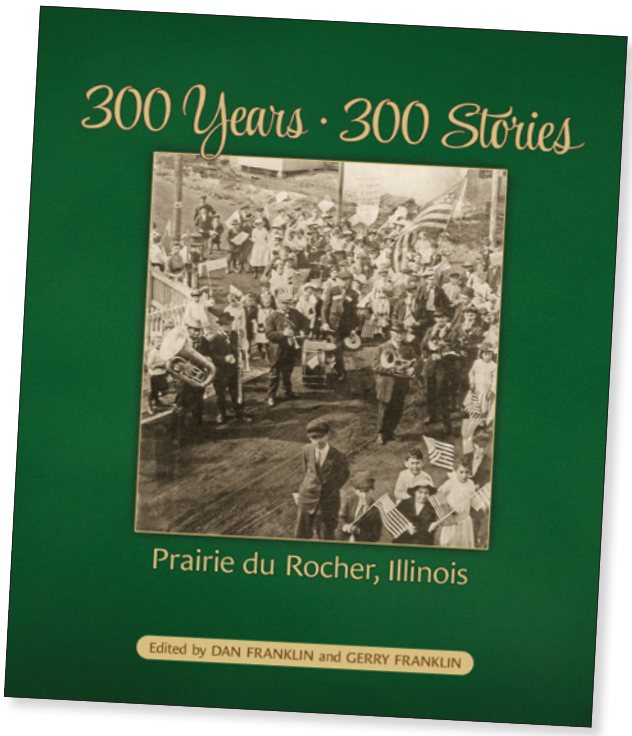
300 Years · 300 Stories

Prairie du Rocher, Illinois



These captivating stories celebrate the tricentennial of the village of Prairie du Rocher, Illinois—French in origin, independent in spirit.

We have rummaged beneath the official history to uncover slice-of-life accounts of what it has been like to live in Rocher over three centuries—the collective effort of the book's 97 authors.

We focus on the characters of the village (the U.S. senator who was born in the Creole House, the Rocher doctor who had seven automobile patents, and Rocher's first woman voter)

... their customs (prenups in the 1700s, the Guiannée, dancing prohibited during Lent, and whiskey not prohibited during Prohibition)

... the events that shaped them (their capture by George Rogers Clark, the Mississippi's frequent flooding, and wartime rationing)

... and the spirit and volunteerism that have built their schools, playgrounds, street signs, and holiday decorations—and defended the village against flooding.

We take you to the limestone quarries north of town and the 1940s airfield to the south, we sneak you into the Brickey House, and we put you on the levee during the Flood of '93.

We tell you

- what happened to all the stone at Fort de Chartres
- why streets in Rocher ramble
- why a Rocher bank refused to launder money
- how they built the levees
- why the French Catholics ran a German priest out on a rail

The words speak for themselves, but they're complemented by 293 photos, maps, and illustrations.

These stories from the past merge into the story of a resilient community that has loved and laughed and worked and danced its way into the 21st century.

- 8½ inches × 10 inches
- 332 pages
- 293 illustrations
- Composed in the ATF Garamond and Le Monde type families
- Softbound

$40.00

VILLAGE PUBLISHERS

300 Years · 300 Stories

Prairie du Rocher, Illinois

EDITED BY

Dan Franklin AND Gerry Franklin

with 293 illustrations

VILLAGE
PUBLISHERS

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1

Name It, Spell It, Pronounce It

La prairie du Rocher. "Prairie beneath the bluff."

At first, the name referred to the large tract of land that Fort de Chartres' first commandant, Pierre Dugué de Boisbriant, received from the Royal Indies Company in September 1721. It measured 2¾ miles wide and stretched from the Mississippi River to the bluff.

When houses began to cluster around Prairie du Rocher's chapel and cemetery, the community assumed the name of the area in which it was located. It could have been named *Prerie du M. Ste. Theresse*, as a 1734 map of the Illinois Country shows, after Jacques Ste. Thérèse Langloiserie, Boisbriant's nephew. This tract had been ceded to Ste. Thérèse Langloiserie by his uncle in the late 1720s or early 1730s.

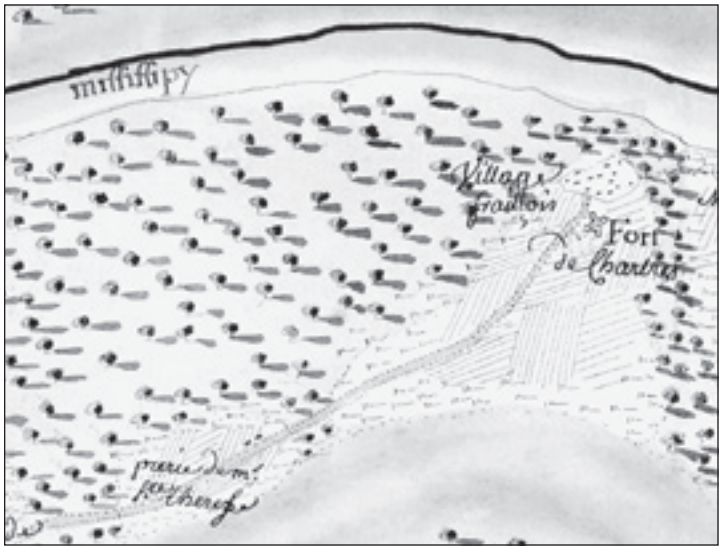
Or it could have been named *Gossiauxville*, after one of the village's early residents, mason Charles Joseph Gossiaux.

Or maybe it happened like this: A farmer told a neighbor at the fort that he was going to *la prairie* the next day.

"Which one?"

"*La prairie* . . . hmm . . . *du rocher.*"

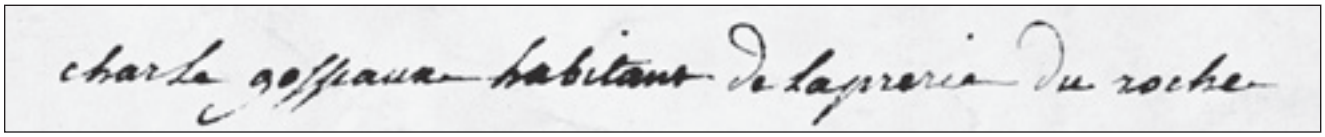
A document dated November 28, 1733 explicitly refers to Gossiaux as a resident of *la prarie du rocher.* By the mid-1730s, it appears that the village, such as it was, was being called *la prairie du Rocher.*



Detail of Ignace Broutin's 1734 map of the Illinois Country.

