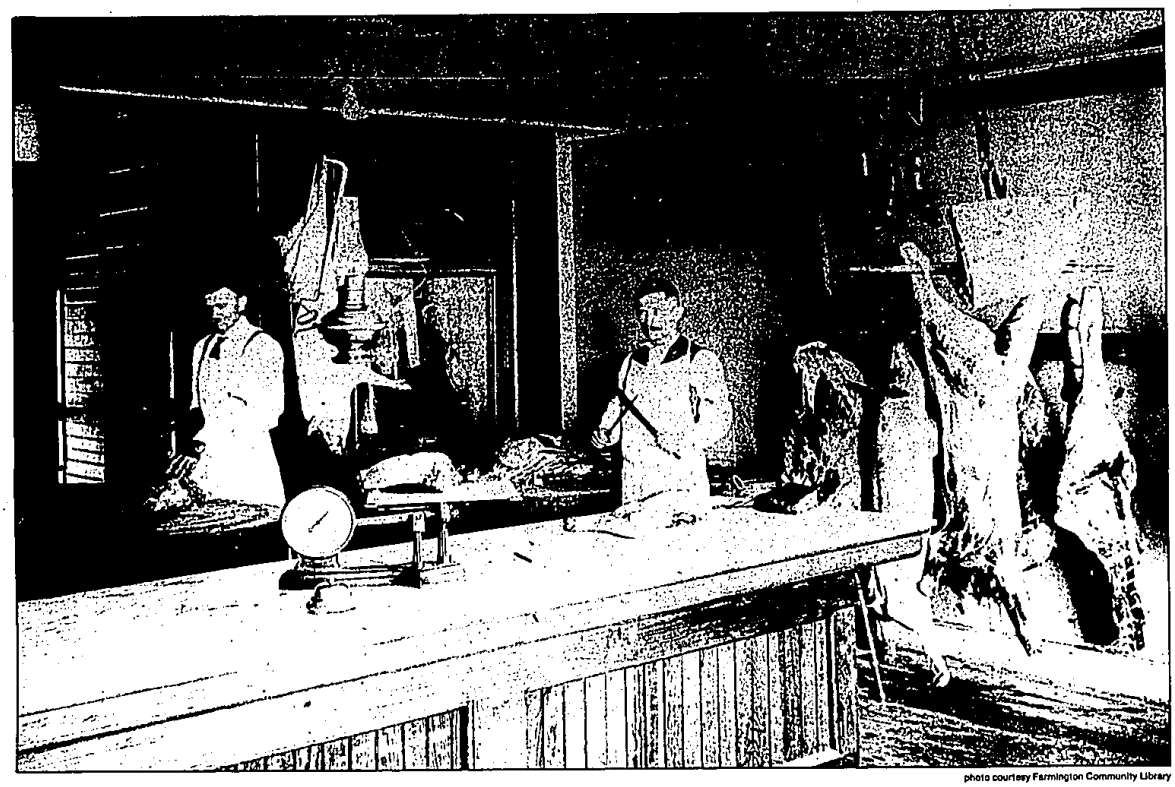

photo courtesy Farmington Community Library

H.A. Schroeder's Meat Market, on the north side of Grand River, east of Farmington Road, in downtown Farmington, as it looked at the turn of the century.

Enterprise captured the life and times

photo courtesy Farmington Community Library

This rare picture shows Grand River east of Farmington Road, in downtown Farmington, in 1870. The stone building (in foreground) was owned by Oliver B. Smith. It housed Mrs. Pierman's Millinery and Dr. Woodman's Drug Store. The Masons' first meeting spot, from 1863 to 1872, was on the second floor. J.N Power's General Store is to the left. To the right, under the hanging timepiece, is Warren Selsby's Jewelry Shop. Beyond are The Dohany Building and Jackson's Blacksmith shop. The fire of 1872 destroyed these buildings.

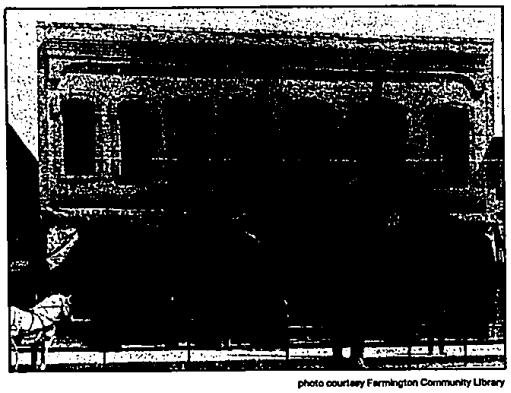

photo courtesy Farmington Community Library

The north side of Grand River, east of Farmington Road, in downtown Farmington, as it looked circa 1905. The young man beside the light pole is Fred Cook; his wife, Ana, stands in the doorway. Cook ran Cook Drygoods at the turn of the century. The Masons' third meeting place was in the Warner Building (1874-76).

THE YOUNG man who began Farmington's first newspaper has been dead since 1905.

