A SHORT HISTORY OF HARLEM TOWNSHIP DEDICATION 1967

IN THE BEGINNING

The very first settlement in Harlem Township was on the east side of Rock River on what was called "Big Bottom." In 1835, a man named Hiram Wattles staked out his farm into streets and lots and called his town Scipio. But its classic name didn't entice the hoped-for buyers, and poor Hiram couldn't even give his lots away. His was the only house ever built there.

The name Harlem comes from Harlem in New York, which in turn was named for Haarlem in The Netherlands. The first Dutch settlers on Manhattan Island, lonely and homesick, chose the name to remind them of home, and, later generations, moving to Illinois, named Harlem Village for the same reason.

THE SAGA OF HARLEM VILLAGE

Did you know, dear reader, that Harlem Village has not always stood where is stands today? Oh, no indeed. It was expediency that removed it to that spot, in 1859, when the Kenosha Rockford Railroad Line was built. Until that time Harlem Village was situated along what is now North Alpine, north of Harlem Road.

In the 1840's, the "Old Harlem" was a thriving little settlement, with a schoolhouse (which was also used as a church), a post office (run by the first lady post-mistress in this area), and a stagecoach stop on the route between Rockford and Janesville.

Trappers had earlier built a few cabins in this area; but the first "settlers" moved in to stake their claims around 1835. Almost nothing is known of the first ones but, in 1836, Asa Taylor arrived, and we do know quite a bit about him, thanks to a diary he kept on his way west. (Do peek at it in the showcase in the lobby of the township building.)

Asa traveled from New York to Chicago by wood-burning steamboat (with sails for auxiliary power), and from Chicago to Harlem in a horse drawn cart—which became bogged in the mud every two or three miles.

The land which Asa bought had sold for $1.00 an acre in 1834; for $2 an acre in 1835; and, when Asa bought it, in 1836, it had jumped to $4 an acre. (Recently, some of the same land has sold for $2,000 an acre.)

In 1845, twelve citizens of Harlem formed a Sunday "Class" which met in the schoolhouse (until a tornado took the roof off). Later, Asa Taylor donated an acre of his property on which to build a church, and the acre next to it to be used as a cemetery.

Old Asa didn't live to see the church erected. And he never saw anyone buried in the cemetery, for he was the first.

In those days, corn cribs were made of logs built up in a crisscross fashion and notched to fit together. One day Asa noticed a log that had slipped its notch and tried to shove it back into place.

But one man's strength was not enough against all those bushels of corn pushing from the inside, and the log snapped back catching Asa in the side and injuring him dreadfully.

Asa Taylor was a sturdy pioneer, not given to complaining, and besides, the nearest doctor was in Chicago, three days' journey away. So, Asa said nothing about his injury—and within two weeks he was dead, and they buried him in the new cemetery. (Many years later, when Asa's grandson, James Taylor needed a doctor for his wife who was about to be delivered of twins, he hopped on the 4 A.M. train to Caledonia and brought a doctor back on the 5 A.M. train, in time to handle things very nicely.)

Lewis Andrew Fabrique, whose family came to America from France around 1700, came to Harlem in 1838 and settled on what is now Machesney Airport, where he raised a herd of 400 sheep. (At that time, the Rock River Valley was recommended for the raising of sheep and, believe it or not, for the raising of silkworms and production of silk thread.) Mr. Fabrique—known as "Ton" (rhymes with Don), for some reason long forgotten—became a potent force in the life of the village.

"Ton's" son, the second Lewis Andrew (he was the one who threw off the yoke of ancestry and changed the spelling to Fabrick) was the first agent for the Harlem Station on the Kenosha Line. He was also the last, and there was no one in between. The line ran between Rockford and Harvard, with 12 trains a day serving the community with mail, freight, and passenger service. A spur line, on which little open cars hauled stone, ran to the quarry at Rock Cut. When "Ton's" great grandson, Ward Fabrick, was a little boy, he and a couple of playmates tripped the brake on a quarry car, which started to roll and zoomed right down into Harlem Station with three frightened little boys tearing after it in a futile attempt to make it stop.

