

NUGGETS of HISTORY

Volume 17

Autumn, 1980

Number 4

THE HOME OF MAJOR ELIAS COSPER
Located in Historic Browns Hills
by Gene Horvath

Oak Knolls was the name Major Cospers gave to his 40 acres of land that once stretched from the Rock River to Prospect Street. Over 30 major trees -- White and Burr Oaks, Pines and Shagbark Hickories --- shade the 1½ acres still surrounding this ornate brick veneer home.

When Cospers built this 2,000 square-foot Victorian Gothic home, he kept an account book of all expenses during its construction from August 16, 1867, to August 28, 1869. The total cost was \$9,563.98. Included in these expenses was \$2.50 for schnapps which was customarily served when the frame of a house or barn was raised. \$100 was the cost for the foundation stone which measures about 18 inches thick. Bricks (yellow Milwaukee brick now painted white) cost \$525.67 in 1867. There are four fireplaces -- two of them white, the other two gray Italian marble. Cospers paid Sherman Cole and Co. \$343.25 for these. Two of them are still in use although they are designed for the burning of coke rather than wood. First floor ceilings measure eleven feet high, while those on the second floor are ten feet.

When Barney Thompson, the late editor of the Rockford Newspapers, bought the home in 1922, he was responsible for most of the major remodeling. Thompson removed the roofed front porch and replaced it with a low-walled stone porch. He also added a small vestibule by bricking up one of the windows and centering the door.

An old photo taken in the 1870s shows the original porch and also some of the ornate railing that topped the bay window of the living room on the south. The back stairs, butler's pantry and downstairs maid's room were replaced by a spacious L-shaped kitchen and bathroom (two on each floor). The plumbing and electrical wiring were almost completely redone during this period. The heating system contains eight separate zones. It looks like the boiler room of a battleship and was reported to have cost



Side view of the Cospers Home

about \$20,000 when it was installed.

Dr. Joseph Bryan and his wife Mercy, who lived in this house from 1962 to 1966, were responsible for extensive redecoration. The outside yellow brick and brown trim were painted white, as were most of the inside walls. Both floors were completely carpeted. The attic was finished off and the home was exquisitely furnished with antiques.

Only the brief period when the house was owned by Art Huenkemeier in 1966-67 was the home more beautifully decorated with period pieces.

There is a real sense of history about this house because of the important roles the owners have played in local history.

The early Rockford banker, John A. Holland, persuaded Elias Cospers and his wife Eliza to leave Chicago and join his Winnebago National Bank here in Rockford. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Cospers resigned this position to accept a lieutenant's commission in 1862. He led Company E of the 74th Illinois Infantry Regiment in the battles of Chaplain Hills, Crab Orchard, and Stones River. He also fought in the fierce battles of Liberty Gap and Chickamauga before he was promoted to Major and served as Paymaster to the Army of the Cumberland for the final year and a half of the Civil War.

Returning to Rockford in 1865, he joined with John P. Manny as a partner in the farm implement business and later helped organize the Rockford Tack Company. He is credited as being the founder of the Rockford Public Library -- having raised money for its beginning and donating his large personal library.

A granddaughter, Mrs. Fanny Cospers Durrell, recalled many memories of this home in a letter written when she was 84 years old. "In my memories of those days are two Winnebago Indian women who often came to the kitchen door to trade articles for food which they carried away hidden in the folds of their long blankets ... they were a peaceful and happy people who camped to the east and north in the woods." She also recalled vividly a special summer night with the moon shining brightly over the Rock River as she and her boyfriend were sitting on the balcony over the bay window on the south side of the house. This was the night she became engaged, to later marry on June 1, 1904.

My wife Phyllis and I have had the pleasure of meeting



Cospers Hill (now Cospers Place)
in 1922



MAJOR ELIAS COSPER.

many of the people who remember Oak Knolls from long ago. One relative believed we had somehow "shrunk" the size of the house, as it was no longer as large as she had remembered it in her childhood visits. Others recalled funerals with their whispered gossip as to the cause of the deaths. I remember talking to Miss Thorberg Swenson who lived all her life in the house to the east of us on Cospers Avenue who recalled Elias Cospers struggling up the Cospers hill to his home.

We have added our history to this home as here our six children matured and left. Memories like breaking through the brick wall in the subbasement to invade the old vaulted rainwater reservoir. These were spooky places for the young children to visit, especially around Halloween. One of these my oldest son, David, turned into a darkroom; and I used one as my first welding studio for sculpture. The attic with its peaked closets became a favorite place for the three girls to play house or for the boys to construct outlandish pads with sheets nailed to ceilings to create a maze of rooms. Steve, our second son, used this area for his electronics and wireless experiments. Probably the most memorable day is our daughter Sue's wedding reception on a perfect June day in 1980 when, for the first time in over seven years, all the family were reunited.

