

THE HISTORY OF DIXON

by

Roger Thompson.

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It is a real pleasure for me to tell you something of Dixon's history, because I have enjoyed studying it.

During the time I lived in Dixon, from 1953 until less than two months ago, I was employed by the Dixon Evening Telegraph. Through this work I became interested in the history of the Dixon area, and started writing a weekly historical column.

Of course, it's the ambition of every newspaper man to write his own column. The rich historical background of this area gave me a wonderful opportunity.

About 125 columns later, when I moved from Dixon, I knew I had gained much more in preparing the stories than those who read them.

It's obvious that much of Dixon's history is similar to that of other cities in this area. The patterns of settlement and growth may be the same, but--as the other cities do--Dixon has its unique episodes, and it is these which I will try to outline this afternoon.

If we were to tell the story of the white man in this area, we would have to speak of the French traders and trappers who roamed the Rock River Valley for many years before 1830.

But the story of Dixon can begin with the man who founded it--the man who gave the city its name. His name was John Dixon. He was born in New York State, and grew to manhood there. He was a clothing merchant and a tailor, and according to his family, was a friend of Robert Fulton.

John Dixon is said to have paid Fulton one dollar for a ride on the first trial run of the Clermont, thus becoming the first passenger fare on a steamboat.

In 1820 Dixon looked to the West, and decided to go to the frontier. He, his wife, Elizabeth, and their three sons left New York, traveling through New Jersey and Pennsylvania to Pittsburgh. They traveled with Dixon's sister and her husband, Charles S. Boyd.

While traveling overland, the couples shipped their household goods by boat from New York to New Orleans, and then up the Mississippi to Illinois. The families traveled by ox team in one covered wagon until they reached the Ohio River. They bought a flat boat and floated down the river. Seventy days out of New York, they reached Shawneetown, and sold the boat for five dollars.

They went to Fancy Creek, in Sangamon County, and lived there until John Dixon was appointed first circuit clerk of Peoria County in 1825.

While living in Peoria, Dixon contracted to carry mail, including that on the route from Peoria to Galena. At that time, the safe passage of Rock River was a major obstacle.

Dixon arranged with a French and Indian half-breed, Joseph Ogee, to establish a ferry on the mail route at what is now Dixon.

Before that time, travelers on the trail had to depend on the Indians for help in getting across the river. One method they used, as described in old histories, was to put the left wheels of a wagon in one canoe and the right wheels in another. They then ferried it

across, while the horses swam.

The old stories didn't give me many details, and it seemed to be a rather precarious operation. In addition, the Indians weren't always available, and there was considerable demand for a ferry at this point.

The Indians weren't convinced of the need for a ferry. There's at least one report of the Indians burning a half-finished ferry being built here by a Peoria man, John L. Bogardus, in 1827.

But in the spring of the following year, Ogee, half Indian himself, had no trouble in launching a ferry operated with poles. He operated the service for two years. In 1829, a postoffice was established at Ogee's ferry, and a Mr. Gay was the postmaster.

But, apparently Ogee wasn't suited for operating a ferry, and in 1830, John Dixon took it off his hands. Dixon moved his family here to live on April 11, 1830. The name was changed to Dixon's Ferry, and Dixon became postmaster. A few years later, the name was changed to its present form.

Dixon quickly improved the ferry system--substituting a rope ferry for the poling system, which was not so easily controlled. With the rope ferry, passengers knew where they would land. On the other, they might wind up a half mile downstream.

John Dixon operated a store and tavern, and soon became known to the many travelers on the trail and to the Indians in the area. He got along well with the Indians, and they named him Na-chu-sa, meaning head-hair-white. Dixon's hair was prematurely white, and he wore it long. Today we still have the name in this hotel, and in the village of Nachusa--five miles east of here.

Within four years of Dixon's settlement, the Peoria-Galena route lost much of its importance as Chicago started its spectacular growth. But Dixon's luck held. In 1834, Dixon was on the mail route established by the government from Galena to Chicago.

Twenty years later Dixon was fortunate again when two railroads crossed here. The Dixon Air Line--later to become the Chicago and Northwestern--rolled from Chicago westward. North-south transportation and shipping was provided by the Illinois Central.

