

THE SPRING CITY: COLFAX, IOWA

BY MRS. MARY NOE

EDITED BY JANE RISDON

Ten miles west of Newton near the Skunk River lies Colfax, Iowa, a town of approximately 2,331 who will observe the Centennial this year. This is a small,



ROBERT STEWART

hilly town which long ago reached a high peak in prosperity and now neither moves forward nor backward; it sits quietly. The Monroe Company (world's largest manufacturer of folding banquet tables), the gravel pit, and the sale of livestock make up the total, current industry of Colfax. Buildings of worn red brick and dirty white wood dismally assert the age of the town, but they cannot begin to reveal the glory of the past when over 13,000 guests would annually

visit just one of the many hotels in town. Colfax used to be a resort town boasting mineral water springs, grand hotels, industry, entertainment, and unsurpassed scenery in its flowered hills; and now little remains of this lost era but the scenery. Here is the story of how Colfax grew, prospered and eventually failed.

It all began when Robert N. Stewart left West Virginia in 1864 and came by rail as far as Grinnell, Iowa. After his arrival in Jasper County, Stewart applied to Josiah B. Grinnell, congressional representative for the Fourth District, for a post office to be located in a stagecoach station ten miles west of Newton. His application was approved and he was given the choice of two names, Sheridan or Colfax. Perhaps due to Schuyler Colfax's long standing support of the Daily Overland Mail, Stewart chose the name Colfax, and this post office has been in continuous service since January 18, 1865. Schuyler

Colfax was then Speaker of the House of Representatives and later was elected Vice President under Ulysses S. Grant.

During the second year of the post office, a dry goods store, general store, and grocery store sprung up in the vicinity. For years, a railroad had been proposed through western Jasper County, but it was not until the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific incorporated in June of 1866 that the right-of-way titles were given. In November of 1866, railroad land near the roughly laid-out little town was purchased, and Colfax began to have a future.

The land which was to become the "original town" of Colfax lay in Section I, Washington Township. It changed hands rapidly as the C. R. I. & P. approached. In April of 1867, Davenport railroadman Abel Kimball bought the land and hired Charles C. Turner to survey it. On July 22, 1867, the town of Colfax was recorded. In the plat, the railroad was made the base line and the area of the original town was bisected by it. Robert Stewart's stagecoach station was a thing of the past as the railroad tracks were laid into Colfax in the summer of 1867. A candid description of the town at that time stated that there were "a few one-story shacks and high board sidewalks along the main street. West were corn fields, rail fences, and prairie, and to the east and south, timber and brush."

Later in 1867, Dr. J. R. Ryan, a physician, opened the first drug store and John Berry built the first hotel. The "City Hotel" was a modest building on the northeast corner of Walnut and Front Streets. Berry then leased the hotel to Mr. and Mrs. Chester H. Stone. Chester Stone was a bridge builder and built all important Jasper County bridges, as well as the Rock Island bridges from Kellogg to Des Moines. This hotel was an important asset to the young town and the first religious services were held in Mrs. Stone's dining room. Stone died in 1874 and his widow, Martha, leased the Pacific House hotel and by 1878 she owned both the City Hotel and the Pacific House. Widow Stone was remarried in 1876 to William Mason Croft who later served as mayor of Colfax.

In 1881, the old City Hotel was moved slightly to the east and the Crofts built an imposing structure adjoining it on the west. This larger hotel became known far and wide as the

Mason House. "Auntie Mason," as Martha Croft was soon titled, would be remembered by travelers from coast to coast for the warmth of her hospitality. In a town that would later be considered a hotel paradise, the Mason House was located closest to the depot and always drew a good business. The building stood as a town landmark until October of 1940.

With the arrival of coal-burning locomotives, Colfax had its first opportunity to become more than a farming community. Possibly around 1863, coal was discovered a few miles east of Colfax. This land was owned by Joseph Slaughter, a pioneer Jasper County farmer. Two young men stumbled over a chunk of loose coal while turkey hunting on Slaughter's land. This led to the opening of a "drift" mine. In 1865, Slaughter's mine near the South Skunk River was described in an issue of the *Iowa State Gazetteer*:

A gently curving ridge extends along the southwest side of the river for a distance of two or three miles which rises to a height of perhaps a hundred feet above the river. The convenience with which coal can be obtained at Slaughter's, owing to the situation of the bed in relation to the river . . . makes this deposit of importance to the adjacent country; a considerable quantity finds its way to the neighboring towns. The bed of coal, where opened, is about four feet thick.