■ ■ ■

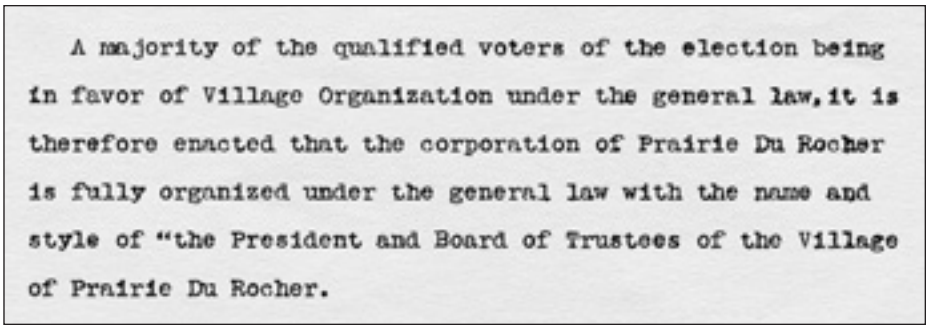
Three hundred years later, the spelling is the same. Which is not to say that it hasn't been mangled at times. Philadelphia newspapers in 1788 called it "Prairie du Rochers," though newspapers closer to home called it "Prairie du Rocher" as early as 1811—and



Excerpt from a 1733 notarial document identifying Charles Gossiaux as a resident of Prairie du Rocher.

that's the way it was consistently spelled in news accounts throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Why do you suppose, then, that the president and board of trustees of the village spelled it differently when the village was incorporated in 1873? On March 22 of that year, 15 men went to the polls and voted, 14 to 1, to incorporate the village under Illinois law. In presenting the results of the election to the state, the name of the village was spelled "Prairie Du Rocher"—five times. Villagers resisted, or perhaps didn't notice, the official "Du"—and continued to write "du." The popular form won out.



A majority of the qualified voters of the election being in favor of Village Organization under the general law, it is therefore enacted that the corporation of Prairie Du Rocher is fully organized under the general law with the name and style of "the President and Board of Trustees of the Village of Prairie Du Rocher.

There have been exceptions. When computerized mailing lists came into use in the 1950s, programmers allotted a limited number of characters for the city name, and so "Prairie du Rocher" was often truncated to "PR DU ROCHE" on computerized billings.

A century earlier, when Prairie du Rocher was only 125 years old, Abraham H. Lee was postmaster. As he sorted the mail, Lee tallied the wayward spellings of Prairie du Rocher that he saw—24 of them:

Perry Deruth	Prairie De Rushar
peredrush	Prarie Du Rush
Prairie du Roncher	Praery du Rucher
Perideroosh	Praree Roodichard
Piere Deroncher	prair deuerse
Praridruch	Prerie darcher
Pirairie de rocher	Prarie duche
Praria Der Rocher	Prairie du Rocheis
Prairn du Rusher	Perraerie Daroushe
Praire du Rocher	Prei Durusya
Prairie du Roocher	Pary Jeruse
Pery doroch	Praiue du Roche

One wonders, how did this mail get to Prairie du Rocher at all?

When the railroad began regular service through the village in 1902, the Valley Railroad timetable listed arrivals and departures for, simply, "Rocher." Residents seeking to purchase return tickets in St. Louis were told that there was no station named "Prairie du Rocher" on any railroad out of St. Louis. Rocherites decided this was a bluff worth dying on and challenged the railroad. By January 1903, the full name of the village was restored on both the timetable and the depot.

Eventually, "Prairie du Rocher" succumbed to Americans' penchant for contracting names of all sorts. Kids from Red Bud and Ruma and Modoc talked about driving to "Rocher." Ultimately, we adopted the shortened form ourselves, although some of us occasionally refer to our hometown as "Prairie du," with stress on the "du".

■ ■ ■

The French settlers pronounced the name as *lah prehr-ee doo roh-shay.* By the 20th century, how-

A Commandant's Praise

On January 20, 1752, Jean-Jacques de Macarty Mactique, the 12th commandant of Fort de Chartres, wrote to Louisiana Governor Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, *"Nous passâmes â la prairie du Rocher; quy fait un Beau Et Bon Endroit"*—"We stopped by Prairie du Rocher, which presents itself as a beautiful and agreeable place."

ever, *PREHR-ee duh ROH-chur* was coming into vogue.

Look at those mid-19th-century misspellings, though; more than half seem to have an OO sound in "Rocher." If people were writing what they heard, ROOCH or ROOSH may have been as common as ROHCH or ROHSH back then. This earlier pronunciation persisted in some people's speech well into the 20th century: H. C. Voris, editor of the *Waterloo Republican* until 1941, used to say, "There's always something going on down in *PREHR duh ROOSH*."

■ ■ ■

Call us Prairie du Rocher, or Rocher if you will.

Spell our name that way, too.

And pronounce it *PREHR-ee duh ROH-chur.*

2

"The Oldest Town in Illinois"

It is tradition, not a document, that sets 1722 as the year Prairie du Rocher was founded. Citing 18th-century documents stored at the Randolph County courthouse in Chester, Illinois, historians tend to describe the village as "emerging" in the 1730s.

A chapel was likely built at Prairie du Rocher in the late 1720s or early 1730s, indicating an existing settlement there. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the records of the mother church of Ste. Anne at Fort de Chartres, and the exact date of the chapel's establishment is unknown.

Certainly by 1734, a number of people were living on the land granted to Commandant Pierre Dugué de Boisbriant in 1721. In February 1734, his nephew Jacques Ste. Thérèse Langloiserie ceded property to at least five residents of the land, along with a commons field that he owned.

. . . The oldest town in Illinois? It depends on how you define "town."

Peoria, settled in 1692, is older than Prairie du Rocher, but its early years were dominated by Native populations that hosted, intermittently, small groups of French settlers.

Cahokia (1696) is older, but in its early years, it existed solely as a Catholic mission serving Cahokia and Tamaroa Indians.

Kaskaskia (1703) is also older, but it was destroyed by the Mississippi River in 1880 and rebuilt in a new area after the flood.

Then there's Prairie du Rocher. It doesn't matter if it came together as a village in 1722 or a decade later. If by "town," you mean a European settlement that has existed continuously from its founding, Prairie du Rocher has no challenger as "the oldest town in Illinois."

3

Prairie du Rocher over the Centuries

Zach Walker

When Prairie du Rocher was founded in 1722, it was more of a stop on a trade route than a town, so naturally the population fluctuated greatly. The numbers would rise and fall while traders moved to and from other places like Cahokia or Kaskaskia. Still, those who lived in the town would stay close. The French favored villages over homesteads for community and security reasons. At first, people would just claim land wherever they pleased. Only later did the French government step in and divvy up the land. The land was given out in long strips from the river to the bluff.

