

Nuggets of History

Volume XI

September-October, 1974

Number 5

HAZEL HYDE PREPARES INDEX FOR NUGGETS OF HISTORY

Hazel Mortimer Hyde, associate editor of NUGGETS OF HISTORY for the past eight years, has prepared a comprehensive index for all issues since the publication began in November, 1963. After each edition has been distributed, Mrs. Hyde prepares additional cards covering articles which appeared in that latest issue. They are all kept in the Local History Room of the main Rockford Public Library, and presently occupy almost two full drawers in the card catalog there.

Mrs. Hyde, a native of Labette County, Kansas, has been a resident of Rockford since 1936, when she arrived to accept a position at Montague School. She was head of the social studies department at Washington Junior High School from the opening of the school in 1940 until her retirement in 1968. She has her Bachelor's Degree from Kansas State College of Pittsburg, Kansas, and her Master's Degree from Northwestern University. For her Master's thesis, Hazel wrote a very comprehensive study of the Swedish element in Rockford, which may be read in the main library's Local History Room.

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is now in its eleventh year, and many topics have been covered throughout the years. Many of the articles have been written by Mrs. Hyde herself. It is certainly a great service to the Rockford Historical Society and to the community that Mrs. Hyde has undertaken. Hazel and her husband Harold, who were married on June 20, 1964, reside at 1518 Comanche Drive. They travel extensively, but still find time to do research and to attend most meetings of the Historical Society.

In addition to Mrs. Hyde's own articles, we have often printed the work of students from her classes at Washington. As she is no longer teaching, we have not had these for a while. However, throughout the years, Hazel kept copies of many of the reports her students handed in, and she will still make some of these available for NUGGETS OF HISTORY from time to time. The article by Miss Shelley Gucciardo was written in 1967; some alterations have been made by the editor to bring it somewhat more up-to-date.

URGENT REQUEST FROM STUART GOLDING

Do any of the members have or know where we can get pictures and information regarding the Old Rockford Grays? This was the company of men that was trained in the zouave type drill before the Civil War by Elmer Ellsworth and went into the war as Company D of the 11th Illinois Infantry. Mr. James Hennessey of Baltimore, Maryland, is doing research on these groups and would like pictures. If you know of anything pertaining to this group, please let me

know and we will make arrangements to have items copied. Contact Stuart K. Golding, 205 Washington Street, 61108, Telephone 226-1502.

JOURNEY TOWARD FREEDOM
By Shelley Gucciardo

Near Byron, Illinois, on Highway 2, about 15 miles from Rockford, there once stood an old stone barn which caused many comments and aroused much curiosity. Even without knowing the story back of the barn, people would look and wonder about the history of this ancient building. Some people did stop to take a closer look at the place and learn its story.

The tradition is that this old stone barn was once used as a station in the Underground Railroad. It is said that the slaves, who went traveling north to Canada and freedom, were brought to the barn at night by an operator, or "stationmaster", of the Underground Railroad.

The tired, hungry slaves would then be given a little food and water and encouragement. They were hidden somewhere in or under the barn. The slaves were expected to be silent and stay in that hiding place until someone came to take them on to the next station. There was supposedly a place in the foundation of one of the walls of the barn where the slaves were kept out of sight of the curious.

Some of the slaves were also said to have been hidden in the homes of the people living around Byron. They would stay in their hiding places for one night and all the following day, and then another "stationmaster" would come for them at dusk to take them to the next station. The white guides were familiar with the backroads, paths along the river, and ways to cross the fields and save distance. Rock River is fairly close to the old barn and may have been a landmark or guide in traveling.

Slaves that were hiding in the barn were said to have traveled through a tunnel leading from the old stone barn to another similar structure not far away. There someone would be waiting to take them to the next station, according to Wilbur L. Pickering, County Superintendent of Schools at Oregon. This property is now owned by Mildred Hamer.

After the barn was abandoned as a slave way station, it was used for a time as a regular barn, but gradually the stones began to crumble. For many years all four walls remained standing with the top open to the sky. There were square windows similar to those used in homes, and rounded doorways faced with stone. An interesting feature was a cellar-like place that adjoined the barn. There was a house close by in which people lived. Some people spoke of this as the Hale House and went there to see the antiques which the owners collected.

The ruins of the barn were at its original site until approximately fifteen years ago, when some new housing was



started in that area. Then the barn was torn down and the stones were hauled away. Being visible from the highway, it had become quite a legend, but people are in disagreement as to the actual time that it was dismantled.

