

Nuggets of History

Volume XI

November-December, 1974

Number 6

HERMAN G. NELSON, CO-FOUNDER AND SECOND HONORARY PRESIDENT

By Mrs. Harold B. Hyde
(Concluded from last issue)

Charter members of Rockford Historical Society will remember that persons interested in local history were invited to a formal organizational meeting, Sunday, March 4, 1962. David W. Johnson and Blanche E. Alden (Mrs. Marvin) turned the meeting over to Herman G. Nelson who explained what action the three had taken as incorporators. Herman explained that Articles of Incorporation were issued to the Rockford Historical Society by Charles F. Carpentier, Secretary of State, on November 22, 1961, and that these articles were recorded in the office of Recorder of Deeds, William M. Two, in Winnebago County Court House, November 28, 1961. Herman read a statement of purpose which included preservation of items of historic interest and fostering of our culture. The full scope of Herman's interest was made apparent as he and the co-founders proceeded with the details of organization. All three were officers of the Rockford Swedish Historical Society, but their vision enabled them to see Swedish culture and Swedish contributions as a large and valuable contribution to the whole of Rockford's development. Herman saw that the heritage from other Rockford pioneers might slip away without a dedicated group to work for its preservation.

Many honors came to Herman G. Nelson. He held membership in a varied group of organizations. In each he gave



ROCKFORD CENTENNIAL COMMITTEE

Officers of Rockford Committee—Swedish Pioneer Centennial—left to right, seated, Dr. Albert Loreen and E. W. Carlson, vice presidents; Swan Hillman, president; Axel Rehnberg, treasurer; and standing, Herman G. Nelson, advisory; Martin Hawkinson, vice president; S. A. Sandeen, vice president and folk festival director; and Nils F. Testor, advisory. In addition, officers are Mrs. Marvin O. Alden, corresponding secretary, and Alf O. Ahlstrand, recording secretary.



Herman G. Nelson's home at 2525 Crosby Street

service and brought about worthwhile activities. It is impossible to mention all but the scope of his life style and interest can be briefly indicated. His first interest was to be a good newspaper man and reporter, giving the news in a complete and accurate way.

Church activities formed an important part of his life. Mr. Nelson was Sunday School superintendent at Zion Lutheran Church; president of Rockford Federation of Lutheran Brotherhoods and president of the Illinois Brotherhood.

In 1954, Herman received the alumnus meritorious service award of Augustana College. In 1949 the Independent Order of Vikings Lodge of Rockford presented him with a



Home of Mrs. and Mrs. Herman Nelson at 215 Calvin Park Boulevard

Nelson's last home at 916 Chelsea Avenue



plaque for his contribution to the preservation of Swedish culture in America.

Among the honors received by Mr. Nelson were the Royal Order of Vasa, knight first class, from the King of Sweden in 1951; the Swedish Tercentenary Medal in 1938; and the Swedish Pioneer Medal from Prince Bertil in 1948. Governor Henry Horner named Herman to the Illinois Swedish Tercentenary Commission in 1938 and he was named by Governor Dwight Green in 1948 to the Swedish Pioneer Commission. His honors are listed in ILLINOIS LIVES, published by Historical Records Association.

Extensive travels took Nelson to Europe eighteen times and he also traveled in Canada and many parts of the United States. He was received by Swedish King Gustaf V in 1948 and by King Gustaf VI Adolf in 1951 and 1953. He met and became friends with Sweden's former prime minister, Tage Erlander, who visited Rockford at his invitation in 1952.

Many persons are indebted to Herman G. Nelson. When in 1946, Dr. Leland Carlson, then professor of history at Northwestern University, later President of Rockford College, was my advisor for a thesis at Northwestern entitled, "The Swedish Chapter in the History of Rockford, Illinois", he sent me to consult with Herman. At that time Herman opened his files with a great generosity and told me that his writings in the Rockford Newspapers were in the Rockford Public Library and that he gave me permission to use whatever material was useful. Herman helped me to compile a list of names for the 100 local interviews I made in Rockford community at that time. He sent me to Augustana College library in my quest and directed me to Major Perry, of the Swedish Salvation Army, for some minimal instruction in reading and copying Swedish for better translation. Readers of NUGGETS OF HISTORY have benefitted from these notes from time to time. It will be many years before anyone can truly assess the depth of Rockford's loss when

Herman was not with us, or know the breadth of his contributions to the community.

