

NUGGETS of HISTORY

Volume 20

Winter, 1982-83

Number 1

ROCKFORD'S HISTORIC ART MUSEUM by Robert H. Borden

Few if any, locations in Rockford can boast of being as historic as the two adjoining sites on North Main Street just north of the Sears, Roebuck store. At 737 North Main stands the Burpee Art Gallery, built by banker John S. Coleman about 1852, purchased by reaper manufacturer John P. Manny in 1864, sold by him to textile manufacturer William Nelson in 1890, and finally bought by undertaker and former furniture dealer Harry B. Burpee in 1936. Next door, at 813 North Main, stands the Burpee Natural History Museum, built in 1893 by William Fletcher Barnes of the W. F. and John Barnes Company. In this article we will concentrate on the Burpee Art Gallery.

Born about 1807 at Walton, New York, John Coleman came to Rockford in June of 1851. At that time the banking firm of Thomas D. Robertson and John A. Holland was three years old, having been opened in 1848. Coleman joined the firm shortly after his arrival, and may have become a junior partner soon after that. Shortly after Holland died in 1855, the firm became known as Robertson, Coleman, and Co.

In 1843, during the administration of President James K. Polk, Dr. George Haskell had acquired from the government much of the land on which these two historic homes were built. He soon sold the lot on which the art gallery is located to Seth S. Whitman. John A. Coleman bought it from Whitman shortly after arriving in Rockford, and built the house. In 1864 Coleman, having been informed by his doctor that he had only a short time remaining to live, sold the residence to John P. Manny for \$15,000.

Manny was born at Amsterdam, New York, on March 8, 1823. He learned to be a blacksmith, and in 1842 came west with his family, settling in Stephenson County. In 1849 his cousin, John H. Manny, who had developed an excellent reaper and mower, asked him to manufacture the knife sections. When John P. Manny was a blacksmith, he had developed an unusual oil tempering process for the hardening of metal, causing it to be tougher than most. For several years he produced the knife sections for the John H. Manny reaper, and received a substantial portion of the profits.

John P. and John H. Manny have sometimes been confused in the minds of certain writers. John H. Manny, who developed the early Manny reapers, died in 1856 at the age of thirty, leaving no children. His widow, Mary, married Robert H. Tinker in 1870. John P. Manny, however, lived a long and successful life. He married Eunice Hicks before moving from Stephenson County to Rockford. The only child of that marriage to live to adulthood was George, who was the father of Dwight Manny, one of the founders of the Williams-Manny insurance firm.

A few years after his cousin's death, Manny establish-

ed his own reaper firm. Eunice Hicks Manny died in 1864, the year after they purchased the home from John Coleman. In 1867 Mr. Manny married Miss Florida Starr, daughter of Melancthon Starr, and they had four children, all of whom were born and brought up in the big house on North Main Street.

After purchasing the Coleman home, Manny, according to his own estimate, spent about \$15,000 more improving the house and grounds. His reaper firm prospered for many years, but in the 1880s the business began to decline. Other reaper companies were adding new products and diversifying. It appears that Manny did not, and perhaps that was the problem. For whatever reason, his company eventually went into receivership. However, shortly thereafter Manny invented what was known as the Manny Lemon Juice Extractor, a simple device made of glass which began to be used in thousands of homes throughout the country. Manny also became president of the Rockford Cemetery Association, proprietor of Greenwood Cemetery, providing him with a salary in addition to the profits from the juice extractor. In 1890, however, he found it necessary to sell his large home on North Main, with its beautiful river frontage, and purchase a less pretentious residence on Franklin Avenue. The selling price was \$20,000. John P. Manny died November 17, 1897, presumably as a result of drinking polluted water from the well at the cemetery.

William Nelson, who purchased the Coleman-Manny home, was president of the Forest City Knitting Company. He was born October 29, 1857, son of John Nelson, inventor of the Nelson knitting machine. Nelson had served as a colonel on the staff of Gov. Richard Yates, and therefore was known as Col. William Nelson for the rest of his life. Mr. Nelson married Olivia Olson on October 7, 1889, and the following April the young couple moved into their newly-purchased home. Their five children were all born there. Mrs. Nelson died January 15, 1905, at the age of 37, but Nelson and his children continued to dwell in the venerable mansion at 737 North Main Street. Seven grandchildren also came to play in its ten spacious rooms and explore the large windowed cupola, which has since been removed.

