

NUGGETS of HISTORY

Volume 10

May-June, 1973

Number 3

ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESIDENTS:

BRICE SHEETS, THIRD PRESIDENT

By Hazel M. Hyde

The Rockford Historical Society has been fortunate in having presidents of high calibre with a real devotion to local history. At first they are reluctant to talk about themselves, and Brice Sheets, never at a loss for words on other subjects, is no exception. First Brice talked about the society while he was president.

"As the record shows, I was president of the Rockford Historical Society from September of 1965 to September of 1967. At that time, W. Ashton Johnson was elected honorary president. During my term of office there were several events that took place which are important enough to mention.

"First, there was the dedication of the monument at Rock River ford on October 28, 1965. This was a boulder taken from the Truman farm in the northern part of Winnebago County with an appropriate bronze plaque attached. Carl Severin, chairman of the project, was responsible for all the work, and most of the credit should have been given to him. Mayor Benjamin Schleicher joined the ceremony. The monument was placed on the west side of the river at the



Fordham Dam, which was the west approach to the ford when it was used by Indians before white men came and by the white settlers of Rockford and the westward-bound white settlers in the 1830s and early 1840s.

"Next, of course, was the passing of Ash Johnson on December 11, 1965. This was indeed a very sad happening and meant the loss to the Historical Society of a very dear and dedicated friend. Much can be said about Ash the man as well as his dedicated mind to the history of Rockford. Let it suffice here to say that Rockford lost a true Rockfordite.

"There was the beginning of the Cultural Center for Rockford. While this very noble project is still in the building stage, it appears that Rockford is going to be the site of an extremely outstanding museum when it is finished. The Swedish Historical Society was the instigator of the project, with Carl Severin (a member of both societies) again doing the lion's share of the work as well as donating half of the acreage.

"It was during the last few months of my office that we began to make preparations for the Illinois Sesquicentennial, which was to be celebrated during 1968. Much discussion and many facts and pictures came to light during this time. The history of Rockford, of course, is a very large part of the Illinois Sesquicentennial. Out of this came the SINNISSIPPI SAGA, a new updated history of Rockford.

"During my membership in the Rockford Historical Society, I have served on many committees, such as program chairman, picnic chairman, nomination chairman. In all cases I had the pleasure of working with many, many fine people. I cannot help but feel that with continued work and devotion by the membership that the Rockford Historical Society will someday become known and respected by all of Rockford."

The entire membership of the Rockford Historical Society has felt very close to Brice Sheets and his wife, Mary Jane. Folks recall his face a little red from working most of the day to cook the barbequed lamb for the big family-style picnic on the old Rockford College Campus. At meetings in the Heritage Room of Home Savings and Loan, there was Mary Jane behind the coffee pot and a whole assortment of home-baked cookies that Brice had carried in. Brice presided over meetings, but most people remember much more clearly his joking as he spread out rolls of white paper on a picnic table. The programs he turned up for the society had historic interest and sometimes an element of surprise.

Turning to his personal history, Brice told me: "I was born in Rockford in 1916, and like my father, I am still living. I attended Garrison Grade School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and Central High School and graduated from Lake Forest Academy in 1933. From there I went to Dartmouth College and was in the class of 1937. Upon leaving Dartmouth, I started to work for my father in the silver business, and continued there until the business was sold in 1955. I worked for the Rockford Spring Company for two years, and for West Chemical Products, Inc., for four years. And then in 1961 I started to work for the Ogilby Insurance Agency, which is where I am working now. I was honored to be el-

ected president of the Independent Insurance Agents of Rockford for one term as well as having been asked to serve on the Steering Committee for the Illinois Sesquicentennial Program for Rockford, serving on the History Committee. And it was from this position that I was able to suggest an updated history of Rockford, which in turn produced the SINNISSIPPI SAGA."

The background of the Sheets family is part of Rockford's history, and Brice supplied this information:

"Raymond W. Sheets, my father, was born in 1889 and is still living. He has lived most of his life in Rockford. He attained the rank of Sergeant-Major during World War I. In 1922 he purchased the Rockford Silver Company (establish-



Sheets - Rockford Silver Company - 1008 - 1012 Mulberry Street

ed in 1875), moved it to Mulberry Street, and renamed it Sheets - Rockford Silver Company. The company was sold in 1955.

"Frank D. Sheets, my paternal grandfather, was born in 1858 and died in 1944. While he never made Rockford a permanent home, he was minister of Court Street Methodist Church for several years.

