
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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EXERPTS FROM LOOKING DOWN MEMORY LANE

By Clara Retzlaff Danielson



This family portrait was taken at the Retzlaff family farm on Spring Brook Rd. The photo was taken to celebrate the 50th anniversary of William and Martha Retzlaff (Clara's parents), in 1946. Clara is in the back row, third from the left.

GROCERY SHOPPING IN EDGEWATER

By Thomas Powers

2030 Cumberland until 1940 when it was sold to Bob Thornton. Bob ran the store until the mid 1950's and the store closed for good in 1958 or '59.

The store at 615 Ellis was operated by several different owners, perhaps the longest by Howard Olson. In 1942 it was known as George Johnson Groceries & Meats. It went out of business the following year.

The longest lasting store was the one located at 2203 Cumberland. It too went through several different owners and the store changed over the years from strictly groceries to include a deli and ice cream parlor. It remained a food store until about 1980 when it was converted into a beauty parlor.

Over the years the large stores got larger and the smaller ones started to disappear. The A & P moved to 1407 N. Main, then to 1612 N. Main in 1938, and finally to 1417 Myott in 1950. In 1972 they closed their last store in the Edgewater area. The Piggly Wiggly, who pioneered "self-serve" grocery shopping in the late 1920's, operated a store at 1438 N. Main for many years. When the A & P vacated the building at 1612 N. Main in 1946, Piggly Wiggly moved in. They operated a store there until the late 1950's when they moved to the new North Town shopping center. One small store that is still here is Cacciatore's on N. Main. They have served their customers for over 35 years at the same location. Most of the other small neighborhood grocery stores have disappeared. They have been replaced by the huge supermarkets of today like Eagle's, Hilander's, and Logli's, but also by modern refrigeration, fast food and TV dinners.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Lyle Baie in researching this article. Lyle has passed away since this article was originally written. His knowledge and memory was very valuable and added a lot to the story. I might add that Lyle has first hand knowledge, having worked for the Up Town Market in the 1930's for \$.10 per hour!

Sources

1. Interviews with Lyle Baie, a 70-year resident of the area.
2. Interviews with Edgar and Mae Rudolph-also long term residents.
3. Rockford City Directories - from 1909 to 1980.

EXCERPTS FROM LOOKING DOWN MEMORY LANE

By Clara Retzlaff Danielson.

These excerpts were taken from a booklet written by Clara Retzlaff Danielson about her memories of growing up on a farm in what was then rural Winnebago County nearly 100 years ago. Reprinted with permission.

PREFACE

Now that I am 95 years old, my thoughts go back to my childhood on the farm. We led a free and fruitful life and enjoyed the spectacular Aurora Borealis, Milky Way, sunsets, rainbows, and the moon shining brightly. All of these were clearly visible in the country, away from the bright city lights. At that time, all these were just taken for granted and as a child, not really appreciated. Now when all these beautiful wonders of nature come to mind, my childhood experiences are refreshed. We were taught about and observed reproduction of plants and animal life as a natural way of life.

I dedicate this book to my kind and loving mother and father.

HISTORY OF SPRINGBROOK FARM

The U.S. Government originally owned this piece of land. In the early 1800s, it was purchased by Avery March for \$1.50 an acre, and then in the late 1800s it was purchased by my Grandfather (Charles Retzlaff). He built a little three-room house just across the drive from his home for his wife's mother and father (John and Fredricka Ollman). They lived there until their deaths in 1901 and 1903. This little house was then used as a brooder house where the small chicks were raised.

My grandfather died in 1905 and shortly thereafter my father purchased the farm consisting of 200 acres for \$25 an acre. He met and married Martha Strassman from Milwaukee. They lived there their entire life raising a family of seven children. They did general farming, dairying and feeding live stock. Mother and father worked hard and long hours so the prosperity they gained was duly earned.

