

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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PIONEER DRUGGIST

John Rice Porter, whose drug store at the southwest corner of West State and South Main streets was a Rockford landmark for over a century, was born at Fultonham, near Zanesville, Ohio, September 22, 1833. He lost his father when he was only eight years old, and his mother passed away on his twenty-first birthday. He remained near his Ohio birthplace for another five years after his mother's death.



John Rice Porter

In 1859 Mr. Porter came to Rockford, buying the drug store of William Brittan at 328 West State Street. One year later he moved to the corner of State and Main, and that location became known to the residents of Rockford as "Porter's Corner". The original building had been built in 1849 as a general store and grocery.

On October 3, 1861, Mr. Porter was married to Miss Lucretia Hosmer of Zanesville, Ohio. They had five children, four of whom lived to adulthood. One daughter, Lucy, died on February 16, 1865, at the age of two years and four months. The four who survived were Charles H., Hosmer C., John W., and Frances I. Porter. Hosmer was the only son who was continually associated with his father in the drug store, although Charles and John started their careers in the store,



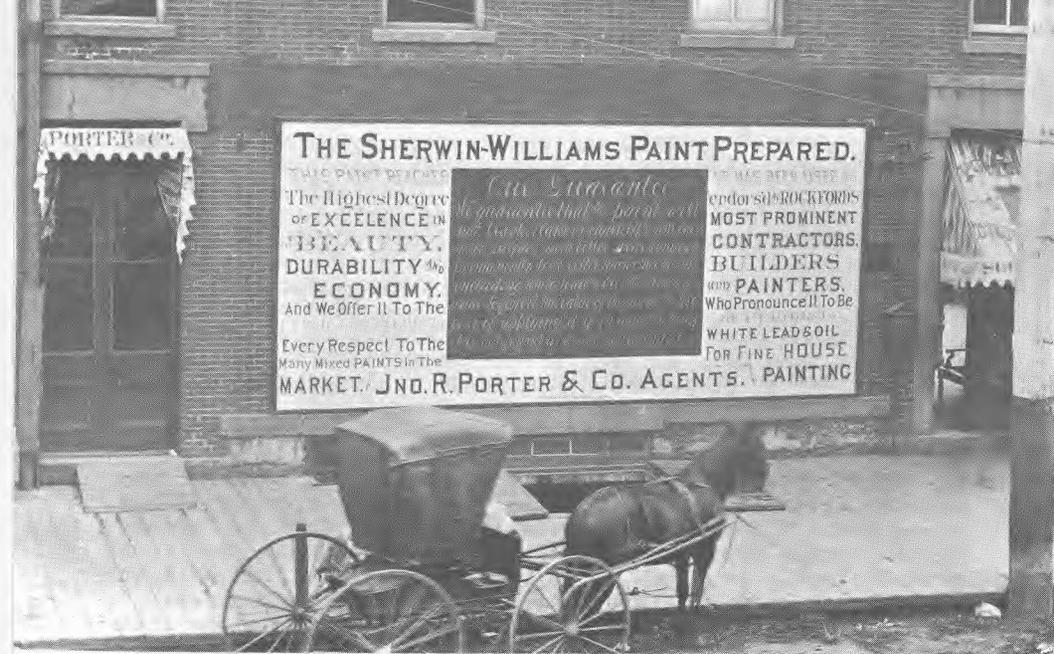
and Charles, after a few years with the Hanford Oil Company, Rockford Cabinet Company, and Forest City Furniture Company, returned to the family business.

In 1868 Mr. Porter had a home built which would be the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Porter for the rest of their lives. We quote from the August 13, 1868, issue of the ROCKFORD GAZETTE:

"Among the many fine residences now in process of completion in this city, may be mentioned that of Mr. John R. Porter, situated on Church Street, West Side. It is a fine commodious house, and well appointed in every way. The doors, &c., are grained throughout, both inside and out, and the painting, which is the handiwork of Messrs. Peats & Austin, of this city, adds greatly to the appearance and finish of the house. It is one of the finest jobs of the kind that we have ever seen, and commends itself to every one who has an appreciation of the beautiful. Those who desire painting of any description, should call on Messrs. Peats & Austin, who are deservedly esteemed equal to any of their profession that can be found anywhere."



