

## NUGGETS of HISTORY

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### EMMA LUNDGREN ELECTED PRESIDENT Building Fund Established

The annual picnic meeting of the Rockford Historical Society was held on Sunday, September 7, 1969, at the Blackhawk Park pavilion. Emma Lundgren, 2703 Jackson Street, was elected president. Miss Lundgren, who has served as first vice president for the past two years, has been a member of the board of directors since the organization was begun in 1962. She is the first woman president, and the fifth presiding officer since the society began.

The other officers elected on September 7 were Paul S. Conklin, first vice president; Jesse Robinson, second vice president; Arthur Huenkemeier, third vice president; Hazel Kluck, secretary; and Faith Armstrong, treasurer. Robinson, Huenkemeier, Miss Kluck, and Miss Armstrong had held the same positions during the past year.

Directors elected to three-year terms were Edwin W. Carlson, Jr., William Condon, Mary Henderson, Harold Mead, Chandler S. Miller, Richard Reece, Frank St. Angel, and Robert H. Borden. Clement V. Burns was elected to serve the remaining two years of an unexpired term.

The first meeting of the newly-elected officers and directors was held on September 17 at Miss Lundgren's home. At the meeting the directors voted to establish a building fund and to transfer \$100 from the checking account into this building fund. Members and friends of the Rockford Historical Society are now encouraged to donate money toward our building fund, anticipating the time when enough will have accumulated to begin a building program. Suggestions and opinions are requested from members.

### NEXT MEETING TO BE HELD AT THE MAIN LIBRARY

The fall meeting of the Rockford Historical Society will be held on Sunday afternoon, November 16, in the Local History Room of the Rockford Public Library, 215 North Wyman Street. The Local History Room is located on the third floor, and the meeting will begin at 3 p. m. A member of the library staff, Mrs. Sally Andrews, will speak, explaining what material is available in the Local History Room and how to use it. Mrs. Andrews is in charge of the local history and geneology section of the library. After the meeting refreshments will be served in the library.

The winter meeting in February will be in the form of a dinner at Centennial Methodist Church, 219 South Second Street. The date will be Monday, February 9, 1970. The entire event is not completely planned as yet, but it is known that the Women's Chorus of the Mendelssohn Club will be present.

JONAS PETERS AND THE ROCKFORD FURNITURE INDUSTRY  
By Hazel M. Hyde

"He was a man with sunshine in his heart," was the description written, February 5, 1901, in Rockford newspapers, when Jonas Peters died at the age of 57. Peters, born in Sweden, came to Rockford in 1854. He lost both his father and his mother at the age of ten, within a week after their arrival in Rockford as Swedish immigrants. He married Miss Ellen Christian of Belvidere in 1863 and had two daughters, May and Christina. He is credited as being the man with "the idea" which brought about the Rockford furniture industry.

Wearing three suits of heavy underwear and the heaviest boots he could find, young Jonas barely reached the minimum weight for enlistment in the Civil War. Finding that his actual age of seventeen was too young, he reported his age as twenty-one and eagerly enlisted for three years. He served with company H First Illinois artillery. After fighting for his adopted country, he returned to Rockford where he eventually became one of the organizers of the Union Furniture Company, the first furniture factory started in Rockford.

Jonas Peters' occupation before the War Between the States was repairing and making furniture for A. C. Burpee of Burpee and Gronnerman. After the war he was an employee of Upson, Herrick and Johnson in a planing mill on the Water Power. Later he went to Chicago as a salesman for furniture factories located on the West Side of Chicago. The Chicago fire of October 7, 1871, threw him out of employment and forced him to return to his hometown.

In Rockford after the fire, he repaired the old planing mill and almost immediately approached the owners, L. D. Upson and S. A. Johnson, to persuade them to make furniture instead of house trimmings. He agreed to sell the furniture they could produce. The planing mill company became the Upson-Johnson Furniture Company, later known as Union Furniture Company. The produce, at first crude and hand-made, was gradually improved.

