



Our Times

Volume 3 Issue 1

THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Spring 1998

Spring is in the Air!

Ah yes, spring! A time to be joyous—to throw open the doors, to breathe in the scents of apple blossoms and fresh-cut grass.

Oh no, spring! A time to be wary—to head for the cellar, to listen for the hammering of hail and the roar of high winds.

We dedicate this issue to spring in our county. Spring as once welcomed by the owners of greenhouses, kept busy with orders for Easter lilies, Mother's Day roses, and Decoration Day grave plantings. Spring as kept year-round in those same greenhouses through the burning of Logan County coal. And spring as sometimes cursed by the greenhouse owners, as well as others who have been victimized by this most charming, most changeable and, yes, sometimes most tragic, of seasons.

Everything's Coming Up Roses!

Gullett and Sons Greenhouses

When Edna Dehner and Gladys Nolan walked home from Central School, eighty-odd years ago, they often took a shortcut through the Gullett Greenhouse yards. The little girls liked to gather the cut roses that had been discarded that day. Maybe the flowers would stay nice enough to take to school in the morning.

Begun in 1865, when William J. Gullett built a 12 by 24-foot greenhouse on low, marshy land at 515 North Logan, the greenhouse business was thriving by the time Edna and Gladys were making their bouquets.



Gullett and Sons delivery wagon. Courtesy of Stuart Wyneken.

Two of William's sons had permanently joined him in the business: Charles Edward ("Ed") in 1888 and Wilbur in 1889. In later years, Ed would work in the office, while Wilbur worked in the greenhouses. From the start, the three men made a powerful combination: by 1903, most of the block bordered by Logan and Kankakee and Tremont and Peoria Streets was filled with greenhouses; and flowers were being shipped to Illinois towns and neighboring states.

William Gullett died in 1909; in 1914, his sons began building greenhouses on east Tremont, on property bought from the Citizens' Coal Company. That East Side (wholesale) plant was located between Sherman and Limit streets and by 1928 consisted of 41 buildings, each 500 feet long.

The downtown plant became the retail operation; the office building is today the home of B & L Photogra-

(Continued on page 2, *Roses . . .*)

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Publisher's Notes

My daughter Cari was born on a snowy night, the day after Christmas in 1978. I stood with one foot in the delivery room and the other in the hallway, looking first to my wife and the nurses who attended her, and then down the hallway in expectation of the doctor. This being still the ancient era before men were liberated, I had no intention of watching the blessed event; I only stood sentinel, eager to announce the arrival of the doctor and then head for the protective cocoon of the waiting room—far from the moans and screams and anguished cries that I knew must accompany such an ordeal. In the nick of time, Doc Ulrich strode through the swinging doors, at last arrived over icy roads through the storm to deliver Caroline Elizabeth (a name Kathy McCullough called “regal”). It was an easy delivery, or so I am told.

Within days (yes, moms stayed days in the hospital in the ancient era, not hours), we noticed that the maternity ward was filled to overflowing with newborn Lincolniters. My wife inquired, “Is this an unusually large number of babies?” The weary nurses answered, “Why yes, it’s been nine months since the ice storm.” I remembered huddling around the fireplace in sleeping bags, with no electricity and no water at Flamingo Heights, in the aftermath of the Easter ice storm; but I must have forgotten some of the details.

When I wasted away the evenings of an ill-spent youth shooting pool at Schumm’s Place in Towanda, an old man would stop in every night to tell stories and slug down a Nehi grape pop. I didn’t know his real name, but everyone called him “’02.” The men pronounced that “aught two,” and the boys pronounced it “oh two.” For a long time, I thought the nickname came from the number of teeth in his mouth, but I later realized that it was a reference to his favorite stories about the big storm during the winter of 1902. I envied him a life experience that had left such an impression (and such material for stories). Now I have a storm story of my own—the Big One of ’78. SR

For Your Information:

- At Tremont Park on the former Gullett property, a portion of an I-beam from an old greenhouse will occasionally work its way out of the ground. Owner Henry Spellman says the beams “are not very kind to lawn mowers.”
- Wilbur Gullett donated the organ for the Methodist Church in Lincoln, where he was organist and choir director for 50 years. He enjoyed playing piano-organ duets there with his oldest daughter, Eleanor.
- Vincent McGough was one of the handicapped people who found work at Gullett’s. He wheeled his chair to the Tremont plant, where his job was to fold newspapers for use in packing the plants.

