

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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FURNITURE FACTORIES By Hazel Mortimer Hyde

One of the furniture factories visited about 1946 by Miss Hazel M. Mortimer was Landstrom Furniture Factory. One memory that never departed was being shown in that factory a very expensive antiques or distressed dining room table. This effect was obtained by beating the wood with chains before the furniture was constructed. There was a good market for these reproductions of the eighteenth century antiques at that time. The finish was hand applied and hand rubbed to give a mellow appearance.

Here, a very simple layman's basic idea of the construction of furniture began to take shape. Skilled furniture workers or management of Rockford's many furniture factories might smile indulgently at my interpretations of "furniture talk" remembered from visits, conversations, and reading.

Furniture factories usually had at first approximately seventy-five or less workers but later had perhaps three hundred employees. In Rockford the cooperative principle was used for financing these relatively small industries. After the panic cooperative financing was not resumed, however. Skilled wood workers were available since many Swedish people in this area had worked with wood in Sweden before immigrating. As the factory became established, semi-automatic machines were added but conveyors were not to be found to the same extent as in mass production plants. Fine handwork added to the value of the type of product produced.

First a piece of furniture took shape in a designer's mind. Then he made a sketch which he submitted for approval. If his idea was approved and the appearance was satisfactory, he made a full scale drawing. A sample was made to check the problems involved in production. Considerable revising might occur at this point. Patterns and detailed cutting orders were made up and sent to the production department. There have been numerous unsung furniture designers in Rockford.

The proper species of well-seasoned lumber was brought in. Native black walnut wood was abundant in the Pecatonica bottoms along the Pecatonica River west and northwest of Rockford. Ash was also abundant in this area along the Rock River. Early factories did not use the fine imported woods that came into demand in later years.

In connection with the woods used, there is Mr. Lindholm as an example. C. J. Lindholm was an early cabinet maker with his own shop located at what was later 402 East State Street. He worked alone and made most of his furniture from designs he brought from Sweden. He even cut the trees himself, using native cherry for a great many of his creations. He constructed many pieces entirely by hand,

finishing them with crude hand tools but with infinite patience and skill.

The planer usually planed the lumber on two sides to detect knots, cracks, and variations in color. Straight line rip saws and cut-off saws were used for certain straight pieces. Parts which must be flat and straight were joined or faced after being cut to rough size. A band saw was used for curved parts after the pattern was traced on the boards. A jig sawer and band saw operator mentioned by Mr. A. J. Erlander in an interview in 1945 was Gus Hollem. Sometimes narrow pieces were glued together into large panels from which parts were cut. Solid wood was usually used for table tops in early factories and the wood might be glued together.

When parts were to be cut exactly alike, they were clamped in forms. Legs for chairs were rough carved and sanded, and then fine detail was done by a hand carver.

The fitting department was the place where ends were cut to the desired angle. Holes were bored there for dowels or tenon. Exposed parts were sanded before the parts were assembled and glued. After the glue was set it might receive further sanding or shaping of edges. Then it returned to the assembly department for final assembly.

The complete article was then cleaned, inspected, and hand sanded to provide a smooth surface for the finish. The final step was the finish.

C. A. Church in his history listed the products of Skandia Furniture Company in 1916 as: complete dining room and library suites, bookcases, odd pieces in oak, mahogany and walnut and the "Viking" sectional bookcase. Mr. Church stated that Rockford factories produced mostly "case goods" which meant dining room and library furniture, buffets, china closets, and extension tables. Two factories manufactured chairs, one made upholstered furniture, one made bedroom furniture. Several manufactured music cabinets, hall seats, shaving stands and pedestals.

In 1940 George Trumbull in a SURVEY OF INDUSTRIAL ROCKFORD listed nineteen factories that made dining room furniture, six that made bedroom furniture, three piano and piano parts, two that produced built up stock, two then making library tables and two that had cedar chests as their product, two made davenport and upholstery, two specialized in patterns, two did buffets, china closets, and book cases.

