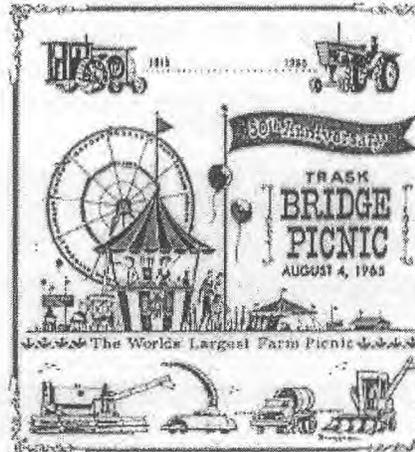

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 42 JUNE 2004 NUMBER 2

THE STORY OF THE TRASK BRIDGE PICNIC

By Donald Milne



HORACE BROWN AND BROWN'S HILLS

By Marty Mangas



Horace Brown

"FORTING" UP IN KNOX COUNTY

By Greg Carter

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents three articles by three different authors.

Don Milne was associated with the Trask Bridge Picnic for nearly 20 years and he was in charge of organizing the last picnic in 1965. Don has been a long-time member of the Board of the Rockford Historical Society. He also is an antique car buff.

Marty Mangas is a resident of the Brown's Hills neighborhood. She has done extensive research into the history of the Brown's Hills and Knightsville areas as well as Jesse Barloga. Mrs. Mangas lives in a Barloga designed home. She is also a long-term member of the Board of the Rockford Historical Society.

Greg Carter is a new contributor but he is an experienced writer for the Old Lead Region Historical Society. He is a student at Rock Valley College. He has a particular interest in the Blackhawk War and is a reenactor of the 1830s time period. I look forward to publishing more of his articles in the future.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 885-1740.

Thomas Powers, Editor

UPCOMING EVENTS

On August 22, 2004, the Burritt History Museum will re-live the Trask Bridge Picnic. There will be exhibits, speakers, entertainment, contests and food. This will take place at the Burritt Town Hall, 8284 Trask Bridge Road (Rt. 70) Both indoors and outdoors, fun for all.

The annual meeting of Rockford Historical Society is tentatively planned for September 12th at Warren Paulson's home in Argyle. A notice will be mailed at a later date.

A fall tour is being planned for a historical site in the area. Details will be announced later.

The annual History Fair will be at Midway Village on January 22, 2005.

THE STORY OF THE TRASK BRIDGE PICNIC

Compiled and edited by
Donald Milne

In the early summer of 1910, four local farmers, Walter Potter (later known as "Picnic Potter"), Walter Livingston, Elmer Scott and Everett Davis, had an idea that there ought to be a Harvest Picnic. So they planned for the picnic to be held in late August or early September. They worked at getting sponsors to set up implement displays, home appliances, rides and games for the children, contests and speakers. They also planned adult games like husband calling, hog calling, wife calling, baseball games, pony rides and other entertainment. They had hopes that at least 200 to 300 people might attend the picnic.

The big day finally arrived and people started to show up soon after day break. It is said that in the end between 2000 and 2500 guests attended. The picnic was held on the Scott farm and it was a very crowded area! The day was a success beyond their thoughts. After everyone had left for home, the four men sat down for a rest and to ponder the day's activities. They realized that it was much too big an undertaking for them to try again.

It was at this time that the Burritt Grange was being organized. A charter was granted Burritt Grange on January 1, 1910. The four men belonged to the new Grange and one of them got the idea that maybe they could sell the picnic to the grange members. So at the next meeting, the matter was brought up before the Grange and the idea passed. Thus was born the Trask Bridge Picnic.

The next step was to find a location to hold the picnic. Andrew's Grove was suggested. It was at the Grove that many picnics had been held in the past. Sunday School Picnics, Modern Woodman Picnics and others had been held there. Mr. Andrew agreed to hold the picnic at his grove. Then they had to decide what to call the picnic. The name Trask Bridge Picnic was suggested as it was in the area of the Pecatonica River where the Trask Brothers had operated the Trask ferry for many years. This location was on one of the direct routes from the Chicago area to the mines in Northwest Illinois and Southwest Wisconsin.

