

# NEWS RELEASE

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau



## The Rockford Region Breathes Life into American History

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**ROCKFORD, IL** — Many have argued there is a real lack of tangible culture in America. An infant nation in comparison to the rest of the world, America does not boast a history dating back more than a few hundred years. However, those few short centuries are ripe with the triumphs and failures that shaped this country into a unique, independent nation.

The Rockford Region, located less than two hours from Chicago, Madison and Milwaukee, is a city that embraces its history and the contributions Rockfordians have made to American culture. From the founding of the city to its diverse ethnic make-up, Rockford is proud of its history and strives to preserve its historic attractions and promote its historical legacy at various sites and museums in the area.

### Rockford's Early History

[Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum & Gardens](#), built in 1865 by past Rockford mayor Robert Tinker, is perched high on a limestone bluff overlooking Kent Creek and the site of Rockford's first settlement in 1834-1835. A rare example of Victorian exotic architecture, this Swiss "cottage," still decorated with the Tinker family's original furnishings and belongings, provides a glimpse into the daily life of one of Rockford's early leading families. Guests touring the cottage will see the ornate woodwork, murals and sculptures scattered throughout the home and, in the library, a wooden spiral staircase traveling up to the second floor and leading to a unique circular balcony overlooking the room below. The museum recently restored the suspension bridge first built across Kent Creek by Robert Tinker in 1870, connecting to the Railroad Gardens that are now also being restored. The museum hosts special events throughout the year focusing on early Rockford and Victorian traditions.

Tinker Swiss Cottage has been marked as a place of historic significance by the Rockford Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and has been named one of Illinois' 150 Great Places by the American Institute of Architects, Illinois Council. This prestigious award is given to places that have been identified by leading architects as contributing to their communities' quality of life.

Prior to its founding in 1834, Rockford was first known as Midway because it was considered the mid-point between Chicago and Galena. Taking inspiration from Rockford's earliest days, [Midway Village Museum](#) was established to preserve and interpret the history of the Rockford area. The museum center is a treasure trove of fun historical artifacts that entertain a wide spectrum of ages and backgrounds. Baseball lovers young and old will find particular interest in the Rockford Peaches exhibit highlighting the history of the Rockford women's baseball team that was the inspiration behind the movie "A League of Their Own" starring Tom Hanks and Madonna. The exhibit features black and white photos of the women who comprised the Rockford Peaches, one of the first four teams in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League founded during World War II, as well as their uniforms, mits and baseballs. Kids and kids-at-heart will delight at the Sock Monkey exhibit detailing Rockford's connection to the nostalgic toy, including the various iterations of the dolls throughout history. Sock monkeys hang from the ceiling or fill display cases, with a special set of monkeys dedicated to the Wizard of Oz.

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Midway Village is also considered Rockford's "living history museum" because of its 137-acre campus with a 26-building Victorian village that depicts life in northern Illinois in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interpreters in authentic period dress provide seasonal guided tours of the village, taking visitors back in time through the gravel streets of the village and into a one-room school house, general store, bank, hotel and more. Special events are held in the village throughout the year, including one of the country's largest World War II re-enactments. Midway Village broke ground in late 2009 on an expansion of its museum center for its "Many Faces, One Community" project, which will explore the history of immigration to Rockford and its impact on the community.

### Diversity in Early Rockford

Contrary to popular belief, the Midwestern region is no stranger to ethnic diversity, and Rockford is no exception. Built in 1850, Rockford's [Ethnic Heritage Museum](#) celebrates the six ethnic groups that helped shape the region. Located in the heart of the old water power district, the house-museum features a room for each group it represents: African American, Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish and Hispanic. Each room is filled with cultural artifacts and photos, from clothing to toys to artwork. Special events from each group's culture are held throughout the year, including The Day of the Dead and Lucia Fest.

The largest immigrant group to settle in the Rockford Region is Swedish, and native Rockfordians are very proud of their Swedish heritage. The cultural centerpiece of Rockford's Swedish-ancestry community, [Erlander Home Museum](#) is located in Rockford's first brick home, built by the John and IngaStina Erlander family in 1871. Restored to its original Victorian decor, the twelve-room home features collections that include Rockford-made furniture, a renowned collection of more than 50 dolls created by Charlotte Weibull and many artifacts recalling Swedish immigration to northern Illinois and Rockford's Swedish heritage. The museum also hosts an annual Midsommar festival in mid-June and Lucia Fest in early December.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Rockford

Benchmarks in Rockford's history did not end in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [Veterans Memorial Hall](#) was completed in 1903 as a tribute to Rockford and Winnebago County citizens who served in the Armed Forces. The first war memorial to honor veterans of all wars, Memorial Hall features large wall plaques listing the names of fallen veterans and artifacts of memories from the Civil War and the World Wars on display. Captions for each of the artifacts, from luggage to uniforms to letters, allow visitors to hear the stories of the fallen soldiers and their families. The building's dedication ceremony featured a speech by Theodore Roosevelt, who said, "No more fitting memorial could be erected to the men who fought than a hall such as this – a hall beautiful because of the uses to which it is consecrated."

Theodore Roosevelt is not the only historical figure to visit the Rockford Region. Bob Hope, the Marx Brothers, Sammy Davis Jr., Liberace and Louis Armstrong are among the legendary entertainers to grace the stage of the [Coronado Performing Arts Center](#). An ornate movie palace and vaudeville hall built in 1927 for \$1.5 million and restored and renovated in 2000 for \$18.5 million, the Coronado is a memorable example of an "atmospheric-style" theater, with gilded Spanish castles, Italian villas and Chinese dragons in relief on the sides and a starry false sky. The Coronado is worth seeing just for its opulent interior, but it is also host to many performing arts groups and traveling shows, and guided tours are available by appointment.

Coronado Performing Arts Center has been named one of Illinois' 150 Great Places by the American Institute of Architects, Illinois Council. This prestigious award is given to places that have been identified by leading architects as contributing to their communities' quality of life.

*Rockford, IL, is located approximately 60 minutes west of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport off Interstate 90. For information on accommodations and things to do, visit [www.gorockford.com](http://www.gorockford.com). RACVB is a private, non-profit organization established in 1984 to champion efforts to promote the Rockford Region as an overnight visitor destination. The RACVB generates positive economic impact for our community through investments in tourism.*

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### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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