

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF SECOND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

By William J. Condon

The formation of the Second Congregational Church was an offshoot of the beginning of Congregationalism in 1837. During the winter of 1837, Rev. John Morrill arrived from New England with his family and on May 5, 1837, organized a Congregational Church composed of 8 members. The first home was a large barn owned by Daniel S. Haight and was located at what is now East State and 3rd Street. By 1839 the membership had increased and a church was built at So. Church and Green Streets. This frame structure served the purpose until 1845 when it was cleared to erect a brick church on the east side at what is now Walnut and South Second Streets.

By October 1849 the fledgling organization had 287 members among its congregation. At this time 43 of these members, believing the time had come when Rockford could support two Congregational Churches, asked for letters of dismission that they might form the Second Congregational Church. It is interesting to note why these people decided to form a new church. The chief reason for establishing a west side church was due to the members' growing tired of tramping across the uncanny old bridge which had superceded the ferry boat. During periods of inclement weather it was many times unsafe to cross the river and consequently, members would arrive late for services or in some cases, not at all.

The mother church considered the move ill-timed but in due course gave her consent. On October 30, 1849, a meeting was held at the school house in West Rockford for the taking of proper measures for the formation of a new church. On November 7, 1849, 41 persons holding letters from the First Congregational Church formed the new church and adopted Articles of Faith, Covenant and Rules of Government. Besides the 41 transfers, 6 persons from other towns joined, making 47 in total. The first church was the frame structure at Church and Green Streets that the First Congregational Church had used previously. The first pastor was Rev. Lansing Porter who had earlier preached at the First. Another thought prevailing at this time was that there was jealousy and animosity between the two factions. The secessionists from the west side proved to be very gracious, however, as they continued their subscription to the old church for another year.

By 1855 the old church had become obsolete, and on August 16 of that year a meeting was held to decide on a site for the new church. One group thought it best to go north of State Street but another faction thought this to be impractical due to the thickets and swamp of the north. By a vote of 11-2 it was decided upon to pay \$300 for a site at South Church and Chestnut Streets. Some members couldn't understand why the pastor, Rev. Joseph Emerson, wanted to live way up north at Haskell's orchard. For those who would wonder where this was, it faced Haskell Park just north of the Mendelssohn Club. This period proved to be the most serious

financial crisis the church ever faced. In January 1856, subscriptions in the amount of \$20,000 were sought. The pews were to be sold and located by those subscribing, scrip being used in the transfer. Those owning seats were to have the advantage of a small assessment to meet current expenses than those who simply rented. A stone church was decided upon but subscriptions were not enough so another was undertaken in 1858 when the structure was completed.

As stated above, the mid-1850's was a period of extremely light money and much self-sacrifice was undertaken to meet the obligations. Interest was an exorbitant 10%, and the currency was mostly worthless if carried for any length of time. But membership struggled through the Civil War and by 1871 during the pastorate of Dr. Frank Woodbury it was voted upon to reconstruct the church interior. This required \$11,000 and proved adequate until 1882 when further changes were made. In 1885 a memorial room was added and was donated by Mr & Mrs William A. Talcott as a memorial to their child, Fanny. In 1887, the church purchased a parsonage at the corner of N. Main Street and Fisher Ave. which, after improvements, cost over \$10,000. This continued to be the parsonage until 1955 when it was sold and is now a business establishment known as Connie's.

In the fall of 1891, during the pastorate of Dr. Walter Barrows, plans were submitted for a new church building. More than \$80,000 was immediately subscribed with Ralph Emerson, pioneer Rockford industrialist, heading the list with a gift of \$10,000. The site is the present location of the church at Park Ave. and Church St. and the cost was \$17,500. The building was dedicated May 8, 1892, at a total cost of \$114,000. Of interest here is the material placed in the cornerstone. Included are: a copy of the Rockford Register Gazette, Records of the church and Sunday school, a list of contributors to the church, records of the public schools, records of Rockford Seminary, records of the Rockford Hospital and churches and records of the City of Rockford. The new edifice was hailed for miles around as one of the finest in the area.

Tragedy lay ahead, though, and the new church was not long for this world. At approximately twelve thirty on February 20, 1894, Mrs. Chandler Starr, the church organist, left the church after practice. By one o'clock a fire had started and by one-thirty was burning uncontrollably. The congregation immediately made plans for rebuilding, and by December 2 of the same year a rededication was held. Only \$40,000 of insurance was realized and once again the members faced an uphill struggle to obtain funds by subscription. T. D. Robertson, a charter member, wired from California pledging \$5,000. Ralph Emerson wrote from Philadelphia pledging one-eighth of the entire rebuilding cost.

