



The Society Story

Newsletter of the LaSalle County Historical Society

May 2011



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Elsie Strawn Armstrong –Pioneer Mother

Elsie Strawn Armstrong was a pioneer woman who came to Illinois with her children to build a new life for them. In her later years when she could not see well enough to sew, she composed the story of her remarkable life in rhyme. Musician Keith Clark also wrote a song about her.

Elsie Strawn was born in 1789 in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, one of six children born to a Quaker family. She started working at an early age, being able to spin and weave linen cloth by age seven. She also helped her father in the fields during planting and harvest times.

When she was nineteen Elsie met Joseph Armstrong and married him after a short courtship. Early in her marriage she and her husband and infant son moved 300 miles to

“I do not think I rode
Ten miles of that long way,
But I walked and drove my cows
With my child from day to day”

land her father had given her in Ohio. Elsie walked most of the way carrying her boy

after the hired man accidentally let her horse escape.

Before the men cleared the land for their new cabin, she insisted that they tap the maple trees on the property. Over her husband's objections she made more maple syrup and sugar than they could use. She then sold the excess to buy things they could not grow, such as tea, coffee and household goods.

Elsie's husband began a distillery and she soon found he liked to sample his product. This didn't meet with Elsie's approval and after a

“I told them that was right,
To chop them deep and well,
And then we'd have the sugar
Both to keep and sell.

My husband said t'was nonsense
To make sugar to sell,
If we made what we needed
We would be doing well.”

But Elsie kept working and made extra, and when the British war broke out ...

Produce did take rise,
And all things else according
Did bear a higher price.

Then I took of my sugar,
And conveyed it to the store,
In order to exchange it
For things I needed more.”

number of years she left him because of his drinking.

In 1831 Elsie packed up her belongings and despite the objections of her family and friends, she and seven of her sons, ranging in age from about three years to 19 years old, travelled by covered wagon to Illinois. Her

eldest son John and her brothers were already there and sent reports back of the rich, treeless prairie land. She knew that they would have a better chance to make a living there than in the increasingly populated region they had come from.

She found land in Deer Park Township and helped her boys build their new home, carrying split logs for the floor.

In May of 1832, they were warned that the local Indians were on the warpath and all settlers should go to the fort in Ottawa for safety. Elsie went to her brother's place near Hennepin, and her older boys went off to join the militia. Joel, at the age of fifteen, took three yoke of oxen to haul provisions and supplies for the militia.

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Elsie and her youngest sons stayed away for the duration of the Black Hawk War, returning to their homestead in August of 1832 to find that soldiers had taken all of the boy's extra clothing that she had been unable to carry. This loss was sorely felt by Elsie since she had made the clothing from cloth she had woven.

The soldiers had also taken three hundred chickens, all of their oats and all of the garden produce that was ripe. Their fields lay uncultivated, but there was corn standing, and pumpkins, beans, cabbage, parsnips, and potatoes in the field. The boys began haying, and soon had enough hay set aside in stacks to carry them through the winter. They then enlarged the house they had begun the fall before.

In eighteen months we moved six times,
 No wonder we were tired.
 To have a chance to be at home
 We very much desired.

The Armstrong boys went on to homestead farms for themselves. John was one of the organizers of the Grange in Illinois. George and William helped build the Illinois and Michigan canal, and George served in the Illinois legislature. Perry and Joel became successful farmers and stockmen, and Joel was also a Justice of the Peace and Town Supervisor. Jeremiah and Isaiah went to California during the gold rush, and Jeremiah died there of a fever. Isaiah became a successful logger.



Even in her later years Elsie continued to work, making quilts and rugs for family and friends until her eyesight was so bad that she could no longer sew. Elsie died in 1871, having achieved her dream of providing opportunity for her sons.

She is buried in Morris.

A complete transcription of Elsie's poetry can be found online at www.genealogytrails.com/ill/lasalle/history/ElsiePoetry

Summer Program

On June 25 the LaSalle County Historical Society will take adults and children alike back in time during "Remembering the One Room Rural Schools 100 Years Ago." You will attend the historic Aitken School and observe the students as they have lessons, chores, and discipline as they would have 100 years ago.

Interpreters will escort you to the Museum, the 1875 post-and-beam barn, and the blacksmith shop where the blacksmith will demonstrate. Lunch will be served in the shelter at Carey Park. Music, singing, and games will follow.