In the early days, there were some traders and merchants, but the vast majority of people were farmers. The system they used was called the commons, a place for animals to graze in the summer months while crops grew on long strips of land given to individual farmers. These fields bordered on the commons field.

This system came with some responsibility; each person would have to maintain the fence

38

The House in the Middle of Main Street

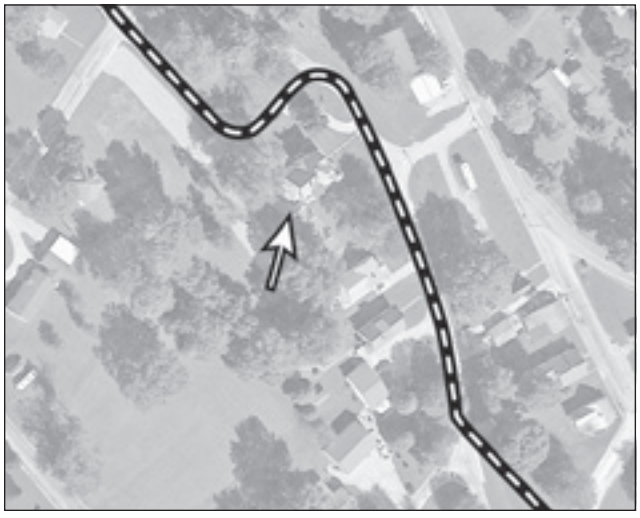
Clyde Franklin

If you had stood on Main Street behind the Catholic church back in 1900, you could have seen all the way up the street to the northern end of town, where the highway would be built in the late 1920s.

William H. Conner bought the property on both sides of Main Street, just south of Duclos Street. Showing the village council a picture of the house he intended to build, he told them, "I'm an old man, I can't wait for trees to grow, so if we vacate Main Street, I can build the house there." The idea was that the trees on either side of the street would be in his new yard.

His chief reason, however, was probably to block traffic to competing businesses on Main Street. That left Market Street, where his store and lumberyard were located, as the commercial north-south thoroughfare in town.

No record of the village council's consent has been found.



Main Street was rerouted to accommodate the Conner House (*arrow*).

39

The Conner House

Jaydian Montroy

One of the oldest homes in Prairie du Rocher is more than 100 years old: the Conner House, now a bed and breakfast. It is one of the most eye-catching buildings in Rocher. As visitors drive through town on Bluff Road, they see the mansion with a large landscaped yard, a massive wrap-around porch, and many other stunning features. This breathtaking mansion was constructed in the early 1900s by the Conner family.

William H. Conner was a wealthy businessman in Rocher. He owned many businesses, such as the Conner Lumber Company and Conner's General Merchandise Store, now Myers Korner Market. William and his wife, Constance, built the Conner House. The mansion would divert traffic from Main Street to Market Street, past Conner's store. Sadly, William died before he got to see and enjoy the completed Conner House.

Although Mrs. Conner was now a widow, she moved forward with having the house built. According to Connie Stellhorn, the current owner of the Conner House, Mrs. Conner was a strong and independent woman. She raised her nine children on her own. By the time she died at the age of 83, on November 9, 1939, all of her children had moved out.

Edward Palmier and his wife, Katherine, then purchased the house and used it as a private residence for their family of four. They would sometimes rent the second floor out as boarding rooms. In the early 1970s, the house was sold to the Sabo family, who lived there for six or seven years, until 1980. The next owners were Dave and Amy Brewer and their three children, who lived in the home from 1980 until the early 2000s.

The Conner House then sat vacant for many years, until Steven and Cheryl Steibel bought it in 2012. They renovated and remodeled the Conner

42

La Guiannée à Prairie du Rocher, 1722–2021

Dan Franklin

It is two hours past sunset on the eve of the New Year. We gather, 20 of us, shivering from the icy wind gusting beneath the bluff. The fiddler is here, and the leader, too. Men in breeches stride up, with women in their long dresses. The group is animated, goodnaturedly cursing the intense cold, talking of Christmas just passed. Now here's the guitarist, and we're ready.

■ ■ ■

We arrive at the first home, its porchlight reflecting dull yellow on the crusted snow. The musicians strike up their introductory bars, and the leader, tapping time with his cane, intones, « *Bonsoir, le maître et la maîtresse et tout le monde du logis.* » As the others echo his verse in the traditional French patois, the door is opened and we enter.

■ ■ ■

In lyrics that are centuries old, our troupe requests the indulgence of the host, a pork backbone for a fricassée, and the oldest daughter to join us. The song done, cries of « *Bonne année!* » ring out, and the host and hostess bring forth a bottle of wine or whiskey to warm their guests against the chill of the night. Then on to the next home.

■ ■ ■

This is *La Guiannée.* In the beginning, the singers were poor people seeking food and fun for the new year. Now lacking its original purpose, but with all its original enthusiasm, *La Guiannée* has been performed in Prairie du Rocher, Illinois on New Year's Eve, without interruption, for 300 years.

Percy Clerc in his corn shucks costume, leading the Guiannée in the 1950s.

to the corncrib. Citizens could buy a wagonload of cobs for 25 cents—the bigger the wagon, the better the bargain.

The uses were sundry: You could use them for animal bedding or grind them up for animal feed. You could use them as kindling for coal fires or fashion them into bowls for smoking pipes. You could make corncob jelly, too. (And toilet paper, invented in 1857, hadn't been universally adopted.)

61

The Bise Sisters Reminisce about Cookin' on the Farm

Isabelle Bise Donjon was born on December 16, 1899. Her sister, Leora Bise Ellner, was born on July 17, 1906. For other segments of this 1981 conversation, see Stories 96, 130, and 175.

BELLE There were a lot of fritters—we called them "bangs."

LEORA Big old pancakes. We always called that "lost bread." They had different names for things, half-French, half-American. Our mom used to make those fritters a lot.

BELLE She'd drop them by the spoonful in the hot fat, and they'd get all different shapes, go round like little frogs or something.

LEORA I made them not so long ago.

LEORA We used to make a lot of soups and cook a lot of chicken. We used to cook in them deep pots, iron, set down in the stove, with feet on them, like little legs.

BELLE A Dutch oven, that's how you fried chicken.

LEORA We were fed pretty bad when we were young. When we were small, Mom used to make us some milk, we called it "boo-ee" [bouillie]—that was something to eat, I tell you. You used to take milk and let it come to a boil, and you'd thicken it.