Two lifelong residents of Farmington of my acquaintance who, as teenagers, heard their first music recordings in Gov. Warner's home on Grand River across the street from them, died last summer.

The oldest graduate of Farmington High School, Harriet Smith, Class of 1907, is 99 at this writing and confined to a nursing home in Northville. She was born the year the Farmington Enterprise published its first issue.

Thus, we cannot know firsthand what life was like in the 1880s or '90s in Farmington, Mich., but we can glean from records — public and otherwise — considerable information about the life and times of Farmingtonians.

We can assume and surmise and conclude. Much of history is thus written.

In the 1880s, there were no cars or buses or planes; no phones or television; no radios or computers; no electricity; no running water to kitchens or baths. In fact, there were no baths; there were outhouses. Water ran in the creeks, and in the River Rouge.

It was indeed a different world. How awful! Not really. When you have not had and do not know it, you do not feel deprived.

A HUNDRED years ago, Farmington had many things. Farmington had horses and wagons and buggies. The mile roads, made of the stuff known as dirt, were in place; so also the main north-south routes, albeit some with slightly different names than now. Eight-thousand buggies or wagons or lone rangers did not each day traverse the Grand River Plank Road, as wheels today pound the pavement on Farmington's main thoroughfare.

Farmingtonians, a hundred years ago, had kerosene for lights; bells for warnings and ringings and callings, for horsemen, schoolmasters and housewives, in that order; they had patent medicines for ills and the ill-tempered; booze and churches for spirit, each of a different variety, to be sure; and water for necessity.

There was land, lots of land, to buy or build on. Once owned or rented, families cultivated their land, grew crops to eat or sell or give away. The land sustained Farmington. It fed the horses and cows and poultry; it fed the hungry mouths of the 2,500 or so folk who lived in the village and township.

In this time were the beginnings of the apple orchards for which Farmington gradually earned a measure of fame throughout the area, a fame that would last another half century. As the orchards blossomed, so also blossomed other aspects of the community.

Lee Peel
local historian

Though the 1872 fire destroyed much of the north side of downtown Farmington, including some, but not all, public records belonging to the township, its ashes brought forth new building for those businesses lost to the fire, or entirely new ones.

IN 1876, the Town Hall, which still stands as a landmark today at the corner of Farmington Road and Grand River, was built by the township and the Masonic Lodge. It was an unusual union, one that would last longer than any real marriage ever does — over 90 years.

The new Town Hall provided a center of attraction, but, more importantly, a meeting place for the developing community. There were plays, musicals, pep rallies, athletic events, political and patriotic speeches, bond rallies in times of war, literary and philosophical and religious lectures. Almost anything imaginable had outlet in the old Town Hall; it was the social fulcrum of the time.

The activities in, or centered around, the Town Hall were legion for the next 75 years. World War II signaled more than the second great war to make the world safe for democracy. When the war came, it signaled finis to America's greatest depression.

During World War II, women moved out of the hot kitchens and on to the assembly lines. What had been America's incipient love affair with the auto became now, as soon as cars rolled once more from the auto plants, a grand passion, and the increased use of the auto gradually diminished the importance of the Town Hall as a gathering place. The Town Hall days of yesteryear began slowly to fade.

Yet, not entirely. Even today, the Town Hall (now the Masonic Lodge and the oldest continuously used Lodge building in the state) and the property immediately adjacent thereto is a hub-bub of activity during Founders' Festival days, when craftpersons and vendors of all sorts sell their wares.

As in its earlier days, the people of Farmington in the period of the '80s and '90s wanted and encouraged education and the building of schools. The youngsters who went to the one-roomers had their class and public recitations, "graduations," picnics, and special programs on various holidays.

IN 1888, the Farmington Union High School was built, though a 1926 Enterprise account by Nathan Power states that he went to a high school in Farmington in 1852. Disputed also is the very first high school graduating class, but in 1989, Farmington High will celebrate its centennial graduating class. Principal Gerald Potter is already making special plans.

Schools and education occupy as much of the energy, thinking, planning and money of its citizens today as they did with the citizens of the community in 1880. The evidence is as clear and resounding in those times as now.

One hundred years ago, on Sept. 19, 1888, Farmington's favorite son married his girl, Martha (Mattie) Davis. It would be six years more (1894) before Fred M. Warner would be elected first a state senator, and six more after that (1900) before he would move on to the Secretary of State's office. And then followed in 1904, again in 1906 and in 1908, his election as governor of the state of Michigan.

For a very small town — we really were that — and one of literally hundreds in the state, to have one of its citizens elected to the highest office was a singular event and a singular honor. Farmington had come of age. Warner was not just a force in his hometown but now a force in the whole state.

As in any age, the '80s and the '90s were the best of times and the worst. The impatient young, of course, decried them; the old sighed, accepted, and went on about their business. There is some truth and some error in both views.

But a community, whatever its mix of young and old, of impatient or satisfied, of rich or poor or in between, lives beyond the years of the oldest members, and each segment of its citizenry forms the subtle fabric into which we are all woven.