

The History of Cordova, Illinois

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English 102 (Mr. Keeley)

March 17, 1960

History about the town of Cordova has always interested me very much. All during the years as I have been growing up, I have heard old timers tell about the town as it was when they were young. It has always been hard to believe that the little town of Cordova was once a very important city along the Mississippi River. As I see the town today, it is a small village of sufficient size to accommodate the families who desire to live in this location. Most of the men of these families work in neighboring cities as the industries have come and gone from Cordova. After doing a considerable amount of research, I have found out many interesting things about Cordova.

I have written this paper for those people who know little about the history of Cordova and also for those who know something about the history of Cordova, but who have never read or heard anything to correlate their thoughts together. I have included pictures of many of the old landmarks that have been torn down today, to help the reader see and understand the town as one of the most extensive copies ever written of the history of Cordova.

Cordova

On the bank of a beautiful river
In a state of the Middle West,
There's a sweet little town that ever
Claims the love of our heart's very best.

It is modest and shy and retiring
As it nestles among the hills,
But it's name is inspiring
with a romance that stirs and thrills.

There is a reason for all our loving
This town on the river's bank,
It's where our mothers taught us
And headed off many a prank.

The mild of all human kindness,
Was first introduced to us here,
In this sweet little town in the valley
We come back to you from year to year.

When we think of that church on the hillside,
Of this town in the Middle West,
And the lessons we learned from it's pulpit
By pastors long gone to their rest.

When we think of the loved ones living
And the loved ones gone on before
Of their working and loving and giving,
We long to come back once more.

Fair Cordova, Town of our childhood,
You mean more than we can tell.
You're a dear river town in the wildwood
In a fair little nest in the dell.

Oh; the friendships we made in that valley
In the days when our world was young
As we floated and swam on the river
With rowboat and gun and rod,
May we always remember the Giver
Of good gifts is our merciful God.

Benway, Alton. Cordova

THE HISTORY OF CORDOVA, ILLINOIS

The First Settlers

The first settlers found Cordova a beautiful wooded site overlooking the Mississippi River. The Black Hawk Indians settled in this area before the country was even settled. Black Hawk Mound, located behind the Baptist Church, was so named because Chief Black Hawks said to have used it for a lookout. From the mound it is possible to see many miles up river. It is said that the Indians used this mound for their burial grounds. At the time of the Black Hawk War, the northern and western part of the state was taken from the Indians by the government and this included Cordova. The log forts, that were found here by the early settlers, were used by the government during this war.

The first white men to settle in this territory were Herdman East, Charles Eads, and John and Theodore Butcher. Herdman East had purchased some of the land around Cordova to settle on, Charles Eads operated a trading post not far from the river, and John and Theodore Butcher were hunters and trappers. Following these early settlers came the settlers who later founded the town of Cordova.

In the fall of 1836 two men on horseback set out in search of new land. Amiziah Rathburn, who lived in McDonough County, Illinois, traveled to the home of Dr. Thomas Baker on Green River, not far from Geneseo, and persuaded Dr. Baker to join him in search of new unsettled country. The two men on horseback crossed Rock River at Crandall Ferry and proceeded to the Archibald Allen Post on the Mississippi, located north of what is now the Village of Port Byron. Incidentally, the name of Archie Allen and the site of the early Post has been preserved and the present Y.W.C.A. Archie Allen Camp has been established here. After spending the night there they went on north until they came to a turn in the river where the gently sloping land on either bank of the river appealed to their desires for a future home. There were large tracts of timber that would permit building of their homes, which were erected very soon. Mr. Rathburn and Dr. Baker took out their claims side by side and then rode to Prophetstown, the nearest place of entry, and filled out the necessary papers. This little incident marked the founding of Cordova by Amiziah Rathburn and Dr. Baker.

Early Development

While Dr. Baker was building his first home, he lived in the old block house, which was erected by soldiers from Fort Armstrong in 1833 and stood where the Justus Johnson home now stands. The block house was built of logs with a tight roof and loop holes in the middle of the walls. It was surrounded with a tight fence, that stood twelve to fourteen feet high, that had loop holes in it also. The fence was made from driving green poles in the ground and weaving sallow saplings in and out.

