

# NUGGETS of HISTORY

Volume 18

Autumn, 1981

Number 4

## HARVEST ROCK RIVER ICE by Hazel M. Hyde

The ice in Rock River would harden day by day until it was very thick indeed in January and February. The entry of high winter would bring out the men who were skilled in harvesting natural river ice. They brought their strongest hand saws and wore their most sturdy clothing.

The ice was first scraped clean of snow and dirt. A marker was used to cut grooves about three feet apart up and down the stream. Then the marker was drawn across the stream to make parallel lines or grooves. Sometimes a plow was used to make the grooves deeper, but usually a saw was employed for the cutting. Their purpose was to mark off blocks of ice of a size that two or more men could handle and yet large enough to store to advantage. With the river ice properly stored there would be plenty of ice to cool the milk and keep the meat in summer time.

There would be a small, windowless ice house for storage. The ice became thick enough in many winters of early Rockford days to provide footing for a wagon and horses. Then the blocks could be loaded directly into a wagon and hauled away without the work of sledging the heavy material to the river's bank. Other times the cakes of ice were floated to shore using a pry to force them along. Then they would be slid up slanting boards or troughs.

Before the turn of the century this work was a part of the winter season. Gathering ice was hard work. The places chosen for this activity had to be away from the areas where young and old would gather for skating. One man would wield a steel implement known as a "busting bar" to help pry the blocks apart.

The hole created by the cut ice steadily grew larger. Because ice is lighter than water, some blocks would float in the water creating patterns of black and white. If the temperature was too cold, care had to be taken that blocks did not refreeze and stick together. If the day was too warm, above about 28 degrees, the ice became very slippery to handle and the blocks might become too soft.

Previous to the cutting operation, sawdust had been laid down in the storage place as part of the needed insulation. Inside the barn or ice house several men formed a crew. They could be heard to shout, "More ice!" The crew sweated and strained in the dim light with pick poles to swing the heavy blocks into position. If the first tier did not lie flat and even, there was trouble with the next layer. Gradually the ice began to mount up. Usually by late afternoon the ice house would be nearing capacity. When the ice house was full, a thick layer of marsh hay topped the heavy blocks. Then the ice house was sealed up to wait for hot weather when it would be in demand. For what was lemonade without ice?

In an interview one snowy day, February 11, 1981, W.C.



Sawing Natural Ice  
From Rock River

(Carney) Sarver, born September 20, 1892, recalled a number of interesting stories about Rock River. He lived on a farm north of Rockford, off Halstead and Kilburn Roads that had been in the Sarver family for ninety-six years. Speaking of the depth of ice on Rock River by February, he stated it ranged from eighteen to twenty inches.

Carney remembered, "There was an ice house around Roscoe and that is the place where we frequently bought ice that had been cut from Rock River and stored. There was a



Harvesting the Ice  
Blocks from the  
River

Advertisement  
in 1877 City  
Directory

H. D. WILSON.

W. L. NEVIUS.

WILSON & NEVIUS,

— ONLY DEALERS IN —



Upper River Ice Delivered to any part of City at Low Rates.

OFFICE, NORTH WATER, E. R.

Residence, 306 Chestnut, W. R., and 405 North Main, E. R.

big building with ice stored away among sawdust. We went over with a sled. A bunch of farmers would go so you would pass the time of day with people you knew while you waited your turn. Then, of course, we stored our own ice.

"The owner would cut the ice in desired size chunks. They had a conveyor to load it on the sled. The sleds were drawn by horses, of course. My brothers, Everett, who was a year older than I and Frank, who was two years younger, were often along. We brothers still get together to play cards.

"There was an ice house in Rockford, too. The men used to plow the snow off so the water would freeze deeper. It was located about where the Riverside (Riverview) Skating Palace is now, or maybe a little farther north of that.

"In order to keep Rockford's skaters away from the ice cutting portion of Rock River, they put up a barricade, a kind of fence. The skaters had a space about a block square with lights and benches."

Helen Sarver (Mrs. W. C.), whose maiden name was Brain, was born in 1898. Her grandmother lived on the east side of Rock River. In 1906, when Helen was eight years of age, she was sent from her home on the west side, across the river on the thick ice a number of times. She crossed about where the library is located because her grandmother lived on Prairie Street. Helen's mother would put things

WILSON, HENRY D., a resident since 1866. Wholesale and retail dealer in Rock River ice. Ice delivered to all parts of the city. Special rates for car load lots and consumers of large quantities. Office 204 N. Water, res. 201 S. Main.