But to go back to the 1830s, the Dixons had lived on Rock River less than two years when the ferry became the center of a theater of war. Black Hawk had led his band of braves, women and children up the Rock River, past Prophetstown and Dixon to a point near Old Man's Creek in Ogle County.

As the frontier became aroused to the threat of massacres, Dixon was the logical staging area for the troops--both regular and militia--pursuing the Indian band.

The late spring and early summer of 1832 saw soldiers camped on the banks of Rock River here. Trigger-happy militiamen marched north from Dixon to rout the redskins in Ogle County. They fired on an Indian flag of truce, and when the angered Black Hawk attacked, the untried men broke and ran more than 20 miles back to Dixon, leaving a few heroes to die covering their retreat. That became known as the Battle of Stillman's run.

Soon the regular army arrived under Lieutenant Colonel Zachary Taylor. He supervised the building of a small fort on the north bank of the river, but it never had to withstand the assault of an Indian attack. Taylor's aide and adjutant was a young lieutenant who also would leave his name in all our history books--Jefferson Davis.

The list of men who came to Dixon during the war is star-studded. There was young Abraham Lincoln, who came up from New Salem as a captain of militia. The man who swore him into federal service was another young officer--Lieutenant Robert Anderson, who was to command Fort Sumpter until forced to surrender it at the beginning of the Civil War.

Some of the others were Gen. Winfield Scott, Lt. Albert Sidney Johnston, Gen. Henry Dodge, Col. William S. Hamilton, Gen. Henry Atkinson and Gen. Samuel Whiteside.

While the troops used Dixon as a base of operations, John Dixon served as a guide for the movement of troops. He continued these duties from the early engagements in Ogle County to the conclusion of the war in Wisconsin.

John Dixon also sold supplies to the army. His account books show Zachary Taylor ran up a six-and-a-half dollar bill before he settled it--with a note.

Dixon settled back into routine frontier life after Black Hawk's defeat, but nerves remained on edge. These nerves were the cause of another war just a year later--but this was a war without battles or bloodshed.

A few Indians remained in the area after the war, and one day in 1833, Mrs. Dixon overheard a conversation in which a few of the Indians were expressing dissatisfaction with the treaty which ended the war.

Well, Mrs. Dixon told her neighbors--the neighbors told their neighbors--the story grew with the telling, and before long settlers were taking their wives and children to Peoria for safety from the impending attack.

Gradually the panic subsided--the rumor proved to be false, and families were reunited. But the scare has come down to this day as Mammy Dixon's War.

Many Dixonites might feel I have committed sacrilege in referring to the city's founder as Dixon. During his long life here he became the community's elder statesman, and always was treated with great respect. To this day, he is most commonly referred to as "Father" Dixon.

Mrs. Dixon was one of the founders of the local Baptist Church in 1838, and her husband was a faithful contributor. Father Dixon was active in support of movements to strengthen northern Illinois. The town of Dixon was not legally incorporated until 1853, and John Dixon was elected president of the board of trustees--or, in effect, the town's first mayor. The town became a city in 1859.

Father Dixon's wife died in 1847, and he also survived his 12 children. He was prominent as a member of the early Republican party, and was a delegate to the first Republican convention in Bloomington 100 years ago.

While John Dixon was 46 years old when he came to Dixon, he was to spend half his life in the city he founded. He lived 91 years, and died only two days after his city celebrated the centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1876.

The Community went into mourning--draping the courthouse and buildings throughout the city in black. The funeral was held on the courthouse lawn across the street, and more than 10,000 gathered for the services. ****

I mentioned that Lincoln came to Dixon in 1832 as a Member of the militia. He was here several times during the war, but he became more familiar with the city in later years.

On the courthouse lawn you'll find a boulder telling of Lincoln's "great speech" here on July 17, 1856. The rising statesman appeared at a ratification meeting--the purpose was to ratify the nomination of John C. Fremont for president on the first Republican Ticket.

The Dixon Telegraph reported the story this way:

"Although the farmers had commenced harvesting, there were about 1,500 people present to make the welkin ring shouts for the cause of the Union, the Constitution and Freedom. J. J. Beardsley of Rock Island addressed the people in a short speech, and then Abraham Lincoln, the man that had defeated Douglas in many an argument, took the stand and for over two hours held that vast audience in breathless silence, save when interrupted by an uncontrollable outburst of applause. Our opponents could but acknowledge Mr. Lincoln's speech a masterly effort."

