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Historical Society Of Pottawattamie County

Member Newsletter

November 2003

Quick Takes

Depot attic work starting

A contract has been let to replace the deteriorated attic beams at the Society's Rock Island Depot. Work is to start immediately. The board is in negotiation with the insurance carrier and contractors regarding the needed roof repairs.

Visitor numbers up

Attendance has remained strong at Society properties in the first weeks following the close of the traditional tourist season. In addition to regular visitors, Council Bluffs' first annual Fall Festival brought close to a thousand guests to Society attractions Saturday, October 4.

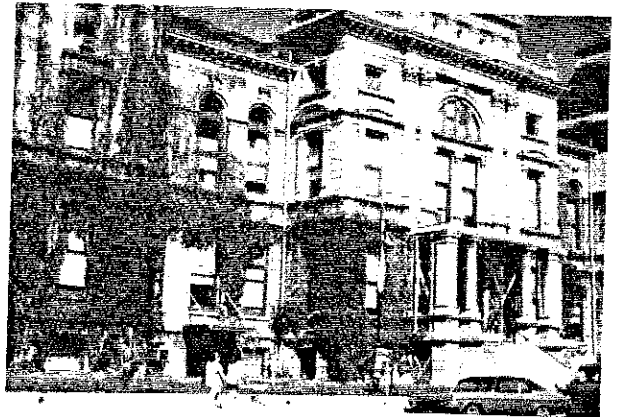
Model railroad layout to be featured

"Model Railroading" magazine shot a number of photos of the GOSOME model railroad layout at the Rock Island Depot for use in an upcoming article. The story is expected to appear in an issue next spring.

Architects of the Squirrel Cage Jail Topic of Next Meeting

In the years following the Civil War architects Edward Eckel and George Mann, operating out of St. Joseph, Missouri, became prolific designers of grand public buildings being constructed throughout Midwest at the time. Council Bluffs benefited from the talents of these men with numerous structures of their plan, including the Pottawattamie County Courthouse and its neighbor, the Squirrel Cage Jail, the latter which remains today as a property of the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County.

Learn more about these prominent pioneer architects and the extensive legacy they left across the Midwest Sunday, November 16, in a presentation by Society board member Ryan Roenfeld. The program will be at 2:00 P.M. in the auditorium of the Western Historic Trails Center, 3434 Richard Downing Avenue (Exit I-B of I-80/29) in Council Bluffs. There is no admission charge, and members are encourage to bring guests.



Architects Eckel and Mann designed a number of area buildings in addition to the jail, including the Pottawattamie County Courthouse which was razed in 1977 (photo by Robert Warner)

Bus Parking Sought

The board is studying proposals to create parking for tour busses at the Squirrel Cage Jail. Significant increases in the number of motor coach tours including the jail on their itineraries has necessitated additional facilities for busses.

Jail Work Progressing

Restoration of the bricks in sections of the east front wall of the Squirrel Cage Jail museum have been completed. Renaissance Restorations is continuing the renovation work on the other exterior walls of the jail at this time.

Fleeced in Council Bluffs

John Studebaker started west with \$65, a bible, and 3 homemade suits. After visiting Council Bluffs—and playing his first and last game of three-card monte—he continued the journey with just one shirt and 50 cents. Council Bluffs, he observed, was a rather “rough and tumble town”... but it taught him a lesson that he said just may have been instrumental in his later business success...

The 49’ers were in full swing, the stream of emigrants West was running strong, and nineteen-year-old John Mohler Studebaker joined the throngs in 1853 by securing passage with a California bound company in exchange for building them a sturdy new wagon with extra large wheels for use on the paths west. He started in South Bend, Indiana and joined a caravan composed of sixteen wagons from Indiana and 22 from Chicago, mustering a total of 210 men, women and children. After five months on the road they squeaked into Hangtown, California, called “Old Dry Diggins... a shifting population of 2,000.”

Between Indiana and California, however, laid what proved to be the most formidable obstacle on the trip: the “city” of Kanessville (Council Bluffs)...

Mr. Studebaker’s mother carefully sewed \$65 in gold into his buckskin belt for safekeeping, because he wasn’t supposed to have any use for money along the way. Right before leaving he recalls his mother putting a small bible in his pocket and saying “My son, read that book, and you will never go wrong.”