Coal for domestic use in the little village of Colfax first came from this mine. Men hauled home what they needed by team and wagon. The approach to the coal "bank" was from the north. A winding road, quite often deep with mud, led to the red bridge, a narrow-one-way structure that crossed the river on Slaughter property. Sometimes men had to wait several days until their turn came to receive coal, but accommodations were provided by the Slaughters.

The mine was a horizontal tunnel driven into the bluff. Coal was dug by pick from the vein where it was exposed and as the mining advanced into the hillside, timbers were set up to support the overburden. The coal was dumped into a small cart, pulled along wooden rails by a mule, and hand-loaded into the customer's wagon by the bushelful. Twenty-five bushels equalled a ton.

Early discoveries such as the Slaughter mine led to an intense search for coal after the railroad's arrival, and to an unexpected era for Colfax. In the fall of 1875, some local men were boring for coal a mile east of town for the C. R. I. & P.

when their work was hindered by a flow of water that rose to the surface. They tasted the water and, noting an unusual quality about it, sent a sample to James R. Blaney, a Chicago chemist, who analyzed it. The water was declared to have a high mineral content and to be of great medicinal value. The artesian spring immediately attracted invalids who arrived with a variety of ailments. In most cases the results were highly satisfactory, and without much advertising, Colfax mineral water quickly acquired a fantastic reputation. The bottling of mineral water became a new industry and the water was sent all over the world, while the coal industry also continued to grow and prosper.

Established 1882 W. C. Crisman, Manager



WE SELL

"The Original" Colfax Mineral Water

Delicious drinks in all the popular flavors a specialty. We make a special effort to entertain "Leaguers" during the assembly, at our plant, and you are welcome at any hour between 7 a. m. and 6 p. m. We always have something cool to drink. We are situated just across the street from the depot.

From Chautauqua Program of 1913

Almost as quickly as word could spread about the refreshing, healing mineral water, hotels were built in preparation for tourists. About a year after the flow of water was discovered, John F. Dixon, owner of the land on which the original spring was located, built a small hotel at the base of

the bluff to house those who wanted to "take the waters." Business increased steadily and in January of 1877, Dixon and two business associates erected a three-story building, 36 x 115 feet. The hotel was filled to capacity that summer, and approximately one year later another well was drilled . . . this time within Colfax city limits.

Joseph McCoy Stayner and Sidney Williams were probably the ones who drilled the first well within city limits, at any rate, they operated a small bathhouse near it. In 1881, they sold the spring to Samuel W. Cole and son who built the Cole Hotel "three blocks from the depot and situated in a natural grove." Later the hotel was sold and became known as the Grand Hotel. In 1911 it was owned by Dr. Lord of Cedar Rapids and contained more than fifty rooms, which were offered on the American Plan at \$2 to \$3 a day. The hotel was not conducted as a sanitarium, but had medical attendants for those who cared to take the benefit of the "health giving spring water." The Grand Hotel is currently still in business and has altered little in appearance. Across the street northwest from the Grand was the Mills House Hotel which has been remodeled and is used today as an apartment house.

THE GRAND HOTEL OF 1912





Photo by Norma Brooks

THE GRAND HOTEL OF 1966

The Ryan Hotel, which had been built by Dr. J. R. Ryan in 1883 on Walnut Street, was sold to Peter W. Luengen who named it Centropolis. In 1915, Dr. R. G. Anspach leased the Centropolis and later bought it. His "Colfax Sanitarium" provided therapeutic bathing and massage until comparatively recent years, and the building itself still stands.

In 1885, Dr. Abner Fry and his son, Dan, bought property called the Spring City Hotel along the C. R. I. & P. tracks about four blocks east of the depot. They re-named it the Fry Hotel and theirs was one of the best resorts in the nation

THE FRY HOTEL



for years. By 1900, it contained over 110 rooms and was located in an 11-acre wooded park. In 1904 the hotel was sold to Tom McNear of Mason City, who called it the Monte Colfax. The Monte Colfax completely burned in 1906 when a spark from a passing train set a disastrous fire.

To the southwest of the Fry Hotel, a building was erected in 1890 by Dr. O. G. W. Adams. The Adams Sanitarium has been known under a variety of names . . . the Gilman, the Kelly House, the McMullen House, and the Victoria. The 30-room structure was enlarged to 60 rooms at one time, and



THE VICTORIA HOTEL

still later, a 30-room annex was built across the street to the west. Dr. Florence Sherborn and her husband, Dr. John Bayard Sherborn, managers of the Victoria in 1912, stated they had "steam heat, electric lights, call bells, telephones and elevator . . . a staff of resident physicians . . . static machine, high frequency coil, vibrator, hot air machine, leucodescent lamp, and galvanic and faradic batteries." It had an operating room in addition to the bathing rooms, all types of hyriatic treatment, and American and Swedish methods of massage.