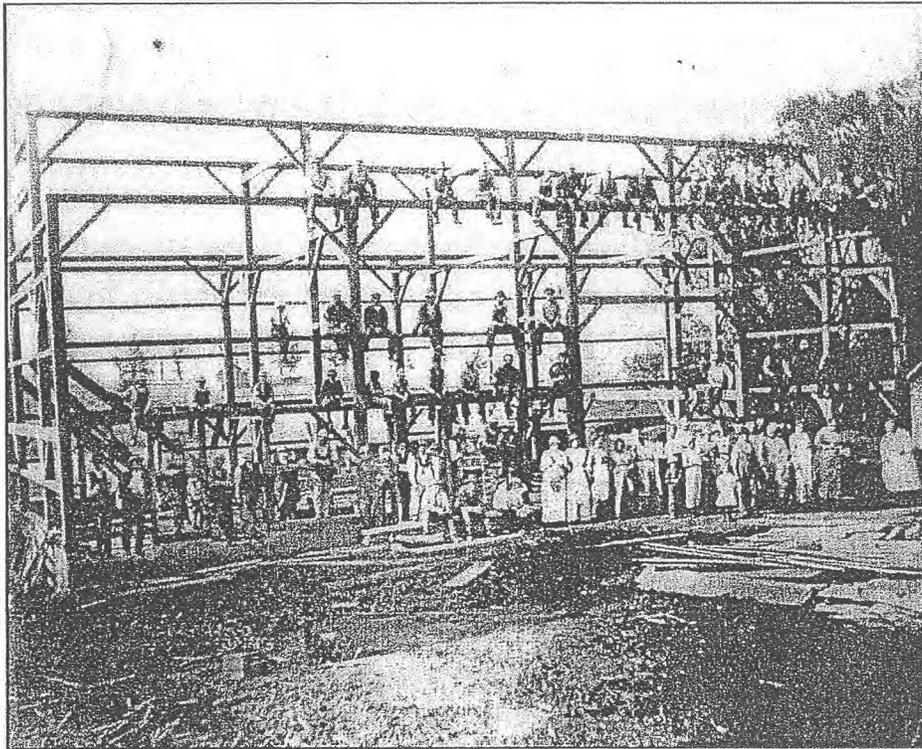
Eighty acres were sold to the Catholic Diocese in 1950. The Diocese built a Mother House for the Sisters of St. Francis, which was called Mount St. Francis Convent. This was built at a cost of two million dollars. It was a beautiful building with many marble statues brought from Italy.

In 1964 the balance of the land was sold to Lobdell Agency. The development of that land included a 12-acre man-made lake and 140 lots with a beach and small lake for the children of that area. This has now been

annexed to the city of Rockford. An apartment building known as "The Harbors" was built in 1970 and now has full occupancy.

So where once the livestock and poultry roamed and the men worked the field of grain and we could hear our echoes; now power mowers, snow blowers and snowmobiles are heard. Modern laundry machines and all other electrical equipment take the place of the work that mother's and father's hands had done. Time has drastically changed this land.

I think everyone at one time has thrown a pebble into a creek or river and watched the ripples spread out wider and wider. That's the way I find it is when I start reminiscing. I think of one thing and just as the ripples spread on the water, so my thoughts go farther and farther into the past.



THE BARN RAISING, JUNE 15, 1915

What are friends for if not to help at a barn raising!

It was a balmy, sunny Saturday, June 15, 1915 when 105 of our friends and neighbors gathered together for the purpose of raising a new barn. There were 75 men under the guidance of the contractor, Frank Garrett, all working together. With the "go" sign from Frank Garrett, the men all at one time gave a big heave and raised the frame work that had been assembled on the ground. Up - up - up went the first wall at 2 PM. After it was raised, a 4-foot wreath was placed in the center on the very top.

On each of the four posts of the first wall, four flags were placed, and my father was very proud. The finished barn was 64 ft by 30 ft with 20-foot posts. It was equipped with modern (at that time) dairy equipment stanchions for 20 milk cows – feeding troughs, special pens for small calves, a large hayloft with plenty of spaces for loaded hay wagons to enter.

After the raising, mother and father provided supper to everyone. Tables were set up in another barn called "The Grainery." These tables were decorated with Peonies and roses from our flower garden. The ladies, twenty in number, helped mother prepare and serve the food. Seventy-five men ate at the first setting and then the ladies and children had their turn. A hearty meal was eaten, finished with homemade ice cream for all and cigars for the men.

This was all hard work, but with friends helping it was a glorious and rewarding day of life on the farm.

The barn stood until 1963 when the farm was sold and all of the buildings came tumbling down.

HOMEMADE BUTTER

Today the housewife goes to the supermarket and buys a pound of butter and very likely never stops to think how it was made. It's simply there, nicely packaged and ready to use.

Seventy years ago, she didn't need to wonder how it was made; she knew, because she made it.

