

Lodge History by Beth Carvey

The present Watch Tower Lodge is the fifth structure built on the crest of the bluff above the Rock River. The next four installments of The History Corner will feature the story and history of the four buildings that preceded the Lodge.

The Black Hawk Pavilion

1882 – 1891

In 1882 Bailey Davenport constructed a small frame building on the crest of the bluff at the area called Black Hawk's Watch Tower. The building, known as the Black Hawk Pavilion, was to serve as a depot and waiting room for visitors who came to the Tower via the newly installed streetcar line.

The Tower had been a popular destination with local residents for many years. The commanding view of the Rock River valley attracted picnickers, sightseers, and day trippers. The breeze on the bluff was cooling on hot summer days. Visitors came by horse drawn buggies and wagons. Davenport, owner of the land, conceived of a plan to bring many more people to the Tower.

In June 1882 Davenport and other local businessmen founded the Rock Island and Milan Street Railway company. The streetcar line ran between the two towns along present day 11th Street, with a branch line extending east to the Tower. Round trip fare to the Tower was ten cents. The site's popularity soared and within a year hundreds of people rode the streetcar to the Tower every day on cars departing every 40 minutes.

The Black Hawk Pavilion became more than a depot. Refreshments were served in a small dining room located at the east end of the building. The proprietor of the pavilion, O.G. Dohlman, took out an advertisement in the Rock Island Argus stating that "dinners and suppers could be furnished on short notice and that all kinds of refreshments were available for sale." In June 1883 Bailey Davenport entertained a visiting group of dignitaries at the Tower. Lunch was eaten in the pavilion's dining room where "ice cream, strawberries, cake and such delicacies were served."

On August 5, 1883 the daughters of Jacob Ohlweiler hosted a "basket picnic" at the Tower. While there, the party "visited all the important points of attraction, including the coal mines in the vicinity." Boat riding and hiking the trails were a part of the day's events. Musicians were hired to entertain the guests while they ate.

Day trips to the Tower remained popular throughout the 1880's. When Bailey Davenport died in 1891, the owners of the recently created Tri-City Railway Company purchased the Tower property from Davenport's estate. The company's president, D.H. Lauderbach, began to develop plans to expand the Tower's entertainment possibilities. In 1891 the Black Hawk Pavilion was razed to make way for a far grander structure.

The First Black Hawk Inn, 1892-1896

In 1892 the first of the magnificent Black Hawk Inns, built on the summit of Black Hawk's Watch Tower, was opened to the public ushering in a new era for the site. In 1891 D.H. Louderback, managing director of the Davenport and Rock Island Street Railway Company, purchased the Watch Tower grounds from Bailey Davenport's estate. In addition, Louderback bought the Rock Island and Milan Street Railway Company, the streetcar line which brought visitors to the Tower. He intended to electrify the streetcar

line, to build a magnificent Inn at the Tower, and to create an amusement area that would attract visitors from around the country.

Louderback hired Davenport landscape architect Charles Sheriff to design the layout for the Tower grounds. Sheriff's plan included a "handsome walkways," a carriage concourse, a new depot, two summer pavilions, and a band stand.

Louderback turned to successful Davenport architect Edward Hammatt to design the building that would crown the Tower's summit. Hammatt designed a classic Queen Anne structure, complete with twin turrets and double wrap around porch. Undoubtedly the building was vividly colorful, with the main structure painted one color and the turrets and other architectural details in contrasting hues. A dining room was located on the first floor and a ballroom on the second. Parlors were located in the turrets to provide space for musical performances and private parties.

The Black Hawk Inn was opened formally on the evening of July 14, 1892 at a banquet hosted by Louderback. One hundred local dignitaries were invited. Special streetcars, manned by the best motormen and conductors decked out in white ties and gloves brought the guests to the Tower. What a sight greeted their eyes! The grounds were illuminated with Japanese lanterns and the Inn was ablaze with incandescent lights, including lighted beads wrapped around the turrets. The dining room was festooned with the national colors and decorated with palms, potted plants, and vases of flowers. A mandolin orchestra played throughout the sumptuous feast.

The Tower's popularity soared that summer. Visitors came to ride the merry-go-round and the Shoot the Chutes toboggan slide. Many people attended the twice weekly musical performances at the Inn. Private groups booked the Inn for dinner and dancing parties. Balloon ascensions and tight rope walking exhibitions brought visitors in droves. The Tower's popularity increased over the next four years, and by 1896 many other amusement venues had been added including an outdoor theater.

A huge celebration was planned for July 4, 1896. Lockhart's famous elephants and several vaudeville acts were to perform in the outdoor theater, a high wire performance was scheduled, and after dark a brilliant display of fireworks would be shot off from an Egyptian river carnival composed of 100 floats and barges "decorated like masses of moving, colored fire."

