

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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OVER A CENTURY OF LIVING

By Hazel M. Hyde

Mrs. Mary Kuter wears her one hundred and three years with dignity and charm. We sat close together because her eye sight is failing and she hears with some difficulty. She was born January 3, 1867, in a cottage on the southwest corner of Kishwaukee Street and College Avenue. Mrs. Kuter's home, before moving to Alma Nelson Manor in 1969, was 1802 East State Street.

School was of special interest and I asked her about the "Swede School". She thought a minute and smiled as she recalled, "I went to Swede School until I was twelve years old. It was not compulsory to attend the public school in those days. The Swede School was a regular school and all studies were taught: history, grammar, arithmetic and the others. It was all in Swedish.

"My name was Mary Lidell and I am the daughter of John Lidell. My father taught the Swede School. You will find a picture of him with one of his classes in one of the books put out by the First Lutheran Church.

"When I was twelve they took me to ward school on Kishwaukee Street. We used Swedish at home. Mother didn't learn English. I was far ahead in my studies, especially in arithmetic. I was promoted to the fourth room."

She thought for a moment before giving the location of her Swede School. "School was on Second Avenue between Fifth and Sixth Streets," she decided. (Editor's note: Possibly Mrs. Kuter misunderstood Mrs. Hyde's question and was thinking of Freeman School, or Adams School which preceded it. It is doubtful that Swede School was ever located on Second Avenue. If any reader can clarify this for us, it will be appreciated.)

"I didn't go to school long because I went to work. I clerked in several stores. I took up dress making. At that time you had to work six months without pay for the certificate -- or", she hesitated for a word, "the pattern." She was afraid I was not understanding and repeated "You worked six months before you could earn any money."

She paused and asked if I was sure the story of her early life would be interesting. Reassured, she continued, "I went to work for a dress maker and worked quite awhile for her. Her name was Selina Ferguson. The Fergusons lived just the other side of Kishwaukee Bridge. They owned the whole block for quite a few years.

"After that I did a little dress making at home. I took in sewing for people. I really didn't do anything to write about.

"My folks belonged to First Lutheran Church. I was baptized in a living house they used as a church. I was born on the third of January and I was baptized on the sixth day of that same month in 1867. You see, they didn't wait

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Mrs. Mary Kuter

Reputed to be Rockford's oldest resident, Mrs. Kuter remembers all the Presidents beginning with U. S. Grant. She also remembers Theodore Roosevelt's visit to Rockford.



long. You know there is a street named Jefferson Street. It was on the first street north of Jefferson.

"We rented a house at first. Then Father built a house on Bremer Street.

"In 1915 in September I was married to Fernando Kuter. General Kuter was his nephew. His father and my husband were brothers.

"General Kuter and his wife were here on my last birthday. They came from New York. Mrs. Kuter came on every birthday. He couldn't always come because he was in the service. Now he is retired and is more free. They had a birthday party in a room here."

(Concluded in next issue)



REV. G. PETERS, JOHN LIDELL, TEACHER, AND PAROCHIAL SCHOOL, 1907

Mr. Lidell, Mary Kuter's father, is apparently the man near the center of the back row, as Rev. Peters always wore a beard.

COLORFUL FOUNDER OF INSURANCE FIRM
By Robert H. Borden

Almost entirely hidden by woods north of Keith Country Day School stands the now-abandoned home of Henry W. Williams, founder of the Williams, Manny, Stevens and Engstrom insurance firm. Reportedly scheduled to be razed in the near future, the mansion was begun for Mr. Williams in 1906 and completed in 1907.

Mr. Williams was the son of Henry Wilson Williams and Lydia Wright Williams, both natives of England, who came to Rockford in the middle 1860s. The first of their seven children, Henry was born on October 1, 1871. An article about the senior Mr. Williams is found on page 1262 of

Church's 1916 HISTORY OF WINNEBAGO COUNTY.