In the spring of 1837 the Baker and Rathburn families loaded their Pennsylvanian Schooner, drawn by four yoke of oxen, with their household goods and started on their way to their new home, which was later to be called Cordova, Illinois. On the 17th day of March in the year 1837 the families arrived at their new home. The Baker family consisted of Volney, Rodolphus, Thomas, Henry, Maria Elizabeth, and a four-month old baby.

The Rathburn family consisted of the wife, Sarah, Filena, a baby and James and Lorenza Dow. Most of the other early pioneers came from around New Jersey since Dr. Baker had many friends up there. Among the first pioneers were Nelson and Chauncey Tupp, William Kelly, DUBY Buck, Peter Beardsley, Abram Adams, William Jenks, John Marshall, Benoni Haskins, Jerry Cool and J. S. Phillips. Dr. Baker gave every tenth lot to each of these pioneers.

Among the first recorded happenings were births, marriages and deaths. The first white children born here were Charles Baker and Josephine Rathburn. Nathaniel Bechler and Joseph Mills belong to the class of bachelors who married sisters from the Jenks Family, which were the first recorded weddings. The first person that is recorded to have died here in Cordova was Benoni Haskins in 1838, and his remains were laid to rest on Black Hawk Mound. The second death was that of Hugh Dailey, who passed away in 1839.

The first schools and churches operated under great handicaps due to lack of room and teachers. Dr. Baker held the first school and churches in his own home as he was a very well-educated man and could teach the children and their parents. He also started a night school for the benefit of adults who suffered a lack of education. Fidelia Rathburn was the first hired teacher.

The newly founded village was now ready for a name at a general meeting of the townspeople the name of Cordova was chosen. It has been recorded that the town of Cordova was named after a Cord-over of wood, as wood in those days was cut and sold by the cord. Cord-over to Cordova. Another record, which is more seemingly correct is that since Dr. Baker suggested the name Cordova, he must have had some recollection with the name. Dr. Baker read many of Washington Irving's books that were written about Cordoba, Spain; therefore, it seems more likely that Cordova, Illinois was named after Cordoba, Spain rather than a Cord-over of wood.

On March 16, 1867, Dr. Baker filed a petition in Rock Island, Illinois set for an incorporation of the village, however, the question was voted down at the following election. Ten years later in 1877 the question was again submitted and was successfully carried. The first board of trustees was elected April 23, in the same year it was organized. At this time the town had a population of 1500 people. President was Daniel Zimmerman and Trustees were Abe Bolinger, F. A. Hall, Thomas Karr, J. B. Vanderbugh, W. D. Webster.

In 1869 a family by the name of Kincade started a brickyard in the southwest part of town. This property then was owned by W. C. Hunt and today is owned by Roy Avery. The place can still be seen where the clay was dug from the ground for the bricks. The bricks, that were made here, were used mostly for building purposes around this locality. The old Methodist church now owned by Jack Guinn, one room of the Hunt house, which was located on the south end of the Roy Avery property, and the house now owned by John Gillispie were built from these bricks. The present Cordova Baptist church was built from these bricks also.

Dragging the river for clams to make buttons first started in Muscatine, Iowa. Around the year 1869 clamming moved to Cordova as a profitable means to make a living. The reason for this being that the bottom of the river around Cordova is mostly sand and gravel and this is the type of environment which clams like to live in. When clamming first started,

the clams were brought up from the river, the meat was taken out and the clams thrown back in the water. Around 1900, probably by accident, a pearl was found in a clam and from then on clambers not only got clams for buttons but also started looking for pearls. At this time clams were sold to the button factory for \$6.50 a ton as compared to \$100 a ton in 1955. A man by the name of Mr. Boepel established the first button factory in Cordova. It was located in the old Diamond Joe warehouse at the far west end of main street. When the dams were build, dragging for clams was no longer a profitable means of making a living. Today there is very little clamming done in this locality.

Bringham and Marshall erected the first grist mill for early settlers in 1853. A grist mill is a device with a paddle wheel turned by running water from the river which rotates one huge stone over the top of another while grinding the grain between them. This was the only means the farmer had to get his grain ground in the early days.

