

## NUGGETS of HISTORY

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MR. PEHR AUGUST PETERSON

OUR LATE PRESIDENT

by Levin Faust

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ine Company )

Mr. P. A. Peterson was born September 8, 1846 in Stora Ving parish in the province of Westergotland, Sweden. He came with his parents to the United States in 1852. The



Pehr August Peterson. This portrait appeared in a book about Rockford published in 1904.

family first settled in St. Charles, Illinois, shortly after in Rockford, and finally in Cherry Valley, Illinois, where they bought a small farm.

Pehr August grew to manhood on the farm where he worked first for his parents and afterwards hired out to other farmers in the neighborhood. At fourteen years of age his pay was that of a fullgrown man, as he could do that much and more work.

When the Civil War broke out, he tried to join the army but being only a youngster of fourteen or fifteen, he was told he could not enlist without his parents permission and mother would not consent on account of his tender age. He then left for timber lands of Michigan, where he had an uncle and there he worked for about three years. While on a visiting trip home, Mr. Peterson bought a team of horses and a wagon and went to Chicago for a season, where there was plenty of teaming work to be had since the big fire swept that city practically out of existence. He then came back home and entered a business college in Rockford, deciding on a business career. Having completed the business course, he went into real estate business with E. H. Baker.

It was then that a few cabinet makers called on Mr. Peterson and asked him to help them start a furniture factory. He did, joining hands with them and incorporating



This is P. A. Peterson's boyhood home on Mill Road, according to Art Alfredson, 1821 24th Street. Peterson's parents, Peter and Inga, settled here on a farm just west of Cherry Valley.

the Union Furniture Co.

"In spite of hard work and long hours, the first year we lost money," Mr. Peterson said, "but the second year we could declare a dividend. I got forty dollars and that was the biggest money I ever received in my life as it was the first money I received without actually working with my hands for it. Later in life I received many times greater sums, but none ever looked so big to me."

Mr. Peterson filled the office of secretary, and besides that he would do all the crating and teaming himself. All bookkeeping and correspondence was done at night after the other workers had gone home. Many a night he hitched his horse to a buggy and rode out to his friends among the farmers around Cherry Valley and would borrow money for the pay-days or notes due at the bank.

The Union Furniture Company was started with very small capital. All the stockholders were working men, and their stock was paid for by a certain deduction from their monthly pay. It became Mr. Peterson's duty to finance practically the whole business by borrowed money. His never failing punctuality, promptness and honesty to take care of all notes and obligations gave him a credit that was second to none in the city.

Seeing that the first industrial venture was a success, Mr. Peterson, with his other stockholders, incorporated and built the Rockford Chair & Furniture Company. This became a new struggle for existence. The secretary (probably Robert Lind) was sent out on the road to sell furniture, and Mr. Peterson took care of this office during the night, as he had to be at the Union Furniture Co. in the daytime. For six weeks, he never went to bed, but what little sleep he got was leaning down his head on the desk in the office of Rockford Chair & Furniture Company about 4 A.M., and when the men came to work in the morning, Mr. Peterson woke up and went down to his work at the Union Furniture Company.



P. A. Peterson's home at 1219 Seventh Street as it appeared in 1970. This was the Petersons' home until they moved to the old Lake mansion on East State Street

By his indomitable willpower he forced things to success, and as soon as success was made of one company, Mr. Peterson was ready for new conquests. Thus he started a number of concerns. The Rockford Mantel Company (now the Rockford Cabinet Co.), Illinois Sewing Machine Co., Rockford Folding Bed Co., Rockford Mirror Plate Co., and Skandia Furniture Co.

Then all of a sudden came the financial panic of 1893. Loans were called for immediate payment, and Mr. Peterson had to sign over all he had in the world to his creditors. Mr. Peterson's friends advised him to take advantage of the bankruptcy law, but he stoutly refused, although his obligations ran into hundreds of thousands, as all his assets were sold at any price the creditors cared to pay for them. Some creditors offered to take half or less if he could pay, but Mr. Peterson told them that he was going to pay 100 cents on the dollar and no less.

