

NUGGETS of HISTORY

Volume 28

Autumn, 1991

Number 4

CAMP GRANT OPENS ITS DOORS by Mike Brubaker Curator of Collections Midway Village and Museum Center

Camp Grant first began training troops seventy-five years ago, marking the beginning of Rockford's active participation in the First World War. Although the camp served as a depot for only a very short time, the events leading up to the creation of the camp, and the existence of the military installation had a tremendous impact on the character and development of the city of Rockford in the early 20th century. Not only did Camp Grant dramatically alter the economic climate of the community, this military installation forced rapid improvement of basic services in Rockford.

The actual construction of the camp began in June of 1917, two months after the United States had formally declared war on the Axis powers. Like the declaration of war, the construction of Camp Grant had a large number of very vocal opponents. The major concerns of these opponents were that a military installation would cause localized inflation, and more importantly, the community was concerned about an inevitable moral degeneration that seemed to follow all United States military outposts.

An example of this collapse of morality came from an anonymous source in the local newspapers. During the Mexican border patrol of 1915, the source claimed, Texas women were forced to carry sidearms in order to protect themselves from the overly amorous advances of the American troops. Similar circumstances would surely develop in Rockford if such a camp were allowed to be built.

The proponents of the camp were primarily members of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce. The leaders of this group of boosters included: John Camlin, E. H. Keeler, William Sparks, Roscoe Chapman, and W. H. Barnes. These men argued the training center would be staffed by a very well-trained contingent of military police. The safety of Rockford would be a major concern to all of the law enforcement officials in the

Railroad Depot, Camp Grant, Rockford, Ill.



ON THE ROAD TO CAMP GRANT
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area.

In addition to this, the camp promised to bring in an additional one million dollars each month to the community. The additional income could be used to hire more law enforcement officers for Rockford and the county, thus providing additional protection from any increases in the crime rate.

The mention of additional income in the city seemed to silence the criticism concerning economics, so that by May of 1917, the community opposition to Camp Grant had been effectively stifled. On June 2, the federal government traveled to Rockford to inspect several possible land options to build the camp.

The competition for the attention of the military was fierce. Rockford's chief rival for the new camp was Springfield. Because of this competition, incentives were developed by the local Chamber of Commerce and leading Rockford business.

As part of the package deal to build the camp on the outskirts of Rockford, local businessmen offered to purchase land and rent the

Bird's eye View, Camp Grant, Rockford, Ill.



property to the federal government to place the camp. This, along with some political arm twisting by Illinois Congressman Charles Fuller persuaded the Army to build on the outskirts of Rockford.

An area between the Rock and Kishwaukee Rivers, on the southwest border of Rockford, was selected as the future site of Camp Grant, Illinois. Construction began the end of June in 1917.

The construction of the camp was a quick project. In a matter of two months 1100 buildings, with 300 miles of electric wiring and 30 miles of water pipe were put in place. Unfortunately, the speed of the project allowed for some haphazard planning and construction.

The first recruits arrived in October to unheated facilities. The winter was fast approaching and the army, in typical fashion distributed summer clothing. Reports were that soldiers permanently stationed at Camp Grant did not receive wool clothing until March of 1918.

The diary of a nurse stationed at Camp Grant effectively summarizes the greeting most recruits received. "Oct. 29th 1917 ... Off for Rockford. Nearly froze and as blue as the hills. Ready to beat it back home. Made several stops and reached the Camp 10:45 in snow. Nearly sick. Station looked like an old country station, filled with men smoking and all standing around the stove. Some impression it gave me. We finally got an ambulance that took us to the nurses home. Trip of four miles--still mighty cold--road very rough. Reached the quarters at 11 a.m. Home not established. Enamel dishes, no table covers, no heat, no hot water."

In spite of the rather shaky opening of the camp, the military seemed to cohabitate with Rockford very well. The officers at Camp Grant were quick to work with the local press to exhibit the efficiency of the military police. The local newspapers were filled with reports of arrests made by the m.p.'s for violations of conduct.

