

Iowa— A Place to Grow... Healthy

by *Tim Lane*

SHS (IOWA CITY)



The message on the back of this postcard reads: "Mt. Hosmer . . . rises to some 450 ft. above the river at low water mark, but as viewed in the picture seems not nearly so high."

Beyond our borders, Iowa is known as a breadbasket, and our reputation for feeding the world is widely known. But we have learned that eating well and eating too much are not the same. Americans are now facing an epidemic of overweight and obesity. During the past 20 years, obesity among adults has risen significantly in the United States. The latest data from the National Center for Health Statistics document that 30 percent of U.S. adults (20 years and older), or 60 million people, are obese. That condition alone is related to 112,000 deaths. In Iowa, 37 percent of adults are overweight and 24 percent are obese.

To fight that epidemic an Iowa initiative called Lighten Up Iowa is impacting America. After a pilot effort in 2002, the statewide effort in 2003 involved 14,000 Iowans and participants from seven other states. Lighten Up Iowa promotes physical activity and good nutrition via a team and competition format lasting five months. This group effort helps change environments that contribute to individual success. Sponsored by the Iowa Games, the Iowa Department of Public Health, and Iowa State University Extension, Lighten Up Iowa has generated more than 10 million miles of activity and more than 50 tons of lost weight. Variations of this program are now in more than 21 other states and is collectively known as Lighten Up America.

In this struggle, as with other efforts, we can find plenty of heroes from Iowa's past and present to inspire us. Just last year in the Boston Marathon, the fastest time by a man was 2:11. Cheri Blauwet, an Iowa native studying medicine and public health, covered the course almost 30 minutes faster in her wheelchair, turning the concept of handicapped on its head. In 1971, a year before Title IX, 20 percent of all U.S. high school female athletes were from Iowa.

Farther back in our past, during the Civil War, Annie Turner Wittenmyer, of Keokuk, Iowa, crusaded for "diet kitchens" that would serve nutritious food to wounded and sick soldiers in military hospitals. Ulysses S. Grant said of her: "No soldier on the firing line gave more heroic service than she rendered." During the war's last 18 months, diet kitchens issued two million rations monthly.

In 1851, one of the bluffs overlooking Lansing and the Mississippi River in northeastern Iowa was named for Harriet Goodhue Hosmer—even though she spent less than two hours in Iowa. Born in 1830 in Massachusetts, Hosmer was encouraged by her father to pursue physical exercise after her mother and siblings died of tuberculosis. In 1851, she was traveling up the Mississippi on a steamboat. When the boat stopped in Lansing and the young men on board proposed a footrace to the top of the bluff, Hosmer joined in the competition. Her early devotion to fitness paid off and she won the race. The mayor and townspeople agreed with the captain's suggestion to name the bluff after Hosmer, as a fitting prize for her energy and ability. Hosmer went on to Rome the next year to study sculpture. Her work frequently addressed the theme of strong women.

Today visitors can enjoy a spectacular view of three states (Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota) and the beautiful Mississippi River simply by driving—or running—to the top of Mt. Hosmer. ❖

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