(Continued from page 1, *Roses . . .*)

phy. Combining the wholesale plant with the 26 smaller greenhouses downtown, by 1928 Gullett and Sons had 22 acres under glass and 40 acres of outdoor plants. That year, 175 people worked for Gullett’s; and the plant shipped flowers all over the U.S.—especially to the Midwestern and Southern states.

The little girls who picked up the roses had stumbled onto what became by far the largest part of the Gullett business. Gullett’s might ship the flowers from 10,000 Japanese Easter lily bulbs in 1915; fans at University of Illinois Homecoming games might wear Gullett “mums”; Lincoln matrons might call 111 in 1939 to order poinsettias.

But ask any Lincoln native of a certain age, and he’ll tell you that Gullett’s was one of the largest growers of roses in the United States. And with 500,000 rose bushes cultivated and four to five million roses cut annually, he’d be right.

The Gullett families had settled close to the greenhouses. The home of founder William and his wife, Nancy, at 411 N. Logan, is gone; but Ed and Ida’s home at 328 N. Logan endures. Wilbur and Mildred raised their three daughters at 520 Tremont, where Wilbur’s grandson, Stuart Wyneken, lives with his wife, Kim.

Of course, the neighborhood doesn’t look quite the same. In 1940, the downtown greenhouses were taken down, leaving just the retail store and a single greenhouse in that location. The lots were sold for homes, with the result that, recently, Dan and Paula Landess found the concrete pad for Gullett’s chimney in their yard at 406 N. Kankakee.

But to get back to our story. As Julia Gullett Holth, Wilbur’s daughter, tells it, “Back in the roaring twenties, everybody had money. But during the Depression, people didn’t buy flowers.” When workers wanted more money, “there was no money to give.” A 1930 strike over union representation became unpleasant, with strikers catching up with one “scab” and forcing him to eat a carnation.

Say It With Flowers

Hembreiker Florists

Everett Hembreiker used to say that “there’s seven days of work” in every week in the floral business. He should know, having joined his father, Otto, in the greenhouse business after graduating from high school in 1928.

Like many other florists (Otto’s brother William, James Knecht, Walt Lehner, and Tom Tibbs come to mind), Otto learned his trade at Gullett’s, where he began working in 1894 at the age of 12. In 1907, he began growing vegetables and then flowers at 437 Tenth Street, making deliveries by wheelbarrow until he could afford a horse and spring-wagon.

By 1920, Hembreiker Brothers (Otto and Carl) had a wholesale business on Tenth Street and a retail store at 504 Broadway in Lincoln. In 1923, Carl sold his interest to Otto and started a florist and landscaping business at the corner of State and Eighth Streets. The curved-front yellow brick office he built in 1944 still stands today.

By 1953, Otto J. Hembreiker had 14 greenhouses. For many years, he also had two stores in Bloomington. Everett’s job was to run the greenhouses and do the funeral and wedding work, which he did with the help of Carl (“Chuck”) Kline. Chuck became a good friend who later helped care for Everett.

Everett’s wife, Mildred Sparks Hembreiker, remembers that her

father-in-law would start out every morning with a car full of plants to sell to florists in the little towns surrounding Lincoln. Shops in De Land, Tremont, Monticello—even Zolds in Peoria—all bought green plants and took orders for holidays.