One of the first things that the Grange did was to organize a corporation to run the picnic that would not be the same as Burritt Grange. This was "The Burritt Grange Corporation" and was separate from Burritt Grange. After World War Two, this was changed to "Burritt Grange Entertainment Association", to operate the Trask Bridge Picnic.

The Trask Bridge Picnic was held annually in late August with the exception of five years. In 1932, Trask Bridge Road was being rebuilt and access to Andrew's Grove was impossible. The years 1942 to 1945 were the war years, and due to rationing of gas, tires, machinery, food and clothing and of course our boys fighting overseas, in respect to the National War Effort, the picnic was not held. So although the picnic was held 50 times, it was not consecutive years.

To anyone that remembers the Picnic, every other year would feature grange people. State Masters, National Master, and other officials of the Grange would attend. The other years it would be political with politicians as the speakers. Of course, the political parties would have their tents at the picnic each year.

It had become the place to hear such entertainers from the WLS Barn Dance. Lulu Belle and Scotty, Uncle Otto, Cousin Tilford, the Ridgerunners, Red Foley and many others entertained the crowd. There were also local talents and amateur programs.

As the picnic grew, as many as 50,000 to 60,000 people attended a one day affair. It was billed as "The World's Largest Country Picnic". It was like a one day fair, with all the exhibits that you would find at a county fair. Agricultural exhibits, baking contests, needle work contests, flower exhibits, farm machinery, airplane rides, pony rides, amusement rides, baseball games, much other entertainment and dances at the halls for the young people (and the older young people).

Some people may think that they remember rainy picnics. (Of course it never rained on Trask Bridge Picnic Day!) However it caused a 15 day postponement, delaying it into September and one year it had to be moved to the Winnebago County Fairgrounds at Pecatonica.

Many reasons have been given for the demise of the Trask Bridge Picnic. However the main reason was simple, the members of the grange were aging, membership was down and members of nearby Granges were hired to help man the seven food stands, two specialty booths, two program platforms, five ticket stands, parking attendants and the flower stand, Bingo stand, needle work and other stands. It was just too costly to keep hiring the work done and came to the point where it cost the Grange to hold the picnic.

1965 saw the end to the Trask Bridge Picnic. This celebrated the fiftieth Trask Bridge Picnic, the end of an era. Nothing before or since has been seen that equaled such a one day affair. May we all remember all the good times that we had at the Trask Bridge Picnic!

HORACE BROWN AND BROWN'S HILLS

By Marty Mangas

Luke Joslin, a hunter, trapper, fisherman and land speculator rode his horse into a heavily wooded area far north of the village of Rockford in 1841. He apparently liked what he saw for he bought a quarter section of land from the federal government for a total of \$3,200. His purchase included all of the land that is bounded today on the north by Sinnissippi Park, on the south by Greenmount and stretches from the Rock River to Scandinavian Cemetery.

Luke built his home along a dirt wagon track known as Beloit Road. Today that road is called North Second Street. His cabin stood on the bulge of land just south of the intersection of North 2nd and Cospers Ave. Luke remained a bachelor all of his life. He did have a niece named Mary Thayer who lived in Vermont. Mary married a man named Horace Brown. In 1859 the young couple decided to come west to settle in Rockford. Horace "read law", became an officer in Rockford National Bank and was one of the organizers of The Insurance Co. of the State of Illinois.

Horace is best known though for building Brown's Hall, Rockford's first major civic center. In 1864 he built three store buildings on the site of the present Luther Center on West State St. The second floor of the three buildings was one large open room that seated 1,000 people. The gallery of the hall was 20 feet wide and ran the entire length of the street front. It was dedicated on November 17, 1864 at a public celebration on the evening of Abraham Lincoln's second election as President. The women of Rockford served a dinner there. The proceeds went to the families of the union soldiers fighting in the Civil War. At first the entertainment was "barnstorming". In 1865, Dr. J.P. Norman, a dentist, became the "amusement manager". From that time, the finest of entertainment was presented. James Murdoch gave an evening of Shakespearean readings. Charles Sumner, Senator from Massachusetts, spoke. Ole Bull played the violin and Anna Dickenson, one of the foremost women of her time, appealed for women's suffrage. The orator, Henry Ward Beecher, also appeared. Brown's Hall was the center for Rockford arts for almost 20 years until the new Opera House was built in 1880. The last performance at Brown's Hall was on November 18, 1881.