In 1875 the lime kiln operated by Wynkoop and Webster was a thriving industry in Cordova. For a number of years it furnished employment for many men around Cordova. Wesley Black and Wilbur Bruner, both deceased, were the last two men to draw lime from the kiln. This kiln was one of the five located around this vicinity, and it is the only one still standing today. It is located on the southwest corner of the Jim Durbin farm or directly behind the Cordova cemetery. When Jim Durbin bought this farm, forty acres of it consisted of a residential district without any residents. Evidently the early settlers thought that the lime kiln would develop into a big industry someday and they laid this ground out for the workers to build homes on. The lime kiln is some thirty feet high with a ramp built across from the tip of the hill to the top of the kiln over which the rock was wheeled and dumped into the kiln. The gigantic ovens baked the rock until it was changed into chunks of lime which were processed and used in plaster. Pine slabs were shipped in to feed the fire in the ovens.

A private bank was opened in the Village of Cordova by J. F. and J. C. Mackey in the year 1916. It was located in the building which is now the Robert Kay House. In 1920 the bank acquired a State Charter and became the State Bank of Cordova instead of the Bank of Cordova. When it obtained it's charter, it had a capital accumulation of \$15,000 and a surplus of \$3,000 and J. C. Mackey became president and F. G. Weiss cashier. During the 1920's a new bank building was built which now houses the post office. In 1933 the bank became a member of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. In 1936 the bank still had a capital accumulation of \$15,000 and a surplus of \$4,000. In 1941 it was decided by the board of directors to close the bank. Liquidating of the bank started immediately and was finished up in 1942 by Jess Reynolds.

Cordova has had four churches during the past 124 years. The first church founded in Cordova was the Advent Church. This foundation did not last too long and finally Daniel Pinneo purchased the building for a home. Soon after Pinneo bought the building, it was destroyed by fire. The second church was the Cordova Methodist Church which was founded in the 1840's when the present building was built. The church operated for quite a number of years, but finally it had to close. In 1909 the church was remodeled and opened again. In 1926 the building was sold to the Union Gospel Tabernacle which operated for only a few years. Jack Guinn purchased the building from the Union Gospel Tabernacle Church and converted it into a home. He is still living in it to this present day. Under the direction of Elder Jesse N. Seeley, a missionary, the Cordova Baptist Church was organized in 1843. At this time it had sixteen charter members. The first church building was built in 1844.

Soon this building became too small and a larger building was built in 1858 at the cost of \$8,000. This is the same building that the church is still using today. In 1888, the walls, which were originally plastered were covered with wainscoting. In 1902 the floor, which originally flat, was bowled and curved oak pews were installed. Also the pulpit, which was originally located in the center of the north wall, was moved to the south wall to fit the curvature of the floor. In 1905 the lofty spire was removed because it was beginning to show signs of age. The old clear glass windows were removed in 1942 and the present stained glass windows were installed. The building which was originally heated by eight stoves is heated by a single oil burner today. A new Sunday School edition was built in 1952 which consisted of six class rooms, an office, and rest rooms. The present pastor is Reverend Richard Barcus.

*** The first library in Cordova was started as a reading room in 1876. It occupied rented rooms in Mrs. G. W. Dean's home, which was located across the street from the present library, until 1914. The library in Cordova became the Cordova Public Library in 1878. The present building was purchased in 1914 at which time it was remodeled. The east room and west room were added in 1917 and 1929 respectively. The library consisted of 4000 volumes in 1914 as compared to 6618 volumes in 1954.

The first post office was established in the home of John Marshall in 1939 with John Marshall as postmaster. A plaque now sets, just west of the library, in the place where this first post office once set. The first post office building was built in the 1890's at the west end of town just east of the Jack Francis Food Store. In 1939 the post office was moved to the east end of town to the present Pettit Food Store. After the closing of the bank in 1941, the post office was moved across the street to the bank building where it has remained every since. Cedric Norton is the present postmaster.

The first school house, which was a private school, was built in the 1850's just west of the Charles Tomer residence today. The second school was build near the present high school and was later torn down. The third school, which was a public school, was built in 1863. It was a four room stone structure with the two upstairs rooms for the high school and the two downstairs rooms for the grade school. At this time the school had an enrollment of 300 pupils. In 1920 the two upstairs rooms were condemned as unsafe to hold classes in. The high school then moved to the Methodist church building until 1922. In 1922 the present high school was built. The rest of the grade school was condemned in 1947. During the building of the new school in 1947-47, grade school was held in the Cordova Baptist Church. The grade school had 86 pupils at this time. In 1951 the grade school became too small and three class rooms, recreations room and rest rooms were added. The present building has grades 1-6 with 7 - 8 at the Junior High at Hillsdale and the High School at Port Byron.