From  
1887-88  
City  
Directory

HOWARD W. HALL, President. FRED J. SOVEREIGN, Secretary.



ROCKFORD, ILL.

# CITY ICE CO.

Wholesale and Retail Dealers in Rock River Ice.

HOUSES FARTHEST UP RIVER. Orders by mail or telephone will receive prompt and careful attention.

Office 120 W. State St. Telephone No. 22.

From  
1889-90  
City  
Directory

in a little basket, such as special rolls or bread, and send them with Helen.

Helen said, "People would be skating on the ice when I walked across. Maybe I sometimes skated on my shoes a little bit, too, even if Mother thought that wore the soles out too fast."

There was a local market for the ice harvested from Rock River. The first ice-boxes for homes were made of wood and lined with tin or zinc. Many people now in Rockford remember the days when a cardboard with numbers on it was hung in a conspicuous place. A hand on it pointed to the number of pounds desired. The iceman with his horse-drawn wagon would chip off the desired amount with an ice pick. He wore a leather apron across his back. With a pair of ice tongs he would swing the ice on his shoulder and carry the ice into the kitchen and place it in the ice box. Children would squabble over the chips of ice at the back of the wagon. On a hot summer day that ice sure tasted good.

With her usual expert knowledge of the resources of the local history and genealogical records room, Mrs. Ruth Lunde pointed out the Rockford City Directories as sources for checking ice companies. In year 1889-1890, City Ice Company, located at 120 West State Street had as its president Howard W. Hall and as its treasurer Fred J. Sovereign. Ad advertisement for ice shows a picture of an ice wagon drawn by horses and a man with ice tongs. The reader was informed by City Ice Company: Wholesale and Retail Sales of Rock River ice. Houses farthest up river should order by mail or telephone. Will receive prompt attention. Those were the days when the river water was pure and wholesome.

Lake Ice Company, listed in ROCKFORD CITY DIRECTORY 1903-1904, had the address 750 North Madison and also 714 Seventh Street, was headed by Andrew Holmberg. To get a

L. H. BAILEY F. J. LEONARD

ESTABLISHED 1875.

## BAILEY & LEONARD,

DEALERS IN

# Rock River Ice.



Purest and farthest up river ice.  
Ice furnished in quantities on short notice.  
Prompt and faithful service guaranteed.

### THE OLD RELIABLE FIRM.

Telephone No. 154. Office 409 E. State.

From  
1892  
City  
Directory

mental picture of the Madison location, the Riverview Ice Rink is located at 324 North Madison, and the Verdi Club is located at number 782.

The 1903-1904 directory also listed Rockford Ice, 204 West State Street. All of these locations are close to the river except the Seventh Street address.

A picture of the "Ice House Gang" is to be seen in a special edition of the Rockford newspaper, showing them with workmen having ice tongs such as were in common use to handle the ice.

This commonplace seasonal industry on many northern rivers and also lakes, now exists largely in the minds of older residents. However, Peter Canby wrote an article, "The Iceman Surviveth", in AUDUBON MAGAZINE, January, 1981. A New England family named Thompson continue down to the 1980s cutting blocks of ice and storing them in an ice house in much the same fashion as was done along Rock River. One element he described was that of caulking newly cut seams of ice with snow so water would not seep in and refreeze them. They used a machine that was heavy, unwieldy, and very noisy to cut the ice. The ice is garnered from Thompson's Pond on their property. Their ice house, built long ago by one Asa Thompson, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Some souvenirs or artifacts still exist of this ice industry such as the ice tongs that can be seen in the Rockford Museum Center on Guilford Road.

Those were the days when most homes had a large ice cream freezer that was hand cranked. Mothers had their favorite ice cream recipes. Young boys and girls helped to pack the ice and salt around the container where the rich confection was being frozen. Sometimes the smallest child in the family was coaxed to sit on an old carpet or piece

of blanket to hold the freezer steady as turning the crank became more difficult. Ice cream socials of that day were truly community gathering places.

## HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS OF SEWARD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH 1841-1981

by Marjorie Hyde Whitney (Mrs. Clifford E.)

In 1841, thirteen people gathered at the home of Truman Judd to "form themselves into a church".

