

Nuggets of History

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ROCKFORD MUSEUM: A HERITAGE TO SHARE

By Hazel M. Hyde

(Continued from last issue)

Harlem Historical Society dates its beginnings from the research of Mrs. Charles Barnes, Mrs. Billy Bittle, and Mrs. R. K. Burden and they became its incorporators in June 1967 with sixty members. Harlem Township Supervisor Kenneth Kieselburg had asked these three to research the facts on the history of the township. This information was to be used in the dedication of the new Harlem Hall in June. The three researchers compiled a "Harlem History Booklet", assembled a display of pioneer artifacts and applied in Springfield for a Historical society charter.

Later in the summer of 1967 the Old Harlem Town Hall built in 1873 was given to the newly formed society. The land on which it stood was not included. Search your memories and you will recall seeing the building standing somewhat forlornly waiting for something to happen to save it from dismantlement. Mary Barb Bittle recalls, "We looked desperately for a place to put the building and construct a pioneer village around it."

The solution of the Harlem Historical Society's problem came in April of 1972 with the formation of the Rockford Museum Association.

The Rockford Historical Society has a record of over a dozen years. The date of its organizational meeting was March 4th, 1962, and the place was the Erlander Home Museum. Presiding over this meeting were Mrs. Blanche Alden, David W. Johnson and Herman G. Nelson, the three incorporators of the Rockford Historical Society and the Articles of Incorporation had been issued November 22, 1961.

Among the activities of Rockford Historical Society have been the Heritage House Tours, one in cooperation with Junior League; county tours; the publication bi-monthly of NUGGETS OF HISTORY; and the publication of a HERITAGE COOK-BOOK. In cooperation with Swedish Historical Society, the Rockford Historical Society placed a plaque on a large boulder to mark the site of the early Rock Ford.

The Swedish Historical Society was organized in 1937. The loyal, hard-working members have developed outstanding exhibits at Erlander Home Museum. The area of their major concern has been to conserve the artifacts of the Swedish inheritance in the Rockford Community. However, this group has spearheaded the bringing together of three historical societies to form the Rockford Museum Association, and has promoted the fund raising for a Museum Center.

Some of the members, notably Carl Severin, Blanche Alden and the late Herman G. Nelson, took a long-range view and helped in organizing the Rockford Historical Society and became active members in it. They wisely saw that Swedish culture and industry was only a segment of the whole development of Rockford and its environs.

In garnering information about the Rockford Museum

Center that grew on a piece of farm land, there have been encounters with many people of tremendous dedication. In an interview with Vi Carlson, she described the early meetings of the newly-formed board. She said, "When you get people together of different cultures and background and age groups and start to dig the building out of the bare ground, you have a fantastic experience." She continued to tell of work and talk that faced and conquered obstacles and found opportunity where only a hint told of its existence. She continued, "People living in areas like National Avenue who usually have their housework done, will dig in for a project in which they have a deep interest." She emphasized, "We never lost sight of our goal."

The purposes of the Rockford Museum as stated in its Certificate of Incorporation are:

"To collect, preserve and display items of historical interest; to build, lease and maintain facilities for the housing of valuable collections and objects, for the holding of meetings to illustrate local history; to serve as the archive in the preservation and display of historical materials."

In speaking of the purpose of the museum, John Nelson, secretary of the Museum Association, turned the pages of the large secretary's record which he was lending to me and then put it all into simple words, "This involves people. It is a local history museum and a village where the people of the community can walk and see how their ancestors lived. Rockford had hard-working people; the people who came here wanted to work."

Mr. Robert Mauk, associated with preservation at the state level as well as the Rockford Museum, in an interview elaborated a bit to say, "The main purpose of the Rockford Museum Center is to preserve the local heritage and to preserve the artifacts of our heritage. There are many school children who do not know the history of Rockford. Why did people come to Rockford? What did they do?"

