

1894 Barrington: eggs cost 8 cents a dozen

By BARBARA BENSON

(This is the 11th in the historical series published during the past year by the Barrington Courier-Review, and based on the collection of letters written from Barrington's Octagon House during a period of 15 years, 1889 to 1904.)

The letters that Emaline Hawley Brown, and her daughter, Hattie Brown Porter wrote from Barrington, to Emaline's other daughter, Laura Brown Nightingale in Fairmont, Minn., were a chronicle of domestic and community lives as experienced and perceived by the participants, ordinary folk, who like millions of others, had migrated years before to claim back some of that open space which seemed to be vanishing from the eastern and northeastern states. Growing industrialization, disease and rising land costs, represented threats to the independence of people whose roots for the most part were in the fearless stock of the early colonists and the freedom fighters of the Revolutionary War. However harsh the realities of settlement, government terms for land in the midwestern and western territories were overwhelmingly favorable, and worth the sacrifice of leaving homes and moving families by wagon and later train, often several thousand miles at a time.

So were they ordinary folk? Were they ordinary people doing extraordinary things, or the reverse, extraordinary people with diligence and doggedness

going through the appointed rounds of life, because that was the way it was anyway? The Brown family's letters will probably never be classified as great literature, and yet there is a narrative detail, an articulateness and fluency of description which recaptures vividly for us both the daily routines of family life, and the comings and goings of everyone around in the community. Occasionally, news of more stunning impact filters in, through the newspaper, which had a world and national news section, or perhaps through talk on the train, among those whose business took them into the city from time to time. From this viewpoint these letters could be considered extraordinary.

It provides a sense of time and place to take a year like 1894 and recall some of the events of the world outside Barrington. As Emaline scribed along about everyone and everything around her, and Hattie became more and more preoccupied in her role as farmer's wife, the universe seemed to be growing ever larger, and to be embarking on a headlong rush towards the end of the 19th Century. In France, Louis Lumiere invented the cinematograph, and Captain Alfred Dreyfus was convicted on a charge of treason and sent to Devil's Island. In Russia, Nicholas II became the "Czar of all the Russians" and Nikita Krushchev was born. In England writers dominated the scene: Kipling's Jungle Book, and George Du Maurier's Trilby were published, and George Bernard Shaw wrote "Arms and

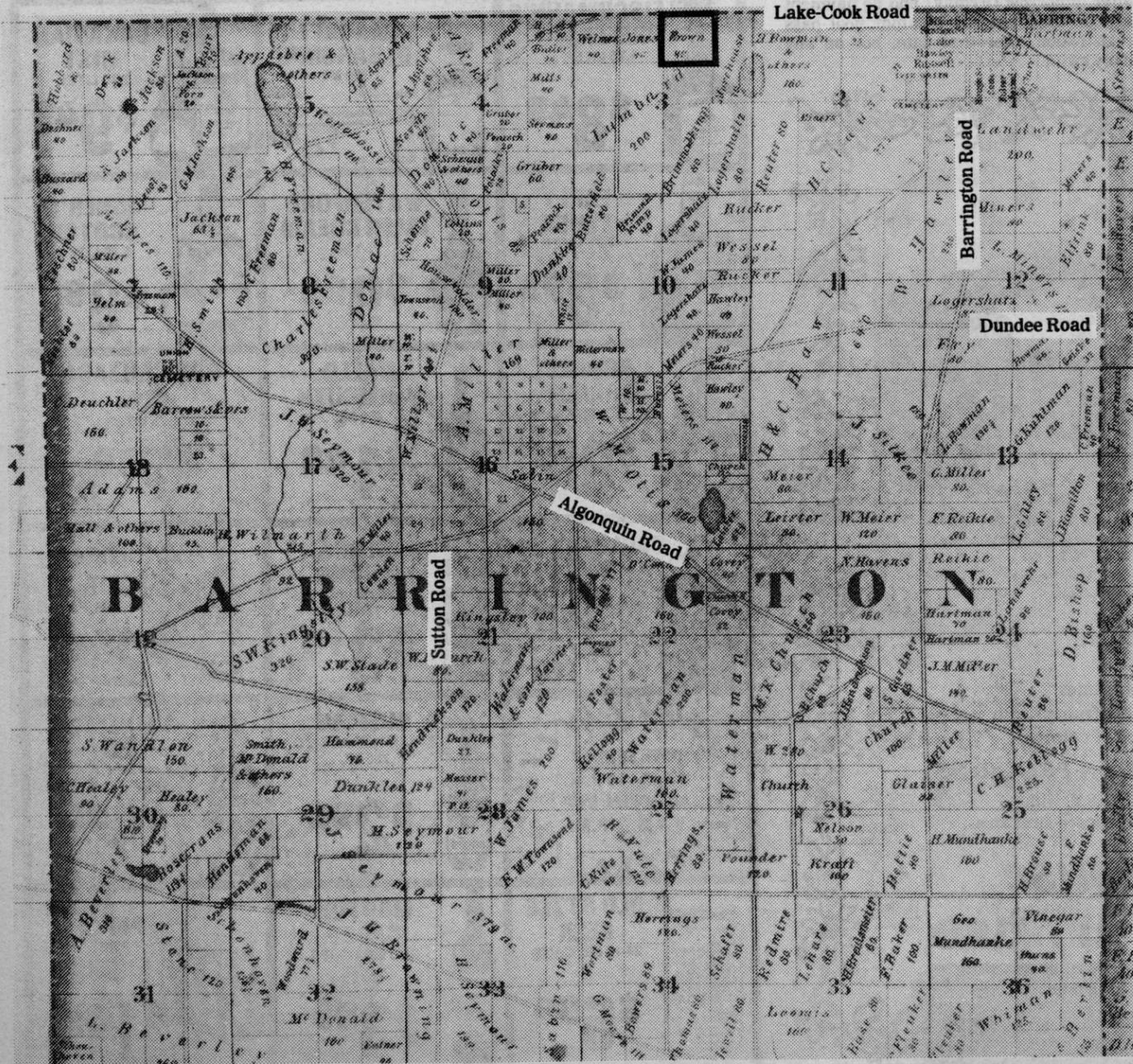
the Man." Sidney and Beatrice Webb published a "History of Trade Unionism" and two men were born who would be pre-eminent in 20th Century literature: J.B. Priestley and Aldous Huxley. Meanwhile, in far away Samoa, another eloquent pen was stilled at the age of 44. Robert Louis Stevenson travelled endlessly in search of an Eden where his chronically poor health might improve, but it wasn't to be. He traveled to America by immigrant ship in 1879 and took an immigrant train to California where he married. He once wrote about Carmel and the Monterey Peninsula that "it was the most felicitous meeting of land and water known to man."