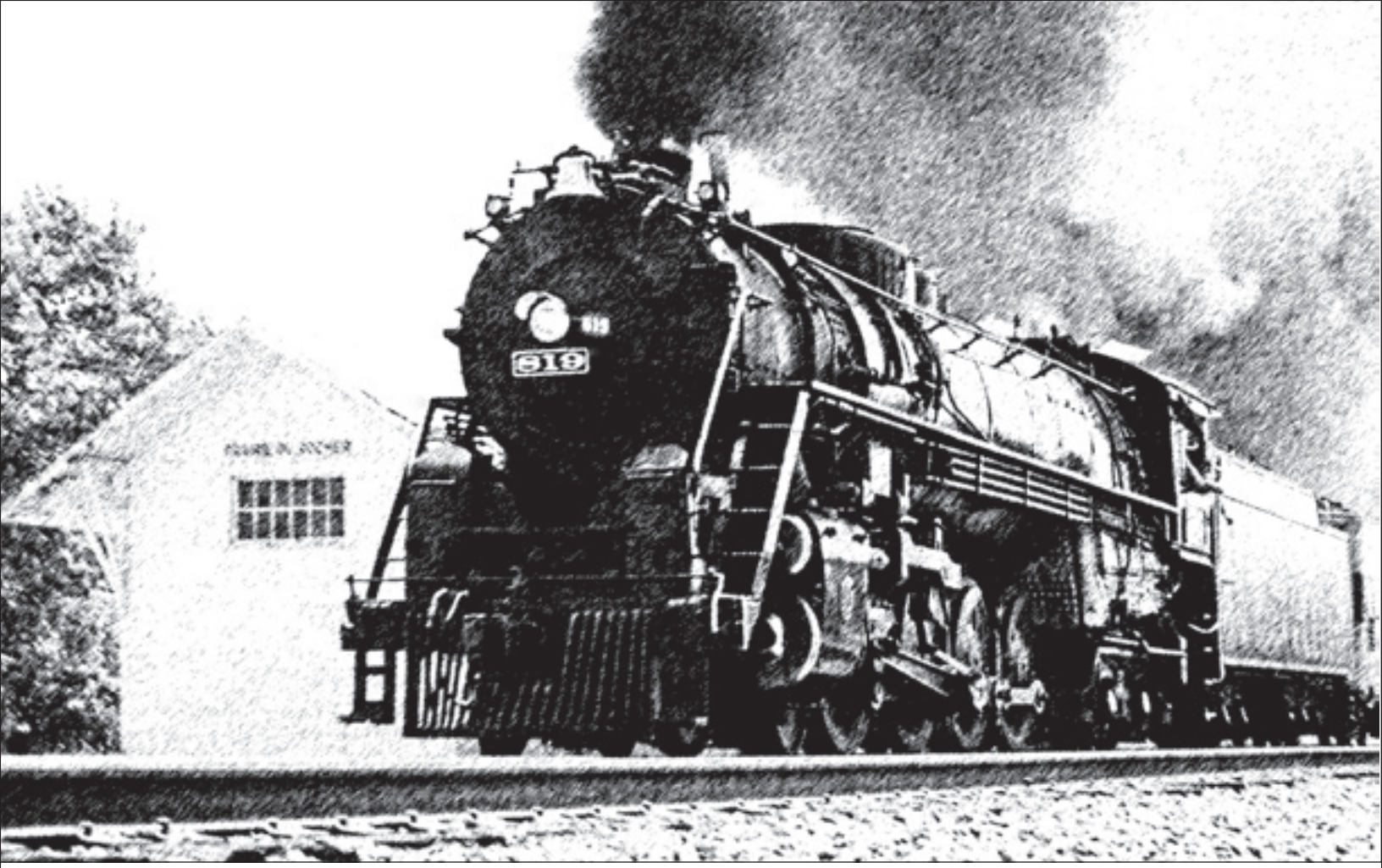
BELLE Thicken it with flour . . .

LEORA . . . and put a little pinch of salt in it and a little sugar. Mom put sugar in it, didn't she?

BELLE Yeah.

LEORA Not much, and when it got real thick, she'd put the whole big bowl on the table and everybody would dive in for some boo-ee—that would be some kind of milk mush. That's

Leora and Belle.



(*above*) Restored Cotton Belt engine No. 819, built in 1943, steams past the Prairie du Rocher depot in 1990.

80

The Railroad Comes to Town

In Summer 1901, the Iron Mountain Railway laid a single set of rails through Prairie du Rocher. "That summer was so hot and dry," recalled Xavier Melliere, "that farmers didn't have crops to feed their livestock. Some had to cut willows as food for their mules, so they could eat the bark.

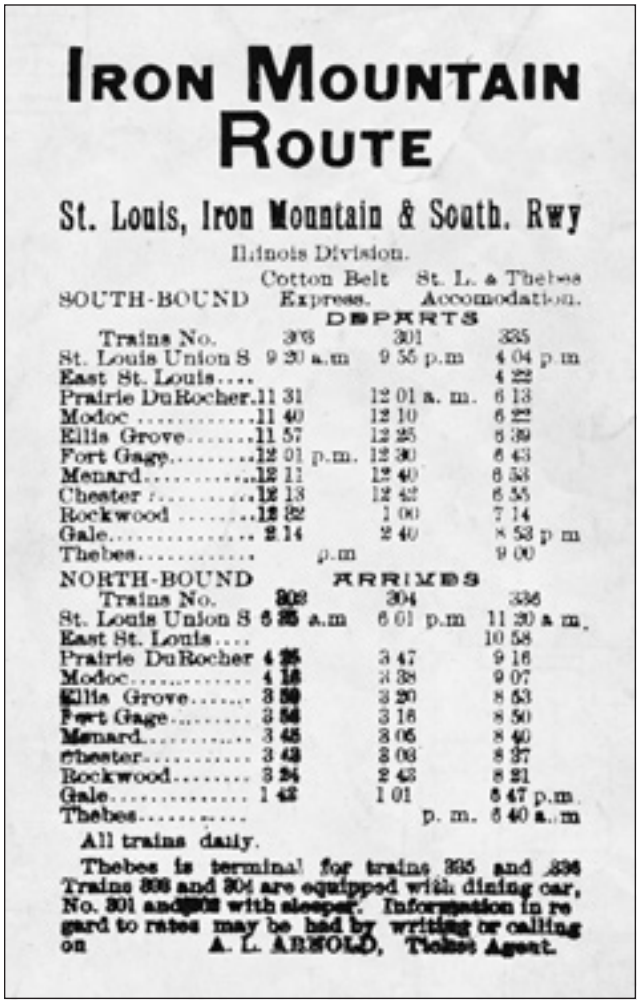
"Since the wooded area south of Rocher had always been such a wetland, the railroad people decided that this particular dry spell was the best time to go through the area with their tracks, so they rushed to get the bed raised and tracks laid before the rains returned. And they succeeded."

