

The Sinclair Era: 1886-1906

Introduction

Brucemore is an estate with rolling grounds surrounding an elegant mansion. At first glance it represents a handful of wealthy owners. But a closer look uncovers much more. Brucemore's story is about the growth of new industries in the Midwest at a time when railroads made moving people and products easier. It is about a staff of house and grounds workers who made their employers' lifestyle possible. It is about hundreds of Czech families who came to Cedar Rapids to work in one of the world's largest meatpacking operations.

Brucemore is also about three wealthy families — businessmen, patrons, philanthropists, neighbors, and friends. Their businesses drew from the region's many resources while the families contributed to the betterment of the city. For almost a century they returned home, at the end of the day, to Brucemore. Their final gift to their community was this home.

The mansion was built for Caroline Soutter Sinclair, a widow with six children, between 1884 and 1886. The estate was then called the "Sinclair Mansion" by some, and "Fairhome" by others. The Sinclair Mansion reflected its place in history as a symbol of the success of technologies developed during the Industrial Revolution.



Sinclair Company History

In 1871, T.M. Sinclair opened his Cedar Rapids meatpacking plant. He came from a family that began operating their first meatpacking plant in Ireland in 1832. Before moving to Cedar Rapids, Sinclair opened a plant in New York in 1862. The company decided to move closer to the source of hogs and selected Cedar Rapids as their next location. The plant's success depended upon railroads, refrigeration, and immigrant workers. In time, all could be found in Cedar Rapids.

In 1872 the Sinclair plant moved to a sixteen-acre site along the Cedar River. T.M. Sinclair employed a large number of people and packed one to three thousand hogs (or more) per day. Despite the bad smells and waste created by the plant, many praised the benefits of this industry:

We doubt if even our citizens really appreciate the extent of this mammoth institution which is silently but surely making Cedar Rapids the pork market of Central Iowa. . . . The other day we took a look through the institution, witnessing the killing of hogs at the rate of one thousand a day, and tracing the course of the porker from the time he is driven in alive, until he comes out in a dozen different forms, in all the endless varieties of pork . . . go through the cellars of this establishment and drive all thoughts of famine, for years to come, from your head. . . . Do we all, and especially the farmers, appreciate the immense benefit of such an institution? We can scarcely estimate the amount to which this one institution contributes to our prosperity. (*The Times*, December 4, 1873)



Prior to 1871 most meatpacking plants closed when it was too warm to pack meat without it spoiling. Sinclair's plant was the second in the country to have ice refrigeration and year-round packing. Cedar Rapids's location on the Cedar River was beneficial because enough ice could be harvested for cooling the icehouse.

Between 1874 and 1894, the Sinclair packing plant became the largest producer of

processed meat in Iowa. During this period there were only two years when it was not the leader. By 1878, T. M. Sinclair and Company had the fourth largest packinghouse in the world.

A fatal accident at the plant took Mr. Sinclair's life in 1881. Caroline's brother Charles B. Soutter took over the meatpacking plant until 1889.

The Growth of Industry in the Midwest—Railroads

In the Midwest, train travel linked Chicago with the rural areas that provided goods for trade and further processing. In 1861, when Cedar Rapids was a town of 1,830 people, a web of rails had begun extending from Chicago, covering most of Illinois and parts of eastern Iowa. These links between the country and the city were important paths for goods. Smaller towns fought for stops on railroad lines.

Such a dispute occurred between Cedar Rapids and Marion. They started their railroad venture together by applying for a land grant to bring a railroad line head toward Savanna, IL into the area. While they were waiting for a response from the legislature, several events complicated their cooperation. The cities clashed over the location of the county seat. After a bitter election it remained in Marion.

Cedar Rapids was approached by the Northwestern railroad about extending their line from Clinton. Marion felt that Cedar Rapids betrayed their joint effort. The legislature eventually passed the bill that provided the land grant for the Savanna line. This gave Marion the edge in the competition, but they did not act quickly enough to build their railroad. Two years later, Cedar Rapids promoters applied for, and were granted, their own land grant to extend the Northwestern railroad west of town. Cedar Rapids emerged from the competition the winner.

The first train arrived in Cedar Rapids on June 15, 1859. The railroad quickly became an important part of the city's growth. Cedar Rapids' supporters enjoyed praising the city's natural advantages, such as its rich farmland, location between major cities, waterpower, limestone quarries, coal and timber. But they were also quick to brag about their key man-made advantage, the railroad. A passage from W. J. Abernathy's 1871 booklet, *The Natural Advantages and Business Resources of the City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa* shows how citizens felt about their many railroad connections:

... it is from her railroads more than anything else that the greatest benefits have been derived. These, reaching out in all directions, and being each year augmented by the construction of new lines and the extension of old ones, are bound to play a most important part of the growth of the place. More railroad interests are centered here than in any other city in Iowa, as we shall endeavor to prove.

