

MORAIN HILLS - A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY By Steve Domski

I set out to do a little research on the history that surrounds Moraine Hills State Park. What first drew me to this was the blurb in the park's brochure noting the remains of a cabin located along the park's S.E. corner which one can see from the park's main road. The cabin's foundation dates back to the early 1800's and belonged to a settler by the name of Horace Long.

As anyone who has attempted to do genealogy research can probably tell you, once you open one door you'll find another. So getting an answer to one question soon raises a bunch more and then you are sucked in! Because I've got more questions to answer, this article will be one of a series of two or three.

What is really important about looking at Horace Long's life is that today Moraine Hills remains much the same as Horace first saw it 175 years ago when he arrived. I'd like to introduce you to some of Horace's journey and the beginnings of the land use/transformation around the park.

Horace Long was born in Vermont in 1804. Then, in 1836 at the age of 32, Horace (as many others from the eastern United States) got wind of a great land opportunity in the Midwest. It was ignited by the end of the Black Hawk War of 1831-32 which led to the 1833 treaty signed by the Indian United Nations. The treaty relinquished all title and claim to Indian lands held east of the Mississippi River in northern Illinois. In return, they were given a 5,000,000 acre reservation on the east bank of the Missouri River and had until August 1836 to move.

The 1836 Act of Congress opened up this land for sale to white settlers. The rush was on and Horace was coming to Illinois. It's not clear, but Horace may have come here with an older brother or cousin by the name of Virgil Long who was a carpenter by trade. I think all stories about pioneers should have at least one guy named Virgil! Imagine for a minute what a tough existence they were in for. But the first settlers, both male and female, were tough people. They came by horse, oxen, on foot or boat by way of the Great Lakes. I'd say any land route to the new west was little more than a foot path. With the U.S. government selling good fertile land for about \$1.25 per acre, this proved an irresistible carrot dangling in front of a lot of hungry faces. And so began this land's transformation.

The new settlers had to rely on their hunting, fishing and farming skills where the Indians had previously changed little of the land's features. European ways called for building homesteads, putting up fences, clearing land for grazing pastures and planting crops. While the land was fertile, water was often a problem. As visitors to Moraine Hills can see, water was likely an issue for Horace too. Ditching and later drain tiles were used to drain wetlands to make the land more suitable for farming. At times, an entire lake may have been drained to increase usable acreage. Within a few short years, many wetlands were drained. Native plants were plowed under for new crops or grazed-out by cattle and other livestock. Many non-native plants were also introduced.

Livestock, the settler's biggest asset, had to be protected from predators such as cougars, lynx and wolves. Until 1850 wolves carried a \$15.00 bounty on their pelts and at that price it more or less sealed their fate. All the big predators were soon gone. A new lifestyle was here.

It could be that Horace was better suited for a different kind of lifestyle or maybe he just got tired of wet feet. Whatever the case, Horace ventured a little north to where the city of McHenry stands today. McHenry County had split from Cook County in 1836 with the Village of McHenry becoming the new county seat. This required a court house and Horace was appointed agent for the county and state to purchase the land and have a court house

and jail built upon it. The task was completed in August of 1840. By all accounts, Horace Long was a respected man in the county.

The Village of McHenry became a hub for all county business. Paths soon gave way to roads and the stepping stones crossing the Fox River were to give way to bridges and ferries. Big changes were underway in a short period of time. In the same year that Horace had set out to build the court house, Lake County had split from McHenry County, thereby moving the county seat out of the geographical center of the county, ironically, to the town of Centerville (today known as Woodstock).

In 1840 Horace married Lodema Salisbury who was six years younger and had settled here from New York. An ambitious man, he was probably by most standards a "good catch". In 1841 Horace became McHenry's postmaster and in 1842 the Long's had their first child, a girl they named Cornelia. A son, James M. Long, was born in 1845 but died in 1848 at age 3. James is buried at Woodland Cemetery, McHenry. A second son, Edwin Long, was born in 1853.

Prior to the birth of Horace's sons, the former court house was auctioned to the highest bidder. That bidder turned out to be Horace Long. He moved the building from Court Street on the public square to the corner of Water Street (now Riverside Drive) and Pearl Street. Horace (and I assume with help from Virgil) turned it into the Mansion House Hotel, the second hotel in McHenry. For 10 years, Horace ran the establishment and it remains today as a tavern called The Town Club. Look for the commemorative plaque on the building mentioning Horace Long as the original hotel & tavern owner.

I can picture Horace wearing a white shirt, with sleeves rolled up, pouring a drink for a patron on a warm summer's afternoon while making small talk about earlier times or visions he had of the future. Horace proved to be a risk taker, a hard worker and a person committed to growing the community. He was probably also a speculator, acquiring land both north and south of the village and on the east and west sides of the Fox River. Perhaps he rented some of it out to farmers, farmed some himself, or envisioned other potentials for its use. Looking at old county plats it seems to indicate that many of the new residents were speculators too, buying and selling tracts of land here and there throughout the county. As early as 1837 road districts were formed, wood and flour mills were built, rock and stone quarries were underway. Even sloughs (wet prairies or marshes) were excavated, thus finding the clay necessary for the manufacture of bricks and drain-tiles underneath the peat beds. The dried peat was often used as a fuel for firing the bricks. This land was going to be a big producer of wealth paid for by nature. But the growth of this county was inevitable.

There is no way to know how many different pies Horace had his fingers in, but I was glad to follow some of his footprints. Horace lived some 40 years in McHenry and died at the Mansion Hotel House in 1878 at the age of 74.

We owe these pioneers, such as Horace, a debt of gratitude for their triumphs in taming this land. As well, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who more recently have helped restore a little bit of McHenry County to its original state, as we now can see at Moraine Hills State Park. I think Horace himself, being a man of hard work and vision, would be proud of the restoration efforts made by the dedicated staff and volunteers.