In 1899 "Hank" Williams married Miss Alta Barnum, the daughter of the Harris Barnums. They had no children, and she died in 1901. On October 12, 1905, he was married to Miss Frances A. Brown, daughter of the Charles W. Browns of 819 North Main Street. They were married at the home of the bride's parents by Rev. Robert Bryant of the Christian Union Church, in a ceremony witnessed only by the immediate families. When they returned from their wedding trip on October 20, Mr. Williams was carrying his arm in a sling, according to the ROCKFORD DAILY REGISTER-GAZETTE; while cranking his automobile in Janesville, his arm and shoulder had been "painfully sprained." Mr. and Mrs. Williams made their first home at 1220 National Avenue, which had been his home since 1901. It is now the residence of the John T. McCartys.

Mr. Williams was first employed as a messenger by the old Rockford Fire Insurance Company. He also worked as a clerk for the Peoples Bank and the American Insurance Company. By 1902 he had begun his own insurance agency, and in 1912 he began a partnership with Frank F. Wormwood, Jr., under the name of Williams and Wormwood.

Dwight Manny, grandson of John P. Manny, joined the firm in 1913, and the name was changed to Williams, Wormwood and Manny. Wormwood withdrew in 1922, and in 1924 Victor B. Engstrom became associated with Williams and Manny. After Webb Stevens joined the firm in 1930, it became known as Williams, Manny, Stevens and Engstrom.

The 1907 Rockford city directory still listed Mr. and Mrs. Williams at 1220 National Avenue, but stated that after July 1st, 1907, their residence would be at 1 Jacoby Place, "North 2d north of city". Although the property fronts on North Second Street, the address has always been 1 Jacoby Place. According to Mrs. David Connolly, a daughter of Mr. Williams, the property was very barren between the house and North Second Street when Mr. and Mrs. Williams first moved there. The thick woods was planted by Mr. Williams. This writer recalls when, as a twelve-year-old magazine salesman, he ventured up a narrow drive from North Second Street, hoping to sell a copy of SATURDAY EVENING POST or LADIES HOME JOURNAL. After rounding a curve, he came upon the large Williams home which seemed to virtually loom up out of the woods. Mr. Williams proved to be a very pleasant customer, and the journey to no. 1 Jacoby Place was repeated each week for quite some time.

A considerable amount of sorrow was registered in Rockford when Mr. Williams passed away on February 7, 1945, at his winter home in Umatilla, Florida. According to the
(Continued on page five)

HISTORICAL TOUR IN AUGUST

President Emma Lundgren and tour director Stuart Golding announce that the long-awaited tour of historic Winnebago County farmhouses and other sites will be held sometime in August. More information will soon be sent to all members.



REGISTER-REPUBLIC, he "was one of Rockford's most picturesque citizens and...made friends easily. He invariably wore a flowing Windsor tie, which, coupled with his jovial and bantering manner, made him a striking figure." The MORNING STAR stated that, although his many friends knew him to be seriously ill, "...it had seemed to them impossible that even grave sickness could cloud his effervescent spirit, and the fact of his death is not easy to comprehend. For the liveliness of his mood was such that his friends thought of it as being perpetual, springing from nature and being as enduring as nature, so that lesser and graver men might go, but this lighthearted one might stay."

The late Frank Edmisson, "Frankly Speaking" to Rockford newspaper readers for many years, lamented that he and "Swan", as he called him, had never gotten around to going fishing together. "Somehow the right day never came along, and now it never will...Death has taken this prized companion, this kind generous and spirited soul..." An editorial



writer for the REGISTER-REPUBLIC, who had formerly been the photo editor, told about Henry Williams' photo collection, --pictures "which he had taken himself as a young amateur, ...better than most professionals...could turn out." After his death, the collection was turned over to the Burpee Museum.

