

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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BOATS FOR FREIGHT OR EXCURSIONS
By Mrs. Harold B. Hyde

Our invitation to attend a potluck at the Harold McGhee home and dessert at the Joseph Bean home on Rock River included a ride between the two houses on a catamaran. Being a landlubber, there were some misgivings about how enjoyable a boat trip on Rock River might prove. As we viewed the shores, the bridges, and the island from a different perspective, we saw a drifting boatload of people and our host graciously gave the boat a tow. The conversations included talk about early river boats and the old amusement parks, later documented by reading old newspaper clippings and browsing several mornings in the Rockfordonia files of Rockford Public Library. Several telephone calls and some interviews later, a story about the boats on Rock River had taken shape. The history may not be complete but it is fascinating.

From St. Louis in 1844 came the "Lighter", a steamer, with a cargo for Rockford. On July 1, the craft made a trip to Roscoe.

Back home glancing through Sinnissippi Saga we read: "First steam-propelled boat ever to reach Rockford was the 'Gypsy', a stern wheeler 100 feet long and 30 feet wide, which made the trip upstream from Alton in 1838 carrying Dr. George Haskell--" His story had appeared in June 1883 Rockford Gazette and explained that it was a time of high water. Even so, great difficulties were encountered before the 16 tons of freight including household furniture, merchandise for a store, and supplies of meat and flour were landed in Rockford.

An early effort was made to ship live stock by flatboat from the Rock River area to New Orleans. A cargo of potatoes started out for St. Louis but never reached that market.

Joshua White of Stillman Valley and Lucius Reed of Byron built six boats, 16 by 50 feet in size. They loaded the boats with 25 cattle and 100 hogs. They set out in April of 1841 and first encountered trouble at the Rock Falls Rapids. It was August when they reached New Orleans.

W.F. Huffman brought to Rockford a lake boat which he called "City of Rockford". It was found that this early "City of Rockford" had too large a propeller for the shallow water. The boat was shipped away after it was decided that its construction was better suited for deeper water. This boat is not to be confused with a later boat of the same name.

A two-deck steamer was built on the Rock River bank in 1857 and named "Rockford". Steve Inman was the contractor and working with him were his brother, William Inman and Captain Weldon. The owners were Potter and Finnick. The Wood Sash and Door Company, located on the Water Power furnished material for the decking and wood work. The boat was equipped with side paddle wheels. It was used as a pleasure boat in Rockford for four seasons. Later, using the chute at the dam, it plied for two seasons as a freighter between Oregon and Rockford. Two more years saw its use between Dixon and Oregon. It ran on an eddy and its useful life was over. The hull was used for a ferry boat. The cargo was often wheat, according to Mr. J. H. Davey, who told his recollections

to an early Rockford newspaperman. Wheat from Oregon was ground into flour in Rockford. This boat was the forerunner of a number of excursion boats.

In the Rockford Republic of July 31, 1905, a hand bill was mentioned. This old document was then in the hands of Mr. Irving Foltz. It mentioned the regular trips of the Steamer Rockford to Rockton, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday of each week, leaving Rockford at 7:00 A.M. and arriving at Rockton at 11:30 A.M. The return trip was 3:30 P.M., leaving Rockford, and arrival at Rockford at 6:00 P.M. Passengers were landed at intermediate points on the River. Freight was hauled or the boat could be procured for pleasure excursions. Pennock, Sterling & Co., Rockford, July 1st, 1857 was at the bottom of the old hand-bill. The poster was then forty eight years old.

The Arrow was launched in either 1889 or 1890, according to



an old newspaper, or at about the time Harlem Park was opened. Sinnissippi Saga gave the date of its maiden voyage as 1885. This trim boat was built in the style of lake boats with shaped hull and awning and vertical engines, driven by a propeller. It was small and handsome. About 1900 the Arrow sank opposite Knightville and the remains of the boat were never removed from the mud and sand of Rock River.

The "May Lee" followed the "Queen" in point of time. It was so well patronized that it was put on the ways, cut in two parts and a middle section added. For some time the added central portion was easily discernible. "May Lee" and the "Illinois" were controlled by the street railroad company. They made regular scheduled trips to the parks and picnic grounds of Rockford.

The "May Lee" was named by Captain Theodore O. Largent for his two children. The boat made regular trips from the piers on the east bank of the river, near the Rockford Wholesale Grocery Company, to Illinois Park, Loves Park, Latham and other upriver outing grounds.

