

News & Views

**Irene Rockenbach**

By Aileen Heimerdinger

[written about 1967]

Miss Irene Rockenbach served 22 years as town clerk of West Deerfield Township in Lake County, Illinois, and when she retired in 1958, she was given a testimonial dinner and presented with a watch, a typewriter, a huge bouquet of American Beauty roses, and a plaque attesting to her outstanding community service. This was a fine tribute to a fellow citizen whose roots go deep into the history of Deerfield. I like to think that the friendly ghosts of her ancestors were also present on that occasion - beaming with pride and wishing her well!

"My mother's sister," she said, "was the first white girl born in Lake County; and believe me," she added with a smile, "I have more nieces and nephews than I can count. I never know when a cousin of some distant relative may turn up from somewhere!" Her great-grandfather on her mother's side, John Jacob Ott, was the first of her ancestors to come with his family to America. They came from Alsace Lorraine in 1830 and settled in a Pennsylvania Dutch settlement near Warren, Pennsylvania, where they had friends. They finally came to the Midwest in 1836. Her great-uncle, Jacob Ott, walking most of the way, explored parts of the Midwest, and eventually found his way to "North Branch", which the Deerfield area was then called. He became one of the first four settlers there in 1835, and sent for the rest of his family.

"Great-grandfather Rockenbach," said Miss Irene, "also came from Alsace Lorraine. He and his family, along with a few friends, sailed from Le Havre, France, in 1841 and landed at New York, but so far as I know," she added, "the two families did not know each other until they had all settled in North Branch." Her Great-grandfather Rockenbach had a friend living at Fort Dearborn, as Chicago was then called; and so family and friends made their way by covered wagon (as had the Ott's) to the shores of Lake Michigan.

The Fort Dearborn friend, who was both prosperous and hospitable, told the little group, "If it is good farming land you want, I will drive you over the northwest trail. If you like it there, I'm sure the government will sell you some good sections of land." That was quite a distance from Chicago in those days. The women rode in the covered wagons and the men walked. When they finally came to the Des Plaines River just north of the Wheeling settlement, the women begged to stop, for they were tired of traveling. The river ran through the area, clear and sparkling, and it reminded them of their beloved Rhine. The men viewed the surroundings with favor. The east side of the river was heavily wooded - the forests would provide logs for their houses and game for their tables; and the west side of the river was clear prairie land - a fine place to start a new life!

"My mother was born in Deerfield," said Miss Irene, "my father, George Rockenbach, was six weeks old when his family left Alsace Lorraine, and he lived to be 95 years old. He was at one time supervisor of Deerfield Township, and it was through him that I was able to piece together so much of our family history. It was always his proud boast that he had cast his first vote for Abraham Lincoln."

She warmed to her subject, and it was fascinating to hear about those stalwart early pioneers, but I also wanted to learn about Miss Rockenbach herself.

"I was one of eight children," she told me. "Both the Otts and the Rockenbachs had large families. I went to the Wilmot school, which was organized in 1848 and named after a family of old settlers. I attended the Metropolitan Business College in Chicago, then I worked for a telegraph company for six years, and as secretary in the general office of the Milwaukee Railroad for seven years. However, I wanted to spread my wings a little. I loved the Midwest, but decided to explore another part of our great country, so I attended Boston University, where I specialized in religious education and social service."

Miss Rockenbach worked in the field of religious education for ten years and taught in leadership training schools in Michigan, Illinois, and California. When the depression came along, she returned to her home in Deerfield and continued her work in religious education in various churches. Later she was approached by friends and asked to run for town clerk of her home township, "It was a challenge," she explained with a smile, "and I decided to run. I loved Deerfield and had many friends there. Much to my surprise I won, but I hardly expected to hold the office for 22 years! It was a wonderful experience."

She has a brother, aged 94, still living in Deerfield, and another brother, aged 88, living in California. She also has a sister living here in the Infirmary, to whom she is devoted and whom she faithfully visits every day. "My sister," she said, "is quite feeble and sometimes lives in a dream world of her own. Occasionally she has lucid moments; then we talk about the years when she was a Sunday School superintendent in Deerfield and I was a Sunday School teacher. We talk about family and friends, and it all makes her very happy." Last December Miss Rockenbach gave a birthday party for her sister's 90th birthday, and several nieces and grandnieces came to help celebrate the occasion.

Miss Irene came to Geneva Place in 1964. She is a lively, friendly woman, bubbling over with memories of the past, but she is also vitally interested in the complexities of the present-day world, and still enjoys watching the political situations of Deerfield. She has inherited the indomitable spirit of her pioneer ancestors and has, in her own way, contributed much to the spiritual faith of her country and to the growth and development of her community.