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Article Summary: The extended O'Connor family achieved important success in agriculture, education, and business. Many family members held political office. The Italianate O'Connor mansion was a center of Dakota County social life.

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Photographs / Images: cover photo of the O'Connor House, Captain Cornelius O'Connor, Catherine Duggan O'Connor, view of Homer from a farm owned by O'Connor



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The Capt. Cornelius O'Connor House in Homer: A Symbol for the Dakota County Irish

BY THOMAS A. KUHLMAN

Introduction—The Dakota County Historical Society purchased the Captain Cornelius O'Connor House 2 miles east of Homer from the Captain's great-grandson J. Colin Green in January, 1969. Since then the Society has made steady progress in restoring the house to its original appearance and in establishing it as one of northeastern Nebraska's major historical attractions. The 15-room brick Italianate mansion, standing on a rise between densely wooded 400-foot bluffs to the south and bottomland which stretches almost unbroken to the point on the northern horizon where Iowa and South Dakota meet, is eminently suitable as a showcase for Dakota County heritage.

The house has special significance, however, which goes deeper than its obvious stature as the home of a particularly successful Nebraska farmer. Especially when we go beyond the biography of its builder and consider the achievements of the extended Irish family of another name for whom the house was once, and in some ways still is, a social center, we can identify it as a true symbol of the accomplishments of the earliest Irish pioneers in rural Nebraska, of their aspirations, and their tragedies.

Yet as such a symbol, the house poses a challenge to the oft-repeated generality that the Irish in the Midwest were less apt to be successful farmers than were immigrants from the European continent. This thesis appears in most, if not all, of the serious histories of the prairie and plains region, as well as in articles and books about the Irish in America.

Carl Wittke, for example, commented on statistics that suggested that few natives of Ireland ever chose to join new farming communities:

The Irish immigrant was primarily a phenomenon of the development of urban life in the United States. The number who took up farming as a means of livelihood always remained low, probably in the neighborhood of 10 per cent. The proportion is small, particularly when compared with the German or Scandinavian immigrants. In the period from 1870 to 1890 we find that one out of every four Scandinavians engaged in farming, and one out of every six Germans, but only one out of every twelve Irish. The nineteenth-century Irish immigrant was not a frontiersman by instinct or choice.¹

The Captain O'Connor House is the tangible evidence of the well-documented Saint Patrick's Colony which was established in Dakota County on June 2, 1856, under the leadership of a priest from County Louth, Ireland, Father Jeremiah Trecy.² Wittke follows his account of the inception, brief flourishing and almost ludicrously sudden dissolution of the Saint Patrick's settlement, the first of its kind in Nebraska, with the story of General John O'Neill's well-known settlement in Holt County, and judges that Irish farming colonies were but a "Quixotic dream." Nevertheless, he admits that "while there is little detailed evidence of how the Irish farmer fared, the fact that his descendants are still on the land would seem to indicate that the experiment was not a failure."³ But the essay by James McShane and Nadine Murphy in *Broken Hoops and Plains People* states that

the Irish success in agriculture in Nebraska, as in the rest of the United States, is very limited. The high rate of failure can be partly accounted for by the factors which rendered plains farming so grueling—soil conditions, drought, and other weather hazards, water shortages, locusts, etc. The majority of Irish immigrants into Nebraska were ill equipped for farming, even if indigenous factors had been less severe. They were little equipped by their experience to handle enormous American holdings, to ride out the bad years which regularly occurred on the prairies, or to endure the loneliness.⁴

Henry Casper, SJ, in his three-volume study of the Catholic Church in the state, reinforces this theme:

The exploring party that went with Father Trecy...in search of a suitable site was in largest part of Irish antecedents. Traditionally the Irish do not make good farmers... And so they may well have passed up superior farmland for that on which they settled in Nebraska for the reason that their agrarian instincts were never developed to the point to which were their other capabilities.⁵