The Victoria was owned successfully by the Sherborns, Dr. C. M. Porter, and Mrs. Loretta Cappellar. It was then closed

for a time and re-opened under the ownership of Dr. S. E. Ball from Excelsior Springs, Missouri. In 1930, the "Ball Health School" added a new brick bathhouse. After this establishment was closed, all of the structure except the bathhouse was condemned and torn down in 1946. The remaining portion is in operation today as the Gardner Nursing Home.

In 1904 a beautiful three-story residence across the street west of the Grand Hotel was converted into the Turner Rest Home by Dr. Lewis C. S. Turner and his wife, Dr. Alice B. S. Turner. The Turners came to Colfax in 1882 and had been associated with the Grand and the Victoria. Their rest home had a spring on the property and was a convenient three blocks from the depot. They advised people, "Do not hesitate to come on a cot. You will not need to go back on it. Two or three weeks is the average time of treatment. Medicine is prescribed only in stubborn cases." Hot packs, formentations, and local heat were used to supplement the three to five quarts of water (both hot and cold) taken internally each day. Room and board costs ranged from \$8 to \$12 a week for one person. Six mineral baths with massage sold for \$5. In 1911, the Rest Home was sold to Dr. C. M. Porter and was operated in conjunction with the Porter Brother's General Hospital. The Rest Home was destroyed by fire in February, 1928.

The Colfax General Hospital was a frame residence with a brick addition. In 1911, its operating rooms were well-equipped and the hospital did a flourishing business for several years. It is today a home and apartment house.

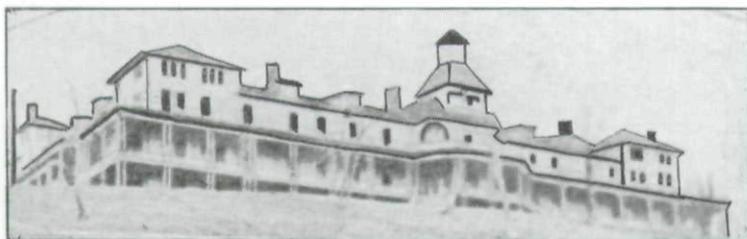
The greatest of all the Colfax hotels was developed one mile east of town on a high bluff. A three-story hotel built there by John F. Dixon at the site of the "Old Magnesian Chalybeate Spring" had burned on Thanksgiving Day in 1881 so a corporation was formed mainly of railroad men known as the Old M. C. Springs Development and Improvement Company. They had secured options on this land by 1882. Water from the Old M. C. Springs had been sent to Professor Gustavus Hinricks of the University of Iowa for examination and he reported, "If a man should tell me the Old M. C. Spring water will not cure rheumatism I should have

no hesitancy in saying he is crazy!" So the corporation built the hotel at a cost of \$100,000 and Schuyler Colfax himself came to participate in dedication ceremonies. The frame building contained over 100 rooms and was known as the "Saratoga of the West." A side track and depot were built at the foot of the hill and an inclined railway carried passengers and baggage up to the hotel.

The corporation's management eventually failed and in the spring of 1892, the hotel was sold to Wesley Jordan for \$10,000. Under his management the hotel prospered for a while. There were a reported 13,000 guests in 1900, but in 1904 the hotel was losing money so it was sold at a sheriff's sale. Col. James P. Donahue of Davenport bought the hotel, determined to return it to popularity. He invested between \$600,000 and \$700,000 in the property over a four-year period. Donahue shrugged, "If the venture doesn't pay, at least I'll have a nice summer house."



