



SANGAMON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICO

308 East Adams Street • Springfield, Illinois 62701 • (217) 522-2500

MAY, 1991

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BOARD MEETING NOTICE - THE NEXT BOARD MEETING WILL BE HELD ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 29, 1991, AT 4:30 P.M. IN THE BICENTENNIAL ROOM AT LINCOLN LIBRARY.

LOOKING AHEAD - A VISIT TO A ONE-ROOM SCHOOL

The Sangamon County Historical Society will celebrate spring with an outing at the Farmers Point School near Petersburg, starting at 1:30 P. M. on Saturday, May 18. The one-room school, erected in 1873, has been maintained by Mr. Elmer Brunen in memory of his wife, Musette C. Brunen, who was a teacher at the school many years ago.

(To reach the school, take Rt. 125 west from Springfield to Rt. 125. Take Rt. 97 north, passing through Salisbury. Directional signs will be posted at the county road where we turn east. The Farmers Point School is 1/2 mile south and 1/4 mile east of the junction of Rts. 97 and 123.)

Following our school program, which is estimated to take about an hour, members and friends may choose to go to the new River Ridge Restaurant for a delicious "no-host" ("Dutch Treat") dessert. Individual reservations are not required but our group is expected at the restaurant approximately between 2:30 and 3:00 P.M. River Ridge is only about 1½ miles from the Farmers Point School. The short road to the restaurant turns east directly across Rt. 97 from the entrance to Lincoln's New Salem Historic Site.

Those attending may want to pay a visit to the New Salem Village while they are in the vicinity. The site is especially beautiful in the springtime. (Perhaps our members would be interested in visiting the "D.A.R. Horse" - a horse on the grounds of the village where period authenticity is enhanced by the presence of the same type of animals kept there in the 1830's. We understand that half of the horse was purchased by the Springfield D.A.R. Chapter in 1989 and the other half in 1990, but we don't know which half had to operate independently between purchases! The Wabose Chapter of the Children of the American Revolution purchased the resident team of oxen which add to the ambience of the village.)

A LOOK BACK - WORLD WAR II DAYS AT THE SANGAMON ORDNANCE PLANT

The Sangamon County Historical Society met at Lincoln Library on April 16 to hear B. David McCarthy of Dawson, Illinois, speak on

the history of the Sangamon Ordnance Plant at Illiopolis. Mr. McCarthy, a teacher in Illiopolis for 15 years, researched the history of the Ordnance Plant during his work for his Master's degree at Sangamon State University. His thesis is available in the SSU archives and at the Illiopolis Public Library. His twelve recorded interviews with local citizens also will be added to the SSU Oral History collection.

The Sangamon Ordnance Plant was started during World War II. Originally there were two plants - the Northside Oak Ordnance Plant, operated by a subsidiary of Johnson and Johnson, and the Southside Plant, operated by Remington-Rand. Later, when the plants were consolidated to cut expenses and duplication, Remington-Rand operated the entire project as the Sangamon Ordnance Plant. Construction began in March, 1942 on about 19,200 acres of land west of Illiopolis. It was completed in September, 1942, and included about 1000 structures. Seven wells were drilled to provide water. Construction costs, which included the wages for about 15,000 workers, were over 40 million dollars. The spacious grounds surrounding the plant, necessary for safety and security reasons, were enclosed by a fence, and 600 guards patrolled the area both by auto and on horseback. Close to 10,000 people were employed in the plant after completion.

Many kinds of ammunition were manufactured, including artillery shells, bomb fuses, airplane cannon shells - and even tiny firecrackers used in "practice models" of booby traps and hand grenades. Casualties in the plant were not high considering the dangerous material being handled - there were only several deaths due to explosions. More people were killed in collateral events, such as car crashes, electrical accidents and fires. Safety measures were strictly observed - workers put on special uniforms after arrival at the plant, no metal hairpins, jewelry, etc., were allowed, and rubber-soled shoes were worn. Showering before leaving the plant was a must for any workers who had been in contact with TNT. Even the ground on which the plant was built was chosen because of its good rock-free quality as static-electricity dangers might be increased by stony soil.

The pay scales were good for that day - an inspector made about \$2000.00 a year, and an average worker was paid 70¢ - 75¢ per hour. Many of the employees were women - 60 to 65% of the workers in the entire plant. They represented a more stable work force than men because the men were not exempt from the draft and were liable to be called-up for duty in the armed services. Women were actively recruited, often by other women in the plant, known as "W O Ws" - Women Ordnance Workers. Enticements included special work schedules such as the "Twin Worker Plan" in which two women could work alternate days on one job. Also, a day care center was established for children. Very few women held any of the higher positions in the plant - there were none in the top reaches of the hierarchy.

The impact on Illiopolis came almost overnight as the town grew from a population of 600 to 3500. Private families took in roomers, trailer courts were established, and 40 - 50 staff housing units were built to accommodate the officials and supervisors. Dormitories on the grounds were occupied by many regular workers. Local businesses such as restaurants, groceries and other stores prospered. About the only complaints were heard from farmers who had lost land when the huge plant was built.

Transportation to the plant was arranged - bus service and car-pools from surrounding towns were organized, and the Illinois Traction System railroad handled much of the east-west travel. A number of cars from the New York elevated system were sent to Decatur, rejuvenated by the ITS, painted bright orange and put into service, pulled by engines painted red, white and blue!

Production stopped quite abruptly as the war drew to a close. There had been some reduction of the work force by the summer of 1945, and by August 9, when the second atom