It's enough to bring tears to the eyes of any Lincolnian--or newspaperman--when the story concludes, "We wish we had space to give some extracts from the able speeches of that day and the evening; but space forbids. The argument was unanswerable."

But we do find an interesting description of Mr. Lincoln in an Amboy newspaper of the time. It said he was "A man with slow and dignified motion, but quick as a flash, and lo, what a man. He is about 6 feet high, crook-legged, stoop-shouldered, spare built, and anything but handsome in the face. It is plain that nature took but little trouble in fashioning his outer man, but a gem may be encased in a rude casket."

It was in Dixon that Lincoln met a man who would become a close friend. He was Noah Brooks, a native of Maine, who had received art training in Boston. Brooks was a Dixon resident when Lincoln spoke here in 1856, and when he was traveling in this area during the senatorial campaign of 1858.

Brooks was employed by the Dixon Telegraph, and covered his speeches in this area. The two men met frequently during 1856, 57 and 58, and then did not see each other again until the Civil War had begun.

Brooks left Dixon in the 1859 gold rush to Colorado, but he missed sudden fortune in the gold fields, and continued on to Marysville, California, where he returned to the newspaper business.

He went to Washington as a correspondent in 1862, and his friendship with President Lincoln was renewed.

As a friend of the President, Brooks saw an unusually large amount of the drama of the war. Mr. Lincoln developed such a high regard for Brooks that he invited him to become his personal secretary as successor to John Nicolay. The assassination prevented the appointment from becoming reality.

This is how Brooks described their relationship--as told in the preface of his work, "Abraham Lincoln."

"It was my good fortune to know Lincoln with some degree of intimacy, our acquaintance beginning with the Fremont campaign of 1856, when I was a resident of Illinois, and continuing through the Lincoln-Douglas Canvass, two years later.

That relation became more intimate and confidential when in 1862, I met Lincoln in Washington, and saw him almost daily until his tragic death. This preliminary egotism may be pardoned by way of explanation of the fact that many things relating to his early

life, herein set down, were derived from his own lips, often during hours of secluded companionship."

Dixon is proud to be a part of the Lincoln Country, and it is especially proud to have, on the north side of Rock River, an heroic statue of Abraham Lincoln. The monument is unusual in that it shows Lincoln at an age not generally portrayed in the vast store of Lincoln sculpture.

In this statue we see a young Lincoln--only 23 years old--as a soldier in the Black Hawk War. The figure is located on what is said to be the site of Fort Dixon, and overlooks Rock River and the city's business district.

The statue has been a part of Dixon since 1930, when it was dedicated during the city's centennial celebration. It is the work of Leonard Crunelle, a student of Lorado Taft.

F. Lauriston Bullard in his book, "Lincoln in Marble and Bronze," credits Crunelle with two "good" Lincolns--the one in Dixon, and the other in Freeport, showing Lincoln as the debater with Douglas.

Gov. Louis L. Emmerson was the speaker at the dedication ceremonies, and he unveiled the figure.

The statue was the result of many years of work. The commission in charge of the project was chairmaned by George C. Dixon, a great-grandson of Father Dixon. George Dixon still lives here, a retired circuit judge, but he needs no introduction to the Illinois State Historical Society, for he was a director of the organization for many years before retiring about seven years ago.

Other members of the statue commission included W. B. Brinton, Henry Hoerner, H. Hammond, O. C. Simmonds, E. F. Lawrence, Charles R. Walgreen, William T. Rawleigh, Joseph Oakleaf, Frank Stevens, Lorado Taft and the sculptor, Crunelle.

I have mentioned the Dixon Telegraph a couple of times. Now I'm not attempting to boost the paper's newstand sales, but I imagine some of you will read a copy of it this evening.

I could be prejudiced, but to me, the Telegraph has an interesting history. It dates back to May first, 1851, making it one of the oldest papers in Northern Illinois.

When it was established, it was the only newspaper between Naperville and Rock Island, east and west, and Galena and Peoria, north and south. The Telegraph isn't the only paper in the city's history, but it is the one which has survived through 105 years of publication--a weekly for more than 30 years, and a daily since the early 1880s.

