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Hardscrabble, Illinois

Unionville, Illinois

Hardscrabble, Illinois was in LaSalle County situated on the Vermilion River approximately 80 miles southwest of Chicago in the prairie and farm land of north-central Illinois.

In 1824, Samuel D. Lockwood, one of the first commissioners of the Illinois and Michigan Canal project, was given the authorization to hire contractors to survey a route for the canal to follow. This canal connected Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River, greatly increasing shipping traffic in the region. Land speculation in areas lining the canal and rivers by ensued and towns sprouted quickly.

The settlement of Bruce Township began when George Basore moved to the fertile State of Illinois and settled on section 24 in Bruce Township, in 1831. Among the others who settled in the township in the 1830s may be mentioned William Morgan, Gayler Hayes, John Morgan, John and David Sotter, Norton Mackey, Rush and Benjamin Mackey, Norton Gunn, William Reddick, Reuben Hackett, William Donnell, Isaac Painter and William Bronson. (Bruce Township was organized in the spring of 1850, and Samuel Mackey was elected the first township supervisor. The City of Streator is situated in Bruce Township.)

In 1861, John O'Neil, a miner, established the first settlement in what was to become the city of Streator when he opened a small grocery and trading business. O'Neil is credited with giving today's town of Streator its first name, "Hardscrabble" after watching two teams labor to pull a loaded wagon up the hill from the landing on the Vermillion Rover. O'Neil remarked that it was a hard scrabble (hard struggle) and then stenciled "Hard Scrabble" on the front of his store.

The Civil War led to Streator's second name - Unionville. Stories vary as to whether the name represented simply the community's devotion to the Northern cause, or whether it symbolized the accord of Democrats and Republicans as soon as war actually broke



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out. Evidently many people regarded the change as merely symbolic, and continued to call the settlement by its original, more descriptive name of Hardscrabble.

Both Unionville and Otter Creek had bazaars and community meetings where they engaged in work similar to that done by the Red Cross volunteers during recent wars - picking lint and making bandages and underwear for the hospitals.

All during the war the post office (called "Eagle") was about two miles from Unionville. The school children usually went from school to Squire Painter's house for the mail. It came twice a week. And when the spring or fall rains came the road was full of water in places and you had to walk on rail fences to get to the post office. Overholt and Holmes had a general store at Reading, but when the Vermillion River was past fording you could not get to Reading and the road to Ottawa was nothing but mud and water, so supplies got quite limited.

The men who returned to Unionville after the Civil War found little change. There were probably a few new settlers and a few new shanties along the river where Water Street is now; the Springer and Painter store had opened for business, in 1864. But when the town was platted on April 27, 1865, scarcely six square blocks were encompassed by its boundaries: Main Street on the south, Bloomington on the east, Kent on the north, and the river on the west. James Campbell, John O. Dent, Clark S. Dey, and Isaac A. Rice signed as owners of the land.

In 1865 some coal samples from the area were sent to Worthy Stevens Streator, a prominent railroad promoter, physician, industrialist and entrepreneur from Cleveland, Ohio. Streator was immediately struck by the quality of the coal and financed the region's first mining operation, forming the Vermillion Coal Company. Streator approached his nephew Colonel Ralph Plumb at a railway station in December 1865 about overseeing the mining operation in central Illinois for him and several investors. Col. Plumb agreed and arrived in the town then called Unionville in January of 1866 with instructions to purchase and develop 4000 acres of coal lands, as acting secretary, treasurer, and resident manager of the Vermillion Coal Company. He wasted no time. Under his supervision, miners went to work and sank the shaft of the company's first mine, the "Old Slope." Located east of the river, at the foot of Adams Street and just north of Cedar, the mine reached a depth of fifty feet and eventually covered about



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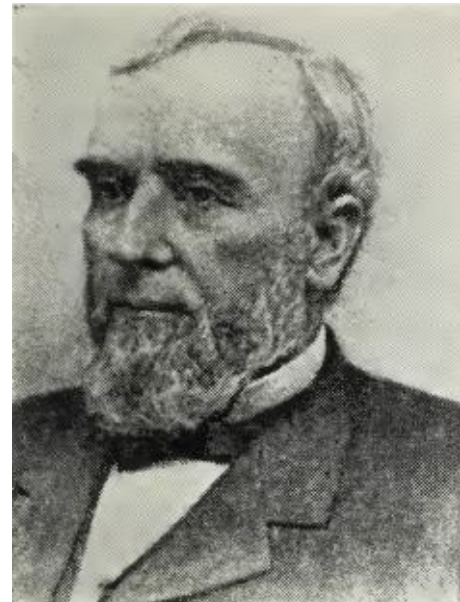
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sixty-five acres. (It never became a large operation, in its heyday employing only between fifty and a hundred men and averaging seventy tons of coal a day.)

While miners worked below ground, workmen above were laying track for the first railroad into Unionville, the fifteen-mile "Stub End Road" that led westward to Wenona and a junction with the Illinois Central line. (It later became part of the Gulf, Mobile and Ohio road.) Halfway between the two towns grew up a small community which Plumb named Garfield after his Civil War commander.

With the new mine and the new railroad, Unionville gained more settlers. A row of wooden shacks sprang up along the railway near the mine. Overholt and Holmes moved their store from Reading to Unionville and put up a two-story building at Main and Bloomington - a site later occupied by the Plumb Hotel. Just back of the store and fronting on Main Street was a three-story frame structure erected by Dr. E. E. Williams; its top floor was the chief place for entertainments prior to the construction of Oriental Hall. Zephaniah Schwartz, one of the earliest settlers in Livingston County, moved to the growing community and built a large rooming house, called Streator House, on the southwest corner of Main and Bloomington.



Worthy Stevens Streator

Unionville was obviously growing beyond the boundaries drawn for it in 1865, so Colonel Plumb and other residents arranged to have it replatted. In the meantime, they gave the town its third and present name, commemorating the efforts of the Ohio doctor who believed in its possibilities. Unionville officially became Streator on November 26, 1867. Less than three months later, on February 10, 1868, Ralph Plumb as secretary together with James Huggans, Albert McCormick, and William Rainey - signed the second plat, which extended Streator's boundaries south to Wilson Street, east to Wasson, and north to Morrell. In the spring a meeting was called "for the purpose of determining by vote the question of incorporating the town of Streator." On the night of April 9, a group of about seventy landowners and businessmen met above the Overholt



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and Holmes store. There they voted, 56 to 5, for incorporation, and later that month, the townspeople chose five trustees for the village council: H. R. Stout, R. P. Smith, Robert Hall, A. J. Baker, and George Temple. The new village was formally incorporated in 1870, with a population of 1486.

In 1870 the Vermillion Coal Company opened its Number 1 mine, with a shaft located just north of Grant and east of Vermillion Street. This mine, the largest in the entire Streator area, was in the thirtieth year of its operation to spread over about 930 acres at an average depth of 80 feet. With a vein of coal between 4 1/2 and 5 feet thick, the mine at its peak yielded more than 2500 tons a day, to make a total of approximately 5,000,000 tons. In 1871 the Vermillion Company united with the Chicago and Wilmington Coal Company to form the Chicago, Wilmington and Vermillion Coal Company - called simply the "Vee Cee" by local residents.

Worthy S. Streator served as an Ohio State Republican Senator from 1869 to 1873.

Note: The Streator High School yearbook is still named "The Hardscrabble."