Things could get pretty hectic, especially during World War II, when the little cards with orders from the servicemen overseas came in. Chuck Kline, for example, was working in a hospital in Italy and wanted flowers sent to his mother.

“Many a time we’d be up all night,” says Mildred. “One morning Everett finally took an hour’s sleep at 5:00 a.m. He thought he had the covers on, but he had thrown a floor rug over himself. That’s how tired he was.”

Mildred remembers sore fingers from making 500 bows for Easter lilies. She also worked in the office after Katherine Hickey retired.

Everett retired from Hembreiker’s in 1968, after suffering a stroke. By 1970, however, he was running the flower shop Tom Tibbs had opened in Mt. Pulaski, where he, Mildred, and Chuck Kline made little round bouquets, trimmed with lace and long ribbons, for the girls to carry to their proms. Everett retired for good in 1978. Otto had retired in 1972, having spent most of his life providing “earth with every plant, and a scent with every flower” (*Lincoln Evening Courier*, August 26, 1953). ■

Wilbur Gullett didn’t think the workers understood. He later told employee Walt Lehner that he had loaned \$50,000 to W. A. Brewerton every fall so that Brewerton could open his mine, getting paid back in coal and presumably giving work to the miners and the Gullett employees. His claim is backed up by the fact that in 1933 Gullett and Sons was one of the petitioners asking that the north mine be sold rather than closed, so that the creditors could be paid.

Somehow Gullett’s made it through the Depression. When the downtown greenhouses were cleared in 1940, the glass was saved to make repairs at the East Side plant. Then on May 2, 1942, a hailstorm struck. Between the storm and a fire that same year, more than two-thirds of the greenhouses were destroyed. Lack of sufficient insurance, wartime restrictions, and a shortage of workers meant that only about half the greenhouses were rebuilt.

After the war, more repairs were made; four greenhouses were built; and by 1950, slightly over 10 acres were under glass. Because of improvements in genetics and disease control, it was possible to produce about the same number of plants in about half the space.

But the rose grower’s days were numbered. The Lincoln mines were closed, and costs of supplies and labor were rising. Flowers from California, where labor was cheap, were being flown to markets in St. Louis and Chicago. Finally, Gullett’s was forced to go into receivership. At last, as Julia Holth says, “The coal company wouldn’t advance any more coal, and they didn’t have the money to pay for it.”

Julia’s parents, Wilbur and Mildred, were hurt that people who had “never spent a dime” at Gullett’s flocked to get free plants when the boilers were turned off in 1961. The property was sold to a group of Lincoln investors in 1963; the 185-foot chimney was blasted; and the greenhouses were cleared from the land. The florist shop at 620 Tremont remained open until 1966. ■



Carl and Otto Hembreiker in their greenhouse. Courtesy of Mildred Hembreiker.

“Stormy Weather”

Spring at Her Most Cruel

Hailstorm of 1942

After the hailstorm of May 2nd, 1942, Walt Lehner worked 12 hours a day replacing glass at the Gullett greenhouses. Mornings, that first week, he woke up with both arms asleep.

The hailstorm struck Lincoln on a Saturday night—a week before Mother’s Day.

Workers had been busy for several weeks before that Saturday, taking orders and picking out plants, which were sitting on the benches with the customers’ names on them—ready to ship or take to the retail store.

The storm lasted fifteen minutes and brought tornadic winds, rain—and enormous hailstones. Walt Lehner remembers that as the glass fell, it cut most of the plants in two. When Wilbur Gullett and Al Sielaff came out to look at the damage, they were in shock.

“We can’t help it,” said Wilbur. “Just charge what it’s worth,” so as to try to get at least some money out of the plants.

Tornado of 1927

On April 19, 1927, a tornado swept

through Central Illinois, flattening the town of Cornland and doing damage at Chestnut, Elkhart, and the area south of Mt. Pulaski. In Logan County, it killed seven people and injured many more.

