

A Brief History
Of
Boone County
(1835-1900)
Compiled by Anna E. Ralston

1---Townships

LeRoy
Manchester
Caledonia
Boone
Bonus
Flora
Spring
Belvidere

2---The City of Belvidere

A Brief History of Boone County (1835-1900)

It is well established that the settlement of Boone County began in 1835. In that year there were permanent settlers in several of the townships. At that time there was no defined area called Boone County and the townships had numbers but no names.

The townships were very important to the early settlers. They were made up of thirty six sections of land, each section being one mile square. As the settlers filed claims to their land, their purchases were described in the deed as a fraction of a numbered section in a certain numbered township. The need for names for the townships was obvious.

Law required that there should be ten rural schools in each township. Each township would elect a supervisor, who would also represent the township on the county board (until the early 1970's). Residents of the township would also elect a treasurer, town clerk, constable, justice of the peace, road commissioner, and perhaps others. The township usually built a town hall near the center of the township for a polling place and a site to conduct township business. The basic needs of the settlers were quite well served by the township government.

Boone County, being one of the smallest counties in Illinois, had eight townships. It now has nine since 1922 when Poplar Grove was "added".

LeRoy Township T.46 N.R.4E.

Located in the northeast corner of Boone County, LeRoy Township was settled by Yankees. An area near the center was known as Round Prairie. The railroad from Sharon to Harvard cut across the northeast corner of Section 1.

The village of Union Corners, later known as Blaine, was located in the southwest portion of the township. The first sermon preached in LeRoy was in 1838 by a Methodist Episcopal minister. Their Methodist Church was built in 1860, and the cemetery across the road had a headstone dated 1836. Blaine developed into a small commercial and community center. There was a schoolhouse, grange hall, a general store, blacksmith, and cobbler who served the community for fifty years and was also their justice of the peace. They acquired a post office in 1839, and also had a steam powered grist mill, cheese factory, cider press, feather renovator, and later a confectionery and pool hall which also furnished space for meetings and social gatherings.

LeRoy Township had three cheese factories. Gypsies often camped in wooded areas and farmers were prepared with firearms to ward them off. A resident of the township exhibited a 3000 pound ox at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. A non-licensed woman practitioner served the medical needs of people in Le Roy and Manchester Townships for many years. Blaine was known for its Folk Festival which was held on the church lawn in June during about 1970-2000.

Manchester Township T.46 N.R.3E.

Unlike LeRoy, Manchester had no settlements such as Blaine to provide many conveniences for settlers. Its town hall was at about the center of Manchester, but there was no settlement there, only Hamm's Tavern. There was a small community at the Hunter crossroads consisting of a Methodist congregation, school, and a general store and post office. Their church

was not built until 1893. A second church community organized around the 1840's was Free Church in the northwestern part of the township near the Winnebago County line. Most of these communities' settlers were from New England and New York State, with a few coming directly from England.

A third church, Lutheran was the center of a Norwegian settlement located in the northern half of the township and extending into Wisconsin. At one time there were two churches and two cemeteries on the Stateline, but they later consolidated, in about 1900, and built a large, white church on the Illinois side with its cemetery in Wisconsin. A cheese factory, post office, and later the telephone exchange were located at this crossroads. This settlement has gone by two names, Bergen and Jefferson Prairie.

A large stone quarry in Manchester furnished building material for foundations for barns and churches and for at least two stone schoolhouses in the township. The three log houses in Boone County's museums came from Manchester Township. No railroad lines crossed Manchester, but three stagecoach stops, Hamm's Tavern, Fish Tavern, and a third location on Tiffany Road near the county line, served at least four stage lines. Coaches crossed the township on their way to and from Chicago, Minneapolis, Galena, Milwaukee, and probably Rockford and Kenosha. There were also freight lines that traveled these same routes. Portions of two of these taverns are still standing at their original sites.

