

NUGGETS of HISTORY

The Bi-Monthly Bulletin of the
ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

May-June, 1966

Volume 3, No. 4

SCHWEINFURTH'S "HEAVEN"

by Hazel M. Hyde

A large red house, trimmed with white, on Weldon Road about a quarter of a mile north of Edwardsville Road, is a well-known landmark of Winnebago County. Some people call the place "The Weldon Farm" because it was owned



for many years by the Weldon family; others call it "Heaven".

George Jacob Schweinfurth was a self-styled prophet and "Second Christ" of the Beekmanites. Prophet Schweinfurth established his headquarters on the Weldon farm, six miles southwest of Rockford, near Winnebago. In 1882, aided by Mrs. Dora Beekman, he had converted the Weldon family and persuaded them to make over to him the large farm, its spacious house, and fine farm buildings as a seat for a new religious cult. Schweinfurth remodeled the house and buildings, painting

them a bright red. He outfitted the home with excellent furniture and stocked the farm with purebred cattle and horses.

The cult started in 1873 when Mrs. Dora Beekman, wife of J.C. Beekman, pastor of the Second Congregational Church of Byron, Illinois, claimed to have experienced revelations. She alleged that she was convinced that Christ had been reincarnated in her form. This fancy so inspired her that she left her husband and went to Alpena, Michigan, to establish a new religious cult and church, sometimes referred to as the Beekmanites.

In Alpena, a young Methodist minister, Rev. George Jacob Schweinfurth, heard Mrs. Beekman. He became her principal convert and returned with her to Illinois. He helped Mrs. Beekman to convert the Weldon family. The farm then became the headquarters for a small colony and seat of the new religion. Before Mrs. Beekman's death in 1883, lesser 'heavens' were also established at Byron, Alpena, Chicago, and several other communities.

The cultists believed, at first, that Mrs. Beekman would arise from the dead in three days. Schweinfurth explained that Mrs. Beekman's spirit had passed into his body and that he was the new Messiah.

Neighbors on the near-by farms reported what they considered scandalous events enacted at "Heaven". The colony was composed of about twenty-five persons, most of whom were workers. There was a type of communal arrangement, but the common workers of the cultists lived on dry bread and mush. The favored members of the group and the prophet ate the best of foods. Certain beautiful women attained the stage known as 'angels'. Schweinfurth dressed in the height of fashion and drove a span of spirited horses.

Schweinfurth created stage tableaux, some biblical in character, others historical, and others creative flights of his own imagination. Twice a week the 'angels' were alleged to have donned flesh colored tights to dance and per-

form in these extravaganzas.

Members of the colony were said to have avowed that the red-haired children of several of the angels were sired by the Holy Ghost. For nearly twenty years, Rockford was shocked or amused by stories concerning events or conditions in "Heaven".

Schweinfurth assumed responsibility for a cloudburst which occurred in Rockford in 1890. The damage from this natural disaster totalled \$300,000. Two houses were set adrift in Kent Creek, and ten bridges across Kent and Keith Creeks were destroyed. The prophet explained that this was a manifestation of Rockford's wickedness and its scornful attitude toward his cult.

The Chicago Daily Tribune, in a feature article published May 29, 1892, described the return of Schweinfurth from his missionary trips: "The woods were scoured and stripped of every blossom, florists at Rockford were called on for elaborate displays. One hour before he was expected, the prettiest damsels, decked in gala attire, carpeted the road for a mile with flowers. The heavenly host met him two miles from the house, unhitched the horses from the carriage that bore his sacred person, and, attaching a rope covered with evergreen, hauled him to the abode that was lonely when he was away"

Mr. Weldon had been made a deacon of the assembly of Beekmanites. Upon the approach of the carriage, he was found waiting on the front steps. Quoting further from the Tribune article, "...the deacon advanced with stately step and placed a gilt paper crown over Schweinfurth's pompedour..."

In the late nineties, legal action was taken against Schweinfurth. In court he was accused of taking money and property from converts, since they had been required to surrender their worldly goods to the cult. He was found guilty and forced to return the real estate he had acquired. He disbanded the flock and moved into Rockford, where he engaged in

real estate. After several years he moved to Chicago, where he died on July 10, 1910.

(Editor's Note: The fact that Schweinfurth was found guilty is substantiated by the book entitled ROCKFORD compiled in 1941 by the Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration. In his HISTORY OF WINNEBAGO COUNTY published in 1916, Charles A. Church claims that the grand jury in October, 1890, completely exonerated Schweinfurth. Both sources agree that he did disband the cult and move to Rockford, but Church claims that he "renounced the cult .. and his following disintegrated.")

BURSON AND THE ROCKFORD SOCK

By Rosile Mangaracina, Ninth Grade, Washington Junior High School, Rockford, Illinois
(Reprinted from Illinois Junior Historian, now Illinois History, November, 1954)

Across the hill from my school stands an old red house where Mrs. Grace Treadwell lives. The house is very unusual for this area because except for having a large front porch, it is of French-style design. Mrs. Treadwell is a descendant of Samuel Adams and is a Daughter of the American Revolution; but to residents of Rockford her relation to a prominent local inventor is even more interesting. She is the granddaughter of the late William W. Burson, who, together with John Nelson, invented the knitting machine which for many years has made the famous seamless work sock known as the "Rockford Sock."