He said they did fine until they got as far as Council Bluffs. “We found a crowd of gamblers there ready to fleece immigrants. We had to stop there three days, and were beset by three card monte sharpers and their cappers.”

“The cappers gave us glowing descriptions of how they were winning money every day, from these helpless gamblers, and they asked: “What is the use of going to California when you can win all the gold you want right here?” showing hands full of money.”

The cappers invited a boy from the crowd in to watch the action. He came back saying he got to see how players were getting rich at the expense of the bankers and picked up on the winning system. It was really too bad, of course, but he explained that we might as well have our share, as the poor dealers were bound to go broke anyhow.

Everyone was sworn to secrecy, not to tell anyone, especially the wagon train bosses, about the newly discovered scheme to fortune. The boy told all who had money about the system, and that he would lead the attack and bust the bank. “When I bet \$5, you bet \$10,” he explained, because he did not want the dealers to know the group was associated. He even explained he didn’t dare win every time, though his system was so perfect he could if he really wanted to.



The Studebaker brothers. Peter and Jacob are pictured in the back row; Clement, Henry and John are in the front row of the photo.

John Studebaker went in with the rest, and for awhile looked on. "The other fellows, mostly cappers as I afterwards learned, were gathering in the money so fast that I got scared for fear it would all be gone, and, I thought, there wouldn't be anything left for me. So I went out, got behind the building, took off my belt, cut it open, taking out the \$65 my good mother had sewed in there."

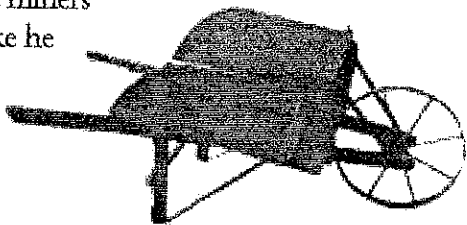
"As quickly as possible I began to bet, but somehow the system didn't work, or luck 'was against me.' To make a long story short, we all left our money with these sharpers."

He was out his \$65 but later in California told friends that experience in Council Bluffs was the best lesson he ever learned, and in later interviews intimated that this one experience just might have been the key to his business success. "Whenever some proposition like that would come along, with a gamble in it," he explained, "whether in business or otherwise, I would always say to myself, 'What a fool. Why should I take a risk? Why should I bet?' for that's what it amounts to when you go into a thing you don't understand ... Never bet on another man's game. Whenever you do you are sure to get the worst of it."

Mr. Studebaker started immediately to try and replenish his lost capital. Omaha was only a small trading post in those days, and the only way to cross the river was by means of a slow flat boat cable ferry. He would earn money by swimming the Missouri to the Nebraska side with a rope around his waist, cutting grass and tying it in bundles, and attaching it to the rope. A friend on the other side would pull the rope and grass back and sell it to emigrants to feed their cattle, as the grass had become very scarce on the Iowa side by that time.

After arriving in California most of the men fled quickly to the gold fields to strike it rich, but John Studebaker, with his Council Bluffs experience still fresh in his mind, wasn't quite ready to gamble yet. Instead he took a job making wheelbarrows, turning out about one a day and getting \$10 cash for each.

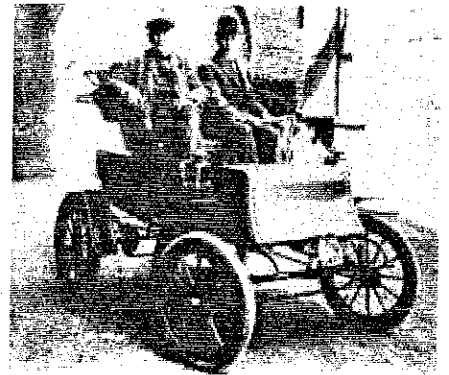
While most of the miners quickly went broke he was able to save some money which he invested in the



family business with his brothers Clement, Henry & Peter in South Bend, Indiana where they opened a blacksmith and wagon building shop.

In 1858 John left California to return to the family business in Indiana. Business flourished and the brother's company became one of the largest vehicle manufacturing concerns in the country.