One gala event heralded by announcement by the Daughters of the American Revolution, having the official emblem and reading: "Compliments of Mrs. Ralph Emerson for a boat ride, to meet the Daughters of the American Revolution attending the Third Conference." In the left hand corner it had engraved "The May Lee, at the Water Works Wednesday, June 7th at 5 o'clock. This old announcement is preserved in Rockford Public Library and the occ-

asion was written up in the minutes of the Rockford Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution. Mrs. Ralph Emerson was the first regent of the Rockford Chapter DAR, and served in that capacity in the years 1894 to 1897.

The "Illinois" was built in 1900 by Mayor Amasa Hutchins and



Mr. Baker and run by these two men until the death of Mr. Hutchins in 1917. Then Captain Baker purchased the other half interest and continued the operation of the "Illinois". These two men had been interested in the Rockford Steam Yacht Company, owning the small propeller boat, the "Arrow".

By 1919, according to the Rockford Morning Star of May 30 the "Illinois" had carried 65,000 passengers. After the first three years, Captain Baker was always in the pilot house.

An old clipping, yellowed with age and undated, in the Rockfordonia File at the library states "--the old 'Transit' that remained in the excursion trade until recent years (sic) and was finally broken up. The last of her timbers and planks were used in the construction of a boathouse on the east side of the river on the site recently purchased by Mayor Jackson for his new home". (Mr. Jackson was Rockford's mayor in 1905.) Further exploration revealed that the "Transit" was a side wheel craft. A feature was that band concerts were combined with the boat ride for several years.

The "Queen" was ironhulled, setting low in the water and using an engine. One winter high water came, followed by freezing and the Queen settled to the bottom of the river and was frozen in. That winter, filled with frozen water, did not damage the hull and the craft was again put into operation.

Rivalry between the owners of the Arrow and the Queen may have led to the construction of the most famous of these Rock River steamboats, the "Illinois" completed in 1900. The "Illinois" was an institution on the Rock River. Afternoon trips were made daily from the landing at the foot of Mulberry Street up the river and back, making a stop at the Harlem Amusement Park. Having a length of 125 feet and a beam of 26 feet, the "Illinois" could carry up to 1,000 passengers. In 1918 it was purchased by the Excursion Amusement Company and renamed "City of Rockford" and was credited with carrying an estimated 50,000 passengers a year. It was destroyed by fire on March 4, 1924, across the river from Franklin Place.

"Did you ever ride on the 'Illinois', the river boat?" was the question put to Mrs. John E. Dirksen, formerly Gladys Beech, born in Rockford 72 years ago.

"Oh, yes! I just loved it. I've always loved the water. My

the native American tradition that had been forming. The Swedish craftsmen turned their skills early to production of furniture that was in demand. Sometimes the designer was first a cabinet maker who showed more than average originality.

For an example of one of Rockford's many designers, turn to ROCKFORD FURNITURE HERALD. Here we find a brief biography of Peter H. Palmer, born April 25, 1861, in Westergotland, Sweden. In some ways his career was typical. Mr. Palmer learned the trade of cabinetmaker in his native Sweden. He first found employment in this country in Union Furniture Company of Rockford.

The early cabinet maker needed a knowledge of every feature of furniture construction. Furniture making was largely hand work. Thus, when Peter Palmer began to give his full attention to furniture designing, he had a fully developed sense of styling. Coupling this with a native artistic ability, he was very successful at the drawing board.

Peter H. Palmer's principal work was with Royal Mantel and Furniture Company. He served as vice president and superintendent of Rockford Standard Furniture Company. It was in 1898 that he became superintendent and designer for Royal Mantel and Furniture Company.

A son, Amandus T. Palmer, became head designer for Landstrom Furniture Corporation and a designer for Blackhawk Furniture Company. Carl Palmer, another son, was in 1928 connected with Rockford Cedar Furniture Company, according to the ROCKFORD FURNITURE HERALD of June 5, 1928.

P. H. Palmer, the well-known Rockford Furniture designer who had come to Rockford with his parents in 1881, died here, May 11, 1928, at the age of sixty-seven years. He was survived by his widow Clara, three sons, and two daughters.

The success with which Rockford Furniture manufacturers exhibited their products and sold them in large quantities, testifies to the skill and ingenuity of the designers. Not only did these men know the problems of constructing furniture, but they kept abreast of the demands and style preferences of their day.

