

A Town that time forgot By Patricia Arrigoni

Galena, Illinois – Once this city welcomed 20 steamboats a week at its port on the Galena River, a short distance up from the mighty Mississippi River. Once it experienced a huge lead mining bonanza as rich as the silver boom in Nevada.

Once its citizens welcomed home the hero of the Civil War and future president of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant. Those were the glory years of the 1800's, and little seems changed today.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation called Galena “a jewel in mid-America,” and its downtown area has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Galena also has been called, “The Town Time Forgot,” for the layout of its streets, its business buildings and homes which have remained true to the 19th century.

A walk through downtown Galena will reveal original red brick and limestone structures, most carefully restored. All remodeling in town is strictly controlled by the Galena Historical Society.

The name Galena means “lead” in Latin. The wealth that came from the lead mines, the land grabbing, and the profitable shipping on steamboats and trains, brought an elegance to Galena unexpected in a frontier town. Mansion after mansion was built on the hills surrounding the Galena Valley by a rising aristocracy with eastern and southern origins.

Today those same mansions have been opened for tours or turned into country inns or bed and breakfast homes. The largest is “The Belvedere,” a 19th century Victorian mansion built by J. Russell Jones, a steamboat owner and friend of U.S. Grant. Others include the John Turney house built in 1840, the Dowling House, Galena's oldest erected in 1826 out of native limestone, and the 1859 Fiddick Mansion.

By far the greatest tour attraction is Grant's home on Bouthillier Street. It is now owned by the State of Illinois and features original furnishings, silver and china. The house was presented to the victorious commander of the Union armies by the grateful townspeople of Galena, upon Grant's triumphant return on August 8, 1865.

Grant, an Ohioan by birth, moved to Galena in 1860 at the age of 38 after retiring from the army and failing at farming. With his wife, the former Julia Dent, and four children, he rented a house at 121 S. High St. and went to work for his father, Jesse R. Grant, a prosperous St. Louis tanner who had stores in St. Louis and Galena. It was from Galena that Grant answered President Lincoln's call for volunteers when the Civil War began.

Galena honored its most famous resident on the 100th anniversary of his death in 1985. There were special programs which included walking tours of the two Grant homes, his church, the Jo Davies County Courthouse where the future general presided over war meetings, the original J.R. Grant Leather Store and Grant Park which contains a statue of U.S. Grant.

Slides shows were given at the Galena Historical Museum located in the 1868 Italianate home of Daniel A. Barrows at 211 S. Bench St. A permanent exhibit there, "Diggers, Smelter, Steams," documented the lifestyles of the area's earliest settlers.

Also on exhibit at the museum was Civil War painter, Thomas Nast's "Peace in Union," showing Grant accepting Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

Visitors were able to enjoy seeing the Old Train Depot; the 1848 Old Market House, now a state museum; and the Stockade Refuge on Old Cobblestone St. The Stockade, which now contains an extensive collection of Indian relics and pioneer treasures, is the only known structure existing that dates from the Blackhawk War of 1832.