This article will suggest that while the great success of one individual such as Captain O'Connor cannot contradict the statistics which showed that the majority of the American Irish

preferred urban settings for their lives, a response to the themes of Casper, Wittke, and McShane and Murphy is in order. The experiences of the extended family of which O'Connor was a part stand out as a paradigm of immigrant agrarian success. This success may in fact have been caused by, and not achieved in spite of, their Irish background. Certainly it is time to give the Irish of Dakota County the kind of study which will reveal something more than the kind of shallow stereotype presented a generation ago in a reminiscence by the distinguished and usually dependable social scientist Alvin Johnson, who was born near Homer in 1875:

There was a community of new immigrants from the Emerald Isle, the men Paddies with snub noses and long upper lips, the women thin and crooked. On Nebraska food their boys were growing tall and handsome and irresistably charming, their girls graceful and bright-eyed.⁶

The first step in our examination must be to reject our male-chauvinistic society's tradition of identifying an historic home primarily with the husband of the family for which it was built. The O'Connor House was equally the home of the captain's wife, the former Catherine Duggan. The Irish of Dakota County hardly had a matriarchal culture, but insofar as the O'Connor house was an economic, social, and political landmark for the county, it was as the most ambitious and impressive structure associated with the triple-branched Duggan family.

The Cork Beginnings—The long, low brick house at Shandangan Crossroads in the parish of Canavee, barony of Muskerry, 4 miles south of the River Lee in County Cork, has been in the Duggan family since the middle of the 17th century. Early in the 1800s Dennis, the son of Daniel Duggan, married Margaret Twomey, one of five sisters from the nearby market town of Macroom. According to a Tithe Allotment book in the Public Record Office in Dublin Castle, they raised their five children—Cornelius, Daniel, Catherine, Margaret and Mary—on a farm of 17 acres and 20 perches.⁷ Both Gaelic and English were spoken in the home; being Roman Catholics the children were educated only in the "hedge schools." There was evidently a modicum of prosperity, however, for the family paid for the services of a dancing master for the girls, and

music was a regular part of family entertainment.⁸

The chief landowning Protestant families in the vicinity were the Penroses and the Warrens.⁹ Today the Duggans living on their own farms at and around Shandangan still tell stories of the sometimes amicable, sometimes abrasive relations with these families. Two extensive demesnes, Warren's Court and Warren's Grove, are located just to the west and to the east of Shandangan, respectively, and it is relevant to the story of the landholding Duggans of Nebraska that for the last two generations, Sir Andrew Warren's "Warren's Court," with its lakes and Georgian buildings, has been in the possession of descendants of Dennis and Margaret Twomey Duggan and their eldest son, Cornelius.¹⁰

Cornelius's response to the hardships of the Great Famine of the 1840s was to move to Cork City, where he became a cattle merchant and later a dealer in real estate. Of his nine children one son, William, continued to manage the family farm at Shandangan; Dennis and John became priests (the former, emigrating to America, attained the rank of monsignor); Kathleen became Sister Mary Leonide of the Order of the Incarnate Word, living most of her adult life in San Antonio, Texas. Son Cornelius's success in real-estate speculation at the end of the 19th century enabled him to acquire as his residence the 20-room Douglas Hall, 6 miles to the south of Cork City, and among his seven children, his daughter Molly became a celebrated opera singer while his son Curley (Cornelius III), an interpreter with the British Foreign Service, married an exiled Russian countess, whom he met while working with a treaty commission in Riga, Latvia, after World War I.¹¹

Duggans Come to America—It is not unreasonable to assume that the motives which impelled Cornelius Duggan and his offspring in County Cork were similar to the motives inspiring Dennis and Margaret Twomey Duggan's three children who responded to the Famine by emigrating to America.