FRONT (ABOVE) AND BACK VIEW OF "NICE SUMMER HOUSE"



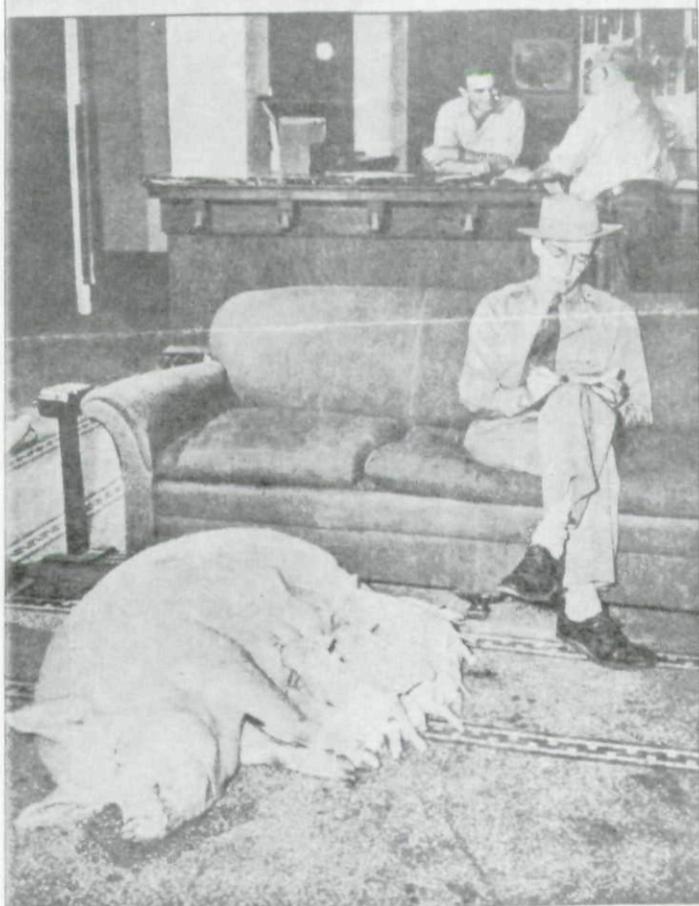
Included in Donahue's improvements were an additional 200 rooms to the hotel, an electric railway into Colfax, and remodeling of both the inside and outside of the building. The Cedar Rapids *Republican* stated, "When the good Lord made Iowa, he dotted it with many pretty spots, but none prettier than the one upon which Col. Donahue has placed the finest resort hotel in the middle west. Moorish in design, the hotel is as beautiful as it is convenient. Interior appointments are excellent, decorations artistic, restful and inspiring. It is homelike." *The Iowa Magazine* said, "The dining room is in soft tones of grey with draperies and rugs of DuBarry rose. The hotel orchestra plays during noonday and evening meals and dances are given once or twice a week for guests and their friends. Broad piazzas surround the hotel on every side." Much of the fresh food served was raised on the hotel property, and the hotel had its own water tank and pumping system, electric power house, and ice and cold storage plants. In addition to liberal consumption of the mineral water, various baths were also given. The treatment was of great value to sufferers of rheumatism, blood complaints, kidney troubles, liver affections, catarrh of stomach and bowels, obesity, and uric acid conditions."

In the years of hotel prosperity, not all of the guests in Colfax were invalids. Colfax was known as the "Carlsbad of America" and few American spas could rival it for popularity. It attracted the same clientele as the fine watering spas of Europe. Around the turn of the century, Colfax was also known as a convention city. People from a variety of organizations came to the little town with the unusual hotel facilities. In 1910 there were an estimated 25,000 visitors, both invalids and conventioners in a town whose normal population was, and still is, around 2,000. At its peak, the "Spring City" had a total of nine hotels and sanitariums, and nineteen of the flowing mineral wells.

World War I brought an end to many of the resorts of Colfax, the Hotel Colfax included. The hotel closed during the

Nothing's Too Good For an Iowa Pig

The world's most unusual hotel guests (and that's something, these days) live in Colfax, Ia. Their home is a former million-dollar resort hotel, the Colfax, an ornate Spanish mission-style structure. It is now headquarters of the National Purebred Livestock Exchange and its guests are hogs and pigs, brought here to be sold.



A Guest Named Biltelite Esther makes herself comfortable in the lobby, which looks to her little ones like a cafeteria. The men are: Kenneth Miller behind desk, Tom Wilson in front of desk, and Wayne Fox on davenport.

Courtesy of Salvatorian Novitiate

war and was a Veteran's Administration Hospital for a short time, and then closed for 22 years. In 1939 the oldest wood structure of the building was removed as a fire hazard, but the remaining steel and concrete still stands. When the hotel re-opened as the headquarters of the National Purebred Livestock Exchange, strange occupants moved into the once-glamorous hotel—455 fat pigs. Officially known as the Great National Swine Palace, the old hotel was soon nicknamed "The Pig Palace." The fine old rooms, like the dining room, were converted into separate little pig pens where the animals could be shown for sale.