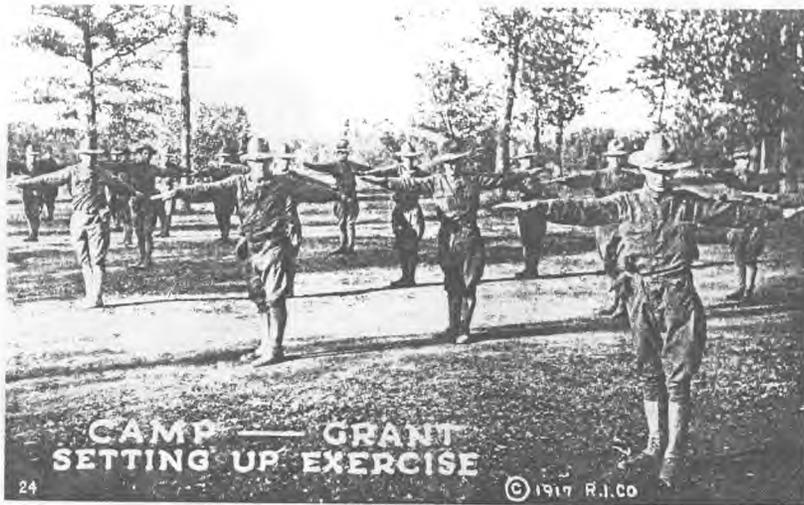
Perhaps the single greatest concern to the camp was the seemingly excessive consumption of alcohol by the troops. Although Rockford was a dry community, Beloit was only 19 miles away. The quick trips to the Wisconsin border town and the inevitable importation of spirits caused major problems for the military and local police. The groups were anxious to make note of their victories and downplay their defeats in this war of enforcement,

In addition, the military police were strict on the code of conduct



MAIN STREET ENTERING
CAMP — GRANT
SECTION OF HOSPITAL UNIT

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of civilians. Price gouging of soldiers by local businesses was not tolerated and local eateries were expected to maintain a level of sanitation acceptable to the military. Several restaurants and cafes that catered to the tastes of the soldiers were declared off limits by the military police when the sensitivities of the inspectors were offended.

Probably the single greatest factor in defining the relationship of Camp Grant and Rockford was the sudden influx of soldiers to the area. At its high point, Camp Grant more than doubled the population of Rockford. On July 31, 1918, the camp recorded a population of 50,543 soldiers, while the city of Rockford could lay claim to only 46,000 inhabitants.

This surge in population put serious strains on the business and recreational facilities of the community. The local newspaper regularly reported traffic jams tying up all roads leading to and from the camp. The strained relations were particularly severe on the weekends.

Up until 1919, the Camp operated as a training facility and later as the disembarkation point for soldiers. Camp Grant was used by the United States Army up until 1924, when it was turned over to the Illinois National Guard and used by a variety of groups. With the coming of World War Two, the camp reopened as a medical training center and a new influx of men and women increased the population of Rockford.

But this second activation by the military was not so startling as the first introduction of Rockford to the military. There was less concern for the morality of the population. In addition, the community, like the entire nation, threw its full support into the second World War.

The construction of Camp Grant and the operation for two years was probably one of the most significant events in the 20th century history of Rockford. The surge in population forced the city to deal with immediate problems. The normal growth of the city did not see the population exceed 100,000 until the mid 1950s. If nothing else, those first years of Camp Grant signaled the potential problems of growth the city would experience.

Ironically, at this same time, the city produced a long range plan for the development of community, known as the Rockford Plan. This plan made an attempt to identify all of the potential problems of the city, including the lack of public transportation and the severe lack of

affordable housing. The construction of Camp Grant, to say the least, simply reinforced the predictions of the plan and forced a more concerted effort to provide for the future of the city. At the same time, the new money from the military payroll provided the community with a firm base of support to finance some of the improvements identified by the report.

ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS
Compiled by
Workers of the Writers' Program
of the
Work Projects Administration
(Continued from last issue)

Rockford of the 1850s was a cross-section of the new and the old. The railroad and the stagecoach met at the city. Covered wagons still walled through the muddy streets carrying settlers into the little known West. The telegraph, skeptically received by the world in 1842, reached Rockford in 1855. The Rockford Gas Light and Coke Company was chartered that year and in 1856 a gas plant was built on the site of the present main public library.

To celebrate the advent of gas lights, Christmas night of 1856 was a gala occasion. Two of the city's public halls were lighted with the new fuel. A great banquet was spread at Warner's Hall on the corner of Main and West State Streets. There were eloquent speeches by public-spirited citizens. Later, ladies in hoops, crinolines, poke bonnets, and Paisley shawls and gentlemen in frock coats, flowered vests, and silk cravats repaired to Metropolitan Hall where fiddle and bassoon played gay music for quadrilles and Virginia reels.

Rockford's stores were first illuminated by gas on February 3, 1857. Despite a charge of \$4 per 1,000 cubic feet, the company failed and was sold to satisfy creditors the following year. Operations were resumed successfully in 1861. By 1860 the city had installed fifty gas street lamps. At one time a movement was started to mount gas floodlights on huge towers at various points throughout the city, thereby supplanting street lamps. Interest in this plan waned, however, and it was never adopted.

