

# THE HOMESTEAD FAMILY

## GAZETTE

Vol. XX, No.2

JAMES MILLIKIN HOMESTEAD, INC., DECATUR, ILLINOIS

November 1995

### A Note From Your President...

Dear Members,

Hasn't this been a delightful fall? Several times when I've been to the Homestead, I've seen school children wandering the grounds writing furiously on their clipboards as they pick up and identify fall leaves. We not only educate inside but outside as well!

Two non board/past board members need to be brought to our reader's attention. These two people contribute greatly to the operation of the Homestead and its grounds. Marilyn Loofbourrow is our historian. Without her wonderful articles we probably would have a very, very short newsletter. She continues to research the Homestead, is our representative at the Heritage Network and contributes her time and talents to the Christmas and Doll Teas.

Bill McGaughey is our grounds chairman. When his term expired two years ago, we asked if he would continue his splendid work and he agreed. Bill weeds, waters, fertilizes and plants the larger gardens on the Homestead grounds. He's also found up on the cupola taking pictures of rotting wood and trying to chase away the pigeons. If you should see either Marilyn or Bill, please tell

### History – A “Dinosaur” in our Midst



visit this fall by two ladies of Chinese ancestry has opened our eyes to the phenomenal history of a group of trees on the grounds of the James Millikin Homestead. There are seven of these stately trees of remarkably ancient origin which have kept a silent vigil to the rear of the Homestead for untold years. They are known by the botanical name, ginkgo biloba, also called the maidenhair trees for the resemblance of their leaves to the maidenhair fern.

Many of us have probably noticed the beautiful fall foliage of these Homestead trees, especially of the two which stand close to West Main Street. In autumn, their small and delicate fan-shaped leaves turn yellow and drop to surround the trees with skirts of gold. Besides the two on Main, the other five ginkgos stand somewhat to the north of them. The age of the trees and who planted them is open to question. The two largest are surely older than the others and possibly could even have been planted by James Millikin, a lover of trees and unusual trees in particular.

Our visitors this fall, Mrs. Ward L. (Tran) Davis and Mrs. Phon (Phung) Ly, came in the hope of gathering nuts from

came to the U.S. from Vietnam, but both had Chinese grandparents who first emigrated to Vietnam. From their Chinese ancestry, both valued the ginkgo nut for culinary purposes. Mrs. Davis had also been acquainted with the nut through her grandfather, a traditional Chinese medicine man who made his living in the honored profession of extracting and compounding herbal medicines.

In Vietnam, Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Ly never saw a ginkgo tree and were accustomed to purchasing ginkgo nuts there imported from China, as they were after arrival in this country. Mrs. Davis came here in 1968. In 1980 an aunt in Florida was delighted to discover a ginkgo tree growing in a park across from her home. Knowing the tree could grow in colder climes, she alerted her niece to look for it. As Mrs. Davis went on walks, she did look and eventually found the Homestead trees, a few ginkgos in parks and on boulevards and one very large, old tree on West William (with a special history of its own, to be told shortly.)

Time has not always permitted, but Mrs. Davis has often made a fall pilgrimage to gather ginkgo nuts. This year she brought a new friend, Mrs. Ly, who has been in the



Climbing the ladder to success, Homestead grounds chairman Bill McGaughey knocks fruit from ginkgo tree for harvesters, below, Phung Ly (left) and Tran Davis (right).

and trying to chase away the pigeons. If you should see either Marilyn or Bill, please tell them you appreciate the work they do.

I look forward to meeting and greeting all of you at the Victorian Christmas Tea.

— Sincerely  
Anne Hostetler  
President

(Tran) Davis and Mrs. Phon (Phung) Ly, came in the hope of gathering nuts from the trees and chatted with grounds chairman Bill and the Homestead historian about their knowledge of the ginkgo, its lore and uses.

Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Ly are women with an unusual and similar background. Both

gather ginkgo nuts. This year she brought a new friend, Mrs. Ly, who has been in the U.S. since 1979, but came to Decatur just two months ago from La Grange, Indiana, with her husband, Phon, a chemical engineer with Staley's. The Lys have four children. Mrs. Davis and her husband, Ward, who is with the Decatur Police Department, have two. Both families are used to having the ginkgo nut appear from time to time on their table in variety of dishes.

Harvesting the nut is no simple matter, Mrs. Davis explained. The nut is actually at the center of a very sticky fruit. Gloves must be worn to gather it. The juice doesn't want to wash off and can adhere for up to two weeks. The pulp and juice are somewhat poisonous, Mrs. Davis warned. Herbal literature confirms their toxicity. They can cause an adverse allergic skin reaction like poison ivy and internal reactions if eaten in even a slight amount. So the fruit must be dried in the sun, then separated from the pit inside, which is then cracked open to reveal the almond-like nut. The nut is cut in half, and a little embryo or sprout found inside it is cut away, for it is very bitter.

Actually, the nut itself also is somewhat bitter. Mrs. Ly said, "It is not good to eat raw like other nuts." It must be cooked. "But," Mrs. Ly added, "You can do anything you want with the nut in cooking," because it absorbs other flavors.

By itself, Mrs. Davis explained, the nut "tastes a lot like a hard-boiled egg yolk. You can make soup with it by adding pork meat or a soup bone and maybe carrots and potatoes. You can steam the nuts with a Cornish hen and add what you like: Chinese mushrooms, bean threads, dried Chinese vegetables. You can make dessert, too. Boil the nuts; add sugar, seaweed and red or kidney beans. Cook the beans until soft. Some put sweetened condensed milk in; some add a little tapioca. Then you can serve the dessert like a pudding, hot or cold." She has also seen ginkgo nuts used in stir fry.

Is the nut eaten for taste, texture or nutritional value? Mrs. Davis answered,

grounds chairman Bill McGaughey knocks fruit from ginkgo tree for harvesters, below, Phung Ly (left) and Tran Davis (right).

"For all." She knew that her Chinese grandfather valued the ginkgo for its healthful properties. It was believed to be good for the eyes and liver; for headache and high blood pressure, and might even be helpful in cancer. She thought that it was the nut her grandfather utilized.

Medicinal use of the ginkgo in China is reported to trace to the oldest Chinese *materia medica* in 2800 B.C., but it is the leaves about which most seems to have been written. Tradition says the leaves benefit the brain, relieve symptoms of asthma and coughs, and even help the body eliminate filaria, the worm that causes elephantitis.

Again, in modern medicine, the ginkgo has risen to prominence for its leaf. The leaf extract is used to improve blood supply to the brain, thereby improving memory, ringing in the ears and dizziness. It may also help varicose veins. The extract has been a widely-used prescription drug in France and Germany for some time. In this country it is now even sold over-the-counter in health and drug stores. Unlike the fruit, the extract rarely causes reaction.

With all this lore, we have yet to "bark up the tree" for its astounding botanical history. Gardner Bill McGaughey has dug up a multitude of facts regarding the ginkgo, which lived with, and outlasted, the dinosaurs. Dinosaurs can be traced to 125 million years ago; the ginkgo, to 200 million years. It is the last survivor of a whole genus of vegetation. By Darwin's terms, it is a living fossil.

A dinosaur in our backyard would be a terrifying sight, but we welcome the prehistoric ginkgo. In fact, it is highly regarded for street planting because of its upright growth, large, round head; easy pruning; ability of its fibrous root system to move easily; attractive foliage; freedom from insect pests, and hardiness. Better than we and better than most trees, this relic of a remote past can adapt to a modern sooty,

## Victorian Christmas Tea

**J**ingle bells, scents of cinnamon and pine, warm sweaters and cold noses...

It's that time of year again. Please join us on Sunday afternoon, the 3rd of December for the Annual Victorian Christmas Tea. The Homestead will be decorated, the tea warm and the cookies scrumptious! We will have entertainment with our own board member Sue Beer playing Christmas tunes on the piano. We also hope to have a group of singers from Opus. Our boutique will once again be open in the library, so bring your money. Jane Lawson is in charge of the boutique and can always use items to sell. Please call her if you have any Christmas items to donate.

