

Nuggets of History

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THE FIRST ELECTIONS By W. Ashton Johnson

The first election held in Winnebago County, as prescribed by the Illinois Statute of 1836, was held on the first Monday in August, 1836. "..... thence north along said dividing line to the northeast corner of Range No. 4, east of the 3d principal meridian; thence south to the place of beginning", read the state law designating this area "hence-forth shall constitute a county, to be called Winnebago."

The law specified that commissioners be appointed in each of Winnebago, Ogle, and Kane Counties for the purpose of determining county seats. Appointment of Rezin Zarley and Robert Stephens, Cook County, and John Phelps, Jo Daviess County, as acting commissioners, was made at the state capital at Vandalia. (It must be remembered that these new counties had been eastern sections of Jo Daviess County previous to enactment of the 1836 constitutional statute.)

The first requisite before establishing a county seat was legal proof that each of the newly formed counties had 300 residents. Dr. Daniel H. Whitney, Belvidere, volunteered to canvass the county and secure sufficient signatures on the petition to be offered to a circuit judge, -- Judge Thomas Ford from Dixon in this case. By court order, Germanicus Kent, Rockford; Joseph P. Griggs, Cherry Valley; and Robert J. Cross, Roscoe were specified as judges of election.

There being no copies of election laws available, it fell to the lot of this trio to "feel out" the best way to conduct an election. "Mr. Kent knew something of the laws of Virginia and Alabama", an 1869 historian related. Mr. Cross was familiar with statutes in Michigan and New York state, while Mr. Griggs had voted in Ohio two years previously. What these pioneer lawmakers did know was that the 1836 election offered an opportunity to vote for a district congressman, two legislators in the Illinois assembly and seven county officers. These were three county commissioners, sheriff, recorder of deeds, county surveyor, and county coroner. Practically the upper fourth of the state constituted the "district" from which a congressman would be named. The area of Winnebago County then included all of the present Boone County and the eastern tier of townships of present day Stephenson County.

Between May and election day there was "hot" campaigning by residents of "East Rockford" and "West Rockford", as well as settlements in various sections of the county. It was finally determined that Belvidere and Squaw Prairie on the east should be favored in submitting candidates for the offices of Commissioner and Recorder. Rockford, the largest settlement, settled for the Sheriff candidate and another Commissioner, while the northern section, consisting

of Roscoe and Rockton Townships, was "awarded" a lone commissioner. This left the southern section of the county with Coroner and Surveyor, offices not considered of much importance.

When the "fixers" announced their decision, these candidates were nominated:

From Belvidere - Simon P. Doty for commissioner and Daniel H. Whitney for recorder.

From Rockford - Daniel S. Haight for sheriff; several sought support for commissioner, but, because of east-west rivalry, the "bosses" refused to sponsor any one man. Until the day before election, Candidate Haight, the East Rockford pioneer settler, figured that a second east sider could be elected to that third commissioner post.

Shortly after the Sunday noon hour, Thomas B. Talcott, the Rockton Choice for commissioner, headed a party of north county voters who paid call on Haight. They explained that they felt that the east side should be content with the sheriff's post and requested Haight's candidate to withdraw his candidacy.

According to an attendant at the verbal scrap, who related particulars to E. H. Griggs, editor and historian of the 1860s, the Talcott delegation won the argument after an hour of debate. Here is the story:

Haight had admitted that he was leading the fight for election of an east side resident. "Even if we have to fight for it tomorrow, that's the way I feel about your request for withdrawal of support.

The voters from the "Mouth of the Pecatonica" as they had introduced themselves, retaliated with --

"If the east side wins the post of sheriff or commissioner, Mr. Haight, you will have to fight for them, Mr. Haight!"

Adding that he could muster a majority of west side votes and many more in the southern portion of the county, the man from the north saw Haight pale and acquiesce. With opposition from two areas, the sheriff's job might go across the river to a Kent follower, along with the commissioner'ship.