Manchester is probably the most scenic township in Boone County. The western part is quite hilly and wooded. Parts of Rockton road are thought to have been an Indian trail and later a stage route. Some of the Manchester roads are graveled with many turns, and views of North Kinnikinnick Creek. Free Church Road north of Hunter Road consists of a series of hills which were quite a challenge for the early automobile. A farmer on Hunter Road had a filling station type gasoline pump and sold gasoline to persons taking Free Church Road, driving cars which depended on gravity to bring fuel from the tank to the motor. This was a self serve pump based on trust that users would pay.

Caledonia Township T.45 N. R.3E

Some of Caledonia's earliest settlers came directly from Scotland as early as 1836. Some settled in the contested one mile strip which was claimed by both Winnebago and Boone Counties, but eventually was awarded to Boone. These settlers made up a part of the Argyle Community, sometimes called Willow Creek for the stream that flows through the area. The village of Argyle, along with the church and school, was located in Winnebago County, as probably were more than half of the Scots.

The eastern portion of the township was settled by people from New York and New England, but there was little concentration of settlements until the railroad came. The C and NW being built from Belvidere to Madison crossed the township diagonally. The need for a station brought about the platting of the village of Caledonia in 1852. Many natives of Ireland "followed" the railroad as construction crews and later railroad employees and became early residents of the village. There also were Scots who operated the stores, creamery, feed mill, blacksmith shop, shoe shop, hotels, etc.

A second railroad, from Kenosha to Rockford, in the early 1860's crossed the township from the east to west through the villages of Caledonia and Argyle, so businesses thrived in both villages.

The Scots continued to attend their Presbyterian Church in Argyle and the Irish are thought to have taken the train to Belvidere to attend the Catholic Church there. A small Bethel church community was located in the area of the present Rte 76. It wasn't until the 1890's that Caledonia village felt the need to build a church, and they opted for a Congregational Church.

The railroad coming from Kenosha needed a station to the east of Caledonia, so that was the beginning of the village of Poplar Grove, then known as Shermantown, platted in 1856. A few had settled at this crossroads earlier and built a school. As the village grew, its main street was also the township line between Caledonia and Boone Townships. Until 1922, residents must have been required to vote in two different townships, depending upon which side of the street their house was located. Poplar Grove had a Methodist and a Congregational church, a school and several stores, hotel, bank, creamery, and later served the village and rural residents with farm machinery and repairs, plumbing and heating services, hardware, and auto repairs.

The coming of the railroad had a great effect upon the growth and prosperity of Argyle, Caledonia, and Poplar Grove. Caledonia's station and hotel were especially busy because it was a junction with as many as fifty trains, passenger and freight, coming from north, south, east, and west each day. The businesses in these village thrived until the 1920's, when automobiles made it easy to travel to Belvidere and Rockford for a greater variety of groceries and clothing. IN 1922 Poplar Grove Township was formed by taking two tiers of sections from Caledonia and Boone Townships. The village of Poplar Grove was no longer divided.

R

Boone Township - T.45W. 4E.

Boone Township's earliest settlements were in the western part of the township. Several farmers and tradesmen located in and around Shermantown. Beaverton was a settlement in the northwest part of the township, near Beaver Creek. A dam was built across the creek which formed an eighty-acre lake. A two-story grist mill was built which was powered by water and steam. Beaverton also had a store, carpenter shop, blacksmith shop, school, and for a short time, a Mormon congregation.

A large number of settlers from Norway moved to Long Prairie, about a mile west of what is now Capron, in 1843. The farms of these sons and daughters of Norway eventually circled the village of Capron. Helgesaw, the Norwegian Community, eventually merged to form Capron. Capron grew and, besides the usual businesses in the 19th century villages, Capron also has a drug and stationery store, barber shop, confectionery, bank, lumber yard, several resident doctors, and Christian Methodist and Lutheran Churches. Capron became the largest of the three villages of Boone County on the Kenosha Division of the railroad.

Their tile factory opened in 1855 and operated for over 100 years. Capron also had a creamery and a screen door factory. In 1900, they built a ninety-foot water tower that supported a 28,000 gallon tank.

