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CELEBRATION OF ROCKFORDS 150TH BIRTHDAY

by Hazel Mortimer Hyde

Excitement and Plans for a grand celebration at Rockford's Museum Center have high priority as committees are being formed to handle special events, invitations to the descendants of Rockford's founders, and of course some kind of refreshments. Rockford's big birthday party, August 24-26, 1984, celebrates the 150th anniversary of its beginning on the west side of Rock River. Without in any way down-



Germanicus Kent

grading Haight's development of the east side of the river, the date August 24, 1834, when three men decided a site on a creek was "the place" they were seeking, has been chosen for special remembrance. Germanicus Kent, Thatcher Blake, and the black man Lewis Lemon started a new settlement along what came to be known as Kent Creek that developed into Midway, later re-named Rockford.

When Sue Welch from the Rockford Museum Center came to the Rockford Historical Society Board meeting in March to gain support for a planned "150th Anniversary of the Founding of Rockford", it seemed a good time to re-read Ash Johnson's account "Rootage of Rockford History" in NUGGETS OF HISTORY Vol. 1 No. 1 November-December 1963, received about twenty-one years ago.

Clement "Clem" Burns and Taylor Decker started some research in 1977 by simply addressing a letter to the postmaster of Blacksburg, Virginia, telling of their search for Kent relatives. They had no idea that Mr. Harlan Little, postmaster at Blacksburg, was married to Nita Black, a great-granddaughter of Germanicus Kent. Burns and Decker were elated when a short time later a letter arrived telling them much of what they were trying to discover. After a letter exchange, the family sent some artifacts, which are now on display at the Rockford Museum Center. (See NUGGETS OF HISTORY, Vol. 15, No. 1, Winter 1978, pp. 2-8, "Rock-



Thatcher Blake

ford Founder Day Celebration", Hazel M. Hyde.)

Clem asked me to participate in "A Founder's Day Celebration". It was decided I would give a short historical talk about the birth of a village known at one time as Midway but eventually named for the ford in Rock River. Clem Burns, president, and Taylor Decker gave talks. We had refreshments, some special exhibits, and other activities. Neither the mayor or the Museum Center envisioned the type of festival or celebration that Clem and Taylor had hoped to inspire.

No descendant of Lewis Lemon exists, for he never married. There is only one Lemon name in the telephone directory, and it is not believed they are related to the Lemon family who owned young Lewis Lemon sold at age 17 to Mr. Kent. The legal papers that gave him his freedom are in the Court House in Rockford.

Thatcher Blake was born in Turner, Oxford County, Maine, March 16, 1809. In 1834, he left Maine to go West by way of Boston, Buffalo, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis. At St. Louis Blake met soldiers recently engaged in the Black Hawk War. They described the Rock River County in glowing terms and told Thatcher of the lead mines in Galena. Blake decided to go to Galena and it was there he became acquainted with Germanicus Kent. The two made plans to explore the Rock River Valley and eventually set out in June 1834 in a Democrat Wagon. This vehicle has lower sideboards than the usual farm wagon and is more nearly related to the spring wagon. Often there was one seat with a space behind for luggage or implements. They went north into Wisconsin Territory. At Hamilton's Diggings they secured a canoe from a Mr. Ransom. They stopped at Winneshiek's Village, later Freeport, an Indian encampment. They followed the Pecatonica River to its



Sculpture of Blake, Lemon, and Kent by Gene Horvath on South Main near Green Street

junction with Rock River. Another stop was at Stephen Mack's place. He encouraged them to continue down Rock River to a tributary stream, later known as Kent Creek. It had been described by Winnebago and Chippewa Indians. Mack felt this inlet on the west side of Rock River was suitable for a settlement and excellent as a site for a sawmill. And it was there Kent, Blake, and Lemon stopped.

