
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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THE FIRST COUNTY FAIR AND CATTLE SHOW IN NORTHERN ILLINOIS

By Bruce Steder



THE POLISH CLAIMS OF 1836

By Thomas Powers

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue contains an article about the first Winnebago County Fair, which was held 170 years ago this October. The Rockford Historical Society is hosting, "Where Rockford Began", the 170th Anniversary of the First County Fair and Cattle Show in Northern Illinois on October 15th 2011 at Ingersoll Centennial Park in Haight Village. Admission is free and open to the public. We are partnering with the Haight Village National Register Historic District to commemorate this event. Historical societies, preservation organizations, and vendors within Winnebago County will participate in bringing historic displays that are germane to this theme. We will focus this event on early Rockford history and the evolution of agriculture in the Rockford area.

The article is written by Bruce Steder. Bruce is a Rockford native, a local history buff, a watchmaker and a musician. Bruce is a past President and current board member of the Rockford Historical Society. He is a former history and architecture tour guide for the River District and is a twenty year member of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. He is involved with the Friends of Ziock, Friends of Camp Grant and the Keith Creek Neighborhood Association.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Midsommer Fest at the Erlander Home Museum 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Greenwood Cemetery Walk – Will be held June 25, 2011 from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Tour of the Wheeler House in South Beloit on Saturday, July 23 at 10 a.m.

Tour of the Briggs Mansion in Rockford on Saturday, November 12 at 10 a.m.

IDEA FOR AN ARTICLE?

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 986-4867.

Thomas Powers, Editor

The First County Fair and Cattle Show in Northern Illinois

By Bruce Steder

In the short span of six years, since Germanicus Kent, Lewis Lemon, and Thatcher Blake set foot upon the land that is now Rockford, this small community of hardy prairie farmers and merchants had seen the fruits of their labor, the formation of Winnebago County in 1836, and the incorporation of their village in 1839. In August of 1840, this small community of 250, along with other county residents came together to appoint a committee to draft a constitution for the Winnebago County Agricultural Society. The society was organized April 13th 1841.

Dr. George Haskell, an anti-slavery advocate, was elected President; Robert J. Cross, the first County Treasurer (1836-1839), vice-president; George W. Lee, Secretary; Charles I. Horsman, who served on the first jury, was elected Treasurer; Isaac N. Cunningham, Newton Crawford, Phineas M. Johnson, Horace Miller, Richard Montague, James S. Norton, and Jonathon Weldon were elected directors.

On July 5th 1841, a meeting was held with President Haskell delivering an address showing support for the society and a recommendation that an event take place later in the year.

The next meeting was held on September 8th where the exhibition was scheduled and the following resolutions were adopted:

"Resolved, On motion of J. S. Norton, seconded by George W. Lee, that the Annual Fairs be held at Rockford, alternately on the east and west side of the river, commencing the present year on the east side."

"Resolved, That all the available funds of the Society be distributed in premiums on the day of the cattle show, and that the premiums be paid in agricultural publications."

"Resolved, That George Haskell, Jonathon Weldon, and George W. Lee be a committee to prepare a code of By-Laws for the society."

"Resolved, That with a view of extending the benefits of the Winnebago County Agricultural Society, of enlisting the combined efforts of the farmers of this county in sustaining the society, J. Weldon, Esq., was appointed our agent to obtain members of the

society, and to collect the monies for the same, which will be devoted to the payment of the premiums at the ensuing Cattle Show."

"*Resolved*, That the Society meet at 2 o'clock p.m., on the 13th of October, and form a procession under the direction of Jason Marsh, Esq., marshal of the day, and march to the place appointed for the delivery of the address."

"*Resolved*, That Daniel S. Haight, Doct. Josiah C. Goodhue, and Charles I. Horsman be a committee of arrangements to prepare a place for a show, and make all the necessary preparations for exhibitions, rent a room for the delivery of an address, and for facilitating the passage over the ferry."

"Jason Marsh was appointed marshal of the day; Isaac N. Cunningham, J. Weldon, and Sebbens Wilson committee on horses; Milton Kilbourn, Horace Miller, and Samuel Hayes on cattle; Isaac M. Johnson, J. S. Norton, and Ezra S. Cable on sheep; Charles I. Horsman, Alonzo Corey, and Jason Marsh on cultivated lands; Benj. T. Lee, Peter Johnson, Daniel Haight, Peter H. Watson, and James B. Martyn, on hogs; Shepard Leach, Henry Thurston, and William E. Dunbar on domestic articles."

"There was no necessity to print a premium list. The whole business was published in a couple of sticks of solid minion in the Rockford papers."