The bell which sets in front of the grade school was placed there in 1936 when the belfry was built by Ed Smith. The bell was originally located on top of the old school. The weight of the bell is one half ton. It was cast in 1863 and put on top of the school in 1865. In 1925 the building was remodeled and repaired and the bell was removed from the roof.

In 1840 Isreal Atherton started the first ferry running from Cordova. It was of the type propelled by hand power, and it's main purpose was to bring produce from the other side of the river to be shipped by either rail or boat from Cordova. Later a steam ferry operated by John Walker replaced the hand powered ferry.

In 1854 a rail road grade was being built from the east through Erie towards Cordova with the possibility of crossing the river at this point. The grade was finished, the ties were laid, and the rock walls built for the bridges. Since iron rails were not made in this country, they had to be shipped from England and it seems that the company ran short of funds about this time, and the rails were never laid in place. Many farmers had mortgaged their land in order to pay for stock. The disappointment of the people was very great and the railroad fell through. The old road bed and the stone walls can still be seen to this day but the railroad crossing was made between Davenport and Rock Island instead of between Cordova and Princeton. At first the railroad was to be called the Warsaw and Rockford, but later it was known as the Sterling and Rock Island Railroad Company.

The railroad through here today was built in 1870. The depot was a freight and passenger station for the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroads. The depot was remodeled in 1944 and in 1950 it was moved and made into a home.

G. Marshall built the first hotel in Cordova kept by himself. It is the red brick house located up the hill to the south from the present library. Later hotels were the Mandel Hotel located on the Ed Rathburn property, now the Justus Johnson property and the Halater Hotel, a three story brick structure east of Freek property owned by the Hofer Brothers.

The first Drug Store was located across the street to the south from the present American Legion Building. Later Dr. Freek operated a Drug Store across the street to the west from the first drug store in present Alfred Miller house. Cordova has had two saloons, as they were called in those days, and in its history too. The first saloon was located where the Harold Scudder house now sets and the second saloon was located where the Judge Turnbaugh house now sets. Directly in back of the second saloon a jail was located. It has been said that the jail was so poorly built that a fellow, who was put in the jail for being drunk one night, had dug a hole under the foundation and crawled out and was gone the next morning when the sheriff came to release him. When the horse and buggy or wagon were used as the main means of transportation, a Wagon Factory was located where the present Cordova Public Library now stands. Cordova once had a Butcher Shop which was located where the Ronald Allen home stands today. Before the Modern Woodman of America took over the present American Legion Building, a Tin Shop was located in it. Carl Iverson ran a Harness Shop in a building where the old Shumate house now stands. An Ice Cream Parlor was also located on this property. The first Barber Shop was also located where Perry Seevers house now stands, and the second Barber Shop was run by Floyd Robinson's dad in part of the building now owned by George Fenno. Also there was been a Fay Furniture Store, a Restaurant downstairs, a dance floor and a roller skating rink upstairs, and a theater in the present George Fenno building. In recent years, part of this building has been torn down.

The present Robert Kay house was originally built for a Confectionery Store and Soda Fountain. Later it was used for a bank and then for a garage when the Model T Ford came into existence. Next to this building stood a Livery Stable for the use of the town people. On the east side of the Pettit Food Store once stood the Village Blacksmith Shop. This building was torn down around 1955. The Pettit Food Store was built when a grocery store that stood to the west of it burned to the ground. On the east side of the present Post Office once stood the Village Elevator and Grainery. This building was torn down around 1952.

Between 1850 and 1870 Cordova became a large shipping point between Moline and Savanna. During this time a large building was erected to the extreme west end of the village on the banks of the river. It was called the Diamond Joe Warehouse. Farmers brought their produce here, from which it was loaded on barges and shipped to various places in the country. Lime from the lime kilns around Cordova was also shipped from this warehouse. With the coming of the railroad, river traffic ceased to remain the main means of transportation. Finally the warehouse had to close because of lack of business. A few years later a grist mill operated in the warehouse, then it was converted into a button factory, and finally to a tomato canning factory operated by J. Pinneo. In 1920 the building was razed by Frank Naftzer and moved to Albany where it was made into a barn.