THE UTTER FAMILY
By Clem Burns

Our Rockford Historical Society was greatly honored on Friday, September 20, by the visit of Mrs. Henry Utter of Chicago, who is the widow of the last of that name; it being quite familiar to many of us as the family who came here in 1852 and contributed so much to the industrial, commercial, and cultural life of our Forest City.

Mr. Utter passed away in Chicago in 1972, after a long life in various public utilities, thirty-four of which were in association with Commonwealth Edison, which serves our city. He was a 1913 graduate of old RHS, and attended the University of Illinois, later being commissioned a lieutenant of the Coast Guard and serving in World War One. Mrs. Utter told us, among other matters, that her Henry always regarded Rockford as his home area, and wished that items of the family might be given to some safe-guarding agency here. In respect to this wish, Mrs. Utter has delivered many items of the family history, photos, and news releases; and of great interest to those following the industrial development, a scrap book of the Utter Manufacturing Company, which is said to be the installer as well as sales outlet of the first water wheel turbine in the "water power". The family was interested in the family name firm; the Rockford Iron Works; three banks; a paper mill with the Rhodes investors; the silver plate plant; and the Rockford Watch Factory. It is gratifying to this Society to realize that we have been of assistance in the acquisition of this watch as well as other items of the early family.

It is documented that the Utter family is of Branden-

burg, Germany origin, having been raised to the nobility of that time in 1653, and an armorial bearing authorized, with an otter carrying a golden fish, as a portion of the heraldry; and that the name was "nobleized" as "Uttermarck", but as the family tradition goes, they "lost a mark, in traveling through Holland."

Isaac Utter was born in New York in 1808, and the family engaged in various enterprises in that state, including a woolen mill which they capitalized and built; they came to Rockford in 1852 to continue the family tradition of initiative and enterprise. The family home was at one time at 325 South Winnebago Street, and this property was given to Rockford Memorial Hospital. A later home was in the North Main and Napoleon area, and a picture is contained in our files.

Mrs. Utter does not drive, but engaged the services of a friend for the trip, and it was the pleasure of Barbara and Clem Burns to entertain the fine ladies at lunch in Henricis. They are greatly enthusiastic concerning the work and plans of our Society, and expressed great pleasure in the opportunity to meet with the prime movers in this wonderful community effort.

Bob Mauk was able to cut his busy day short, and greet Mrs. Utter, as were Carl and Tekla Severin, Stuart Ralston, Blanche Alden, Jan Davison, Mr. Ralston of the Harlem Society, and Mr. Linde. A researching of the Utter papers reveals that they made paper, water well drills, and associated machinery, which they apparently sold over most of the middle and western states; sorghum cane crushers, and evaporating equipment to reduce the liquid to syrup as well as to process maple tree sap into syrup and sugar; also a line of farm machines, horse power units, drills, seeders for both grain and grass seeds, the "Tiger" cultivator for all row crops, and planters for row crops, which required the presence of a teenager, wife or hired man to operate the lever to drop the seeds, as the other person drove the team of horses in straight rows. A far cry from the \$50,000 to power a farm in these days.

ROCKFORD FIRE FIGHTERS By Eugene Bressler

The history of the Rockford Fire Department dates back to the year 1852, the year the city was incorporated. The city charter concerning fire protection read as follows: "...the common council shall have the power to make and maintain public cisterns, dig wells, and erect pumps in the streets, for the extinguishment of fires and to organize and establish fire companies and to regulate the building and fixing of chimneys, flues, and stove pipes and to prevent the deposit of ashes in unsafe places." In 1855 an ordinance was passed establishing the fire department. This ordinance stated that the department was to consist of a chief, two assistant chiefs, one or more wardens, and such enginemen, horsemen, hook and ladder men, and bucketmen.

The first fire company was established on the east side in May of 1856 and was called the Washington Co. No. 1. It was located in the 100 block of South First Street, and remained there until 1900. In June of 1856 the west side was represented by Washington Co. No. 2, stationed at North Main Street just off West State Street, where Busch Jewelry Store is now located. Later came Union Co. No. 3 to cover South Rockford. These three companies were all volunteers. The first chief was Howard Frost, chief of Washington No. 1 and the East Side Volunteers.

Staffing the new hose companies was no problem. Aside from the fact that each volunteer escaped paying a poll tax, the social prestige and the civic pride made the position one to be desired. Some of the first volunteers were E. F. Ellis, M. A. Bartlett, Samuel Church, and E. F. Frost.

One of the first problems the city encountered was the stealing of water from the public cisterns. Therefore, on January 16, 1860, an ordinance was passed which said that any person taking water from a public cistern would be fined \$3 for the first offense, \$5 for any other time. The first big hotel fire was at the Winnebago House in 1866. This was located at the corner occupied until recently by Rockford Dry Goods.

