

The Bolender Family Legacy in the Area

People who have been around Monroe for a number of years, or who have studied our local history, probably recognize the Bolender name. John, patriarch of that family in Monroe, was born in Pennsylvania in 1837 and moved to Stephenson County, Illinois with his family at the age of three. He came to Monroe as a young man where he worked in a dry goods store. He later opened a grocery store here and switched to a dry goods store in 1873. The first dry goods store was in the building where the Garden Deli now operates (shown on page 23 of the Monroe Area Pictorial History). After John's death in 1902, his son, Fred, moved the store to the west side of the square where Burington Shoes now operates (shown on page 33 of the same book).

I took notice of an article in the June 19, 1901 Monroe Sentinel about the Bolender family reunion whose headline said, "Only 300 Present." Nearly 300 descendants of John and Michael Bolender, and their collateral kin, had gathered at the home of Mrs. Elizabeth Maurer in Rock Grove township, Stephenson County, Illinois for their first reunion on the previous Wednesday. It was their first annual reunion and an enjoyable occasion with the relatives starting to gather in the early forenoon. The young, old, and middle aged came from all over Stephenson County and some from southern Wisconsin.



This photo of the first annual Bolender family reunion held in Rock Grove township, Stephenson County, Illinois in June 1901 came from the collection of Ron Spielman. Shown in the back row are Michael Bolender, John Bolender, Aaron Bolender, and Henry Bolender. Anna Fehr, Amelia Belknap, Mary Marian, Elizabeth Maurer, and Levi Bolender are in the front row.

They spent the morning renewing acquaintances with those who had come from a distance, followed by a large basket dinner at noon. A program consisting of the history of the family's trip from Pennsylvania to Illinois (written by Levi Bolender) and addresses by Honorable John Bolender, Uriah Rubenhall, and others started the afternoon. It was followed by a literary and musical program.

The family decided to meet near Orangeville the next year on June 6 with the following officers in charge: John Bolender of Monroe as president; George Maurer of Rock Grove as vice president; Michael Bolender of Orangeville as treasurer; W. H. Bolender of Rock Grove as the secretary. Henry

Bolender of Orangeville, Mrs. M. E. Bolender of Freeport, and John Bolender of Rock City formed the invitation committee.

Coverage in the Monroe papers was sporadic. The June 4, 1908 Monroe Evening Times stated, "Fred J. Bolender, C. B. Bolender and family, Mrs. John Bolender, Miss Edna Bolender, and Morris Jackson drove to Orangeville today for the Bolender reunion at Riem's Grove."

The coverage the next day shared that 250 people had attended the annual reunion, which was again held in Riem's Grove south of Orangeville. The day was spent with speeches, music, feasting, and a program by the "little folks." Dr. F. W. Byers, of Monroe, and superintendent of schools Grove, of Stephenson County, were among the speakers. Music was furnished by the Bolender orchestra with Stewart Bolender in charge.

Mrs. Eggert and daughter from Ackley, Iowa attended the picnic, representing the Bolenders from that vicinity. Aaron Bolender, of Rock Grove, Henry Bolender, Mrs. Fahr, Mrs. Mary Marion and Mrs. Belknap, of Orangeville, and two more from Buena Vista were the original Bolenders who attended this year.

Only 150 family members attended the annual reunion at Riem's Grove on Thursday, June 18, 1914. Music was furnished by the Bolender band and the Orangeville quartet. Fred J. Bolender, of Monroe, was reelected as the historian of the family association this year and again in 1915.

The 1915 gathering "was one of the most enjoyable ever held although not one of the largest owing to the weather condition." It started at 11:00 with an address of welcome made by president George A. Bolender, followed by an address by Rev. William Funkey of the Orangeville Lutheran Church. A large picnic dinner was served at noon with the Bolender band giving a concert afterwards and then selections by a quartet. There was a baseball game at 3:30 between the Orangeville and Rock Grove teams with Orangeville winning 8 to 2.

This article also included information that would be helpful to the current historian of the family. It listed those who had died in the previous year. Moses Maurer, 84, of Rock Grove had just passed on Wednesday. Bernice Bolender of Rock Grove, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Bolender of Orangeville, and Peter Rubendall of Alliance, Nebraska, had also passed. Henry Bolender had been the vice president of the family association and one of the older members of the family.

The seventeenth annual picnic of the family was held on Thursday, June 21, 1917 in Riem's Grove. There were about 125 relatives and friends there to "enjoy the sumptuous dinner which was served at noon." After a short program, "there was visiting and a general good time was had by all."

An article in the Times on the day before the reunion that year gave an interesting historical sketch. John Bolender left Union County, Pennsylvania on April 5, 1840. His brother Michael and family joined the next day. The two families journeyed together toward their future home. They arrived in Stephenson County on June 6. John soon purchased a tract of land one mile east of what would become Rock Grove. Michael took his family to a farm north of Orangeville, which was owned in 1917 by his son-in-law, Forrest Belknap. Both men raised large families, many of whom were then living in the area. Only three children of the original pioneers who emigrated to Illinois were still living at the time.

It is unknown how many years these reunions continued. We can take some lessons from these early settlers. Remember to keep family and friends close, especially during this holiday season, and make many memories that will sustain us for our remaining years.