

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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JOHN ERLANDER AND THE UNION FURNITURE COMPANY

By Hazel Mortimer Hyde

A decision which was to have a great impact on the furniture industry of Rockford was made in 1876 in the home of Jonas Peters, 602 North Second Street. This proved to be the preliminary meeting for the organization of the Union Furniture Company. The organizational meeting that followed was held in the home of John Erlander, 402 So. Third St.

John Erlander was elected president; P. A. Peterson, secretary; Jonas Peters, manager and treasurer; and Alexander Johnson, foreman.

This first furniture factory organized on a cooperative basis was a solution to the problem the early Swedish people faced in raising capital. The amount of capital was \$30,000, with only one-third paid in at the start. Most of the workmen had little business experience in managing a company or selling the product, although they were skilled cabinet makers.

Jonas Peters went to the farmers on Pecatonica River with horse and cutter to contract for a year's supply of timber. The wood used in the manufacture of the first furniture was almost exclusively black walnut, which was in abundant supply near Rockford. The best walnut was found in the Pecatonica "bottoms", west and north of Rockford. Ash wood was sometimes combined with walnut wood.

John Erlander, the president of the fledgling Union Furniture Company, had been in the tailoring business with S. A. Johnson. This firm was recognized as the first Swedish retail establishment in Rockford, and the men started their business in 1861 and kept up the partnership until 1885. Previous to 1861 Mr. Erlander was associated with Johannes Forsberg.

A. D. Erlander, the son of John Erlander, then age 86, gave an interview to the writer on September 23, 1945, at his home, 402 South Third Street, which later became the Erlander Museum. He stated:

"S. A. Johnson came here in '52. He had learned the tailor's trade in Sweden just as Father had. Father and John Fraley had a tailor shop. They were about to fail. Father bought Fraley out. That was the first Swedish tailor shop. Father got a man named Forsberg to work for him. He let him go in about a year because he could not cut.

"S. A. Johnson could cut so Father got him to go in with him in the early '60s. They were in partnership until about 1885. I believe that was the year S. A. bought Father's interest. They were to share everything half and half. When one bought something, the other bought the same thing.

"In 1871 Erlanders built this house. Mary was a year old. The Johnsons made a house on Kishwaukee Street across from the present Swedish Mission Church where the printing place is," and Mr. Erlander pointed down the street where the church building, since purchased by another congrega-

tion, still stands.

"That shelf with the clock on it has a duplicate clock and shelf bought at the same time by the Johnsons. Later it was learned that our shelf was a little longer," he said with a shy smile.

"S. A. Johnson and Father swore on a Bible that they would share everything equally. Then they followed the old Viking custom and swore in blood to keep this pledge.

"The first furniture factory really was the one started by A. C. Johnson, known as 'Boss Johnson'; John Nelson, the man who invented the knitting machine; and Gus Hollem, a jig sawer and band sawer. They made sashes, doors, interior fittings, and crude furniture. This cupboard in the kitchen was made by John Nelson for his own home," he added pointing it out. We had been walking about looking at some of the furnishings in the home shared by John and Mary Erlander.

"At first the Union Furniture Company had a hard time. John Erlander had stock in it and was its first president. He was in a clothing store and was the only stockholder who was not working in the factory. Father resigned due to the dissatisfaction of the workers who owned stock cooperatively and worked," he observed regretfully, but picked up the story and continued.

"The company needed ten thousand dollars. Father didn't have ten thousand dollars. He just had his part in the Erlander and Johnson clothing firm. He went to Mr. Spafford, the banker, got advice and the loan of the necessary money. To thank Father, the men made that secretary there in the corner," and he pointed to it.

"Mother's brother, Jonas Peters, was eleven years old after (his) father and mother died. No one wanted an extra little boy, so Jonas was let out to Harry Burpee's father. He learned about the furniture business. Chairs and other furniture came in sections. They showed him how to set up furniture. At night he had to go wait on Mrs. Burpee at her home. You might call him an apprentice," he explained to the writer who was taking notes as rapidly as possible.

"Later Jonas Peters became a founder of a furniture factory here in Rockford. Union Furniture Company was started in this very room. Jonas went to the Civil War and saved up one thousand dollars." A. D. Erlander paused to think a bit and went on.

"He got Father, who was his brother-in-law, to get some men together to make a little factory. Father's name was John Erlander. Father became the first president of the Union Furniture Company. Jonas Peters was secretary and manager until Mr. P. A. Peterson was ready to start in, about a half a year later. This was the start of Swedish furniture in Rockford. Of course, this was not the first furniture factory. The first factory to make furniture was really that of A. C. Johnson, but Union Furniture was the first to make fine furniture."