Kent was a natural leader and his temperament was such that he was eager to get a sawmill built and put into operation. The three went back to Galena, then a trip of nine days. They selected supplies, recruited two men willing to work, bought a lumber wagon and a single span of horses. The trip overland was difficult because no road existed. A keen sense of direction seemed to have been an important gift of pioneer men. Using the sun they could usually steer a fairly accurate course.

The wagon pulled up and stopped in what was to become Rockford on Sunday, August 24, 1834. Blake was determined to scout the countryside for good farm land. While waiting to find the right place, Blake was employed by Germanicus Kent.

Germanicus Kent kept a journal, recording his activities and some of his thoughts. He was the man who had made an investment and he could see there was no chance of an immediate return. There was much work to do, in getting the mill built, and finding and cutting the trees.

One early entry in Kent's Journal stated, "Hired Mr. Blake at eighteen dollars per month to live with me on Rock River, to take charge of my business, to do all kinds of work, to remain with me from one month to twenty-four months."

If you want to learn more about those early days, find



Side view of Thatcher Blake's home on South Main Street (no longer standing)

a copy of Sinnissippi Saga compiled and edited by Hal Nelson and published by Winnebago County Sesquicentennial Committee in 1968. There you will learn that both Kent and Blake established claims on the west side of Rock River. All the hardships of cutting wood on the site of the former Rockford College Campus with crude tools will become real to you. The alarm when the January thaw broke up the ice and washed out the dam they had struggled to build is pictured for you. You'll feel like raising a cheer for the courage that made the men build a new dam and race for the mill.

In the fall of 1834 Kent's family left Galena to live here in a larger cabin. Lewis Lemon, the black man who had been a slave entered into an agreement by which he could buy his own freedom with his work. The time it took to become a free man was six years and seven months but he secured his freedom in a little over four years. Lewis remained in Rockford and operated a truck garden. He was a good and respected citizen. His grave now has a fine stone paid for in large part by children's gifts.

Additional workers came to work in the mill. Kent established a general store, a blacksmith shop, a private banking system and post office. Kent eventually left Rockford. Thatcher Blake stayed on his farm until 1851 then moved into town and built up a thriving real estate business.

Blake's claim included parts of sections 20 and 21. Thatcher Blake has carefully picked out land suitable for farming. While he had qualified as a school teacher, farming was a more important interest to him. He built a cabin on the land he had chosen for his farm. Thatcher



Front view of Thatcher Blake's home

Blake has been described as a fair hand with tools and his farm land was soon cleared. The house was on a plot of ground adjacent to a large black walnut grove. Besides walnut trees, huge oaks, and some hickories were growing on Blake's chosen land. It is recorded that nuts were gathered there as late as 1901.

Thatcher Blake married Mary Jane Goodhue in Freeport, November 6, 1838. This was the first marriage performed in Stephenson County. She was born August 29, 1813 in Peterboro, New Hampshire. The Blakes had one daughter, Kittie, born in 1855. She married Clarence Bean, October 14, 1876. He was a druggist with a drug store at 106 South Main, and was in this business with a man named Allen so the store was known as Allen and Bean, Druggists. After 1879 and more probably 1882 the name of the firm was changed to Bean and Perryville.

In 1880 Thatcher Blake died and his widow Mary Jane Blake went to live with her daughter and son-in-law in their home at the corner of South Main and Montague Streets. The 1877 History of Rockford, and Rockford High School Annuals tell the story of the Blake and Bean families. The son, Thatcher Blake Bean, graduated from Rockford Central High School in the class of 1895. He served as a private in Rockford's Company "K" in the Spanish American War.

The Thatcher Blake family owned land in the former Elida, the original Lysander and Old Guilford Township. Land purchased by Mr. Blake in February 15, 1836 in Burrill Township was the first land sold in Winnebago County, Illinois.

A biography of each of the three founders is found in the History of Rockford and Winnebago County by Dr. Charles Church. A fine story of Germanicus Kent is to be found in a twelve page booklet: "Germanicus A. Kent, Founder of Rockford, Illinois 1834."

