

Nuggets of History

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IMAGES OF THE PAST: WILLARD WHEELER HOME

By Hazel M. Hyde

The home of Willard Wheeler, 228 South First Street, built 1843, is Gothic Style architecture and it is within the Haight Historic Village District of Rockford, Illinois. It is historically important as the home of Rockford's first mayor. Photographs were taken by Charles E. Herrick about 1900 and research was conducted by Arthur Huenkemeier, a member of the Rockford Historical Society Board. He made them available to the Haight Village Restoration Society.

I became acquainted with the house shortly after 1945 when people called it "The Daffodil House". Dr. Frances Johnson, formerly a professor of Rockford College entertained a group from American Association of University Women (A.A.U.W.) in her home at 228 South First Street. I was impressed with her period furniture and especially by a fireplace in the living room. Dr. Johnson still lives in this house. Her field of expertise was physics and her Ph. D. From University of Minnesota. She told us some of the history of her home. It is architecturally one of Rockford's "jewels".

When there was a movement several years ago to have Haight Village area in Rockford set aside and marked as an historic village, Rockford Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution was asked to verify the information. We met especially with Arthur Huenkemeier, historian of the Haight Village Restoration Society. Among the several points to authenticate was who lived at certain addresses for a number of years. I was a member of the researchers from the chapter. We found city directories from 1852 forward in Local History Room of the Rockford Public Library and checked ownership year by year, after the date it was alleged to have been built. We were given some rather simple books on architecture with some of the points listed that marked a house as belonging to a certain type or period. We walked through the area with addresses, certain houses being assigned to definite people. Fortunately, one member's husband was an architect and he took our sheets and further edited our findings. We did this as a community service and were much surprised when a donation was made for use on one or more of our philanthropic projects. It was at this time I joined Restoration Education Group, but some years I have forgotten to pay dues. One of the houses was the Willard Wheeler House. I have been inside a number of houses in Haight Village on house tours by the Haight Village Association and Rockford Historical Society. Rockford Chapter DAR also has house tours.

William Condon, President of Rockford Historical Society, 1971-1973, announced Saturday and Sunday, October 7 and 8, 1982, would be the society's second tour of homes. Among the houses was the Wheeler Home because of its historic significance.

An incident concerning Willard Wheeler came about shortly



Photograph by Charles Herrick, Collection of John Whitehead, Home of Willard Wheeler, Research by Art Hucksmeier

after 1838. Germanicus Kent, one of the founders of the city of Rockford, was considering the need for a ferry across Rock River. He went to John Bull, an enterprising man, Winnebago County's early rope maker for a rope cable strong enough for a ferry and long enough to reach across Rock River. Mr. Wheeler grew the hemp for the cable and Mr. Bull made the rope.

When Willard Wheeler built this charming two-story brick home in 1843, Rockford had a population of less than 2,000. This was a time of great events in Rockford history. The Water Power Company--the source of industrial power for early manufacturing--was organized in July of 1851. The first train to Rockford, The Galena and Chicago Union, arrived on August 2, 1852. A few weeks later the first Swedish settlers arrived by train from Chicago. The cornerstone for the first Rockford College building was laid on July 15, 1852.

Wheeler was located in Rockford in 1839 coming from St. Thomas, Upper Canada. He was Rockford's first tinner, and records state, a good one. Wheeler changed occupations rapidly. In 1843, he was a fur dealer offering "cash for furs and the highest price" in a newspaper advertisement. In 1857 he was listed as a foundryman and in 1874 as an insurance agent. Wheeler died in 1876 at the age of seventy-two.

Wheeler and his wife, Freelove, sold their American Gothic home in 1861 to Daniel and Julia Littlefield. It stayed with members of this family until 1945 when it was acquired by its



The home of Rockford's first mayor, Willard Wheeler 228 South First Street, Rockford, Illinois built 1843
Also called "The Daffodil House" 1984 home Dr. Frances Johnson

present owner, Dr. Frances Johnson, retired chairman of Rockford College's Physics Department.

