THE IMMORTAL SPOON

Harold Kee Welch

Amaquonsippi was the Potawatami name; and its meaning, Shell River. There are 108 varieties of fresh water mussel, most can be found in Spoon River. The indians used the mussel shells for spoons. In over one thousand of their mounds uncovered in Fulton County, every food bowl contained a shell spoon, most with the half the right thumb fits into, but a few with the opposite half, for the "lefty".

This little bivalve, especially from this particular stream, was useful to the indian in other ways. Besides being a valuable source of food, the pearls and shells were highly prized for ornaments because of their unique lustre and beauty. They, at one time, were sought after by the crowned heads of Europe.

Spoon River lies in the heart of that rich region embraced by the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. This small torturous stream, roiled by erosion, begins its meandering in Bureau County and flows southward, winding across the map of central Illinois, depositing its turbulent waters upon the placid bosom of the majestic and gently flowing Illinois near Havana.

Sometimes this seemingly innocent little river can, without warning, turn deceitful and treacherous, repeatedly flooding its wide valley, depositing a rich, thick, black layer of corn-rocketing gumbo, the super soil for next years bumper crop.

It is truly a river of many moods and has been called

"the classic Spoon", "the turbid Spoon", "the treacherous Spoon", "the lovely Spoon"; and perhaps the most significant of all, "the raging Spoon". It floods, it destroys, and its ice packs wound the beautiful trees at unbelievable heights. During the flooding periods, this unpredictable river often gouges a new path to follow; but its depth, as always, is a closely guarded secret. The tale has become a legend, - "Each year the river takes one human life as a toll".

First the river was forded, then crossed by many swinging foot bridges, then ferries, later covered bridges, and finally iron, steel and concrete bridges.

The migration of the pioneers, like that of the indians, followed the waterways. They were delighted with the valley. Evidences of five separate and distinct cultures are found here. The river supplied fish, turtle, and fowl; and the forests gave them many varieties of game, nuts and honey. In every ravine there seemed to be a spring of delightful water. It was the habitat of literally thousands of deer. At the time of the arrival of the white man, strains of the great indian nations of the Sac, Fox, Chippewa, Kickapoo and Potawatami were found here.

Mills soon began to dot the banks of Spoon River. They were important to the economy of the frontier and towns invariably sprang up around them. The first of the Spoon River mills was the Hackleton Mill built in Isabel Township in 1831 by an Eastern engineer. Giant water-wheels performed giant tasks. Often a saw and grist mill were operated by the same source of

power. In the next four years five more mills were constructed. These mills were located at Waterford, Duncan Mills, Bernadotte, Ellisville and London Mills, where the Spoon enters Fulton County.

Situated on a wooded bend in the river, its magnificent trees stand with dignity about the thriving little town of London Mills. From there we drift downriver passing Ellisville, Babylon, and Seville. We see between terraced hills and the luxuriant green of the trees which line her banks, giving us only an occasional glimpse of the fields of corn and grain which lie beyond, maturing in the valley. When we arrive at Bernadotte, the patriarch of all the mill towns, we sense most keenly the undaunting spirit of the pioneer who came from many lands to tame this virgin wilderness. Fifty deerskins was the original price of this small valley surrounded by seven verdant hills. This site triggered the imagination of the indian fighter, William Walters, in 1826. He bought the land, built his cabin, and began the twelve years span of operation of what was known as the Fulton Ferry. The village grew and became a thriving center for milling and fur trading. The indians were treated with kindness until they began pilfering, molesting and endangering the lives of the pioneers. Williams organized every man and boy who could carry a gun, disarmed the indians at Great Bend, drove them across the river and up the state across the Mississippi at Oquawka, and bid them never to return.

The town was platted and named Fulton in 1835. It prospered during this period when the waterways were the chief means of transportation. The beautiful little village of Tuscumbia, just two miles downriver, was founded in 1817 and flourished until 1837 when its people drifted into Bernadotte and other surround-

ing towns. The pirogue was the most successful vessel used on Spoon River. They were cut from the giant cottonwoods, which were about four feet in width and forty feet long, and were propelled by either oar or sail.

After General Bernadotte betrayed Napoleon at Waterloo in 1837, he decided it would be wise to leave France and come to America. Many of his countrymen had settled in the Mississippi valley where he first visited. There were several families, in the valley of Spoon River, to whom he gave valuable presents of jewelry which have been handed down as family heirlooms. He then proceeded to make his way down to the little mill town of Fulton. He was entranced by the loveliness of the place and remained there until he returned to France. He asked that the name Fulton be changed to Bernadotte. Later he was appointed King of Sweden and married a commoner. For this reason he was threatened with dethronement. This made little difference to the king who planned in that event to return to the new world with his bride and set up a kingdom in a city named for himself, surrounded by, he said, "the most beautiful country the Creator ever placed upon this earth." He was never to see it again.