Catherine, born on September 9, 1831, and Margaret, born on June 24, 1833, came first, to New York City in 1849. By early 1851 Catherine was in Boston, and there on April 18 of that year she married Cornelius O'Connor, a carpenter who had come to America from County Cork with his parents at

the age of 8 in 1829, and who had participated in the war with Mexico in 1849. Margaret and Catherine's brother Daniel arrived from Cork with his wife, another Catherine, in 1852, and he settled in Newburyport, Massachusetts, as a foreman in one of the mills that lined the Merrimack River.¹²

The future of these three Duggans was determined once and for all when Daniel read an advertisement in the *Boston Pilot*, a Catholic newspaper, in the winter of 1855-1856. It was the time of Know-Nothingism and "No Irish Need Apply" signs, and Father Jeremiah Treacy, encouraged by the Irish Emigrant Aid Convention, organized in Buffalo, New York, by the brilliant Irish journalist Thomas D'Arcy McGee, was advertising for a group of Gaels to "go where no one lives."¹³ Here for Daniel was the opportunity to gain land. In the American West there would be neither the near-feudalism of Shandangan nor the humiliations offered by Yankee prejudice. Daniel, his wife and sister quickly decided to join the Treacy adventure. The Cornelius O'Connors would remain in the East to join the colony in another year if Daniel sent back favorable reports.

The Duggans, then, were among the approximately two dozen families who gathered near Garryowen, outside of Dubuque, Iowa, in the spring of 1856 and traveled by ox-drawn covered wagon across that state, arriving at their Dakota County destination on June 2. On that day the men of the colony erected a 40-foot cross to symbolize the religious significance of their settlement.¹⁴

The initial hopes of the colonists were raised even higher by a misleadingly benevolent summer, which ended, however, before satisfactory crops could be harvested. The winter of 1856-1857 proved to be one of the worst of the century, and with it began a series of hardships almost beyond the range of belief for the natives of Ireland. In his history, Father Casper writes that

the Duggans. . . could make their way from the dugout to the stock shelter only by the means of a clothesline hung from one point to the other, since snow drifts frequently obliterated all traces of a dugout.¹⁵

For 40 days the temperature did not rise above the freezing point, Casper relates, and the snow stood 4 feet deep on the level. Roads to Sioux City were impassable and even the least

appealing food was almost gone before spring. The pioneer colony survived the winter, but soon they learned that each season had its own rod with which to chasten the too-optimistic. Within a few years the settlers would experience prairie fires, grasshopper plagues, tornadoes, and floods. To these natural challenges to the success of the group venture, they would add their own human challenge; personal and political disagreements would soon result in the abandonment of Saint John's City in Saint Patrick's colony as a formal unit. One by one families moved away from Saint John's, where each street bore the name of a saint, and on December 3, 1866, the town officially ceased to exist.¹⁶

The settlers had in no way, however, given up on Nebraska. From the original site, now with hindsight judged inadequate, they moved to farms nearby or to the new town of Jackson, 2 miles south, which had its beginning when a Saint Patrick's colonist, Gerald Dillon, built a house there on the bank of Elk Creek in 1860.¹⁷ The hardships of Dakota County were still no match for an Ireland which meant death or an East which meant bigotry.

It is not known whether or not Cornelius and Catherine Duggan O'Connor learned from their Nebraska relatives of the hardships of that first winter. In any event, in the spring of 1857, they started west with their 2-year-old son, Cornelius Jr. Taking the steamer *Florence* from St. Louis, they landed at St. John's City on May 18, and promptly took a claim on Elk Creek. Nine months later Cornelius was elected assessor for the community in the first election held in St. John's.¹⁸ More than a century of involvement in politics by Duggans and their spouses had begun.

Enter a new character in the Duggan story, one who with his descendants would add extraordinary momentum to the family's quest after the American Dream. Thomas Ashford had arrived in Dakota County even before Father Treacy's colony, on March 10, 1856. A native of County Wicklow, Ireland, he had come to America at the age of 21 in 1849 and had lived in New Orleans, Cincinnati, and Indiana before moving to Nebraska Territory. In 1859 he joined the Colorado gold rush, ascending the Platte Valley on foot. He remained in the Denver region long enough to acquire the funds to pay for the claim he had staked in the Omadi precinct about 20 miles

southeast of the Trecy colony, and in 1861 built the first brick house in northeastern Nebraska. The house stands today, windowless, almost roofless, a few hundred yards west of the O'Connor mansion. Even in 1861 the location was rich in historical associations, having indeed a veritable *genius loci*. The claim included the blufftop location of a series of Woodland and Omaha Indian burials, and was midway between Ton-Wan-Tonga, the "Big Village" of the famous Omaha chief, Blackbird, which was visited by Lewis and Clark in August, 1804, and was the area of the Spanish Fort Charles, operated by the trader James MacKay in 1795-1796,¹⁹ the exact location of which has not been established by archeologists.