This picture of Mr. Porter's home at 727 North Church Street was taken shortly before the house was razed, about the year 1932. All of the pictures shown in connection with this article were provided by Miss Frances Porter and Mrs. Max E. (Alice) Webb, granddaughters of John R. Porter and daughters of Hosmer C. Porter. After the Porter home was razed, the site remained vacant until after the Second



World War, when a building from Camp Grant was moved to the lot. Since then the Rockford headquarters of the American Red Cross has been located there.

On Monday, October 28, 1895, John R. Porter went to his store room on the third floor over Hiram H. Waldo's book store at 304 W. State Street, the next store west from Porter's. While he was there, he noticed that the upper sash of one of the windows was open at the top. Sending Gus Will, one of the employees of the store, downstairs to get a hammer and some wooden plugs to fasten the window, Mr. Porter presumably opened the lower part of the window and leaned outside to see if he could make the necessary repairs from that position. He apparently leaned out too far and lost his balance, falling and catching hold of the iron



shutter. He was able to cling to the shutter for a few moments, during which time he called for help. Hearing Mr. Porter's call, Gus Will ran up the stairs, but he reached the top just in time to see Porter lose his grip on the shutter and fall to the court below. In falling he struck some electric wires a short distance below the window. These partially broke his fall, but not enough to prevent him from receiving severe injuries when his body landed on a galvanized iron ash pan belonging to Mr. Waldo. Although Dr. F. H. Kimball and Dr. Henry Richings were summoned immediately and gave Mr. Porter hypodermic injections, he died less than half an hour after his fall. The verdict of the coroner's jury was that death was caused by a brain concussion.

After Mr. Porter's death, his widow became president of John R. Porter & Co., and remained in that position until her death about 1923. Their son, Hosmer C. Porter, remained as secretary-treasurer all of his life. Hosmer had three sons, - Hosmer B., Carson H., and Dr. John R. Porter. Carson became president of the firm and continued in that capacity until 1952, at which time the business was sold to Karl Wheat and LeRoy Hayes. Hosmer B. became secretary-treasurer upon the death of his father and remained in that position until his death. Dr. John R. Porter was a Rockford physician and did not affiliate with the store except in his youth when he worked there as a clerk. No other Porter grandchildren or great grandchildren went into the business, so it was finally sold to outsiders. It no long-



er occupies its famous location at State and Main, but instead is now located at 2608 Kilburn Avenue, and is "Porter's" in name only. However, to old-timers in Rockford, the southwest corner of State and Main will forever be "Porter's Corner".

THE STORM!
by
John R. Borden

Early in one morning last July
Hardly a cloud there was in the sky.
But later that forenoon I had neglected
To notice how many clouds had collected.
My brother and I, later that morning
Heard on T-V a severe storm warning.
Outdoors the thick clouds made everything
dark;
The approaching storm would soon leave
its mark.
Soon rain fell and the wind began to
blow
But the damage it would do I did not know.
But soon, after a loud crack we could vaguely
see
The outline of a falling hickory tree.
The roaring of the wind was fearful to hear
And the tree that fell was so very near.

The wind blew harder and the trees
did strain
To stand against the terrible hurricane.
Soon there was an awful cracking sound
And a huge white oak tree fell to the ground.
Immediately after the oak tree went
A maple tree snapped and made its descent.
With terror I wondered if this storm could
Destroy every tree in the neighborhood!
But soon the wind began to diminish.
Three trees we could see had fought 'til
their finish.
The rest of that beautiful day in July
Hardly a cloud there was in the sky.