The Piscasaw Creek in southeast Boone Township was larger than the Beaver, and capable of successfully powering the Bosselman Mill in the southern part of the township. While no settlement was built there, there was a tavern to service stage passengers on the

Kenosha-Galena stage line. The present Angling Road follows the old stage route. The Piscasaw also provided fishing, swimming, skating, and picnic areas for settlers in the area.

Boone Township settlers seemed to have taken advantage of their natural resources, the benefits of the railroad, and the merging of the Yankee and Scandinavian cultures. They seemed to have become a prosperous and forward-looking community by 1900.

Bonus Township - T.44N. R.4E.

Bonus - the good township. Someone remembered his or her Latin when this township was named. It did seem to offer much, with the Kishwaukee River flowing across its southern sections and the Piscasaw and Coon Creeks joining the river there. The prairie was very inviting and beautiful to the new arrivals. To the west was a new city - Belvidere, which was beginning to take shape. There already was a stage line laid out, crossing the Kishwaukee in Bonus Township on its way to Belvidere, Rockford and Galena.

One early settler took advantage of the stage line and built a tavern south of the Kishwaukee near the spot where the stage line crossed the river. A trading post was added, and this was the beginning of Amesville.

A few years later the village of Russellville was established in the northern part of the township. Sixteen families lived there and Russellville School had many pupils enrolled. This little settlement also had the Christian Church, a store, blacksmith, doctor, post office, brick factory, and cheese factory.

The village of Garden Prairie had its beginning when the railroad was built about 1850. The owner of the tavern in Amesville felt that his business would be so threatened by the railroad that he attempted to stop it. He built a house on the proposed railroad right-of-way, and refused the railroad's offer to be station master there. The railroad moved the house and decided to locate their station a mile and a quarter east of Amesville, and Garden Prairie came into being.

The businesses connected with the railroad in Garden Prairie attracted settlers and more businesses. There were stores, two blacksmiths, the Congregational and Methodist Churches, lumber yard, wagon shop, hotel, post office, school, creamery, and later a condensed milk plant. In 1884 a two-story elementary school was built.

Out in the rural area, Little Thunder Mill was built on Piscasaw Creek. Camp Epworth, sponsored by the Methodist Church, was built along the south bank of the Kishwaukee in 1895. Early in the 1900's, Bel-Mar golf course was platted near Coon Creek and the Kishwaukee as a nine-hole course, later enlarged. When U.S. Route 20 was constructed through Garden Prairie, Bonus Township had a new means for residents and farm products to reach Chicago.

A reminder of the "good old days" is a tombstone in the Garden Prairie Cemetery on the east edge of town. It reads:

"Daniel Stott - poisoned by his wife and Dr. Cream"

Flora Township - T.43N. R.3E

Flora Township was appropriately named. There was very little wooded area there, just prairie, so it was colorful six months of the year. The south and west sections are under laid with stone, sometimes close to the surface, so the quarries were a valuable source of building material for the township and nearby Belvidere. The only streams in Flora are two small creeks in the south.

The early settlers located in an area within two miles of Blood's Point in the southeast portion of the township. The fact that there were wooded areas there attracted settlers. The northern part of the township was avoided, probably because of lowlands, called sloughs. No village grew up around Blood's Point, although a two-story residence and creamery was built in 1882 and operated successfully for about forty years.

The Illinois Central Railroad crosses Flora diagonally across the western sections. It was built in 1886 by the Chicago, Madison and Northern Railway and later sold to the I.C. A village was necessary to serve the railroad, its passengers and farmers who were shipping and receiving goods. And so the village of Irene was born, named for the daughter of the donor of the land. Various businesses in Irene included a store, grain elevator, blacksmith, farm machinery sales, barber shop, post office and a school a few rods north of the village. At one time, there were ten passenger trains a day through Irene.