Churning time was a busy time and involved a lot of hard work. Our churn was made of wood, which was pumped up and down. Day old cream made the best butter. It was poured into the churn, the cover fastened on and then we started working the dasher. This was no easy task for it usually required a steady up and down motion for about 40 minutes before the butter came. We children took turns churning, but towards the end, mother took over because the butter had to be watched carefully once it started to come. When the granules were about the size of a kernel of corn, it was time to stop churning. Then the buttermilk was drained off and stored in a large pitcher. Nothing ever tasted better than a cold glass of buttermilk with tiny chunks of butter floating around in it.

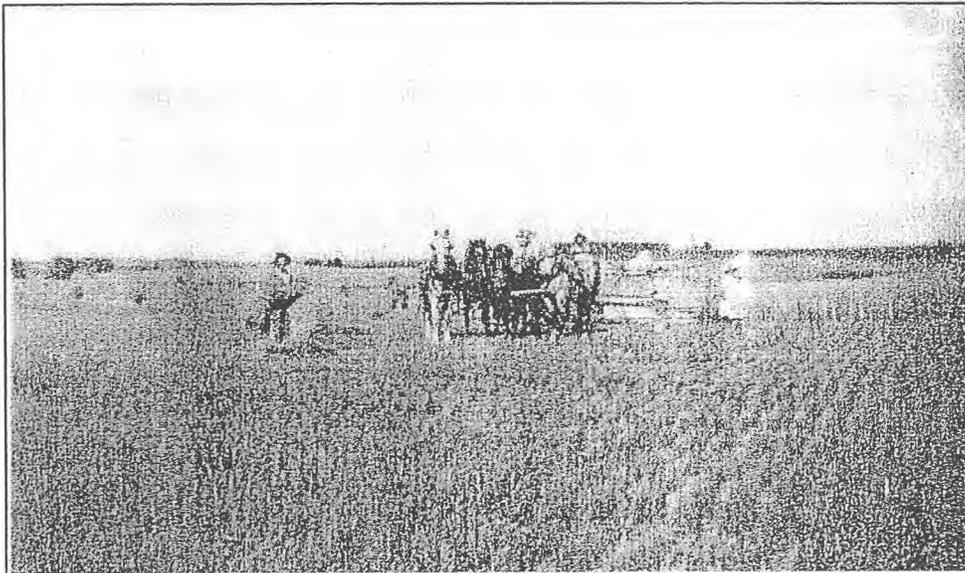
After the buttermilk was drawn off, cold water was poured over the butter and then churned some more and then drawn off again. This process was repeated until the water came off clear. Then the butter, still in a granular stage, was transferred to a low wooden bowl. At this stage the butter was white so mother added butter coloring and also salt.

The granules were worked with a butter paddle, which mixed the salt and coloring, squeezed out what little water was left, and molded the butter into a mass. The paddle was made of smoothly polished wood and was

nearly square with a stubby handle. The ladle part was slightly curved and was a perfect implement for working the butter.

After the butter was finished, it was packed in a crock and covered with heavy waxed paper and stored in a cool place.

Yes, it was a lot of work to make butter many years ago, but you had the satisfaction of knowing you had accomplished something worthwhile and maybe that had something to do with the fact that it seemed to taste better then.



This is a photograph of William Retzlaff (Clara's father) and his family gathering oat bundles after the binder cut and mechanically put the oats into bundles. The man on the left is William Retzlaff.

HARVEST TIME

Harvest time in the early 90's was vastly different than today. The binder was the most advanced piece of machinery. It cut the oats, tied it into bundles and tossed them along the way all in one operation. Then men would have to gather up the bundles and stack them into shocks to be left in the field for weeks to cure. A 4-horse team drew the binder.

On our farm, the men stayed in the fields all day and we younger children would carry out a large basket of food for their lunch, which was packed by mother. Also, we would drive out four horses at noon and bring back the four that had worked all morning. On arriving in the barnyard with them, they would go to their watering tank for a good long drink of fresh

cold water. Then we would remove their bridles and put on their halters and lead them into the barn for their feed. I recall I was too short to reach their heads to change their bridles, so they always obliged by lowering their heads for my convenience. During all this process, day after day, not once did any of us small children get injured.

After the shocks were properly dried, then came the threshers. Threshing time was the highlight of the year. Not every farmer could afford one, but usually a few farmers formed a co-op and they purchased the steam engine and they made a business of going around the different farms at harvest time and did the threshing. 1-2 stoked the machine with coal, 1-2 carried water for the water with a large water wagon, and 1-2 tended the machine.