Colonel Nelson died in his residence on January 21, 1934, at the age of 76. By then all of his children except daughter Elsie had married and left home. It was too large a domicile for one person, so the Nelson family decided to sell. Harry B. Burpee, whose undertaking business had outgrown its quarters at 108 West State Street, decided that the graceful historic edifice at 737 North Main would make an ideal funeral home. He received an option to purchase, which would run until December 6, 1935. Burpee and his wife, Della, lived at 702 North Main, so he no doubt thought it would be handy to have his business so close to home.

Burpee had not yet consulted with his neighbors, but when he did, he found that many did not take kindly to having a funeral home in their midst. However, the neighbors soon found that something less desirable than a funeral



The Coleman-Manny-Nelson Home in 1904

home might grace their neighborhood. The Public Works Administration, a governmental agency of the 1930s, had offered to help the Illinois National Guard build a new armory in northern Illinois. Rockford would be the lucky city if a suitable location could be found.

A civic committee began looking for an acceptable site. For a time the Freeman School location on South Fifth Street was considered, but the board of education decided that the school was needed for education of the handicapped. Haight, Haskell, Fairgrounds, and Blackhawk Parks were all considered, but were rejected for one reason or another. Still another site being strongly recommended was the Coleman-Manny-Nelson property on North Main Street. When the neighbors on North Main heard that, they were just as opposed, if not more so, as they had been to having the funeral home. Burpee himself was probably not too enthused about having an armory so close to his home.

On November 12, 1935, it was announced that Harry Burpee had exercised his option and purchased the Nelson property for \$20,000, and four days later the newspapers reported that the home would become a civic art museum. The Burpees issued a statement indicating that they had intended to create a trust in their wills for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a museum, but that "the opportunity for preserving this beautiful property intact and utilizing it for a nucleus for the ultimate object, presenting itself at this time, should not be allowed to pass unheeded. Therefore," Burpee's statement continued, "the Burpees acquired the property to become the permanent home



Rear of Burpee Art Gallery

of the Harry B. Burpee Art Museum...."

Harry and Della Burpee recognized a beautiful and historic piece of property when they saw it. Their statement issued at that time clearly indicates that the historic mansion with its 18-inch-thick stone walls should be forever the home of the Burpee Art Museum.

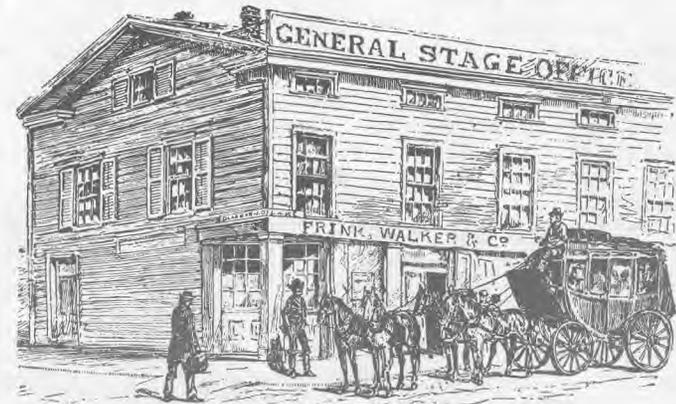
"RIDE THE STAGE AND LEAVE THE DRIVING TO US"
FRINK, WALKER & COMPANY
ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS
by Greg R. Larson

Travel by foot, horseback, ox team or old lumber wagon was difficult and time-consuming. Man needed a more convenient way to travel, and with the formation of state roads, the way was prepared for the advent of the stage coach. Frink, Walker and Company established itself in Rockford, and in a flurry of excitement the first stage arrived on January 1, 1838, from Chicago.



4 Greg R. Larson

The Frink family had been in the stagecoach business since 1817, beginning in the east and gradually moving west. The Frinks had several



GENERAL STAGE OFFICE.
Of Frink, Walker & Company on Lake Street, Chicago.

partners in the operation, but by the time the stage line came to Rockford, John Frink, Jr. and M. O. Walker had formed the Frink, Walker & Company firm. Mr. Frink became well acquainted with the politicians and statesmen of the era, and as a result, the Frink, Walker stage lines acquired most of the U.S. mail contracts for the area. John Frink, Jr. was said to have been one of the most widely known and well-liked citizens of the county during this period of time, even though he held no official position.

The first Frink, Walker stage barn was located near the intersection of East State and Third Streets and had been built for Daniel S. Haight, Rockford's first east side settler. The stage company also acquired barns several miles to the west of Rockford on West State Street road.