In 1875 the city's population was about 11,000, and this also marked the completion of the city's waterway system, plus 125 fire hydrants.

Rockford's first paid fire department was formed in 1880. The population was then 13,000. John Lakin was the first paid fire chief. The first thing he did was to establish ten fire alarm boxes, using four miles of wire to connect them with the fire headquarters. Prior to this, bells were located on or near churches to sound alarms. Until Montague School was razed recently, there was still a bell located there for this purpose.

The fire department had one chief and five men who were paid \$1 a day; the chief received \$45 a month. The stations were to stay open 24 hours a day, with one man on duty during the day, and one at night. The salaried firemen were assisted by 13 volunteers. The first year of the professional fire department, there were seven alarms, and fire damage totaling \$9,000.

During the next four years, two new stations were built. Station No. 1 was located at 212 South Church Street. This station also served as a police station until 1906. The fire station remained at the same location until 1961. In 1887 the fire department had seven horse carriages and nine horses. Three years later the city had its first steam engine, which cost \$3100.

Chief Ed Heffran took command of the fire department in 1881. A year later Engine Co. No. 3 was built. Chief Heffran had two major fires in his first two years. They were at Potter Bros. Dry Goods and the Second Congregational Church. In 1904 a law was passed creating a board of fire and police commissioners. Between the years 1901-1907 Rockford hired its third fire chief, Frank Thomas, and stations five and six were occupied with hose companies and

horses.

The first fireman killed in the line of duty occurred on March 7, 1909. While fighting a fire at the Paper Box Company, Capt. Ernest Pearson was killed when a brick wall collapsed, burying him under the debris and killing him instantly. It was Capt. Pearson's day off, but when the alarm was turned in, he hurried to the fire with his family, who saw him killed. A year later a pension was created for firemen's widows. Also during this year the Rockford Fire Department purchased its first motorized truck. At this time the Department had 67 men, six stations, and twenty-one horses.

During the construction of Camp Grant, Capt. Julian loaned the camp a team of horses and a hose wagon to protect \$6,000,000 worth of government property. But in short order Camp Grant was hit with \$15,000 in fire damage, mostly from grass fires.

The last team of horses to make a fire run in Rockford came on July 19, 1918, from Station No. 6. Markings are still visible where the harnesses were suspended from the ceiling. The only retired member of Engine Co. 6 still living is Robert Loomer.

Chief Steve Julian retired as the fourth chief of the department in 1921. Thomas Blake was appointed the fifth fire chief in the history of Rockford, taking over six stations and a complement of 87 men. While responding to a fire that year, Arthur Wakeford was killed, becoming the second Rockford fireman to lose his life on the job.

On May 28, 1926, a serious fire at the Sutton Shop at 400 Elm Street killed five women and seriously injured eight others. In 1928 Engine Co. No. 8 was put into service at 505 Sherman Avenue. However, in 1931 this station was closed as an economic measure because of the depression.

Rockford's fire fighters escaped a near disaster when a major fire broke out in a sporting goods store, igniting shells, gunpowder, and many other flammable items. Eight companies battled this blaze, and fortunately no fireman were injured. The same year alarm boxes were installed at a cost of \$45,000.

The 1941-46 war years changed the fire department. Many of Rockford's fire fighters went into the armed services. The city had to take on sixty new men. It was also necessary to train men for air raids and to train volunteer firemen in case of a disaster of any kind.

Wayne E. Swanson was appointed the sixth chief of the Rockford Fire Department in 1947. Under his guidance and leadership many new and progressive methods were introduced. He was the first chief in the country to install a two-way radio system in fire equipment. It was through him that the fire prevention bureau was started. At that time the city's population stood at about 95,000.

In 1952 there were 91 men on the fire department and 13 pieces of equipment. Through the years the department had responded to over 1500 alarms. In 1954 there were 110 men at a time when the city had a population of 105,000. At a later time a home inspection was put into operation by

Chief Swanson, and 34,290 homes were visited.

In 1958 the Rockford Fire Department went on a platoon system because of a state law lowering fire fighters to 56 hours of work per week. By this the department was up to 140 men and 18 pieces of equipment, and a new station had been added to replace old Station No. One which was almost eighty years old. In 1962 Rockford installed a new fire alarm system called the warbler alert which is said to be easier on a fireman's heart. Also a new and modern telephone line was added which goes directly to the alarm operator.

Today we have a new chief, James Cragan, with 245 men under his direction; there are ten stations and sixteen companies. The fire department is planning two new stations for the east side. Three new deputy chiefs were recently added. In 1973 the Rockford Fire Department had 2,088 alarms for the convenience and safety of its citizens and the most up-to-date fire-fighting equipment.

ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S PRESIDENTS:

HERMAN G. NELSON, CO-FOUNDER AND SECOND HONORARY PRESIDENT
By Mrs. Harold B. Hyde

The founders of Rockford Historical Society were Herman G. Nelson, Blanche Alden, and David Johnson. At a meeting of the Rockford Historical Society Board of Directors on June 7, 1972, in the Fireside Room of Trinity Lutheran Church, board action was taken to elect Herman G. Nelson as Honorary President of the Rockford Historical Society for life. He was the second to be thus honored by the society, the first being W. Ashton Johnson.

Entertaining the Board on February 3, 1972, gave Marge and Herman an opportunity to share their home at 916 Chelsea Avenue. It was at this meeting that Herman agreed to write a brief resume of the history of the organization's first years. [See NUGGETS OF HISTORY March-April, 1972, Volume IX, page 1]

Marge and Herman Nelson resided first at 215 Calvin Park Boulevard. Herman continued to serve the Rockford Historical Society Board from the time of its inception until the end of his life. Marge served unofficially and had a real art of performing many necessary services for the society.

After forty-three years of writing which began in 1926 with the old ROCKFORD DAILY REPUBLIC, which merged with the ROCKFORD MORNING STAR in 1930, Herman Nelson retired on January 2, 1970. He continued his weekly column "Reporter at Large" and "Our Senior Citizens" from his home.

Herman was born on March 8, 1902, in a log cabin located at Rock, Michigan, about twenty-eight miles from Escanaba. This cabin was his parents' first home. In the Escanaba High School he published the school's first newspaper. He became a foreman in a job printing firm after graduation, and he wrote an editorial column, "Let's Wake Up" for the Gladstone, Michigan, newspaper.

Herman attended Augustana College and Theological Seminary, Rock Island, graduating in 1926. There he was editor of the AUGUSTANA OBSERVER and the BIG INK WELL, a publication of the Lutheran Students of America.

After graduation from Augustana, he came to Rockford and met Barney Thompson, the editor of the DAILY REPUBLIC. He was hired on June 6, 1926.

In the middle of 1929, Nelson took a year off from newspaper work and traveled to Sweden to study. A newspaper merger took place in his absence, and on his return he was part of the ROCKFORD MORNING STAR staff.

From 1934 to 1954 his specific assignment was the county courthouse and political beat, but he also wrote extensively on church news and the business scene as well as general assignments. Some of his articles on Rockford's ethnic groups attracted wide and favorable attention. The "Reporter at Large" Column became a feature in 1952, starting out with the title "Under the Courthouse Dome."

Nelson was elected to the board of supervisors, serving from 1937 to 1949, and in 1945-46 served as its chairman. He also served a term as chairman of the county Forest Preserve District.

Herman Nelson and his first wife, the former Rosa Bolander, had two daughters, Margaret and Ruth, and lived for almost twenty years at 2525 Crosby Street. After his wife's death, Herman married Mrs. Margaret D. King of Moorestown, New Jersey, in Philadelphia, in May of 1960.

The father of Herman G. Nelson was Edward Nelson, born Sept. 6, 1878, in Sweden and coming from Harmstad, Sweden, to northern Michigan at the age of fifteen. Herman's mother, Esther Swanson, married his father in 1901. The father was a farmer, lumberman, and railroad man. He was employed by Chicago and North Western Railway and made his home in Escanaba, Michigan.

There were three brothers, of whom the best known is Hjalmer (Hal) Nelson of the Rockford Newspaper staff for many years. The other brothers, George and Gunnar, lived in Escanaba, Michigan. He also had two sisters, Mrs. Allan Abernathy, Chicago, and Mrs. Elmer Peterson of Gladstone, Michigan.

History became a special interest of Herman G. Nelson. He was a charter member of the Swedish Historical Society, founded in 1937, and served it as secretary and president. He helped in starting the Erlander Home Museum and the local Lucia and Midsummer Festivals.

His interest was much broader than Swedish pioneers and their accomplishments. Herman served as vice-president of the Illinois State Historical Society.

(Concluded in next issue)

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is published bi-monthly by the Rockford Historical Society and sent to all members. Address correspondence to 1614 Huffman Boulevard 61103. Circulation: 121 Washington Street 61108, Phone 397-4767. Membership Chairman: Stuart K. Golding, 205 Washington Street 61108, Phone 226-1502. President; Clement V. Burns, 121 Washington St. 61108, Phone 397-4767. Typing by Mrs. Warren Burlend.