Because it was necessary to be on hand for an early morning start, the crew usually came at 4 AM and were soon at work to get the machine started and steamed up before the threshing began. By 7 AM most of the neighbors arrived with teams and hayracks. There were about twenty men and a dozen teams, which were driven to the fields. One man drove the team while others pitched the bundles onto the racks until the hayrack was loaded. Then it was driven to the threshing machine. Two men would then fling the bundles into the machine as fast as they could. The oats came pouring out of a spout into a box wagon which had been driven to just the right spot and, when it was full to the brim, it was driven to the barn where the grain was unloaded into bins with scoop shovels.

The straw was blown out through a long pipe to create a straw stack. The children got to climb on the haystack and then slide down. They got straw and chaff in their hair, shoes, mouth, and nose and down their neck, but that was a small price to pay for the fun they had.

While all this work was going on outside; considerable work was going on inside of the house. Previous to the threshing day, mother had spent several days baking innumerable loaves of bread, besides all kinds of pies, cakes, doughnuts and cookies. It took lots of food to satisfy about twenty hungry men, so say nothing of all of the neighborhood's wives and children. Several of the neighbor ladies helped mother prepare the potatoes and vegetables and meat. I can still see those huge roasts of about 15 pounds and remember how delicious it was. The table was then pulled out its entire length and set. When the first crew had finished eating, the table was hastily cleared and reset for the second crew. The ladies and children then sat down to eat.

Next was the task of washing all the dishes and hand towels the men had used when they washed up.

This was all hard work, but somehow both men and women managed to get a great deal of enjoyment and satisfaction out of it. There was something wholesome about everyone working together and helping each other.

We never heard the word "togetherness" in those days – we just simply lived it. It was a way of life for us.

HOUSE CLEANING

Now you can hire someone to come in with a vacuum cleaner, rug shampooer, and floor waxer. They spray a little liquid on the windows and wipe it off; drapes are dry cleaned so in no time housecleaning is completed.

Not so in the early 90's as most people had rag rugs, which reached from wall to wall and were fastened to the floor with thumbtacks. Usually the rugs were swept once a week with a damp broom and when housecleaning time came, a near revolution took place.

All the tacks were removed with a claw hammer and there seemed like a million of them. Then the carpet was taken outdoors and either hung on a line or placed on a bedspring and everyone took turns beating it with a carpet beater, which was a fan shaped instrument. You were practically exhausted after 15 minutes of beating, but you kept it up until no more dust could be pounded out.

While we were doing the pounding, mother got down on her hands and knees with a scrub brush, a bar of strong soap and a pail of hot water, and she removed the year's accumulation of dust and dirt from the rough floorboards.

Then came the job of spreading newspapers over the floor, the carpet was brought in and laid in place. A member of the family tacked it down while someone else held tightly to the edges and pulled with all their might to keep it even. Then the woodwork was scrubbed until there wasn't a speck of dirt to be seen.

Most of the furniture had hand-embroidered throws that had to be washed, starched and ironed with irons, which had to be heated on a cook stove. The doilies were also washed, starched and ironed, and then arranged on the tables, chairs, sofas, hat racks, clock shelves, dressers and washstands.

The windows were washed and while that was going on someone had to stand on the outside to be sure no specks were missed.

The curtains that usually reached to the floor had to be washed and then tacked on the curtain stretchers to dry. This took a lot of time and caused sore fingers, for we would invariably stick our fingers until they bled.

The featherbeds and straw ticks were taken out to air. Then we cleaned the slats or if you had springs, you cleaned them with a brush especially made to fit in the spirals to get the dust out.

KEROSENE LAMPS

Now, when we want a light, we just flip a switch and if we want a light in another room, we just flip another switch.

Not so in the early 90's, for the method of obtaining a light was much different. You furnished the power by filling lamps with kerosene every morning after you had first cleaned the chimneys, trimmed the wicks, and polished the burner.

The lamps were gorgeous – some had globe shaped shades over the chimney, some had dome shaped ones made of ruby or milk glass, with dozens of sparkling cut glass prisms hanging from the lower edge. Both shades and lamps were painted brightly with flowers, grapes or flying birds.