Much less has been known about Thatcher Blake, his careful purchases of real estate, and his gradual investments, until he became a prosperous man. Leaving his farm he moved into Rockford and engaged in the real estate business. A legal document on file in Winnebago County Court House at the death of Thatcher Blake lists an estate of \$75,000 real estate and \$50,000 personal estate. The will listed his heirs, and stated he was late of the town

of Rockford. It was produced and filed the 12th of October, 1880.

Careful reading of the will of Blake's widow showed that the money put in trust for her life use was a considerable amount and that the children of the adopted daughter were well provided for and inherited a considerable sum.

Mary Jane Blake died on October 26, 1900, at her residence. The daughter, Kate Bean, was at that time forty-seven years of age. In her last will and testament, Mary Jane designated Kate as her daughter, "entitled to all the rights, privileges and exemptions as if she had been the daughter by blood and lineal descendant of....Mary Jane Blake deceased."

The three children of Kate Bean were mentioned in Mary Jane's will. They were Thatcher Blake Bean, Winslow G. Bean, and Arthur C. Bean, all sons of Kate Bean and her husband, Clarence Bean, who had already died.

Under the Statute of Illinois relating to the adoption of children entitled "An Act to revise the law in relation to the adoption of children...." passed in 1874, the children of Kate Bean mentioned in the will of Mary Jane Blake were entitled to all the rights, privileges, and exemptions relating to inheritances as if they were grandchildren by blood of Mary Jane Blake. Thomas Goodhue, a brother of Mrs. Blake, was also mentioned in her will.

In the July, 1901, terms of the County Court, a deposition by Frank Bean, brother-in-law of Kate Bean, was entered in the matter of the estate of Mary Jane Blake, sworn before Andrew Gilruth, Notary Republic, and read as follows:

Q. Do you know Kate Bean mentioned in the residuary clause of the Last Will of the deceased?

A. Yes. She was the wife of my brother Clarence Bean who died about fourteen years ago. As I understand it she, Kate Bean, was not the daughter by blood of, and was never legally adopted by Thatcher Blake and his wife, said Mary Jane Blake, both deceased, but since she, the said Kate Bean, was about one year old she had lived with Thatcher Blake and Mary Jane Blake as their daughter and was always called their daughter.

Q. Do you know when said Kate Bean was united in marriage to your said brother Clarence Bean?

A. Our family bible contains an entry showing that Kittie Blake and my said brother Clarence were married at the Thatcher Blake Homestead in the Town of Rockford on November 2nd 1875, the then age of Kittie Blake being 22 years and that of my brother Clarence 21 years and six months.

Q. Were you present at the marriage ceremony and have you since known Kittie Bean?

A. I was present at said marriage ceremony on said November 2nd 1875 and I know of my own knowledge that said Kittie Blake is the same person as the Kate Bean mentioned and described in the Last Will of said Mary Jane Blake deceased.

Q. State if you know what if any children were born unto said Clarence Bean and said Kittie Blake or Kittie Bean

his wife.

A. Thatcher Blake Bean, now 24 years of age, Winslow G. Bean now 22 years of age, and Arthur C. Bean now 17 years of age, all of which said children were born in lawful wedlock unto said Kate and Clarence Bean.

Chandler Starr of the Winnebago National Bank and Edward P. Lathrop, attorney, were executors of Mary Jane Blake's will. They affirmed that Kate Bean was the adopted daughter of Mary Jane Blake, and that Kate Bean died March 31, 1925, leaving her only children Thatcher Blake Bean, Winslow G. Bean, and Arthur C. Bean as her only survivors, and that no other child of Kate Bean had died before her death leaving a child or children. The children of Kate Blake Bean therefore were the only heirs to what was left of the estate of Thatcher Blake.