That one set of railroad tracks was the source of much noise and soot—and an occasional fire in the dry grasses at the edge of the rocky railbed. Streets crossing the tracks were often blocked by idling trains, and buildings shook throughout the day and night as trains passed through.

Still, there were immediate advantages:

- In the past, coal had been a luxury in Rocher: Residents were compelled to haul it in wagons from Red Bud, paying 12 to 14 cents a bushel. Now, the coal would be delivered by railcar at a cost of 6 to 8 cents a bushel.
- Storekeepers previously reliant on steamboat shipments had to pick up their merchandise at Fort Chartres Landing, three miles away. Commodities would now be delivered directly to the village by rail.

- Travelers had required a horse and buggy and half a day to journey to St. Louis. Now, residents could travel to the city and back in a single day.
- St. Louis's early-edition newspapers would arrive at 8 o'clock in the morning.
- Mail was previously routed through Red Bud, reaching the village about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, if the roads were good. In spring and fall, it could arrive as late as 8 o'clock in the evening. Before, a letter mailed in Rocher on Thursday might not have reached its destination in St. Louis or the county seat in Chester until Saturday. Now, the letter would arrive in less than two hours.
- Real estate values surged.



IRON MOUNTAIN ROUTE

St. Louis, Iron Mountain & South. Rwy

Illinois Division.

SOUTH-BOUND	Cotton Belt Express.		St. L. & Thebes Accomodation.	
	DEPARTS			
Trains No.	308		301	335
St. Louis Union S	9 30	a.m	9 55 p.m	4 04 p m
East St. Louis....				4 22
Prairie DuRocher.	11 31		12 01 a. m.	6 13
Modoc	11 40		12 10	6 22
Ellis Grove.....	11 57		12 25	6 39
Fort Gage.....	12 01	p.m.	12 30	6 43
Menard.....	12 11		12 40	6 53
Chester	12 18		12 47	6 55
Rockwood	12 32		1 00	7 14
Gale.....	2 14		2 40	8 53 p m
Thebes.....		p.m		9 00
NORTH-BOUND	ARRIVES			
Trains No.	302		304	336
St. Louis Union S	6 25	a.m	6 01 p.m	11 20 a m.
East St. Louis....				10 58
Prairie DuRocher	4 25		3 47	9 16
Modoc.....	4 16		3 38	9 07
Ellis Grove.....	3 59		3 20	8 53
Fort Gage.....	3 56		3 16	8 50
Menard.....	3 45		3 05	8 40
Chester.....	3 43		3 03	8 37
Rockwood.....	3 34		2 53	8 21
Gale.....	1 42		1 01	6 47 p.m.
Thebes.....			p. m.	6 40 a..m

All trains daily.

Thebes is terminal for trains 335 and 336 Trains 308 and 304 are equipped with dining car, No. 301 and 302 with sleeper. Information in regard to rates may be had by writing or calling on A. L. ARNOLD, Ticket Agent.

It wasn't till 1906 that Rocher provided water for the steam locomotives' boilers. Huge quantities of easily accessible water were required, so three wells were dug at the northern end of town. Construction soon began on two storage tanks on the west side of the tracks. By March, the 200,000-gallon tanks were completed atop concrete pillars sunk deep in the ground.

In the 1930s, a second set of tracks was laid by men grateful for the employment. Working side by side, local men laid creosoted ties on a gravel bed that would support miles and miles of rails.

A Reporter's Testimonial

From the August 28, 1902 edition of the Chester Tribune

One is struck with the neat residences in Prairie du Rocher. All are kept well painted, and the lawns are a revelation. Well cropped, they are set off with various shaped flower beds—little lakes of loveliness in an ocean of emerald lawn. Not less than a half dozen neat cottages were in course of construction or just completed in different parts of town, and all indications point to a rapid growth for the village. The citizens are proud of their little village, and they are conscious of the fact that its natural beauties will not fail to attract the attention of wealthy businessmen of St. Louis who desire to have a quiet, comfortable residence in easy distance of the city.

The whistle of the locomotive of the Valley road has aroused the latent possibilities for the little village, and echoing from the perpendicular bluff of rock against which the village stands, bursts through the gloom and silence of the American bottom to announce to the world the rejuvenation of the earliest settled portion of the state.

Looking south on Market Street in horse-and-buggy days. The steps and doorway at far right lead to the dance hall on the second floor of the Palmier Building. Conner's Store is at center.

95

Speed Limits

In 1915, what with the heavy use of railroad tracks running through Prairie du Rocher and the increasing number of automobiles on the streets, the village board enacted ordinances for *every* vehicle in town:

AUTOMOBILES

1 mile in 16 minutes, when turning a corner [3.75 mph]
1 mile in 4 minutes, driving through the village [15 mph]
1 mile in 6 minutes through the business portions of the village [10 mph]

BICYCLES

Must have an attached bell. Not lawful to ride, push, or run over any sidewalk, footway, or foot crossing in the village (fine—$5 to $50)

RAILROADS

6 miles per hour for train of cars (fine—$50 to $200 per occasion)

96

The Bise Sisters Recall Streetlamps in Rocher

Part of a 1981 conversation between sisters Isabelle Bise Donjon and Leora Bise Ellner. For other segments, see Stories 61, 130, and 175.

BELLE They burned coal oil for lights in town. $1.75 for a gallon of coal oil—more than a gallon of gas.

LEORA They'd light them at night. Big lights on a post, but not on every block.

BELLE I guess they had to fill them up every night or every other night—I don't know.

LEORA They should have left one up just to show what they were like; they took them all down.

112

The Telephone Comes to Town

According to the Commons Telephone Company records of 1906, a new customer had to "furnish his own box and all necessary material for connection to the company line and bear expenses of construction—$.75 for each pole measuring 6″ by 20′, set 4′ in the ground."

The *Prairie du Rocher Democrat* kept pace with news about this newfangled apparatus in the early years of the 20th century, although it isn't always obvious which telephone company is being referred to.

June 23, 1905: "A telephone line is to be put in town, and as far as we can learn, the following business offices will be connected with a phone to the depot: Bank of Prairie du Rocher, C. J. Kribs Company and Conner and Company. This will be convenient for the business men with much business connected with the depot. All telephone enterprises should be encouraged for they are a benefit to all."