Mr. Erlander rummaged a minute in a drawer. "Here is an old photograph of the Union Furniture workers," he said, handing over the picture. "You remember I told you that

Jonas Peters was the manager. Father was president. P. A. Peterson was bookkeeper. The great P. A. was not important yet. I got fifty cents a day working there later, after it got started. There is my picture," and he pointed proudly.

A picture like the one which Mr. Erlander displayed is to be found in the files of Rockford Public Library in the furniture scrapbooks in the local history and genealogy room.

The newly-organized furniture firm rented what was known as the Tinker Building on the water power fronting South Main Street, where it remained until 1889.

John Erlander was born April 7, 1826, in Sweden, being the son of John and Steine (Pearson) Johnson, who remained in their native country. Like many Swedish immigrants, Mr. Erlander apparently changed his name when he became a citizen. Steine died at the age of seventy-nine and her mother at the age of ninety-four. The father lived to the age of eighty-two years.

The John Erlander who became a mover in Rockford industries, with his brother Peter and sister Katie, left Gotenburg for New York in 1854. They sailed for seven weeks before arriving in America. They came on at once to Rockford.

In 1855, Miss Christine Peterson became John's wife. She died in 1857, leaving one son, William, who lived only to the age of fifteen years.

Ingas Peterson, a sister of the first wife, born in Sweden July 9, 1833, to Peter and Katie (Orvid) Johnson (sic), had come to Rockford with her parents in 1854. The parents both died of cholera during the first week after locating in Rockford, at the ages of forty-eight and fifty-two respectively. Ingas became John Erlander's wife in 1857.

Seven children were born to Ingas and John Erlander: Frank who died in childhood; Alfred (known also as A. D.) who lived for a time in Chicago; Frank C., a watch-maker in Rockford; Peter E. who operated a confectionery establishment in Chicago; Hannah C., a dressmaker in Rockford; Mary O., a milliner; and John J.

Mr. Erlander, who came to this city with little cash and only a knowledge of the tailor's trade, became a prime organizer in the city's industry and progress. Beside his activities in organizing Rockford's Union Furniture Company, he aided in establishing Excelsior Furniture Company in 1880, became a member of the Board of Directors, and tided it over a threatened failure.

Erlander was a stockholder and director of the Central Furniture Company; a stockholder in Manufacturers Bank; a stockholder and director in the Rockford Brick Company, and one of the chief organizers of the Swedish Mutual Fire Insurance Company established in 1873. Also he was a supervisor of the Second Ward for nine years.

A giant step forward was taken in the Erlander home, when the first factory to make fine furniture was organized there. The faith in the future exhibited by this group of Swedish workmen brought jobs and productivity to the men and industrialization to Rockford. The furniture industry was born in the minds of a few determined individuals and

flowered after repeated acts of sacrifice. The skilled hands of the workmen overcame the disadvantages of small capital.

RALPH EMERSON, PIONEER CAPTAIN OF ROCKFORD INDUSTRY
By William J. Condon

Ralph Emerson was born May 3, 1831, at Andover, Massachusetts, the son of Ralph and Eliza Rockwell Emerson. His father was a Congregational clergyman and related to the famous Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Young Ralph was a very tall and retiring chap during those early New England days. He was ashamed to associate with boys his age and was too young to associate with the ones his size. His only early childhood attachments were with his family, and this left its trace throughout his adult life. He had difficulties in school as the teachers would think he was retarded since smaller boys could spell much better than he. Of course, the smaller boys were actually 3 to 4 years older and could be expected to grasp subject matter more rapidly than young Emerson.

Other children would pick on Ralph and try to intimidate him, but the lad was not to be bullied and was always ready to fight back. His health was not good as a youngster, and besides this he did not particularly like school. He was determined not to follow his four older brothers on to college. As he grew older, his health improved and thanks to a cousin he began to study Euclid. Although he thoroughly studied this book, he could not figure out a certain problem. He later found out that there was a misprint in the book. This reassured Emerson's faith in the educational process, and according to him, this incident made him into a new creature. From then forward, he liked school and thus gained a confidence that had previously not been attained.

He took a position as a schoolmaster at a select school at Hampstead Peak, New Hampshire, for the princely sum of \$25 per month. He then moved on to another school at Sandown, New Hampshire, but found that teaching exhausted him and he left for the West in early 1851, never to return again except for occasional visits.