The only church in Flora was the Flora Union Church, located in the south, one-half mile from the DeKalb County line. DeKalb and Boone County residents were members, representing five Protestant denominations - Methodist Episcopal, Wesleyan Methodist, Free-Will Baptist, Disciples of Christ, and Universalist.

Two organizations were very important to Flora residents. One was the Flora Home Mission, organized in 1892. This group of women made supplies for the Red Cross during WWI and made and bought equipment for local hospitals. This group met and worked for many years.

The other organization was Flora Grange, organized in 1873. This was a part of a national movement involved with rural and farm problems and concerns. In 1874 they built and dedicated their grange hall, one of the first built in Illinois. It was made up of two stories, the upper level for their meetings and social gatherings, and the lower level for the horses who had brought the Grangers to their meeting.

Flora residents were concerned that all were law-abiding citizens. They had a vigilance association, and each man watched over his property and his neighbors'. They were very proud that Flora had been settled for twenty-five years before a case was brought to the Boone County Circuit Court. In the first forty years, only three Flora cases had been sent up and docketed.

The following is a quote from *The Past and Present - Boone County, Illinois - 1877*

"One thing in Flora excites curiosity. When first settled, boulders or surface rocks were unknown. As the County has grown older and been subjected to cultivation, these boulders have appeared, some of them so large and heavy that two good horses cannot move them. Where did they come from? Has some internal action of the earth forced them to the surface? These are questions for scientists to answer."

Spring Township T.43N. R.4E.

Spring Township may have been named for its beauty at that season of the year or, as some people claim, for several springs that were found there. It had good soil for farming and attracted families who prospered and remained there for generations.

Mosquito Creek is the only stream of significance. A scenic area named Fern Hill marks the highest elevation in the township. While Reed's Crossing, Shattuck's Grove, and Hoosier's Grove are mentioned as small school and/or church communities, none developed into a village. The Shattuck's Grove Cemetery was begun in 1840 when a stranger, given shelter by the Shattuck family, was found dead the next morning in their loft.

The building of the Chicago and Northwestern Railway's branch from Belvidere to Spring Valley changed this agricultural community to quite an extent. The initial reason for this railroad was to bring coal from the mines near Spring Valley to the northern area of Illinois. Coal was replacing wood as the fuel for heating homes and for producing steam for train locomotives, steam engines, steam heating plants, etc.

Right-of-way for the railroad was acquired in 1884 and there was need for a village to provide services. The designated area was named Herbert for the land donor's son. The village was located on the DeKalb County line in the southernmost part of the township.

The village grew rapidly. The railroad depot handled several coal trains daily as well as passenger trains. Soon there was a grain elevator, pickle factory, creamery, post office, implement dealer, stockyards, public hall, contractor, lumber and coal yard, blacksmith shops, general stores, and telephone exchange.

The Davis Methodist Church was organized in 1891 and the church was built one mile north of Herbert near the Davis School. In 1919, the church was moved into the village of Herbert.

The Grange and Ladies Home Mission were important civic and social groups in Spring Township. Such groups often met in school houses, such as the Stone School near the center of the township.

Spring Township was proud to have sent two men as representatives to the Illinois state legislature in the late 1800's. But, perhaps their main claim to fame is the possible visit of the James gang in about 1880 near Mosquito Creek. A band of men were camped in a wooded area, and one man came to a farmer's door asking for provisions. He paid for them with gold coins. Later, residents heard of the James raids in Minnesota and the possibility of them being sighted in Clinton, Wisconsin. It seemed quite logical that the visitor had been Jesse or Frank James. A historical marker marks the location.

Belvidere Township T.44.N. R.3E

Belvidere Township had some attractive features when first seen by land speculators and early settlers. The Kishwaukee, which flowed across the Southern part, was a sizable river since the Piscasaw and Coon Creek had emptied into the river in Bonus Township. The northwestern part of the township had rolling hills and was quite scenic. The mound, burial place of Big Thunder, attracted the settlers of what was to become the city of Belvidere and was made the site of the county buildings.