Tragically, however, at 3:30 on the afternoon of July 3 the Black Hawk Inn caught fire, and within an hour had burned to the ground. Faulty wiring in the southeast turret was the source of the blaze and a stiff southerly wind rapidly fanned the flames out of control. Plans were announced immediately to replace the building. Within hours of the Inn's destruction architect Edward Hammatt was asked to draw plans for a new Inn.

The Second Black Hawk Inn, 1897-1915

In the spring of 1897 construction began on the new Black Hawk Inn at Black Hawk's Watch Tower Park. The new inn, designed by architect Edward Hammatt, was replacing one destroyed by fire the previous summer. The building was completed by June 8th. and opened to the public on June 24th.

The second Black Hawk Inn was more magnificent than the one it replaced. Broad, double verandas encircled the modified Queen Anne structure, providing a shady place to view the surrounding countryside. Broad steps led up to the verandas on the east, south, and west sides of the Inn. A newly constructed carriageway provided an entrance on the north side. The building was painted bright salmon.

The Inn was three-storied, and the interior was described as “commodious and highly ornamented.” The first floor housed the dining room, the east end of which was partitioned off to provide space for private dinner parties. An ice cream parlor, soda fountain, the kitchen, and offices also were located on the first floor. The second floor housed the ballroom where many dances, both public and private, were held in the evenings. Doorways led out onto the veranda where dancers could enjoy the cool breeze. The third floor was used as dormitory space for female employees.

The Inn was formally opened to the public on June 24. The grounds were brilliantly illuminated that night with red, white, and blue lights. Electric globes, located throughout the grounds and around the Inn, glowed in the darkness. Hundreds of people attended the opening event. Peterson’s orchestra provided music, and claret punch was served. Visitors were given souvenir cards decorated with an image of the new Inn and containing information about the Watch Tower.

Many improvements were added to the Watch Tower Park that summer. The toboggan slide was rebuilt, and a new dance pavilion was erected. An electric fountain was installed. A bowling alley and billiard hall were added too.

Black Hawk’s Watch Tower Park was a lively place during the summer of 1897. Attractions such as vaudeville companies, opera companies, band concerts, and balloon ascension and parachute races were offered nearly every day. A huge celebration was held on the Fourth of July. Over 10,000 people came to enjoy the day. The Gillett circus, with trained horses, acrobatic feats, and clowns performed in the outdoor Tower Theater. Don Octavio De Nariega, the King of the Wire, provided tight wire exhibitions. Fireworks were shot off both day and night.

Over the next eighteen years the popularity of Black Hawk’s Watch Tower Park soared. New amusements were added including a roller skating rink, a photo booth, a shooting gallery, the Tunnel of Love ride, and the Figure Eight roller coaster.

Tragedy struck though on the morning of August 1, 1915. At 11:25, a park employee who had just arrived at work saw flames shooting through the roof of the Inn. By 12:30 the Inn was completely destroyed. The fire spread so rapidly and created such intense heat that little could be saved from the interior. Though the fire department responded to the fire, there was nothing they could do; there was no supply of water on the grounds except enough for a garden hose.

Tri-City Railway Company officials immediately made plans to construct a temporary structure where meals could be served and visitors could take shelter for the duration of the summer season. Company officials began to discuss a permanent replacement. The new building was to be constructed of stucco, concrete, and steel—a fireproof building—and by the spring of 1916 the next Inn was under construction.

The Third Black Hawk Inn, 1916 - 1935

On April 7, 1916 the contract was let for the construction of the new inn at Black Hawk’s Watch Tower Park. Workers cleared away the debris remaining from the last inn which had burned to the ground the previous summer. Construction of the new inn progressed quickly and by June 1, the \$60,000 structure was complete. The inn was opened formally on the evening of June 15 with a dinner dance. The cost was \$5.00 per couple.

The third Black Hawk Inn was designed in the popular Colonial Revival style. Colonnaded porches surrounded the building on all sides, with open porches off the

second floor. The inn was built of concrete with a white stucco finish, making the structure fireproof throughout.

The two story structure housed a dining hall capable of seating 500 people on the first floor and a ballroom on the second floor. An office and living quarters for the manager were included, as were living quarters for the employees. Refreshment booths sold ice cream, cake, and fountain sodas.

During the summer of 1916, promenade dances were offered in the ballroom every Tuesday and Friday evening. Local orchestras and bands provided the music. Those attending could buy a Table D'Hote dinner at 50 cents, 75 cents, or \$1.00.