The most prosperous years for the stage line were during the years 1840 through 1852. The coaches carried passengers, light freight, and mail. They improved the mail service to the area, and the revenue from the deliveries kept the company operating profitably. Mail often arrived late at night, and the postmaster was expected to take charge of it whenever it came in.

Stage service was provided from Chicago through Rockford, Freeport, and Elizabeth to Galena, from Chicago to Peoria, from Peoria to Springfield, to Dixon and other points throughout the state. Chicago was the center of the extensive coach line service. Stages from the east arrived in Rockford late at night and from Galena and Dixon during the day. The scheduled running time between Chicago and Rockford was 24 hours, and travel on to Galena took another 24 hours. Stagecoaches frequently arrived late at their destinations due to broken wheels, broken harnesses, or bad weather. Total suspensions of service for days or weeks at a time were not uncommon during periods of deep snows or heavy rains that rendered the roads impassable.

Stations were built at fifteen mile intervals to pro-

vide a stop for fresh horses. Provisions were made at way-side inns for passengers traveling overnight. Many farm-houses became lodging places for state travelers. Meals were usually provided, but the lodgings offered few conveniences -- a tin bucket, a warm basin, and a candle dip for light. Travelers slept on the floor in blankets or on a corn husk mattress. In Rockford, passengers stayed at such places as the Rockford House, where they found good food and entertainment on occasion. A theater group, which included Joe Jefferson, who later became world-famous in his role of Rip Van Winkle, became weatherbound in Rockford while traveling from Chicago to Galena. As a result, townspeople and stage travelers saw a theatrical performance given at the Rockford House. Two rooms for sleeping were located on the third story of the Rockford House and were reached by climbing a ladder made of slats nailed to two pieces of studding.

Stage roads often passed over old Indian trails. Such stage roads as West State Street, Charles Street, and North Second Street were deeply rutted and extremely bumpy. Passengers were frequently requested to get out and help push the stage up a steep hill or through a quagmire of mud. Many farmers along the road charged a fee for pulling the stage out of mud holes. This became a profitable business during the wet spring and fall.

The Frink, Walker stagecoaches provided a stupendous addition to transportation, but heavy rains, snow and cold weather, broken wheels, harness troubles, bandits, and bottomless mud encouraged people to initiate a better way to travel. In August of 1852, the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad entered the vicinity and the stage line began to die out. In 1854, the main stage office was moved west to Galena, and by 1856, the Frink, Walker & Company was history. John Frink dabbled in railroad building for a time and died in 1858. Years later the Rockford and Interurban Railway passed over the old stage trails -- today we fly over them. Stagecoaches endured only a short time, but they were important to public transportation -- they were a beginning.

PROVIDED WITH DEDICATION AND LOVE
by Hazel M. Hyde

Many groups have been made welcome and acquainted with the facilities of the Winnebago Center for the Blind, located in Rockford, Illinois. The group with which I participated in the tour of the center was American Heritage Committee of Rockford Chapter DAR. The time spent was most enlightening.

Mary Burns, a nurse, had us sit for a time around a table while she spoke about the services available to the blind and those with sight impairment. Looking around, we were surprised and pleased to see the beautiful colored wall

6



Winnebago Center for the Blind, 625 Adams Street

size murals and decorations, giving the place a bright, cheerful look. Mary explained that many legally blind people have some degree of sight. When my father was in his late eighties, he became a part of this group. He could see masses, some shapes, dark and light. Only gradually had his sight failed from ability to read large print to inability to read. The first service she explained was that offered by the Rockford Public Library. Talking Books are kept in the library and can be checked out by persons eligible for this service. The Blind Center provides a listing of books on the inventory and will read aloud the list to those unable to read it. Large print books and magazines are available both at the public library and those kept at the Blind Center for use there. My father had to obtain his list and machine from the Winnebago Blind Association and secure the books by mail from Washington, D.C. They were records, not tapes, but most of the talking books are now recorded on tapes.

Transportation to and from the center is provided at a minimal cost, less than from Care-a-Van. Recreation is provided at certain hours on definite days. Meetings are held in the assembly room by the association composed of the blind persons and conducted by their own officers.

The radio station WNIU, Dekalb, has volunteer readers for reading the Rockford Register Star Newspaper, which is broadcast on a sub-channel with a special receiver available to those who qualify for it.