October 13th 1841: The livestock was exhibited near the northeast corner of First and Oak streets, which was known as the "Oak Openings." This spot of land was a grove of burr oak trees where the ground was covered with a prairie grass tuft. Cattle and horses were tied to the trees; sheep and hogs were pent. The various committees met here at 11 a.m. to examine the animals. Domestic articles and garden produce were displayed in the hall of the Rockford House. Henry Thurston, proprietor of the Rockford House, provided the fair with a giant squash weighing 108 pounds, and took second place; while Charles I. Horsman won first premium with a specimen weighing 128 pounds. In the street in front of the Rockford House were several wagon loads of grain. Among them a wagon-box full of a new variety of white corn on the ear. This hybrid was shown by John Paul, the school teacher, who said that he would not have been there but for the ferry being free that day, as he had no money with which to have crossed the river. In the 1840's there was no cash market for grain except under certain circumstances. A bushel of wheat could not buy

a pound of beet sugar, but could be traded for dry goods, although tavern keepers would pay ten cents per bushel for the oats and corn they needed for the manufacture of whiskey. The Goodhue and Blackstone distilleries were located on Turtle Creek, six miles from the town of Beloit.

At 2 o'clock the society and visitors formed a procession, under direction of Jason Marsh and walked to the court house which was on the east side of the river near the northwest corner of Market and First streets. A prayer was given by the Rev. Joel B. Potter. Dr. Josiah Goodhue, the man who gave Rockford its name in 1835 and a distant relative of Aaron Burr, delivered an address. He professed the importance of the labor of agriculture and was very optimistic about the future of Rockford and Winnebago County.

After the proclamation, dinner was served at the Rockford House. The menu selection likely consisted of, roast chicken and turkey, alamode beef, cranberry and mince pies, different varieties of cakes, candies, tarts, and Rock River cheese.

At 5:30 the committee on awards made its report. There were seven premiums for horses, six for cattle, four for hogs, and two for sheep; one for best cultivated ten acres of land, one for the best twenty-five pounds of butter, one for the best ten yards of flannel, one for the best fifty reels of sewing silk, and one for the best ten pounds of beet sugar manufactured in the county. And so on October 13th 1841, the first county fair and cattle show in northern Illinois had begun and finished in one day.

The next day the editor of the Rockford *Pilot* commented on the Fair:

"The cattle show came off yesterday in good style. The day was fine, the women were fine, and the pigs were fine. The display of stock certainly exceeded our anticipations. Surely we live in a wonderful age. Mobs, miracles and morality are developing in a manner that would have bothered the brains of our forefathers. Yesterday we saw a thousand people collected for the great object of improvement in the sciences of agriculture, and a display of domestic stock that would have been creditable to any portion of the United States. We saw silk that had been manufactured by the hands of the ladies of our place, and a variety of products that show the rapid strides that we are making toward perfection in the noble science of agriculture."

SECOND ANNUAL

Cattle Show AND FAIR

ONE THOUSAND

WINNEBAGO COUNTY AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY,

To be held at Rockford, Winnebago County, Illinois, on Tuesday and Wednesday, the 11th and 12th of October, 1892.

Committee of Arrangements--John W. Taylor, Cyrus E. Miller, E. Wyman.

Marshall of the Upper-Charles II. Edwards

PREMIUMS, COMMITTEES AND REGULATIONS.

Class No. 1—Cuttle.

Flowing Communities—H. chord. Montezuma, H. mon., H. Petiolaris, Petia H. Watsonii.



Class No. 2—Homes

It is 11 hours old, best do first time postmortem at 1 year old, he do. 1 for old. Eller grown in the same 1 year old, best do. 1 year old, last cold, best spin broken down.

The above advertisement appeared in the *Rockford Pilot*

The society continued with its annual exhibits, alternating on the east and west sides of the river until it ceased to exist. In 1852 another society was formed and in 1858, twelve acres were purchased by Charles Horsman at six hundred dollars per acre for a permanent fairground. Later purchases increased these grounds to twenty-two acres. The location of this land is bounded by Kent creek to the west, Acorn Street to the north, Kilburn Avenue to the east, and Mulberry to the south. This area is known today as Fairgrounds Park.

The Rockford Historical Society is hosting, "Where Rockford Began", the 170th Anniversary of the First County Fair and Cattle Show in Northern Illinois on October 15th 2011 at Ingersoll Centennial Park in Haight Village. Admission is free and open to the public. We are

partnering with the Haight Village National Register Historic District to commemorate this event. Historical societies, preservation organizations, and vendors within Winnebago County will participate in bringing historic displays that are germane to this theme. We will focus this event on early Rockford history and the evolution of agriculture in the Rockford area. The Haight Village association will also provide an historic tour of the village.

The Historical society is pleased to report that the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois' Board of Trustees has approved the society's grant request from the Neighborhood Grants Program in the amount of \$837.

This grant is for the explicit purpose of signage, programs, insurance, and fees related to our event. We wish to thank the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois for accepting and approving our grant application.