"Benjamin F. Sheets, my paternal great-grandfather, was born in Wattsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1832. He died in Oregon, Illinois, in 1922. He was very active in state as well as local politics. He attained the rank of Brigadier General during the Civil War.

"Christian F. Henry, my maternal grandfather, was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1854, and died in Rockford, Illinois in 1942. He was most well-known for his clothing-store, which he operated for so many years on the northeast corner of State and Main Streets. Also, he figured in many early landmarks, such as the present Trust Building and the Elks Club Building. His father's name was Johann (John) M. Henrich, who lived from 1814 to 1872, coming to America from Wurttenberg, Germany, in 1848. He became a citizen in 1852 and changed his name to Heinery. Several years after that the name was shortened to Henry.

"Charlotte Aileen Henry, my mother, was C. F. Henry's daughter. She was born in Rockford in 1889 and died in 1957. Her mother, Fanny Henry, was also born in Rockford in



1858 and died in 1925. Her father, James B. Skinner, came to Rockford from Barre Center, Vermont. He was born in 1821 and died in 1872. It was while he was a young man in Rockford that he invented a gang plow and a riding cultivator. The Skinner homestead was situated in the first block on North Main street and his shop occupied the site on which Woolworth's now stands. Part of the original homestead is still in existence within what is now called the Henry Building, in which you will find Stuckey's, Harmer's, Driscoll's etc., today. I can still hear my mother tell of her mother, while out hanging clothes to dry, being approached by two Indians asking for a drink of water. They had paddled down the Rock River from their encampment, which is now Sinnissippi Park, and parked their canoes about where the Moose Club is."



Childhood Home of Brice Sheets, 113 Lawn Place

By Hazel M. Hyde

In an interview on October 16, 1971, the fifth president of the Rockford Historical Society, Miss Emma Charlotte Lundgren, agreed to talk about her family.

"Both my paternal and maternal grandfathers came to America from Sweden in 1865. They were boyhood friends, both gunsmiths, and both had attained the rank of master in their craft. When my maternal grandfather, S. M. Ekwall, was offered a chance to work with John Ericsson--inventor, designer and builder of the ship "The Monitor," he persuaded his friend Carl Lundgren to go to America with him. Carl's older brother, Gustaf, had been in the United States for ten or more years and had repeatedly asked his brother to join him in Rockford. So the two friends set off together.

"But when they came to the United States, the Civil War had just ended, John Ericsson was no longer in favor with the government, and S. M. had no job. So both young men set off for Rockford where Carl (Charlie) went to work for his brother, but where S. M. could not find work.

"Hearing that jobs were open in the Brown Shops in Galesburg, S. M. took the train to that city. There he found work to his liking. There he also met Charlotte Anderson, loved her and married her. And that," said Emma with a chuckle, "is the way I trace my ancestry without a break to Adam and Eve, for Charlotte was the daughter of Adam and Eve Anderson."



Emma Charlotte Lundgren, fifth president of the Rockford Historical Society.

Three children were born to that marriage. Esther, Emma's mother, was the youngest. When Esther was eight, years old, the family moved to Nebraska. A few years earlier her father had purchased a section of land from the government at five dollars an acre, broken the prairie, and built the first frame house in Fillmore County, which is sixty miles southwest of Lincoln. Here the children grew up, became acquainted with prairie dogs and prairie chickens and rattlesnakes, experienced prairie fires, saw the buffalo disappear, and saw the prairie give way to farmland. Stories of these early days were favored by Emma and her brother over the conventional fairy and nursery tales

Emma Lundgren with her mother, Mrs. Esther Lundgren, and her older brother, Ralph Lundgren



of their childhood era.

When Esther completed the local schools, she went to Lincoln to study at the Nebraska Conservatory of Music. After completing her studies, she returned to the town of Shickley to teach piano, organ, and voice, play the church organ, and direct the church choir.

"My grandfather Lundgren stayed on in Rockford and worked as a smith in several factories. Several old directories list him as a blacksmith, but he never shod a horse. In his own workshop he made knives, razors, and small hand tools.

"In 1866 Helene Johanneson came from Sweden to marry him. They had two children. Henning was the older. Marie who died in infancy, was interred in the second grave to be dug in the Scandinavian Cemetery.

"My father attended Rockford Public Schools and graduated from the business college. He then studied watch repairing. As a young man he went to Shickley, Nebraska, to start a jewelry store. The two families had kept up their friendship through the years, and that was the reason he chose that place."

Here Miss Lundgren stirred the fire a bit, then resumed. Esther Ekwall and Henning met, and found they had much in common. They were married in 1895 in Nebraska.