A settlement named Newburg grew along the Beaver Creek where it flowed into the Kishwaukee River. It was founded in 1835 as a stop for the freight and stage-coach lines. This business attracted settlers and within a few years Newburg had a saw mill, flour mill, three stores, a school, wagon shop, tailor shop, cemetery, chair factory, two-story hotel, mill yard, blacksmith shop, wool carding plant, brickyard and distillery. Newburg was located in the disputed mile strip until 1843 when it was determined that it was to be a part of Boone County. Newburg was a thriving village competing with Belvidere until 1850. At that time the railroad, which had been built from Chicago as far as Belvidere, chose to go through Cherry Valley rather than Newburg. People gradually moved away, the buildings tumbled down or were torn down, and the village disappeared.

The City of Belvidere

Belvidere's first permanent settlers came in 1835. They were from the state of New York. John and Hannah Tower and their eight children arrived July 31. They came in two covered wagons, one drawn by horses and the other by oxen. They came by way of Michigan and Lake Michigan to Chicago. There they purchased food supplies, a second, heavier Conestoga wagon, and four teams of oxen. A few days later Simon P. Doty and Dr. Daniel Whitney arrived. The three men looked over the area and determined to build their homes on the north side of the river, near the mound. The stage and freight lines, bound for Rockford and Galena, crossed the Kishwaukee in Bonus Township and proceeded along the north bank of the river to Cline's Ford. They would need the services of a hotel and stagecoach stop, so this seemed the logical place for a settlement.

Doty and Whitney went back to New York for their wives and soon returned. Whitney's wife had died while he was gone. Whitney was the planner and had funds to invest in this new settlement. Doty was the entrepreneur who could always figure out a way to make things work and to make some money, although, he never became a rich man. A hotel was the first priority and Whitney felt that Doty was the man to run it and saw to it that a hotel was built. It was Doty's home, and later served such purposes as a polling place, county jail, and government meeting sites. Doty provided a place for rest and relaxation and served food and drinks and provided food and water for horses. Doty was an ardent Whig and the county sheriff.

Later in 1835 other settlers came by and decided to stay. The next year the Belvidere Company was formed by ten men who each contributed \$1,000. This fund was used to build the sawmill and flour mill and also to encourage not only Craftsmen such as blacksmith, cobblers, coopers and harness makers but also storekeepers, barbers and watch repairman, to establish their business in Belvidere. The sawmill was built and then the flour mill, and the mill race was dug. All buildings were of logs until the sawmill was up and running. The road along the river was named Mechanic Street (later Lincoln Avenue) to encourage tradesmen to build there.

A temporary, primitive bridge of stringers and logs was built in the area where the State road turned north (now East Lincoln and North State). Since all business and most homes and farmsteads were north of the river, a bridge wasn't a necessity until Flora and Spring Townships became populated. The bridge was often washed out by high water. Doty once engineered a pontoon toll bridge after one washout.

Mail service was established in 1837 and Seth Whitman served as postmaster as well as being minister for the Baptist Church. Colonel Joel Walker visited the new settlement and seemed to be eyeing it for future development. He moved in permanently in 1839 and built the first brick home at the southwest corner of North Main and Mechanic Street which he named "My Mansion House".

Colonel Walker's son-in-law, William Gilman, and his family soon arrived and built a fine hotel, The American House, on North State Street. He also purchased a large tract of land south of the river and built a brick home at the end of a long driveway off of Warren Avenue.

By 1850, Belvidere had become a thriving community on the north bank of the Kishwaukee River. There were three hotels, three mills, a private academy, court house, several churches, and many establishments to provide services and provisions. But drastic changes were in the offing.

William Ogden, Chicago's first mayor, now headed the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad. He was seeking right-of-way in the Belvidere area for his railroad as he

moved toward Rockford and beyond. William Gilman offered him land for his right-of-way which meant the railroad would run south of the Kishwaukee River. The first train arrived in Belvidere in December, 1851. There was great celebration in every hotel and hall in Belvidere, but there was danger of there being two Belvideres.