The question I asked of many people was: "When was the 'golden period' for furniture in Rockford?" Mr. John R. Anderson, then living at 1524 Kishwaukee Street, in an interview with Miss Mortimer answered as follows: "The 'golden period' in the furniture business is hard to place exactly. Furniture was good from the beginning when the Union Furniture Company was organized in '76 until the Panic of 1893. It was good when the west was being developed and settled. That created a fertile field for furniture and everything else. Before P. A. died he said, 'Furniture is through. I'll devote my energy to the metal industry.'"

John R. Anderson's mother, Ella Peterson, was a sister to P. A. Peterson. P. A. Peterson lived in their home, after his own mother became feeble, until his marriage at the age of fifty-six. Mr. Anderson's desk was next to P. A.'s for thirteen years. Hence he was well acquainted with P. A. Peterson's tremendous activity in the furniture business in Rockford.

It appeared puzzling that the furniture business grew up in this area in what appeared to be far from a source of lumber supply. This question was put to me on February 13, 1970, by Stephanie Byars, a seventh grade student from Roosevelt, sent by her teacher for an interview on Rockford history. To Stephanie, one of our newest student members of the Rockford Historical Society, the answer was from the notes of the interview in 1946 with Mr. John R. Anderson, who was born in 1878 and knew much about that problem. He said: "When the heart of the furniture business was in Rockford, the lumber came from Madison. As the forests were cut down it came from farther north. Now lumber comes from the South. About twenty years ago people came to (begin to) build factories in the South. There is still a good field for furniture in Rockford."

A SCHOOLMASTER'S DAUGHTER

By Marie Howard

I am a schoolmaster's daughter. My father is John Howard, president of Rockford College. Maybe that is why I became interested in a schoolmaster's daughter - about the time Illinois became a state - in 1818.

In 1818, the site that was to become Rockford was just a forest on both sides of a river where a rocky ford made it possible for Indians to cross the river. It would have to wait nearly twenty years before two men settled here and started a saw mill near what was to become the water power, the start of industrial Rockford.

What if I had been a schoolmaster's daughter in Illinois in 1818? This might have been my story.

Whenever a new family came to our settlement of Edwardsville in 1818, everyone hastened to welcome them. Soon the men would build the newcomers a cabin. I remember when our family came to Edwardsville in 1812. Everyone was glad to see us -- especially because my father was a schoolmaster. Schoolmasters and schools were few, and Edwardsville had neither until we arrived.

Last week there was a corn-husking. I was on my father's side, and our side won. Afterwards Mr. Charles played his violin and everybody danced.

Even though we have much fun, our settlement leads a hard life. Many people in our settlement became ill because of stagnant water and decaying vegetation, but luckily Dr. Manly, and everyone who wasn't sick, helped. In the year 1812 the corn crop was a failure and many settlers went hungry. Corn is our main source of food. We use it

for pone, hominy, samp, roasted ears, popcorn and succotash. My father owns a big field. He raises pumpkins, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, mellons and grain. We have two horses and two pigs. Our settlement depends mainly on farming, but my uncle is a hunter. He visits us sometimes. He is rough, daring, and hates Indians. He is one of the best shots with a rifle, and most hunters do shoot well. Last year he was in a hunting match with the Indians, and they won, so maybe that is why he does not like them, but he is queer. He hates Indians but he dresses like them. The people in the French settlement near us wear 'capots', which are like blankets. Most of the people in our settlement wear leather, rug-like coats and moccasins.

My father organized our barn so that he could hold school there. He began two weeks ago. In short (considering the long long school days we had with him), I will tell you what an average school day would be like....When we all arrived, he began:

"Quiet down! Jamie!" (Jamie is my brother who is ALWAYS getting in trouble.) "I told you to quiet down. Do you know what other teachers would do to you? Most of them are very strict, so they would punish you severely! I am not going to do that. I am just asking you to recite yesterday's history lesson."

Jamie repeated, "The first public library (in Illinois) is in Albion. Nathaniel Pope made a change in the enabling act to give financial support to public education. He wrote that a part of every city or town is to be sold, and the money to be used for public education. There are about 40,000 people in Illinois. Some are French. The French are progressive...."

"Jamie, they are unprogressive," my father interrupted.

Jamie finished, "...are unprogressive, but we have a sense of government."