Bernadotte's first grist mill on the river was built before 1835 replacing the horse-powered mill which had faithfully served the first settlers. In 1844 a mill, replacing the one destroyed by a flood, was built along with a picturesque log dam. A bridge of mud and logs replaced the Fulton Ferry. It flooded out in a few years, and in 1846 a two lane covered bridge was built. It was divided by stone pillars and lattice, built entirely of

native wood and stone, and held together with wooden pegs. This was a unique structure and a source of great interest not only in construction but also in the many stories which evolved during the seventy years it stood. It was a station on the undergound railroard during the Civil War. Slaves were hidden in the rafters.

Bernadotte quickly became a milling and fur trading center. People came from miles around by mule and horseback, covered wagon and ox-team to have their grinding done. The indians and half-breeds brought their pelts to sell and trade. General stores were opened that drew crowds of pioneer shoppers. A blacksmith shop and two planing mills were soon added. Two good doctors, several young lawyers, a justice-of-the-peace, a notary and a sheriff joined the community and took an active part in village affairs. After the Civil War, business continued to thrive. Stores sold a wide variety of goods. A lumber yard, a lime kiln, an iron foundry, some small factories, two large livery stables, ice houses, a number of hotels, inns and dance halls aided in the growth somewhat delayed by intermittant floods.

Flatboats plied the river carrying meat cured at the packing plant to Todd's Landing on the Illinois River; and other boats left Bernadotte with full cargoes for such distant places as St. Louis and New Orleans.

Bernadotte, from its existance, was an ideal center for recreation. People came for miles to enjoy picnicking, Fourth of July celebrations, and to play games of strength and skill. Henry Zoll, owner of the mill, operated the steam pleasure boat "Ruby", about ninety feet long, carrying many a festive group to picnic grounds above the dam, offering excellent views of the scenic

banks of the Spoon along the way.

Such mighty men of God as Peter Cartwight, William Rutledge, and Uncle Dick Haney thundered out their sermons to those who filled the small church (built in 1827) to over-flowing and also to the hundreds who crowded the yard outside.

Ambitious young people, hungry for learning, came from as far as the Chicago area to sit on split-logs to study and listen to the learned Bernadotte schoolmaster. Many young couples came from an equal distance to obtain their marriage license. Vandalia was chosen for the state capital of Illinois, winning over Bernadotte by only one vote.

In 1870, when the first railroad by-passed Bernadotte, the people still had hopes of being connected with the surrounding towns by rail. When other cities and towns served by the railroad began to grow and prosper, Bernadotte began its decline. The people became disheartened and moved away and buildings fell into disrepair. The seven verdant hills, the site of Bernadotte, was now practically abandoned. Like Rome, it had known both glory and decay.

In 1942, because of its varied types of terrain and the river, the U. S. Army selected 60,000 acres for the site of Camp Ellis with Pernadotte in its center. It was ideal for their purposes. After the war, the land was re-sold to former owners and private individuals. A spark of life could again be detected in Bernadotte. Even though stripped of her glory and with a sign posted showing the dates of her existance (1826-1941), she continues to attract. A new dam was built by the government on the site of the old log dam. One can see some of the old foundation

stones still in place. It was always believed that the refuse from the mill attracted fish; but fishing today is still excellent, perhaps because her waters are still free from the poisons of industry.

Many things have not changed; the wild grape vines still hang from the trees, waiting to give some young Tarzan, stripped bare, a colossal swing far out over the river to drop him with a rebel yell and a splash. Coon hunts with hounds baying still echo in the autumn moonlight. Skating parties arrive by bobsled on cold crisp winter nights; and build bonfires to warm by, after gliding over the crystal surface of the Spoon. Gentle rains and warm sunshine release the magic morels, the sponge mushroom everyone knows and fries crisp and golden in butter. One can slide his canoe into these turbid waters and smoothly glide with the gentle current under the rusty and wooden bridges, free from the pressures of the modern world. A feeling of timelessness prevails. Along the banks one sees a man of patience with a bottom-baited line dreaming and hoping the Spoon will give up another of her succulent be-whiskered blue channel cat. Around a bend, startles a drinking white-tail that quickly loses himself in the thicket, leaving hoofprints in the muddy banks of the Spoon.

The railroads ended Spoon River Valley's active part in early Illinois history. Spoon River was immortalized by Edgar Lee Masters. A humble little stream, not a great river of power or commerce or even of much importance; but today world famous because of that genius. It is now experiencing a new revival of

interest because of a rich heritage of folk music and folk lore. Although the towns have dwindled, the mills have disappeared, the river traffic almost forgotten, it remains beautiful, peaceful and endowed with nostalgic memories.

"I arise and follow alone for hours the winding way of the river,
Hunting a vanishing light, and a solace for joy too deep.
Where do you lead me, wild one, on and on forever?
Over the hill, over the hill, and down to the meadows of sleep."

from Epilogue
Spoon River Anthology
by Edgar Lee Masters
Mc Millan 1914