Other improvements were made to the Watch Tower Park that summer. Most notably, the streetcar tracks were moved, allowing entry onto the grounds in a loop west of the inn instead of in the ravine on the north side of the inn as they had before. Now visitors no longer had to climb the long stairs to access the park. The Old Mill ride, located in the far west section of the park, was built that summer at a cost of \$4,000. The Shoot the Chutes, Figure Eight Roller Coaster, Sunday band concerts, and other pleasures continued to attract visitors from the tri-cities and beyond.

But nothing lasts forever. The Watch Tower property was owned and maintained by the Tri-City Railway Company. As the twentieth century progressed, revenues began to decline as more people rode bicycles and later drove automobiles instead of taking the streetcar. As automobile ownership increased, families now could go far a field for a summer afternoon's enjoyment. By 1925 the Tri-City Railway Company was forced to look for a buyer for the Watch Tower property.

In 1927 the State of Illinois purchased the 200 acres owned by the railway company, creating Black Hawk State Park. The Black Hawk Inn and all the amusement rides were included in the purchase. Within a year the amusement rides were dismantled. The inn remained standing and meals continued to be served. In 1933, when the Civilian Conservation Camp was established at Black Hawk, the inn was used as camp headquarters. In June 1934, construction of the present lodge began. The museum, located southwest of the inn, and the refectory, located at the west end of the inn, were completed within a year.

In the summer of 1935 the third Black Hawk Inn was razed and in time the Black Hawk Room was built on top of the old foundation. The present hallway, or loggia, is built where the south colonnaded porch had been.

The Watch Tower Lodge, 1935 to Present

On July 1, 1927 the State of Illinois purchased 200 acres of land from the Tri-City Railway Company, creating Black Hawk State Park. For the previous 45 years the area had been a place of amusement, located amid beautiful, natural surroundings. The focus of the new state park, however, was to be the area's natural aspect. The amusement park days were over.

By February 1928 the rides and structures associated with the amusement park had been removed with the exception of the Black Hawk Inn. The State intended to replace the Inn with a structure more suited to the natural surroundings. But before plans to do so could be implemented, economic disaster hit the nation. The Great Depression dried up funds and the State was unable to move forward.

On April 5, 1933 newly elected president Franklin Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps. The thrust of the CCC was to provide badly needed work in national

and state forests. In September, Black Hawk State Park was awarded a CCC camp. At last the State had the means to implement their plans at the park.

State architect Joseph Booton drew up plans for the new structure. It was to be a complex of three separate buildings connected by an open walkway, or loggia. The complex was to be constructed of native limestone, the local bedrock. Booton, a follower of the Prairie School of architecture, wanted the new structure to appear to rise up out of the bluff, to appear to be a part of the landscape.

The Watch Tower Lodge was built in two phases. The east most building, which became the museum, and the west most building, which became a restaurant, were built by the CCC and completed in July 1935. The Inn was razed and the foundation capped. The CCC camp was moved before the Lodge could be completed and not until 1941 did the State appropriate the money to complete the structure. The final, central building, now known as the Black Hawk Room, was built on top of the 1916 Inn's foundation. The loggia was built connecting the three buildings. Open patios were located on the east, south, and west sides of the Black Hawk Room.

On July 25, 1942 the Watch Tower Lodge was formally opened to the public. The opening event was attended by thousands of people. Mary Mack, great-great granddaughter of Black Hawk, and other Sauk attended the grand opening as guests of John Hauberg. Many state and local officials attended the grand opening too.

The Watch Tower Lodge continued the long standing tradition of offering relaxation, food, and dancing that had been the hallmark of the previous Black Hawk Inns. The new restaurant was known for its chicken dinners which were served family style. The Black Hawk Room was used as a lounge where visitors could sit quietly and enjoy the beautiful structure. In the 1950's, a "rec" room was opened in the basement. Young people danced, not to the strains of an orchestra as had been done in the past, but to popular tunes now played on a jukebox.

Major changes were made to the Lodge in 1968. The restaurant was moved to the Black Hawk Room, the open patio on the west was enclosed and bathrooms put there, and the open patio to the east was enclosed and made into a kitchen. The loggia was enclosed using the two hallmarks of late 1960's architecture: Plexiglas and plywood.

The restaurant closed in 1978. For the next 15 years the Black Hawk Room was used by groups as meeting space. In 1994 the State refurbished the interior of the Black Hawk Room and installed air conditioning. Citizens to Preserve Black Hawk Park Foundation, incorporated in 1972, then began to rent the Black Hawk Room for private functions. An exhibit on the CCC was installed in the east building, now known as The Refectory.

It has been more than 130 years since the streetcar line was extended to Black Hawk's Watch Tower and the first of the buildings that crowned the top of the Tower was constructed. To this day, the Watch Tower Lodge continues the tradition of offering a place for the public to gather, to eat, drink, and be merry, while enjoying the beautiful natural setting the site has to offer.