Please drop in for some early Holiday cheer. See you then.

1:00-3:00 p.m. - Membership

3:00-5:00 p.m. - Public

# History – A “Dinosaur” in Our Midst (Continued)



Phung Ly (left) and Tran Davis (right) get ready to scoop up bucketful of ginkgo fruit at Millikin Homestead.

congested city environment quite well. An odd fact, not found in books, is reported by Bill from a conversation with a usually reliable friend: that ginkgo leaves will not burn. (Our trees hadn't yet dropped enough leaves to test.)

Mrs. Davis started a ginkgo in her yard from a nut. It is now six year old and three feet tall. She observed that “birds never stop on it.” They will land on a near-by cherry, but not on the ginkgo. Neither do bugs bother it; butterflies avoid it.

Ordinarily, the tree grows slowly to 60-90

feet tall, but with time—as in centuries—it can grow to 100-122 feet, with a diameter of three to four feet. Imported early into Japan from China, some trees in Japan are reputed to be a thousand years old.

In ancient literature, the tree has been known as the “duck's foot” for its leaf shape, or “silver apricot,” or even “grandfather-grandson tree,” because only old trees bear fruit. The fruit is small and a silvery green which ripens to yellow. There are male and female trees, but only the females fruit. The Homestead has both. For boulevards, males are more often planted to avoid fruit production. Both males and females have clusters of creamy white flowers, but the blossoms are formed with a slight difference. The pollination process of the ginkgo is unusual, and its discovery was considered one of the great finds in botany of the 19th century. It has moving male pollen like that of ferns and lower

plants, unlike trees.

The ginkgo was all but wiped out in the Ice Age. Once spread through the world in mild Temperate Zones, its last bastion for growing on its own in the wild became the mountains of Eastern China. The tree was discovered in the Orient in 1690 by a German botanist and physician serving the East India Company. Specimens were brought to Europe, then to England in 1754. In 1784 the first tree was imported to the U.S. to the garden of William Hamilton near Philadelphia, in which vicin-

ity a number of fine old specimens still grow. Now being grown widely again, the tree is hardy in the U.S. as far north as New York. Once it flourished in the, then, subtropical climate of central Washington state, where petrified ginkgo stumps are found in Ginkgo Forest State Park.

The oldest ginkgo in Decatur is very likely one at 241 W. William Street. For 130 years this tree has been remembered as one planted the day that Abraham Lincoln died, but tellers of the tale usually did not know who planted it. Interestingly enough, the tree was planted by a collateral ancestor of our own Homestead President Anne Hostetler. It was Dr. Joseph Abraham White Hostetler who brought the tree to his yard on April 15, 1865. Dr. Hostetler was the brother of Anne's great great grandfather, Dr. Daniel Josephus Hostetler. The two brothers were the sons of a pioneer Christian church minister in Macon County, Rev. Joseph Hostetler, and lived back to back as neighbors with their families on West William and West Prairie.

Dr. Joseph, planter of the tree, was a physician who served as a surgeon in the Civil War, assistant to Dr. Will Barnes, in the 116th Regular Illinois Infantry Volunteers. While his loyalty to the Union cause was obvious, it was purely coincidence he chose to plant his tree on this significant day in history. From this happening, however, the family was always able to recall when the tree had been planted. Now it serves as a memorable link from that time to this.

Even so does the ginkgo tie us to far more distant eras. As a paleobotanist once said of the ginkgo, “It appeals to the historic soul: we see it as an emblem of changelessness, a heritage from worlds too remote for our human intelligence to grasp, a tree which has in its keeping the secrets of the immeasurable past.”