DATING ROCKFORD-MADE FURNITURE IS DIFFICULT By Hazel M. Hyde

Bedroom furniture made in Rockford many years ago has found its way into the home of Betty L. Canon, Route 1, Box 586, Lincoln California 95648. This furniture was made by Rockford Cabinet Company. It has hand painted designs on the top drawers and on the foot of the bed. A letter addressed to Rockford National Furniture Company brought the response that the bedroom suite was probably manufactured between 1876 and 1893.

The Rockford National Furniture official further stated that in the years 1876 to 1893 Japanese persons made door to door calls on many Rockford furniture companies to hand paint furniture.

The history of the Rockford Cabinet Company must start with



the Rockford Mantel Company which was organized in 1890. A building was erected and it began operations at the corner of Eleventh Street and Eighteenth Avenue. Its first secretary was Louis Sandeen.

A change of name came about when the company was reorganized in 1894. The panic of 1893 may have been a factor in reorganization. George King became president of the Company then bearing the name East Rockford Mantel Company. One person among the promoters at that time was Armour Jones. Linking the information concerning the years the Japanese artists were active in seeking work in Rockford furniture factories and the change in name, might tend to date the bedroom furniture prior to 1894.

However, the name Rockford Cabinet Company was restored in 1905. The type of ornamentation might rule against this later date. In 1905 the president of Rockford Cabinet Company was C.G. Peterson, brother of Rockford's well-known furniture factory promoter and organizer. P. A. Peterson was vice-president and A. E. Johnson was secretary-treasurer. The capital of the company was \$60,000.

Dr. W. L. Ransom in a series of articles for Rockford Morning Star, entitled "How Rockford Became an Industrial City," written in 1924, wrote that bedroom furniture was one product of Rockford Cabinet Company. P.A. Peterson had advanced the idea of producing built-up stock, or plywood. The Rockford Cabinet Company worked after 1905 in conjunction with the Rockford Veneer and Panel Company located at Twelfth Street and Nineteenth Avenue.

To the unpracticed eye, the photographs with their beautiful markings in the wood itself, suggest the use of veneer rather than solid wood. Scanning catalogues of various years failed to establish that a hand-painted and veneer ornamented furniture of this style was being made at the later date. The delicate blues and light buff tones of color suggest a Japanese artistry.

In 1915 O. E. Landstrom joined the company as secretary and later became president. In 1924 the company had a capital of



\$1,500,000 and approximately 500 employees.

In the 1930's the Rockford Cabinet Company became a division of Consolidated Industries Corporation. The last listing of the Company was in the 1952 City Directory as a division of the Free Sewing Machine Company.

Mrs. Sally Andres of the Rockford Library's Local History and Genealogy Room, has many such requests for information on Rockford furniture and on the industries themselves. She states there are scrapbooks, furniture catalogues, and furniture magazines of the periods in question. Further, there are still persons living in the community who might have family connections with the management or workers in early furniture factories.

PLANS FOR ANNUAL BANQUET

The second Annual Banquet of the Rockford Historical Society will be held on Thursday, March 4, 1971 at Henrici's Restaurant, on East State Road at the Tollway. Dinner will be served at 6:30 P.M. followed by a tour through the Atwood Clock Museum located at Henrici's. For more information contact Brice Sheets, chairman of the banquet committee, whose phone number is 399-2552.

Plans for the banquet were finalized at the quarterly meeting of the Board of Directors held on Wednesday, January 27, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Phillip B. Johnson, 208 North Prospect Street. Among other topics discussed at the meeting were changes in the by-laws suggested by Attorney Johnson, and several local buildings which are available and have been suggested as possible permanent homes for the organization. No action was taken in regard to the buildings.

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dad was a traveling man. When he came home he would take mother and me for a ride on the Illinois."

"There was an Illinois Park", she continued, "named for the Illinois boat. The place, though, that was most popular for amusement in those days was the Harlem Park. The last time I was in Harlem Park was in 1924, the year I was married. My marriage took place August 29, 1924. The 'Illinois' docked there and took on passengers or let them off. The boat ran only in the afternoons and evenings."

"What kind of amusement was to be found there?" was my next question.

"There were such things as the Figure 8 up in the air with little cars you sat in, the Giant Dip, and the Circle Swing. Oh, there were picnic tables, too. Chautauqua had fine programs at Harlem with concerts, lectures and the like. Oh, we loved to go there. Besides the boats they had open air cars, like trailers, behind the street cars. The seats were covered with straw matting. It was especially fun to sit in the back seat."