My father grinned. "About that last sentence, you young rascal, YOU do not have a sense of government; the American leaders, not the children, have a sense of government. Now we will begin with our lesson. Shadrach Bond became our governor on October 6, 1818. On April 18, the president agreed to the enabling act. On August 26, the first constitution of Illinois was adopted. Kaskaskia is the capital of Illinois. We have two senators. Their names are Jesse Thomas and Ninian Edwards. Our state has the most water-bordered edges. The Ohio, Mississippi, Wabash rivers and Lake Michigan are all surrounding our state. Nathaniel Pope got the land on the northern tip of Illinois bordering Lake Michigan by threatening to join the southern states. Illinois, as you should know, was named after the Illinois Indians. Some other main groups of Indians are the Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Sauk, Fox, Winnebago, Potawatomi, Ottawa and Chippewa. Some of them are extinct. All the tribes have two types of homes, one for summer and the other for winter. Some summer dwellings are built in the shape of an oblong. The winter houses are round and have the same principles as an oven. The basic organization is the clan. Clans are named after things, like beasts. The

Indian Agents are very important.

"Jamie! Stop talking! Will you please recite my last two sentences?" Jamie replied, "Clams are beasts. Indians are very important for food." Everyone burst out laughing, except my father, although he was turning red trying to withhold laughter.

"I will go on," he said. "The Indian Agents are very important, for they help communications between the Indians and the settlers, trying to help them understand each other." Finally he put down his book, and picked up his math book, assigned us a page, and excused us.

Today is Sunday. Uncle came today, but he thinks Sunday is a day for complete rest, and he is not going to church with us. The religions in Illinois are French Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian. Dear me, I am beginning to sound like my father! We were walking to church today because it is so nice. Some of the other ways we travel are by boat on water routes and wagons. The roads are not very smooth. We came to Edwardsville by covered wagon with oxen pulling, but our oxen died when we arrived. Our horses now pull us around although starvation stunted their growth. The horses are accustomed to it. They work a great deal and are very strong.

Our preacher is not very well educated, nor is he expected to be. He preached today about the wrongs of men (as he does every Sunday).

When we arrived at school today, Father said that we were to go to the road (our only one). There were settlers all dressed up. Father explained that today, December 3rd, we (Illinois) had become a state. As I watch I am just beginning to understand what he (my father) meant when he said we had become a state. At the very end are my two brothers carrying a large banner with the words:

"Hallelujah! we are Illinois, the twenty-first state!"

Industry has left the water-power district, Rockford College campus is now on rolling hills east of town, and as for the town that was not there, at the rocky-ford, in 1818, Rockford is now the second largest town in Illinois. We are still the twenty-first state, but there are now fifty, and Illinois is one hundred and fifty-two years old. I too am beginning to understand what my father means when he talks about being a part of the state of Illinois.

OLD SCHOOL BECOMES SOCIAL CENTER

By Frances Render

(Reprinted by permission of ILLINOIS HISTORY, formerly ILLINOIS JUNIOR HISTORIAN; appeared in January, 1952, issue)

The building which now stands at 524 Kent Street in Rockford is quite interesting from a historical point of view. The building was constructed in 1858 as Kent Grade

School, but after many years of service it was vacated. Now it houses the Booker T. Washington Social Center.

Germanicus Kent came to Rockford in the 1830s. He was one of the first men who built up the small settlement which later grew to be the city of Rockford. Kent was a native of Suffield, Connecticut, and had spent some years in Alabama. He and Thatcher Blake came from Galena and selected the junction of Kent Creek and Rock River as the site of their settlement, then they journeyed back to Galena for supplies. Upon returning, on August 24, 1834, to their site they built a sawmill on Kent Creek in order to replace the rough log structures which were being built.

Kent Grade School and Kent Street were so named in honor of Germanicus Kent. Kent probably wanted to name the river settlement Midway, because he gave directions for reaching "Midway" from Galena, in a letter to a friend in Alabama, late in 1834.

In the early 1840s the influence of Germanicus Kent began to decrease. He had suffered heavy financial losses in the late 1830s, and was certain that Rockford held few possibilities of prospering. In 1843, he took his family to Virginia and never returned. Before he left, he freed his Negro slave, Louis Lemon Kent, the only slave in Rockford.

The Booker T. Washington Social Center which used to be located on South Main Street was in need of a larger building. Learning that the Kent building was empty, they purchased it.

