

Three words sum up the early history of Bethalto: grain, coal and trains. The first settlers in the area arrived in the early 19th century and found a land blessed with rich soil and various outcroppings of coal. The construction of the Alton-Terre Haute Railroad in the mid 1850s ensured Bethalto's destiny as a farming and mining center.



It was around 1809 when large numbers of settlers arrived in this area -- many of them Dutch and German settlers who came to farm. Indians were also found in the area, so numerous at one time along Indian Creek that there were Kickapoo villages, and that creek became named after the Indians. Many Indian relics have been found in that vicinity. Block houses were built in case protection might be needed, but there were few problems and only one recorded massacre in 1814.

Bethalto was favored in many ways to become an early settlement. It had good soil for growing grain and all needed food. There was a good vein of coal which had



outcroppings that were discovered at an early date. There was a healthy growth of timber, especially on the west, north and south sides of the site which included oak, hickory, walnut and other trees suitable for making building materials. The roads were also better than usual in a time when trails were the roads and ferries were the bridges. Game was plentiful, with an abundance of squirrels, rabbits, turkey, prairie hens and other game.

About the time that the railroad was being constructed in the 1840s and 1850s, the population had grown to the point that it was necessary to plat further development. The first plat was laid out by Joe Starkey and was recorded on June 23, 1854. This is considered to be the humble beginning for Bethalto.

At one time, a railroad track was located where Erwin Plegge Expressway is today. The railroad, the second one built in Madison County, passed through the center of town and was responsible for the growth of Bethalto. The town consisted of four blocks facing the railroad -- West Main and Sherman Streets on the south and Mill and Third (now Central) to Oak Street on the north. The railroad, built between 1854 and 1856, was

extended to St. Louis and was known as the St. Louis & Terre Haute. Later, it was taken



over by the Big Four and then the New York Central. Railroads were the major transportation before the days of the car. Therefore, most towns were located near a railroad. The railroad linked Bethalto to the Mississippi River so the people could market flour and coal. The opening of the rail line through Bethalto enabled the coal

milled here to be transported to a dock on the Mississippi River near what is now the town of Hartford. From there, coal was carried by steamboat to towns throughout the Midwest. This encouraged the development of more mines. At one time, there were at least 40 mines in or near Bethalto.

Yankee Diggins, one of the largest coal mines in the state of Illinois, was located in Bethalto. During the Civil War in 1861-1865, mine production was down. Following the Civil War, coal production rose; but by 1900, almost all the mines were gone. One by one, they closed during the first decades of the 20th century as the coal supply was depleted and the market diminished. Today, there are no coal mines operating anywhere in Madison County.

Mills also formed a very important part of Bethalto's early history. Construction of the railroad through the Village proved to be as pivotal for the milling industry as it had been for coal mining. At one time, Bethalto was one of the most important flour milling towns in the nation and was home to the largest mill in Illinois.

As the 20th century progressed, Bethalto underwent a gentle transformation. Flour milling and coal mining gave way to corn and soybean farms and industry. Transportation remained a major factor in the Village's development, however, the methods changed.

Construction began in 1946 on what was then called Walston Aviation. Now known as St. Louis Regional Airport, subsequent expansion and addition of an office and industrial park are helping to propel Bethalto, into the future.

The railroad era ended for Bethalto in 1966. The right-of-way was offered to the Village by the New York Central Railroad Company, which



last operated the line. The Village did not have the \$15,000 the rail company was asking for the 32 acres of land, so Bethalto National Bank stepped in and provided assistance for the purchase. This made possible the cross-town Expressway, a new home for the bank and a park and arboretum for the Village.

While Bethalto has moved forward, the Village has not forgotten its past. The old Village Hall, built in 1873 and enlarged in 1885, is a two-story brick Victorian/Italianate



town hall. It is the oldest governmental building still in use in Madison County. Recognizing its historical significance, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987 and serves as our Bethalto Museum. The city's tiny one-room jail can still be seen today. The Museum contains exhibits on Bethalto's past including the role of its citizens

in World Wars I and II. Other exhibits include the founding of the town, the annual Homecoming Celebration, and a recreated classroom from the past. In 1998, a fire at a local home revealed a perfectly protected log cabin within the structure. State historical preservationists estimate that the cabin was built in the mid-1800s. Bethalto school children were asked by the Bethalto Rotary Club to help raise the funds needed to move and restore the cabin to its present site next to the Museum. The "History Makes Cents" campaign collected more than one million pennies (\$10,000.) The Bethalto Log Cabin stands as a symbol of the village's pioneer past as well as the resourcefulness of its present youth.