He accepted a position as traveling salesman for Central Furniture Company and for three years proved his efficiency as a salesman.

Although Mr. Peterson was by far the heaviest loser in this calamity, the stockholders in the different concerns that had failed blamed him most severely, and when the creditors became tired of running these factories and offered them back to Mr. Peterson, providing they got their money back, he found these stockholders unwilling to cooperate with him. Undaunted by all obstacles, he negotiated the return transaction of these factories, and even then his credit was good enough to make his own notes acceptable to all creditors. In a few years he had paid up all debts, and all the stockholders who had stock in these factories that failed received their stock back in full without any effort on their part. Many stockholders were by this time scared of stock and offered it for sale. Mr. Peterson bought all stock offered and then became the largest stockholder in a number of plants.

He paid more than anyone else offered and bought stock



Home built by John Lake at 1313 East State Street, and later purchased by Mr. and Mrs. P. A. Peterson; as it appeared in 1965.

at prices varying from 50¢ to 100¢ on the dollar. As soon as these began to pay dividends and stock was considered worth par, he promptly paid such stockholders from which he had bought stock for less than par, the full amount or 100¢ on the dollar, without them asking for it. There were cases where he had bought stock and paid the full price for it, but finding out that the stockholder was in modest circumstances, he instructed the secretaries to send the dividends of the stock to the original stockholder, and this was kept up for years.

As soon as the original factories were in sound financial condition, Mr. Peterson started on new ventures. Thus he founded the Haddorff Piano Co., Stonefield-Evans Shoe Co., Hess Bros. Department Store, Rockford Glass Bonding Works, Rockford Book Case Co., Rockford Drop Forge Co., Rockford Life Insurance Co., Kurtz Action Co., and Rockford Steel Furniture Co. He also became largely interested in the Rockford Varnish Co., National Lock Co., Mechanics Machine Co., Standard Furniture Co., West End Furniture Co., Central Furniture Co., Mechanics Furniture Co., Sundstrand Adding Machine Co., Rockford Tool Co., Rockford Miter Box Co., and Hanson Clock Co. In most of these concerns, Mr. Peterson acted as president.

The most outstanding and unusual trait in Mr. Peterson's character was that he did not acquire all these holdings to gain personal income and benefit from the same, and he generally got into a large number of them when they practically were struggling for their very existence. When they did not know where to turn for their next pay-day or to redeem a note due, they generally went to him and he always helped them out and endorsed their notes, which he afterwards had to pay himself, and he was given stock for such advances, thus becoming a large stockholder in many factories.

His generosity was well known not only in Rockford but throughout the country. To give was a religious duty to him. He gave to the poor and to churches regardless of

creed or denomination.

It is claimed that he was the largest donor to the temperance cause in the country. He did not give because he had in abundance; he gave when he was largely in debt.

His place in the community can never be filled. He was in a class all by himself. God bless his memory.

#### FROM DUSTY RECORDS TO NEW PERSPECTIVES

by Hazel M. Hyde

(Continued from last issue)

Old Isaac D'Israeli, the father of the prime minister, wrote, "Many peculiar advantages attend the cultivation of one master passion or occupation." Genealogy can become a major occupation. You will find searching for information on the family tree will become absorbing. It will appear to others that you are working very hard.

Sam Levenson in "In One Era and Out the Other" said, "We had a permissive father. He permitted us to work." The hobby of genealogy will permit you to work.

The Bi-Centennial has awakened new interest in our origins not only as a nation but as individuals. We ask: Who were our ancestors? Where did they live? What kind of people were they?

Several stories illustrate the use of notebooks, file cards, files, and folders. It is hard to avoid becoming bogged down in details unless a person develops a system. A certain secretary puts the day's unfinished work in a manila folder which she has labeled, "Residue." When asked the reason for that choice of heading, she replied, "I do what I can today, and the rest I do tomorrow."