At one time Cordova had a very active Concert Bank which was organized in 1855. it played at all local celebrations and it's annual event was to play at the Farmer's Picnic at Woodward's Grove.

The Masonic Lodge No. 543 was organized in 1867. The B.Y.P. U and the Baptist Guild Society were organized in 1887 and 1906. In 1926 the Cordova 4H Club was organized and in 1936 the Foods Club was added. The Cordova Boat Club was organized in 1955.

Since most of the early settlers settled in the west part of town, this section became known as Jersey Row. Later the east end of the town started to develop. Most of the buildings in this part were built by Brigham and this section became known as Brigham Addition. With the development of the east end a bridge was finally built to connect the two parts of time. Up to this time if one wanted to cross to the other side, he had to cross by boat or drive clear out around through the country.

Cordova Directory of 1877 with a population of 1500 listed:

Theodore Abbott	Attorney
J. Cool, Jr.	Dealer in Agricultural Implements
F. A. Hill MD.	Physician and Surgeon
J. Marshall	Implement Dealer
W. G. Marshall	General Stock and Grain Merchant
A. J. Sible	Dealer in Groceries and Provisions
W. D. Webster	Dealer in Dry Goods
O. N. Wherford	Dealer in Groceries
J. L. Wynkoop	Manufacturer of Cordova White Lime

In 1885 the village had four general stores, one grocery store, two drug stores, one restaurant, two black smith shops, two shoe shops, two wagon shops, one meat market, two grain buyers, two stock buyers, two lime kilns, two physicians and surgeons and one lawyer.

In 1936 the village consisted of two churches, two schools, three garages, four grocery stores, a drug store, a barber shop, a bank, a depot, a library, a post office, a lunch room, a meat market, two elevators, a coal business, a blacksmith shop, the Farmers Association and the M. W. A. The population was approximately 400.

Today there are two grocery stores, one gas station, two garages, a post office, a library, one school which is the grade school, a restaurant, the American Legion Building, a sales and service appliance store, a barbershop, one church which is the Cordova Baptist church and a dining room and tavern combined.

Conclusion

The river commerce began in 1820. It reaches it's height in thirty years, and another thirty years brought the end. The railroads banished the steamboats from the landings as they had driven the stage coach and the covered wagon from the prairie trails.

The history of Cordova presents a panorama that entails the founding on a beautiful wooded site along the Mississippi River through a period of development of the natural resources and the growing of industries, important to small towns in an earlier day.

Like many other river towns it shared an ambition that someday it would be an important commercial port. No doubt when the first white man settled on the land, which was to be the future sit of the village, he was impressed with the natural possibilities. There was an abundance of natural rock for building purposes. It was softer than some rock and lended itself readily to be shaped for building purposes by the equipment that the early pioneers had to use.

Before the railroads pushed their way across the continent, transportation was a major problem of the early settlers. The river afforded the best means of travel and shipping and this industry found an excellent station at Cordova. The harbor was good and the landings were wide and dry. There was no hill to climb to gain access to the back country and the farmer's ox cart could come to the very landing of the steamboat to dispose of the sacked grain or to receive the cargo of merchandise from a distant port. Wood from the timbered slopes adjacent to the river afforded lumber and fuel, for human consumption was no problem was the water level was within thirty or less feet from the surface and the digging in most places could be done with a spade. In fact, it was an ideal spot for settlement waiting to be discovered by the imagination and ambition of one of the pioneers as the frontier gradually pushes it's way westward.

A century has come and gone since the founding of the little village and the town has given way to the modern methods of manufacture augmented by facilities of shipping and travel.

The natural resources have become exhausted to the greater extent. The fact remains that any town that develops on the strength of the natural resources much face the

day when that industry will of necessity cease to exist. Manufacturing concerns at early date learned that locating near a source of supply was not the most essential requirement of the business. Consequently towns grew into cities because of the large number of manufacturing concerns that located there, while towns like Cordova, Port Byron and many others along the river in our own locality were over-populated for a period and then gradually receded to their present size.

All of these factors have taken from the town many of it's people and from a busy manufacturing and shipping point there now stands a quiet and comfortable dwelling center which amply supplied with stores, garages, and etc. In the place of the industrial institutions has come the development of the land surrounding Cordova. Large tracts were broken into smaller parcels and these afford some of the best farm sites available in the section.

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