This house will always have special meaning for me as an artist. Not only will I remember its beauty, the interesting way the light and shadows are modified by the old pane glass in many of the windows, but our period of living in the house has coincided with my own return to the fine arts and sculpture. It is here in the attic and basement that I made most of my paintings and made the models for the American Bank 30-foot eagle and the Founder's Sculpture. These Bicentennial projects have allowed me to become part of Rockford's history and propelled me to major sculpture commissions as far away as Phoenix, Arizona.

THE POLIO EPIDEMIC OF 1945

Infantile paralysis, better known as polio because of its scientific name, is no longer the scourge of the land as it so often became in late summer before the Salk and Sabin vaccines had been developed. Each summer, usually beginning in late July, parents would watch their children closely for signs of the dreaded disease.

Probably the worst epidemic of poliomyelitis in Rockford's history occurred in 1945. Before it was over more than thirty people in Winnebago County had died from the disease, and many others received permanent disabilities. A total of 183 cases had been reported in the city and another 121 in the county outside of Rockford.

On July 25 it was reported that the disease had claimed its first Rockford death of the 1945 polio season. The victim was seven-year-old Barbara Fillmore, a resident of the Rockford Children's Home. By August 2nd, four more residents of the city had died, and the plague seemed to be spreading. The next night Major General David McCoach, Jr., commanding officer of the 6th service command, ordered that Rockford would be "off limits" to personnel at Camp Grant.

One of the unique developments of the epidemic was the effort to combat the disease by the use of DDT sprayed from an airplane, which was done in mid-August. The results were inconclusive, and the disease raged on. The public schools delayed opening until September 17, and the football season was very short that year.



Trailing a plume of DDT, a specially-equipped army B-25 Mitchell bomber swoops low over Rockford as a large area is sprayed with the miracle insecticide in an experiment to determine its value in checking poliomyelitis' spread. —Register-Republic photo.

PECATONICA'S HISTORIC TREASURES A House on the National Register by Hazel M. Hyde

A house from Times Past! That is the tall white house with green trim that calls for your attention as you drive or walk along Main Street in Pecatonica. This is the house that is now on the National Register of Historic Places. The William H. Roberts House is on the west side of the



Dr. Roberts' Home in Pecatonica, Illinois which is on the National Historic Register

street, located on a corner, with the address 523 Main St. This privately-owned dwelling is one of Winnebago County's show places. It is an antique shop, open by appointment, belonging to John and Carol Barron, who reside in a tall, handsome, brown house at 625 Main Street. Baby Lindsay will grow up surrounded by history.

The legal description of Roberts House resides with the Recorder of Deeds, Winnebago County Court House, Rockford. It was listed October 1977 in Illinois Historic Sites Survey Inventory, Department of Conservation, and a copy is filed in Springfield, Illinois. It sits on the original site and is in excellent condition.

In an informal interview, April 16, 1980, Carol Barron told me that the first step in getting a building on the National Register is to do research on the former ownership and the architecture. In a generous gesture, she allowed me to copy the physical description of the house, which has been slightly altered in the passage of years, and I quote:

"The 2 story structure was built with a front, center, and rear section. The front section's exterior consists of No. 1 Pressed Brick, the center and rear sections having common brick with all window and door trimmings of Joliet Stone.

"To the left of the facade is a double door entry (the



Mr. John Barron,
owner of Dr. Rob-
erts' House and
Antique Shop



Mrs. John E. Barron and Lindsay

doors and transom having etched frosted glass) sheltered by an ornamented porch; the center line boasts an identical set of bay windows, one atop the other; inset to the right is a single entry door with porch which was the doctor's office entrance and is designed to match the front porch but in lesser proportion. A squared set of bay windows is featured on the south side of the front section. All bay windows and porches are trimmed in ornamented wood brackets and patterns of geometric, scrollwork, and incised stylized flowers, and all topped with oriel roofs and, except for the lower front bay, crowned by iron fences. The deck roof also features an iron fence. The verge boards under the peaks of the 3 roof gables, front section, are festooned by a sawwood ornament resembling a medieval spear pointing downward. There is a special whistle and talking tube device at both facade entrances used to reach the doctor in his sleeping chamber upstairs.

"An addition to the rear section was added within the last 25 years. One window on the south side of the rear section was altered. The baluster and hand rail leading to the double door entry was removed. The natural brick was painted white during the 1930's and has remained."