The steep pointed roofs and the gingerbread trim of this 1843 house are typical of those Victorian homes influenced by A.J. Dowling's "Architecture's Country Houses", the popular inspiration for that period. The triangular peaking of the second story windows is a more unusual feature as is the cantilevered dormer that projects over the front porch area. No one has found an explanation states a tour pamphlet of the Haight Village Society. This window is on the south wall midway between the first and second floors.

The trim has traditionally been painted green while yellow paint covers the natural color of the brick. This color scheme is responsible for naming this house "Daffodil Cottage".

The wooden wing to the rear was once the woodshed and summer kitchen. Furnishings include a bed and buffet dating back to the early owners as well as antiques from the family of Dr. Mary Bragington who for a time shared this home. Dr. Bragington was formerly the president of Rockford College when it was a woman's college. She was president the summer session that I taught an American history course at the old campus of Rockford College next Rock River. An inlaid brass tea set was memorable. The bedroom had floor to ceiling peaked windows, which was rather uncommon for that time. Your eye was held by the pink tile fireplace with its antique lamps. There were many brass and unique lamps



Willard Wheeler residence 1848 • Gothic style
Rockford's first Mayor

Gothic style Residence of Willard Wheeler,

Rockford's First Mayor, Built 1843

including a "cael", which is a French peasant lamp. An early American snout lamp can be found among this home's interesting furnishings.

Rockford's house tours are not as famous as those of Galena, Illinois, but there are certainly homes that merit being seen and admired.

Willard Wheeler was elected the first mayor of Rockford in 1852, following the receipt of the city charter from Springfield. His term of office was set for one year and the city was divided into four wards.

As contact person with Rockford Chamber of Commerce for Rockford Historical Society, and corresponding secretary for the society, I have had questions about some of Rockford's



Interior View of the Willard Wheeler Home, Rosamund Littlefield at her desk. Rockford, Illinois

historic and old homes. One of these requests was to supply some data for a picture to be placed on the front of the publication of the Real Estate Dealers of Rockford. An historic house is used for each issue. Annually Haight Village Restoration Society compiles a calendar with pictures of the charming old homes, still used as residences, after being restored to nearly their former appearance. Citizens of Rockford are proud of Haight Village Historic Area. Many people are enchanted with the Willard Wheeler Home, often called "The Daffodil House". "What is Honored in a Country Will Be Cultivated There."

Sources which I used and wish to acknowledge are:
Nuggets of History, July - August 1972, Vol IX No 4,
 President's Corner--William Condon;
Nuggets of History, November-December 1971, Vol VIII No 6,
 pp 6-7 "First Rope Made in Winnebago County"--Hazel Hyde
Nuggets of History, Spring 1980 Vol XVII No 2, p 11
 "A Brief History of Rockford"--W. Ashton Johnson
 Calendars and photographs of Haight Village Restoration
 Society, Years 1978-1984

A MANUFACTURING CENTER
by W. Ashton Johnson
(Written in 1964)

Rockford's early development as a manufacturing center dates from the 1840s, when the harnessing of water power launched several infant industries.

Although sturdy New England immigrants, who settled the town sites in 1834 and 1835, pioneered the manufacturing urge, the arrival of Swedish immigrants opened the furniture and knitting industries, 1854-1860.

From the days when pioneer settlers from New England launched their small shops and factories to the present, creative arts and crafts have brought fame to our city. At the close of the Civil War, there were two score of small industries in operation. At the turn of the 20th century, our town was noted for its fine furniture. Later, machine tools that were "made in Rockford" found users all over the world. Furniture, knitting machines, agricultural implements, construction vehicles, wheels and parts, wood and metal turning lathes, gears, milling machines, fasteners, screw products, castings, pianos, phonograph, radio and television cabinets -- all these and more were being produced in 575 manufacturing plants, as of January 1, 1964.

What really might be termed "Acts of Providence" proved a boon to Rockford and a deterrent factor in the town of Rockton's ambition toward industrial growth. The Talcott brothers, Sylvester, William, and Thomas B., had settled within our northern neighbor's confines in 1835. Each saw the advantage of damming the river and construction of a mill race. Between 1851 and 1858, five paper mills were in operation. Down the river in Rockford, rivalry between residents of each side of the river had lessened. Internal troubles were stilled, but spring floods had carried out two dams and caused much property damage to concerns using water power. Not until 1853 was a more permanent dam in use. The mill race was then changed from the east side to the west side because of deviation in the current above the dam.

