

NUGGETS of HISTORY

The Bi-Monthly Bulletin of the
ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Ash Johnson's Boyhood Home on No. Court St.



John L. Clark's Home on South First St.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT -

Before you read this message, please glance down to the bottom of the page and read the four words printed there. This was Ash Johnson's last contribution to the Rockford Historical Society. And I might add that no single person contributed as much to our Historical Society as Ash.

All of us, I am sure, are aware of the "Past Progress" of Rockford. Evidence of our past accomplishments is everywhere. However, as time marches on, many of these accomplishments grow dim; they will eventually disappear if we do not record them in some way. This is a fact. The part that the Historical Society will play in recording these accomplishments is obvious.

Since our origin in 1962 we have attempted to get started in doing this job. We have made progress to be sure, but our steps are small. We need help and suggestions from all of you, not just a few. A large membership is not the answer alone. From a large membership there must come forth people who are interested enough in Rockford to work within the Historical Society. This is what we need. We should not make the mistake of allowing a few that will participate become the only ones that do. This, I believe, is the direction that we are now heading.

Now to the purpose of this letter, - "future growth". I am referring specifically to the growth of the Rockford Historical Society. All of you are members of the Historical Society and must agree that the organization is indeed a worthy one. Is there any reason, then, that we should not increase our membership? As soon as we have accomplished this, we then should be able to expect more help from within our ranks. And with this additional help from within, along with the few that are working now, we should begin to grow.

May we have your suggestions, or better yet

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may we have your help? We are doing everything within our power and abilities to keep the Rockford Historical Society growing. To stand still is to die on the vine.

Very truly yours,
Brice H. Sheets, President

THE CHERRY VALLEY STORY by Lenore Docter

In 1835 George Griggs halted his covered wagon by the side of a stream of clear water in northern Illinois. He had come from New England in search of a new home. He noted the lovely valley around him and envisioned the great potentialities it had. The rich soil, the signs of abundant game and a river that could be forded and was yet strong enough to provide power for a mill were features that made it especially attractive to him.

The Indian had named the river the Kishwaukee, meaning clear water, and near the west banks George Griggs built his home in what is now Cherry Valley. The house was crude structure of rough logs. Poles were placed over the top of the walls and covered with straw and prairie grass to form the roof.

He was so happy with his new home that he encouraged others to join him as they came westward. Within a year five families had settled in the valley.

Mr. Griggs established a regular ford near his home, and the area soon became known as Grigg's ford.

By 1840 a thriving town had grown up. Farmers often drove their livestock to market in Chicago from as far west as Galena.

The water and grass lands made this an ideal spot for a stopover place on the long drive. The next day they would continue to Aurora and rest before going to Chicago.

The grist mill that was built and powered

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by a water wheel and the river worked as did the people to make the town busier and bigger. Teams and wagons made trips of two or three days to come here to have their grain ground into meal and flour.

In 1852 a really momentous event occurred. The first train steamed into town pulled by a crude little engine called the "Old Pioneer". The train was loaded with officials and the celebration that followed lasted well into the night.

The little town had changed names several times in the years of its existence. It had been known by the name of Butler for the last few years, but now that the railroad had come and a post office was soon to be established, the people felt they would like a new name for their growing community. Various suggestions were written on slips of paper and dropped in a hat. The slip bearing the name of Cherry Valley was selected and decided upon. A lady who had previously lived in Cherry Valley, New York, had made the suggestion.

By now a school had been established for the children of the area. A bridge was built across the river to carry the new railroad on toward Rockford. A wooden bridge spanned the river for wagon and foot travel.

The Valley had lived up to its promise and the new community had become an important part of the state and of the nation.

FIRST WOMEN LAWYERS OF ROCKFORD

by Hazel M. Hyde

When 18 years of age, Miss Alta M. Hulett applied, in the 1870's, for admission to the Bar and met considerable opposition. Her only predecessor in the state had been Mrs. Myra Bradwell of Chicago.

Miss Hulett was the daughter of a farmer living north of Rockford. She had graduated from Rockford High School in 1870 and had begun

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the study of law. Her recommendation to the Supreme Court for admission was presented by A. S. Miller, J. M. Wright, and C. M. Brazee. Her license was at first refused.

