GRAND ISLAND
An Island in Nebraska?

"**Grand Island" came from the French name "La Grande Ile,"** meaning the large or great island in the Platte River which was formed by a narrow channel branching off the Platte River approximately 28 miles upstream from the present city of Grand Island and rejoining the main river about 12 miles downstream from the city.

Fur traders **probably discovered the island in the late 1700's**. Grand Island or "Grande Ile" was a **well-known landmark** for fur traders by 1820. The Grand Ile appears on a French map published in 1821 and on American maps published in 1822 and 1825. Both the Long and Fremont exploring expeditions of 1820 and 1842 took note of the size of Grand Island. Its **size ranged from 40 to 70 miles in length and 1 1/2 to 3 miles wide**. Westbound travelers of the 1820's often mentioned the island as the most conspicuous feature of the Central Platte Valley. Pioneers heading West on the Oregon, Mormon and California Trails also note the Platte River and 'Grand Island' in their journals. A marker located in Stolley Park commemorates "La Grande Ile".

Another account exists regarding the first reference to the Platte River according to the *Hall County History* published in 1890 by the Goodspeed Publishing Co. – it **records that in 1673** during Father Marquette's voyage down the Mississippi he wrote "The Indians told us that by ascending the Pekitanoni about six days' journey from its mouth we would find a **beautiful prairie country twenty or thirty leagues broad, at the end of which…a small river**, which is not difficult to navigate…leads to a deep river flowing to the sea!" The description points out the Platte and headwaters of the Columbia.

1857 brought the first settlers to Hall County when three Iowa-based businessmen saw the economic potential of a town near the Platte'' Grand "Island", and speculated that the railroad would soon follow. The venture went bankrupt, but the **37 German settlers hired** to start "Grand Island City" stayed. The majority of these original settlers were from the area of the German-Danish border, Schleswig-Holstein. Today Grand Island is a Sister-City to Bad Segeberg located in this same area of Northern Germany.

The first schools, churches and newspapers were in German. The German language was still spoken in many local homes until WWII. It is interesting to note that the German settlers came from different areas and spoke both High German and Low German (Platt Duetsche). To this day two clubs survive; one which was originally for the High Germans – the *Liederkranz* and one for Low Germans – the *Platt Duetsche*. This distinct history was the reason Grand Island was selected to host the 2001 International Low German Conference. Grand Island was also recognized by German Life magazine as one of 11 German-American locations to visit in their June/July 2002 issue.

Word of gold in the mountains of Colorado spread in 1858, and the westward rush was on. The **would-be city of Grand Island prospered** as it met the needs of those heading west. **As Grand Island Station in 1866**, the railroad drove most of the town's early growth. The early streets of downtown developed just south of the Union Pacific roundhouses on North Front and Locust Streets. In 1872, Grand Island was incorporated. We soon lost "La Grande Ile" when the north channel of the Platte River was dammed to prevent the yearly flooding of crops.

The city **boomed in the 1880's** and survived the devastating recession of the 1890's. At the turn of the century Grand Island had carved out its place in Nebraska and the nation. The advent of the **Lincoln Highway** (first transcontinental highway) through Grand Island in 1916 furthered tourism, commerce and development.

During **World War II** the city was the home of the Grand Island Army Air Base with thousands of soldiers and airmen training for duty. Two German POW camps were located in the city and many of the

prisoners worked for local farmers during the day. A large Army installation at the Cornhusker Army Ammunitions Plant employed over 4,000 people during WW II, and was reactivated for the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

The city was **hit June 3, 1980 by seven tornadoes** devastating 25% of the community and causing $137 million in damages. President Carter came to survey the damage and offer words of encouragement as well as economic assistance for rebuilding. A 1984 book, **"*Night of the Twisters*",** by Ivy Ruckman, is a fictionalized account of this natural disaster from the human perspective. In 1996, a made for television movie, **"*Night of the Twisters*"** was shown on the Family Channel. Following the tornadoes was the severe agricultural recession of the 1980's. This was indeed a tough decade but Grand Island maintained its status as a major manufacturing, agricultural, business, tourism and retail center.

Grand Island is **Nebraska's fourth largest city**, birthplace of actor Henry Fonda, three time **All-American City** (1955, 1967 and 1981), 1997 Outstanding Nebraska Community, *World Trade Magazine* ranked Grand Island 9th in the Top 10 List of Smaller Communities with an excellent quality of life, *Forbes FYI Magazine* declared "Grand Island is the #1 place in the world for bird-watchers" referring to the Spring Migration of the Sandhill Cranes and most recently Grand Island was **designated the City of Kindness**.