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Unraveling the Mysteries in Two Vintage Photographs

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Recently I was given a tattered envelope marked "Old Photos of Champaign," contained a handful of negatives. A friend kindly printed them for me, and most of them turned out to be quite ordinary and recognizable images from around Champaign, probably taken in the late '40s. Two of the photographs, however, presented a bit of a mystery. Neither pictured building looked familiar, but at the same time their locations did seem familiar.

A Fashionable Address

One photograph depicted a large, three-story wooden apartment building on a sunny street with large shade trees. The apartments appear to have been rather good-sized. Each one boasted a spacious, airy porch on the front and a profusion of big windows. The roof line was rather odd as it seemed to consist of parallel gambrel roofs, like two small barns, set side by side, pierced by a collection of gables and topped by an attic. The upper porches also seemed to be someone's afterthought. They had posts and trim that did not match the detailing on the first floor porch, and they seemed to have been built on the roof of what had originally been a single-story veranda. I had no idea where the building was until I noticed the building to its left. Surely, that bay window and towering stone façade must be the parish hall of the Methodist Church at State and



Large, airy, and somewhat odd: an architectural enigma on Church Street, sometime during the 1940s.

Church streets. Perhaps this apartment house had been located where the education wing of the church, built in the '60s, is now located. The apartments looked as if they dated to the late 19th or early 20th century, so I first took a look at the Sanborn map for 1897. According to that map, there was a single-family dwelling at that location, 208 W. Church, and working backward through the maps revealed that it had been there as far back as 1887. Back then, before the parish hall was built, the jeweler L.C. Garwood lived next door at 210 W. Church. The neighbor to the east at 206 was Francis T. Walker, the principal owner of the Walker Furniture Co., a well established Champaign

firm. Obviously this was a fashionable address. Eventually I found a listing for 208: Mrs. Almira Roberts, widow of Alonzo. I have no idea what Mr. Roberts may have done for a living, but I do not suppose he was the TV weatherman well known to several generations born in 20th century Champaign-Urbana.

Next I checked the Sanborn map for 1902. The single-family house was gone from 208 and the apartment house was there. The city directory shows that it was known as the Hessel Apartments, and it was occupied by Mrs. Mary Hessel, the widow of Gustavus Hessel, who had run a large harness and carriage business

