

The CourierNews

SWAN's long history started with the Lords, Hendees and Sousters

January 26, 2008

The South West Area Neighbors -- or SWAN -- is one of the more active residential organizations in the city. The district it serves has a long history and is bounded by the U.S. 20 bypass, Walnut Avenue, the Fox River and Commonwealth Avenue.

The Kimball families from New Hampshire were the first settlers on the west side. Joseph Kimball came west in 1835. His son, Samuel **Jewett** Kimball, had an apple **orchard** on his farm. Sam, who died in 1866, was the second mayor of Elgin.

Urban development didn't begin until the opening of the National Street bridge in 1870 encouraged building for employees of the watch factory located directly across the river. The early homes overlooked the tracks of the "high" North Western and the Chicago & Pacific, a railroad that later became the Milwaukee Road and is now Metra.

George P. **Lord** was the watch factory's business manager from 1866 to 1872. His home was located on South State Street, and he became owner of much of the acreage now included in the SWAN area. This explains the origin of some of the street names. His first wife was Marcy **Billings Hendee**. Her father was **Homer** Hendee, and her mother was Huldah **Washburn** Hendee. On her father's side, she was a descendant of the Rev. Eleazar **Wheelock**, a Congregational minister, who was the founder and first president of Dartmouth College. On her mother's side, she was related to Captain Miles **Standish**.

Mary Washburn Hendee, Mrs. Lord's sister, was engaged to **Griswold** Lord before his death. He was a brother of George P. Lord. She later married John Palmer **Morgan**.

At a crisis in the watch factory's fortunes, when more capital was needed, Martin **Ryerson**, a wealthy Chicagoan, invested in the firm and became a major stockholder. William **Wilcox** was a subdivider, and Seth **Moseley** was a surveyor.

Henry **Willis** was a courageous Elgin mayor responsible for establishing our water system.

George **Souster** lived in a large house at 576 S. State St. the last home on the west side of State north of the bypass. He started a gardening business in 1883, later becoming a florist. His greenhouses were on Adams Street.

Because many German immigrants settled in the area, it became known as "Dutch," being a variation of "Deutsch." Scandinavians settled around their Norwegian-Danish Lutheran Church, the oldest on the west side. The original building was first occupied in 1884.

Lowrie School, now the west side's oldest public school, opened as the Oak Street School on Jan. 28, 1889. It was commonly called the Dutch Flats School, and the official name was changed to Lowrie in 1913 to honor Adam Hilton Lowrie, editor of the Elgin Daily News.

By 1892 more than 250 homes were standing on the west side, south of Walnut, but there were still many vacant lots. George P. Lord at that time owned an undeveloped tract of about seven blocks north of Orange Street between Moseley and Billings. It was called Lord's Pasture.

Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Rovelstad, a bridal couple, occupied their newly built home at what is now 539 Ryerson in 1893 and celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in the same home in 1943. Enlarged, it served as the studio for a son, Trygve Rovelstad, sculptor of the Pioneer Memorial Monument and designer of the Combat Infantryman's Badge.

A nightmare on Elm Street came in the form of the Palm Sunday Tornado of March 28, 1920. Some homes on Elm between Walnut Avenue and Oak Street were heavily damaged. A post-storm survey described No. 329 as "almost a complete wreck" and No. 333 as "practically entire house demolished."

The watch workers who lived in the area had to trudge up the National Street hill going home. Streetcars ran up Walnut but didn't go up the hill. If workers wanted to ride home, they had to take a Grove Avenue car to Fountain Square and then transfer to a west-side car. They also had to avoid tardiness at the factory when long trains pulled by steam locomotives were taking on water and blocking passage across the bridge.

Finally, in 1923, a wooden pedestrian bridge was constructed over the tracks. Called the "Golden Stairway" because it saved lost wages, it was torn down in 1935 with the switch to diesel engines.

Some of the houses once occupied by these watch workers now belong to members of SWAN, who are dedicated to making their neighborhood a good place to live.

E.C. "Mike" Alft, a retired Elgin High School teacher and former Elgin mayor, is the author of several books about Elgin history.