January 22, 1910: "Cost for free connection to Harrisonville Telephone Company's lines is $1.50 per year for each phone." (How does that make it free?)

By 1910, Rocher subscribers to telephone service were so numerous that Wilfred Albert published the first telephone directory in March.

March 22, 1912: "The Harrisonville Telephone Company moved their switchboard from the A.E. Palmier Building to the residence of A.J. Mudd."

On February 13, 1952, thirty-one Commons subscribers voted to have their company join the Harrisonville Telephone Company, whose line had been in Rocher since 1905.

113

"Number, Please"

Joy Melliere

For 20 years, Louise Coleno was Rocher's switchboard operator—a confining job if there ever was one. As children, we delighted in seeing that large, fascinating board in their home on C Avenue. We were spellbound as we watched her handle the calls! Undoubtedly, Louise learned a great deal about the lives of Rocher's telephone subscribers; it must have been hard not to "share."

Louise's starting salary, in 1928, was $75 a month. When she retired 20 years later (and turned the switchboard over to Charley Shea's wife and daughters—Alice, Dorothy, and Joyce), her last paycheck was *still* $75 a month.

About 1954, the Sheas gave up the switchboard, and Katie Mudd became the operator. Ten years later, a dial system was launched for Harrisonville Telephone Company customers in Rocher, and you never heard "Number, please" again.

Louise Coleno operating the switchboard.

117

Our Cistern Refrigerator

Melba Nivois Barbeau, as told to Joy Melliere

We had two cisterns—one on the west side, the other on the south side of the kitchen. The latter was an open cistern—it didn't have a top, just loose boards laid over it, so that Mom could move them aside to put butter, meat, and other perishables in a basket or bucket and drop it down into the cistern on a rope. Instant refrigerator! A pipe ran from the other cistern to a cast-iron pitcher pump in the kitchen; it didn't have a pump outside.

Do you know what we called cistern water? "Shingle soup"—because all of the water had washed down off the roof.

118

Pumps to Faucets

In 1914, Prairie du Rocher built its own water distribution system, although few businesses and residences tapped into the system at first.

Eventually, when diesel-fueled engines replaced coal-burning locomotives, the railroad sold its water tanks and wells to the village. Those wells, drilled in 1906 for the railroad's use, supplied great-tasting water, which was pumped to the village's large reservoir on the bluff above town. From that vantage, the flow of gravity was all that was required to deliver water to end users.

By 1939, thanks to the Works Progress Administration, water pipes had been run to all residences in the village. From that day forward, all subscribers who paid for "town water" had only to turn a faucet handle. No more cranking, carrying, dipping, and dumping!

119

Rocher Electrified

In 1906, reading by coal-oil lamp appeared to be tapering off. The *Prairie du Rocher Democrat* reported on April 7:

> The proposition of putting in electric lights is being talked about. We understand that a party has made an offer to put in electric lights at a moderate price, providing the town will do the wiring. This is a proposition that merits our thoughts and should be acted upon.
>
> Electric lights will be as cheap as, if not cheaper than, coal oil, and then consider the work and dirtiness of coal-oil lamps. With electric lights, you have no lamps to clean, coal oil to buy, lamps to fill, groping in the dark for matches, and all other inconveniences, which fall to the lot of those burning coal oil.

Ten years later, Rocher had its own electric power plant in a brick building on the north side of C Avenue. It had a one-cylinder diesel engine with a cowhide belt, but the engine was run only a few hours each evening, from 6 o'clock till about midnight. In the 1920s, the plant provided electricity on Monday and Tuesday mornings. This was for housewives lucky enough to have electric washers and irons: They washed on Monday, let the laundry dry that afternoon, and ironed on Tuesday. Before the widespread use of automatic washers and dryers in the 1980s, quite a few households in town maintained this Monday/Tuesday laundry schedule.

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Jump-Starting the Generator

Xavier Melliere

Armin Muskopf was running the electric plant when my dad, Abel Melliere, was village clerk.

The 1885 school building, razed in the 1970s.

hospital and went on sick leave. On April 24, a committee of men inspected the old building to determine if they could fireproof it. On April 25, the bishop inspected the building himself.

On May 16, the fire marshal returned to check if any of his safety recommendations had been implemented. They had not. On May 25, the school board, the county superintendent, Father Siekmann, and a group of citizens met from 7:30 PM to 1:30 AM and decided, finally, to discontinue the two-year high school in Prairie du Rocher. Three days later, Mr. Dearworth returned after a month in the hospital. On June 27, he resigned as principal and teacher at District 134 public schools. He had begun his career as the seventh- and eighth-grade teacher at the Prairie du Rocher grade school in 1931. Like the high school itself and all the principals and teachers who had staffed it, he had "served his day."

In Fall 1959, all of Rocher's high schoolers attended school in nearby communities: Red Bud Public High School, Precious Blood Institute at the Ruma Convent, and Ss. Peter and Paul High School in Waterloo.

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Playing Tricks on Sister Mary Pauline

Clyde Franklin

I think Sister Mary Pauline only had one year of high school before she came down here to teach first and second grade. She finished her high school education over the summers. I didn't know that she was just a little bit older than me. She was a teacher, after all; to me, that meant she was an old woman! With that white thing around her face—who would guess?

We played some ornery tricks on her. She played the organ at mass, and we had to pump the bellows. We would let the organ run out of air, then Father Van Delft would look up at the choir loft, and we'd start pumping like crazy.

Sister Pauline was good-natured about it. One time, though, Father Van Delft said, "We'll have to have the bellows looked at. They must be leaking air."

SALOON
Geo. Seitz's; Henri Palmier's; DeWitt's; John Bachelier's

SCRAP IRON DEALERSHIP
Felix Paschal Sr.

THRESHING
Jos. Steibel

UNDERTAKING SERVICES
A. Mohrhard family; C. S. Dashner

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Conner's Store Origins

It was in 1839, according to Antoine Blais's grandson Thomas J. Conner, that Antoine established a barter and trade store in an old building in the southwest area of Prairie du Rocher, between the present-day Catholic church and the cemetery. That's the area where most Rocherites lived. But when the population center shifted northward, Antoine moved his store into an uptown building later occupied by Clyde Billingsley. He then built a store building in front of the old Steve Chaudet property, which was later known as the coffin shop when it was used for that purpose by Apolinia Mohrhard.

In 1872, Antoine constructed a brick building at the corner of Market and Court Streets. Over the years, the store was known by several names:

Antoine Blais's first brick store building.