In 1850 the little church divided, and in 1853 the remaining members built a little white church on the southwest corner of the Needham farm on Comly Road. When it was almost completed, a disastrous wind storm tore off most of the roof but work was resumed and the church was completed. The Ladies Aid made shirts by hand and sold them and the overalls, also sewn by hand to raise money for building materials.

On February 20, 1868, a new house of worship was dedicated on or near Fenton corners, the Robert Smith property. In 1901, the church was moved to the village of Seward, which was beginning to grow. This was accomplished by using planks and rollers obtained from a Rockford firm which specialized in moving buildings. The church was pulled by a capstan powered by twelve horses. A cable attached to the church was wound around the capstan thus propelling the building on its way. The men, including the minister, moved the logs and kept the church on course. The distance of approximately one-half mile was covered in one week. The cost was one hundred dollars. That is how the church got to its present location.

From time to time, as the need arose, there has been extensive remodeling and redecorating. The first major improvement was the digging of the basement which was done by slip shovels pulled by small mules. Later, a balcony was added to the sanctuary and was removed some years later to expose the beautiful stained glass window for all to enjoy. This was all done with volunteer help. Other improvements include three new class rooms, a pastor's study, kitchen cupboards, new floors, new pews and a beautiful pipe organ.

Through the years, the church activities have reflected the times. During World War II, the Young Adult Class sponsored dances in the school gym, using a juke box for music. This was for fun and for money-making but also used little gas, which was rationed, to get there. Also, during the war, the ladies of the church made cookies every Saturday and gave them to the soldiers passing through Seward on the train, which made a briefstop. The church has always been a community center. It has furnished leaders and a meeting place for 4H, Scouts, CROP collection and clothing collection for those who

have met misfortune. When Rockford Memorial Hospital was raising money for their building the church members collected and donated money to finance a room there. The Pilgrim Fellowship, Couples' Club, Jr. Choir, Sr. Choir, Sunday School, trustees, deacons and deaconesses, various committee members and Womens' Fellowship have all contributed greatly to the fellowship and well being of the church. Also the Missionary Society which was very active in years gone by.

In 1941, the church celebrated the 100th Anniversary with a memorable pageant, written by Verlee Nelson, and given in the Forest Preserve. This had a covered wagon which was horse-drawn, the choir trudging up the hill singing hymns and "pioneers" in costume.

In 1966, the 125th Anniversary, there was a banquet at the Seward Gym, a program and a rededication worship service. Letters of years gone by, which were researched in Chicago by Rev. Close and Max Fry, were read and were found to be enlightening.

We are indebted to all of our wonderful, caring ministers who furnished spiritual leadership and to all those who have given of their time and talents so that we might have this rich heritage and inspiring house of worship.

## WATER POWER SCRAMBLE by W. Ashton Johnson

The fact that the famous Polish rights claim prevented Rockton from being surveyed until 1844, and five disastrous fires, were causes that brought about retardation of the finest water power site, and led industry to develop in Rockford.

Settled in 1835 by William and Thomas B. Talcott, Rockton was a natural place for water power because of a natural head of seven and a third feet at that point in the river, and the early settlers were aware of that. A bend in Rock River afforded opportunity to develop a race, dam the river, and raise the level another five feet. A federal government grant enabled Rockton pioneers to boast of the first power dam across Rock River in 1851.

By 1858, four paper mills produced a large volume of print and book papers and Rockton seemed headed for national prominence in this industrial field. The Enterprise Mill was erected in 1853; Bradner Smith & Company operated the first pulp mill in the midwest a year later, while the Winnebago Paper Mill showed \$105,000 in sales in 1855. Wright & Newcomb's mill was launched in 1869. Six large industrial plants were leveled by fire between 1857 and 1886. Of these, the Bradner Smith firm was burned out three times. Other losses that resulted in discouragement in further Rockton development were: Talcott & Co., flouring mill; Wright & Newcomb; Kenny Paper Mills, Coles &

Gates flouring mill; Northwest Paper Mills.

State legislation of 1843 provided that a corporation could erect a dam for the development of water power, subject to a provision that the state could "take over ownership of said dam and locks if such action was deemed necessary". The state government did assume the cost of maintenance. Appointment of a Water Power Commission resulted in these appointees: Daniel S. Haight, Germanicus Kent, Samuel D. Preston, Laomi Peake, Charles I. Horsman, George Haskell, and J. C. Goodhue.