This report of the city's railroads sounded as if Cedar Rapids would become the next Chicago, but that was not to be. Still, the population and industries did grow significantly. Between 1870 and 1880, the population increased from 5,940 to 10,104. In addition to bringing more people, railroads helped new industries.

Railroads added to the rapid growth of Sinclair's plant by providing transport of goods out and labor in. The city passed several laws to allow the plant direct connection with all railroads entering the city. After the hogs were processed, nearly half of Sinclair's products were shipped to the British branch of the company via the railroad.



Immigration to Cedar Rapids

The railroad also brought people, mainly immigrants, to the West looking for work and a new life. For example, Cedar Rapids experienced an influx of Czech immigration late in the nineteenth century. Iowa worked hard to attract immigrants, as Martha Griffith found in her study of Czech settlement in Cedar Rapids: “From 1870 to 1873 a State Board of Immigration not only published a handbook in foreign language, but sent agents to European ports to persuade foreigners to locate in Iowa.” During this time two important industries were founded, T. M. Sinclair and Company and North Star Oatmeal Mills (which later became The Quaker Oats Company). Between 1870 and 1881 the number of Czechs employed as laborers (as opposed to craftsmen) increased from 20 percent to 38 percent.

Technology during the Industrial Revolution

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rapid mechanization of the United States. These changes caused much excitement. Admirers of new technology packed Machinery Hall at Philadelphia’s 1876 Centennial Exhibition to see the thirty-foot tall Corliss Steam Engine. This machine provided power to all the exhibits in the building. Within the next ten years many technologies that are still an important part of our lives were developed. Thomas Edison’s phonograph brought the sounds of the opera house into people’s homes. The electric light bulb made factories more productive by allowing work to continue through the night. Alexander Graham Bell had his first telephone conversation in 1876. His invention brought people closer together by making communication possible across long distances. All of these innovations changed the ways people lived, worked, and interacted.

Household Technology Nationally and in Cedar Rapids

Nationally, most homes in cities had running water and indoor bathrooms. However, people in the country were often not as fortunate. Most still had to carry water to their homes and used outhouses.

Sewage disposal was new when the mansion was built. In early 1886 the city debated the construction of a sewer system and which parts of town should be the first to benefit. Two years after the system was built, few people had connected their homes to it. According to the 1888 city engineer George Mitchell, “We have the best water with our homes properly sewered, we ought to have the healthiest city anywhere. . . . All these two hundred connections have been made voluntary. They have been made in the most cases by the richer class of people, and yet not in all cases either.” Mitchell proposed that the city require sewer connections in the best interest of public health. Building sewer lines was very popular in most late-nineteenth-century cities for the same reasons.

Residences near the center of town were the first to have running water. This is evident in the description of the following property from 1885: “New house and 50 foot lot on First Ave. House has seven rooms furnished, natural wood, oak and Georgia pine, piped for water and gas. Has all improvements. \$3500.” The *Gazette* also advertised farms and properties located outside of town which may not have had all improvements, but at least had running water: “Small farm for sale three miles from Cedar Rapids. 43 acres, 12 acres tame grass, grove, balance in grain. Running water. Six room house, 30 x 36 barn, cribs, sheds, etc., small fruit orchard, only \$1,900.” By 1894, Cedar Rapids had twenty-eight miles of water main mostly east of the river. The west side also had a growing system of mains.

The Construction of the Mansion

T. M. Sinclair never lived in the home that his (and others’) hard work helped produce. As a widow with six children, Caroline built her home on the outskirts of town near her brother’s property. Mrs. Sinclair hired local architects Josselyn and Taylor to design her new home. The Sinclair Mansion was complete in two years and the Sinclairs moved in November of 1886. The site occupied ten acres; most of which included the area from the mansion to First



Avenue. Located two miles from downtown, the Sinclair mansion overlooked the city from its position at the top of a gently sloping hill.

Perhaps the mansion's most remarkable features involved its technology. Upon completion in 1886, the Sinclair mansion had all of the latest amenities: running water, steam heat, gas lights, sewage disposal, a fireplace in nearly every room, and eight bathrooms. These features not only showed Mrs. Sinclair's wealth, but the city's ability to provide such services.

Steam heating was part of the mansion's construction although little is known about how it was installed. There were only 7,500 feet of mains laid in 1885 for the city steam system. They most likely did not extend as far as the Sinclair Mansion. Boiler heat was becoming a popular alternative. Even with steam heat, the mansion included fourteen fireplaces to provide additional heat in the cold Iowa winters. More importantly, they had a decorative purpose. The hearth was a traditional symbol for the home, and led some to include fireplaces in their homes even if they were non-functional.