Members of the Rockford Historical Society Board were guests of the Museum Board at the museum before the exhibits were arranged. The museum board consisted of a president and five other members from each of the three area historical societies. With ready pen it was possible to cite an unbelievable list of accomplishments. After the meeting the officers opened their notebooks and related their experiences. Mr. John Nelson, the Secretary, brought a tremendous book of minutes from the day of the Board's creation which detailed letters, legal details, and the kinds of service people were donating, in such unstinting quantities.

Of historic interest is the letter to John B. Whitehead, Chairman of Land Purchases for the Rockford Park Board, June 7, 1974, and I quote:

"After our conversation last night I will try to outline the purpose of the Rockford Museum Association as far as building the museum on the 13½ acres of land located near Guilford and Mulford Roads."

"We will give the park board the land and the museum building with the intention that we would maintain it on

the inside and staff it with voluntary helpers. We would continue to carry on some of our fund-raising activities so we could be able to maintain our obligations.

"The park board would have to build and blacktop the parking area, furnish the grounds with shrubbery, and carry on the maintenance of all the buildings and grounds, plus fencing.

"We are thoroughly convinced that you will need additional land to the extent of 70 to 100 acres to create more facilities and also a well-planned park could be run in connection with the planned museum.

"We feel that the location of this property is probably one of the best, being located on the far east where the city seems to have the greatest growth.

"We ask you to consider these requests and hope that you come up with a favorable answer.

"We have enclosed the plat plan and brochure. If there is any other information that you would like to obtain, do not hesitate to call or write."

People who have worked on such far-reaching projects will appreciate the steps taken by the Museum Board that all should be legal and that procedures should be correct. All possible information was sought in the early stages of planning. Mr. Robert Mauk was responsible for investigating the provisions of the Preservation Act of 1966 for moving and restoring early buildings. Advice was sought from the Illinois Arts Council. Representatives of the State Museum Council, Mr. Lowell Anderson and Mr. James Wilkie, were asked for advice. Mr. Dave Reno, a representative of Illinois Tourism and also the Rockford Chamber of Commerce Tourism Council expressed their enthusiasm for the project. Mr. Thomas Campbell, State Historian, Department of Conservation, met with the Board of the Rockford Museum Association in May of 1972.

On January 12, 1972, a meeting was held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Carlson, Jr., 1804 Parkview Avenue. (Vi is known to many of you personally because of their home museum and antiques.)

Mr. Bengt Granberg explained the proposed Rockford Museum Center as being a modern 70 x 100 foot, one-story, fireproof building located on a 13½ acre tract on Guilford Road, 3/4 mile east of Mulford Road. One-half of the land had been donated by Mr. and Mrs. Carl Severin to the Swedish Historical Society to construct a building to house and preserve items of historical interest. Also it was to include a historical village in addition to the museum. The value of the land was approximately \$70,000 and the cost of the museum building project was estimated at \$120,000. The Swedish Historical Society had by that time raised \$65,000. Building construction was anticipated for the summer of 1972.

Mr. Linde explained there was a possibility of the Rockford Park District maintaining the property if given title. However, it would be necessary for the three historical societies to make this a combined project.

Wednesday, April 19, 1972, a meeting was held at 7:30

P.M. at Home Federal Savings and Loan Building with representatives of the Rockford, Swedish, Harlem, and other historical societies present for the purpose of organizing the Rockford Museum Association. Approximately sixty people attended. Also present were members from the Tinker Cottage Association and Rockton Historical Society. At that meeting representatives of the Rockford, Swedish, and Harlem Societies elected Mr. Bengt Granberg as temporary chairman and Mr. John C. Nelson temporary secretary.

As discussed at the prior January 12, 1972, meeting, the initial board of directors would consist of the presidents of the three societies plus five representatives appointed by the president of each society, making a total of eighteen board members for the Rockford Museum Association.