After this briefing, we visited many different rooms. There were workshops where many activities are in progress

7



Barbara Ring, Chairman American Heritage Group, DAR, and Mary Burns, Nurse at the Blind Center.

such as chair caning and the making of many items from wood. There were women in the crafts room working at small hand looms. There were looms for weaving. We had our own refreshments dispensed from the kitchen by a committee of our group. We had visited the swimming pool and had the abilities of blind swimmers explained. We were surprised at the extent of the exercise room with such items as exercise bicycles. We saw the bowling alley and the area where shoes and the like were stored. It was a real experience to see the many provisions for developing skills. Betty Carlson, another nurse, told us more about providing reading glasses, magnifying glasses and other items on a loan basis until the user knew which best met their personal needs. By referral from their doctor, opticians, optometrists or ophthalmologists, certain persons with very intricate problems receive eye examinations and follow-up at the Blind Center. Mary also described the exercise program which people coming to the center engage in.

The history of the Blind Center dates from March 12, 1962. It was incorporated on that date as an Illinois not-for-profit on that date. The purpose of the organization was then and continues to be:

To provide a Center in which activities may be carried on for the visually impaired and totally blind.

The Center is a private voluntary agency that was built originally by the Rockford Lions Club and is now supported in part, by the Rockford Lions Club and other Lions Clubs in the area, together with other totally private donations, grants, special gifts, endowment funds, and individuals.



Nurse Betty Carlson explains examinations and aids available to persons referred by doctors

Through the organization and dedication of those associated with the Center, programs have been developed to help the visually impaired in these important areas:

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Daily Living | Geriatric Services |
| Communications | Education of the Family |
| Mobility Orientation | Children and Youth |
| Work Development | Low Vision Services |
| Manual Skills/Employment | |
| Recreation and | |
| Leisure Activities | |

The Center serves over 500 blind or visually impaired people in the Rockford, Northern Illinois, and Southern Wisconsin area.

Annually a member of the Lions Club, or perhaps his wife, calls a long list of people to sell roses. The total profit from the sale of roses goes to the support of this great work for the blind.

Prior to the building of the Blind Center, Lions Club volunteers worked with the Association of Blind Persons. Miss Averil McCullough, since deceased, was a very active blind person. She taught blind persons to use their talking books machine. She was able to do a considerable amount of travel by herself, but lived with her mother who was a very thoughtful person. She visited the sighted persons of a family and taught them how to arrange food on the plate and referred to the face of a clock as a guide, meat being always placed at a definite spot. She gave hints as to how to



Pauline Fry at the bowling alley in the Winnebago Center for the Blind

let a blind or partially sighted person take your arm or place a hand on your shoulder when walking together. From her the family learned how to preserve the independence of the blind member of the family.

Lions Club members provided transportation in their own cars for taking the blind persons to their monthly meetings. They provided refreshments and entertainment. The meeting place was a building on West State Street. If a sighted member of the family wished to attend, they were welcome. At the Christmas party the participants brought a gift, wrapped, and marked "man" or "woman". Perfume with a nice scent was a very welcome gift for women.

Gradually you came to know many of the members of the Association. I remember Mr. Maggio, the piano tuner, for his ability to care for himself in familiar surroundings, although he was blind from birth. Sam Maggio and his blind wife were eating out with a young man recently at Shady Lane. I was still impressed to see him eating with great confidence.

Another person who attended regularly before the building of the center was called Gene. He wove doormats from old discarded automobile tires. He made them so well that we are still using one that must be thirty years old. These people never speak of their blindness as making them handicapped but rather as an inconvenience. You can often see Gene on the streets with his white cane.

What a wonderful thing we thought the scent garden when it was laid out and labeled in braille at the Center. However, it was of less value than a swimming pool would be, so the pool was added in its place. Love, dedication and caring are personified in the marvel of a Winnebago Center

for the Blind, now a reality and serving many.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, Author of the Power of Positive Thinking, is quoted in a booklet telling about this great place and its work, "...I think the Center and the people responsible for it are an ever-blossoming tribute to the American Character."

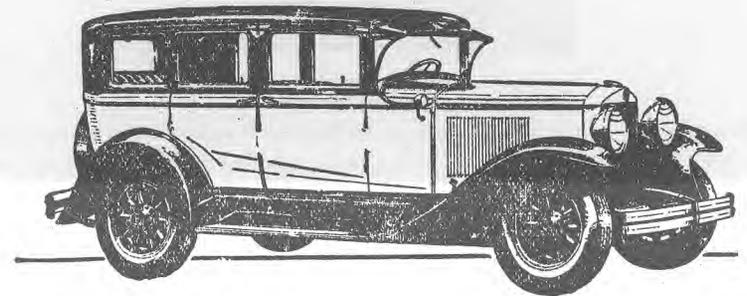
The emphasis this year in Rockford Chapter DAR is on LOVE. It is taken from the NSDAR Administration Theme: "So faith, hope, love abide these three; but the greatest of these is love." I Corinthians 13: 13; The NATIONAL HYMN: "Loves Devine, All Loves Excelling" (Charles Wesley). So what better time to have a program that deals with dedicated service than the day of a tour through the beautiful Winnebago Center for the Blind! The program was the story of the hymn by Mrs. James A. Ring.