Results of that first election were as follows:

For Member of Congress: William M. May, 73; John T. Stewart, 44.
For State Legislature: (2) John Turner, 74; Charles Bennett 73; Elijah Charles, 34; James Craig, 40; L. H. Bowen, 8.
For Sheriff: Daniel S. Haight, 83, Henry Hicks, 31.
For Coroner: Eliphalet Gregory, 95.
For County Commissioners (3): Thomas B. Talcott, 83; Simon P. Doty, 68; William E. Dunbar (Rockford West Side), 60; G. Kent, 35; Seth Scott, 45; Levi Moulthrop, 32; Isaiah Courtright, 4. Doty resided in Belvidere; Talcott in Rockton Township.
For Surveyor: D. A. Spaulding, 81; John Kelsoe, 28.
For Recorder: Daniel H. Whitney, 72; John E. Vance, 41; James Boswell, 1.

The first election in Rockford clearly showed the value of free speech and a return to reason. Its results

had much to do with the choosing of Rockford over Winnebago as the seat of government for the county.

Editor's note: The preceding is another chapter of the book which Ash Johnson, the first editor of NUGGETS OF HISTORY, had hoped to have published. Since his death, Mrs. Johnson has given NUGGETS OF HISTORY permission to print it a chapter at a time. Mr. Johnson also wrote a page of "Acknowledgements" which he had intended would precede the text of his book. We have not heretofore printed this, so we will do so at this time:

Acknowledgements

The author wishes first to express his gratitude to the descendants of the late Charles A Church, for permission to use factual anecdotes from his "History of Rockford & Winnebago County".

Many incidents woven into this effort were originally published in early day directories and gazeteers. Among these were: Roreback & Andrus' (1866); Kaufman & Burch City Directory, (1869); Holland's "Rockford Directory & History (1873-74); and Kett's "History of Winnebago County" (1877). Early pioneer family notations compiled by the late Aileen Henry Sheets (Mrs. R. W.), and letters of Rev. Augustas Conant, pre-Civil War liberal clergyman were sources of many briefs found in the Chronology.

To the late Louis Caster, who inspired me to compile a brief chronology of our town in 1934 and to two professionals in their respective fields, go my thanks. Of the latter, Dr. Ruth Shonle Cavan, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Rockford College, and author, has given graciously of her time and knowledge in correcting style and continuity. The other "Pro" happens to be my partner along life's meandering road, Mabel Nelson Johnson. Without guidance such as these two offered, this narrative would have been halted on several occasions...and discarded.

THE WHIGS GET READY

By Billie Whitsitt

The Panic of 1837 left its mark for several years. Thurston remembers:

".... in the fall of '40, a bushel of wheat could not be exchanged for a pound of loaf sugar. Wheat was accepted by the local dealers for dry goods, but cash was required for groceries....

"In the early forties the people of this county were so poor they 'couldn't cast a shadow,'.... I venture to say that in 1841-42 there were not twenty farmers in the county who possessed a suit of clothes suitable to wear to church or to court, which they had purchased with the avails of labor on their farms."

The early elections in Rockford, involving such things as sheriff and commissioners, did not divide the voters very strongly along party lines. That picture changes sharply as the bitter presidential election of 1840 ap-

proached. Van Buren was in the White House; the Whigs were determined to get him out; some of the Democrats thought, as they tightened their belts, that the Whigs might have a point. Thurston wrote of the beginnings of the campaign:

"I was too young at the time to have had a personal knowledge of the inside political work going on in 1838-9 and the early forties, and can only state that being well mounted, myself and pony were frequently called upon as bearers of dispatches for the Democrats, to which party I then adhered from inheritance, and in mature years from conviction."

Though Thurston and his family and friends were largely Democratic, it was the uproar of the Whigs that he remembers:

"The Whigs of this locality imitated the tactics so successfully practiced throughout the Union. They had no cider either hard or sweet, but they did possess in abundance, all the paraphernalia used by the party in the populous parts of the country. They put up a log cabin in regular pioneer style, on the southeast corner of State and Madison streets, for political headquarters, profusely decorated with coonskins and other regalia pertaining to the times; imported speakers from Galena, Chicago, and intermediate points; got up processions, and with Frank Parker blowing an E flat bugle and China Parker a clarinet - neither of them having the slightest knowledge of music, and each blowing with might and main in a vain effort to drown out his companion -- marched about the street whenever they could secure a following. The village drum was in the possession of the Democrats, and consequently not available for Whig celebrations."