THE SCOTCH SETTLEMENT

The first settlers in Argyle were John Greenlee and his family, in 1837. And, with all the trials and tribulations they encountered, we're lucky it ever got settled at all. Not many people would have had the necessary fortitude.

Just as the Greenlee family was about to embark from Scotland for the New World, John was apprehended by an unscrupulous land steward, on a trumped-up charge, and hauled back to Cambeltown, while his frightened family went on alone.

The townspeople, with little love for the rascally land agent, came to John's aid and, because they had the audacity to defy the authorities, he escaped. One told him of the outhouse with two doors, behind the building in which he was being held, so asking and being granted permission to use the facility, John quickly went in one door and, just as quickly, slipped out the other. Reaching a nearby friend's home, he was given a lady's long cloak and hood which proved to be a most convenient disguise.

After a few days in hiding near the coast, two more sympathizers rowed the fleeing man 30 miles to the coast of Ireland, with the revenue boat in hot pursuit. Mr. Greenlee was meant to get to America; for, just as his boat was about to be overtaken, a dense fog arose, hiding it until he was safe ashore.

Mrs. Greenlee and her youngsters, meanwhile, had sailed from Liverpool, not knowing what else to do under the circumstances. They were desperately worried during the ocean voyage, wondering what would happen to them when they reached the other side. Well, Lady Luck stepped in again, and who should be on the dock to meet the young family but Mr. Greenlee himself!

In March 1837, the family reached their destination and moved into a log cabin which had been built by Mr. Greenlee's nephews, the Armour brothers who lived in Ottawa. The cabin was a most primitive structure, built only to lay claim to the land, not as an abode. There was no door, and only a wool blanket, hung across the opening, protected the family from wolves, weather and possible intruders. It was a frightening beginning to a new life.

A few intruders might have been welcomed by Mrs. Greenlee now and then, for it was the spring of 1838 before Hugh Reid and his wife emigrated from Scotland to become their neighbors. The Greenlee's daughter, Ellen, was the first girl born in the Settlement (some say the first in Winnebago County), and the Reid's son, William, was the first boy. It took 100 days to get from Argyleshire, Scotland to Argyle, Illinois: 40 across the ocean, 53 more to Chicago, and another week to reach the Settlement.

In the spring of 1841, logs were cut and hauled to a site near John Greenlee's quarry and, in 1842, the log schoolhouse, which was also used as the church, was built. The seats were slabs hewn from logs, each family providing a seat.

In 1848, the village decided it was time to build a church, and to pay for it, the seats were sold at auction to the highest bidder. The first seat was sold to John Andrew for $30, that being the highest price. Those who purchased seats had the sole right to them for themselves and their heirs as long as they paid the yearly assessment.

An early minister wrote: "When the old log church gave place to a more commodious brick structure, there were walnut pews with doors to them, so that when the family all got in, they latched the door and shut out all intruders. On an elevated platform, was an enclosed box pulpit, also with doors, so that when the preacher got inside, he was secure against all inquisitive eyes and could take a pinch of snuff, curl his hair, or adjust his white necktie without anyone being the wiser."

"DEAR OLD GOLDEN RULE DAYS"

The first school in Argyle was taught by Miss Janet Giffen in her father's home. In 1842, the log schoolhouse was built and Mr. Lovesee became the teacher.

The Harlem Village School was about a block from the well, the only source of water in town. Each day, two youngsters were sent to fill a bucket. Returning to school, they would pass up and down the rows letting each student help himself to a drink with the dipper. Everyone drank from the same dipper, but if someone couldn't finish all he had dipped up, he dumped the remains into an empty bucket, not back into the drinking water. Such was sanitation in 1896.

Harlem Consolidated School was the second consolidated school in Illinois. The building was equipped for instruction in manual training, domestic science, and agriculture. It was considered an ideal community center. A barn was provided at the east edge of the property for students who rode horses to school. For others there was a special 5 cent fare on the trolley from any point in the district.