When Mr. Williams died in 1945, he was survived by his wife Frances; two daughters, Mrs. Russell Taylor and Mrs. David Connolly; four grandchildren, Henry and Russell Taylor and Frances and Sarah Connolly; two brothers, Joseph T. and Andrew P. Williams; and a sister, Mrs. Lavinia Tuke. After a year or two the home on Jacoby Place was sold to the George Tullock family, and later to the Robert Stormonts. It has been vacant most of the time for the past two or three years, and may soon be demolished to make way for apartments or a subdivision.

LOCATIONS WERE MANY---MUSIC WAS VITAL

By Hazel Mortimer Hyde
(Concluded from last issue)

MUSIC NEWS, a magazine published in Chicago, May 4, 1923 had a notice on its front cover: "Mignon at Rockford, Illinois". The first article bore a banner headline: "Rockford, Illinois", with a smaller heading: "The Rockford Mendelssohn Club a Wonderful Organization -- Mrs. Chandler Starr a Queen Among Executives -- A Fine Performance of 'Mignon' Offers Conclusive Proof of the Practicality and Effectiveness of English Translations". Charles E. Watt reviewed this production, given for one thousand people, very favorably. He wrote, "The scenic investiture was surprisingly good and the costumes were, throughout, fine and effective." He considered Miss Nelson a good physical type for "Mignon" and her action true and logical. He wrote of fine musicianship. Mr. Cherichetti was definitely of the operatic type. Mr. Miller was noted as the possessor of one of the best voices of the cast. Mr. Whitney and Mr. Tucker made admirable villains.

Certain years were especial celebrations, for example, "Seventy Years of Harmony". At that time a backward glance showed that twenty-two operas and operettas had been given. These included: Bartered Bride, Blossom Time, Madame Butterfly, Cinderella, Cosi Fan Tutte, Fra Diavolo, Hansel and Gretel, Iolanthe, Juggler of Notre Dame, La Boheme, Lakme, Lucia Di Lammermoor, Martha, Mignon, Merry Widow, Natoma, Paliacci, Robin Hood, Secret of Suzanne, Shanewis, Song of Norway, and Student Prince.

Typical of Mendelssohn programs is the Six Hundred Eighty-Seventh performance, December 3, 1925, in the Shrine Temple at Three o'clock. It was "Lucia Di Lammermoor," an opera in four acts, music by Donizetti, adapted from Walter Scott's novel.

Characters:

Sir Henry Ashton of Lammermoor

Mr. Rollin Pease

Lucia, his sister
Sir Edgar of Ravenswood
Lord Arthur Bucklaw
Raymond, Chaplain to Sir Henry
Alice, Companion to Lucia
Norman, Captain of the Guard
Musical Director
Dramatic Director
Pianists

Mrs. Joseph Goldman
Mr. Ambrose Cherichetti
Mr. Will Irewin
Mr. Sumner Miller
Mrs. Ralph Lawton
Mr. Francis Edstrom
Mrs. O. R. Brouse
Mrs. Ezra Greenslet
Misses Helen Barnes
and H. Anderson
Miss Lola Remick
Mrs. Chandler Starr

Harpist
Costumes and Scenery
Copeland's Orchestra

The Club Rooms on Mulberry Street served for several years. Mendelssohn Club maintained a Service Men's Center for Camp Grant soldiers interested in music, while in this location.

In the 1947-48 season, when Miss Anne B. Walton was president, members were urged to watch for the date of the Open House Reception. The new club rooms were in the former U.S.O. Building, using the Northwest Entrance on Walnut Street. Members were told, "Carpenters are busy getting the new Club Rooms ready for our coming season. We're moving, improving, advancing--making your club comfort and convenience our first consideration. The new club rooms will be a better place for recitals, rehearsals, rentals, and studio work."

"Texas Sherry," a three act operetta, written by June Boettcher and Joan Peterson, Auxiliary members, was presented February 28, 1947, in the Lincoln Junior High Auditorium. Tickets were sold for sixty cents.