Ralph W. Walquist, zoning officer, notified the Rockford Museum Association, June 7, 1972, that by a vote of Winnebago County Board the petition for a Special Use Permit in Agricultural District for a museum had been approved in a resolution (which was enclosed.)

The Fund Raising Committee consisted of Mr. Armour Severin, William Condon, and was headed by Mrs. Billie Bittle. There have been others, too, like Stuart Ralston, who have worked with finances. Allen Mallquist, the president, mentioned there were no matching funds and no government aid. And Vi Carlson said, "Mr. Mallquist would not let us spend a penny until we had it."

At the Ground Breaking Ceremony, Governor Richard Ogilvie said, "This occasion is unique as it is the first such ceremony I have participated in when the building and the site were already paid for."

Carl Severin smiled, on another occasion when he said, "It's all paid for and we have money in the bank." Carl Linde sid of fund raising, "We have received nothing but friendliest courtesy."

The question of obtaining additional land has been considered but must be done in connection with the Rockford Park Board. The Park Board had landscaped the area, dredged a lake, made roads and parking lots. The low bidder on the construction was Building Systems. The contract was awarded excluding mechanical costs. It was the understanding that Mr. John Cook, the landscape architect, was to be paid out of Park Board Funds.

Ray Knowland, a well-known Rockford architect, donated his services. Imagine free architectural work! As Vi Carlson had stressed, "Every penny donated went into that building. No contribution went for anything except the museum itself. We contributed as individual people for cookies or postage stamps and many other items..." The dedication of people who believed in the value of the project was superb.

The Carpenters Union donated labor; the Contractors Association donated building materials; and Adamson-Johnson gave the paint and wallpaper.

Ground Breaking and Laying of the Corner Stone were held on Sunday, October 1, at 5:00 P.M. at the Museum Site, in 1972. Open House for the public to see the progress and the promise inherent in the undertaking was Sunday, June

16, 1974. A dedication service was to be held later.

The Marengo Jail is in place in the Village awaiting hammer, nails, and strong backs of volunteers to recondition it. First National Bank has undertaken the moving of a quaint old frame bank from Holcomb as its donation to the museum. Other banks have been among the major cash contributors.

After Harlem Township Hall was taken apart board by board from its original location and reconstructed, Breckenridge House was acquired for the Village. Harold and I had seen the house in which my parents started house-keeping in 1904 used as a place for grain storage. So it cushioned the shock of learning that Breckenridge House, reputed to be Guilford Township's first homestead, located near Rock Valley College intersection, was rescued from serving as a chicken coop. It has found its place in the Village, eventually to be furnished with period and Rockford antiques.

A Blacksmith Shop was donated by Mr. Floyd Eyster. He also placed it in operating condition. Bruce Holmes, a brother-in-law of his helped on days when the museum has been open.

The clang-clang of the pounding on the anvil in a village blackshop and the leaping flames when the bellows were used are a remembered part of my childhood and perhaps of your youth. Now young people can see some of the activity out at 6799 Guilford Road in the Village. The frame shed is identical with the many such smithies that served our parents and grandparents. The horseshoes in the collection that line the walls make it easy to picture the days when a smith in his raw-hide apron held the hind foot of a farm animal and skillfully applied a horseshoe. The anvil in the shop was used before 1900 by Pat Reynolds in a shop between First and Madison Streets. Contributions came from towns in the Greater Rockford area. Al Goranson, for example, had a Swench wedge over a hundred years old which he was happy to see in a place where it would be safe and could be viewed by people of the community and could prove a link with the past to today's school children. To talk with Mr. Eyster is to sense the salty humor and to feel the strength of his experience and dedication.

The family of Mrs. Henry Utter of Chicago were early manufacturers on the Water Power. This lady, 82 years of age, speaks of the farm machinery and the water wheel turbines down in the mill races, which the Utter firm either produced or handled. She has become a life member of the Rockford Museum Center and Rockford Historical Society has voted her a life membership. She presented an inventory of items associated with the Utter family and business concern to the Museum Board.