A few years later the grounds and hotel were purchased for \$2,000 by Dr. Frederick McCallister, Chief of Staff at Still Osteopathic Hospital in Des Moines and used as a treatment center for alcoholics. One of the largest of its kind in the United States, the center could serve 100 patients at a time. The old hotel underwent a few interesting changes with each new owner—for example, the room used for the office at this time had walls, ceilings and woodwork all painted black.

When the treatment center failed due to expenses, the building was bought by Foxbilt Feed Company of Des Moines as a training center of sales personnel. Since 1955 the property has been owned by the Catholic Society of the Divine Saviour, and is known as the Salvatorian Novitiate. The novices have worked, and are still working, to preserve and restore the

THE SALVATORIAN NOVITIATE

Photo by Norma Brooks



building. The chapel of the Novitiate is located in a room which once housed pig pens, so the novices removed every floor board, cleaned it, then replaced it. The grounds are once again immaculate and covered with flower beds.

In addition to mineral water and fine hotels, the Colfax of the past could also boast of its Chautauqua. West of the Hotel Colfax were the Chautauqua grounds, permanent home of the Epworth League of the Methodist Church. On the grounds were a frame auditorium with seating capacity of 2,000, a dining hall, a sparkling mineral spring and camping grounds. Here was a major source of entertainment, featuring educational and religious speakers in addition to singing or acting groups. The Colfax Chautauqua of 1913 was sponsored by S. M. Holladay, who believed "indeed proper entertainment is food to the mind and soul." Sometimes the entertainment came from far corners of the world, combining with speakers like Billy Sunday to give a well-rounded evening's entertainment.

BALMER KAFFIR BOYS' CHOIR

Photo from Chautauqua Program of 1913



During the development of the hotels, the mineral water bottling plants, and the Chautauqua, the coal industry had prospered and acted as a backbone to the Colfax community during the winter months when few tourists invaded the town. Colfax was the loading point for coal which came from surrounding mining camps and towns such as Oswalt and Seevers. During the early 1900's, however, the coal supply dwindled and the mines eventually closed.

The decline of Colfax can not be easily explained. Of course the coal industry died because there was no more coal, but the mineral water springs did not die for this reason, for water still flows some 300 feet below the earth's surface in Colfax. It seems that a combination of World War I and financial difficulties closed the resorts and ended the bottling industry and the Chautauquas. Also, many ailments that were formerly treated solely with mineral water are now in the domain of modern medicine and surgical techniques.

The countryside around Colfax is much like it was in the past, as described in *My Island Home* by James Norman Hall, co-author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, who was born in Colfax in 1887, and lived there as a boy:

Of all the haunts of boyhood, the Hill was the one I most deeply loved. It was the highest of the wooded hills east of town. The Chicago-to-Denver branch of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad wound around the bases of the hills and just beyond was the 'deep tangled wildwood' bordering the river: a paradise for boys but no more so than the hills themselves. The view from my Hill was even more beautiful than that from the one where our house stood, and from the middle of April the forest floor was carpeted, first with hepaticas whose fragrance is the very breath of spring; then came violets, Dutchman's-breeches, dogtooth violets, jack-in-the-pulpits, cowslips, bloodroots and Mayapple blossoms. And in the autumn when the hills were ablaze with color, there were hickory nut, black walnut and butternut trees and hazelnut bushes loaded with spoil.

Whenever, during later years, I have returned home, I have always planned to arrive in mid-April, if possible, so as to be in time for the hepaticas, and within half an hour of my arrival I head for the woods. At the crest of the highest hill there is, or was, a great linden tree where I loved to sit looking out to the north over the bottom lands of the Skunk River.

Today Colfax has no facilities for those who might want to bathe in the once-famous spring waters since the promoters, the money, and modern accommodations are missing. There is

one lone artesian well which produces a meager supply of mineral water for the patient person who will wait 20 minutes while his jug fills. The Chautauqua grounds are now farm land and timber. The meandering Skunk River has been straightened out and no passenger trains stop in Colfax. In the light of glamorous days gone by, perhaps the saddest thing one can say to an older resident of Colfax is the fact that the depot is so quiet all day, for they remember when it was not quiet for a minute.

THE LAST WELL



Photo by Norma Brooks

PANORAMA

is a new section in the *Annals of Iowa* for answering your questions about Iowa's history. Send any question you want concerning Iowa's history and the most interesting will be answered in Panorama, others will receive reply by mail. Suggestions for article topics are welcomed also. Mail questions to: Panorama, Annals of Iowa, Iowa State Department of History and Archives, Historical Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.