

# Re-discovering ILLINOIS

Have you ever heard of Shokokon? Probably not. Few talk of Shokokon today but once it was an important place — the western end of the "old California trail" in Illinois. In its heyday it was a trading post of several hundred people.

Merchants, horse traders, saloon keepers, gamblers, cutthroats and thieves congregated here on the Mississippi river. For years on years a myriad of people in covered wagons, never-ending trains of them, forever headed west, drew up wearily and stopped.

**River Steamers Took Them**  
River steamers tied up to trees and stabs and took them aboard with their wives and children, their horses and oxen, their cats and dogs, their kettles and chickens and packets of seeds, "herbs and mineral medicines," which they carried to guard against illnesses, and their other pitiful, intimate belongings.

Steamers carried them up the river six or seven miles and landed them at Burlington, Iowa, where they headed on to the farther west. They could not make the crossing straight at Burlington for on the eastern side of the Mississippi was swamp and lowland, no fitting place for camping out and resting to await the ferry's coming.

Shokokon today is all but deserted. I found it a jumble of fishermen's shacks, fish traps, nets drying, dogs nosing about, a pen of ducks and a dozen leathery men. The landing place is a junkyard gone to seed. Not far away is a row of summer cottages, presumably deserted except for the warmer months. So passes glory.

In Henderson County  
All this is in Henderson county. I recently spent a week in Henderson county and ought to have a couple of "stories" out of it. For Henderson county is a sort of laboratory where men are working out their affairs methodically, often a little backwardly, but with hoping.

I visited Oquawka, Bald Knob, Rozetta, Biggsville, Gladstone, Carmen, Lomax, Terre Haute, Media, Rariton, and Stronghurst. Oquawka, on the Mississippi, is county seat of Henderson county. I sat where Stephen A. Douglas once sat, in the little courthouse built in 1841. Here he rules, a stubby little round man, as circuit judge. I saw the spot where a block house was built in 1831 when Black Hawk began to grow restive.

Oquawkiek in Sac means Yellow Banks. That was too big a mouthful for the white man so he shortened it. Yellow Banks because of its primitive beauty and good hunting, a favored spot, was loved by the Sacs and Foxes. It was at Oquawka that Black Hawk held his famous powwow with White Cloud, his prophet, which led to the Black Hawk war.

**Wrote History**  
John B. Patterson, editor, came to Oquawka in 1824. He it was who Hawk, as the old Sac chief dictated it, founded the Spectator, earliest of Henderson county newspapers and lived out his lifetime here. Some day I hope to glean from that book a chapter for this series. It is the most vivid picture of an Indian chief's tormented mind that I have ever read and if what Black Hawk says is true there never was a Black Hawk war — just the debacle of a huddled, frightened, starving, hopeless tribe fleeing before

persecutors; striking back now and then to stay off instant death but always with hunger ahead and hell at their heels. Yet he tells it with a grim humor and a red man's philosophy.

But I must write of the now.  
**The Present**  
When you look over the restful old homes of Oquawka, the business section that seems to sun itself, half-sleeping, it is hard to think that this spot was once staked out as the site of a great metropolis. Subdivisions with painted stakes and waving banners, auctioneers and salesmen, are not new.

On that wild sale day in Oquawka in 1836 when the auctioneer howled, barbecue simmered and whiskey flowed, town lots averaged \$900 each and some choice business corners ran into thousands of dollars. Many lots in Oquawka can be bought today at a discount from their 1836 prices.

But the town did boom for a time; boomed big. It was a Mississippi river shopping point and boats came by the hundreds. Farmers freighted grains and produce in Oquawka from 75 and 100 miles around for shipment. Here was the market. That until the railroads came and river freighting died.

When the C. B. & Q. poked its rails west and nozzled across the Mississippi river it struck Iowa at Burlington. Oquawka didn't care. It was secure. That has been Oquawka's fault all ways. It has waited, Kismet. All would work out in destiny. So it is on a little-used branch line today.

I had to drive forty extra miles to get to Oquawka. The creek was up. Henderson creek is a wobbly, winding stream. It is forever overflowing. When it does Oquawka is almost on an island. You get in over sand flats to the north. The flood plain of Henderson creek covers 12,400 acres. I talked to farmers. One said to me:

"I've lost three crops out of the last five." Another spoke up: "I've lost four out of the last seven." A third, a larger land owner, told me: "one flood cost me \$60,000."

**Flood Cost**  
I asked them what a flood might cost the valley and they replied in estimates which ran all the way from \$250,000 to \$1,000,000 as a single season's loss. But, they said, there is a cure for it. A ditch can be built at a point above Oquawka, a ditch three and a half miles long, that will cost \$200,000 and end the floods for all time!

That ditch, engineers who have made surveys say, would tax the owners of the 12,400 acres less than \$17 an acre. They estimate that the minute it is through their land values will be increased \$50 an acre or \$620,000—because no more floods.

I asked them when they were going to dig the ditch and they replied, with tired smiles, "we do not know. We do not seem to be able to get together on a plan."

So the creek rises almost yearly and a flood takes two or three times the cost of the canal! Roads are bad into Oquawka. A citizen, a bit wearily remarked, "We could have better roads, but we can't seem to get to-

gether on a plan. Some here feel that good roads would take business out. They do not seem to realize that there are only a few hundred of us to go out but that there are thousands who might come in."

**Watermelons**  
I saw an old man beside a pile of watermelons. Oquawka is famous for its watermelons. One strain of melons has been named by a seed-house the Oquawka melon. The old fellow told me that he had been raising and selling melons for 42 years. I asked how business was. He replied, "Plenty of melons but little market. The creek is up, you see."

We drove our long way around and finally got back on the concrete road, a dozen miles or more away. I found a young man by the side of the road selling watermelons. We stopped and bought one and asked about business. He answered, with a merry smile, "Fine, I've sold more than \$5,000 worth here this season."

**Hard Roads**  
They are beginning to know the value of hard roads in Henderson county. They are beginning to see what a hard road does to land values and how it brings the market nearer. A dozen miles of concrete highway cuts through the county, east and west.

It goes through the one-time marsh that stopped the early immigrants and drove them south to Shokokon. That marsh has vanished. Ditching machines have grazed channels and have drained the low places. Drainage districts have lifted levees to guard against rising waters. High corn stands in the fields.

Some of it has been laid out as an industrial site. The Burlington road has just completed plans for a 10-track switch yard. Big corporations have been inspecting locations near the east end of the Mississippi river wagon bridge, along the flats crossed by steel rails and concrete.

**Future Bright**  
I'd like to own some acres there. Burlington, across the river, seems rather crowded in by the high hills beyond it. Unless I err, people and industries are going to pour in here fast in the next quarter century. It seems to have all things needed to make a future—if those who own it will be aggressive.

Aggressiveness, careful planning, organized effort to grow. Think of the millions in profits that \$200,000 ditch will pay to the people along Henderson creek, and the merchants who deal with them. If they get together. Perhaps they have begun to do so. They have organized a Henderson County Chamber of Commerce—county-wide in its plans. The ditch is one of its first goals.

Someone attached a placard to the Wilson Memorial Tablet at Geneva which declared that "The American people have done nothing to deserve that the President should be designated as the founder of the League of Nations." Well, that's something to be thankful for anyhow.

The old hearthstone about which we gather Thanksgiving day is very frequently the hotel radiator.

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