Cost for lunch and entertainment will be \$6 for adults and \$4 for children. Space is limited so please call with your reservation soon.

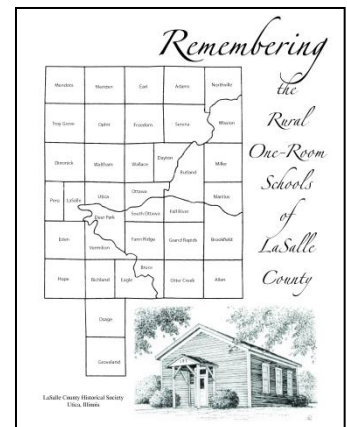
"Remembering the One Room Rural Schools 100 Years Ago" is supported in part by a grant from the Illinois Valley Fine Arts Trust.

Book Reception to be Held at The Book Mouse

On Saturday, May 14, the writers of "Remembering the Rural One Room Schools of LaSalle County" will be available to answer questions and sign copies of the book from 11 a.m. until 1 p.m. at The Book Mouse in Ottawa.

Cake and lemonade will be served, and all are welcome. The Book Mouse is located at 820 LaSalle Street in Ottawa.

Copies of the book are available at the LCHS Museum in Utica and at the Book Mouse.



Utica Events

There are a number of special events happening soon in our home village of Utica. We hope you will come to some of them and take a little time to see the new things in our Museum, too.

May 14 and 15 are the dates for the **Honor the Eagle Pow Wow** to be held at Starved Rock State Park. Presented by Midwest SOARRING Foundation, the Pow Wow features Native American dancers, a drum circle, flute players, arrowhead making, storytelling, children's crafts and cultural demonstrations. S.O.A.R. will have Deshka the American Bald Eagle and other birds of prey. This is a wonderful family event. Hours are Saturday from 11 am until 10 pm and Sunday from 11 am until 5 pm. Admission is charged. Call 773-585-1744 or contact www.midwestsoarring.org for more information.



June 11 and 12 will see the **Utica Garden Faire and Walk**,



where local gardeners will open their yards to the public. A huge plant sale is planned and craft and garden

vendors will participate. Hours are Saturday from 9-5 and Sunday from 11 - 5. For information visit www.uticagardenclub.com

Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War

May 3, 1861: Lincoln calls for 42,034 three year Army volunteers plus 18,000 seamen.

May 4, 1861: Western portion of Virginia begins action to secede from state of Virginia.

May 24, 1861: Colonel Elmer Ellsworth became the first Union casualty as he removed a Confederate flag from a hotel. The hotel keeper was the assailant.

May 29, 1861: Jefferson Davis arrives in Richmond, the new CSA capital. Dortehea Dix organizes a hospital system.

May 30, 1861: Secretary of War Cameron declares fugitive slaves to be property of an enemy, thus they can be seized by Union forces and freed.

Aitken School Program

Children from over forty area schools will attend the Aitken School Program at the museum this spring. Pictured below are Keelan Rice and Wyatt Baldauf of Seneca checking out the LST display featuring their home town's history.



Calendar of Events - 2011

April 25 - May 20 - Fourth Grade School Program, Museum Complex, Utica

May 14 - Book Reception at the Book Mouse, Ottawa 11 - 1

May 14-15, Midwest SOARRING Foundation Honor the Eagle Powwow, Starved Rock State Park

May 21, Bureau Valley Antique Club @ Harold Steele Farm, Dover, IL

May 18 - Civil War Round Table -Ottawa High Cafeteria - Show & Tell - 7:30 pm

June 25, "Remembering the One Room Rural Schools 100 Years Ago", 9:30 - 2 pm, Museum Complex, Utica

October 9, 2011 - 42nd Annual Burgoo Festival

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Burgoo Meeting

There will be a Burgoo planning meeting on Saturday, May 7, 2011 at 9 a.m. at the Museum in Utica.

Please join us to help make this year's event successful.

New ideas and helping hands are always welcome.



Construction Updates

Watch our website and the Village of Utica website for updates on the construction project and how to avoid delays and congestion when visiting Utica and the state parks.

Use of alternative routes such as US 6 and IL 71 are encouraged due to the bridge construction on the I-80 overpass at IL 178.

Route 178 through Utica is open although there may be some short delays.