Mary Barb Bittle reported in July 1972 that Mr. Irl Martin, Chairman of the Board of Woodward Governor, and Mr. Eugene Abegg, Chairman of the Board of Illinois National Bank, offered to arrange a luncheon at Rockford Country Club. They planned to invite officers of older Rockford Industries to obtain their support of the Industrial Building and section of the Museum Project. Such a luncheon was

scheduled and held with many industrialists attending. A tour of the new museum was part of the plan.

The Industrial Museum, to be housed in a second building, will contain machines of Rockford origin, old time tools, both originals and replicas. The heads of about thirty-five of the larger industries have been contacted and some ground work accomplished on what is wanted and acceptable, the history and library materials, old models, the kind of support that can be helpful, and product displays. A transfer form has been worked out. Small industries have not been neglected. Donations in thousands of dollars have been received.

Swedish Historical Society planned to supply some type of exhibit from Erlander Home. Mr. Carl Linde had charge of the extent of that exhibit. Probably the first display to be placed was the hand-made scale model of the boyhood home and mill in Sweden of Carl Severin and his donations showing carding, spinning, and weaving processes.

Permission was granted for a tree to be planted by Winnebago County Garden Club. The landscape architect has been consulted concerning an appropriate site. Mr. and Mrs. Robert Mauk have provided a gift shop in the Museum, donating the items, with proceeds going to the museum. A child's coloring book has been developed for sale by some local artists.

Negotiations for items, not officially reported as having been concluded, are constantly increasing. Examples of the types of items under consideration were: Mr. Powell of Pinehurst Dairy will consider building an old Ice Cream Parlor in the Village; Former Fire Chief Wayne Swanson has information on an old fire station and Ed Thorne has donated an old fire engine; Greenlees have an old woodworking machine; Barnes Drill has prepared an exhibit for the present building; the interior of an old post office has been located; a telephone exchange and an old print shop are the types of buildings that are sought.

Near the entry-way is a wall plaque listing names of donors of \$100.00 or more. Mr. William Condon arranged the details of the plaque. In March, 1973, Harold L. O'Donnell (since deceased) of Cayuga, Indiana, wrote concerning a large gift of about eight thousand dollars, as a memorial to his wife, writing in part: "Mr wife was Helen Trahern (died 1971) and her father and grandfather were pioneer manufacturers down on the Water Power on Mill Street. I have been one of the main beneficiaries of their hard work and thrift and since we had no children, I would like to memorialize the Trahern name in a substantial way. There are no Traherns left in Rockford or practically anywhere else either as there were never many of them... Delbert E. Trahern and Harvey R. Trahern had only one child each and they were girls. My wife was Delbert's daughter, and Mrs. W. C. Ogilby of 1518 National Avenue is Harvey's daughter. Mrs. Ogilby has one son, Trahern Ogilby, living on Harlem Boulevard, and his first name is all that is left of the Trahern name..."

Pause when you tour the museum to observe the Water Power diorama prepared by Mr. and Mrs. Meyers to depict the

Water Power as Harold O'Donnell requested.

The first meeting held in the Rockford Museum Center Building was held December 3, 1973, at 7:00 P.M. This was a meeting of officers and directors with boards of the three historical societies also in attendance. Rockford Historical Society, Rockford Chapter DAR, and North Suburban Womans Club were among the first organizations to plan meetings in the museum building.

Mrs. Robert K. (Vi) Burden, Woman's Auxiliary Chairman reported that at a meeting scheduled by January 11, 1974, the auxiliary was organized and defined its functions to furnish guides, arrange exhibits, and be responsible for housekeeping. Dues and membership in the Rockford Museum were proposed. Later this group was named Friends of the Museum and men were encouraged to join.