The Union Furniture Company was organized in 1876 on the Water Power rented of Mrs. J. P. Manny. An old photograph, on file at the Rockford Public Library, shows these men connected with the Union Furniture Company:

John Erlander, L. Noreen, P. J. Lilljenholm, John Carlsson, Andrew Kjellgren, Bergstrom and Bergsten, JONAS PETERS, Alexander Johanson, John Lundstrom, John Lundstrom's son, Ekeberg, Charlie Bargren, Peterson, Robert Lind, Henry Edberg, P. A. Peterson, C. F. Anderson, James Sundquist, Oscar Hall, Alexander Steinman, A. Will, C. F. Blomberg, A. Kjellberg, Alfred Anderson, John Andrews, August Lind, John Kjellberg, Alfred Erlander, C. Erlander, and a man with the last name of Kellberg.

Union Furniture factory of the old days was in a building adjacent to the old Emerson plant. This building was destroyed by fire in 1889. In 1900 a new brick factory was built at Ninth Street and Eighteenth Avenue. Its products

included dining room and living room furniture.

Mechanics Furniture Company was organized by Mr. Peters and he served as its secretary from its incorporation until his death. Mechanics had the smallest paid-in capital among Rockford furniture factories, -- a sum of only \$16,000 invested to meet cost of plant and working capital. It was Jonas Peters, who by hard work and sacrifice prevented Mechanics from going into the hands of receivers in the panic years of 1892-1894.

"Uncle Jonas", as he was affectionately called by many, borrowed money on his own home to pay the company's obligations. Since it was a cooperative organization, this sacrifice was not demanded of him to act alone. He was too modest to take undue credit, as the years went by, for his level head that made good dividends on the stock that many of the employees held.

Alfred Kjermer was called the principal agent in establishing Mechanics Furniture Company, by Dr. W. L. Ransom, but he called Jonas Peters an active lieutenant in the project. Mr. Peters brought to the organization experience gained in the Union Furniture Company on the Water Power. J. August Johnson became secretary of Mechanics Company in 1901, after the death of Jonas Peters.

Early furniture factories were organized by early Swedish settlers of Rockford who pooled their limited resources and organized cooperative concerns. The workmen, who brought skills learned in the old country, usually had one or more shares of stock in the company.

Rockford furniture makers never claimed supremacy in volume of production. Rockford claims that in design, materials, workmanship and finish, its furniture is not excelled anywhere. Countless years of skilled workmanship in the Scandinavian countries gave a background for the workers of the city's factories. This city has been a wood-working community since early settlers were attracted to Rock River in their search for the site of a saw mill. Jonas Peters personifies all the skills, know-how, and driving energy associated with the furniture industry located here.

THE COURTHOUSE DISASTER

By Gary Lundberg  
(Jefferson Jr. High School Student)

It was about noon on a Saturday when I was walking along West State Street toward the Court House to watch the construction of the dome. I had just come within sight of it when I heard a grinding roar. I watched a single stone fall from the top, then the sides crumbled and fell inward, with the front pediment leaping in the air toward me. Through a cloud of whitish-yellow smoke I saw a half dozen workmen suspended in air or taking the death leap.

The newspaper later described it as a "palace of doom." In this tragedy on May 12, 1877, ten men died and ten were seriously injured. It took three days before all of the

bodies were recovered from the debris. Memorial services were held at the Second Congregational Church.

It was found that all but a portion of the front pediment of the main central tower had fallen almost entirely through the middle of the tower. The debris filled the front of the space behind the grand entrance, the northwest and northeast basement rooms, and the central hallway.

The contractor was W. D. Richardson from Springfield. However, it was the architect, Henry L. Gay, who was blamed for the crash. The charges were thus: "First, Henry L. Gay failed to provide for the great amount of weight called for to complete the building according to the plans he designed; second, want of care on the part of said architect in not giving special specifications and plans for the part of the general plan required to carry the extra weight in proportion to the superficies; third, the board of supervisors failed to use due caution in examining the plans and specifications, and in not employing a competent architect."