Manufactories in operation during the 1850s included: Forbes Malleable Iron Works; Bertrand and Sames, plows; F. L. Blackman and A. K. Campbell, pumps; Bradley Planing Mill; Morrill & Co., candle makers; Burpee & Groneman; J. B. Marsh & Co.; Theodore Radecke and H. H. Palmer, all spring bed factories; Tanner & Hess, leather tannery; several wagon maker shops, including Johnson & Anderson, A. Neumeister, and Hutchins & Clendenning. Early Water Power district manufactories were: J. & W. Dyson, wollen mills; Ralph Emerson & Co.; Mary Manny (widow of John H. Manny); F. H. Manny Co., LaPointe & Derwent, Nelson & Co., Campbell & Wood, all planing mills; Graham & Co., cotton mill; Clark and Utter and W. D. Trahern, foundaries.

The improved Manny reaper and mower was being manufactured by the J. P. Manny Co. at the rate of 2,000 annually in the 1860s, following the close of the Civil War. So great was the demand for this machine, which retailed for

about \$150, that other water power factories were hired to produce them for the parent corporation. Anxiety over the famous McCormick-Manny law suit had been a contributing factor in hastening the death of the pioneer inventor in 1856. His widow and relatives carried on and benefited greatly in later years.

John Nelson, who was one of the early arrivals from Sweden in the 1854-55 migration, and W. W. Burson joined forces to produce the "Nelson Family Knitter" in 1866. Patents were issued to the firm in 1868, 1870, and 1872, each time with new features incorporated into the basic unit. It was now a power knitter, and within five years the Nelson Knitting Co. was formed, with Messrs. William Brown, John Nelson, and Antes S. Ruhl as officers.

In 1881, the St. Charles Wollen Mills was moved to Rockford. W. H. Ziock, its president, renamed the firm the "Rockford Mitten and Hosiery Co." In subsequent years, four more knitting firms were launched. These were: Nelson Knitting Co., 1890, Burson Knitting Co., 1891; S. B. Wilkins Co., which removed from Rockford to Kenosha in 1892, after eight years of activity, and B-Z-B Knitting Co., composed of Messrs. W. W. Burson, William H. Ziock, and Frank Brown.

All of the above firms played important roles in the prosperity of our city for from 30 to 50 years. One by one they were absorbed by nationally known corporations, or dissolved and retired from the field.

Development of the furniture industry here was the result of Scandinavian skills and inventive genius, and its beginnings date back to 1869. Andrew C. Johnson, a member of the small colony of Swedish immigrants who arrived in Rockford in 1852, set up shop on the water power district and began manufacturing chairs and stools. In 1865 he joined in partnership with Gust Hollem and John Nelson for making sash, doors, and blinds. Mr. Johnson formed a partnership with J. P. Anderson in 1872, and Jonas Peters worked for them both as a furniture maker and salesman. Several new items were added to their line and a year later L. D. Upson was admitted to the firm and a new factory was built. Soon afterward the founders retired, and E. L. Herrick assumed their interests. Under the name of Upson & Herrick, furniture continued to be produced until January 21, 1877. A disastrous fire razed the factory on that day, and it took the combined efforts of firemen and volunteers to prevent the conflagration from spreading to other factories.

Messrs. Anderson and Johnson re-entered the furniture business in 1874 when banker Gilbert Woodruff joined forces with them. They acquired a brick building at the corner of Railroad Avenue and Seventh Street and formed the Forest City Furniture Company. Mr. Woodruff was its first president. Other officers were Charles H. Keith, secretary-treasurer; A. C. Johnson, superintendent; and J. P. Anderson, director. It was a "co-operative" company with each workman owning some stock. In 1877 Mr. Keith died and was succeeded by Lyon P. Ross. The company flourished, and during the panic years of the early Nineties, weathered the

storm with a minimum of loss. W. F. Woodruff became president of the company upon the death of his father.