The Studebaker brothers were the only corporation that was successful in making the transition from horse drawn to gasoline powered vehicles. Studebaker eased their way into the automobile market after the turn of the century. Their automobile line started with an electric car in 1902, impressing Thomas Edison, who purchased the second one to be manufactured. They introduced gasoline powered cars in 1904, but kept on producing horse-drawn wagons as well, for the next 16 years. Early automobiles were sold under the name "Flanders" and "EMF", but after 1913 all carried the name "Studebaker." In 1927 they purchased the luxury automaker "Pierce-Arrow." During World War II Studebaker made B-17 "Flying Fortress" engines as well as other military vehicles.



Studebaker merged with Packard in 1954 and had continued ups and downs in the automobile marketplace for the next decade. In December 1963, Studebaker closed its South Bend plant. Production continued through November 1966 at the Hamilton, Ontario, Canada plant, where a blue and white 1966 Cruiser marked the end of 114 years of Studebaker vehicle production.

John Studebaker lived to see the family business thrive in automobile production. In his senior years he frequently cited those experiences "out on the frontier, where lessons are burned into the hearts and minds of men" as key ingredients of his success.

(Much information for this article contributed by Darlene Vergamini from "Platte River Road Narratives" and a 1916 Nonpareil article; other sources were the El Dorado County Historical Society and Studebaker National Museum, South Bend, Indiana)

Island Park

In the early part of the 20th century Council Bluffs boasted that it had more public park land than any city of its size and population in the United States. The southern most park in the city was the third largest of the Council Bluffs park system... Island Park.

The early history of Council Bluffs can be taken to paint a somewhat unrefined picture of the young city, but the natural beauty of the area and the need for relaxation wasn't lost on early civic leaders. Opening with the words "Buried deep within the soul of every dweller of the city lies an inherent desire to rub elbows with nature" a 1914 report on the status of the city park system proudly points to hundreds of acres of parks already in existence at that time and heralded plans to develop and build more.

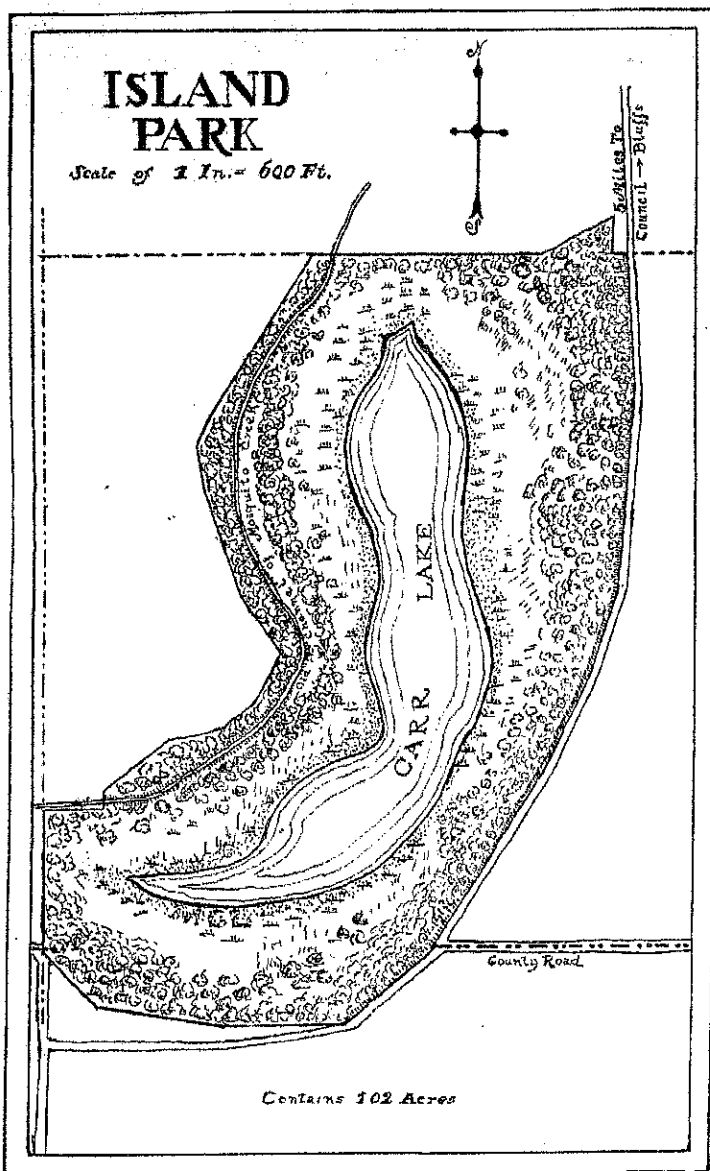
A 1913 report on the park system outlined several goals for selecting new park lands, including preservation of some of the best scenery of the area, distribution within the community to serve all parts of the city, and being in locations to anticipate the city's growth.