The paper has been owned by one family for more than 100 years. Benjamin F. Shaw was editor and publisher for more than 50 years--from 1854 until his death in 1909. A son, Eustace, worked with his father in the operation of the newspaper, but the son died in 1902.

After B. F. Shaw's death, his young daughter-in-law, Mrs. Mabel S. Shaw, Eustace's wife, assumed supervision of the paper, and continued as its publisher until her death in 1955.

B. F. Shaw was prominent locally as editor, circuit clerk and postmaster. He also was a member of the Illinois Editorial Convention February 22, 1856, in Decatur. He was named to the credentials committee of the convention, which was an important step toward the creation of the Republican party in Illinois.

His daughter-in-law, as I said, operated the Telegraph for more than 45 years. Under her supervision the paper grew in circulation and importance. The B. F. Shaw Printing Company, which publishes the Telegraph, expanded widely in the field of commercial printing, until now its advertising matter is used across the continent.

As evidence that the Shaws are a newspaper family, Mrs. Shaw's three sons, George, Benjamin and Robert, all received newspaper training under their mother, and continue the operation of the newspaper today.

Mrs. Shaw traveled widely, and took an active interest in Republican politics. She became a friend of many national figures. But Dixon was her first love, and this hotel is a symbol of her community spirit.

The Nachusa House is a beautiful link with Dixon's historical past, and it was Mrs. Shaw who had it remodeled into the modern structure it is now.

A few years ago, the Nachusa House had plenty of history, but it was far from being a modern hotel. Mrs. Shaw saw the opportunity here to give the community a first-class hotel, and at the same time preserve an historic tavern for the community.

The Nachusa is the oldest continuously-operating business--aside from the newspaper--in Dixon. Construction was started by the Dixon Hotel Company in 1837, but the panic that year left only a foundation. It wasn't until 1853 that the original section of the hotel was completed. Those walls--the front portion of the hotel--still stand. Through the years three additions were made, and then in 1951, Mrs. Shaw began the remodeling project that was to transform the hotel to its modern shape.

And so, the walls which housed scores of the great and the near-great remain today. A few of those who slept here - Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Eugene V. Debs, Stephen A. Douglas, John A. Logan, Horace Greeley, Schuyler Colfax, James Doolittle, Jefferson Davis, William J. Bryan and J. Edgar Hoover.

Turning to the story of Dixon business and industry, the city, naturally, has been a trading center for the rural areas surrounding it since the time the prairies first were turned by plows. But its business life is not restricted to retailing.

Early industry of Dixon was of the types common to cities with a good source of water power. They included flax mills, flour mills and a woolen mill. For many years the Grand Detour Plow Company was located here, but I'm sure you'll hear more of John Deere and his steel plow when you visit Grand Detour.

On the north side of the river in Dixon you'll find the Borden milk plant. It was built in 1888 by George H. Page for the Anglo-Swiss condensed milk firm. Page, whose home was in Palmyra Township northwest of Dixon, had been associated with the Nestles of Switzerland, and returned here to build the plant.

The plant gave a tremendous boost to Dixon's economy--for it soon required the milk of almost 6,000 cows for its operations and paid out about \$400,000 a year for the milk it bought. The Borden company acquired the plant in 1902.

Another of the city's major industries is the Medusa Cement plant, which has operated east of the city for more than 50 years.

The plant was built in 1905 and six, and has operated from the vast quantities of limestone along Rock River. At present, the company is in the midst of an eight-million-dollar expansion program.

At one time, two shoe factories flourished here. They later were merged, and the operation has continued to the present under different owners. The plant now is owned by the Freeman Shoe Corporation.

In 1894, Horace G. Reynolds started a wire cloth mill here. The wire mill has continued to prosper, and there are now two plants in Dixon which manufacture wire cloth and screen.

They are the Reynolds Wire Division of National Standard Company.

Other companies which are well-established here include Boyd Casket Company and the Henry Pratt Company, which manufactures a large variety of valves. In addition, the Public Service Company has a large generating station here.

The State of Illinois maintains a district highway engineer's office here, operating over a 10-county area.

A large state institution also is important to Dixon. The Dixon State School today has about 5,000 residents--classed as mentally deficient. The school is located on beautiful grounds along Rock River northeast of the city.