The quality of Rockford made furniture became familiar to retailers in a dozen mid-western states ere the decade between 1870 and 1880 closed. The fact that the Forest City plant gave employment to 100 skilled workers prompted formation of a second co-operative factory. This was the Union Furniture Company, and its success as a producer of furniture marked the advent of the strangest success story in the history of Rockford. The man who rose from "rags to riches", nearly went bankrupt, and again became a millionaire was Per August Peterson.

Coming to this country on the sailing ship the "Lulea" in 1852, young Per Peterson was one of twenty-odd children who made the perilous crossing of the Atlantic. Peter, the father, was a merchant tailor; his mother, Inga Marie, was an energetic housewife. After four years of residences in Rockford where the major part of the immigrant colony settled, the Petersons removed to Cherry Valley in 1856. Young Per August received a common school education in this city and in the neighboring village. When his parents moved to a farm northwest of Cherry Valley in 1862, the young man decided that job opportunities were better in the furniture manufacturing center than in the rural districts. At the ripe age of 16, young Peterson became identified with the making and sale of furniture.

In 1875 Peterson interested Jonas Peters, John Erlander, John Pehrson, and James Sundquist in incorporating the Union Furniture Company. One of the oldest factories erected in the water power district was leased, and business was launched. A co-operative concern, the plant brought profit to stockholders and employees alike. In 1892-93 most of the company's 140 employees were laid off temporarily in order to save the firm from bankruptcy. Mr. Peterson, who was secretary, took to the road after convincing local bankers that the firm's notes would be paid. His mode of travel embodied several transportation avenues -- train, horse and buggy, and shank's mare.

The indomitable spirit of the man brought a trickle of orders sold on a cash discount basis. Most of the Union Company's financial problems had grown out of erection of a new factory in the southeast end industrial area. Their first plant in the water power district had been destroyed by fire in 1889.

Previous to the panic years, our furniture industry had grown by leaps and bounds. Among the prosperous firms doing business in the Eighties were: Rockford Co-Operative Furniture Co., 1880; Rockford Chair & Furniture Company, 1880; Standard Furniture Co., 1887; Skandia Furniture, 1889; West End Furniture, 1890; Rockford Frame & Fixture, 1889; and Mechanics Furniture, 1890.

Later additions to the list included Rockford Cabinet; Rockford Desk Co., 1896; Rockford Palace Furniture Co., 1897; Rockford Furniture Co., 1905; Empire Furniture Co., 1906; Illinois Cabinet, 1906; Excel Manufacturing Co., 1907; Rockford National, 1907; Rockford Bookcase Co., 1909;

Rockford Superior, 1910; Rockford Cedar Chest, 1911; Rockford Light Furniture Co., 1911; Illinois School Furniture Co., 1912; Monarch Furniture Co., 1914; Old Colony Chair Co., 1914; World Furniture Co., 1915; Blackhawk Furniture, and Rockford Republic Co.

Following the World War I years, the Forest City's manufacturing list showed the dissolution of many early day furniture factories. Others moved to southern states where cost of operation was less due to climate and a lower labor scale. The semiannual Furniture Expositions, similar to those held at Grand Rapids, Mich., and Jamestown, N. Y., were discontinued. A Furniture Manufacturers Association disbanded after 15 years of successful operation. By 1940 there were but few familiar names in this industry that had made Rockford famous throughout the world. Where there had been two score of furniture plants in operation in 1916, the year 1963 found but 15 listed. Several of these were specialty factories employing from but 25 to 50 hands. Skilled artisans of Scandinavian background no longer practiced their craft as wood carvers; no longer were specialists sent out to install or finish ornate wood work in palatial residences and offices.

The 1963 Manufacturers' directory listed these firms as manufacturers of furniture: Atlas Furniture Co.; Gannon Manufacturing Co.; Rockford Cabinet (a branch of General Electric Corporation); General Wood Products Co.; Hanson Clock Co.; Kraker Moulding Co.; Mid-States Wood Products Co.; Rock Furniture Co.; Rockford Peerless Furniture*; Rockford Republic Furniture Co.*; Rockford Special Furniture Co.; Sorenson Custom Cabinetry Co.; Weiman Co.; Winnebago Cabinet Co.*; The Rockford Standard Furniture Co.* (which halted manufacturing after more than 50 years of successful operation, and now devotes its former plant to retail sales of several major lines of furniture craftsmanship). An asterisk following a firm name indicates a plant identified with the trade from 45 to 80 years ago.