The city charter of 1852 provided for cisterns and wells as public safeguards against fires. An effort was made to organize a volunteer fire department in 1855, but the four engines ordered were unsatisfactory. A year later two companies were formed, the Winnebago Company No. 1 on the east side and the Washington Company No. 2 on the west side. A second west side unit was organized a short time later. The volunteers received no reward for their fire fighting other than social prestige and freedom from paying a poll tax. The roster of the various companies reads like a social register, and memberships were at a premium. Firemen's balls and other annual affairs were red letter days on Rockford's social calendar.

The early fire engine resembled a handcar with pumps or "brakes" operated by hand. The engines were hauled by ropes and equipped with leather pails and leather hose. When the first rubber hose came into use it was extremely brittle and had to be carefully protected from the wheels of wagons. The swiftest runners in the fire company were detailed to pull the engine, or if at night, to carry brass lanterns to light the

way over streets so muddy that often the wagons were stalled in the mire. The less speedy manned the brakes or formed the bucket brigade between the fire and the municipal fire cistern or well nearest the scene. Fire chiefs were empowered to conscript spectators for service; failure to serve was punishable by a fine.

A full-time fire department was established in 1881. John T. Lakin, the first salaried fire chief, received \$45 a month; his force consisted of five firemen who were paid \$1 a day. At Chief Lakin's insistence, the city installed a fire alarm system of ten boxes, connected electrically with the water department and the central fire station. New equipment, including steam engines and elaborate hook and ladder carts, was added as the department grew. The smoking fire engine, drawn by three horses abreast, clattering madly through the city streets to a fire, was one of the most thrilling spectacles of the times.

The importance of education was recognized in the earliest days of Rockford. Private schools that often accepted food or personal services in lieu of tuition were established in the city throughout the 1840s. Pedagogy was a precarious profession, as more than sixty teachers learned in their efforts to found schools in the first twenty-one years of Rockford's existence. Of the various institutions that provided elementary and higher education prior to 1855, only one, the Rockford Female Seminary (now Rockford College), managed to survive.

In February, 1855, the private grade schools were doomed by the enactment of the common school law which provided the first sound basis for a public school system in Illinois. Indicative of Rockford's interest in public education was the fact that by June, 1855, the city had established school districts in accordance with the new law. As so often in Rockford's history, the river served as a dividing line. The east side of the river was designated as school district No. 1, the west side as No. 2. Jason Marsh, A. S. Miller, and Dr. George Haskell constituted the first board of inspectors.

By the autumn of 1855 Rockford children were attending schools financed by general taxation. Classes were held in rented quarters. The basement of the First Baptist Church, then on the southwest corner of Mulberry and North Church Streets, served as the west side school; A. W.

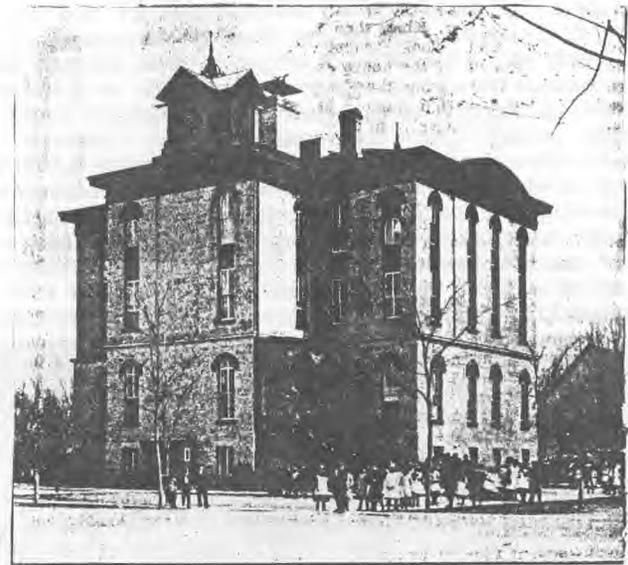


OLD ADAMS SCHOOL.

Freeman was the teacher at an annual salary of \$800. On the east side, the old courthouse on North First Street was converted into a school, and H. Sabin served as the teacher. The first municipally owned school building was completed in 1857.

Meanwhile, efforts were being made to establish the Rockford Wesleyan Seminary on a site near the present intersection of Elm Street and Independence Avenue. A number of buildings were erected there in 1856, and \$57,000 were subscribed to back the venture. It failed, however, and the school buildings were moved into Rockford.