Local agitation to have the school located here began in 1913 and 14, and much of the credit for having it built here was given to a prominent Dixon civic leader, Colonel W. B. Brinton.

Construction began in 1916, and the first patients entered in 1918. The names given the institution at various times mark the progress made toward a greater understanding of mental problems. Originally known as the Illinois Colony for Curable Epileptics, it later became the Dixon State Hospital, and even more recently, the Dixon State School.

But after talking of Dixon's industry and institutions, I must not neglect such matters as her education and culture.

Even as a frontier outpost, Dixon had her schools. The first classes were conducted in 1833 by a schoolmaster hired by Father Dixon to teach the Dixon children at home.

The first school building was built in 1837 by public subscription. The first high school was held in 1858 in the First Methodist Church, built in 1843. That building still stands on Second Street, less than a block from here.

The public system has grown with the population until today the city has a large high school--it's overcrowded--and four grade schools--I guess they're just crowded.

A Catholic parochial school has been operated here since 1872, and plans had been made, before I left, to open another.

During the 19th century, Dixon had a long list of academies, seminaries, colleges and so-called universities. Most were good, but ill-fated. However, one, Dixon College, gained a considerable reputation for high standards of academic excellence. That college went out of existence about the time of World War One. Apparently

the competition from state-supported colleges was too much for it. Parts of three college buildings remain today in west Dixon. They now house businesses, but the memory of Dixon College still is strong in the lawyers, teachers and others who attended it.

Dixon has had a library since the 1870s when the firemen started a book lending service. You could get books only on Sunday Afternoon. Today the library is open every day except Sunday, but tucked away in the stacks, you'll occasionally find a book bearing the original bookplate of the Dixon Hose Company library. That's not to imply that the library today is outdated. I can testify it contains a wide variety of new books, too.

While Dixon has developed its school system and library, it has not neglected its churches.

A Methodist missionary gave the first sermon here in 1834, and a Methodist class was organized in 1837. As I mentioned a few moments ago, the first Methodist Church was erected in 1843.

By 1845, four denominations were represented in the town-- Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal and Congregational. Others followed through the years, until now at least a score of congregations are established here.

While many prominent men of the cloth have occupied pulpits in Dixon, perhaps the most widely-known was the Rev. Joseph Fort Newton, who was a prolific writer of biographies, histories and sermons.

The Rev. Fort Newton came to Dixon from New England in 1903 to organize a People's Church. He spent several years here before going to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Later, he served in the City Temple of London and the Church of the Divine Paternity in New York City.

In his autobiography, "River of Years," the Minister recalls a clash he had with the great evangelist, Billy Sunday, when the ex-baseball player came to Dixon for a five-week revival.

Attendance for Sunday's series of meetings in a temporary tabernacle totaled more than 147,000, but he and the Rev. Fort Newton conducted a between-pulpits feud.

Sunday said Fort Newton was the only man in Dixon he wouldn't pray for, and The Rev. Fort Newton opened a series of counter-revival meetings in his own church.

Fort Newton summed up his feelings on the revival with--"After a furnace of fanaticism, only clinkered religion remains."

Despite his popular appeal, Sunday probably shocked the Dixonites, too. The local sponsors had prepared 14 cloth bags to use in taking up the collections during the revival. They figured each sack would hold half a peck of money.

But Sunday wouldn't stand for them. He said the soft cloth "offered too much temptation to put in buttons, and that fellows would make a bluff at putting something in."

He ordered, "Get some pie tins. Every fellow wants to see what his neighbor puts in."

In addition to its schools and churches, Dixon has long been proud of what we today would call its adult education program.

Beginning in the 1850s, local sponsors presented lecture series that featured the greatest minds and finest speakers of the country. In fact, a Cincinnati paper once expressed its surprise that such a small city as Dixon should offer such a first-rate program. Among the speakers one year was Ralph Waldo Emerson-- but the editor of the Dixon Telegraph was not impressed. The paper

said Mr. Emerson's speech on "Beauty" might have been all right for reading on a rainy day, but paying \$50 to hear him read it was "paying too much for the whistle."

In the early days of this century, Dixon's Rock River Assembly filled a cultural need for a large section of northern Illinois. The assembly held here reportedly was second only to Chautauqua, New York, in fame and prosperity.