With the active support of these local attorneys and other friends, Miss Hulett delivered a speech in old Brown's Hall on November 25, 1871, in which she clarified the discriminatory action against her. Miss Hulett's aroused friends prepared an enabling act which would permit women lawyers to practice in Illinois. It became law, and this young Rockford woman prepared the way for others who might wish to follow.

The second Rockford woman to be admitted to the practice of law was Catharine Waugh McCulloch. She was the daughter of A.M. Waugh and was born in Ransomville, New York, June 4, 1866. Rockford Female Seminary was her Alma Mater. After graduation in 1882, she went on to graduate from Union College of Law in Chicago in 1886. She was admitted to the bar the same year. She was married to Frank H. McCulloch on May 30, 1890.

ASH JOHNSON'S DEATH A GREAT LOSS TO THE SOCIETY

When W. Ashton Johnson passed away on December 11, 1965, the loss to the Rockford Historical Society was inestimable. Ash was not only Editor of NUGGETS OF HISTORY, but was almost a limitless source of ideas and encouragement for the organization.

Mr. Johnson had seen the need for a local historical society for many years, and had proposed such an organization in his column in the Loves Park newspapers. When it was finally made a reality in 1962, he became a charter member and one of its most enthusiastic workers. He was a member of the Board of Directors from the formation of the society until his death last December, and he was very seldom

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absent from either directors' meetings or quarterly meetings of the organization. When it was decided late in 1963 to begin publishing a historical journal, it was only natural that the Board of Directors turned to Ash to be its first editor. The first edition to be issued was written almost entirely by him, and it was he who gave the publication its name.

To many people in Rockford and the surrounding area, W. Ashton Johnson was "Mr. Rockford History". No better tribute can be made to his memory than for the members of the society to continue to strive for a greater and better organization.

JOHN L. CLARK
by Robert H. Borden

One of the leading industries in the city of Rockford today is the one established by John L. Clark and his Son, L. Harold Clark. John L. Clark was born May 15, 1845, in Burlington, Vermont, a son of Patrick and Mary Clark. When he was twelve years old his parents moved to Rockford, and Mr. Clark continued to reside here for the remainder of his life. His father having died, his mother remarried and became Mrs. Martin Crocker.

John Clark attended school at the old Freeman School, then known as the East Side High School. After graduation from high school, he served for eighteen months during the Civil War aboard the Navy ship "Winnebago" under Admiral Farragut, seeing action at the fall of Mobile.

When the war was over and it came time for John to choose a trade, he became a tinner's apprentice in the store of Israel Sovereign. In about 1874 Clark and Norman S. Robinson began a partnership under the firm name of Robinson and Clark, located at the corner of East State and Kishwaukee Streets. They were "dealers in stoves, tin ware, hardware, Japanned

ware, lamps, and manufacturers of tin, copper, and sheet iron ware." At that time Clark's residence was over their business establishment, the address of which was then 519 East State Street. In 1877 he was listed as living in the two hundred block of No. Second Street, and it was not until about 1883 that he moved to the home at 328 South First Street which is pictured on page one. Until 1894 the house number was 310 South First, but many of the house numbers throughout the city were changed in 1894.

Robinson and Clark sold out after a few years, and Clark intended to become a stock raiser and rancher in Kansas. He spent a month preparing for his move westward, and the day before he was to leave Rockford he stopped by his old shop to grind a hand axe. The Middlekauf brothers who had purchased the business had already tired of it, and asked Clark to buy it back. He did and thereby never realized his life-long dream of being a rancher.

One of the first stores opened on Seventh Street was a hardware establishment in which Mr. Clark was a partner with Frank McKenney. A few years later Clark and McKenney purchased the oldest hardware shop in the city, established by Palmer and Wingate in the 1850's. They moved to that firm's location at 429 East State Street, site of the present City Hall. J. L. Clark was president and F. B. McKinney was secretary and treasurer. About 1900 Clark purchased the McKenney interests and established the J. L. Clark Hardware Company together with his son, L. Harold Clark.

In 1905 the J. L. Clark Manufacturing Co. was established, with J.L. as president and L. Harold as secretary and treasurer. In 1915 Mr. and Mrs. Clark moved from their home on South First Street to 939 North Second, and their son and his wife moved in next door at 1003 No. Second. J.L. Clark died in 1919 and his wife in 1924. In 1934 L. Harold had his house, his parents', and one other residence razed to make way for the present Clark mansion at 939 North Second Street. L. Harold Clark died in 1953.

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