The Rockford Hydraulic Company was organized, and by the autumn of 1845 the dam and locks were completed. Made of timber cut from an 80-acre grove, the dam was located approximately a block north of the present Park Avenue. The error of building the dam at this site was manifested less than a year later, when nearly 200 feet from the east bank gave way and carried an acre of land down stream. Twenty foot width mill races were designed on either side of the river, but two breaks caused losses to the James B. Howell Company; Gergory, Phelps & Daniels sawmill; Nettelton's Grist Mill; and Wheeler & Lyons' sawmill on the east side; firms greatly damaged on the west side were the Robertson & Horsman sawmill and Orlando Clark's Iron Foundry. From 1847 to 1851 excellent water power was available for the new industries. On June 1st of 1851 a serious flood caused the entire wooden dam and supports to wash out.

New legislation, designed to improve navigation and increase water power thereon, encouraged a new company to carry on industrial development along the banks of Rock River. Accordingly, the Rockford Water Power Company was incorporated, which consolidated with the pioneer Hydraulic organization. In 1852 this group, headed by Messrs. John A. Holland, Thomas D. Robertson, Judge S. M. Church, C. I. Horsman, William Hulin, H. R. Maynard, and a dozen others, decided to erect a permanent dam across the river on the limestone bottom of the old ford. In May, 1853, the 760-foot long dam was completed. The main mill race was directed to the west side, due to currents and deviation of the main channel from east to west.

The arrival of John H. Manny of reaper fame was a boon to industrial expansion in 1853. The firm of Clark & Utter assumed manufacturing rights and produced 150 of the newly invented agricultural luxury. The next year saw a great demand for the reaper, and the J. H. Manny Company with Wait and Sylvester Talcott as backers, manufactured 1,100 of the machines. Jesse Blinn and Ralph Emerson, hardware dealers, entered the firm as Manny and Company.

In 1855, the famous European trials of the reaper, arranged by Robert H. Tinker, resulted in a blue ribbon first prize at Paris. The year also brought public notice of the Cyrus H. McCormick patent infringement suit, during which Abraham Lincoln served as one of the associate counsel for the Manny firm.

(To be concluded in next issue)



ABOVE: Graveside service following the funeral of Clement V. Burns, past president who passed away in August.

RIGHT & BELOW: Scenes from Society picnic held in September at Sinnissippi Park





Scene at Historical  
Society picnic in  
1978 at Severson  
Dells Forest  
Preserve

WINNEBAGO COUNTY'S FIRST EXECUTION  
by Robert H. Borden  
(Concluded from previous issue)

About one-thirty, Alfred Countryman said his last farewells to his wife and mother at the jail. They did not attend the execution. Alfred was then led to the second carriage, and the procession began. The team of horses pulling the prisoner's carriage soon balked and refused to go further, so they had to be replaced. As if fate was trying to prevent the execution, the prisoner's carriage was again stopped about a mile and a half from the jail when the whiffletree broke. Exactly how this problem was surmounted is not clear, but apparently the occupants were transferred to another vehicle, as they eventually arrived at Sheriff Church's farm.

A crowd of thousands had assembled to watch the proceedings. Estimates of the size of the crowd varied considerably. The Rockford REGISTER placed the number at 8,000, the Rockford REPUBLICAN at 15,000, and the ROCK RIVER DEMOCRAT stated that it was not less than 20,000. The scaffold was constructed in such a way that there was a platform large enough to provide seats for Rev. Crew, Mr. Miller, Dr. Clark, Dr. Lyman, Sheriff Church and his deputies, the sheriff's brother Judge Selden Church, and a Mr. Weldon. Sheriff Church then announced that the purpose of the gathering was "to take Alfred Countryman and hang him by the neck until dead" as ordered by the Circuit Court. Rev. Crews, who had been ministering to the prisoner since his sentencing, then offered prayer.

The prisoner was then given an opportunity to address the crowd, and the following speech was quoted in the Rockford REGISTER: "Gentlemen and Ladies, I don't know as I can address you very much. I am not gifted with speech. I thank the Lord I have found that there is one above me to whom I can look. I would like all who hear me, especially the young, to take warning and learn to fear God. My time is very short, it is near at hand, but I can die happy, and hope to enter into a world of joy. I have found great trouble in making my peace with my Redeemer, but I thank

God that I had a friend on earth to direct me, and pray for me. I can go before the Judgment Bar of God with this crime of wilful murder charged against me, with a quiet heart, and when we all meet there we can tell who is right and who is wrong. May God have mercy on the dear one that I leave behind me, and have mercy on my two little children. May He have mercy on my brothers and sister, too, and bless them; may He have mercy on each one of you, and on them, and may we all meet where sorrows be no more. I bid you all farewell."