Actually, according to Mrs. Barron, the exterior is the most important aspect of the house. It dates from 1883 and and builder and architect were Henry Hebard and John Winchester. The application called for a statement of the significance of the building. This is the Statement of Significance, and is quoted:

"The Dr. William H. Roberts home was built in 1883 at a cost of \$3,240 and was considered to be, at that time, one of the finest residences in Pecatonica. Dr. Roberts' concept of locating his residence/office on the Main Street near the downtown area and making it easily accessible to the people is, it itself, significant in that it connected his life and work as a physician and surgeon closely with that of the Pecatonica community. Also, his fine taste for

quality construction and design are evidenced in the architecture of this late 19th Century home. The exterior of this home still retains its 1880's charm, and although progress has destroyed its immediate neighbor and others nearby, it still stands proudly among newer structures reminding us of an era long since passed.

"In 1960, an attractive offer to purchase this home was made by an Oil company to the owner for its removal along with the neighboring home, the latter home being demolished and a gas station erected. Fortunately, the 30 year owner rejected all offers made by the Oil Company; thus, a significant step towards its preservation. Being located in a zoned business district, the house is highly vulnerable to modern commercialization; and for that reason, it was purchased in 1977 to preserve and protect its historic value.

"Dr. Roberts passed away June 23, 1886 from a lengthy illness at the early age of 33. While his life and profession in Pecatonica was shortlived, he had won many friends and was highly respected by all."

Then, Carol, who is a good friend and a member of Rockford Chapter DAR, explained that there was a waiting period before they were sent from the United States Department of Interior, National Park Service, a Continuation Sheet on which they were to further clarify some of their statements, and here is the direct quotation of the information added:

"The Dr. William H. Roberts home was built during a transition era when Gothic Revival and Italinete styles were realizing their conclusions and a new birth of Queen Anne was being accepted -- all of these styles including basic principles of Eastlake influenced the total design of this home.

"Basically the style of this home is Italinete (era



Mrs. Clyde Weingartner
in front of the Morning
Glory Talking Machine

concluded 1885) with touches of Gothic Revival (which had lost its influence by 1880) and, Queen Anne (1875-1900) complemented by Eastlake. Its Italinatne characteristics are its asymmetrical arrangements of the squared shapes and lines on the bay windows and porches, heavy ornate brackets that support the five oriel roofs and the "port-hole" attic windows set under the medieval spear on the north and south sides.

"Symbolic of its Gothic Revival style is the Joliet stone trimmings that drape the tall slender windows and the medieval spear attached to each of the 3 vergeboard peaks.

"In 1883, the Queen Anne era was approaching its height and these characteristics influenced by Eastlake principles are: The ornamental iron fences with Eastlake medieval motifs; the geometric squares and scrollwork, incised stylized flowers appearing on porches and bay windows; the frosted etched glass in double doors and transoms; and lastly, the gallery effect of spindles which line both porch rails.

"Prior to 1900, not many homes of substantial quality or design were built in Pecatonica, and the home of Dr. Roberts is noted to be the only home of its particular craftsmanship and architecture from the 1880 period."

While I was talking with Carol Barron, I had been busy taking pictures of the exterior and then some items in the antique shop. A red pitcher and glasses caught my eye and she laughed and explained that was Depression Era. A pair of lamps was really old and she lighted these for me to show how they had been electrified. Postcards



Mrs. Wendell Galloway
and the Gone With the
Wind Lamp

of old scenes in Pecatonica can be purchased. There you see Main Street with the horse and buggy outside a store. So excited was I during Harold and my private tour that I almost forgot to photograph the metal marker that attests to the placing of this house on the National Register of Historic Places.

On the Friday prior to this interview, I had introduced John Barron, who is employed at Sundstrand, but works with antiques in the evenings and holidays, to the Rockford Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution. John and Carol gave a slide program that showed their concerns with preservation and a persevering research into Pecatonica and Durand history. The Barrons had found old black and white photographs or colored post cards of the way houses had looked in the 1880's and their present appearance with the alterations made by different owners. Churches, parks, and bridges were included. The Roberts House was one of many interesting places shown and described.

Prowling through their home which is furnished with period furniture, I photographed, with their permission, such items as the morning glory talking machine, the fireplace, ceiling fan, lamps with flower decorated globes, portieres, the varnished wall-paper beads that hung in the double door. Other interesting objects were a three-vase epergne on the dining table, a china cabinet with crystal and glassware, an old water pitcher and bowl, Tiffany shades for lamps, Gone with the Wind Lamps, a Morris chair, beautiful mirrors, old fashioned patterned kerosene lamps. I noticed the carved newel post at the foot of the stairs, wall paper reminiscent of old times, and floral-patterned carpeting on the floors.