During the early 1890's a great debate ensued within the church regarding the matter of pew rentals. In those days, most churches either rented out or sold outright pews to members who desired such. As mentioned above, ownership kept operating assessments at a low level. Renters of pews and others paid a higher assessment for current expenses. A ty-

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After The Fire



pical method for apportioning the fixed number of pews was indicated in a letter written by Treasurer John Barnes on May 26, 1892, when the new church was built. He states in a note to the congregation that the earliest members (those joining from 1849-59) would be invited to make their selection of seats. Then the remainder may make their selection. According to the records of January 22, 1891, the highest rental fee was \$80. Each member would decide how much he wanted to pay for the right to have a reserved seat at a certain location (not unlike the arrangement at sporting or other recreational events). It was not until 1894 that the Board of Trustees finally voted to create a system of free seating. Under the existing system of fixed seating, either by rental or assignment, the seating capacity was already filled. However, by allowing free seating it would make possible a larger growth of membership which would in turn allow for a permanent increase in revenue. One can imagine the confusion on the first few Sundays, under the new regime, as a former pew renter would approach his old pew only to find it already occupied.

By the time the church celebrated its 50th birthday in 1899, 805 members were listed and at the 75th Anniversary, approximately 1300 names were on the membership rolls. As far as the physical plant was concerned, very little was done from 1894 to 1949 except for several faceliftings of the altar.

On the 100th Anniversary date, November 7, 1949, ground was broken for Gordon Chapel. This addition was made at the south end of the church and was named after Dr. John Gordon and his wife in appreciation of their 34-year ministry from 1912 to 1946. This chapel has become a popular setting for marriages regardless of denomination. The church has also fostered the growth of several Congregational churches in the Rockford area which ironically has taken members away from the mother church.

In closing it must be noted that the imposing structure at the corner of Park and Church must be a pretty good place to work. Only 11 men have served the church as pastor in its 121-year history.

BELVIDERE AND ARGYLE TOUR

By Hazel Kluck

One of the hottest days of the summer, Sunday, June 20, found about 25 members and friends of the Rockford Historical Society gathering for a tour of the eastern part of Winnebago County and part of Boone County. The group divided, half going first to Belvidere to visit the Boone County Historical Society's Museum, where none other than His Honor, Mayor Dominic Kirane, joined Emmett Sullivan and other members of their society in welcoming the members of our society.

Among the many things to be seen at the museum was a miniature demonstration of a barn raising. This model was built, explained, and demonstrated by Herb Hallstrom. Their displays include quite a few Indian artifacts, as well as historic and pioneer pictures, early household and farm equipment, toys, musical instruments, military items, clothing, Miss America (Judith Ford) items, and things manufactured throughout the years in Belvidere--just to mention a few items. Some of the displays bear the names of some of our own members as donors. One fairly recent acquisition of which they are very proud is a beautiful rosewood Chickering "square grand" piano. Mr. Sullivan asked if anyone in the group played, as no one had played a tune on this fine piano since they had received it. One of our guests, Barbara Borg (who is totally blind), was volunteered by her friends, and delighted everyone, particularly our Belvidere hosts, by sitting down at the piano and playing a couple of numbers, while her trusty Leader Dog, Lucky, occupied his favorite spot--under the piano. Dr. Maude Stowell did the honors for the second group.

The Boone County Historical Society Museum is located at 311 Whitney, Belvidere, and is open 2:00 to 4:30 p.m., on Sundays and at other times by appointment for groups. A visit to this museum, which is only three or four years old, is well worth the time and effort. It gives an idea of what it will be like for our society once we obtain a "home" for the things we have.

The other half of the tour group made their first stop at the Willow Creek Presbyterian Church at Argyle, where they were greeted by Rev. and Mrs. Lester Reemtsma. On a hot day, there's nothing like a drink of cold fresh well water! (Even Lucky agreed.) All were invited to enjoy the cool dining room of the church while Clem Burns and Stuart Golding, the Leaders for the two groups, presented a bit of history regarding the area and the Scottish settlers as researched by Clem Burns; and Pastor Reemtsma told some of the history of the church. There was a display of historic pictures of the congregation, etc. In case you think the name Reemtsma doesn't sound Scottish, -- the pastor is of Holland Dutch descent, having been raised in the German Valley area of Stephenson County. He is quite often asked how a Holland Dutchman ever got mixed up with all the Scots of Willow Creek. After an informal visit with Pastor and Mrs. Reemtsma and among members of the tour group, everyone toured the church at leisure, after which Mrs. Reemtsma and her helpers brought forth ice cream, home-made cakes, and coffee which was enjoyed by all

before continuing the tour.