About 1964, when Bill Barrick was president of Rockford Historical Society, Dr. George E. Bean of Little Rock, Arkansas, offered a valuable collection of papers and paintings owned by Thatcher Blake. Dr. Bean reported that his father made a trip to Rockford in an effort to leave a diary, various paintings, and other family papers but was unable to find a place where they could be properly displayed. The diary is said to have been lost but at last members of the family plan to come to Rockford in August of this year (1984) to bring some of the family papers. There exists a fine gold watch that belonged to Thatcher Blake but the family is reluctant to part with it.

A Girl Scout Troop from 4th grade at Jackson School under the leadership of Marsha Akerman has asked me to give a talk about the early history of Rockford. I will tell the story of three men who started out looking for a place to build a sawmill and land suitable for farming and who started a settlement leading to a city which is second in population in the state of Illinois. They should go see Gene Horvath's large sculpture near the former postoffice building. And they should enlist their parents to come for a fun day something like Country Days or Apple Day or other special festivals at the Museum Center.

WHAT BECAME OF BRINCKERHOFF?

George W. Brinckerhoff came to Rockford in 1837. In 1838 he and Germanicus Kent operated the ferry across the river at State Street. That same year, Kent and Brinckerhoff built the first Congregational church building on the southwest corner of South Church and Green Streets.

In the winter of 1838-39, it was believed by some that Brinckerhoff had advised and encouraged a "claim jumper" in the building of his shanty on a previously-claimed piece of land. Neighbors and friends of the "true owner" tore down the shanty built by the claim jumper, placed it on ox sleds and hauled it into town. They took it to Brinckerhoff's home at 323 South Main Street, and deposited in on his



BRINCKERHOFF HOUSE.

Built by George W. Brinckerhoff in 1838, on the northwest corner of Main and Green streets.

front yard.

In 1840 Brinckerhoff and Kent were sales agents for Charles S. Hempstead who was selling land in southwest Rockford for Daniel Whitney, who had previously purchased it from its Indian owners. This was land known as "Indian floats" which the government had granted to certain Indian descendants of "mixed blood" who did not wish to migrate with their tribe after the signing of the Prairie du Chien Treaty. Brinckerhoff and Kent sold most of this land to Issac Cunningham, Abiram Morgan, and Richard Montague, all of whom are memorialized by the names of streets in southwest Rockford. Also in 1840 Brinckerhoff was appointed to a committee, along with Daniel Haight and Dr. Josiah Goodhue, to keep residents of the counties along Rock River advised on the subject of navigation of the river and state legislation pertaining to such navigation.

According to Worchester A. Dickerman, who arrived at Rockford in 1844, George Brinckerhoff had already left town by the time Dickerman arrived. Brinckerhoff's house on South Main Street was still standing, however, and according to Dickerman it was the first home for many new-comers until they could build their own, with as many as three families sometimes living there at one time. There seems to be no record of Brinckerhoff's later life. Like many residents throughout the years, he seemed to just disappear.

Brinckerhoff's home apparently remained standing until about 1910. The last residents recorded in the City Directory at that address were Lonnie and Jane Mesmer. Mr. Mesmer was a linotype operator for the Register Gazette. It is not known whether the house was razed or moved to another location in the city. The Leland Hotel, now known as the Chandler Hotel, was built at the corner of Green and South Main Streets.

George Washington had been President for a year and a month when, on May 31, 1970, Germanicus Kent was born at Suffield, a town in northern Connecticut about ten miles southwest of Springfield, Massachusetts. As a young man he spent some time in the state of New York, and later headed south. In Virginia he met Arabella Amiss, a young lady almost eighteen years his junior. After spending five years in the dry goods business at Huntsville, Alabama, Kent returned to Virginia and married Arabella on June 7, 1827, at Blacksburg. He was 37 and she was 19.

Germanicus Kent returned to Huntsville with his bride, and for a few more years he continued in the dry goods business; he was also a partner in a cotton factory. Although opposed to slavery in principle, he purchased several slaves while residing in Alabama.