After resuming his seat, Countryman shook hands with Rev. Crews, to whom he had referred as his "friend on earth to direct me and pray for me". He also shook hands with his lawyer, Mr. Miller, and others on the platform. His arms and feet were then tied. He then stood up, and as the hood was being drawn over his head he made another short speech: "I ain't afraid to die. Glory be to God! Farewell, friends, once more. I hope to meet you in a heavenly land where sorrow be no more. I am going home. Glory be to God -- I am going home. Farewell." Just before the noose was placed about his neck, he made one last comment: "Gentlemen and ladies, I have given a correct history of my life, which will be published here in Rockford, in charge of Mr. Upright."

The hood was then adjusted over his face, and the noose was drawn tight, and at seventeen minutes past two the bolt was pulled, the trap door opened, and the sentence of the court was fulfilled. The Rockford REGISTER described the scene: "He writhed convulsively for about seven minutes, and then all was still -- the immense concourse neither moving nor talking for some time. The body hung for about twenty minutes, when it was cut down and given in charge to his sorrowing family, by whom it was conveyed to Mrs. Avery's on the East Side, from whence we believe it will be taken to Ogle County for interment. His father, sister and one brother witnessed the execution. His father controlled his feelings until the bolt was drawn, when he wept loudly and bitterly." The Mrs. Avery mentioned in the article was apparently Mrs. Caroline Avery, who lived at the corner of Market and North Fourth Streets. It may be that she ran a boarding house and that the Countrymans had stayed with her while awaiting the execution.

The remainder of Samuel I. Church's term as sheriff passed without any further incident of such magnitude. Samuel Church was the youngest of the three Church brothers who came to Winnebago County. Selden M. Church, the eldest, arrived here in 1836 and served as postmaster, county clerk and county judge. The next brother, Ulysses, arrived in 1847. Selden was anxious to have Sam settle here, also, as he knew Sam was a good blacksmith and felt that the community would be benefitted by another blacksmith shop. Sam agreed to open a shop here if Ulysses would be his partner, so in the fall of 1848 the two Church brothers opened a blacksmith shop in a frame building at the southeast corner of East State and Water Streets. It was said that custom-



The family plot  
of Sheriff Samuel  
Church in Cedar Bluff  
Cemetery, Rockford,  
Illinois

ers came from as far as twenty-five miles away, and the Church brothers had to hire two or three extra smiths to assist them and ran four or five forges. They were also listed as wagon makers in the 1857 and 1859 city directories.

Ulysses Church remained unmarried, but Samuel, shortly before migrating to Rockford, had married a young lady named Silence. They were married at Camillus, New York, just west of Syracuse, and soon set out for the prairies of Illinois. They journeyed mostly by lake to Chicago and thence to Rockford by wagon team. Mr. Church purchased his land in the early 1850s, but although he farmed most of it in the '50s and '60s, the family lived on South Second Street between State and Walnut until about 1870, when they built a house on the farm. In 1877 his holdings were valued at about \$16,000. Their farm eventually became part of the city, and their address was then listed as 2605 School Street.

Mr. Church died in his sleep on March 11, 1886, at the age of 70. Although the youngest, he was the first of the Church brothers to die. Silence continued to live in the farm house on School Street until she passed away in 1905 at the age of 75. Three children, Samuel, Jr., Willie, and Theodore preceded their parents in death. Theodore had become a physician, but Sam, Jr., and Willie died as infants. Another son, S. Richmond Church, died March 17, 1908, and the only daughter, Mrs. Emmagene Paul, died March 25, 1912. The entire family is buried at Cedar Bluff Cemetery.

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NUGGETS OF HISTORY is published quarterly by the Rockford Historical Society, Rockford, Illinois. William J. Garson, President, 3516 Meadow Lane, 61107. Jack Mundy, Vice President; Lawrence Wendland, Treasurer; Evelyn Anderson, Recording Secretary; Winona Madden, Corresponding Secretary; Gertrude Mead, Past President; Robert H. Borden, Editor; Hazel M. Hyde, Associate Editor; Mrs. Warren Burlend, Typist. For membership information, contact Victor R. Barnard, Membership Chairman, 5003 DelMar Street, Telephone 399-7565