Bill McGaughey

Marilyn Loofbourrow



## Committee Update

### Preservation

Just today I was with Bob Furhoff as we worked on determining colors and design for the ceiling work. Might have it on by Victorian Tea...Lucien

### Membership

A little behind last year so help us by bringing friends to the Victorian Tea...Jim

### Treasurer

We're still afloat and setting aside moneys for the ceiling as well...Bob

### Scheduling

Busy as it should be and ahead of last year in people and rentals...Donna

### Boutique

Preparing for things to offer. Can you help? Call Ann Hostetler - 422-7587.

### Grounds

33 new landscape plants in the nursery from 10" to 7' and some new plantings on the lawn. Check it out...Bill

### Ways and Means

Cant' sit on success of the fine Doll Tea. Planning things. Send us your idea...Betty

### Victorian Tea

Every year not the same - special music for you to enjoy...Brigetta



## Footnote to History:

### A Lincoln Rail?

A curious memory came to mind for Homestead board member Lucien Kapp in a chat about the degree of friendship between James Millikin and Abraham Lincoln, the topic of this newsletter's front page history column.

In the hectic first days of restoration of the James Millikin Homestead, the work consisted of sheer drudging, down-and-dirty cleaning. On particular closet in the former caretaker's apartment had been emptied and found to contain an assortment of oddities, including the architect's pen-and-ink drawings of the facades of the terra cotta-ornamented Millikin bank building and the original Anna B. Millikin home, both commissioned by James.

These drawings, damaged by time, were passed along to Lucien for safekeeping and some possible restoration work of their own. (Lucien himself was not officially involved in the Homestead cleaning nor present for the emptying of the closet, but, recognized for his support of and interest in restoration, he was informed from time to time of some of the more interesting experiences of the teams at work.)

Probably upon receiving the drawings, Lucien learned - too late for him to be a witness to it - of another object found in the closet: either an old bare length of wood hewn like a fence rail or a picture framed by such a piece. The fate of the odd item he did not learn; he just knew it was already gone.

Now the memory of this odd artifact is another that comes back to haunt. It evokes the question: Did James Millikin, a proclaimed intimate of Abraham Lincoln, have in his possession a rail associated with the

first proposal of Lincoln for the Presidency of the United States?

Lincoln gained his nickname as the "rail splitter" candidate at the 1860 Republican state convention held in Decatur. To present Lincoln as a man of the people, his supporters hit upon the idea of characterizing him as a "rail splitter," a hard job at which Lincoln engaged in his youth, and particularly in 1830, the only year he ever resided in Macon County.

Richard Oglesby, later governor of Illinois, and John Hanks a Macon County relative of Lincoln's, arranged for a banner attached to two split fence rails to be brought into the midst of the Republican convention. The banner announced, "Abraham Lincoln, the Rail Candidate for President in 1860..." It was held aloft, taken to the platform and paraded around the convention site. The ensuing uproar almost literally brought down the "house," consisting of a huge tent, dubbed the "Wigwam," erected for the occasion. Immediately, Lincoln's name was proposed as the Illinois nominee for President.

Only two rails were involved in holding the banner, but at least two accounts report that six rails altogether were brought into the tent. They were purported to have been split by Lincoln and Hanks, although Lincoln gracefully skirted the issue of his having actually split these particular rails.

After the convention, it is chronicled, John Hanks sold one rail to a man from Kentucky for a five-dollar gold piece. Another was split into three sections. One section was kept by a man named Abe Kramer who later gave it to his nephew, Charles M. Borchers, whose family has

retained it even to this day. "Fate of the other four rails is unknown," according to late Decatur historian, O. T. Banton.