Following is a slightly edited version of the research done by Clem Burns and presented by him and Stuart Golding to their respective groups at the church at Argyle.

THE SCOTTISH SETTLEMENT

This Willow Creek Presbyterian Church is so closely intertwined with the surrounding community that the story of one is of the other, down to our present day. (The church celebrated its 125th anniversary in 1970.)

In the district of Kintyre, Argylshire, Scotland, a peninsula about forty-one miles long and seven miles wide, Christianity first came to the western highland country of Scotland, in the parishes of Campbeltown and South End; and it was from these two districts that the pioneers of our Argyle settlement came.

The "Black Plague" broke out in London in 1666 and spread throughout parts of Scotland (or Caledonia, as it was called) and almost depopulated the Kintyre area. The Marquis of Argyle encouraged families from Renfrewshire, Ayrshire, and Galway to come to his holdings; and these were the Covenanters of Scotland. The first settlers here at Willow Creek had worshipped God in the old South End Church and in the Long Row Church in Campbeltown.

The first settlers to leave Kintyre for this area were the Armours, who came in 1834 and settled in Ottawa, LaSalle County. James Armour, a shoemaker in Ottawa, came to this area of Northern Illinois looking for land and took up a claim on the county line between Winnebago and Boone Counties, on Willow Creek, which likely was named for the flora of the waterline. This claim was passed on to cousins, John and George Armour, who built a log cabin as part of proving the claim. They later returned to Scotland, where they found the farmers of Kintyre in serious condition, and spread the word of the good land and opportunities in this area of Northern Illinois. Their Uncle, John Greenlee, came in 1836 and built a cabin on this land which had been purchased from the Winnebago Indians in a treaty consummated at Fort Dearborn. It is said that as the Indians vacated the land, Mr. Greenlee purchased corn standing on the tract now occupied by St. James Catholic Church, 400 North Second Street, Rockford and husked it, thereby providing grain food to supplement the game of the area. In order to have the corn ground, it was necessary for Mr. Greenlee to carry a sack of it to the Newberg Mill on the Kishwaukee River, at present Mill Road. Ellen Greenlee was the first child born in the parish.

In the period from 1837 to 1848, seventeen families came to this area. First were the Reids, who were blessed with a son in 1839, the first male child born in this settlement. Then came the Pickens, Howies, Giffens, MacDonalds, Fergusons, another Picken family Andrews, other Reids, more Armours, Ralstons, Harveys, McEachrans. These courageous families embarked from Campbeltown on the Gleaner, and others from Glasgow and Greenock. It is recorded that the Gleaner hoisted anchor June 4, 1842, and that the voyage was three weeks and three days.

This church was organized in December, 1844, with the

first sacrament celebrated January 13, 1845, the congregation having decided to follow the "old School" Presbyterian, as being sounder in doctrine, in spite of some pro-slavery views.

So the descendants of the Covenanters, who, in the 17th century, bound themselves by covenants to maintain Presbyterianism as the sole religion of Scotland, and were instrumental in establishing the supremacy of Parliament over the Crown in Scotland and England, and initiated the first covenant for religious purposes in 1557, called the Congregation of the Lord, greet visitors to Willow Creek Church today.

We know how these Scots contributed to the religious and community spirit, but let us also consider how the same area of the world sent forth men and women as educators; medical, engineering, and mechanical professionals; as well as men of letters. And do not overlook those of agricultural bent who gave us the broadbacked black Scottish "doddies," the Aberdeen Angus; the red, white, and roan Shorthorns, sheep for wool and meat; the oats to make big men and strong horses; and barley to malt over the smokey peat fires of Lord Dewar-Dewar (pronounced with a syphon, rather than a hyphen, as Don Dewar formerly herdsman at Rock River Farms was wont to say). Many stockmen still mention the names of William S. Marr, Lord Sudley, Amos Cruikshank, and others who strove for quality lines in their stock.