The village drum had been in the hands of the Democrats for some time. They had started collecting money for it in 1838. Among the contributors was Haight, giving the most, three dollars, and Henry Thurston the next most, two dollars. Alexander Miller, wandering about town, with nothing else to do but look and listen, gave fifty cents. James B. Martyn, lured to "Midway" by Kent, pledged one dollar but never paid it.

The battle between the Whigs and the Democrats over the new occupant-to-be of the presidential chair, Van Buren or Harrison, was the cause of the first two newspapers in Rockford. One historical source says:

"The first newspaper published in Winnebago County was the ROCK RIVER EXPRESS. Its publication began in Rockford, May 5, 1840, by B. J. Gray. In politics it was Whig of the most radical type. In a village of perhaps 300 inhabitants there was very little of a local nature that could be published. The primary purpose of the paper's existence seems to have been to promote the election of William Henry Harrison to the presidency. Its ambition was satisfied, but after it had been published one year, the press and printing material were sold and removed from the village....THE ROCKFORD STAR was founded in the autumn of 1840, as a Democratic newspaper, with Philander Knappen, editor. The printing material was owned by Daniel S. Haight, Daniel

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Howell, and Adam Keith. The office was located on the southeast corner of Madison and Market Street, in the building erected by Mr. Haight for religious, Court and other purposes J. H. Thurston was the 'devil' in the office...."

So John Thurston, now seventeen years old, was the "devil" in the office of THE ROCKFORD STAR. It is interesting to note that only once in his "Reminiscences" does he mention the ROCK RIVER EXPRESS, and then in an innocuous way, and not once does he speak of its editor, B. J. Gray.

Mr. Gray came from parts unknown and departed for parts unknown. He came in May, 1840, and since it was October before Knappen published his first issue, Gray had the town all to himself for five months. Nothing is remembered about him, but he reveals something of himself in his newspaper.

There was not a great deal in the way of local news and almost no foreign news. The great bulk of what might be called news was reprinted from various papers about the country, usually showing the Whigs in a good light or the Democrats in a bad light. Whether pro-Whig or anti-Democrat, nearly every sentence was verbose and/or filled with innuendoes or obvious exaggerations. It was the style of the day, with little intellectual content, many atrocious puns, a great deal of boasting about one's own candidates, and grandiose comments about what was going to happen to the opposition's candidates when election time arrived. The words expressed caricatures, even as a political cartoon expresses caricatures.

In the fall when Philander Knappen appeared on the scene, he used much the same approach against the Whigs as B. J. Gray used against the Democrats. There was one major difference: Gray could not resist bringing Knappen and THE ROCKFORD STAR into every issue of his paper, whereas Knappen ignored Gray. Gray cackled; he hooted; he poked fun; one can even imagine him rolling in the dust with laughter, keeping one eye open to see if the village was with him in his slapstick attempt to get Knappen's goat. In the spring, long after the election, when Knappen decided to take a bride, Gray could not keep quiet, but jeered and jabbed at him, letting the public know that Knappen had been married once before. For the eight months or so when their lives as editors of rival papers followed somewhat the same course, Knappen chose to ignore Gray. He set his sights in some other direction, and in his rather pious manner, pretended he edited the only newspaper in town. For a brief time he did, from May 22, 1841 (when Gray left the community after a year's editing) to July 1, 1841, when the incident occurred that caused Knappen to leave THE ROCKFORD STAR.

But that summer of 1840 when Gray was the first and only editor in town, he needed the Democrats, espoused the work of the Whigs, and had a little fun at the expense of the local bachelors. Early in June there was a notice in the EXPRESS about an "Old Bachelors" meeting to be held at

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Washington House, and a teasing, friendly comment by Gray in another column about the meeting. The next week Gray apologized for his teasing because the meeting showed the club to be for mutual "solace and comfort" while being cursed with the single life. The purpose of the club was to encourage each other to get married! The following week Gray ran this item:

"BACHELORS LOOK AT THIS: ___ The Chicago Democrat, of a late date, notices the arrival at that port of fifty unmarried Yankee girls, all destined "for the Rock River market. Won't they 'use up' the Bachelors' Club!"