The building was finally completed a year later at the total cost of \$211,000. Materials used in the structure were wrought iron, cast iron, oak, sandstone, hardstone, and brick.

The courthouse has since been shortened by the removal of its domes. A new courthouse is now being built on the same block. The old courthouse will soon be demolished, thus destroying one of Rockford's historical places. I think the old county courthouse should not be torn down but instead saved and converted into a museum about law-making in the Nineteenth Century.

#### DREAMS COME TRUE FOR TWO SOCIETY MEMBERS

By Hazel A. Kluck

(Concluded from last issue)

Many of the churches began with a school before or at the time the congregation was organized. Beside some of the churches is an old school building, some of which are now used as more or less of an annex for meetings and social functions. Most of the churches have an adjacent cemetery, and very seldom did I see a cemetery without a church.

I visited the little cemetery at the site of the old church in the write-up that started it all--St. John's Lutheran. The church has long since been disbanded and the building torn down. There is no road up the 45-degree hill and only one family plot is kept clean. The view looking up the valley towards Dornsife from the hillside was beautiful.

As we wound across a large valley from one cemetery to another, I had the strangest feeling of trespassing as the narrow blacktop twisted and turned between the closely set farm buildings--between house and granary and chickenhouse, chickenhouse and barn, etc.--with little more than the width of the road between them.

I saw several covered bridges, a few "hex" barns, and



scenery which, aside from the road being blacktop, must be much as it was when our ancestors first lived there in the 1700s. Unknown to me at the time, we passed the farm that has been in the Adam family for seven generations. It was one of the nicest farms I saw.

The Howerter Cemetery was badly in need of mowing, but there we found many more of the Klocks. At the Himmel's Cemetery I found many Adam or Adams graves. The Himmel's Church (L. & R.) dates from 1773. I would like to quote just a few lines from Bell's HISTORY OF NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY (1891): "The large pipe organ is a notable feature, and from this circumstance, it has been popularly known as the organ church." . . . . "This church was for many years the principal one in all the Mahanoy region and was attended from a radius of twelve miles. Barefooted, coatless, and in farm wagons, the people would flock to their place of worship. No pride disturbed their minds, no fatigue furnished an excuse for absence. No one esteemed himself





above his fellow Christians." This is where our great-great-grandparents, Bernhard and Salome Adam, were members and are buried.

On Sunday, June 29, Erma, Diane, and Bruce came to pick me up. We spent that night and the next forenoon at Gettysburg and the Country Store at Biglerville, which is certainly like turning back the clock. Then it was back to the Turnpike headed west.

After no contact with the Pennsylvania relatives for two generations, it was certainly a thrill to meet four generations of them. When I came home, I decided that not only am I "related to half of Stephenson County" (as Mary X. Barrett often introduces me), but I must be related to at least half of Northumberland County--Klock, Adam(s), Zerbe, Ferster--especially when I learned that the Zerbes are all supposed to be descendants of Lorenz Zerbe through his son John, the father of twenty sons and four daughters.

I found Pennsylvania a strange mixture of the old and



the new. One thing I noticed in particular was the architecture of their new houses. Many of them still maintain what I call "Pennsylvania Dutch proportions" of width of house and pitch of roof--even in the new one-story houses. Another thing they have largely maintained is the exposed basement with entrance at ground level, regardless of the height of the house, one-story, two-story, or split level.

Five good places for genealogy research are: family, court house, library, church, cemetery; and as you can see, I went to all of them. You can still do your own court record researching in Pennsylvania. I tape recorded the wills of Valentine Klock (1867), Bernhard Adam (1860), and Casper Adam (1827), among other things.