A paragraph in a letter from Mr. Fred M. Johnson to John Nelson, secretary, reads: "Although Rockford may be well remembered for Swedes and furniture, a more honest appraisal of Rockford is in the mechanical developments that emanated from Rockford, ranging from knitting equipment to machine tools; it would seem that we should have a major portion of any museum center devoted to Rockford and its machinery contribution. Think of the invention of the jig saw that goes back to the days of W.F. and John Barnes, or the knotter of Barber-Colman, the invention of the milling machines... Rockford watches would certainly add an interest..."

NUGGETS OF HISTORY has been the bi-monthly publication of Rockford Historical Society for about a dozen years. When Eleanor Overfield moved from Rockford area she donated a complete file of the publication to that date. Rockford Historical Society designated these for the Museum. A binding should keep them in chronological order. I have made a cross index, with some attention to categories, for Rockford Public Library. At present I am typing this index for the Herman G. Nelson Library at the Rockford Museum Center.

Allan C. Malquist, President of Rockford Museum, wrote to Margaret Nelson, widow of the late Herman G. Nelson, "As you may know, we are naming our library at the Rockford Museum after Herman Nelson; a good true, fine man who served our community with pride and joy...."

ROCKFORD REGISTER-REPUBLIC, Monday, November 27, 1972, stated: "The library in the new museum is to be named the "Herman G. Nelson Library" in honor of the late former president of the Swedish Historical Society and long-time reporter for the MORNING STAR." The Rockford Historical Society had made Herman G. Nelson, one of its incorporators, an honorary life president.

Mrs. Billy Bittle, known to many of you as Mary Barb Bittle, and Mrs. E.W. (Vi) Carlson, who are directors of the Museum Association, led a caravan in August of 1973 to Hillsboro, Wisconsin, on a mission for the museum. Mr. and Mrs. Robert K. Burden were among the fifteen or more people who with their own hands dismantled a historic old barn for transport to Rockford. They were met by another contingent of volunteers who unloaded the hand hewn beams and the

sideboards with their gray patina. Vi Carlson reported that the barn was built by the first blacks who came from the South after the Civil War on farm land given to them by the United States Government.

These glorified scavengers received calloused hands and sore back muscles but continued to harry every site where a treasure might be found. From Hess Brothers Store, a landmark building constructed in 1910 by P.A. Peterson, that fell to the wreckers, they acquired much old P.A. Peterson furniture and custom made shelving. One more example of sleuthing was the finding of a rusty old metal bathtub abandoned down by the river. It required two months of concentrated work to clean and scour it for display.

Briefly, some of the more unique displays are:

A model of a Pacific type steam locomotive made to scale by Raymond Jewell; a coat from a tanned horsehide given by Benjamin Hoffman; desks in the school room that had been stored at the Children's Farm, where chickens had roosted on them; many beautiful dresses given by Don Milne; Civil War and World War I military weapons.

Already classes of school children from the summer session have been taken on guided tours to the Museum Center. One small boy returned on the following Sunday with his father, mother, and sister, to whom he proudly explained, "This is my museum!"

The thoughts you take away from a visit to the Museum Center should be appreciation that Rockford had hard working early settlers and even later people came here because they wanted to work. We are told that Rockford is fifth or sixth in the country in cities of our size in the number of millionaires. But our people of wealth have been workers. No one would have guessed that O. G. Nelson was a millionaire if they had seen him carrying his lunch in a bucket and driving a little car. As John Nelson, secretary of the Rockford Museum Center Board, said, "Rockford has a record of inventors and creators. We can't afford to lose our creativeness."

If we are to preserve our pioneering spirit we must make available to the community the inspiration of "A Heritage to Share".

HISTORIC HOME TOUR BEING PLANNED

The historic home committee, headed by Maureen Gustafson and Gene Horvath, is busy preparing another tour for next fall. The last such tour was held on National Avenue in 1973. At present it is hoped that the 1975 tour will be held among some of the historic homes of Browns Woods. More information will be forthcoming at a later date.

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