

NUGGETS of HISTORY

The Bi-Monthly Bulletin of the
ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

November-December, 1964

Volume 2, No. 1

HISTORIC COURT HOUSES



OFFER SUSTAINING MEMBERSHIP FUND FOR HOME "DRIVE"

Following the example of neighboring city historical society members who now possess their own homes, our own Rockford Historical Society will launch a 1965 Home Fund drive soon. Solicitation of these memberships costing \$25.00 per year will be launched next month through an appeal to many of our
(Continued on pg. 3)

(The ornate circular stairs that once graced our court house are no more. In fact the 1878 gem has become slightly bald.) Winnebago County's Court House is one of eighteen outstanding county buildings in Illinois which are the subjects of an 84-page booklet published this year by the National Society of Colonial Domes of America in the State of Ill.

Entitled HISTORIC COURT HOUSES IN ILL., the publication was
(Continued on page 2)

written by Mrs. Lucy Miller Sturges. It includes pictures of twelve of the court houses, a two-page bibliography, and a listing of the 102 counties of the state giving the dates of construction of the first court house in each county and of the current building.

Our Winnebago County Court House is not pictured, but a four-page chapter is devoted to it. Chapter XII, "On the Rocks," begins with a brief history of Winnebago County government starting with the enabling act of January 16, 1836. It gives the results of the first county election in August, 1836, at which Simon P. Doty, Thomas B. Talcott, and William E. Dunbar were elected commissioners, Daniel S. Haight was chosen as sheriff, Daniel H. Whitney as recorder, Eliphalet Gregory as coroner, and D. A. Spaulding as surveyor.

In 1839 the County Commissioners selected the public square on the east side of the river for the court house, but the structure was never built there. In 1844 a one-story court house with Doric columns was built on the site of the present building. The court room could accommodate 300 persons.

Spurred on by an elegant court house dedicated in Freeport in 1873, Rockford citizens decided not to be outdone. The old building was removed, and the cornerstone for its replacement was laid on June 24, 1876. Despite the collapse of the huge dome on May 11, 1877, killing nine workmen and injuring many others, the present edifice was finally completed in 1878 at a cost of \$211,000. In 1916 the south addition was authorized and constructed.

The foregoing information and much more is contained in this interesting booklet. It is available at a price of \$1.50 each from Mrs. A. A. Binz, 532 Roscoe Street, Chicago, Ill. 60613.

-- Robert H. Borden.

Those working on early day families report more than a score complete geneology tracts have been turned in to date.

Stranger than Fiction are Historical Facts 3

579 manufacturing firms. Inasmuch as all monies so acquired will benefit a non-profit corporation, membership fees may be charged off to benevolences in income tax returns. Historical organizations of Madison, Janesville, Milwaukee, Springfield, Bloomington, Dixon and Oregon, Ill. have used legacies from philanthropic minded individuals and manufacturing plants large and small with which to purchase homes and museum sites. It has been pointed out that our city has no museum nor headquarters where tourists or interested citizens can procure historical data concerning Illinois' second city.

Among the projects characterized as worthy of development in 1965 are these:

1 - Carrying on research in compiling historical biographies of pioneer families whose progeny are still active members of our community. This committee consists of Mrs. Robert (Kay) Boehland, chairman; Mrs. Barbara Capron, Trahern Ogilby and Frank Capron.

2 - Continuing collection of mementos and heirlooms for the archives. Committee: Chandler Miller, chairman; Clarence Agnew, Mrs. John McHugh, Jack Mundy and Mrs. Roberta Monk.

3 - Study of publication of up-to-date history of Rockford and publication of revised school history booklet authored by Miss Emma Lundgren and titled "Pioneer Town". Mrs. Sheila Tinsley heads the committee that will report recommendations at the next directors' session. Her aides are: Hazel Hyde, Emma Lundgren and Robert Borden.

4 - Historical marker committee: Carl Severin has succeeded on acquiring a suitable hard strata boulder to mark the site of the first ferry connecting "East Rockford" and "West Rockford" in 1843. A bronze plaque is to be attached to its face when weather permits stone masons to anchor the marker. Former campus of Rockford College was the location of the ferry house.

The Way of All Flesh - And Old Homes Also

Another home on East State Street was leveled early this month. Two other old ones on East Jefferson met the same fate last month, and so it goes. The Peterson Floral Shop will soon be replaced after being on East State Street as a landmark for many years. Time marches on.

We are all for progress. The pioneers who built our fair city were for progress, too. Neither they nor we favored saving the old just because it was old.

It is, however, the duty of a historical society to keep a record of the community for the benefit of later generations. This can best be done by preserving photographs of how it used to be. Official records, newspapers, personal records, and city and telephone directories are all indispensable, but "a picture is worth a thousand words". Regardless of how much we may read about the history of our town, it means far more to us if we can look at pictures about what we have read.

Do you have a camera? Do you like to take pictures? There are many scenes in our city which are being changed. As a historical society, we should be preserving these on film. It is, however, too big a job for one person or even a few. We need to have many of our members pitching in. If you are willing to help, please contact W. Ashton Johnson or Robert H. Borden for details.