As the storm approached the Cornland village school, principal Zenobia Zimmermann and teacher Laura Nicholson hurried the children into the basement. As the storm raged, the 43 children, half of them six-year-olds, knelt and repeated the Lord’s Prayer. Their words were drowned out by the roar of the storm and a crash as the roof of the school was blown away.

When the children came out of the basement, they could see that their homes had been destroyed. In some cases, their parents and brothers and sisters lay injured in the ruins. Two of the McIntyre children were among those who had taken refuge in the school basement. Their baby sister had been killed in her mother’s arms by a falling beam.

In April of 1927, Dorothy Kline was an eighth-grader, one of 19 pupils at Oakland School, a country school seven miles southwest of Mt. Pulaski. She remembers the day of the tornado “as if it was yesterday.”

It had been raining all morning. School took up again at 1:00. When it began to hail about 15 minutes later, the teacher, Mary McCullough, commented, “My goodness, that’s large hail!”

Suddenly, the wind began to blow; and the last thing Dorothy remembers is the crash of glass as the windows broke.

When Dorothy woke up, the pupils and the teacher were lying outside on the ground, surrounded by debris. At first, Dorothy had been thought to be dead: she was lying unconscious, face down, with a large beam lying across her back and the end of her braid wrapped around the spike nails. When rescuers finally got her up, she thought she was all right; but 15 minutes later she “began to hurt all over.”

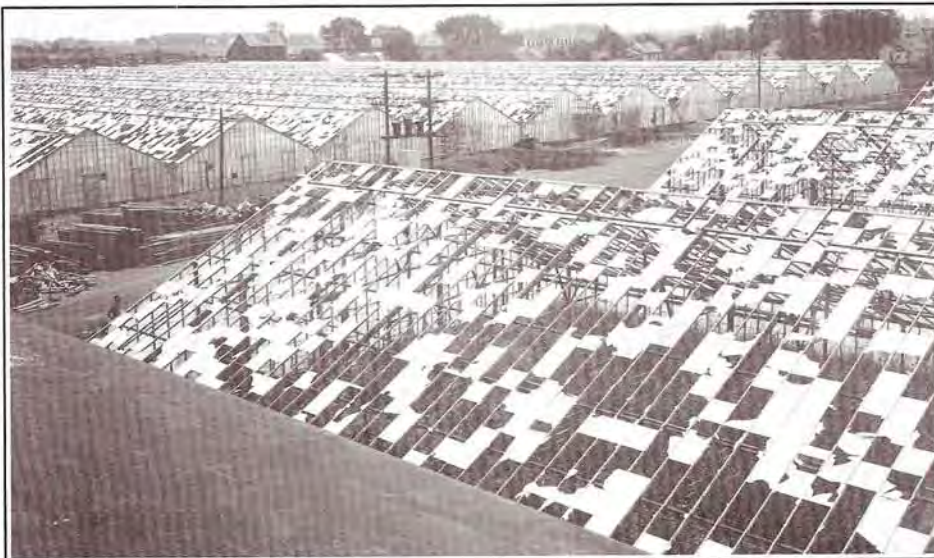
The children were taken to the farm home of J. S. Cook, where Dr. L. L. Dennison examined them. Two children had broken hips, so the fast train was flagged down to take them to the hospital at Springfield.

The schoolhouse had been carried 100 yards out into a field and demolished.

The long-term result of the tornado for Dorothy was back trouble which has lasted all her life. Short-term, every time it started to cloud up and look like rain that summer, Dorothy and her two sisters began to cry.

Even had the teacher had more warning, there would have been no place to go; Dorothy’s school had no storm cellar. County Superintendent of Schools E. H. Lukenbill made basements in country schools a priority after the 1927 tornado.

Basements and storm cellars saved many lives that day. It took a great deal of courage (or fear) to go stand in a storm cellar that was waist-deep in water; but many people did, and doing so sometimes meant the difference between life and death.