Burson and Nelson were local inventors each of whom had valuable patents on minor parts of knitting machines. They combined their patents and "knowhow", and after working many years on the problem, finally perfected the parallel row knitting machine in 1872-1873. This machine saved time by finishing the toe and heel of hose simultaneously.

Burson retired from the knitting business

for a while, and then developed a practical machine for knitting fashioned seamless hose of silk or lisle. The Burson Knitting Co. was organized in 1892; today (1954) it is one of the largest knitting factories in Rockford. Here the Burson machines produce the seamless Rockford Sock (and also nylons).

Although the factory was located in Rockford, Burson's home was in Chicago; so during the week while working at the plant, he stayed at the home of his granddaughter, Mrs. Treadwell. Burson's picture hangs in the hall of the stately old red house where he spent so much time. He used to give miniature socks and mittens to the children of the neighborhood. Strangely enough the miniature socks, the smallest in the world, were made on the same machines as the larger ones.

(From Rockford, Illinois; American Guide Series, 46-48; Rockford Streamlined, 1834-1941, p. 16; and an interview with Mrs. G. Treadwell)



Editor's Note: Mrs. Treadwell, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Seth C. Trufant, died more than a year ago and the property has since been sold. However, the house at 1401 Clifton is still standing. At the time that Mr. Burson

stayed there, it was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Trufant, who were Burson's son-in-law and daughter. Trufant was employed by the Burson Company.

CENTENNIAL SONG FOR ROCKFORD, 1952
(Tune: "In the Evening by The Moonlight")

In the evening by Rock River,
You can hear all Rockford singing
Of our lovely Forest City
Whose Centennial is ringing
With a kinship that is burning
In the hearts of all who live here,
As we sing in the evening
By Rock River.

In the evening by Rock River,
You can see the lights a-gleaming
From the city's centurama
And the streets where life is teaming
Down the Century of Progress
In historic scenes a-dreaming
As we sing in the evening
By Rock River.

- Vera Dell Jacobson

WINNEBAGO COUNTY SONG

Mrs. Gladys Robinson, a teacher at Fairview Elementary School, has sent to NUGGETS OF HISTORY a copy of a letter written to the children of Winnebago County in 1901 by O.J. Kern, the county superintendent of schools:
To the Children of Winnebago County -

Rockford, Ill. October 23, 1901

As we have a state song "Illinois" and a national anthem "America", it has seemed to me that we ought to have a third which would sing the praises of our county. So at my request

Mrs. Harriott Wight Sherratt of Rockford has written for you a county school song, "Winnebago," to the music of the "Battle Hymn of The Republic." Thus we have a trinity of school songs - "Winnebago", "Illinois", "America" - the County, State and Nation. Several thousand copies of these songs will be published so that you may learn them and be able always to sing them without the printed words. I feel quite sure that Mrs. Sherratt's memory will be cherished by the thousands of school children who will sing her beautiful song - "Winnebago".

Sincerely,
O.J. Kern, Superintendent

LEVI RHOADES, MAYOR OF ROCKFORD, 1876-1877
by Robert H. Borden

It is interesting to speculate what the reaction of Levi Rhoades would have been had he known that his residence at 630 North Court Street would one day be the home of Happy Hour Day Nursery and Kindergarten. A photograph of the Rhoades house as it appeared at the turn of the century is pictured on the following page. A drive past the place on North Court today will reveal to the reader that time has changed the general appearance, but the basic lines of the building are the same. Gone are the cupola and the large veranda, but a comparison with the picture will indicate that it is indeed the same house.

Beginning with 1876 and continuing for several years, the sale of intoxicating beverages was the paramount issue in municipal elections. Those opposed to the sale of liquor supported the no-license party, while those who felt the intoxicants should be allowed favored the license party. Levi Rhoades, a faithful Methodist, was the candidate for the no-license party in 1876. He defeated Seymour G. Bronson, the license candidate, by a vote of 1,291 to 918 and four of the seven aldermen were also

for no licenses. The mayors' terms were of one year's duration in those days, and in 1877 Rhoades was defeated by Duncan Ferguson, the license candidate. In 1878 Rhoades tried again and was defeated by William Watson. In that campaign a large cartoon entitled "Colossus of Rho(a)des" was displayed in a West State Street drug store. It showed a gigantic statue standing at the entrance of a harbor, with the face of Levi Rhoades. Robert H. Tinker, a license supporter, was the artist.

Levi Rhoades died on November 19, 1891.



PERMISSION GRANTED

Permission has been obtained from the Illinois State Historical Society to reprint in NUGGETS OF HISTORY approximately a dozen articles from the ILLINOIS JUNIOR HISTORIAN, whose title has been changed to ILLINOIS HISTORY. These articles were originally written by students of Mrs. Hazel M. Hyde at Washington Junior High School. Some of the articles won governor's awards for their student authors.

The first of these articles, "Burson and the Rockford Sock", may be found in this issue.

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is published bi-monthly by the Rockford Historical Society, Rockford, Illinois. Editor: Robert H. Borden. Society President: Erice H. Sheets. Bulletin address: 1325 Cosper Avenue, Rockford, Illinois 61107.