In America in 1894, Thomas Edison opened Kinetoscope Parlor in New York, and the Flagstaff Observatory was erected in Arizona. Oliver Wendell Holmes died, but James Thurber was born, and in Barrington, week after week, Emaline and Hattie wrote their letters and Laura answered, with rarely a mention of the horizons beyond their own. But wasn't there enough to write about anyway? Their letters were sometimes 3 or 4 pages written at one time and mailed, but more frequently diaries, which could be written over a period of several days, and therefore often amounted to 14, 15 or 16 pages. In one instance it was 22. Hattie, as a teacher, was a literate writer, apart from some colloquialisms of the time; Emaline tended to omit punctuation and to continue in a stream of consciousness style

which betrayed that her mind was racing faster than her pen could take it, but she had to tell the whole story anyway, so there! Where Emaline was forthright, and sometimes brutally honest, Hattie liked to make inferences, to hint at a situation or an issue, only rarely did she get outright mad, as during the time when she wished that her sister-in-law Hattie would hurry up and marry and clear out from the Porter Farm. Whatever their differences of style, both Emaline and Hattie possessed sufficient language skills to say exactly what they wanted, and one suspects it was the same with Laura.

In 1894, the single-minded and independent, but always dutiful daughter of the Browns quietly became the mistress of her own house. It is clear that her reasons for delaying moving into the Porter farm until some seven months after her marriage were quite simply that she did not wish to share the house with another woman. Once Ren's sister was married all objections were removed and she took up homemaking with great seriousness and dignity. The fact that Hattie's father-in-law still lived in the house didn't seem to bother Hattie. She wrote:

Pa Porter doesn't care what we do with the house or how we fix it. But he likes to have things picked up and cleared away. He and I get along tip-top. Ren was saying that Pa didn't like to draw the cistern



Brown farm on 1871 map

When this series first began, there were certain aspects of the story which needed continuing research to further explain the origins of the Octagon House, and the influences on Joseph Brown's life which might have motivated him to employ a style of architecture, which was long past its zenith at the time that he moved into the property in 1882. There was little documentation apart from his ledger to track Brown's early years in his native New England, and his work as a carpenter in towns of the Connecticut River Valley where many Octagonal houses can still be found. There was even less information available about the loss of his first wife and two daughters by that marriage, and his journey to the Midwest, probably in the company of members of the Hawley family in the mid 1850's.

He has been most definitively placed by the Census records—1850 in Amherst, Mass.; 1860 in Cuba Township, Barrington; and in 1870 in Barrington Township, and thereafter in Barrington Township. Although the letters sometimes contain references by Emaline and Hattie about driving out to their old farm, and "around by Albright's, down at Goose Lake and out to the Center," it was not known until recently where this "old farm" was in Barrington Township. The Cuba Township farm was already established by the 1861 Lake County landowners map as being on Cuba Road at the eastern end of White Cemetery.

Now, the Barrington Historical Museum has acquired from the Chicago Historical Society, photographic copies of 4 landowners maps from the Society's collections, and two of these provide us with the location of the Brown property in Barrington Township. The 1871 map is reproduced here. The source is: Rufus Blanchard—Blanchard's Map of Cook and DuPage Counties, 1871.