The present Henry Freeman School, 910 Second Avenue (now an office building), stands on the site of the Adams School, the first public school on the east side. O. O. Blackmer was the first principal. In 1859 Henry Freeman became principal and later superintendent of east side schools until 1880. Nine female teachers constituted the staff. The



OLD LINCOLN SCHOOL.

first west side school was erected at 405 North Court Street. George G. Lyon was the first principal; the teaching staff consisted of twelve women. In 1857 the annual expense of the principals and instructors was \$10,000.

Subsequently, as additional grade schools were built, the original schools on the east and west sides were converted into high schools, serving as such until the reorganization of the school system in 1884, when a central high school was opened in upstairs rooms at 113 West State Street. One hundred and fifty pupils were enrolled at the first sessions of this school. Professor A. W. McPherson was principal, Miss May Frye, assistant principal, and Misses Anna Lathrop and Jennie Waldo, teachers. Miss Waldo continued teaching until her retirement in 1930.

Coincident with the growth of the school system was the development of mediums for cultural and social expression. One of these was the Young Men's Association, in existence from 1853 to 1860. Through the efforts of this group Rockford enjoyed lectures and concerts by Horace Mann, Horace Greeley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Henry Ward Beecher, Adelina Patti, Ole Bull, and Wendell Phillips. In comment-

ing on the address of Emerson, Hiram Waldo is quoted as having said: "The hall was packed, but half the audience was sleepy. The lecture was pronounced by some to be a failure."

Following a nation-wide religious revival in 1858, several Rockford churches sponsored the organization of a Young Men's Christian Association. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the association was disbanded, but it was reorganized in May, 1876. Mrs. D. S. Penfield donated a site at the northwest corner of East State and Madison Streets in 1890, and a \$42,000 Y. M. C. A. building was erected. The association existed until 1907, when waning interest forced its dissolution. Sporadic attempts to revive the organization in later years proved unavailing. (Editor's Note: In 1941, the Y.M.C.A. was reactivated, using a bequest from the estate of P. A. Peterson as its impetus. Offices were eventually established in an old mansion at 918 North Second Street, but building the present complex did not begin until after World War II.)

The first library in Rockford was established by and for members of the Sinissippi Division No. 134 of the Sons of Temperance. On September 11, 1855, the Young Men's Association acquired this library and opened a public reading room. The first effort to provide a genuine community library was made in March, 1857, when a subscription paper was circulated to raise money for that purpose. By October 14, 1858, approximately \$6,000 had been subscribed. A library of 1,000 volumes was opened in rooms on the third floor of the Robertson, Coleman and Company Bank. F. H. Bradley was the librarian. Interest lapsed during the Civil War and the books were later sold at auction, most of them to Robert H. Tinker. Many of these volumes are still in the Tinker Cottage.

The enactment of a bill by the state legislature in 1871, providing for tax-supported libraries, spurred Rockford to attempt the establishment of such an institution. The city was unable to advance money for the purpose at that time, and Major Elias Cosper, known as the "Father of the Library," conducted a campaign to raise funds. About \$2,000 were soon subscribed. Reading rooms were opened August 1, 1872, on the second floor of a building that stood on the west side at the northwest corner of Main and West State Streets.

Miss Mary Rankin served temporarily as the first librarian. The appointment of William L. Rowland, a Yale graduate, as permanent librarian on September 17, 1872, gave the new institution a man who made his work a labor of love. Upon his death on September 27, 1900, he was succeeded by Miss Jane P. Hubbell. In June, 1876, the library was moved to the second floor of a building at 101 West State Street. It remained there until the completion of the Carnegie Library in 1903.

The Winnebago County Fair, organized and operated by the Winnebago County Agricultural Society, contributed much to Rockford's social life for many years. The first fair, held in 1841 at a grove on the northeast corner of what is now Oak and First Street, was attended by 1,000 persons. The livestock exhibits were tied to trees and the domestic exhibits were displayed in the Rockford House (Daniel Haight's hotel). One of the prizes awarded was for the best skein of silk made in Winnebago County. Fifteen years later the Horsman pasture was leased for the fair. In 1857 twelve acres of this site, now Fairgrounds Park, were purchased; ten more acres were subsequently added to the tract.

When Henry P. Kimball was elected secretary of the Fair Society in 1861, the organization acquired a showman whose publicity methods were to make the fair one of the best known in the country. Kimball was secretary for twenty-two years. General John A. Logan was the speaker at the fair in 1866, and other notable men appeared from year to year. An invitation was extended to Jefferson Davis in 1875. The former

Confederate president accepted, but withdrew later when Union Army veterans protested. In 1880 General U.S. Grant and his wife were guests of the fair, as were Governor Cullom, and Alfonso Taft, father of President Taft. The fair continued to be an important event for many years. It was held for the last time at Rockford in 1902; two years later the grounds were sold to the city and converted into a public park. Since 1902 the fair has been held at Pecatonica, about sixteen miles west of the city. (Editor's Note: Excerpts from this W.P.A. study of Rockford's history will occasionally be printed in future issues of NUGGETS OF HISTORY.)