The park commission appeared pleased that they had four large parks to anchor the system on each side of the city; Dodge Park on the west, Lakeview on the north, Fairmount on the east, and Island Park on the south.

Island Park came about from the same influence that created Fairmount Park, the vision of Park Commissioner A.C. Graham. Graham, who was referred to by later Park Commissioner H.G. McGee as "that hard headed nature loving Scotsman," was a tireless advocate of park development in the early years of Council Bluffs.

In 1879 Graham became impressed with a tract of land he hunted on about four miles south of the city. With the city park network always on his mind he envisioned this property as the southern anchor park of Council Bluffs system, with a scenic drive connecting it to the other parks, possibly even turning it into a resort. Mr. Graham commented that there was no particular hurry about developing the park, but rather it could be considered an investment for the future that could be availed when the need arose.

Just as with the land that would become Lakeview (Big Lake) Park, the United States Government held title to the property since it was within the meander line of the Missouri River. Local Congressman Colonel William Fletcher Sapp introduced bills that were successful in giving the land for Lakeview Park as well as 72 acres of land, which included Carr Lake, to the city through a special act of Congress in 1880. Thirty acres of adjoining wooded property was purchased by the Board of Park Commissioners from O.H. Lucas, the chief of police, bringing Island Park to 102 acres and establishing it as the third largest park in the Council Bluffs system. Both Island and Lakeview



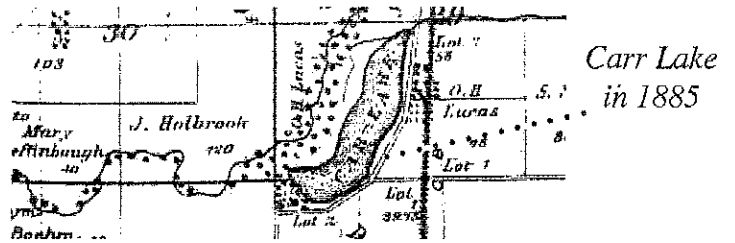
Parks were unique in that they were considered city parks yet outside the city limits.

Island park was right on the Chicago Burlington and Quincy railroad line and while it attracted some picnickers and sportsmen from the city most of the eyes that feasted on it's beauty were likely looking out through the windows of C.B. & Q. passenger trains.