In addition to other amenities, the mansion included burglar alarms, call bells, and fire alarms. These were among the "extras" that Mrs. Sinclair added to her home. Overall, the Sinclair mansion was a fine example of the technology available locally and nationally.

Local newspapers described the features of the mansion in detail. The house had the only carriage porch in Cedar Rapids. The porch kept people dry while entering and leaving carriages in bad weather. This porch and the main entrance to the house were on the north side of the house, opposite today's entrance. The intense curiosity of local residents is reflected by the detailed descriptions of the mansion printed in newspapers. The following passage from the *Cedar Rapids Republican* provides a good sketch of the main floor:

Entering the house at the front, a broad hall is reached from the vestibule. Directly in front of the entrance and at the rear of this hall is the main staircase, with a landing the length of the width of the hall and midway between the two stories. On the landing are windows filled with rich colored antique glass. Under the landing a view is had of the conservatory, which in the winter, when filled with plants and flowers, will add much to the beauty of the hall.

To the right of the entrance door is the parlor, a fine room finished in California redwood. At right angles to the main hall and immediately back of the parlor, with a large doorway into it and another into the library, is the sitting room hall. This has an octagonal end, with a fire place in the center of the octagon and a window on either side, one of which looks out onto the street and the other toward the south, with communication onto a side porch and garden entrance. Back of this hall is the library, with a fire place in a bay window looking south, from the windows of which views are to the south and west, and one window looks into the conservatory. There will be seats fitted up on either side of the fire place with bookshelves under the windows, near at hand. This bay will be a bright and cheerful place on wintry days. Around the



walls are permanent bookshelves and cases. This room is finished in birch. To the left of the entrance door is the dining room wainscotted and finished in oak, with a fireplace of dark red brick in a recess, with a mantel of oak to match the finish of the room. In the center of the mantel is a window of stained glass, on either side of which are cabinets.

This article was one of several describing the house's features in detail. Whether all of the things described were installed is unknown. No photos exist to show how these rooms looked. However, several articles agree about the locations of the library and parlor. Photographs show the conservatory.

Newspaper articles further described progress on the building and its amenities claiming it was "In all probability the finest residence this side of Chicago." The Sinclair mansion, at a cost of \$55,000, led the list of city improvements published in the December 24, 1885 *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*. The mansion cost more to build than the Masonic Library (\$40,000) and the First United Presbyterian Church (\$10,000). Other local residences such as A. T. Averill's (\$16,000 for the brick house, \$3,000 for a brick barn), A. B. George's (\$10,000), and A. C. Taylor's (\$9,000) were also less expensive. These other homes, while fine buildings, were not as elaborate as the Sinclair mansion.

The cost of the mansion was similar to that of other country houses at that time. In his 1886-87 book *Artistic Country-Seats*, George Sheldon reported the cost of fifty-eight of the ninety-three houses he featured (all of which were built within ten years of the Sinclair mansion). More than half cost less than \$50,000 to \$60,000. In fact Sheldon often pointed out that a fine country house could be built quite reasonably. Therefore, the Sinclair mansion compared favorably to homes of the family's peers.

Sinclair Family in Philadelphia

Although the mansion provided her with a sophisticated and comfortable home, Caroline decided they would need to leave Cedar Rapids for her children to receive the education she wished them to have. According to Caroline's obituary, she and the family spent the summers at the Sinclair Mansion and the school year in Philadelphia. Despite living in Cedar Rapids part-time, Caroline remained dedicated to the city through many charitable donations to Coe College and the Presbyterian Church.

Caroline Trades Homes with the Douglasses

In 1905, the Sinclair children were grown and Caroline decided to move back into town. She first tried to find a charitable use for the house.

Caroline and her son Robert tried to sell Fairhome as an orphanage, but the deal fell through. In 1906, Caroline Sinclair traded homes with George and Irene Douglas. The Douglasses had a house on Second Avenue (now Turner Mortuary East). At the time, the two properties were worth about \$125,000. The transaction was one of the largest real estate transfers in the city's history. When Robert's wife died in 1908, Caroline permanently moved into the Second Avenue home with him and his children.



Conclusion

In many ways the Sinclair period typifies the period historians call "the Gilded Age." The growth of railroad access, the development of exciting new forms of technology, and the building of mansions by "captains of industry" were important events taking place across the country. Through their home, the Sinclairs created a model of upper-class living in Cedar Rapids. Their successors, the Douglasses, built upon it as the city and its available technology continued to mature.