"All right, listen," Dolores told the agent. She then let loose with the sounds of Patrick and Rebecca Levy for the first time in weeks … and got the ticket.

If her voice ever failed her, well, Dolores could segue into the patent medicine business: She was president of Mantho-Kreoamo Co., manufacturer of a cough remedy developed by Doc Gillen himself—the doctor who had treated Rocherites in the early 1900s.

Illness overtook Dolores in the last year of her life. She died on December 8, 1947, barely 40 years old.

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The Marshal's Daughter

Jackie Aubuchon Prange's Family

Jackie was born in 1921, fourth in a line of eight children. The family lived in a small frame house near the bottom of the Rocher hill, and all eight kids slept in the attic. In the winter, they used heated rocks to warm their beds before going to sleep—and often woke up covered with snow in the morning.

The new highway into Rocher (Route 155) ran through the Aubuchon family's front yard. Prior to that time, three families lived on the hill side of the road—with enough children to have a ball team.

The multitude of kids in the neighborhood found plenty of things to do. They played ball and marbles and cards. They fished and picked wild blackberries. One day, they raided a neighbor's watermelon patch, breaking melon after melon till they found one that was ripe. The town marshal, Lee Aubuchon, who also happened to be Jackie's father, dispensed justice in his own way.

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Showtime!

In 1946, the Russell Moro family of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri built a freestanding movie theater on Henry Street just west of Middle Street. Jackie Laurent remembers working at Bill Shea's concrete block works across the street; Jackie's job was to cart the cast blocks over to the theater construction site.

The Prairie Theatre opened on Tuesday, August 6, 1946. It was a gala affair: State Representative "Boots" Brands was master of ceremonies, and Mayor Dom Schilling spoke a few words. Then, the lights dimmed and *The Blue Dahlia*, starring Alan Ladd, Veronica Lake, and William Bendix, filled the screen. The 26-mile round trip to the Red Bud theater was no longer necessary.

There was seating for 304 patrons, with space in the rear for disabled veterans. A single unisex bathroom served all patrons.

L. C. DeRousse's parents ran the theater for the Moros. Admission was 50 cents for adults and 20 cents for children 12 and under. Initially, movies were shown every day of the week, four different movies per week—Sunday/Monday, Tuesday/Wednesday, Thursday/Friday, and Saturday. On

247

The Summer of MORP

Dawn Walker

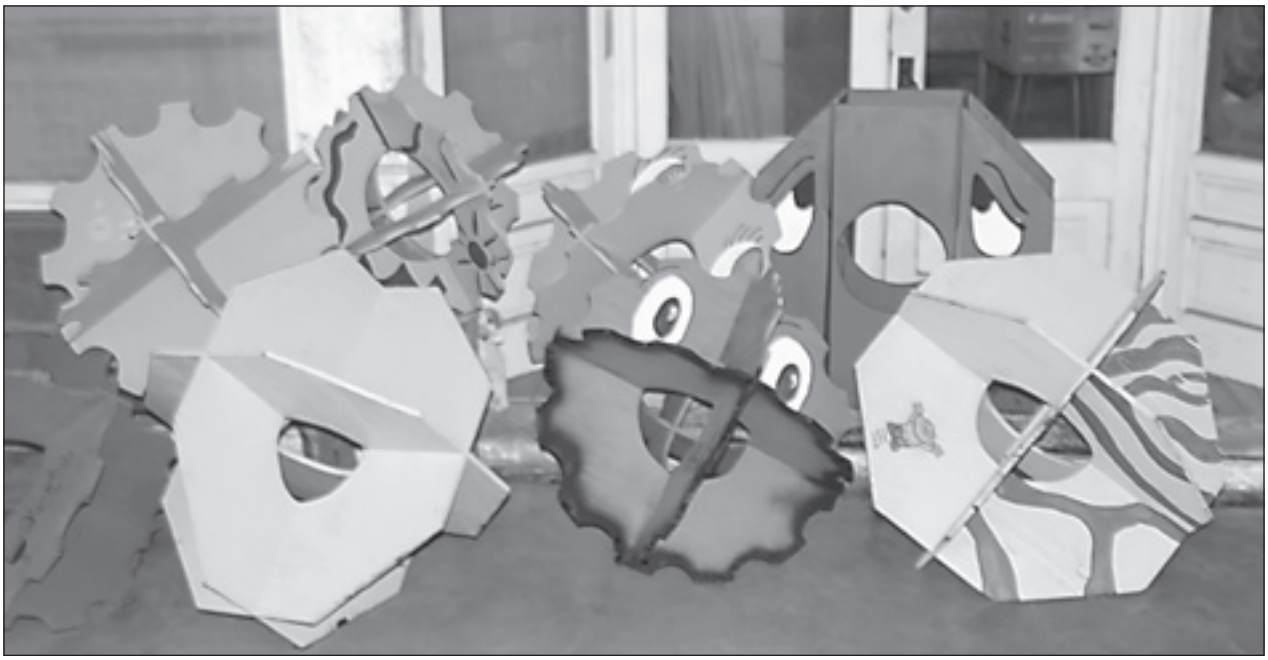
One day back in 2016, these odd "creatures" began to appear around town. At first, there was only one, and it would move from yard to yard, as if by magic. Then there were two, and people started moving them around themselves. A Facebook page was created to track their journeys around town.

When the MORP visited our house, our daughter Kira hung out with it for a bit. She and the MORP wanted to go for a Razor ride, of course, before we shared the fun with one of our neighbors. Families documented their visits from the MORP by autographing them or drawing a picture on them.

Everyone was curious: We knew they were called MORP ("PROM" spelled backwards, because that's where the plywood came from—scenery from the Red Bud High School prom from years past), but who was behind this? Several people in town, both men and women, could cut out the shapes and assemble them. Anyone could have painted them. Was the project hatched at Lisa's one night? Was more than one person involved?

Kira Walker, MORP lounger.

It turned out that the creator of MORP was the most obvious person of all: Gerry Franklin. (Of course, he denied any involvement, but they did appear first in *his* yard.)



MORPs return home (Franklin Woodworking shop) after a summer of fun. They've been decorated by temporary MORPsitters as they trekked from yard to yard.

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A Phantom Funeral

John Allen

Those who appreciate the lore of ghosts know that they are only disembodied spirits that have returned to the realm of the living. A ghost comes back for one of two purposes—to free itself from a spell or curse cast upon it while it was yet a living being, or it may return to correct some injustice. In the breaking of a curse or the righting of a wrong, the ghost may incidentally bring misfortune upon the living, but ghosts are not cruel.