Then there was the bracket lamp, which was fastened to the wall. This consisted of a cast iron bracket with a bronze finish, which extended out from the wall and could be swung around to suit your fancy. At the end of the bracket was a place for the lamp, which had a glass base for holding kerosene and a tall glass chimney to protect the flame. Back of the chimney was a silvered glass reflector that could be turned to throw the light in any direction. What a handy convenience in the early 90's!

But the most common of all was the ordinary glass stand lamp that could be picked up and carried from room to room.

It's doubtful that anyone will remember any particular electric light, but few people will ever forget those wonderful kerosene lamps that lighted them through the darkness of long ago.

GROCERY SHOPPING IN EDGEWATER

By Thomas Powers

Editors Note: The Edgewater neighborhood is the area north and east of the North Main and Auburn intersection. The area was originally platted in 1890 and was best known 100 years ago as the home of the Harlem Park Amusement Park, the Riverside Park baseball stadium, and the Ingersoll Milling Machine Co. Most of the homes in the area were built between 1910 and 1930. This article originally appeared in the Edgewater Neighborhood Association Newsletter in 1995.

How many grocery stores are there within a mile of your home? How many are there in the whole city? Not near as many as there were 50 or 60 years ago. Today there are about 50 grocery stores large or small, in the city of Rockford, spread over 45 square miles. In 1930 there were well over 300 grocery and meat markets in a city that at that time covered only 12 square miles. But it was a different era and stores and shopping habits were very different then they are today.

At the turn of the century this was a largely rural area, but it was growing fast. In 1892 there were 26 homes north of Auburn St., and east of Main St. By 1914 there were 131, including some 2 and 4 family homes. By the 1920's there were many more. The first store in the area was the Smontek Grocery & Meat Market established in 1910 or 11 at 2200 N. Main. The store lasted less than 5 years, but within a few years several other stores opened up. By 1915 there were 4 grocery stores along N. Main including one at 1438 N. Main at the present site of "Bobby's North". There would be a grocery store there for the next forty years.

By the 1920's, grocery stores and meat markets were springing up all over the area. In 1917 the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Co., came to town. The A & P, as we call it started out importing tea from England in the 18th century and they were an old established business. They opened three stores in Rockford in 1917 and in 1920 they opened their sixth store at 1313 Auburn St. in the building currently used by "Zazines". By 1935 A & P had twenty-five stores in Rockford. Another early chain was Piggly Wiggly. They opened a store at 1438 N Main in 1920. By 1930 they had eight stores in Rockford. That year there were six grocery and meat markets in the 1400 block of N. Main St., and eleven others in Edgewater or along its borders.

How did all these stores stay in business? Well, many of them didn't. In the 1920's, '30's and '40's many stores opened, closed, moved or changed hands after a few years. But others replaced the ones that closed. Refrigerators were new in the late 1920's and it was another 10 years before most people had one. Many people had iceboxes, but fresh food didn't keep very long, especially meat, so you had to shop almost daily. Most of the stores were very small and didn't carry a wide range of foods. Some were on residential streets and catered to people who needed a few items in between their trips to the larger stores, much as the "7-11's" do today. Others competed in other ways. A.W. Burr's carried a premium line of foods and meats. They catered to those who were a little better off. The Monarch Grocery and the Uptown Grocery offered delivery service. Stores carried different brands of canned goods. Some were open longer hours. Some stores provided better services and some had better prices. There were many ways to compete.

Most of the small stores would allow you to run a tab. You were supposed to come in at the end of the month and pay up, but that didn't always happen, especially during the depression. A.W. Burr's went out of business in the mid '30's because they could not collect enough of their tabs. Undoubtedly many other stores had the same problem. It was a difficult problem. The large stores generally did not extend credit, but they had lower prices too.

There were three grocery stores that opened within Edgewater in the 1920's. They were located at 2030 Cumberland (1922), 2203 Cumberland (1926), and 615 Ellis (1922). F.W. CARL and his wife operated the store at

2030 Cumberland until 1940 when it was sold to Bob Thornton. Bob ran the store until the mid 1950's and the store closed for good in 1958 or '59.

The store at 615 Ellis was operated by several different owners, perhaps the longest by Howard Olson. In 1942 it was known as George Johnson Groceries & Meats. It went out of business the following year.

The longest lasting store was the one located at 2203 Cumberland. It too went through several different owners and the store changed over the years from strictly groceries to include a deli and ice cream parlor. It remained a food store until about 1980 when it was converted into a beauty parlor.

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