The Barrons were not expecting over forty-five guests, so they brought out ice cream chairs to fill in spaces.

A personal pleasure in Pecatonica for Harold was seeing old-time friends from the time he farmed near Winnebago and Seward. Amy Branstetter Woods, whose mother Mrs. Dorin E. Branstetter was a former DAR regent, was one of these. Her father, aged 101, is still living and in fair health. We saw Sue Stubblefield Neely, Florence Bentley Eickman, Joan Chambers Werkheiser and others who live in that area.

On April 18, 1980, we visted with Minnie Thiel, who had her 100th birthday last summer. The Thiels ran a hardware store in Pecatonica for many years. She was happy to talk about early days there and people she remembered. We spoke with her concerning Dorin Branstetter and she said the Branstetters were close neighbors.

There is a a heap of history in Winnebago County, and some of its treasures are being preserved.

EFFIE ROSENQUIST BORDEN DIES SEPTEMBER 19
A Charter Member; Mother of Editor

The daughter of Swedish immigrants Andrew and Agda Rosenquist, about whom an article appeared in the last issue, Effie Borden lived her entire life in just two Rockford locations. She remained in her childhood home, 1322 Eighth Street, in which she was born in 1892, until marrying Hjalmar R. Borden in 1924. After their honeymoon, Effie and "Jolly" moved into their newly-built residence at 1321 Cospers Avenue. Hjalmar passed away in 1949, and eventually her children married and left home, but Mrs. Borden continued living in the same house until suffering a stroke late in 1979.

Effie Rosenquist began teaching at the old Brown School in the fall of 1912. Brown School stood on the northwest corner of Eighth Street and Sixteenth Avenue; the principal was Lydia Gregory. Effie's first assignment was assisting Ethel Frederickson in the first grade. Miss Frederickson later married Emil P. Olson, Rockford industrialist who in 1957 was elected Rockford City Treasurer.

When a third grade teaching position became available at the school, Miss Rosenquist was transferred and taught third



Effie Rosenquist Borden



MISS LYDIA GREGORY



Brown School

grade for several years. She preferred first grade, however, and eventually returned to that level. She continued to teach at Brown School until 1925, a year after she was married.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s Mrs. Borden gave elocution lessons in her home. Her pupils were occasionally asked to recite their "pieces" over station KFLV, Rockford's first radio station, the predecessor of WROK. She was also much in demand to tutor children in reading.

After husband Hjalmar died in February of 1949, Effie Borden returned to the classroom, accepting a position at Terrace View School in the Harlem district. The Terrace View building was a former Camp Grant structure which had



First and Second Grades at Terrace View School, 1950-51

been purchased by the Harlem School District and moved to Melbourne Avenue. It had apparently been used for a small theater, as it had a raised area at one end which appeared to have been a stage. A wall was built to make it into a classroom, which was occupied by the highest grades, which at first were the sixth, seventh and eighth grades. After 1953 the seventh and eighth grades were sent to a junior high school.

Mrs. Borden taught first and second grades combined, and at times had over forty pupils. Another teacher taught third, fourth and fifth grades, and the "head teacher", Nellie McCabe, taught the upper three grades on the old stage. Miss McCabe became the first principal of Windsor School when it opened in 1953.

After six years at Terrace View School, Effie Borden was transferred to the newly-built North Park School on Harlem Road, where she taught first grade until her retirement in 1961 at the age of sixty-nine. Her principal at North Park School was Joseph Sinkiawic, the present mayor of Loves Park.

Even after her retirement Effie continued to tutor an occasional pupil in reading, and she taught Sunday School at First Lutheran Church until she was eighty-six years old. Active in the Daniel Post American Legion Auxiliary, of which she was a charter member, she had served as president, and she continued as Girls' State Chairman almost until her death. For several years in the 1940s she was leader of the Jackson School troop of Girl Scouts. She was a charter member of the Rockford Historical Society and the Browns Woods Association.

With all of these activities, Mrs. Borden's greatest interest was her family. Her grandsons always enjoyed a visit from "Grandma", and when she was laid to rest on September 22, it was her six grandsons - David, Paul, and Mark Westman, and John, James, and Timothy Borden, two of whom had to travel over 2,000 miles for the funeral - who served as pall bearers.



Effie Borden, Nellie McCabe, and Ann Wiley,
Terrace View Teachers in 1952

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is published quarterly by the Rockford Historical Society, Rockford, Illinois. Address correspondence to the President, William J. Garson, 3516 Meadow Lane 61107. Editor: Robert H. Borden. Associate Editor: Hazel M. Hyde. Assistant Editor: Timothy Borden. Typist: Mrs. Warren Burlend. Acting Membership Chairman: Gertrude Mead