Damage to Gullett greenhouses after 1942 hailstorm. Courtesy of Stuart Wyneken.

David and Robert Drake were little boys when the tornado struck near their Cornland home. They have two wonderful records of the tornado: a letter written by their grandmother Abigail Mount Drake and an account written by their father, Martin Bogarte Drake.

David and Robert's mother, Clara Belle, was with the four older children in the dining room when the storm began; as the wind blew and it got darker outside, the house began to move, and she decided to go to the front room to get the baby. She could hardly get the door between the two rooms to open; when she did, the walls of the two rooms parted enough for her to see a crack of light between them.

While the children huddled around their mother in the dining room, David, who was nearly six and the oldest, kept repeating, "I wish Aunt Edith was here. I wish Papa was here. I wish Miss Clark (the household helper) was here."

Imagine Clara Belle's shock when she looked out the various windows and saw that their little red barn, the chicken house, and the smokehouse had disappeared.

Still, they were fortunate. The damage to the house itself was minimal, and none of the family was hurt. Although the shed in which the Ford sedan was parked was wrecked and partly blown away, the car itself was unharmed.

David and Robert's father, M.B. Drake, was cashier of the State Bank of Cornland. When the storm broke, he and his assistant, Mervin Volle, were alone in the bank. They took refuge in the vault, and thus escaped harm.

When the two men came out of the vault, they discovered that the roof of the building had been blown away. In the main room, only the part of the walls that was below the window sills was left.

When the tornado had passed, an anxious M.B. Drake hurried home. Once he found that his family was safe, he helped with the rescue work:

carrying the dead McIntyre baby across the street to the neighbors; helping free Mrs. J. T. Irving, who was trapped under the rubble; accompanying Mrs. McIntyre and her injured son to the Springfield hospital on the fast train.



Oakland School site after the 1927 tornado. Courtesy of Dorothy Kline.

The 300 volunteers who soon poured in to help from other parts of the county were much appreciated; the 10,000 people who came that Sunday to gawk were somewhat less welcome. Belle's brother Andrew Robinson came and built the first building erected in Cornland after the storm—an outhouse.

In addition to the McIntyre baby, six more people were killed in the 1927 tornado: Hobart Baker and Murray Goodin, two eight-year-olds, darted from the Chestnut Community Consolidated School building and were killed instantly by falling debris from the roof and second story. Frank McCue, 55, of Cornland, was killed when the Henry Ford general store was crushed. Henry Mattingly, Jr., 35, was crushed to death when the farm home of his father was destroyed. His father was fatally wounded in the accident and died that same night. William C. McCann, 62, of Chestnut, was caught out-of-doors when the tornado hit. He took refuge in a low spot and hung onto a tree, where the wind beat him against the ground. He died April 28th.

Ice Storm of 1978

Ron Leathers worked for CILCO for 30 years, but he remembers that the Easter weekend ice storm of 1978 was the "worst storm I ever worked."

As he watched the weather that Friday, March 24, 1978, Ron could see

trouble ahead. With heavy rain and the temperature falling from a high of 35 degrees, the ice was beginning to accumulate on his porch and the trees. Soon power lines were sagging from the weight. Wires that weren't broken by the weight of the ice alone were broken by the wind and falling tree limbs.

At 5:30 p.m., Good Friday, the main transmission line to the city of Lincoln went down. Nor were Lincoln people alone. E. Erie Jones, state disaster agency director, estimated that one million people were affected in the storm that left about 100,000 homes without power and did \$10-12 million of damage in 24 counties. Bloomington, Decatur, Springfield, Champaign, Jacksonville, and Danville were all hit.

The 1978 storm was the most dangerous Ron ever worked. Not only were all the poles and wires full of ice, but it was hard to drive the trucks on the slick roads. Walking on the sheet of ice was difficult. When the sun finally came out and melted the ice, "it helped a lot," says Ron.