He railed to Buffalo and steamed to Detroit. From this point he took a train to New Buffalo, Michigan, and steamed to Chicago. He had said to his uncle back East several years earlier that he wanted to go out West where grain was cut by machine rather than with a cradle as was done in New England. This was a cue to his first big business venture several years later. When he arrived in Chicago, one of the first things that caught his eye was a chimney with the word "Reapers" on it. This confirmed to him that this must be a great part of the country since he noticed that there were two reaper shops in Chicago.

Upon arriving in Chicago, he soon headed for Beloit via a steamer to Racine and then by a stage to his brother's home at Beloit. He planned to study law in Bloomington in

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the office of a man named Kersey Fell. On the way to downstate Illinois, he came upon Rockford and was fascinated by the water power on the Rock River. After traveling and overcoming various troubles common to pilgrims of that day, he finally arrived in Bloomington and went to work for Mr. Fell, teaching his children and doing clerk work. This was where young Ralph first came in contact with Abe Lincoln. The future President would come to Bloomington to help local lawyers try cases. Actually, Lincoln had a hand in shaping Emerson's future due to the fact that Lincoln told Emerson that it was well nigh impossible to make a fair living honestly as a lawyer.

(Continued in next issue)

A 1946 INTERVIEW WITH MRS. FRANK SHELAIN
By Hazel Mortimer Hyde

On April 1st, 1946, as preparation for writing about the Swedish people of Rockford, Miss Hazel Mortimer, then living on Kishwaukee Street and trying to study Swedish with Major Perry, had an interview with Mrs. Frank Shelain. Previous to the visit to the Shelain home at 422 South Second Street, there was a session of reading about the Swedish Singing Societies of Rockford and particularly about the Lyran Society.

The participation of Rockford musicians at the Chicago World's Fair proved an inspiration for forming the Lyran Singing Society in 1893. Early meetings were held in the homes of chorus members, but in 1911 a hall was built on Fourth Avenue. Frank Shelain, of the Nelson Knitting Company, was active on the building committee. After fifty years of promoting Swedish singing, Mr. Shelain was awarded a medal by the United Swedish Singers of America.

Sometimes on these visits, which were primarily a



Frank Shelain home at 422 South Second Street

session of visiting together and discussing the old times, there were refreshments of Swedish bakery and delicious Swedish coffee. On this occasion Mrs. Shelain wrote the answers to some of my questions herself.

The questions that were asked and the answers ran like this:

What was your father's name?

Gustaf Swenson when he arrived in Rockford. Rev. Peters changed it to Gustaf Beckman.

We must have talked a few minutes about the changing of the names. From this came the impression that there were too many people arriving from Sweden with the same surnames. This early Swedish minister persuaded them to take a new name in the new country and often helped them to choose a suitable name.

What was your maiden name?

Hilda Maria Beckman.

What part did Mr. Frank Shelain have in the Swedish Singing societies? Did this help to keep alive Swedish culture?

Mr. Shelain was at one time director of the Lyran Singing Society. Had been a member forty-seven years. Mr. Shelain joined the society in 1894. He was president of the society in the following years: 1896, 1900, 1901, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, and 1917. In 1900 he was chairman of the building committee. He sang with the Lyran Chorus up until a year before his death, though he was then seventy-nine years old. Yes, I would say he had a large part in keeping the Swedish culture alive in Rockford.

What did Mr. Frank Shelain contribute to the success of the Nelson Knitting Company? What was his connection with that company?

He was superintendent of the Nelson Knitting Company for fifty years, employed there sixty years. He had several inventions to his credit on the knitting machine.

At this point we entered into the discussion of an old letter found in Mrs. Shelain's aunt's box after she passed away. Mrs. Shelain felt that her mother was not certain about the letter which was from Westerbrog, Dala, Sweden, written February 21, 1847. Her mother had not come to America until 1869. Apparently the letter had a list of persons who were thinking of coming to America. We decided that it was not quite clear who had written the letter.

Did you attend one of the Swedish schools held in Rockford in an early day?

Mother and I both attended Swedish School. The one mother attended was in the old church. I attended at Luther Hall on Kishwaukee Street. Swedish was taught and the Lutheran Catechism and Bible history as well as singing.

Why did Mr. Shelain's family come to America?

Here we evidently misunderstood each other for her answer was, Father's family did not come to America. Father came at the age of sixteen years with three other boys. Later he sent for one of his brothers. The rest of the family remained in Sweden. The date she gave for the Shelains was 1879 from Elssjo, Sweden, and for her parents 1869 Dala, Sweden.

Why did your parents come to America?

To see the new world where living was supposed to be so much better than in Sweden.

