

Re-discovering ILLINOIS

by LESTER B. COLBY
ILLINOIS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Macoupin is an Indian word meaning artichoke. Old-timers down in Macoupin county appear to pronounce it as if spelled Ma-goop-in. Wild artichokes used to grow in abundance along a creek flowing in a westerly direction into the Illinois river not far from its mouth. This became known as Macoupin creek.

When time came to carve a county out of the virgin land hereabouts, rich and fertile, the pioneers called it Macoupin county. Carlinville is the county seat. It is named in honor of Thomas Carlin, one of the first governors of Illinois. Carlinville claims a distinction—it is the only Carlinville in the world.

Unique College
There are facts of interest in Carlinville with its 5,500 people. It is the home of Blackburn university. There is no other university or college just like it in all America. It is a school conducted along unique ideas. We find also in Carlinville a courthouse that half a century ago plunged Macoupin county into an opera bouffe scandal.

That amazing courthouse, built in 1867, cost \$1,300,000 and in those times a few thousand dollars meant a fortune. Carlinville today seems prosperous—but there are more than 100 empty houses in the city. I shall tell about these things.

Self-Help School
What strikes one most about Blackburn university is the fact that it is "a 100 per cent self-help school." That means that every student is employed, working for pay. There is no other way there. To enter school one has to pass certain requirements and the first among them is that the student must be in need of this sort of school. He must be minus in riches.

The school year was just coming to an end when I visited Blackburn. The most of the 197 young men and young women were preparing to return to their homes. Generally they live in the dormitories and board in the dining hall. This dining hall is managed by students; one student head cook, others assistant cooks.

Students operate the laundry, do all the work there. Students manage all the business about the school, do the buying, the selling—for there is selling from the school farm. The newer buildings at the school, including the girls' dormitory, were built by the students. They have just completed a new president's house.

I was told that students did everything in erecting these buildings with the exception of the actual laying of the brick. Each year finds students in Blackburn from many lands—as far away as China, India and Persia. The fame of Blackburn has traveled. I was told that room, board and tuition costs, on the average, \$160 a year in money, work for the rest.

Give Scholarships
Certain wealthy persons interested in these young people who help themselves each year give scholarships. Boys go to schools like Princeton; girls, sometimes, to Mt. Holyoke or other famous schools. I asked how these boys and girls, courageous enough to work themselves through Blackburn, fared in the later rankings in the bigger, softer schools.

"They're among the best students there," was the reply. "They take honors regularly."
Blackburn, the school that is operated by paid students, rather than for paying students, I think you will agree, is unique.

That Court House
I mentioned Macoupin county's \$1,300,000 court house, the one that once had a \$90,000 fence around it. The story is a bit of unappreciated comedy. Residents of Macoupin county still smile painfully when it is mentioned. They were forty-three years paying for it and forty-three years is a long time.

When charges started to fly and indictments were demanded, the builders of this surprising edifice, raised in the name of justice, fled. The

most of them came back,—in time. Nothing was ever proved against them. Prosecutions collapsed. A patriarch amid the splendor confides to me:

"They just ment hog-wild spending money."
Ornate? you ask. Yes, and then some. If you ever get into the vicinity of Carlinville by all means visit this court house, relic of the spending orgy. Its great sandstone columns are somewhat weathered now. Its mural decorations are old-timey. Its tiles are worn and loose ones clink under foot.

Scrollwork and ornamentation in metal is everywhere. There's much that the modern architect would call "gingerbread" about it. Doors are massive and there is too much of everything and everything is too big. Each chandelier in the big court room cost several hundred dollars, I was told. Even the glass in the windows might have been made for a cathedral.

The Judge's Chair
When you visit this extravaganza of a court house I warn you do not depart until you have tiptoed to the shabby dark little storeroom and have gazed with awe upon "the chair." It is the chair, designed for the judge, that no judge has ever had the temerity, boldness, crust or foolishness to sit in.

That chair is handcarved with flourish. It has gargoyles and lions' heads and symbolic figures of Lilliputian Goddesses of justice, now broken. It is an amazing thing, throne-like.

The uncomfortable seat is so broad than twin Tafts might perch in it un-touchingly. Its high back perpendicular above bulbous legs with claw feet. For nearly sixty years jurists who have come to hold court among all the royal fussiness of this courthouse of splendor have backed away from this final inspired touch of comedy.

And so the old chair, its tapestries once gloriously crimson, its nailheads once shining brass, rots amid dust and mildew. It cost, they told me, \$700.

Vacant Houses
There is no humor, no comedy at all in the 100+ houses standing vacant in Carlinville. They are all rather newly built, good houses, well painted. There's nothing of the shack about them. They sit in orderly rows in a subdivision not long built up. You can rent one of them very cheap. It happened like this:

There is a thick seam of good coal under Carlinville, about 316 feet from the surface. It runs from seven to eight feet of mineable coal. A large oil company, one of the biggest, running a string of refineries, bought a big acreage of this coal. We went out to one of the mines—standing idle. The investment at this mine, I was told, is more than \$4,000,000. The mine ran for a time. It easily put out its 8,000 tons a day. Capacity, I was informed, might be 12,000.

Why shut down, I asked. Why all the homes of workmen empty? Why this investment standing idle? They smiled and told me that it was because the miners demanded so much money that the oil company could buy coal in other states cheaper than it could produce it.

Why burn its own coal when other coal could be bought for less than the coal it owned could be brought to the mine-mouth? That seemed the answer, wages so high that wages ceased, and there was no argument.

Agriculture
Basically Macoupin is agricultural. It is in the lower edge of the primary

corn belt. Yields of from fifty to eighty bushels of corn to the acre are common. Wheat does well, often forty to forty-five bushels to the acre. League are growing in favor and some farmers are liming their soil. The farm bureau has done that. Macoupin ranks among the foremost counties of the state in poultry production. Commercial orcharding is making strides.

The Macoupin county farm bureau has held a large number of what are called "farm lawn" meetings. These bring out sometimes as many as 500 people. Interesting programs, motion pictures and refreshments add to the interest. Two primary thoughts center around these meetings:

- 1—How to get more money out of the soil.
- 2—How to put more fertility into it.

Carlinville also has a clay products plant, chief output brick and tile. I said in the beginning Carlinville seems prosperous and has its head up in spite of the 100 empty houses. It looks upon the houses as an asset. It has them. Surely something will come along to fill the void. Some new industry, perhaps.

It has something to offer, Carlinville people tell me, houses and labor. Carlinville has learned to smile when it is "shooting in the rough." Take the case of the \$1,300,000 court house. A thought strikes me:

"What heroes and pathmakers might those gay spenders of '67 have

been if, somehow by some magic, they could have used that money for concrete roads instead of a royal gingerbread courthouse!

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