Being a saver of old appointment books, or "week-at-a-glance", found there notation on February 23, 1949: "Messiah Practice at U. S. O. Building, Mendelssohn Club Rooms (Mendelssohn chorus with the Rockford Men Singers)". It was this same year, Thursday, February 17, this note appears: "Mendelssohn-Slavenska Ballet--Wonderful!" And April 7, Thursday, 1949, "Give Messiah at Shrine-Tickets sponsored by Court Street Church."

The Tebala Shrine at the corner of North Main and Park Avenue became the concert hall for several years. Then the club began to use the Rockford Theatre of the Woman's Club building on Park Avenue and North Church Street as its performance hall.

Presidents up to 1952 included Mrs. Chandler Starr, Mrs. George S. Briggs, Mrs. Mary Wilkins Holt, Mrs. Elliott S. West, Miss Anne B. Walton, and Mrs. Upton Bartlett.

The tried-and-true appointment book, Sunday, May 4, 1952 states: "Mendelssohn Club--We Sing--3:15--5:15--7:15." The program for the Dedication of the Mendelssohn Building was as follows:

	Ralph Emerson Memorial Auditorium
	Mrs. Elmer Xanten, Master of Ceremonies
3:00 p.m.	Invocation Dr. Charles Parker Connolly
	Greetings His Honor Mayor C. Henry Bloom
	Auxiliary Department

"At Parting" Rogers
"O Don Fatale" (Don Carlos) Verdi

Miss Betty Crouse
Mrs. H. R. Milroy, Accompanist

Student Department
"Rondo des Lutins" Nerini
"Feux-Follets" Philipp

Miss Dona Warr, Pianist

Chorus Department
"Tales From the Vienna Woods" Strauss-Riegger
Mendelssohn Women's Chorus assisted by

The Rockford Men Singers

accompanied by Miss Helen Wicke and Mrs. Sigfred Sandeen
String Music in the Mame Reitch Music Room, played by Mr.
Joe Copeland, Mr. Carroll Stanley, Mr. Donald Carlson, Mrs.
Sigfred Sandeen, Mr. Robert Stenholm, Mrs. George Trumbull,
Mr. George Trumbull, Mr. Ralph Hall, Mrs. Ralph Hall, Mrs.
Ella Satre Nordstrom, Mrs. Hannah Spencer Armstrong, and
Mrs. Beatrice Marden Kingman.

It was not until 1952, Rockford's Centennial year, that
the club owned and dedicated its own clubhouse. The build-
ing of that home was made possible by the generosity of
Mary Emerson Lathrop and other members of the Emerson fami-
ly. Mendelssohn Chorus was giving its annual Messiah, the
1,000th program, Fall of 1949, in the Shrine Temple when
the public announcement was made that the Mary Lathrop gift
of \$50,000 must be matched by the Mendelssohn Club and the
community. Dora Emerson Wheeler gave the land where the
Emerson house had stood. Chills of excitement were ex-
perienced by the chorus members, who had not previously
been notified of the nature of the announcement by Mrs.
Edward P. Lathrop.

The Mendelssohn Building is fireproof and soundproof and
includes rehearsal rooms, housing eight pianos, and ade-
quate social facilities. Ralph Emerson Hall, the lovely
auditorium, seats three hundred persons with two grand
pianos on the stage, with its own box office to provide for
small audiences.

What is Mendelssohn Club? "It is a cultural organiza-
tion unique in our country; the oldest community musical
club in the United States with a continuous, unbroken
history."

To read more about this remarkable organization, visit
the local history and genealogy room at the Rockford Public
Library. There is a special collection of the programs
given over the years in a file drawer and many newspaper
clippings are found in the scrapbook called "Rockfordiana".
Visit the Mendelssohn Building and look at the painting of
Mrs. Chandler Starr standing near the south entrance, just
as some of the older Rockford residents remember her.

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