THE STRUCTURE OF A COUNTY TOUR By Clem Burns and Stu Golding

Over the last five years we have conducted Sunday afternoon tours for members of the Rockford Historical Society. These tours have been to all parts of our county and have extended into Stephenson, Boone and Ogle counties.

What are the elements that make these tours interesting and worthwhile and of historical significance to our members? It is that desire for learning the traditions and folklore of those who make this area what it is today. It was in "Fiddler on the Roof" where Tevye remarks "Without tradition we have nothing",--another way to express our motto, "Learn from the past that we may apply this knowledge to the future".

No two persons could ever develop these tours without a great deal of help, first from our wives, and secondly from our good secretary, Hazel Kluck, who has done the typing and reproduction and added much to our notes from her own knowledge of this area. Barbara Burns, with her long line of ancestors in this county, had a vast amount of history to give us. Many of our members gave us information concerning the areas of their acquaintance. And of course there are books plus the many people we met on these tours:

Claire Scott of Seward, Claude Colberg of Pecatonica, the Carr Sarvers, living on the Farm between Durand and Pecatonica, where David Sam Campbell homesteaded in 1837. Just west of the Sarver Farm is the Hulse Cemetery, one of the oldest in the region, where a Revolutionary War soldier is buried. There are so many memories of these old timers, like Billy Sarver, who played fiddle for barn dances; and Arb Campbell, who paid for his farm by hauling wood to Rockford, crossing the Pecatonica River on the ice. Help from our library with Ruth Lunde in the history room, who knows where to find the books if she cannot tell you direct. We also received much help from the historical societies of Boone, Ogle, and Stephenson counties where we visited on these tours.

So in laying out a tour of this type we must listen to suggestions concerning places and events, study our maps and come up with a tour of about thirty to fifty miles with enough stops to examine historical spots or to listen to someone who can tell us more about the site or sometimes just to view the scenery.

So we study our maps, and with the help of a tape recorder, travel the suggested routes noting the mileage, pointing out interesting things along the way that we have learned about. Then we must take these notes, condense them and tabulate them so that Hazel can give us a summary which our drivers can use.

Perhaps our last tour this summer of 1974 illustrates the methods and the results obtained from a study of this type. This area was chosen by Clem and Barbara as being different, but one with which they were both familiar. A preliminary drive was taken along the route where notes were made and questions were asked. A preliminary stop was made at the Museum in Oregon and at the Stronghold retreat. Then Clem and Stuart went over the route again with these notes and the tape recorder.

A starting place was chosen at the First Lutheran Church on South Third Street where we had the use of their parking lot. From here we went west towards the old High School, the Rockford Watch Factory and the Fordam Power plant. It was at the old watch factory that the famous Rockford 17 & 21 jeweled Railroad watches were made, one of which has been given to the museum by Mrs. Utter.

Then over to Kishwaukee Street, past the old high school field and past the area where the Buckbee green houses stood with over eleven acres under glass, where Stuart spent one spring helping to pack plants for mail order shipping. Seeds and plants accounted for from one to three express cars leaving the siding on the Illinois Central Railroad every day during the season.

Farther down we come to the Gunite plant which had its start on the water power district under the name of Forbes, on a street of that fine Scots name. Right in here also was the old circus grounds that many remember.

As we cross the railroad tracks at Harrison and Kishwaukee, we are reminded that this at one time was called "Halfway", meaning half way to Old Milford. Then down



ROCKFORD WATCH FACTORY.



Grandstand
at Beyer
Stadium

through the Camp Grant District. The many many barracks and buildings that were there during the first World War have long since gone and even the home of the commanding general has now been razed. At the bypass road we turn left and then right on the Kishwaukee road that leads to Stillman Valley. Over the hill is the site of what was known as Rib Town, a project that failed, leaving nothing but bare rafters showing like giant ribs of a prehistoric creature.