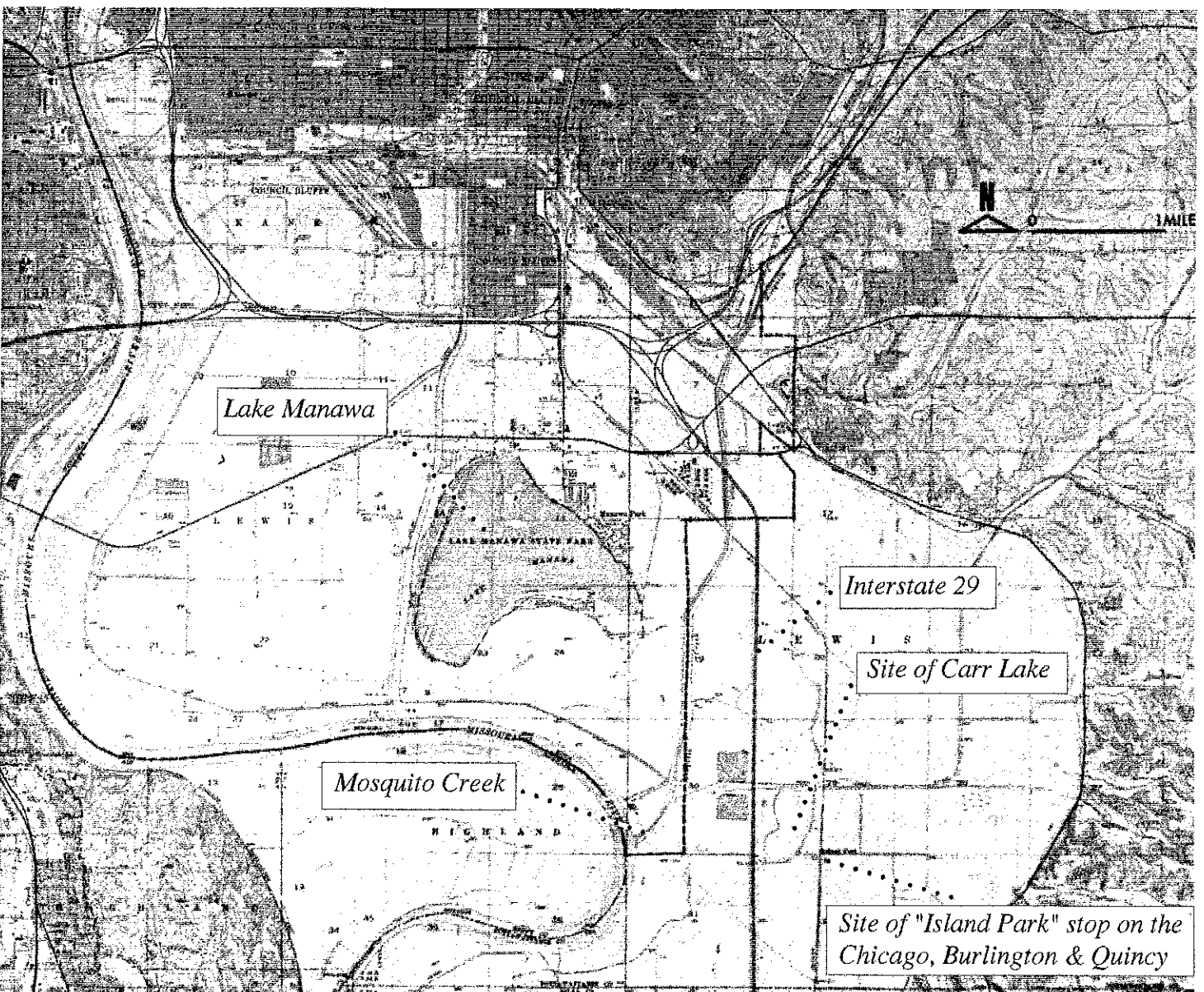
Large and stately elm trees were a signature feature of the park.

Island Park was never developed by the city. Over 50 years after it's creation a 1933 park department report still passed it off as something for the future. By 1950 reports no longer made reference to Island Park in planning.

Today the traveler on Interstate 29 passes just a few hundred yards from Carr Lake, though there is no longer any water to be seen. The only clue to the past history of the location is a sign on the BNSF tracks reading "Island Park."



Map page 4 from "Review of Council Bluffs Park Systems" 1914; map below from "Council Bluffs Open Space & Recreation Plan" 1974; map above showing Carr Lake before creation of Island Park is from 1885 atlas of Pottawattamie County. Story by Dick Warner.



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Nominating Committee Calls for Nominations From the Membership

In accordance with the bylaws, the Nominating Committee of the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County is requesting nominations from the membership for the various positions that will be up for election at the Society's general meeting in January.

The office of president and secretary along with four board of directors positions will come open this year.

Those wanting to nominate a person for a position should write to the Historical Society Nominating Committee Chairman at Post Office Box 2, Council Bluffs, 51502. The nominating committee, as elected at the 2003 annual meeting, consists of Dr. James Knott (chairman), R.H. Fanders, and Eleanor Schultz.

Annual Meeting Date Set

The Board of Directors has set Sunday, January 25th, as the date for the annual Historical Society of Pottawattamie general meeting and banquet. The event will be held at the Best Western Crossroads meeting room. Results of the officers and board members will be announced at the meeting. Times and other details will be announced.

Historical Society of Pottawattamie County web address: [Http://www.geocities.com/heartland/plains/5660](http://www.geocities.com/heartland/plains/5660)

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