The Brown's had lived in various residences until they decided it was time to build their own home. It was only natural that Uncle Luke would sell them a portion of his land, the area from present day Brownwood Drive to Greenmount and from the Rock River to Scandinavian Cemetery. Horace and Mary built their home high on a hill overlooking Beloit Road. After Mrs. Brown died, the home was vacant and then demolished in 1925. In 1927 Carl Mattison of Mattison Machine Works built his large half-timbered Tudor home on the exact site of the former Brown home. It is easily visible from North Second St. today.

The Brown's had three children. William Thayer Brown was born in 1854. The home his parents built for him when he married Mary Spaulding still stands just north of the sight of the original Brown home and is easily visible from North Second St. William later became treasurer of the A. G. Spaulding Co., producers of athletic equipment. Their second child, Alice, married Duncan H. Ferguson, son of Duncan Ferguson who served as Rockford mayor. Tragically, Alice died eight days after giving birth to their first child, a son named Donald. The Brown's third child, Carrie, committed suicide when she was 25 years of age. As they stated "under a temporary mental cloud" she walked into the Rock River and drowned.

In 1865 Major Elias Cospers purchased the remaining portion of Luke Joslin's land. He built his Victorian Gothic home high on a hill overlooking Beloit Road. For a quarter of a century the Brown and Cospers homes had been the only homes in the area. In 1889 B.A. Knight, a realtor and developer, began convincing businessmen that it was not necessary to build all the factories in the Water Power District. The river was navigable for transportation of supplies and finished goods. Major Cospers sold the riverfront of his property and Skandia Furniture Co. was built there. Today the former site of the factory is the large green space south of the Sinnissippi Park greenhouses. Horace Brown became the first president of Skandia. Because of this development, the Browns sold some of their property for homes along Beloit Road. They remodeled their own home extensively. However the rest of Brown's Woods remained just that-woods. Horace was very concerned about the new Swedish arrivals that settled

in Knightsville. He allowed the men to go small game hunting in the woods. Since Knightsville was so far removed from Rockford, the residents had to be self-sufficient, keeping horses for transportation, chickens for eggs, cows for milk and tending large gardens for produce. During the summer the Browns allowed the Knightsville residents to pasture their cows in the lush grass of the woods. Each family claimed a tree to which their cow was tethered. Morning and night the older children came to the woods, bucket in hand, to milk the cows. The Browns also allowed the Knightsville residents, who were all Swedish; to hold their mid-summer festival in an open area at what is now the junction of B Street and Greenmount. The festival lasted three days.

Horace died August 11, 1906. His conservative philosophy as stated in his will was "it is better to fly low than to fly high and fall". It worked well for him, for he died a wealthy man. Grandmother Brown continued to live in the family home. She out-lived her husband and all three of her children.

Donald Ferguson, Alice's son, was the only grandchild to settle in Rockford. He was in the process of building his home just south of his grandmother's when World War I broke out. The home was completed when Donald was in service overseas. Upon his return the family occupied the home and Donald began the Ferguson Construction Co. specializing in bridge building, but also doing other engineering.

Donald became a good friend of architect Jesse Barloga. Jesse had graduated from the University of Illinois School of Architecture in 1911. He had worked in Chicago for W. Carbys Zimmerman and C.E. Bryan who built Forest View Abbey in which Jesse had the role of architect of the interior. He also worked in the office of well-known Rockford architect Frank Carpenter. After these years of experience, he was prepared to take his state boards in 1919 to become a licensed architect. Donald and Jesse were both bright young men from wealthy homes who traveled in the correct social circles. They walked through Grandmother Brown's woods and believed that it was an ideal area for a new residential development. Grandmother Brown gave her approval and they began laying out lots and roadways. Jesse, who had lived close to a woods north of Pecatonica as a boy, was taught by his mother to appreciate nature. The rolling hills and drainage areas provided large green spaces so important to Barloga. It was only after World War II with the need for G.I. housing and modern drainage technology that Jesse's green spaces were filled with homes.