The Public Library at Sunbury is housed in a big square house of early 1900 vintage, similar in style but larger than our old home which formerly stood at 1047 East State Street. The Northumberland County Historical Society and its library are housed on the third floor. You guessed it--the attic, which, without ventilation on a 94-degree day was, to quote the librarian, "hotter than the bad place." Luckily, they had some state and local books on the main floor in the shade of a fan. While the librarian Thermofaxed forty-one pages for me, I tape recorded from another book. It will take months to digest it all.

Once that genealogy bug bites you, it doesn't let go!

#### EARLY DAYS IN WINNEBAGO COUNTY

By Billie Whitsitt

(Continued from last issue)

Thatcher Blake, meanwhile, farmed his claim, married, and later went into real estate, living to be an old man in and around Rockford. Lewis Lemon, a free man now, raised and sold produce. When he died in 1877 his funeral was attended by an organization of Old Settlers, men who had lived in the area before 1840.

After Haight's arrival a few other settlers began to trickle into the new community and the surrounding areas. One of these was Thomas Lake whose story of misery and misfortune from the time he left England until after his first winter in Rockford, which he set down first hand many years later in several pages of "Reminiscences." He tells of his arrival in Rockford in March, 1836:

"We found that we should be obliged to cross a number of streams--many of them quite large--and no bridges, except when frozen over. It had been quite cold, and those streams were now safe; but, as it was getting well along in February, a thaw might set in at any time, and compel us to wait until the ground became settled . . ."

Thomas Lake and his family were befriended by Mr. Haight, and since Lake was a carpenter he was soon put to work building various structures, one of them being Rockford House. There was plenty of work to make a living, but other problems arose:

"At times, provisions ran very low. I remember, return-

ing from my work on Mr. Haight's house one evening. I had had no dinner; my wife set a small piece of bread on the table, and a little butter, and a cup of tea, with the remark, 'I don't know what we shall do, for that piece of bread, and what I am to bake,' which she had made up ready for the oven, 'is all we have.' . . . I knew we were running short, but did not know we were so reduced. I left the table immediately, without tasting a mouthful, returned to Rockford and called on Mr. Haight and stated our situation. I was sorrowfully told by him that he could not possibly help us in the least, as he was situated much like ourselves. I started for the river and hailed a boat. When I was ferried across, I made for Mr. Kent's and told him as I told Mr. Haight. The same reply. 'I can't help you with a pound. Come and see.' He lifted the cover from a flour barrel and stated how many he had to feed, and knowing well if either had any to spare I could get it in a moment, I turned away sorrowfully to return. Mr. Kent plainly saw my suffering of mind, and called me back. 'Mr. Lake, you shall not go so; I will let you have a little.' I held open a little bag, he took a very little plate and dipped out of the barrel a few times, looking closely after every dip, knowing he was doing what we ought not to do in justice to himself. Weighed it; there were twelve pounds. I asked the price; he hesitated, at last he said one dollar and fifty-five cents. I never paid money, I think, as cheerfully as I did this. A few days after I saw a large Hoosier wagon coming down the hill toward the river. Hope and fear were about equally balanced in my mind. They may have flour on board. Before they fairly stopped, I hurriedly asked, 'What have you on board?' 'Flour.' 'What do you ask?' 'Twenty-two dollars per barrel.' 'Roll me out three barrels.' Here I made a mistake, for it soon fell to \$16, but I had flour."

Lake wrote some rather detailed accounts of the crookedness of land claimers and criminal assaults of the time. He wrote on this particular theme, he said, because people seemed to have forgotten, and looked back on those early days as being times of harmony. For example, after finishing the building of Rockford House in the fall of 1837, Lake wrote: "At this time settlers began to come in very fast, and the first few settlers felt uneasy about their claims, and some wanted to 'unload,' provided they could get their price, which was more than the land would bring for years after. A great many claim-holders hung around 'seeking whom they might devour.' If a wagon hove in sight, they would hold a council and decide what to do."...

(Continued in next issue)

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