The last score of years during which P. A. Peterson lived were marked by several evidences of his benevolences. He had served on the first directorate of Swedish-American Hospital and made several contributions to its building funds. The man who had interests in more than a score of industrial firms in Rockford, more than any other citizen before or since, bequeathed a half million dollars for the development of a home for the aged. The home on Parkview Avenue opposite the Sinnissippi Park golf course is known as the P. A. Peterson Home, Inc. Another bequest of half a million dollars went to the Augustana Synod of Lutheran Church Missions. Mr. and Mrs. Peterson (Ida May Anderson) displayed a lasting interest in children. Upon the former's death in 1927, his will disclosed a bequest in excess of \$250,000 in favor of the local Y.M.C.A. organization. This money was used in building the first unit of the riverside buildings now in use. His widow provided other cash gifts to various welfare groups in this city.

While Rockford has lost prestige as a furniture cen-

ter, the 1963 industrial census made by the Chamber of Commerce disclosed that there were 574 manufacturing plants in operation at the close of 1963. Nine of these employed a total of approximately 19,000 on payrolls and reported a working personnel of between 501 and 1000 each, while 15 plants were in the 251 to 500 employee category. Twenty-three factories distributed their respective payroll to between 101 and 250 men and women. More than a hundred firms employed between 51 and 100 trained workers. In the "A" section, indicating between 1 and 25 employees, there were 517 listings.

In the milling machine and heavy machinery trade Rockford's Ingersoll Milling Machine Co. and Greenlee Brothers Co. produce machinery for the automobile industry at Detroit, Flint, Michigan, Kenosha, Wisconsin and the Janesville plants of General Motors. These two corporations and the Sundstrand Machine and Aviation divisions provide the Defense Department and other federal agencies with millions of dollars worth of merchandise annually. The Woodward Governor Co. must be added to this list of export manufacturers and U. S. Navy contractors.

A comparatively new industry, that of the Illinois Water Treatment Co., has been developing in the past 30 years. Wallace Morrison, one of the founders of the firm, succeeded in interesting capital in 1931. He and John F. Wantz took over physical equipment of the Ward-Love Pump Co. and began production of a water softener unit. In 1935 Paul H. Casky joined the firm as vice president in charge of engineering while A. C. Reents later became vice president and director of research. Wantz remains (in 1964) as president; Morrison as vice president in charge of sales, and J. C. Bailey serves as treasurer. This firm has installed water treatment plants in such municipalities as Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Philadelphia and several large cities of England and on the European continent.

Illinois Bell Telephone Co. boasts of being a "top grade" customer of Rockford's industrial family. No less than 45 firms have annual contracts for providing parts of the cradle phone in your home. General Motors paid bills of several million dollars to factories in the de-forested Forest City The mammoth Chrysler Corporation plans to continue trading with a dozen local factories for automotive parts for the new Belvidere plant.

Another local institution which was launched in 1910 as a family undertaking is that of the Smith Oil & Refining Company. The late Charles G. Smith and his sons purchased a small 4-horse kerosene and gasoline business from William Lawton in 1910. The venture was successful because of the expansion of two industries - the automobile manufacturers and the oil and gasoline business. Four sons carried on when their father, a former paint distributor, passed on. As the automobile became a familiar sight along the dusty highways of the midwest, the name "Smith Oils" went up on stations across three states. Today as Gulf petroleum products distributors, the corporation has become one of the

best known and most respected independent firms serving the automotive industry. Messrs. Ernst E., Stanton K., Guy R., Carl A. and Oman Smith represent the second and third generation of one family. Their wholesale division of cutting oils and special formula lubricants serve almost every automobile manufacturing concern in the nation.