And we must recall that Scots settled in many parts of Winnebago County: the Cambells and Barkers and others north of Pecatonica; around Winnebago: The Smiths, McGeachies, Kerrs, Barricks, McDougalls; and so many others that one is hard put to recall all of them. But who remembers Will Nicholson and his sister who gave us music with a good Scottish accent? And Luther McCullough of Harrison Township and his imitations of another famous Scotsman, Harry Lauder? Note the men who left their marks in the old stone buildings they built so well-because, as my old friend, Greg McKenzie, maintained, the doors and windows of the Scottish masons were superior, tighter, and more draft free than those of their English mason counterparts. And the marks left in so many other ways, such as the newly arrived cousin of one of the Italian masons, who went to work for Greg McKenzie, who had some of the Priests, Lyddons, and others in his employ, and so the poor Venetian learned his English with a Scottish accent as broad as a bolt of wooled goods.

But, in the words of the Immortal Bard: "A man's a man, for a' that."

We hope all who made the tour enjoyed themselves, and that you, too, have enjoyed part of the tour by reading this bit of history.

EVERY MAN HAS A STORY
By Hazel M. Hyde
(continued from last issue)

"I was working for a furniture store in 1909 in Joliet," he continued. "I fed the horses and picked up freight. In my pocket was ten dollars that belonged to my employer. Someone had told me about Rockford so that day I asked for my



wages of twelve dollars. They said I must wait until the end of the week but I pointed out I could keep the ten and they could send the two dollars. Another young fellow, Teddie BJORKE, and I bought tickets on the interurban for Rockford. We had to wait awhile in Elgin. After we had paid our fare we had only twenty cents between us. We spent ten cents for a half dozen cinnamon burns. It was about 4:00 P.M. when we got off the interurban at 5th Avenue and 7th Street in Rockford. No friends, no money! You couldn't really count ten cents as having money in a strange town. I was nineteen years old when I came to Rockford in 1909.

"Four young men were talking Swedish and I knew considerable Swedish. I went over and asked them for a quarter to get something to eat and inquired the way to the Swedish Salvation Army where the two of us hoped to sleep. They asked some questions and then they asked me to come stay with them and let my friend go to the Swedish Salvation Army. The four of them lived in one room. They had beds and there may have been a dresser but there was no carpet on the floor. They talked to the landlady and she got a pillow and blanket and put them on the floor for me to use for sleeping. They also talked her into giving me meals until I got a job. My friend stayed with the Swedish Salvation Army on 4th Avenue and 7th Street and beat the drums in their band. Afterward he went to California and died there.

"Every morning for two weeks I headed for Bursons first, then the water power, up Kishwaukee, to 23rd Avenue looking for a job. By 2:00 P.M. every day I had reached Haddorf Piano Shop on Harrison Avenue. Finally I found a new furniture factory, the Peerless, on 23rd Avenue near 7th Street that needed a worker. They had a Swede superintendent who gave me a job taking away from a rip saw at \$1.25 a day. I worked the last day of February and the first day of March. The custom was to hold back a month's pay so I got the pay for the one day in February in March and the first day of



March in April.

"On March 1st, Burson Knitting Company sent me a card to report for a job at \$1.65 a day to learn to be a knitter. The superintendent at the furniture factory was not very pleased but I had my buddy, Teddie Bjorke, with me and I asked that my job be given to him. He said, 'Well, I took a chance on you so I might as well take a chance on him.' And I hurried to Bursons and took the job. That was good money in those days.

"After I had worked two years at Bursons I began to notice the lint from the knitting machines was bad. About that time, Dr. Rogers, he was lame you know, examined me for insurance. He explained he must turn me down because lint is bad for the lungs.

"Leaving Bursons, I worked at a Swedish Restaurant at 2nd Avenue and 7th Street, where Gulers Appliance store is now. They featured 'All you can eat for a quarter.' They put buttermilk and milk on the table and you could drink all you wanted. For four years all went well on this job. The place was open on Friday and Saturday nights with just a lunch counter and that was part of my work.

"Sword Brothers Plumbers and Steam Fitters, located on 7th Avenue with an office on Seventh Street and Sixth Avenue, gave me my next job. I worked in the warehouse.

"Then I worked at Skandia Furniture on North Second Street. I was running a cross cut saw and a rip saw for \$1.25 a day. They used solid walnut for the tops of buffets and I had to match the grain when I sawed the tops.

"By this time I had met Esther Carlson and we were planning to get married. March 8, 1913, was the date we had set. I got to thinking about the future. How could I support a wife on \$1.25 a day? About 2:00 P.M. I went up and asked for a raise. 'You were only supposed to be getting \$1.00 a day and that's all some men get that have worked here longer. Because you did a good job, we are paying you top wages. I went back to my saw like a whipped dog. Then I went back and asked for the rest of the day off. The reply was, 'Take the rest of the day off and here's your pay. Don't come back tomorrow.' I sure felt bad but I went out to look for another job.

(continued in next issue)

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