Charles Wesley lived 1707-1788 and he is less often spoken of than John Wesley, his brother, and another son of Samuel Wesley. But Charles Wesley was a famous hymn writer of Methodism. It is safely estimated that he wrote 6,000 hymns. Beside "Love Devine, All Loves Excelling" these two are probably the best known; "Jesus, Lover of my Soul" and "O For a Thousand Tongues."

Charles was born at Epworth, and studied at Westminster School in London and at Oxford University. At Oxford, he led in the formation of the Holy Club. He was ordained in 1735 and sailed with his brother John to Georgia.

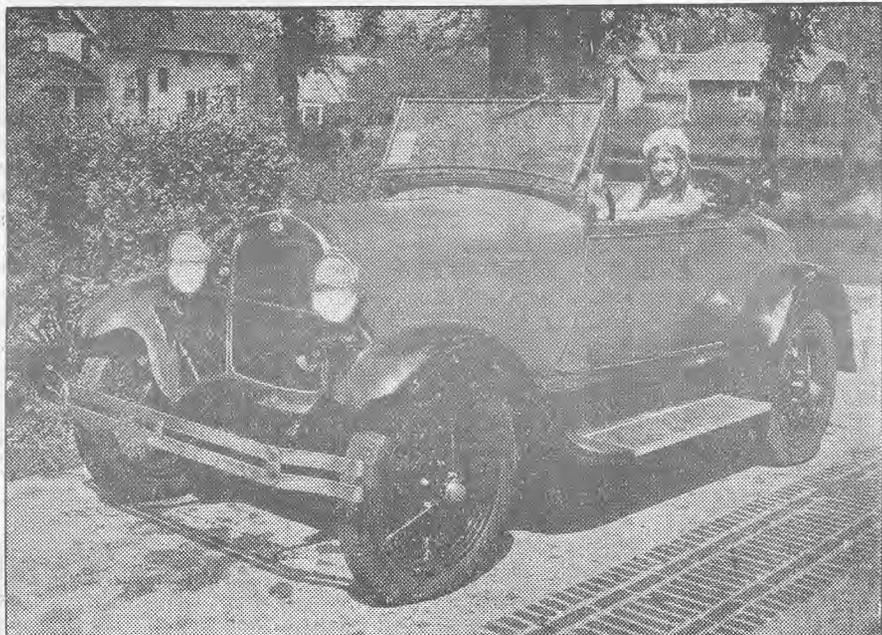
On May 21, 1738, after reading of Martin Luther's commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, a book of the New Testament, Charles Wesley was "born again" into the new Christian faith. For seventeen years he was a traveling minister among the Wesleyan societies. Although he differed from his brother on many points, they were always loyal to each other.

Beside telling the story of Wesley's life Barbara Ring read the famous words of the song and related it to the activities we had just witnessed at the Blind Center as we watched many sightless or sight impaired persons happily engaged in a variety of activities.

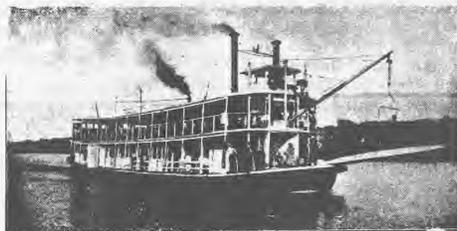


1930 Graham
Sold by the Woodward Motor Company
329 West Jefferson Street

Wins Roadster As Snapshot Prize



Phyllis Reinert, 816 Rome ave., at the wheel of the sporty new Ford roadster which she won as first prize in the snapshot contest sponsored by 18 Rockford film shops and The Daily Republic. Miss Reinert polled 20,914 votes.



The Illinois, the largest and finest boat on the Rock
Capacity 900 passengers.

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; Mrs. Patricia Dauenbaugh, Circulation Chairman, 1507 Greenmount Street, Rockford, Illinois 61107, Telephone 962-1268. For membership information contact Victor R. Barnard Membership Chairman, 5003 Delmar Street, Telephone 399-7565