When the late Frank G. Hogland and P. A. Peterson launched the National Lock Co. at 7th street and 18th avenue in 1903, the Rockford City Traction had a terminal at 14th avenue (now Broadway) and 9th street, and Lock company employees hiked the four blocks from the end of the line. Three years later this pioneer plant in the 18th avenue district had severe growing pains. More than 150 employees were on the payroll. These workers were kept busy for 54 hours a day making special locks for the furniture factories. Capitalization of the corporation has jumped from \$5,000 to fifty, one hundred fifty, and finally half a million dollars in the first 10 years of its existence. By 1950 the National Lock possessed a working force of over 2,000 men and women.

In 1931 several associates of the Lock Company withdrew and organized the Rockford Screw Products Co. A modern factory building was leased, and the firm launched operations with a list of 15 customers. When the depression era was an end, the company erected a more spacious building and installed the latest machines to manufacture screws for the automotive trade. These were a "lock tight" screw used in joining sections of automobile bodies. With four plants in operation, Rockford Screw (now Rockford Products) is today one of the best known industrial firms in the midwest.

Removal of the Ingersoll Milling Machine Co. from Cleveland, Ohio, a year before the panic years of the Eighteen Nineties, launched the manufacturing of heavy machinery here. At the turn of the new century the Greenlee Brothers Co. followed the transfer of the Barber-Colman Co. (1902) by two years. Both of these firms are members of the "Big 8" in production, man power and floor space. Barber-Colman was organized in 1900 by W. A. Barber of Warren, Wisconsin, and Howard D. Colman, then of Beaver Dam, a Badger state malleable iron producing center. It began manufacturing a check pump for dairies, but in 1901 produced a hand knot-tying implement for cotton mill use. Branch offices were opened in Boston and in Manchester, England, in 1901 before the firm moved to Rockford in 1902.

The Greenlee firm had its beginning in 1866 when two brothers launched a Chicago plant making wood working machinery and mechanics' tools. The growth of Rockford's furniture industry caused its move to Rockford. W. B. Greenlee, a second generation industrialist, James A. Lounsbery and George C. Purdy were the men responsible for developing this firm into one of the largest in the midwest.

During the first decade of the present century, two young engineers and graduates of the University of Wisconsin invented a gasoline motor driven vacuum machine for

the cleaning of household residences. Mounting the apparatus on four automobile wheels and drawn by a motor car, the first Atwood Vacuum Machine Co. product did an immaculate job super-cleaning residences of Rockford and homes in nearby cities. Oscar Ross, son of a veteran mechanic, undertook the task of earning a livelihood as an Atwood contract agent. A few of the machines were sold to ambitious young men in nearby cities. Later units serving department stores, apartment houses, and "big business" were produced by the little factory housed on N. Water st., a block north of East State.

James T. and Seth B. Atwood were not content to rest on their oars with one successful invention. They soon developed auto body hardware, stamping assemblies for the major automobile makers; the internationally known Dayton Hitch, a coupler attached to thousands of military service trucks, artillery units and for owners of trailers and finally for mobile homes. Their new factory above Fulton st. on N. Main has twice been expanded and become a very vital industry in Rockford's family, producing a dozen products such as various hinges, bicycle kick stands, and all forms of trailer hardware.

The beautiful Atwood Park and playgrounds where outdoor education was introduced a few years ago was the gift of the Seth Atwood family. Other benevolences have been acquired by our township and county agencies in recreational progress during the past years.

The American Cabinet Hardware Co., launched by two Aldeen brothers on an upper floor of the 12-story Ziock building on S. Main street in the post-war 1920s, is another mushroom growth manufacturing plant. Its present plant covers a vast area on Auburn street equipped with parking facilities for 1000 and more employees' cars. Changing the corporate name to "Amerock Corporation" in the 'Fifties, this firm produces hardware for many varieties of cabinets, furniture and industrial, metal window frames and small appliances. Gedor W. and R. A. Aldeen, founders of the company, were active until 1962 when Gedor died.

"Name it; We'll Make It" has been the slogan of many of Rockford's post-World War II manufacturing plants. From a logger's adz and hammers, to toys, from animated dolls to zithers and talking animal toys to freight-car-length milling machines, Rockford genius carries on today.

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