M. M. Warner, writing with the romantic viewpoint of 1893, expressed Ashford's next action this way:

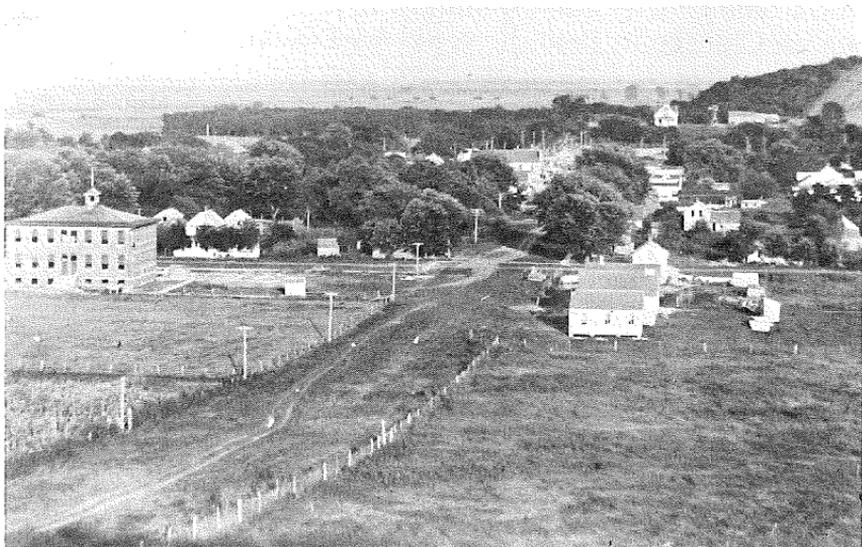
He saw that if he ever expected to accomplish much in the world he must immediately "settle down to business," and in order to do this he must have someone to help him out with it. Maggie Duggan, sister of Hon. Daniel Duggan of Jackson, was also studying the same proposition, and somehow or other—the world will probably never know how it did happen—but history tells us that they were married in the Catholic church at Jackson, Nebraska, April 1, 1861.²⁰

Politics—Thus three Duggans from Shandangan were married now, moving into middle age and with their spouses ready to accept the responsibility for a share of leadership in Dakota County affairs. Cornelius O'Connor acquired the title "Captain" (by which he was known for the rest of his life) when Governor Richardson commissioned him as head of a company of soldiers organized to resist attacks from Indians. According to the Andreas *History of Nebraska*, "During the [Civil] War, he, with the assistance of Col. B. Bates, of this county, raised a company of cavalry (Company I, 2nd Nebraska) which rendered service against the Indians in northern Dakota under Gen. Sully."²¹

The captain's association with the colonel had begun when the two of them represented Dakota County in the 8th session of the territorial Legislature in 1861, and O'Connor was again a member of the 11th session in 1865. Representation in the 12th session was passed to his brother-in-law Daniel Duggan, who had been a county commissioner in 1862 and would



Captain Cornelius O'Connor. . . .(Right) Catherine Duggan O'Connor. . . .(Below) Homer, Dakota County, looking east from a farm owned by C. J. O'Connor. The Captain O'Connor mansion is 2 miles southeast behind the bluff on the right.



be a county assessor in 1867 and a census enumerator in 1869. (The latter position would be assumed by Duggan's daughter Kate in 1890.) Brother-in-law Thomas Ashford had been a county assessor in 1863 and 1864, and justice of the peace in 1863 and would be a county commissioner in 1870. The captain, too, would be justice of the peace for the Omadi precinct in 1868: obviously, the extended family was enjoying politics, and soon the second generation would be making the achievement of public office a family tradition. By 1884 the captain's son Timothy, the first white child born in Dakota County, was a county assessor, and in 1891 C. J. O'Connor, the oldest son, became county treasurer. Daniel Duggan's son John C. would be postmaster in the village of Hubbard.