It was probably early in 1834 that Kent decided to head westward. His brother Aratus, almost four years younger than Germanicus, was a Presbyterian minister, and had been sent to Galena, Illinois, in 1829 to organize a church. Aratus wrote to Germanicus from Galena, telling him about the great opportunities in that prosperous mining town. Apparently Germanicus was impressed, or perhaps things were not going well for him at Huntsville. He sold his home and business holdings and headed for Galena. It can be assumed he brought Arabella and their children to Blacksburg to stay with her family until he was settled, but we have no way of knowing; they may have been with him in Galena when he first went there.

We do know that one of his slaves, Lewis Lemon, accompanied Kent, although he sold the others before leaving Alabama. Arriving in Galena, Kent probably went immediately to his brother's home, as he presumably knew no one else in Galena. It may have been Aratus who introduced Germanicus to Thatcher Blake.

A much younger man than Kent, Thatcher Blake was born in Maine on March 16, 1809. His birthplace is usually given as "Turner, Oxford County," but Turner is presently located in Androscoggin County. One of Blake's obituaries in 1880 gave his birthplace as Oxford, Maine, located in the southern part of Oxford County, but Turner is generally considered to be his birthplace. It may be that Turner was in Oxford County in 1809.

The Blakes soon moved about 70 miles northeast to the Dover-Foxcroft area, where the father began the clearing and cultivating of a large tract of wild land. Thatcher assisted his father on the farm, attended school, and eventually qualified as a teacher. On June 1, 1834, he left his paternal home and started westward to seek his fortune. He eventually reached St. Louis, where he met soldiers who had been in the Blackhawk War, and from them he heard about Galena. He therefore headed for Galena, and there he became acquainted with Germanicus Kent.

Kent had heard about the beautiful Rock River valley, but it seems strange that a man of 44, who had already been

a successful dry goods man for twelve years in a well-settled community, would now decide to establish a new community in a wilderness. There must have been a spirit of adventure in him which had not previously shown itself.

Kent and Blake could not have been acquainted very long before deciding to begin their exploration. In late June, 1834, they started eastward from Galena in a wagon. Reaching the Pecatonica River, they found a man from whom they obtained a canoe, probably trading off the wagon. Continuing down the Pecatonica River to the Rock, they then headed southward and eventually reached the small stream now known as Kent Creek. Although this site seemed very favorable, they apparently were not yet certain that it was the best place to settle. Traveling south again, they passed the future locations of Byron, Oregon, and Grand Detour without finding a better site. By the time they reached Dixon's Ferry, as President Reagan's home town was then called, Kent had made up his mind. Selling their canoe, they returned to Galena by land. The trip had taken nine days.

Having decided that the area around the rocky ford and that small creek was the best site they had seen, they now prepared for a longer stay. They obtained a lumber wagon and loaded it with enough supplies to last several months. They set out from Galena on August 20, and reached the present site of Rockford on Sunday, August 24, 1834. There were five of them altogether: Germanicus Kent, Thatcher Blake, Lewis Lemon, a Mr. Evans, and another man whose name is unknown. Kent was the leader and bore the expenses. He paid Blake eighteen dollars per month, and undoubtedly paid at least two of the others also, although it is not known how much, Lewis Lemon being Kent's slave, he probably received no pay.

The first thing they did after their arrival was construct a log cabin for Kent on the south side of Kent Creek at what is now South Main Street. Blake staked out a claim about two miles west which was partially in section 20 and partially in section 29 of what is now Rockford Township. After finishing Kent's cabin, they went out to Blake's claim and built his cabin. They then settled in for the winter, spending their days building a dam and sawmill on Kent Creek. Rockford had begun!



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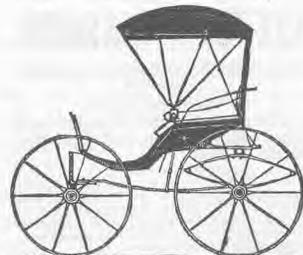
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