Everybody seemed to have enjoyed the picnic of last September, for there were echoes of praise emanating from the last board session at the Barrick home. Formal thanks were extended by motion to Vice President "Go-get-em" Sheets and to Atty. Milton Fischer, the broasted barbecue king.

Winters Were Rugged Way-Back-When

The first wintry blasts that blow snow down from the north always seem to turn one's thoughts to the winters that used to be. One of the changes that time has wrought has certainly been in regard to school. Often there are years with only a day or two missed because of weather, and once in a while, no days at all.

Time was, when weather created many problems, from frozen drinking water, to the inability of the teacher to arrive at all. If the teacher was her own janitor, as was often the case, her getting there early to start the fire was part of her daily routine. Those who sat close to the stove were literally scorched with its sting of heat, while those at a distance could hardly be said to benefit at all. (One old school record book at Latham Park had a report from the teacher at the end of each year on the condition of the building and its supplies. One poor woman annually said that the condition of her broom was poor, but nothing ever seems to have come of her complaint.)

About the turn of the century a new type of stove came to the country school. Its main value was to cause a greater circulation of air by surrounding the stove with a circle of sheet metal that caused the air to be sucked in at the bottom and pushed out at the top. One of the priceless side effects was the vent to the outside that carried away some of the odor of wet leather and wool and hair that was part of the unpleasantness of the season.

But as those children decorated their Christmas tree with popcorn and cranberries and sugar cookies; and made hankies and mufflers, and whittled figures from wood for that much loved teacher, they celebrated a season of love - just as we would today.

- Dorisanne Nielsen

CHRONOLOGY OF ROCKFORD (Continued from last issue.)

1858 - Rockford's first military drill company, the Rifles, were holding weekly drill rehearsals at the Fairgrounds, while the Grays were being recruited by G. L. Nevius.

1859 - Duncan Forbes and Son Foundry introduced a line of cast iron grates and stoves. A traveling salesman from New York wrote of our town as the "Forest City" and the name stuck, replacing the appellation of the Reaper City.

1860 - Recent development of manufacturing along the water power districts sent the city's population soaring during the 1860-60 decade. Federal population figures stated as follows: Rockford Township - 1850 - 2565; 1855 - 6,520; 1860 - 8,117, of these being 7,046 residents within the city of Rockford.

1861 - "Rockford City Grays", which had won drill honors in 1858 under the direction of Major Elmer E. Ellsworth, became the first local unit to be ordered into active war service on April 22nd, 8 days following firing of Fort Sumpter. Five other militia units joined up within a few weeks. They were the Grays, Rockford Rifles, Company B, Durand Guards, Washington Rifles and Ellis Rifles. Col. E. E. Ellsworth then one of President Lincoln's staff at Washington was shot and killed in leading a raid on Secessionist sympathizers in Virginia. He was first Union officer killed in the Civil War.

1862 - Funeral of Col. E. E. W. Ellis was held here April 22nd, two weeks after regimental leader was sent home due to battle wounds. War Department designated Rockford as a site of infantry training camp in area now bounded

by Guard, North Main, Ellsworth Streets and the river. The 74th, 92nd, 95th and 96th Ill. Vol. Inf., units drilled here for nearly a year.

1863 - Enrollment of Rockford men who had entered military service as of January 1st numbered 462. Chaplain A. H. Conant, who had left pulpit of the Unitarian Church in July of 1862, died in a Tennessee Military Hospital of pneumonia, incurred caring for the Union wounded on battle fields. Former Postmaster Malanthon Smith, who had enlisted with the Galena Lead Mine Regiment at war's outbreak, died from battle wounds in Vicksburg Military Hospital. His widow was commissioned postmaster, first woman to be so honored by President Lincoln. Col. G. L. Nevius was killed in action during siege of Vicksburg.

1864 - The Republican slate headed by Lincoln and Johnson won a landslide victory - total of 3,905 to 817 for Democrat Gen. George B. McClellan. First National Bank opened doors with Alonzo Wood as President and E. H. Grimes as cashier.

1865 - News of General Lee's surrender to the Union - General U. S. Grant brought rejoicing and a day of thankful prayer. Joy was short-lived for on April 14th news of President Lincoln's assassination was flashed over telegraph wires. Rockford reacted by a period of mourning that continued until after the late president's funeral trail pulled away from the city a week later. Memorial Services were held in the largest auditorium in the city - 2nd Congregational Church.

1866 - More than 125 southern refugees, "underground travelers" during the war, decided to remain here permanently. Another attempt to secure legislation for conversion of Rock River into a great inland waterway to the Mississippi brought delegates here from up-

Rockford Historical Society
(Non-Profit Organization)

Bulletin Address:
2011 Guilford Road
Rockford, Illinois

Contributions or Complaints should
be sent to Editorial Board: Ash
Johnson, Editor; Herman G. Nelson
or Robert H. Borden, Associate Ed-
itors at Bulletin Office.

river cities. Second meeting at Beloit recom-
mended before adjournment.

The old Thompdon Manufacturing Company building
on Race Street is being razed for a parking lot.
This site was once considered as a possible loc-
ation for a museum.
