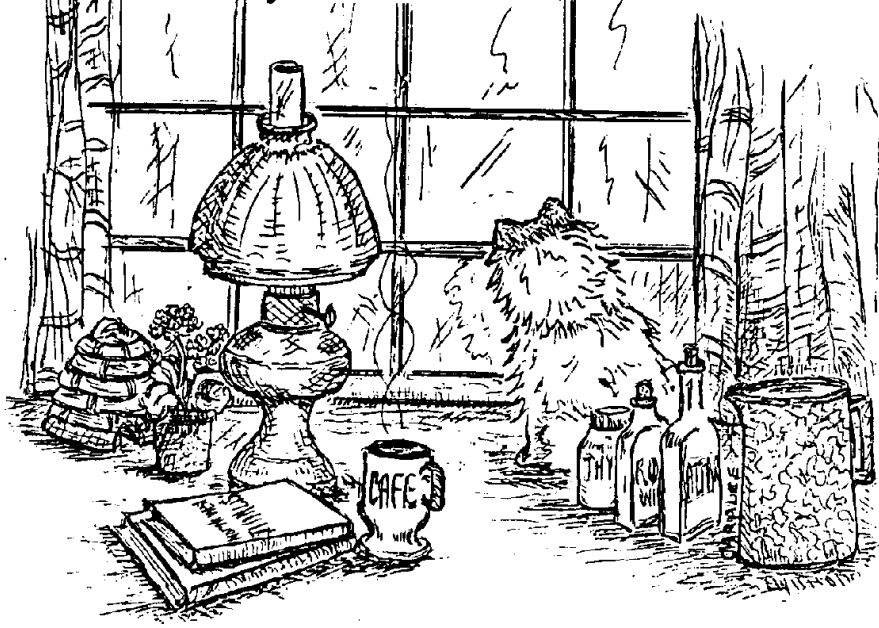


Please Don't Quote Me ...

by Caralee Aschenbrenner



Part III

The broad pool at Sabula created by Lock and Dam #13 at Fulton prevents us from clearly picturing how the Mississippi once looked. Distance between it and Savanna may not have seemed so great as it does today. Viewing River Front Park at Sabula, today a pretty aspect, it would be difficult to picture the mammoth pork packing house which once stood there also.

That processing business at one time vied with Dubuque for ranking in the state. It had its origins in 1859 when Josiah Stiles, a Sabula resident and banker, determined that it was just the place to create a market for slaughter and dressing of hogs, then to ship them out via the river.

Stiles sent to Racine for his brother, Perley, a recently retired ocean-going whaler but now in a retail meat market. The initiative business in Sabula was at first a rather primitive, makeshift affair named, "Stiles and Brother." Scalding of the hogs (to remove the hair from the hide) was done in huge cauldrons near the open air corrals. It was said one hundred hogs an hour could be cleaned, apparently a goodly number. Lard was merely rendered in kettles over open fires until a tank heated by steam was installed. By the mid-1860s a bigger factory was necessary, bigger than the two-story stone warehouse, so a three-story structure of brick and wood was put up where the park is located today, 40'x300'. A second addition of 70'x360' came next, four stories high until ultimately the packing house was 800' long and enclosed three acres. This did not include the holding pens for the about-to-be hams and rashers. Or the ice house which was another 50'x100' which stored ten thousand tons of ice, no doubt, harvested in season from the Mississippi. Ice storage was the only way shipping was accomplished as there was as yet no other type of refrigeration. This did not encompass the separate offices from which Josiah and Perley directed a crew of over two hundred employees. During the 1860s they concluded that having a Chicago office would be beneficial to their business.

A General Commission office was organized on south Water Street, long the location of food markets in the

Windy City. Consignments of pork were not the only article the packing house received however... By this time, too, partners had joined the original pair and various combinations continued to the end. Their company now handled "truck"—meaning then butter, cheese, eggs, potatoes, seeds, etc. Grain was also entered on the Board of Trade. An eccentric Scottish bachelor, Isaiah Goldy, late of Lyons, Iowa, invested a considerable sum which greatly capitalized their venture. But in 1871 The Great Chicago Fire destroyed the Stiles' office and they abandoned their trading in 'truck.'

Losses both physical and financial were high. Because their insurance was carried by Chicago companies, little was realized due to their bankruptcy. By 1879 though the Sabula branch had weathered the devastating effects of the fire so it was decided to incorporate into a joint stock company under the name, "Iowa Packing Company."

That year also a huge remodeling of the plant occurred on the by now aging riverfront factory including the removal of its landmark cupola.