Of all the Duggan descendants, it was Thomas Ashford Jr. who was the consummate politician. Born in 1864, he was a trustee of the village of Homer by the time he was 23, when he had scarcely finished his studies at Notre Dame University. In 1893 he was clerk of the precinct, and in 1896 became chairman of the Dakota County Democratic Central Committee, a post he held until his death 50 years later, when he passed it to his nephew William Ashford, who held it for another 14 years. During the first half of the 20th century, then, the Ashford name was synonymous with the Democratic Party in northeastern Nebraska. At Thomas Jr.'s first state convention he cast a ballot for William Jennings Bryan; at his last national one, in Chicago in 1940, he voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Politics absorbed still more members of the extended family, and the homes of the first and second generations that by the new century dotted the roadside eastward from Homer towards the Missouri River echoed many a vehement discussion. Thomas Ashford Sr.'s youngest son, George, and Daniel Duggan's son John C. contributed to family harmony as Democratic precinct committeemen. Even second-generation marriages had political overtones: George's brother John married the daughter of a Sioux City judge, and in 1904 George himself married Catherine McLaughlin, the daughter of a greatly respected Lancaster County treasurer and the sister-in-law of a future four-term Democratic congressman from Omaha. Eventually Mrs. George Ashford would be one of the first women on the Democratic State Central Committee.

All was not complete harmony, however, as two daughters

of Thomas Ashford Sr. married men active in the Republican Party. Margaret married a physician, Charles Maxwell, and Julia a former sheriff and county judge, William H. Ryan, and in 1900 both husbands were delegates to the Republican State Convention while Ashfords and Duggans were attending the Democratic one. And early in the century two first cousins were pitted against each other as C. J. O'Connor and Thomas Ashford Jr. competed for the office of mayor of Homer.

The foregoing has been a lengthy list of offices held. What is its significance? It lies in the fact that these Irish immigrants and their children could exercise in America some form of control of their social environment, which they could not have done in 19th century Ireland.

Such control could not fail to stimulate hostility among those long bred to fear immigrants, especially Catholic ones. Once again, we may quote the impartial observer Alvin Johnson, who almost but not completely sees through stereotypes:

[Homer] was a discordant community. The Protestants disliked the Irish—they were dominated by the priest, and the priest took his orders from Rome. My father regarded that as nonsense. He had seen the priest, a tall, grave man, standing outside the door of the saloon, saying nothing, but making it impossible for any Irishman to go beyond a single glass. He almost made a Protestant out of the saloonkeeper, whose business was shrinking to a mere trickle. My father used to say he'd give all the preachers in the county for that one priest. As for orders from the Pope, the Pope had his own job to do, way off in Italy.²²

Such distrust of the Irish as Johnson observed went beyond mere conversation and into print, especially when politics were concerned. The following editorial comment from the *North Nebraska Eagle* of October 20, 1892, however accurate or inaccurate it may be as a record of a particular incident, is outstandingly significant for its unsubtle rhetoric:

The Great Unwashed

The Democrats of Dakota county met pursuant to call at Hubbard last Tuesday afternoon in delegation (not "convention—it would be a disgrace to stigmatize it by that term, but in an unruly mob that knew not what it wanted). . .

. . . This world is full of surprises—and fools.

. . . The Irish seem always *in it* in Dakota County. Strange as it may seem there are within the ranks of the Democratic party in Dakota County some of our best citizens of every nationality, but as a rule, when it comes to holding

a convention our Irish citizens generally walk off with the phat of the land. It must be edifying to such men as J. W. David, J. O. Fisher, Thomas Ashford, Sr., Capt. Cornelius O'Connor, Denis Duggan, James Hartnett, et al., who are of a character that represents the wealth to a considerable extent in Dakota County and the brains of the Democratic Party, to see a man of the calibre of John Peysen, who knows not what constitutes a law abiding citizen and who is a champion of law breakers, dictate to them politically.²³

Though unsigned, the editorial is probably the work of the *Eagle's* founder and senior editor, Atlee Hart, who in 1900 joined Maxwell and Ryan at the Republican convention, and its virulence is therefore based more on political than ethnic animosity. Nevertheless such pieces could only have made the O'Connors, Duggans and Ashfords more than ever aware of their ethnic identity, especially insofar as it had been forty-four years since the first generation had settled in the county.