The roster of families building in Brown's Hills was like a who's who of Rockford. The homes were large architecturally designed homes, eleven of them designed by Barloga. Gilbert Johnson, Willis Hubbard, A. Rayner Eastman, Chester Wolfley and the Eihle Brothers were other architects involved. You had to be invited and approved by the other residents if you planned to build in Brown's Hills. When the neighborhood history was written, original residents were asked if they had ever denied access to anyone and they all replied in the affirmative.

Residents of Brown's Hills were part of the same social circle. It was the roaring twenties and life was good. Despite prohibition, parties were a big part of entertainment here. Bridge was popular. Stories were told of residents lining up on both sides of Brown Hills Court and trying to out-sing and out-cheer each other for their alma maters, Wisconsin and Illinois.

When Brown Hills Road intersected with North Second St. (it no longer does), a special iron Brown's Hills sign hung from the branch of a huge oak tree at the entrance. The sign disappeared at the same time the street was widened. The A.C. Woods ornamental arch at the entrance to the H.L. Clark home was removed and placed in front of the Church by the Side of the Road next to the Wagon Wheel by Walt Williamson. Despite a search of the Williamson properties, the missing Brown's Hills sign could not be found. Memories had faded, but the residents of Brown's Hills remembered that the sign pictured a boy in a tree throwing down (they thought apples) to his friend below. Every resident had a rubber stamp of the sign that they used as a return address on mail. The stamp was used on invitations to parties, bridge tallies etc. Jan Vogt, Donald Ferguson's daughter, from California returned to the neighborhood to visit. When she learned that the neighborhood was preparing its history she asked her mother, Mrs. Donald Ferguson, about the sign. Mrs. Ferguson was living in a nursing home in California at the time. In Mrs. Ferguson's box of precious keepsakes they found a stamping of the original sign on a letter. The rubber stamps had all disintegrated long ago.

Mrs. Ferguson remembered that someone in Brown's Hills had known John Held, Jr., the originator of the flapper. They had this sign especially made for the area and it depicted a boy in a tree throwing down hickory nuts to his friend on the ground. (The area had many hickory trees.) A description of John's work in a special issue of Life magazine called *American Life and Times 1900-1950* says;

He took a look at the Flaming Youth and caricatured what he saw, filling the old Life, the New Yorker, and the funny pages with pictures of thin and sophisticated creatures with rolled stockings, shingle bobs, flasks, and cigarettes holders. In its turn Flaming Youth looked at Held's wonderful pictures and patterned itself after them.

In 1985 the Smithsonian prepared a traveling display of John Held Jr.'s work that was to travel to major cities for one year. With the help of Elizabeth Driscoll of the Smithsonian and Maggie Held, John's widow, Brown's Hills, Knightsville and Restoration Education were able to bring the display to Midway Village for exhibit. We were the only small city included on the tour.

Maggie Held, John's fourth wife, was kind enough to write and send material about the signs. In the 1920s John and his third wife, Ada had purchased a farm on Ladder Hill Rd. in Weston, Conn. There was a forge on the farm where they had made axes in pre-revolutionary war days. John decided to start a business making wind-vanes, gate signs, door knockers, and fire screens of copper, brass, and iron. John was to design them. Mr. Lindvall would do the firing and Ada would run the business. They printed a 21 page catalog and business was brisk. Today some of these signs are still present and treasured in the area around Westport and on the East Coast. Occasionally one will appear in an antique store and bring a very high price.

Since the Brown's Hills sign could not be found, Gene Horvath, a nationally known metal sculptor who lived in the neighborhood and occupied the Cosper home with his family, volunteered to reproduce the sign, the cost to the neighborhood being only the materials. Open houses were held in Jesse

Barloga's dream home at 1364 Brown Hills Road and in the first home built in Brown's Hills in 1922, 831 Overlook, designed by Barloga for Dr. Charles Cibelius' family. The Brown's Hills sign was placed on the point of land at the junction of Overlook and Brown's Hills Road in the lawn of the first Brown's Hills home. Ground signs were chosen for fear of vandalism with hanging signs. The residents of Knightsville chose a design of children sledding. Older residents remembered a time when they could sled from the top of Oakes Ave., across North Second and onto the river. That sign is placed at the main entrance to Sinnissippi Park. Both signs have been landscaped.