School was not all work and no play. There were festivals in the spring, community fairs in the fall, spelling and declamatory contests, historical pageants, home and school association, corn-growing contests, parent-teachers' associations, and the Winnebago County School League.

Ward Fabrick and Linea Larson comprised the first graduating class from Harlem Consolidated in 1913.

"THE HUDSON OF THE WEST"

Thus has the Rock River been described. Sometimes we live too close to a thing to appreciate its worth; but to others our river is one of the most beautiful in the country, with its great sweeping curves cutting through lush green fields and high stone bluffs; its rushing waters reflecting myriad varieties of trees and bushes—every shade of green in summer, scarlet, and gold and bronze in the fall.

Sad to say, it's not the same river the early pioneers saw. Before men began to farm along its banks, Rock River was a crystal-clear stream with a smooth gravel bed and sandy shores. It was only as the land was tilled that the rains began to wash mud into the water making it the color it is today.

Plans to "develop" Rock River for navigation all the way from its mouth to the mouth of the Pecatonica failed dismally. But the old paddle-wheel pleasure boats—the "Illinois," the "May Lee" and the "Queen"—still plied back and forth from Rockford almost to Roscoe. It was the "thing to do" to invite a group of friends for a cruise up the river on the old "Illinois," have a picnic in Illinois Park, and dance on the deck by moonlight on the trip back. (Have you ever seen a photograph of a turn-of-the-century picnic—the men all dressed in dark suits, ties and straw hats, the ladies in voluminous dresses, lace gloves and enormous hats with veils? No wonder the bugs didn't bother them!)

CRIME AND PASSION

From 1837 to 1845, the Rock River Valley was infested with a notorious gang of horse thieves. Their operation was unique, and the men went unsuspected for a long time because they were all well-thought-of, prosperous citizens. In fact, one of them was so completely unsuspected that he came within a few votes of being elected justice of the peace.

Along the entire line of the gang's operation, which extended through several states, there were convenient stations in charge of what appeared to be honest, hardworking settlers. Under this arrangement, a horse stolen anywhere along the line, could be passed from one station to another and no agent be absent from his home or business for more than a few hours at a time.

TRAVEL IN "THE GOOD OLD DAYS"

Roads for wagons and carriages, in 1836, left something to be desired, as described by an early history: "The Whiskey Point Road, extending westward from Chicago, was a fair sample of them all. When the frosts had come and the flowers gone, when the rains had filled the ground with moisture, making every depression a slough, then the wheels sank to the hubs, then the hearts of the drivers sank correspondingly. The spring was worse, if possible, than the fall. Woe to the farmer then who should presume to transport anything without a caravan of neighbors to assist with extra teams, to pack the bags of grain from one stalled wagon to another."

As soon as there were enough settlers to warrant it, the stagecoaches began to run through the territory, bumping and jogging their way over roads that were little more than footpaths. Mrs. Charles Spafford wrote of her first stagecoach journey: "From Chicago I traveled by stage…stopping at night in one of the extremely primitive wayside inns of that early period. The accommodations were not extensive or luxurious in these little hostelries. I was awakened in the night by the light in my room and saw a man at the foot of my bed, busy with two large mail bags. It was the postmaster changing the mail. Remembering the limitations of the place, I immediately took in the situation, and made no outcry. It was a dreary ride…and I was very glad to arrive at the end of my journey… "

Hotel rates, established sometime between 1836 and 1842 were:

- For victualing, per meal- 37 ½ cents
- Lodging, per night- 12 ½ cents
- Oats, per bushel-$1.25
- Liquor, per glass- 6 ½ cents

In the 1850's the railroads came in, changing many things. They cause some towns to grow, some to wilt; made some people millionaires, some paupers; helped some industries to thrive, others to disappear. The Kenosha Rockford Line, between Rockford and Harvard, was the reason for Harlem Village being where it is today. When the villagers in "Old Harlem" learned where the line would run, they pulled up stakes and moved the whole kit and caboodle over to the right-of-way, where they built a store with a post office at one end, a blacksmith shop, a depot and a grain elevator, stockyards, a school house and the Town Hall.

M.B.
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