The Business of America—If politics was one means these three branches of the Duggan family chose to satisfy their need to make up for the powerlessness they felt in Ireland, it was not the only one. Education and business were also tools which, properly employed, could guarantee that no Duggan, O'Connor or Ashford would be as vulnerable to a privileged class as he or she had been across the ocean.

Capt. O'Connor was associated with the founding of the first school in Dakota County, that at St. John's, in the summer of 1857, and from that time on the extended family took an extraordinary interest in the education of each of its members. For their first three or four decades in the new county, the parents felt that their children needed academic training beyond that which was offered within the limits of the county, and after completing the program of the rural schools, each adolescent was sent to the high school across the Missouri River in Sioux City. When towards the end of the century Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, opened St. Catherine's Academy in Jackson as a boarding school, many of the families' children went there. Following high school graduation, both male and female members of the family followed a similar pattern, combining a year or two at the state universities in Lincoln or Iowa City with years at Catholic institutions. (Of the second generation, there were seven Duggans, eight Ashfords, and 10 O'Connors.) That meant schools like the Visitation convent Georgetown, DC,

for the young women, and Notre Dame or the Jesuit St. Mary's College in Kansas for the young men. It would remain for the third and fourth generations to choose private secular schools such as Smith and Vassar, Western Reserve, Northwestern, or Brown.

Their educations completed—or perhaps interrupted in lean years to finance the continuation thereof—the young women invariably taught school. Mary Ashford, the oldest daughter of Thomas Sr., was principal of Sioux City's Webster School in the 1890s. Capt. O'Connor's daughter Catherine entered the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, while two of his granddaughters, Ellen and Benetta Green, joined the Religious of the Sacred Heart. Both were long associated with Manhattanville College in New York, Madame Ellen serving from 1925 to 1934 as its dean, as well as becoming the first dean at Newton College of the Sacred Heart in Boston.²⁴

The extended family was following the pattern for ambitious Americans. The daughters were learning the genteel arts, teaching, traveling abroad, acting as hostesses in their own homes, as guests in the most comfortable homes in Dakota County and Sioux City, and working for the church.

Thomas Ashford Sr.'s son John appeared for one year on the list of Dakota County school teachers, but for men of the extended family maturity meant adding to the family's agricultural fortunes through various business enterprises.

In 1892 Daniel Duggan's son John laid out the town of Goodwin, 10 miles south of Jackson. He conducted the town's only general store and was postmaster. There is a story that the Pacific Short Line, which ran through the two-square-block town, refused to stop there, but John Duggan and one of his brothers one day stood in the middle of the tracks as a train approached, refusing to budge. The train stopped that day, and every day thereafter. In 1911 Goodwin had four streets, each a block long, the two principal ones being Railroad Street and Duggan Street. The town was bordered on all sides by Duggan farms. In 1925 John was still president of the Goodwin State Bank.²⁵

The second generation Ashfords and O'Connors made Homer the base for their commercial operations. Thomas Ashford Jr. opened a general merchandise business in 1887 and was its proprietor (and northeast Nebraska's oldest active

businessman) at the time of his death in August, 1946. In 1911 he was president of the Security State Bank of Homer, with his brother John as vice-president, his Republican brother-in-law Will Ryan as cashier, and his youngest brother George as assistant cashier. During the 'teens and twenties and until the bank's failure in 1933, the president was George Ashford and the vice-president Ryan.