Realizing we had strayed from the subject of Rock River boats, she paused and then resumed, "There was another boat called the 'Queen'. Our Epworth League from Grace Methodist Church used to take this boat for the church picnic in Illinois Park. It was a wooded area and very nice for this kind of outing. You will remember someone pointed out the Illinois Park used to be near the land owned by the Lobdells and house of Annette and Joseph Bean on your catamaran trip on Rock River. It was fifteen cents to take a round trip on this excursion boat in the daytime. At night it cost more because they often had dances and musicians on the boat."

"Where did you get on the boat?" I put in.

"We took the boat down near the library at Library Park. I've still got a plate that shows the Library Park, the first post office I remember, and old high school. You can see the owls of the high school on it."

"Did you go on the 'Illinois' often?"

"Oh, yes. My grandfather John Harmon Beach was a sailor in the days of sailing vessels. Maybe I just inherited my love of the water."

"How did your people happen to come to this area?"

"Well, my grandfather was married in 1853. My father was born in Winnebago County. It happened this way: Grandfather Beach came to visit an uncle near Pecatonica. He went to a dance and met Mary Oviatt and after a time they were married. Her father was a supervisor and a justice of the peace. My parents first lived at 844 North Madison, close to the Y. I was born on 1238 Quarry Street. The house is still standing but the number is changed and the street is now Fairview, that's parallel with School and Blaisdell. Rent was \$5.00 a month in those days. I've lived 63 years in my home at 128 Irving. It's in the west end and I'm going to live here until I die here."

Mrs Harold McGhee, formerly Marion Knighton, said Mrs. Dirksen called her and told her I was checking up on the old excursion boats. She hunted up a "History of Loves Park", which really was a park, which her daughter had written at school in 1957. She said the steamer, the Queen, took people to Loves Park, which was named for the Malcolm Loves Farm, although Love was not the first

owner. The park was north of the woods across from the country club. The Winnebago Outing Club composed of Rockford businessmen rode the Queen, a small steamer, so they could play baseball there. The neighborhood boys used to shag the baseballs for them in return for a free meal. There was a dance pavillion, too, up near the baseball diamond. Mrs. Betty McCarren Asprooth, of the bakery folks, built a cottage still standing next to the McGhees' home, and the baseballs sometimes broke their windows. The playing field was south of the McGhees and the pavillion was where the woods start. In 1944 an old pump and old planks from the pavillion were still up in the woods. The Beefsteak Club used to meet at the Loves Park also. There was a board walk from the old high bridge to Loves Park.

"Harlem Park was across the river. The Queen was just a small steamer and it was kept very busy. Now some boats were used to bring people from some of the churches to the island across from and near the McGhees for mass baptisms, but I don't think the Queen was one of these."

"Where did the 'Illinois' dock?"

"The 'Illinois' docked at the foot of Glendale Road, near where Joseph Bean's home is. People could dance at the pavillion there. You see the excursion boats were tied in with the beaches for swimming, the parks, and good picnic places. Part of the old Eddy farm was used for baptisms. Then there was the Shippee Swimming Beach. Folks didn't usually just get on the boat to take a boat ride. They went somewhere, usually to an amusement park like the Illinois Park or Harlem Park. The 'Illinois' was later called 'The City of Rockford'."

I then told her about Gladys Dirksen's favorite amusement at Harlem Park. Mrs. Dirksen said, "The one I liked the best was the Old Mill. It was a stream of water and you went through it in a rowboat, only you didn't row. At one place there was a devil with a pitchfork. At another place a mule kicked at you."

"Yes," said Mrs. McGhee, "That's the sort of thing you found. There was a roller coaster, too, at Harlem Amusement Park. That was just north of Auburn Street on the west side of the river. I'm sure you'll find more about the boats in early Rockford newspapers. At that time the excursions were a favorite family amusement and the young people enjoyed them especially well."

OF DESIGN AND DESIGNERS OF FURNITURE

By Hazel M. Hyde
(concluded from last issue)

The migrating pioneers were not always the poor, and often some fine piece of furniture was carefully packed and brought to the frontier in a covered wagon. The homes of the more prosperous early settlers might contain several fine examples of the best American made furniture or some brought from England.

Factory productions, with its interchangeable parts, brought a kind of confusion of styles and a restless search for novelty about the 1850's.

Rockford's furniture factories began after the Chicago fire of 1871. These profited by the double heritage of Swedish design and