This was popular Indian country as here they found the three things that were necessary: wood for fuel, freshwater springs, and plenty of game and fish at the junction of the Kishwaukee and Rock Rivers. On down through the Hoisington area and the Kishwaukee settlement where Bill Condon, our past president, and his family have their roots. Then into Stillman Valley, served until recently by two important railroads. Here, like every visitor to the Valley, we must detour a few blocks to pass the monument to the men who were killed in the battle of Stillman Run in the Black Hawk War. Then west on route 72 toward Byron and as we get nearer the river we will pass the site of that famous or infamous battle of Stillmans Run. Following the south side of the river we pass the Eichert farm with its wonderful old stone house. Originally this was the home of the Austins who came from New York State in 1842. We are told that Abraham Lincoln stopped there for a drink of water when on one of his trips to Rockford. There is a small cemetery near the farm where the Austins are buried.

Nearing Oregon we come to the Lowden Memorial Park, now part of the campus of Northern Illinois University, and it is here that we stop to view and study the so-called Blackhawk Statue. This statue overlooking the valley which the Indians loved is symbolic of all the tribes of the area and was created and erected by Lorado Taft at his own expense.

As we approach route 64 we see ahead of us in the distance the edge of the Lowden estates. Lowden, one-time governor of Illinois, was married to a daughter of the



Monument in Stillman
Valley dedicated to
the men killed in
the Battle of Still-
man's Run during the
Black Hawk War

Pullman family of Pullman Palace Car fame.

Then across the river into Oregon and a visit to the museum of the Ogle County Historical Society where our hostess, Mrs. Hardesty, entertained us and served coffee.

Up the west side of the river we get another view of the Black Hawk Statue, and come to "Stronghold", towering over the bluffs with a wonderful view of the Rock River valley. This famous castle was built by a Chicago newspaper family and is now a Presbyterian retreat which was opened for our visit.

We pass many other interesting places on our way home. In Byron are two places said to be stops on the underground railway that helped the slaves on their way north. After we pass Lake Louise and come past the foot of the bluffs, we come to Rock River Farms, once the estate of Senator Medill McCormick, where the large herd of dairy cattle once produced milk that was held under strict standards and sold, unpasteurized, in Chicago, Rockford, and other communities. We continue along the river, and coming back into Winnebago county opposite Prairie Road we see the road that leads down to the original Rockford Motor Club, one of the earliest motor clubs of its kind in the country. Later

the area was known as the Hidden Inn until it burned not long ago.

In laying out a tour of this kind, one of the hardest things is to know where to stop, so we suggested that we cross on the Nelson Bridge, turn north on Seminary Street, where we will again pass the old College Campus, now with its high-rise apartments called Campus Towers, and down South Third Street past the Erlander Museum and to that corner where three churches flourished for so many years; the buildings are still there, each serving a worthy cause in the community.

ROCKFORD MUSEUM: A HERITAGE TO SHARE

By Hazel M. Hyde

(A speech given for Rockford Chapter, Daughters of American Revolution Sept. 20, 1974, and for North Suburban Womans Club Oct. 22, 1974, at Rockford Museum Center)

Have you ever watched a wrecking crew at work and heard the smack and crunch of the wrecking ball? Such an experience brings questions as to what should be preserved and why some ties with the past are valuable for the future. A tiny shiver of fear that our children and coming generations may be rootless awakens us to long thoughts on the worth of our heritage. What means are at our disposal to conserve artifacts and transmit some sense of values to the community and especially to our youth?

So when Carl Severin invited the Rockford Historical Society Board and other interested members to his farm property, we listened intently to his plan. We walked to an open field and listened to the sounds of late afternoon insects and the rustle of grasses. We tried to catch a vision of a museum and a village that would capture and project the ways of life in Rockford area from which our present has emerged. What led to the development of the Rockford area? What kind of people settled here and worked and built and planned?

Carl Severin donated one-half of the thirteen acres on which Rockford Museum Center now stands. While other men had dreamed and even agitated for a museum, he took the step that marked the real beginning. To enumerate the times he talked to historical societies, businessmen, park board and others is impossible. It is a story of devotion, a love story with Rockford's history and accomplishments together with a sensitivity to the way people would respond to his call for action.

(To be continued)

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.