A few years later a Chicago packing house was bought but which "packed" for the English market. In 1885 the owners of the Sabula plant were crippled by a wild speculation scheme known then as the "Peter McGeogh Lard Corner," only one of several nefarious dealings which plagued investors. The company was left with thousands of dollars of debt plus other losses from other sources as well. But the Sabula company paid all their creditors in full and by the next season had sold their riverfront business to a company of ten capitalists. This group ran it only three or four years until it merged with "Iowa Packing and Provision," Clinton, which then built a modern new factory in that city. They made no further use of the once bustling packing house in Sabula. In 1904 the immense structure was razed by a Chicago firm for its material and not even the memory of the squeal of the pig was recalled of the concern by the next generation, that which had so dominated the

waterfront for so long.

If you think the community was down and out, you're mistaken. Although the loss of so many jobs was a severe blow, there were other industry and as much will to carry on... saw, flouring, oat, planing mills, touched on last week; the logging resulting from the northern pineries which harbored here and, of course, the considerable fishing-related occupations. And clamming. Clams or mussels meant shells. Shells back then



Crew at the Button Factory posed on a pile of shells.

meant jewelry, a very lucrative and stylish phase and fad beginning in the 1870s. Novelty or necessity, according to milady's point of view, shells were inspiration for iridescent, pearly adornment and decoration. "Pearl" buttons became a rage... long sleeves lined with buttons, shirt and blouse fronts, studs and cuff links, brooches, pins, fobs, gimcracks and gewgaws were wrought of shells reaped from the ugly mollusk from the muddy Mississippi. The shell factory was only one of the long term businesses which was supported by Sabula and environs.

A button factory exclusively was another separate going concern initiated in 1895 by harvesting the crusty bivalve. After about ten years it was sold to a New York concern which changed the name to one less local, the "Iroquois Button Company" but which prospered on the banks of the mighty river. At the height of its boom over a hundred were employed there either as fishermen-clammers or in the factory as cutters where machines stamped out buttons of varying sizes and types leaving behind huge piles of discarded holey shells. Pearl buyers were regular travelers who arrived in town nearly every week to purchase the elusive prize

which was bought for from five dollars to over a hundred. For nearly thirty years the pearl button factory was a part of the diverse commercial atmosphere of the community, important for employment and its distinction. Many other river communities all over the Midwest until 1930s made clamming a thriving enterprise. Downriver, for instance, Camanche, Iowa was once considered the second largest pearl market in the United States. The zipper, plastic along with less demand for closures, made the beautiful pearl button a thing of the past so that following a fire after 1930, this business was also razed and another chapter was finished.

The ferry business, longest in term of operation, ninety-five years, ended its run in 1932 (last week). It carried hundreds-thousands back and forth to work at the huge railroad yards at Savanna and the ordinance depot, north, which was in use for eighty years. Both these enterprise are closed. A ferry reinstated in 1985 when the interstate bridge was closed for renovation. Many rode the ferry then just for the novelty of it.

If Sabulans are identified as being anything it must be for resourcefulness because despite all the highs and lows over the years, they've persevered. Perhaps the reputation they have was spawned back in the bad old days when it was called the toughest river town between the Saints... Paul and Louis. It was a river town where you had to be gritty to survive. But, too, it was a handy and only welcom-

you **not** call after nine and disturb them!

There was a quickening pace as the twentieth century rolled along. Just as it was important to be linked to the world, it was imperative now to be wired, too. Yet in 1913 the night watchman lit kerosene street lamps but Peoples' Gas and Electric of Savanna proposed that they would supply electricity wholesale if Sabula would lay the cable 'cross river plus erect the required poles. It seemed too good to be true even if the estimated cost was \$5,000. The community voted on the proposition as all communities should when such a large issue is at hand with the males voting 264 for, 11 against. The women were also allowed to have their say though counted separately... **all** in the affirmative, 112.

Five weeks and the poles were set. Another forty-five days the cable was made. Projects were almost always home grown then. In early autumn, 1913, the first electric bulb was clicked on at Eldredge's Drug to ohs and ahs. Lights then were flicked on all over town... **over** and **over** again as residents ran outside to see their homes and businesses in a newly illuminated perspective. It was estimated that at Hundevard's Barber Shop the comings and goings were thirty times in thirty minutes as various combinations of bulbs were tried. What an occasion to jubilate. Have we grown to blasé to appreciate such accomplishment?

After the Savanna-Sabula bridge was constructed in 1932 cable was carried on it instead of underwater. A picture showing the crude boat used in the initial operation is shocking in its simplicity. Interstate Power ultimately absorbed the firm whose basic plan was "buy wholesale, sell a bit higher."

Cooperation among residents continued into the 1960s (and after, of course). Natural gas was proposed for fuel. The sanitary sewer plant was built then also. As early as 1894 balloting had taken place concerning a waterworks system when, too, women were allowed the franchise. Testing of the water at that time showed that the water had absolutely no organic matter... quick to see the potential of bottled water, far ahead of the craze a hundred years hence, a business was begun which sold the water advertising its purity and curative qualities to all parts of the country. Not until 1936 did this "artesian" supply appear to be diminishing so that a water tower had to be built. Water. Both bane and benefit.

Next Week — More water plus just a few other aspects about Sabula.