A woman who had been collecting records for her family history had been pounding the typewriter for twenty-five years. Her grown children finally bought her a large filing cabinet. They went back later to see how she had gathered all her notes together. The four big drawers were labeled (1) Under-the-Bed Manuscripts, (2) On top of the Chest and Closet Shelf Correspondence, (3) Fruit Cupboard Marriage and Birth Records, and (4) Garage and Utility Room Cemetery and Land Records.

For people living in Rockford a good place to start research is the local history and genealogy room. Using the card catalogue here can save precious time when visiting other libraries. Failure to check local resources will result in time spent in copying data from a distant library that could be obtained at home; and thus failing to explore in other libraries materials that are not locally available. Mrs. Ruth Lunde, at the library, is most able and knowledgeable on the subjects of genealogy and local history.

The Wisconsin State Historical Library on the campus of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, but a separate entity from the university library, has excellent resources. One great advantage in doing research there is that a person may sign in and work directly in the stacks. A preliminary

inary scanning of the card catalogue will give a general idea of the floor on which material may be located. Carry the slips with titles and call numbers with you and invariably other titles of interest will be found nearby. You do not replace the books on the shelves.

Newberry Library in Chicago has valuable collections, but work progresses more slowly because you must present the slip with the call number to a librarian. Then, when a book is brought it may be evident that the title was deceptive and it does not contain the material you need.

Because he is hunting for detail, the genealogist or family historian finds his material in unlikely places. This is as true of search in libraries as in what we might call out-of-door search in the subject's home county or locale.

A woman searching for her family history asked, "Do you ever get the feeling that you're starting off on the wrong foot -- and you're a centipede?" "In libraries it is not well to hurry," as Catherine Drinker Bowen, author of many biographies, said. "The books have been where they are for a long time; they reveal themselves slowly, at their own pace."

Thomas Carlyle has said, "Listening from a distance of Two Centuries, across the Death-chasms and the howling kingdoms of Decay, it is not easy to catch everything." The Bi-Centennial points up the fact that if we are looking for data on an individual who served in the Revolutionary War, two hundred years have elapsed. To catch anything? It is not easy to find records after fires have destroyed court-houses or the Civil War swept through an area.

Lord Byron wrote, "One of the pleasures of reading old letters is the knowledge that they need no answer."

An old trunk in the attic may provide just the date you wanted. Sometimes a marriage date is written on the back of a wedding picture. An old Bible with family information may lie forgotten. An old diary or even a business ledger may turn up a place name. An old book may have a birthday inscription with the date and age of a child. These treasures may provide an inspiring, dusty insight.

A young lawyer once said, "When I go into a really good library, things happen to me." This is doubly true for a researcher who is tracing a family biography with all its migrations. By a tactful approach the assistance of a scholarly and able librarian can expand the clues as to available materials. Often they will go beyond the normal path of duty to suggest maps or local histories that may not have come to mind. Or they may refer to a local person who has records and suggest interviews with relatives still living in the vicinity.

Rockford has a number of enthusiastic people who go to libraries, visit old cemeteries and court houses, and interview elderly relatives, as a part of the annual vacation. If you contemplate such a trip it is essential to chart your known information and list problems you wish to explore. Also a tour such as that annually provided by Heritage House of Tomson, Illinois, to Washington, D.C., to

archives or to Salt Lake City, can be rewarding. Several people have written their own family histories and made their work available either through DAR Genealogical Records Committee or by publishing their findings.

When you seek an ancestor, remember that this man or woman once lived. The circumstances of his career are to be found in records, letters, deeds, wills, newspapers, or books. There is sometimes a choking accumulation of library dust. Sometimes the personality becomes so real through reading an old diary, that the subject steps from the records with a brave refusal to rest quietly in the past. Then you are rewarded with a new perspective.

Walter M. Everton, in his "The How Book" wrote, "Just because you find an event written in a book or even in several books, doesn't always make it a fact. Many an error has been copied and recopied. Printed records are excellent sources for clues, but unless the author has documented his facts or has given references as to where he obtained his material, be careful. It may be that he has reproduced errors of others or made mistakes of his own. And even though he has documented and referenced the book, it would still be well for you to test his sources to be sure he has not erred in his judgment or transcriptions. Original, official records are the most reliable sources."