The Chicago DEMOCRAT was a paper Gray quoted from on occasion, sometimes joking at it, often accusing the editor of misquoting him. In July he wrote the following, referring to the custom of printing in the local newspaper the names of those people who had unclaimed letters at the post office:

"We have been making calculations of the distance from the Rockford Post office to the "Chicago Democrat" office, and from the said Post office to the "Express" office, in Rockford, and we are forced to the conclusion that the Express is some seventy-five or eighty miles nearer than the Democrat to the said Post Office. Another thing, we find upon inquiry, that we circulate in Winnebago Co. 50 papers to the Democrat's one....we have taken into consideration the object of advertising letters remaining in the Post offices....and the instructions to Post masters relative thereto, and we find it our duty to publish the list of letters in the Post office at this place; and furthermore, that the Post master here is, by his instructions, obliged to furnish us with said list of letters, this being the nearest newspaper office to him. He had, however, been so kind as not to trouble us sending that to the Chicago Democrat, from which we take the same."

The postmaster was Daniel S. Haight. As mentioned before, Haight was one of the owners of the printing material that Knappen used for his Democratic paper, and it is safe to assume that Haight was active in finding Knappen and getting him to locate in Rockford.

INTERURBAN RAILWAYS By Charles A. Church

The Rockford & Belvidere Electric Railway Company was organized in 1900, and the line was completed in November, 1901. The Rockford & Interurban Railway Company was incorporated in the autumn of 1902, as a consolidation of the Rockford & Belvidere Electric Railway Company and the Rockford Railway, Light and Power Company. It was capitalized at \$1,000,000, with the following officers: R. N. Baylies, president; John Farson, vice-president; G. G. Olmstead, secretary; W. F. Woodruff, Treasurer; T. M. Ellis, general manager. An interurban line was completed to Freeport in

Interurban tracks along Woodruff Avenue



1904, which was operated by a separate organization called the Rockford & Freeport Electric Railway Company. The Rockford, Beloit & Janesville railroad was a third interurban line operating between Rockford and Janesville. All these lines were subsequently consolidated into one system.

June 10, 1909, the entire system, including the city and the three interurban lines, was sold to the Commonwealth Power Railway and Light Company, an eastern syndicate. Mr. Ellis retired as general manager, and was succeeded by Chester P. Wilson, who served from November 1909, to November, 1910. He was succeeded by W. C. Sparks, April 1, 1911, the Rockford City Traction Company was organized to operate the city lines....

Editor's note: When Mr. Church wrote the above paragraphs in 1916, the interurbans had been in operation for only 15 years, and no one would have predicted that 14 years later they would be discontinued, victim of the automobile. Even the concrete support shown in one of the photographs was destroyed last year during the repaving of Wesleyan Avenue just east of 20th Street. Photographs by John Cummings.

THE LYRAN SINGING SOCIETY By Colleen Collins

The Lyran Singing Society is an organization which was begun by ten men who considered themselves musicians in the year 1893. They were members of the American Union of Swedish Singers, and they had attended the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where they were inspired to being their own chorus group. They did so that same year, their chorus consisting of eleven men: Axel Swanborg, Oscar Swanborg,



One of the last reminders of the Interurban system was this concrete support along Wesleyan Avenue east of Twentieth Street

Charles Swanborg, and Gust Swanborg as first tenors; Claus A. Swanborg and L. J. Swanborg as second tenors; Charles Erickson and R. Wingquist as first basses; and Charles Samuelson, Edward Carlson, and Albert Enquist as second basses. Later this chorus became known as the "Lyran Chorus".

The first meetings were held in some of the members' homes, but the membership soon decided that rented quarters would be more suitable to further their musical abilities. Long after the organization was decided upon, the members wanted to include the protection of its members whenever illness or death struck. The main reasons for this association were to encourage Swedish singing amongst their countrymen in Rockford, to assist in the building of character, to encourage social welfare among members and to assist members and their families financially at times of illness, and death. Even though most Lyran members were singers non-singers were admitted as well.

(Concluded in next issue)

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