"There was a period of depression, so Father decided it would be wise to leave Nebraska. There was no money in the jewelry business, nor in the teaching of music either. So they moved to Rockford. He went into the Rockford Watch Factory."

A delicious odor of something baking came from the



Kitchen, and Emma went to check the cupcakes she was baking, to take to a new neighbor. Returning, she resumed, "There were three children, my older brother Ralph, then Emma Charlotte, and the young brother Henry. When Henry was a baby, the family moved to Elgin and remained nine years before returning to Rockford. Grandmother Lundgren had died, and grandfather wasn't well enough to stay alone. Father worked in the Rockford Watch Factory until they closed.

"My brother Ralph and I graduated from Rockford High School, my brother Henry from a preparatory school in Chicago."

Emma smiled a little and said she supposed she started talking about the family because she didn't enjoy talking about herself. However, when assured that the historical society members would want to know about the lives and ambitions of their presidents, she began, "I attended Rockford College on the campus beside Rock River for two years. Then I went to the Chicago Training School, which trained people for religious work. It is now affiliated with Garrett Theological Seminary. I planned on going to South America to teach in a Methodist school in Argentina, but couldn't pass the physical examination because rheumatic fever at the age of thirteen had weakened my heart. Father had died in 1923 while I was in school. I came back to Rockford and applied for a job to teach in Rockford."

Emma Lundgren taught a year at old Kent School in a portable building. (It was an old Camp Grant Barracks of World War I.) There was a furnace in one corner of the old wooden building. However, it was so cold in the far corner that all children and the teacher wore boots for warmth. These were the days of galoshes with big buckles, in the 'Flapper Era.'

One day Emma, wearing flapper boots and a coat with a big fox collar, tripped over a little red chair and fell flat on the floor. The children didn't even laugh, although it must have looked funny to see the teacher stretched out on the floor. They looked at her and then went on with their work.

As for discipline, she found she could stand up in

front of the children and use words with four or five syllables and they were fascinated. It worked. One little boy said, "say it again--it sounds like singing."

(To be concluded in next issue)

WILLARD ASHTON JOHNSON, FIRST HONORARY PRESIDENT

By Hazel M. Hyde

(concluded from last issue)

In October, 1961, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were honored by more than 150 friends at the Church of the Christian Union on the occasion of their 40th wedding anniversary. They were presented with a coffee table with a Florentine marble top.

The children are Joan Johnson, who married James Duff, and lives with her husband and children in San Hosea, California, and Miss Bonnie Johnson, an art teacher in a New York High School. Bonnie is a talented artist and a licensed art teacher. One of her many paintings is a portrait of her father.

Among Ash's interests from youth was fishing. His father had about thirty acres of land on South Main Road near the Camp Grant Bridge, located in the bend of the river. It was a beautiful spot when Ash was growing up and it was a favorite fishing place. As boys, Ash and some of his friends, especially Hosmer C. "Red" Porter, used to go fishing together. They also went to Long Lake to fish. Another favorite fishing place was Lake Na-na-ka-gon in Wisconsin. Ash "stood up" for his old friend and fishing pal Red Porter and Porter did the same for him when he was married. Ash had been a member of a bachelor club called Wate-a-Wyle. Funny remarks shared with old friends and the family private jokes were a vital part of the life style of Ash Johnson.

Children reading Ash Johnson's book in NUGGETS OF HISTORY may wonder what kind of man he was. Here was man with a great sense of humor. His friends tell that he displayed extreme kindness to those in trouble. Ash had faith in people. He had a gift for making people feel special.

W. Ashton Johnson was aged 74 when he died at his home at 2011 Guilford Road. He had come to his love of printer's ink through his father, Harry Melancthon Johnson, who had been associated with the old DAILY REPUBLIC so many years. He was remembered by all as a good reporter. An editorial in ROCKFORD MORNING STAR accorded him this well - merited praise: He was "a community-minded citizen and a good reporter." His pride in Rockford had spun from his typewriter in humorous anecdotes, legends, and local facts he published as editor, columnist, and historian.

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is published bi-monthly by the Rockford Historical Society and sent to all members. Editorial Address: 1325 Cospers Ave., Rockford, Ill. 61107. Circulation Address: 2130 Clinton St. Phone 965-3126. Membership Chairman: Stuart Golding, 205 Washington St., Phone 226-1502. President: William Condon, 1215 Camp Ave., 61103, Phone-963-7203. Typing by Mrs. Warren Burlend.