Here is a quote from the "President's Message" of Illinois State Genealogical Society's president, Mrs. Myrna Park, who wrote in the summer, 1975, issue, as follows:

"Some persons doing genealogical research may not be aware that an amendment to the Vital Records Act, passed in 1973, permits members of any genealogical society in Illinois to have access to the indexes of the vital records (prior to 1916) in the custody of the local registrars and county clerks without fee. This Senate Bill No. 317 is a real breakthrough for anyone doing research in Illinois records.

"While the law does allow a society member to search the index without fee, the copy of the desired records must be requested from the clerk who will charge the usual amount. The advantage of the personal index search is the assurance that there will be no cost unless the record is found, thus eliminating the possibility of paying several search fees for an unavailable record. This is especially helpful in the many cases where the exact county is not known.

"Notification of this new law was sent to the county clerks in each county in Illinois after the bill was passed in 1973. Word has come to the Illinois State Genealogical Society that not all custodians of records are aware of the change. Letters are again being sent to each county explaining the law and also the genealogist's obligations.

"Some custodians may be reluctant to allow this new procedure because of unfortunate experiences with researchers in the past. It is a known fact that unscrupulous persons have mutilated records in various ways, such as leaving pen marks on documents and ledgers and even clipping parts of records. It is the duty of the courthouse officials to protect public records, so many have reason to be

wary. Genealogists appreciate the use of these records to acquire needed information, so it is imperative to treat all such material with the utmost respect and care. The legislation has indicated a trust in genealogists in granting this special privilege. It is important that we be worthy of this trust."

"Information is where you find it," according to Mrs. Evelyn Peters, now deceased, when she conducted a Genealogical Seminar at Kaskaskia Hotel in LaSalle, Illinois. You may find data in: Birth certificates, hospital records, naturalization papers, insurance policies, passports, immigration records, voting, Who's Who, on a baby's spoon for a birth date, and engraved watch, auto registration, and ship passenger lists---in addition to those you think important such as: probate, land, or military records, the family genealogy, church records, funeral home records, county histories, family bibles, and census records.

Avoid the faults of procrastination and lack of organization from which so many of us suffer. One lady spent over a thousand dollars in travel, books, and copies of records; but she failed to organize it. At her death, young relatives gathered up scraps of paper of varying sizes, many pages of photocopied records, and threw them into a waste basket, the contents of which eventually ended in the garbage. If she had set an obtainable goal as to years, organized the family history, and made certain it was preserved in a library, her work would have been valuable to others. Or her work might have been given to a local history society. This kind of wasted effort is constantly repeated.

Why are people interested in genealogy? A few reasons are: 1. To enable people to join a patriotic society; 2. To understand history; 3. To learn about your own family; 4. To pursue a subject that constantly challenges; 5. To choose a hobby that may lead to interesting correspondence; 6. To give the mind some puzzles to solve; 7. To add a new incentive to travel; and 8. To prove eligibility to inherit from an ancestor.

Dr. Jessopp of Norwich, England, a long ago historian and schoolmaster said, "Who that sets forth upon a voyage of discovery ever knows whither he may be carried."

#### ROCKFORD ARTS AND SCIENCE HISTORY IN THE MAKING by Galey Day

(Note: The following article was written by Galey Day, President of the Rockford Council for the Arts and Sciences, for NUGGETS OF HISTORY, at the request of Mrs. Harold Hyde. For further information, Mrs. Day may be contacted at 1-544-0902 or 963-6765)

Local history was made on August 28th when a new organization, the Rockford Council for the Arts and Sciences was formed. The organization is a merging of the Rockford Center for the Arts and Sciences with the Rockford Arts

Council. In order that the readers of NUGGETS OF HISTORY understand the role of this new organization in the community, some past history must be examined.