These informal conversations gave me a much better understanding of Rockford. Perhaps by preserving these there will be some contribution to the people who are interested in the history of Rockford.

EARLY DAYS IN WINNEBAGO COUNTY

By Billie Whitsitt

(Concluded from last issue)

So it is through Thurston's eyes that we see Rockford in the spring of 1837. Writing of the east side, he says:

"When I arrived the town consisted of Daniel S. Haight's log cabin . . . (north-east corner of State and Madison streets.) The frame of the main part of his dwelling house on the opposite end of the same lot. The frame of the main part of Rockford House . . . (north-west corner of State and Madison streets.) Bundy and Goodhue's store . . . (south-west corner of State and Madison,) fronting east. A log cabin built for Vance's store . . . (on First Street . . .) . . . William Penfield's blacksmith shop, a frame building . . . (corner Market and Madison streets.) Haight's barn, a large frame structure, near the square (north) at the intersection of State and Kishwaukee streets. A log cabin about ten rods south-east from this barn, occupied by a family named Kingsley. . . . John Bosswell's cabin . . . at or near the east end. . . . Jacob Posson's cabin in the locality of block 21, Gregory and Penfield's addition, and a small log hut which was on State street, about 75 feet southwest from Haight's cabin and which he used for a stable. . . . These were all the structures within half a mile of the intersection of State and Madison streets, on the east side of the river.

"Upon the west side of the river, my recollection is not so distinct. Germanicus Kent's cabin . . . stood about ten rods from the creek and eight rods east of Main street. His sawmill on the creek a short distance west of Main street. There was a log hut eight or ten rods below the mill that had been used for a blacksmith shop. Wm. E. Dunbar occupied a log cabin about one hundred yards south from the creek and twelve to fifteen rods east of Main street. Nathaniel Loomis and his son . . . lived in a log house near the south-east corner of State and Main streets. Abiram Morgan's house stood on the present site of the Horsman homestead, the block bounded by Mulberry, North Winnebago, Peach and Court streets, and there was a cabin well up on the bank of the river about 130 rods from State street, occupied by Rev. John Morrill."

John Thurston's recollections are the heady experiences of a thirteen-year-old city boy permitted to roam and play in a wonderland. He wrote of that first spring and summer:

"The season of 1837 opened early, and as the earth became clothed in green it presented the most beautiful land-

scape I have ever seen. Innumerable flowers dotted the scene in every direction. What is now the second ward was covered with tall, thrifty white oak timber. The fires had killed most of the underbrush, and it was a magnificent part from Kishwaukee street west to the river, and to Walnut street south to the bluffs at Keith's creek. The trail to the ford wound through the south half of block 15, near Walnut street, down the hill to the river bottom, and entered the river where the present dam strikes the bank.

"The bluff below the ford was sodded to the edge of the water and crowned with a row of red cedar trees. In June, 1837, . . . the side of this bluff was fairly red with strawberries . . . there were acres here where one could not step without crushing the strawberries. . . .

"The summer of 1837 was wet; the crop was superb. My father cultivated a part of Haight's field. At harvest time the blackbirds made sad havoc, alighting on the small grain in numbers sufficient to break it down . . . I shot and gathered nearly half a bushel of them one afternoon, with which my mother made a splendid pot pie. . . .

"Water for household use was hauled from the river in a cask fastened to the crotch of a tree; for drinking water a barrel was sunk in the river bank about one hundred feet above State street. There were some large springs gushing out of the bank on the west side, and in summer I frequently went there in a canoe for a supply. A trail on each bank of the river extended as far as I explored, made by the Indians in their hunting, and in August the grass beside the trail would completely hide a man standing erect. Snakes were abundant. I once killed a massaagua (local name for rattlesnake) in the path to the water barrel. The hogs which ran loose soon made them scarce."

In the fall of 1837 the Thurston family moved into Rockford House. Mr. Thurston claimed it to be the first hotel in Winnebago County that was of a frame structure. Perhaps it was. He remembers it in this manner:

"There was no way of getting to the third story of the house which was divided into two rooms, except by a ladder made from slats nailed to two pieces of the studding in the first story of the main building. It was a part of my duty that winter to make the beds and escort the guests of the house up that ladder when they retired. I was specially charged not to drop the melted tallow from the dip which I carried up the ladder onto the party who followed me."

There was not yet a newspaper in the pioneer town of Rockford, but in another three years there would be two, the editors competing with each other in their rather individualistic styles; and seventeen-year-old John Thurston was to be hired as the office "devil" by one of them.

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