The first day, Ron drove out on Route 10 to the Waynesville road. As far as he could see, every single pole on that road was down. Overall, 800 poles were down, meaning a lot of work for the 100 CILCO employees who eventually tackled the job. Many came from Peoria and Pekin, where the storm hadn't been so severe.

"We worked 17 straight days," says Ron. "The first day, we worked 30 hours, then slept for six. We came in for 32 more, slept another six, and went out again." After the first few days, the schedule became 18 hours on and six off.

Although 90% of Lincoln people had power by 10:00 a.m. the Monday after Easter, most of the residents of outlying towns did not, according to Gary Wadley, CILCO's Lincoln district manager. The area serviced by Mt. Pulaski was especially hard hit, with three or four miles of lines down. The last customer had power 17 days after the storm hit. ■

20 Acres Under Glass

The Family Remembers

When Julia Gullett Holth was five years old, her picture was on the cover of a national florists' magazine, holding a chrysanthemum.

The third daughter of Wilbur and Mildred Gullett, Julia lives in Florida. She remembers fishing in the lake which was dug to provide water for the East Side plant and playing hide and seek among the greenhouse benches at the old plant across the street from her house.

Julia's mother, Mildred, liked taking home movies. Once, when Ed Gullett had the MGM lion at one of his parties for Lincoln children, she climbed inside the cage to get a shot of the animal. She also took movies of Gullett employees playing on the Florists' baseball team and changing the soil at the greenhouses. After her girls were raised, she took a more active role in the business, making corsages for the Elks' New Year's Eve dance, for example.

Julia's sister Martha married Alan Wyneken, who joined the firm in 1948. Their son Stuart remembers that the greenhouses smelled of chrysanthemums and roses and steam in the winter and what fun it was for him and his sister Jeanette to

walk around inside them in shorts.

Stuart says that as a small child, the huge boiler room, with its massive boiler, "scared me to death." In fact, everything about the plant seemed vast: the large tank where the chemicals were mixed, the enormous coolers, and the long conveyors on which women sorted the roses for packing. It seemed as if the greenhouses went on "forever."

Stuart's grandmother had taken movies of flowers being placed on trucks on their way to the train station. Stuart remembers riding with his father to deliver flowers to the Springfield airport, where they were sent out on Ozark Airlines.

Walt Lehner Remembers

Walt Lehner started working for Gullett's in 1935, helping out over the holidays. Soon he was sent to the wholesale plant, where one of his responsibilities was helping to spray the cyclamen plants with a nicotine solution that killed insects. Walt says that anyone who worked at Gullett's didn't smoke, because cigarettes didn't taste good after breathing in the nicotine.

Lincoln was a natural spot for greenhouses, according to Walt,

because of the coal mines. Gullett's could burn very fine waste coal, called slak, which only cost \$2- \$3 a ton. When Walt first worked at Gullett's, the plants normally burned 45 to 50 tons of coal a day during the winter. If the nights were cold and windy, however, they would burn as many as 100 tons.