"CRADLE OF BASEBALL"

by W. Ashton Johnson

(Written in 1965 or earlier)

During the last year of the Civil War, returning invalided soldiers began to explain to their neighbors how the game of baseball was played.

Today's foremost "National Pastime" had its beginnings in New York state, and the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown is supposed to mark the origin of the sport in the 1840s. Rockford, however, was famed all over the east, following the Civil War, because of the skill of its Forest City Baseball Club. This club, organized in August of 1865, made a triumphal tour of the eastern states in 1870, playing 20 games on the tour and having a season's record of 51 victories against 13 losses.

In 1912, the late Horace E. Buker, then editor of the Daily Republic, compiled a series of articles on the history of the Forest City Club. At



THE OLD FOREST CITY BALL TEAM.

his desk were original records handed down by Henry N. Starr, who served as secretary and scorekeeper on the famous eastern tour. Stories developed from perusal of the box scores proved the most interesting series of sports articles ever printed in a local newspaper.

As far back as 1869, Historian Burch sang the praises of Rockford's fame in the following article, which is quoted verbatim:

"Had it not been for an inquisitive group of cricket players, who prodded a traveling man to explain baseball, Rockford would not have

Sterns, outfield; George King & Al Barker, catchers; and Manager Henry N. Starr. Seventeen of the 20 games played on the trip resulted in victories for the Rockford club.

Spalding later became a millionaire sporting goods manufacturer in Chicago. Born in Byron, young Spalding had accepted a \$40 per week job as pitcher for the Chicago Excelsiors during part of the 1869 season, but returned to win 14 games on the Forest City club's invasion of the eastern states. The club racked up victories over three New York state clubs, including the famous Highlanders; Washington, D.C. Nationals; Cincinnati Red Stockings; Chicago, St. Louis, Dubuque and Madison, Wis.

In spite of its excellent showing in 1869 and 1870, the Forest City club had to disband in 1871 for lack of funds, after finishing seventh among the eight teams in the National Association, predecessor to the National League. For the next six years there were several good amateur teams in Rockford which played against teams from neighboring towns and Chicago. The Forest City club was reactivated as an amateur team, and held their own fairly well against the Bluff City nine of Elgin, whose pitcher was Charles A. Comiskey, the "Old Roman" who later owned the Chicago White Sox. Rockford lost 6 to 3 in that game in 1877, but in 1878 the Forest City club became semi-pro and won most of its games. In 1879 Rockford, Davenport, Dubuque, and Omaha formed the first minor league in history. Rockford finished second after a rainy season which discouraged the officers of the league, called the Northwestern League, from continuing; it was disbanded after a very brief history.

Rockford was then without professional baseball until 1888, when it joined the newly formed Inter-State League. However, that conference became insolvent after only six weeks.

Formation of the Illinois-Iowa League in 1891 found the city in competition against clubs in Davenport, Ottumwa, Joliet, Quincy, Ottawa, Cedar Rapids, and Aurora. The next year Jacksonville, Moline-Rock Island, and Terre Haute, Ind., replaced Ottawa, Cedar Rapids, and Aurora. Stockholders lost most of the \$5,000 raised in 1891 and withdrew after two seasons. Until 1895 Rockford was again without professional baseball, and the ball park west of Tay Street was used by amateur clubs on weekends. In 1895, the Western Association organized an 8-club circuit as follows: Des Moines, Quincy, Omaha, Lincoln, Jacksonville, St. Joseph, Mo., Peoria, and Rockford. The city enjoyed good baseball for three seasons before Rockford withdrew. After a year of inactivity, a new club was formed here in 1899, and we were in the Western loop again. Bad weather caused a shortened season and league bankruptcy.

The organization of the Three Eye-League, which became the oldest minor loop in the nation when it finally succumbed in the 'Sixties, brought professional baseball back for four seasons. From 1905 until 1908 baseball was dormant, but in 1908 the Wisconsin-Illinois League was started. This franchise allowed fans to watch Class C baseball until 1915. The league pennant flew from Kishwaukee Park on Opening day of 1916.

(Continued in next issue)

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is published quarterly by the Rockford
Historical Society, Rockford, Illinois

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