The intriguing combination of circumstances in 1860 and at the time of Homestead restoration leads us once more to ponder: Can it be that James Millikin - Decatur resident in 1860, acquaintance, admirer and active backer of Lincoln for President - came to own one of the legendary, unaccounted-for rails from Abraham Lincoln's initial campaign?

Marilyn Loofbourrow  
Historian

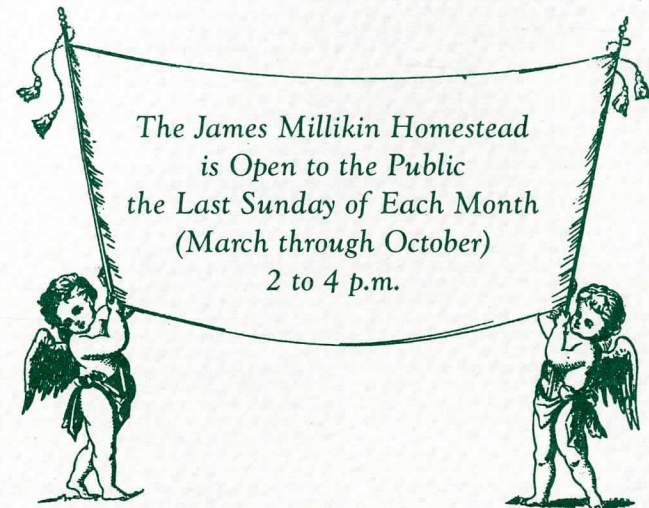
## Transfer House Celebration Set



The 100th anniversary of Decatur's beloved landmark, the Transfer House, will be celebrated by a band concert and other activities on June 22 in Central Park. The Decatur Municipal Band will donate its services for the concert, which is open to the public without charge. Time of the event is tentatively 6-8 p.m.

The Heritage Network of Decatur and Macon County, of which the James Millikin Homestead is a member, is over-all sponsor for the community celebration. The band and Transfer House have long been associated together from the days when the band used to play from its roof. Other activities in the park are being planned in conjunction with the concert.

The Heritage Network is composed of 22 member organizations, including also the Municipal Band. Current Network president is Martha Place of the Decatur Area



# Ways and Means

## Victorian Doll Tea

The Ways and Means Committee is busy planning this year's Victorian Doll Tea. Last year's event was a great success and many who attended requested we repeat it. The details of this year's tea will be announced in the near future. Plan to attend and bring your children or grandchildren and enjoy a delightful time. The proceeds go toward the continuing restoration of the Homestead ceilings. Watch for your invitation.

## Tree Memorial Fund

A tree and ornamental plantings memorial fund has been established for the Homestead. Memorial contributions may be made to this fund which will be used to continue restoration of the landscaping of the Homestead grounds.

Mr. Millikin had a great love and knowl-

edge of trees and enjoyed planting unusual specimen trees and plants.

In keeping with his interests, a tree nursery has been established at the Homestead. In a few years several species of oak, maple and ash will be ready for planting. A number of bald cypress, Chinese chestnut and dawn redwood are presently in the early growing stage. Restoration of the grounds has been underway for many years and there is much left to do.

A donation has been received for a scarlett oak tree to be planted in tribute to Helen Russell. All donations and memorials will be recorded in a memorial book which will be kept in the Homestead library. For further information on the project, please call Bill McGaughey at 428-5373.

Betty Ploeger  
Ways and Means



*The 1996 Annual Meeting*

*will be held on*

*Thursday, April 25, 1996*

*at 6:30 p.m.*

*It will be held at the Homestead.*

*A business meeting will be conducted.*

*Lucien Kapp will present a program*

*on the ceiling restoration project.*

*All members are welcome to attend.*



## Thank You – 10,000 Times

As you all probably remember a very grand anonymous gift of \$10,000 enabled us to undertake the restoration of the South parlor ceiling! Mr. and Mrs. Anonymous, we thank you from the bottom of our heart or "the top of our ceiling"!!!