In 1967 a group of representatives of various cultural and cultural-related organizations met to form the Rockford Cultural Council. Rod McDonald served as the first president, and the group's purpose was to co-ordinate cultural activities and to keep a dialogue going among the arts community. Founding members were: Rockford Civic Theater, Mendelsohn, Rockford College, Rock Valley College, Junior League of Rockford, Rockford Art Association, Rockford Symphony Orchestra, and the Community Concert Association. The Cultural Council's first project was a monthly calendar of arts events. This was followed by a Music in the Schools program and other projects.

In 1973 the group changed its name to the Rockford Arts Council, and in September, 1974, hired its first director, Mike Smith. (Today Mike is the executive director of the Ramsey Arts and Sciences Council in St. Paul.) Membership in the council was made up of a limited number of individual members and representatives of various organizations. There were some permanent members and some rotating members to keep the council at a fairly workable size.

In 1977 after a long range planning study was carried out, the Rockford Arts Council voted in a new structure. In essence, this is the structure the organization is now operating under. A board of nine was formed and all other individual and organizational members were joined in an Arts and Sciences Forum. Membership is open to all individuals and organizations wishing to join. The forum elects three representatives to the board. The board deals with policy decisions and fund raising. The forum structure allows all organizations to send a representative and for an unlimited number of individual members.

Now to look back to 1976 when the post office vacated its facility on South Main, the city was deeded the building for use as an arts and sciences center. A committee was selected to screen members for an Arts and Sciences Center board who were then appointed by the mayor. This board was faced with the task of programing the facility. However, much of this work was done through the Educational Services office as the center board had no staff. During this time 10 exhibits were held on such things as Medical Photography and Thread Lines of Pakistan and more than 5,000 children and adults saw these exhibits.

When funds became available from the state for a Metro Center in Rockford, the city had to have a local match and thus the Arts and Sciences Center facility was used as part of that match. Legally the building was turned over to the Metro Authority in August, 1978.

However, the Metro Authority had no means of programing the facility and wished to work with a not-for-profit agency which would be eligible for grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, etc.

During the spring the Arts and Sciences Center board, which had been working in the facility, and the Rockford

Arts Council who had staff but no facility, decided to join forces. On August 28th the two groups voted to merge the Arts and Sciences Center board with the Rockford Arts Council and call the new organization the Rockford Council for the Arts and Sciences. Shortly afterwards the RCAS signed a six months agreement with the Metro Authority to program the facility in exchange for office space.

The first exhibit, "The Spirit of Innovation", which had been at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, opened on September 22nd. On November 5th a Model Railroad Open House was held, and on November 12th an exhibition called "Traditional Arts of Africa" opened. This was assembled from private collections in Rockford and Chicago. Many participatory events are planned in conjunction with the exhibits such as an African Dance Demonstration in conjunction with the African Arts show. Following this will be an exhibition on Illinois Architecture.

The Rockford Arts Council had always done a great deal of outreach programming, and the newly formed organization does not intend to drop these functions. These are the CETA Artists-in-Service who are available at no cost to all organizations. Currently the artists include a musician, visual artist, photographer, dancer, and a theater arts person. These artists work in the high rises, at community centers, in park district programs, in the schools and wherever they are requested throughout the city. The CETA artists also are used in the Artist-in-Industry and Artist-in-Hospitals programs of the council.

The "Beattie...Is" arts festival is probably the RCAS's best-known program. This annual event was even written up in a recent yearbook of the World Book Encyclopedia. A yearly festival is also held at Booker Washington Center as part of the council's Urban Arts program, a group which links together and promotes the arts activities in Southwest Rockford.

The RCAS also provides technical assistance to its member organizations through a series of workshops on topics such as fund raising. Groups such as the Symphon and NAT have received help with grant writing. The RCAS is currently administering a number of Arts Development grants from the Illinois Arts Council for which other organizations can apply.

Now that RCAS has a facility, the organization is also serving as a "booking" agent for those groups which wish to meet in the building. There is a forum room which seats about 100 people and a board room which is already being booked monthly by such groups as NAT. RCAS is also conducting a forum series on such topics as Archaeology: Lost Cities of Vesuvius, Voices from the Depression and Traditional Dance of Africa.