This ghost story survives among the older persons at Prairie du Rocher, in Randolph County. Perhaps it can be told best by setting it down exactly as it was related by a very old lady and tape recorded by the writer. Here it is in the teller's words.

"This happened between eleven o'clock and midnight on the evening of July 4, 1889. Mrs. Chris and I were sitting in front of her building keeping a vigil over her little dead baby. But 'twas too warm for us to be in the building, so we were sitting on the outside. All at once, I look and I said to Mrs. Chris, 'Isn't that a funeral a-coming down?' She says, 'It looks like it.' I says, 'We'll see when it passes here.' So, when it passed right in front of where we were sitting, it was a funeral.

"There was a number of wagons, all alike, like the little wagons they haul trash in today. I said to

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Rationing during World War II

Joy Melliere

The *Prairie du Rocher Sun* announced on Friday, November 30, 1945:

> The rationing of all meats, canned fish, and foods, fats and oils, including butter, was ordered abandoned effective at midnight Friday. Also included was margarine, lard, shortening and cooking and salad oils.
>
> The sweeping action left sugar as the only food commodity, and tires the only non-food item, remaining under the rationing programs instituted early in the war to assure supplies for military requirements and to provide equitable distribution.
>
> Because of a serious worldwide shortage, there is no "immediate prospect" of ending sugar rationing. Tires, on the other hand, may come off the ration list shortly after the first of the year.

Rationing affected everyone.

The first item rationed was rubber. The Japanese had seized the rubber plantations in the Dutch East Indies, which produced 90 percent of the raw rubber used in the United States. To compensate, citizens were urged to turn in all their scrap rubber, even shower caps!

Joy in one of the flour sack dresses she sewed.

Gasoline soon followed. Everyone was issued a windshield sticker indicating how many gallons a week could be dispensed to their vehicle. An "A" sticker was good for four gallons a week, and "B" stickers for eight gallons (for those whose driving was considered essential to the war effort). A "C" sticker was for physicians, mail carriers, railroad workers, and ministers. Truckers, members of the U.S. Congress, and other VIPs got their own stickers, and there were also special stickers for nonhighway vehicles like farm tractors.

My sister, Fay, and I responded to the call for milkweed pods that were ripe but before they projected their seeds; the floss was used to fill life jackets.

To alleviate the fabric shortage, manufacturers of bags for animal feed, flour, and other commodities began printing flowers and designs on their cloth sack material—the "fabric" could then be recycled into clothing. Mom and I made flour sack dresses and other clothing items.

But out here in the country, food rationing

295

The Great Flood of 1993

Ian Hankhammer

The events that led to the Great Flood of 1993 began during the summer of 1992: above-average rainfall and below-average temperatures. Similar weather continued throughout the autumn, and during the winter of 1992–1993, the Midwest saw a large amount of snowfall. These weather conditions continued into the spring, producing storms and large amounts of rain. The ground was completely soaked by the beginning of the summer of 1993—the wettest the area had been in 99 years. Because the ground was completely soaked, rain was flowing into rivers and streams and not soaking into the ground. From January to July, more than 20 inches of rain fell.

A special report by the Illinois State Geological Survey identified four characteristics that made the flood such an unprecedented event: (1) The rivers remained above flood stage for months rather than days or weeks; (2) flooding typically occurs in the spring, but this event lasted through the summer; (3) multiple flood crests occurred at most locations; and (4) flood crests set record highs. This flood smashed records as well as levees. In St. Louis, the Mississippi soared past its record by reaching 49.58 feet, almost 20 feet above minor flood stage. The river stayed above flood stage in St. Louis for 147 days.

Prairie du Rocher fought hard against the Mississippi River. Two levees protected the town: the fort (primary) levee, running for 20 miles along the Mississippi River, and the Modoc (flank) levee, running east and west along the north side of Prairie du Rocher. The fort levee was sopping with river water and beginning to ooze, like a rag that has soaked up as much spilled milk as it can. The river was reaching underneath, clawing holes through the earth.

The town knew that if the fort levee failed, the floodwater would overwhelm the Modoc levee. On August 1, the levee broke near Columbia, Illinois, flooding thousands of acres of land and

The sun sets over the flooded area north of Prairie du Rocher—a basin from the levee along the Mississippi River to the bluff, and extending from the breached Columbia levee to the dual levee system protecting the village of Prairie du Rocher.

completely covering Valmeyer and Fults. The break sent water toward the levees protecting Prairie du Rocher.

The Army Corp of Engineers and local leaders decided to fight water with water. Their idea was to tear a hole in the fort levee. They hoped it would do two things: (1) create a "backflood," a wall of water that would cushion the impact of the coming avalanche and protect the Modoc levee, and (2) allow some of the water pouring in from the north to drain out. "It's the only thing we could think of to make the difference between losing Prairie du Rocher and saving Prairie du Rocher," said Gary Dyhouse, a Corps of Engineers hydrologist.

The 400-foot break in the fort levee wasn't big enough, though, and the Modoc levee was threatened by the backflood. Rejecting the advice of the Army Corps of Engineers and running the risk of flooding even more farmland, the Prairie du Rocher & Modoc and Fort Chartres & Ivy Landing levee districts voted to blast holes in the fort levee with dynamite. Shortly after, approximately 1,000 volunteers helped sandbag in Rocher to reinforce the fort levee. Truckload after truckload of rock was hauled in to help strengthen it. The plan worked: Within a day, the water started dropping and moving away from the Modoc levee.

The town stayed dry. The farms and homes north of the fort levee, however, were damaged. Historic Fort de Chartres was also hit by the Mississippi waters. These areas were unfortunately going to flood anyway, with or without the backflood. As she mourned her family's losses, Carol Dufrenne said, "We had a beautiful home, fireplace wall to wall, a nice new machine shed. And we put in every nail ourselves."

Although it may be hard to imagine what the Great Flood of 1993 was like, many residents of Rocher know how scary and devastating it was. Whether a person lived in town or outside the levees, everyone was involved and has memories of what it was like during the summer of 1993.

The town's leaders and residents rallied together to protect Prairie du Rocher and won! The mighty Mississippi couldn't take down Prairie du Rocher.

The basin floodwaters failed to overtop the fort and Modoc levees, and Prairie du Rocher was saved. In this aerial photograph taken on August 8, the swollen Prairie du Rocher Creek is contained by the Modoc levee in the foreground, and the village is dry all the way to the bluff. The railroad tracks run from center left to upper right. At top right is the Catholic church steeple.

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