Booker Washington Center was founded in 1917 "to promote civic, cultural, and recreational interests and activities, and to conduct community betterment programs." The agency has been in continuous operation since 1917 and has been a part of the Rockford Community Chest.

After being housed in the three-story brick building for a time, the Center felt the need for a gymnasium-auditorium. This year (1952) the Center will mark its thirty-fifth anniversary. The Center's program has kept pace with its facilities. Today it is prepared to offer recreation for Negroes of all ages. There are craft rooms, woodshops, two game rooms, day nursery, and club rooms, such as the Theresa Severin room, and the Lola Robinson, and others named



after people who were at one time affiliated with the Center. The gymnasium has room for badminton, archery, basketball, volleyball, and many other large group games. The Center has Boy and Girl Scout troops, junior high school girls' clubs, and junior and senior high boys clubs, young adult and adult groups. There are various activities going on almost every day, and special Sunday afternoon programs for which the new gym is used, because it can accommodate a large number.

The Center is managed by a board of directors elected annually in January. Each member of the board is chairman of a committee which has a definite responsibility toward the Center's program.

(Editor's note: At the time the foregoing article was written, the author was a student of Miss Hazel Mortimer at Washington Junior High School. Miss Mortimer later became Mrs. Harold Hyde, and Miss Render became Mrs. Frances Allen of Los Angeles, California, where when last heard from she was employed as a social worker.)

ANNUAL PICNIC TO BE AT MACKTOWN FOREST PRESERVE Pre-Picnic Ice Cream Making Bee to be Held

The annual picnic meeting of the Rockford Historical Society will be held on Sunday, September 13, 1970, at the Macktown Forest Preserve shelterhouse. Supper will be at 5:30 p. m., followed by the annual meeting and election of officers. The cost of the supper is \$1.50 for adults and 75¢ for children from six to twelve years of age. Children under six are free. Meat, rolls, butter, and beverage will be furnished. Bring a dish to pass and your own table service. Send your reservations to Eloise and Lucille Eshbaugh, 2133 Guilford Road, and make out your check to the Rockford Historical Society.

Your cost includes tours of the Stephen Mack Home Museum and the Whitman Trading Post, which will begin at 1:30 p.m. There will also be an Old Days Parade in Rockton beginning at 3 p.m.

Ice cream for the event will be made at the home of Barbara Nilsson, 429 Westchester Drive, the night before the picnic, beginning at 5 p.m. Old fashioned hand-operated ice cream freezers will be used. All are welcome!

OVER A CENTURY OF LIVING By Hazel M. Hyde (Concluded from last issue)

Mrs. Kuter had a lovely ring on her finger and I spoke about it. It was a diamond with gold loops around it; quaint and beautiful. She told me her husband gave it to her.

"My husband built our house himself for he was a carpen-



ter. He owned property between Sunset and Albert Avenue. That would be the 1900 block on School Street. My husband worked for a man who did a lot of building." She thought a moment and said her husband's employer was named Kite (or perhaps she said Keyt). She recalled that she did not work after she was married.

"My husband, Fernando Kuter, came from Hinckley, Illinois. We lived next to his parents on School Street. They had bought four lots, two lots each. Father Kuter built on two lots. My husband built in the middle of our lots because he didn't want to live so close.

"In Hinckley my husband's father had a furniture store, but when he came to Rockford he didn't continue working."

She spoke again of the building of the present First Lutheran Church.

"I have started my 103rd year. I was 103 the third of January. I don't feel a hundred years old. I don't feel like I was more than 70 years old. I am not blind but I can't see Edith across the room." (Edith was her room-mate.)

"They are wonderful to me here in the home. It is a lovely home. All of the helpers and nurses are so good."

When our interview was completed, I asked if I might take her picture. She agreed and removed her sweater because she thought her appearance would be better. She patted her beautiful white hair to be sure it was in place. We chatted gaily during this proceeding. Then I helped her put her sweater back on and gave her a little surprise gift of solid cologne. Her delight at the fragrance was wonderful and she opened the little box and held a tiny bit near her nose again. "It's mine?"

"Yes, do you like it?"

And she agreed it was a nice surprise and invited me to come to visit again.

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