In addition, the Council has had another project under its wing that most of you are aware of and that is the Alexander Liberman sculpture, "Symbol" on the mall. This was a project starting in 1975 with representatives of such organizations as Eye Delight, the Junior League, the Rockford Art Association, the Women's Board of the Art Association, etc. The group considered all kinds of sculpture projects

such as a sculpture garden but decided to start with a truly monumental piece of sculpture.

The committee asked to become a part of the Arts Council as this association with a not-for-profit organization made them eligible for funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. The committee drew up a budget which was simply a "guesstimation" and applied to the NEW which later awarded a \$21,000 grant to the Rockford Arts Council.

The then NEA sent 3 members to meet with 3 members of the committee to select an artist. The NEA stipulated one of 3 sites, all downtown, must be used.

The group selected Alexander Liberman of New York, and he came to Rockford to select the final location and to meet with the committee. Some months later he shipped a maquette (artist's model), and this was approved by the committee.

The design proved to be so complicated, however, that a New York structural engineer had to be hired to do the engineering of the connecting pieces. This delayed the project for many months because the committee first tried local and then Chicago engineers. Dr. Salvadori in New York proved to be the only one who had had experience of complicated sculpture, and the committee wanted the benefit of his experience. All other work was done locally; most notable was the job done by Arntzen Fabricating. Mr. Liberman said never has he had a better job of fabrication done anywhere, and RCAS is proud that Rockford can provide such superb workmanship.

The project ended up costing \$117,000 but over \$50,000 of that has been in in-kind donations such as the paint and most of the steel, etc. A very generous citizen underwrote the sculpture project so that it could be completed without any further delays. By losing so much time on the engineering work, the sculpture committee lost some credibility and decided they could best complete fund raising after the sculpture was up. The committee still has over \$20,000 to raise and is grateful for any and all gifts. The Rockford Council for the Arts and Sciences hope that "Symbol" will become a symbol of Rockford and be identified with Rockford much as the Picasso is with Chicago. Grand Rapids, after some initial protests about their Calder, has become so proud of the sculpture that it now appears on all city letterheads and even on all city vehicles.

RCAS hopes you all will come down and walk under and around the sculpture. You won't like it, but as the mayor has said, the important thing is to come down and see it. Don't expect it to look representative of anything such as a horse--just enjoy it for what has been called "the geometry of the piece." It's a collection of forms arranged to look almost as if they are floating and to draw your eyes up and give you an uplifting feeling.

Frederica Lepore, one-half of the husband-wife ministerial team at the Unitarian Church, interviewed Mr. Liberman just before the dedication, and the next morning delivered her sermon on the meaning of symbols in our lives and the meaning of Liberman's symbol in Rockford.

The following are quotes from her talk: "When asked

what are some of his hopes for his work in the city of Rockford, he speaks in terms of up-lifting of the spirit. He says, 'The color red is a signal to arrest attention. It is an obvious device to say "stop and look, stop and feel" and then you enter the symbol and look up. This physical experience of tilting one's head in order to perceive causes something to happen. The symbol is the possibility of a moment of escape. It can bring the onlooker from the reality of everyday life to the spiritual life.'

"Alexander Liberman's sculpture, we believe, will come to symbolize the re-emergence of Rockford's downtown as a cultural center. A steel abstract, it is a study in contrasts, within its immense proportions delicately and delicately balanced shapes. Standing 47 feet tall, the bright red array of steel cylinders, segments and parcels conveys the sense of its surrounding Rockford, as a source of soaring, swirling steel. From Rockford shops, steel fans out to the world as machinery and fasteners. Now its image will also go out as fine art. Alexander Liberman's thoughts in steel rise like temples to a demanding God.

(Continued in next issue)

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GREGORY HOUSE Y.W.C.A. Rockford, Illinois

The above photo of Charles H. Spafford's home has been donated by Isabelle Newton, 2616 Landstrom Road. Two photos of Mr. Spafford's home accompanied the article, "A Lady of Sorrows: Carrie Spafford Brett", which appeared in the Spring, 1978, issue, but this picture provided by Mrs. Newton gives a much clearer view of the Spafford home.

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