

Legends of Freeborn County Unearthing stories of settlers fascinating

by Bev Jackson

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Bev Jackson is the executive director of the Freeborn County Historical Museum.□

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The inhabitants of Itasca in 1860 were an industrious, lively bunch of people. These biographies are taken from the letter dated 1930 that Ida wrote to her brother, Victor, then on the staff of the University of Minnesota.

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"Itasca at that time (1860) had a half dozen families living close in with a few living nearby who also called themselves belonging to Itasca.

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Charles Colby was the earliest settler and he coaxed his sisters, Maria, Mary Ann, and Sarah Jane, to come there with him while Minnesota was still a territory and the Redskins were holding their revels on the bank of Fountain (Albert Lea?) Lake. Colby was a dreamer and impractical but he started things which other people found it to their interest to follow up. He first built the house where his parents lived, then he built another one, then the house known as the Round House, an octagon queer building with a hollow wall filled with sawdust which was expected to keep it very warm, but only succeeded in making it very dirty and alive with bugs of various kinds. Then he built a fairly comfortable house which he moved into... He was the most enthusiastic boomer for Itasca...

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Another boomer was Dr. Alfred Burnham, a bright reckless young physician who had come from Buffalo with his young wife about the time Charles Colby came. He gathered around him a crowd of adventurers and there were wild stories of gambling and drinking which were probably much overdrawn but which had surely some foundation in fact. His wife was a s darling as she was beautiful... warmhearted, helpful...not of the sinking kind...Burnham's satellite, an odd uncouth man named Franklin, who had a pretty little wife and a child or two and who lived in the Round House. He copied Burnham's daredevil manner and speech. I think the two had more kinds of profanity on their tongues end than any two I have ever known, and Mrs. Franklin did her best to follow Mrs. Burnham.

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"And Uncle Dunbar, as everyone called him, who kept the Post Office and a little store just opposite our house, were the town's characters. He was more than suspected of being part negro. He surely had the features and he wore a wig which was said to conceal a wooly crop of hair. He had married a widow by the name of Payne, back in Rock County, Wisconsin. They were good people and my brothers and I always liked them but they were perhaps the two stingiest people in the country.

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"Ole Stugo lived opposite the Colbys. He was a lime burner. I remember how fascinating it was to gaze into the fiery mass when he opened the furnace door to put in fuel. Once he said to me, "Dat looks just like Hell." I had been brought up a Universalist (I was eight years old.) and I promptly told him I had heard of such a place but has no faith in it. Maria Colby and her husband Hannibal Bickford, or "Bunk" as he always called, lived a little way west of the town, but they belonged to it...Mary Ann Colby was quiet like her mother. She was an exquisitely neat housekeeper and worried to death lest something happen to baby George, then a year old. Dan Hurd, her husband was twenty years older. He was a dry joker but chiefly intent on getting all the land he could.

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"Mr. Frost... always had a hobby, and he rode it hard whether it was Spiritualism or what not, and in a voice that fairly made the windows rattle he insisted on presenting his proofs to whatever he was interested in, which made him rather dreaded. But his wife, Margaret, was a splendid cook, a motherly, hospitable soul who made their house a most comfortable

place to visit. Isaac Botsford, the printer, E. D. Hopkins, called generally Charlie Hop, and Mr. Peck, bachelors, made up the rest of the community.

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"All were interested in getting the county seat away from Albert Lea. That village, however, had in the fall of 1865 been reinforced by D. G. Parker, a lawyer, Dr. Wedge, a young physician, Wm. Morin, and Augustus Armstrong, who among them, had much ability, more money and consequently more influence in the county and so Albert Lea won out."

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I had a great time researching the story, and I'm so glad that Ida shared her memories with us.

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