Across the street the O'Connors were equally busy. C. J. O'Connor was president of the Homer State Bank, and his mother, the former Catherine Duggan of Shandangan Crossroads, was a director. C. J., like his cousin John Duggan in Goodwin, was a notary public, and owned a ballroom and a grain elevator in the town. But his most glamorous—and disastrous—role was as a railroad entrepreneur. In September of 1904 he purchased the Sioux City, Homer and Southern Railway. The road, which existed on paper only, had a debt of \$22,000. O'Connor paid \$4,500 for it, intending to build the line as it has been publicly announced.²⁶ He was too late, however, because the Burlington almost simultaneously announced that its new line from Sioux City to Lincoln would go through Homer, and the need for his line vanished. C. J. lost his investment, and, renamed the South Sioux City, Crystal Lake, Dakota and Homer, the railroad under new ownership served only as a commuter line between South Sioux City and the county seat.²⁷

The Agrarian Life—An extended family, which within less than a decade after its arrival in Nebraska had offered two of its members for seats in the Territorial Legislature and which would remain active in politics for more than a century, was obviously a family committed to being Nebraskan. To be a Nebraskan means to be concerned above everything with agriculture. This, of course, brings us back to our original point: that the O'Connor mansion is a symbol of the experience of Irish-American farmers in the northeastern corner of the state. Success in politics and business here presupposed a thorough and working understanding of farming and farmers. Even in education, the agrarian was a significant motif: our contemporary activity in lifelong learning programs was specifically foreshadowed in 1886 when Captain O'Connor and Thomas Ashford Sr. were among the founders of the Farmers' Institute, a chautauqua-like college-without-walls

dedicated to the promotion of scientific agriculture.²⁸

Twenty-five years after they had settled in Omadi precinct, Captain O'Connor and his wife had built their original farm of 160 acres to one of over 1,300;²⁹ a generation later their descendants would be farming these acres and a ranch near Valentine in Cherry County. By the late 1920s Ashford holdings in Dakota and Thurston Counties would be in excess of 10,000 acres, and descendants of the Shandangan Duggans would be on the record as the owners of a total of nearly 20,000 acres.

By 1882 it was already natural, then for Daniel Duggan, Thomas Ashford and Captain O'Connor to join with their neighbors to found the Dakota County Pioneers and Old Settlers Association, with Duggan as its original vice-president and Ashford as its treasurer. Ashford held that post for more than a decade.³⁰ The second annual reunion of the association took place at Ashford's Grove, a spot half-way between Homer and the O'Connor mansion on which in 1904 George Ashford and his sister Julia built homes. Adjacent to this was the Homer Driving Park and Picnic Grounds, organized in 1889 with C. J. O'Connor as president.

The contents of scrapbooks and albums of photographs and autographs on display today in the O'Connor house testify to the central place of the house in the social life of Dakota County. During the 1970s as restoration progressed, area newspapers regularly printed reminiscences by third-generation family members who recalled the balls, banquets, and "high-five parties" which took place in the house. The most detailed account to appear describing a gathering of the extended family and their mostly Irish friends, however, was written in 1940 by a Sioux City woman, Grace McCarty, who recalled a picnic in the 1880s. Here a complete listing of every item of food that had been provided, and of the entertainments—a merry-go-round, a shooting gallery, and dancing—offers little to suggest that such picnics differed noticeably from most others of the time in Nebraska or even from picnics of our own time; but the indisputable impression left by the article, which concentrates specifically on the author's sharing the day's play activity with the O'Connor and Ashford grandchildren, was that prosperity, health, and contentment prevailed.³¹ The impression is both accurate and

misleading, for it suggests nothing of the tragedy for which the O'Connor mansion would eventually become known.

The tragedy was one familiar to many Irish in America, but it occurred on a scale so far beyond the ordinary that its occurrence is another reason for considering the mansion a notable symbol of the Irish experience. The tragedy was tuberculosis, or as the Irish called it then, consumption.

Infant mortality was of course not uncommon in pioneer families, and the Thomas Ashfords had lost two infant sons, Dennis and Daniel, in the 1870s. But what made the O'Connors' experience so unusual was that their 10 children reached adulthood before the consumption appeared, and then in an astoundingly brief time the family was nearly extinguished.

The first O'Connor death was that of Mary, a veteran of seven years of teaching in the county schools, who died in 1887 aboard a train bringing her home from her wedding the previous day to Colin Chisholm in Denver. In March and April of 1889, respectively, Julia and Daniel died, both in their 20s. The next year Frank died, and within two years more, Catherine and Margaret. In February, 1898, the final victim was Charlotte. The funeral, as usual, was at Saint Cornelius Church in Homer; Cornelius and Catherine Duggan O'Connor had survived seven of their children.