Residents of the area appreciate the history that has been collected. They maintain their homes and gardens well. Brown's Hills-Knightsville became a local historic district on Feb. 6, 1984. Tours of the area have been given through the Center for Learning in Retirement through Rock Valley College. We invite visitors to walk or drive through Brown's Woods and remember the family that was an important part of Rockford's history.

"Forting Up" in Knox County

By Greg Carter

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Indian Troubles

In April 1832, word of Black Hawk's band crossing the Mississippi River with his armed band of warriors spread quickly from settlement to settlement. Panic was gripping settlers across Illinois and the Michigan Territory. The residents of settlements across the state began "forting up" and banding together for defense against Indian depredations and for offense, to go after the British Band and expel it from the state or destroy it. Forts were erected from around Chicago to Rock Island and from Galena to St. Louis. Given that Black Hawk's band crossed the river near the "Yellow Banks", below present-day Oquawka, Illinois; the settlers along the Henderson River in present-day Knox County became particularly nervous. After all, their settlements at Ruthsbury and Henderson Grove were alone in the wilderness and unprotected, 2-days ride from the nearest fort or large town. They also stood directly in the path of the British Band.¹

The two principal settlements in Knox County were the communities of Ruthsbury² and Henderson Grove. Today, they are known as Oquawka and Soperville.³ Ruthsbury sat at the mouth of the Henderson River at the Mississippi, and Henderson Grove sat along Henderson Creek above present-day Galesburg. Cabins and claims of various sizes spread around these two settlements. These included the claims of Mr. John B. Gum, the first permanent resident of the county, and Mr. William McMurtry and his family.

Hints of Indian troubles were heard in the Henderson Grove settlement as early as 1829 when the McMurtry families arrived. They took up residence in

Knox Township on Middle Creek, several miles below Henderson Grove. On their property they built a fort for the common defense⁴ as soon as they finished their homes. They would later sell this land to a Mr. William Meeks⁵ and move to Iowa. This was the first fort erected in Knox County. A nearby neighbor, Mr. John Gum, would also fortify his cabin.⁶ This cabin would later become Knox County's first courthouse and post office.⁷ After being moved to a nearby park for preservation, this cabin was burned by an arsonist in 1952.⁸ The Old Courthouse museum occupies the site today.⁹

Forting Up

On the 18th of April 1832, a delegation from Henderson Grove reached Fort Armstrong on Rock Island. Thomas McKee, James McMurtry and Fantelroy Freeman¹⁰ had ridden to the fort with a desperate request for arms. While the delegation was at Fort Armstrong, the remaining settlers of Henderson Grove wasted no time erecting four additional forts for their protection. Under the industrious supervision of William Lewis,¹¹ two forts were erected in Henderson Township, one in Rio Township, and one below Knoxville. The small fort located 3 ½ miles southeast of Knoxville may have been located near present-day Gilson, IL.¹² The exact location is presently under investigation. According to one source, this fort was never used.¹³ Fort Aggie, the fort in Rio Township, stood on section 27. The first fort in Henderson Township was called "Henderson Fort". Fort Aggie, Henderson Fort, McMurtry's Fort and the fort below Knoxville appear to have been similar in size to Apple River fort, being small stockades of wooden pickets surrounding a house or other dwelling.¹⁴

The principle fort for defense in Knox County was Fort Lewis, named for its builder. It is also the only Knox County fort that is described in any detail. The fort stood on section 33 of Henderson Township, just above the grove of timber above Lake Storey. The Volunteer Rangers erected Fort Lewis in four weeks in April-May 1832. The Fort was 210 feet square, built of oak timber pickets with sharpened points. The inner wall of the fort was then lined with 4-inch thick pieces of sod cut from the ground. Every four feet along the walls a loophole was cut out. Two corners were fitted with blockhouses, each measuring 16x20 feet square. The tops of the blockhouses were several feet above ground and projected out beyond the walls to "enable the guard to prevent the approach of incendiaries". Each blockhouse was covered in clapboards. The fort was finished with one 12-foot door (gate) made of heavy puncheons. That was the sole point of entry and exit. Only one building graced the inside of the fort, a small shed.¹⁵ The Volunteer Rangers used this fort to hold additional the firearms, supplies and provender that they were supplied with by the US Army.