With the coming of the railroad, there was less stage traffic on the north side and a need for hotels and a railroad station on the south side. Railroad workers built their homes near the tracks, and soon businesses were locating there too, along the state road which became Logan Avenue and South State Street. Owners and employees in the stores and offices built homes near their places of business. John Plane moved his hardware store to the south side and built his store at the corner of Logan and State Street (now the site of Belvidere Bank). He built a home at Locust and State and was in business in Belvidere for a total of Fifty-Eight years. Progress slowed during the 1860's because of the Civil War, but resumed after the war. Joe Balliet opened his State Street Store in 1869 and remained in business for seventy-two years. He sold pianos and organs and later sewing machines.

Belvidere was a divided city for only a few years, but until the early 1900's there were North and South high Schools. The north side retained its fine residential areas on West Hurlbut and in the area of the court house and park. Banks, grocers, dry goods stores, drug stores, and churches continued to do well on the north side, but nearly all manufacturers located on the south side because of the railroad.

New hotels, like the Marquette and Julien, were built to serve railroad passengers. A railroad bridge east of the Main Street bridge made the North Yards possible. There was a round house and many additional tracks for making up freight trains and repairing locomotives and cars.

The Chicago and Northwestern Railway, as Ogden's railroad was now named, had extended its line north from Belvidere through Caledonia, Beloit, Madison, and St. Paul. A few years later a line was built south from Belvidere to Spring Valley, near LaSalle, primarily to bring coal to the Belvidere area. The village of Herbert in Spring Township grew up along this railroad.

Belvidere citizens, as well as all of Boone County, played an active role in the Civil War. The Boone Rifles and others formed the 95th Regiment which was formed in answer to President Lincoln's call for volunteers in the spring of 1861. Stephen Hurlbut led this group in training, and later distinguished himself in the battle of Shiloh where he served as Brigadier General under General Grant. After the war Hurlbut served as minister to Peru and Colombia as well as in the House of Representatives.

Adjutant General Allen Fuller, a Belvidere attorney and business man, served in Springfield during the entire war. He was in charge of raising and assigning troops from Illinois and determining promotions. After the war Fuller served in both houses of the Illinois legislature. He returned later to Belvidere to again take up his law practice. He was also part owner of banks here and elsewhere and investor in the National Sewing Machine Company. When his daughter Ida died in her twenties, Fuller gave money to the city to fund a city library to be named Ida.

After the Civil War, Belvidere became an industrial town. The June Manufacturing Company came in 1886 and, operating as the National Sewing Machine Company, was a major employer in Belvidere for sixty-five years. In addition to Mr. June, those later serving as president were Barney Eldredge, David Patton, Harry Pierce, Walter Derwent, and Raymond List. Other industries became important to Belvidere at or about the turn of the Century, such as

Brown's Screw Machine, Parson's Casket Hardware in 1898. Gossard Corset, Borden's Dairy, Cleveland Spring Bed and Mattress Company and Keene-Belvidere Canning Company in 1903. Sanitary Scale and Midwest Bottle Cap Co. came later in 1922.

Social life and entertainment were important to Belvidere residents. In the late 1800's Union Hall, on the north bank of the river, was a large general meeting and entertainment center. Later the site became the home of the Derthick Opera House and still later Apollo Theater which showed moving and later talking pictures. On the south side were Adelphi Hall and the Majestic Theater. The YMCA was organized in 1902 and their building was constructed at West Locust and South State soon after.

A detailed account of business, industry, schools and churches of Belvidere can be found in Boone County Then and Now pp. 69-98. Social and Service Agencies are described on pp. 99-111.

Sources of Information

The Past & Present ---Boone County, Illinois 1877

Boone County - Then and Now 1976
Boone County Bicentennial Commission
Edited by Virginia Moorhead

Plat Book -Boone County, Illinois 1946