From among the letters of condolence they received at Charlotte's death, the parents chose to save one from a family friend who at the time was practicing law in Sioux City. The friend was Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, whose statue stands today in Dublin's Saint Stephen's Green: he had been among the first Irishmen to join the Fenian Brotherhood in 1853, and gained international fame for his fiery oratory and angry books about his six years in six British prisons.³² Rossa's letter to the O'Connors contains only the usual expressions of sympathy and trust in Providence, but its existence today in the possession of an O'Connor great-grandson is meaningful. What happened to the Ashfords, Duggans, and O'Connors in Dakota County was often a matter of great good fortune and sometimes a matter of profoundest tragedy; but whatever happened, it happened to an extended family which for a century and a quarter after its arrival in Dakota County considered itself wholly American and wholly Irish.

The brick mansion east of Homer is its symbol.

NOTES

1. Carl Wittke, *The Irish in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 62.
2. Casper, Henry W., SJ, *History of the Catholic Church in Nebraska: The Church on the Northern Plains 1838-1874* (Milwaukee: Bruce Press, 1960), 66.
3. Wittke, 66.
4. James McShane and Nadine Murphy, "The Irish: The Heritage of Charles Stuart Parnell," in *Broken Hoops and Plains People* (Lincoln: Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, 1976), 375.
5. Casper, 76.
6. Alvin Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress* (New York: The Viking Press, 1952), 35.
7. Report to the author from Irish Genealogical Office, Dublin Castle, Dublin, Ireland, January, 1975.
8. Interview with Teresa Murphy (Duggan descendant), Shandangan, Ireland, January 9, 1981. All information concerning members of the O'Connor, Duggan, and Ashford families for which references are not supplied is to be attributed to the author of this article, whose roots are in Dakota County and County Cork.
9. Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970; originally published in 1837), I, 248.
10. Interview with Dr. Michael Cagney (Duggan descendant), Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland, January 8, 1981.
11. Interview with Mrs. Michael Cagney, Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland, January 8, 1981.
12. Obituary of Daniel Duggan in scrapbook in possession of Judge Timothy Green (Duggan descendant), St. John's, Michigan.
13. Casper, 68.
14. Casper, 79.
15. *Ibid.*
16. M. M. Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska, From the Days of the Pioneers and First Settlers to the Present Time* (Dakota City, Nebraska: Lyons Mirror Job Office, 1893), 54.
17. Warner, 79.
18. Warner, 53.
19. Nebraska State Historical Society Preservation Series, Report No. 1 Historic Preservation in Nebraska (Lincoln, Nebraska State Historical Society, 1971), 12. (After the publication of this report, the vicinity acquired another element of significance, when on October 1, 1972, Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton dedicated the 1000-acre Thomas Ashford Scout Reservation 5 miles southeast of the O'Connor Mansion. The tract, comprised of virgin timber on rugged bluffs, was a gift to the Prairie Gold Council of Boy Scouts from Mrs. Judson E. Packard, daughter of Thomas Ashford Jr.)
20. Warner, 180-81.
21. A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1881), I, 614.
22. Johnson, 36.
23. *North Nebraska Eagle*, South Sioux City, Nebraska, October 20, 1892. 1.
24. "Mother Ellen C. Green, Dean of Manhattanville 1925-1934," *Manhattanville Alumnae Review* (Fall, 1961), 20.
25. G. W. Anderson, *Atlas of Dixon and Dakota Counties-Nebraska* (Des Moines: The Anderson Publishing Company), 48.
26. Dakota County Scrapbook, I, Archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
27. E. Bryant Phillips, *Nebraska Street and Interurban Railways* (Crete, Nebraska: J-B Publishing Company, 1974), 65-71.

28. Warner, 101.
29. Andreas, 614.
30. Warner, 87.
31. Grace L. McCarty "Homer Celebration This Week Recalls Early Day Old Settler Picnic," *Sioux City Journal*, Wednesday, July 31, 1940, 2.
32. Henry Boylan, *A Dictionary of Irish Biography*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1978) 313-14.