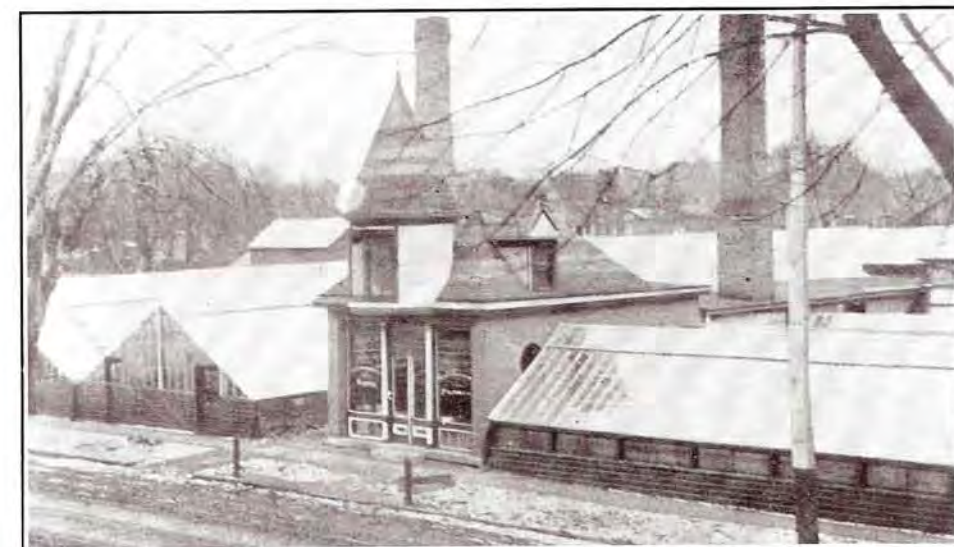
Gullett employee Roy Bacon spent the greater part of his time going out into the country and the fairgrounds to get manure to fertilize the rose plants. The manure was dumped into a pit adjoining the packing shed and flooded with water. By turning on a faucet, workers could send the nutrient-rich water to different areas of the greenhouse.

To talk to Walt is to take a short course in flower-raising. He reminds us that it takes two cuttings to make a long-stem rose and that carnations are cool-weather plants that were planted outside in the summer and only moved to the greenhouses in September. Hydrangeas normally produce only pink and white flowers, says Walt, but adding aluminum sulfate to the water will produce shades of blue. Chrysanthemums are a short-day plant; at Gullett's they were forced into bloom early by being covered with black cloths every day at 4:00 p.m.

Walt left Gullett's to serve in the navy from 1943 to 1946. When he returned home, he was made supervisor of the potted plant department.

Adolph Nielson had been plant superintendent before Al Sielaff, and Walt remembers that he used to come help pot plants. After 40 minutes of trying to outpot everyone, he would say, "I gotta go." Walt says, "He couldn't beat us, but he was fast."

Although Walt says, "I enjoyed every job I ever had," he also reminds us that there was "always that weight [of responsibility] on your shoulders." But working for Wilbur Gullett, who "never, ever bawled me out," was a pleasure. ■



The downtown plant of Gullett and Sons on Tremont Street. The former office is now the home of B & L Photography. Courtesy of Stuart Wyneken.

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Memories of the 1978 Ice Storm and Power Outage

LINDA FUNK FRANZ REMEMBERS her husband Dwain's using the generator from their motor home to supply electricity to their house.

KAREN STALIONS REMEMBERS keeping food from the refrigerator in coolers on the porch and cooking hot dogs and popcorn over the fireplace.

BOB AND SANDY HAHN MEINERSHAGEN REMEMBER changing their 6-month-old daughter Tami in front of the gas oven (the only warm place in the house) and putting bells on the shoelaces of 19-month-old Troy so they could find him when he toddled off in the dark.

VICKIE KUHN REMEMBERS having Marc Short's family as houseguests for a week. The hog farm on which she lives had a generator, which Marc was helping check every few hours all night. Everyone else slept on the floor in the only warm room; Vickie got the couch because she was pregnant.

SANDY BLANE REMEMBERS thinking it was really cool that her family had to drive through the field to get to Easter dinner at her aunt and uncle's home because their ice-covered lane was so slippery.

JANET KLEMM DAHMM REMEMBERS taping piano music for the wedding of Cheryl Hoewisch and Bill Hedrick at Zion Lutheran because there was no electricity to run the organ. Nobody had thought to turn off the light switches; so the romantic candlelight service was interrupted when power was restored, and the harsh overhead lights suddenly came on.

Material for this issue came from the *Lincoln Courier* under its various names, *History of Logan County Illinois 1982*, various Lincoln city directories, Mildred Gullett's diaries, and the memories of our friends.

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Inside This Issue

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