

Samuel Lockhart Hawks (1832 – 1905)

Samuel Lockhart Hawks, known as “Louis” Hawks, was born in Scotland on March 7, 1832 the son of Robert and Margaret (Lockhart) Hawks. He married Emeline Preston on September 9, 1872 and they had a son named Joseph Knowlton Preston Hawks. They lived at 821 W. Washington Street where Louis moved after residing for years at 1005 W. Front St.

It is unknown when he moved to Bloomington but in the fall of 1854 he came to work at the Chicago & Alton Railroad Company. He first began his career as a railroad employee in the shops of the Akron & Hudson Railway in Pennsylvania where he started out as a machinist apprentice getting paid fifty cents a day. Louis then became a fireman on the railroad and served as engineer and conductor as well. He also worked on the Cleveland & Pittsburg roads on the Pennsylvania Railroad before going to Chicago.

Louis was known as one of the most interesting figures of the Illinois railways. He worked at the Chicago & Alton Railroad for fifty years and spent thirty of those years as superintendent of air brakes. He was such a good engineer that he was given the task of breaking in new engines for the Chicago & Alton. He was also one of five engineers assigned the task of breaking the drifts during a huge snowstorm in the winter of 1854 which had tied up the railroad for three weeks. Five engines were coupled together in the hopes of breaking drifts on the tracks. After leaving Chicago they managed to get the train as far as Towanda which was only 10 miles north of Bloomington. The crew was then forced to walk the rest of the way to Bloomington for assistance for passengers and other members of the trains’ crews.

Louis’s most famous achievement was his role as engineer of Engine No. 97, the Bloomington train that aided in the taming of the Great Chicago Fire that began on October 8, 1871. The next day, the Prairie Bird Fire Company #1, part of the Bloomington Fire Department, received a telegraph from Chicago’s fire department stating: “Our Fire Department is entirely used up with a number of engines burnt and disabled.”¹ The Bloomington Fire Department, which was just newly established on June 19, 1868, responded to the call and sent their newest fire engine to help put out the fire.

A few years prior to the official organization of the Bloomington Fire Department the City of Bloomington purchased their first “steam fire engine,” replacing the old hand pump engine. “When the new steamer arrived, it was necessary to have someone ‘on duty’ at all times to keep the steamer ‘stoked and ready.’” Thus, the Bloomington Fire Department was founded.

At that time No. 97 was going in the wrong direction, southbound to Springfield. A telegraph was sent to tell it to stop and Louis backed it all the way back to Bloomington at a high speed. The engine was placed on a turntable at the Bloomington yards and a flatcar was coupled to it. The steam fire engine was then loaded on the flat car and the train was ready for the journey. All other trains using the line had been ordered to be on the sidings so that the engine Hawks was driving would have the line all to itself and could make better time. With Louis as engineer, the train traveled a whopping mile every 57 seconds, making the 126-mile trip in two and a half hours. No other train had ever made the run to Chicago that fast before! Once in Chicago the

¹ Bob Williams. “The Bloomington Fire Department Celebrates 125 Years of Service: 1868 – 1993,” 5. McLean County Museum of History Archives

Bloomington firemen commandeered two horses to lug the five-ton fire engine to the scene of the fire, and helped get the fire under control. The fire was completely extinguished on October 10th. Louis and all the firefighting volunteers returned home to Bloomington safe and unharmed and locally were deemed heroes.

The news of the speedy trip spread worldwide. Many photographers came to take pictures of the engine and spectators came to the stations and terminals to see the famous train too. Conductor E.J. Smith of the Chicago & Alton Railroad gave a detailed account of the trip. He said that before it made its journey, “Little 97 gave a hiss and started. Its steam was up almost to the limit and it had been panting and nervous as if it knew what was to be done.” Smith also talked about the trip itself: “Hawks was noticed at every station, sitting in his cab with his cap pulled down low, his body slightly bent forward, watching every turn in the sails...No one knows how that little steaming, panting 97 fairly burned the rails toward Chicago. Only persons standing by the side of the road could tell how she strained every ounce in her cylinders to reach the burning city.” After making this remarkable run engine No. 97 was used solely for making special runs. Later, it was used to take the pay-car over the railroads until the system of paying by check was inaugurated around 1890. At this time No. 97 had the nameplates “Major Knowlton” added, for “Knowlton” was the name of the paymaster for the railroad at the time.

Along with sending the fire engine to aid the Chicago Fire Department, Bloomington residents did further to help out with the immense fire by forming a Bloomington Relief Fund for victims of the fire. *The Pantagraph* put out an article urging everyone to come to a public meeting called by R.H. Holder, president of the board of trade, and to come prepared to donate carloads of flour, meal, pork, beef, potatoes, clothing, money, and whatever else they could give. With Judge David Davis as chairman of the Fund, Bloomington citizens raised over \$14,000 to help aid over 100,000 homeless and hungry persons in Chicago. That would equal about \$245,167.91 in 2008.

Later that week Louis and the volunteer firemen were invited to the engine house to receive the testimonial of their regard. Mayor Benjamin Funk was present and Louis was presented with a Knight Templar’s cross—a Maltese cross—of solid gold, of exquisite finish and workmanship. Louis gave a speech that was short but acquitted himself creditably. *The Daily Pantagraph* said, “The steadiness of hand, the coolness of brain, and the nerve, which he exhibited on the ride to the Chicago fire, mark him as a man equal to a great emergency.”²

Working for the railroad was also very dangerous work. Louis had suffered several bad injuries during his work as engineer when he fell between his engine and tender while workmen were drawing the coupling without his knowledge. While moving the engine, the tender separated and he fell between, narrowly escaping death. He was laid up several months because of the mishap. He was then appointed as superintendent of air brakes. Five years later he was a victim of a train wreck in a Pullman car going from St. Louis to Kansas City on Christmas Eve, 1879. He was laid up for a year to recover from his injuries. Because of his thirty years in the air brake department and his experiences with injuries caused by working on the railways, he was closely identified with the gradual development and improvement in the indispensable safe-guards to railroad trains.

² “Prairie Birds and Hawks,” *Daily Pantagraph*, 1872? Samuel Hawks file folder, McLean County Museum of History Archives

Aside from his extensive roles with the Illinois railroads, Louis also served as an elder at First Presbyterian Church. He was described as having a long beard streaked with gray which gave him a patriarchal appearance fitting to his character.

Louis died in Bloomington, IL on January 2, 1905 after suffering from an illness for several months which had prompted him to retire from his job with the railways. His sickness became worse and he lapsed into unconsciousness three days prior to his death. On the day of his death, the *Daily Pantagraph* reported that he was one of the “few whose active career on the rail spans a half century.”³ Louis was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery on January 4, 1905.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

³ “Samuel L. Hawks Dying,” *Daily Pantagraph*, January, 2 1905