TOUR OF HISTORIC CEMETERY

One of the most interesting meetings in the history of the Rockford Historical Society took place on May 25. Mr. Stuart K. Golding, a member of the board of directors, led us on a tour of the Greenwood Cemetery, oldest burial ground within the city. Approximately fifty people attend-



ed the gathering. Mr. Golding spent many hours planning the tour, and those who were present enjoyed it immensely. The meeting began at about 3:30 p.m. After a short introduction by Mr. Golding, the group moved from their meeting by the Chapel and, following Mr. Golding as well as a map which he had provided for each person, visited the burial plots of twenty people who were prominent in Rockford history. The twenty whose graves or tombs were



visited were Charles Horsman, John Beattie, John Fisher, Chandler Starr, John H. Manny, John P. Manny, Gov. William Bebb, Dr. Elisha C. Dunn, Prof. Henry Freeman, Hiram Buckbee, John Schmauss, Frank R. Brown, Ralph Emerson, Thatcher Blake, William D. Trahern, Julia Lathrop, Anna Peck Sill, Duncan Forbes, and Jehial Harmon.



EARLY DAYS IN WINNEBAGO COUNTY
By Billie Whitsitt

In 1834 the wilderness that would be Rock River Valley, its forests and prairies filled with the noises of abundant wild life, was not entirely free of human existence. Occasional Indian bands still camped here and there following, perhaps, the path taken by Blackhawk and his men when they were pursued by General Scott in 1832.

There was one permanent white settler, Stephen Mack, in the territory that was to be named Winnebago County. One early historian has written:
"His cabin was built in a grove about half a mile above the mouth of the Pecatonica River....The time of his coming and casting his lot with the Winnebagoes is not definitely known....Stephen Mack was born in Vermont....entered as a student at Dartmouth College,...he abandoned it without waiting for commencement day....whither he drifted, or how he was occupied...until he came to the Rock River country is left to the conjecture of the curious. Having mixed a great deal with the Indians,...he at last married an Indian

woman named Ho-no-ne-gah, the daughter of an Indian chiefOf this marriage eight children were born....Ho-no-ne-gah...died in 1847, and a year afterwards he married a white woman....She robbed him whenever occasion offered, and finally set fire to their house while under the influence of opium....A short time after this occurrence the life of Stephen Mack went out...."

Stephen Mack had built his cabin in 1829. Occasional traders and explorers came and went for the next five years, but at last two men came to settle.

Late in a day in August, 1834, they guided their canoe past Stephen Mack's lone cabin on the Pecatonica, into Rock River, on down several miles, and stopped at a little creek flowing from the west bank. They were Germanicus Kent and Thatcher Blake looking for a suitable place to settle. Thatcher Blake, 25 years old, school teacher and farmer from Maine, had come to seek his fortune in the west. Germanicus Kent, by way of Alabama, Virginia, New York, and Connecticut, had come to Galena to live with a brother while he found a place to build a sawmill. Meeting and laying plans in Galena, they had this day found the sites they wished for.

They returned to Galena, bought supplies, arranged for wagons and teams, and hired three men to stay the winter, building a dam, digging a race, and felling timber. They then settled in, four men alone. (Kent preferred to remain with his family in Galena.) Neighbors were hard to find. The closest ones to the east were fifty miles away in Elgin; to the south, Dixon, forty miles; to the west was another forty miles and no one but Stephen Mack to the north.

During that fall of 1834 Mr. Kent wrote a letter to a J. B. Martyn of Alabama telling him how he could get to "Midway," as he referred to the beginnings of the settlement, because it was half way between Galena and Chicago. He wrote as follows:

"From Galena go directly east until you come to and cross Apple river, thence turn in a south-easterly course to Plum river, and from there to Cherry Grove. There leave some timber on your left, and a small grove on your right and then keep on until you strike Rock river, from which a blind path will lead you to Midway."

We know that Mr. Martyn found his way because, among other references, his name is listed as a petit juror in the first session of the court held October 6, 1837.

(To be continued in next issue)

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