References

Reminiscences, Sporting and Otherwise of Early Days in Rockford,
Illinois
John H. Thurston, 1891

History of Rockford and Winnebago County Illinois from the first
Settlement in 1834 to the Civil War
Charles Church, 1900

Rockford Streamlined 1834-1941
Ford F. Rowe, 1941



Caption for photo:

Tuesday night February 15th 2011, the Rockford Historical Society was represented by Bruce Steder (back row, second from the right) at the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois' grant recipient reception. Eleven neighborhood groups split \$15K in funds from the Neighborhood Grants Program. Also present was Lori Gustafson (front row, fourth from the right) president of the Haight Village National Register Historic District.

NOTE ON THE COVER

The color banner shown on the cover was designed by Charles Larry. He was the Founders Memorial Library's (N.I.U.) graphic artist until his retirement last week.

The following article deals with the same time period as the County Fair and covers an issue that is mostly forgotten today, but which affected every single person in Rockford and Rockton Townships 170 years ago. This article was originally published in the *Edgewater Neighborhood Newsletter*. It is reprinted with permission.

THE POLISH CLAIMS OF 1836

By Thomas Powers

The story of the Polish claim made in 1836 is one of the most interesting events in the history of Rockford and Winnebago County. It had a major impact on the lives of the early settlers for several years.

When the first settlers arrived in 1834 and 1835 in what would later become Winnebago County, all of the land was owned by the federal government. It had not been surveyed and it had not been put up for sale by the government. This meant that anyone who settled here was considered by the government to be a squatter who had no legal rights to the land. The settlers all knew this and most were not overly troubled by it. Ever since the Northwest Territory had been opened up to settlement after the Revolutionary war, settlers had moved into new territory faster than the surveyors could keep up. There were some attempts at claim jumping, but neighbors were quick to defend each other's rights and claim jumpers were dealt with swiftly.

In the fall of 1835 Don Alonzo Spaulding, an early settler, was appointed as the government surveyor. He picked up the 3rd Principal Meridian (Meridian Road in Winnebago Co.) two miles north of the Illinois River and continued it north to the Wisconsin state line. He then continued to lay out all of the township boundaries in what would become Winnebago and western Boone counties. He finished his task in the spring of 1836.

In the fall of 1836, Count Chlopicki arrived in Rockford representing a group of 235 Polish exiles. They had been the leaders of a rebellion against the Austrian government which at that time controlled a

portion of Poland. (Poland had been partitioned between Austria, Russia and Prussia in 1795. It would not become a nation again until after World War I.) The rebellion was put down and the leaders were exiled. A group of them appealed to the United States Congress for asylum and assistance. Congress answered their appeal in 1834 by passing an act granting them 36 sections of land on which to form a community. The act specified that this land had to be in three adjacent townships, and that it had to be unoccupied land in Illinois or Michigan.

While he was here, the Count stayed with Germanicus Kent who pointed out that Rockford Township already had a number of settlers and thus was not "unoccupied land". The Count acknowledged this and assured Kent that he would not claim land in this area. After he left, a number of settlers became suspicious. They were worried since their land had still not been put up for sale by the government. They took up a collection to send Mr. Kent to Washington to make sure that their claims would be honored. When Mr. Kent arrived in Washington he found out that the Count had lied to him and had claimed Rockford and Rockton townships for the Polish exiles!

When Germanicus Kent complained to the land office he was told that the settlers were considered trespassers and they had no right to the land they had settled and the homes and farms they had built. However, the Secretary of the Treasury refused to grant the land to the Polish exiles because they had violated one of the provisions that congress had stipulated. They had claimed land in Rockford and Rockton townships but not in Owen township, thus their claim was not in adjacent townships as congress had specified. This left the question of who had the rights to the land in Rockford and Rockton townships in limbo!

The local citizens petitioned congress for relief but nothing happened. In 1839 the government finally put the land in Winnebago County up for sale except for Rockford and Rockton townships which were still disputed. The citizens petitioned congress again and again with no result. Finally in April of 1842 congress passed an act denying the Polish claim on the basis that it was not in adjacent townships, and authorizing the land to be put up for sale. It was 18 months later on October 30, 1843 that the land was officially offered for sale at the Dixon land office for the standard price of \$1.25 per acre. Those who had settled unclaimed land got the chance to purchase a clear title to their property. Those who had purchased farms or town lots from

others had to purchase it again from the government. But at last they had clear title to their land, land that some of them had lived on for 8 or 9 years. Whatever happened to the 235 Polish exiles remains a mystery to this day.

A Tribute to Lou Suit

This issue of the *Nuggets of History* is dedicated to the memory of Lou Suit who recently passed away. Lou was a member of the Board of Directors and was a past President of the Rockford Historical Society. He was also involved with Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum and the Korean War Veterans Association. Lou was a retired Mechanical Engineer and had many interests including flying, serving as a flight instructor, woodworking and carving, astronomy, reading writing and motorcycling. Lou was a valuable member of the Society and he will be missed by all of us.

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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