The Volunteer Rangers

Along with the numerous forts in the neighborhood, the men in the Henderson Grove area formed into a ranging company of mounted militia for protection. These men would become "the Volunteer Rangers" and range the length of the Henderson River for 60 days.¹⁶ William McMurtry commanded 64 men during the first enlistment from April to June 3, 1832.¹⁷ James Ferguson

commanded 53 men during the second enlistment from June 3rd to July 4th, 1832.¹⁸

The first problem confronting the Rangers was that of arming the company. In a petition drafted on 17 April 1832, Fifty-six settlers had affixed their names to a petition for arms, stating that "not more than one fifth of the Inhabitants have arms." (This suggests that only 12-14 men were in possession of firearms!) They further requested 150 such arms for the common defense.¹⁹ The delegation shipped the arms down river to Ruthsbury, then carried them overland by wagon to Henderson Grove and distributed them to the men there. The men were initially issued 100 arms. These arms were likely P.1795 muskets, and/or 1803 rifles left over from the War of 1812, along with accouterments. These were most likely P.1808 accouterments with either 1812-surplus black cross-belts or P.1819 white cross-belts.²⁰ The company "did not wear uniforms, but continued in citizen's dress."²¹ All of the men were mounted. Their appearance was not likely to have been much different than that of the militia in the Michigan Territory. Upon receiving arms, the men of the company signed for lead, flints, bullet molds, screwdrivers, wipers, gunpowder, a spring-vise and powder flasks.²² The Volunteer Rangers were mustered out of service on July 4th, 1832. For their trouble, each man was paid eighty-six cents per day of service and rewarded a bounty of 80 acres of land.²³

In addition to arms and accouterments, General Henry Atkinson ordered a large quantity of provisions, including barrels of flour, pork, corn, gunpowder, lead, rice, sugar, coffee, rum and other such articles to the mouth of the Henderson River.²⁴ These may have been for the extended use of the Volunteer Rangers or of the companies heading north from southern Illinois who were to rendezvous at Yellow Banks and proceed north from that point.²⁵ The Rangers did not engage in combat with the "British Band" at any time, nor were any of the Knox County forts ever attacked.

Notes

¹ *Wakefield's History of the Black Hawk War*, p. 34

² *Illinois State Library*

³ *DeLorme™ Illinois Atlas & Gazetteer*, 1996, p. 31

⁴ *Annals of Knox County*, p.108

⁵ *Land sale records of Knox County, 1850-1880, Knox County courthouse.*

⁶ *Letter to Galesburg Post from granddaughter of John B. Gum, recounting her mother's recollection of the Gum Cabin, written before her death in 1959*

⁷ *History of Knox County, Illinois*, frontispiece.

⁸ *Galesburg Post, Thursday, July 28th, 1977, p. 10*

⁹ *Knox County Historical Society*

¹⁰ *History of Knox County, Illinois*, p.151

¹¹ *History of Knox County, Illinois*, p. 152

¹² *DeLorme™ Illinois Atlas & Gazetteer*, 1996, p. 39

¹³ *History of Knox County, Illinois*, p. 152

¹⁴ *History of Knox County, Illinois*, p. 152

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- ¹⁵ History of Knox County, Illinois, p. 152-153
¹⁶ History of Knox County, Illinois, p. 152
¹⁷ The Black Hawk War 1831-1832, Vol I, p. 460-461
¹⁸ The Black Hawk War 1831-1832, Vol I, P. 112-113
¹⁹ The Black Hawk War 1831-1832, Vol. II, Part I, p. 269-270
²⁰ History of Knox County, Illinois, p. 151
²¹ History of Knox County, Illinois, p. 152
²² History of Knox County, Illinois, p. 151
²³ History of Knox County, Illinois, p. 152
²⁴ The Black Hawk War 1831-1832, Vol. II, Part I, p. 308-309
²⁵ Wakefield's History of the Black Hawk War, p. 41

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