A large hall was built on the north side of the river in 1899 for the assembly meetings, which were growing annually. The building would hold 5,000 persons. The Assembly Park also contained a three-story hotel, a large tabernacle, offices, horse sheds, bath houses and boat landings.

Among those who appeared in the hall were Galli-Curci, Madam Schumann-Heink, Billy Sunday, Sam Jones, Robert M. LaFollette and William Jennings Bryan.

The radio, automobile and motion picture eventually put an end to the annual meetings, and in the 1940s the auditorium was a roller skating rink until fire destroyed it in 1949.

I have mentioned Rock River several times, but always in a good light. Throughout its history, Dixon has received much from the river. The benefits of trade from those using the ferry, the power it provided for industry, the beauty of a riverfront, and the varied opportunities for boating and swimming.

But the river has had a vicious nature at times, too. For years it made playthings of the bridges thrown across the stream here.

A bridge was built in the fall of 1846 and early in 1847. But on March 20th, 1847, the river ripped away the north half. During the summer the bridge was rebuilt, but it lasted only until 1849, when ice tore the south half from its piers.

Again the bridge went up, and in 1855, ice took it away again. Another bridge was built, and ice took out two spans in 1857. It suffered more damage from ice in 1867, and on March 7, 1868, the entire bridge was ripped away by ice.

Dixonites used a temporary frame bridge until Jan. 21, 1869, when a new iron bridge--the Truesdell truss bridge--was dedicated.

Almost every town has a disaster which all residents remember. It may be a vicious tornado or a devastating fire--but in Dixon it is a bridge disaster concerning this Truesdell bridge.

When the bridge was completed, Dixonites were convinced that, at last, they had a bridge which would be permanent. The bridge did serve the city well for four years before it caused Dixon's greatest calamity.

On a warm spring day--Sunday, May 4th, 1873--most Dixonites went to church. As many of the churchgoers were returning home from services, they found an event of considerable interest taking place at the north edge of the river.

A Baptist congregation had left its church and gone to the river to hold a baptism ceremony. Men reined their horses to a halt, pedestrians stopped, and soon the north end of the bridge was crowded with people. The bridge afforded an excellent vantage point from which to see the baptism.

Then, without warning, the bridge gave way. A witness said it sounded as if a large pile of lumber had tipped over. Scores of men, women and children hurtled into the water--other scores clung to the wreckage hanging from the bridge piers.

Within minutes almost 40 people were dead--either drowned or pinned under the wreckage. Others who died later brought the death toll to 43.

The theory later was that the large crowd at one end of the bridge was enough to cause the tragedy. The entire north span had dropped into the water, and the south end of the bridge had been pulled from its bank.

The eyewitness I mentioned described the scene like this-- "The River was covered with people, their heads almost touching, over on the north side, and the bridge hung in loops on the piers."

Dixon Newspapers printed black-bordered extras that week--lamenting the loss and listing the funerals. There were so many funerals--forty-three--for so small a city.

I must say a little more about the eyewitness to the bridge disaster, because she still is living here in Dixon. She is Miss Fannie Murphy, who observed her 100th birthday on March 5th, this year.

She is a retired school teacher, and has an active interest in Dixon's history. Two days before her birthday this year, I had the privilege of recording an interview with her, in which she told of hearing the crash when the bridge fell. She was in a building in the business district, and ran to a window to see the river covered with people.

In the same interview, she told me of the time she watched soldiers training for the Civil War. They were stationed at Camp Dixon--on part of the land now occupied by the city cemetery.

She told me of seeing Old Jeff Davis hung in effigy on First Street, and she remembered the Sunday when the Thirteenth Regiment broke camp and marched through Dixon to board the Illinois Central cars, on their way to war. She saw their uniforms--made by the women of Dixon, and she heard the men march singing, "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

That interview with Miss Murphy is one of the brightest moments I will remember of Dixon.

Now I cannot pretend to have presented even a complete outline of Dixon's 126 years in what I have said here today. But these are the highlights that impressed me in two and a half years of producing a local history column. They stood out in the sweat and fury of fighting a deadline.

In a little while many of you will go on a tour of some of the scenes and sites where episodes I have mentioned took place. I hope you thoroughly enjoy that tour, and the remainder of your visit in the heart of the Rock River Valley.