The Mansion in The Country

The term, “mansion,” typically brings to mind a large, impressive, stately and opulent residence owned by the affluent and wealthy and is most likely located within a city. Familiar examples might include the Glensheen Mansion in Duluth, the Hubbard House in Mankato, the James J. Hill House and the Alexander Ramsey House in the Twin Cities, and locally, the Wohlheter Mansion in Fairmont. However, Martin County is the home to another, albeit lesser known, mansion located in Section 34 of Fraser Township.

This mansion was built by Charles Anthony, a highly esteemed citizen of Martin County of his era. He also happened to be a first cousin of Susan B. Anthony, the American social reformer and feminist who played a significant role in the women’s suffrage movement.

Built in the late 1800s, it was apparently started in 1880 and completed in 1886. It was originally comprised of eighteen large rooms with high ceilings, an English style that also included a basement, two full stories, and a large attic. A house of this magnitude obviously took a number of years to complete, especially considering the time period in which it was built.

It had a full basement made of Kasota Stone that included the bases for the three fireplaces that were located on the first floor. All of the basement windows had iron bars covering the windows. A hand operated water pressure system and tank was also located in the basement. Below ground level, but not a part of the basement, was a large cistern for the collection of rain water that was routed there by gutters and down spouts. This “soft water” was used for washing cloths and bathing. At one time an office was also located in the basement.

The first floor had a number of open porches by various outdoor entry areas into the mansion. Above these ground floor porches were porches for the second story. There were three fireplaces on the first floor, a large kitchen, a sink for washing dishes and a sink for hand washing, both having hot and cold running water. Next to the kitchen was a large pantry with counters, cupboards for storage and bins for flour and sugar.

Also located on this floor was an interesting room called the “Ice Room.” This room was long and narrow with thick, tin lined, interior and exterior walls that were filled with sawdust serving as insulation. It was not unlike a walk-in refrigerator and was used to store milk, butter, meat, and other perishables.

In addition, the first floor had a dining room, a parlor, and a stairway going up to the second floor. Two of the three fireplaces were located in this area, one in the dining room and another in the open stairway area. The master bedroom, located off the

dining room, was quite large with an adjacent small bathroom containing a sink and toilet. Next to this room was another large room with sliding doors that incorporated the third fireplace.

The second floor was comprised of six bedrooms, a maid's quarters, and a back stairway leading down to the kitchen on the first floor. This floor also had a complete bathroom with sinks, a bath tub with hot and cold running water, and a flushing toilet. A large foyer was located at the top of the second floor open stairway.

The attic was large and unique in that there was a trap door to the flat part of the roof above. That part of the roof was enclosed with a wooden railing known as the "widow's walk," referring to English wives who lived by the sea that could watch from the "widow's walk" for their husband's ships to return home.

The mansion's grounds had an underground silo measuring fourteen by twenty feet that served as a cesspool for the collection of drainage from sinks and toilets. It held an estimated 92,000 gallons of waste water and sewage.

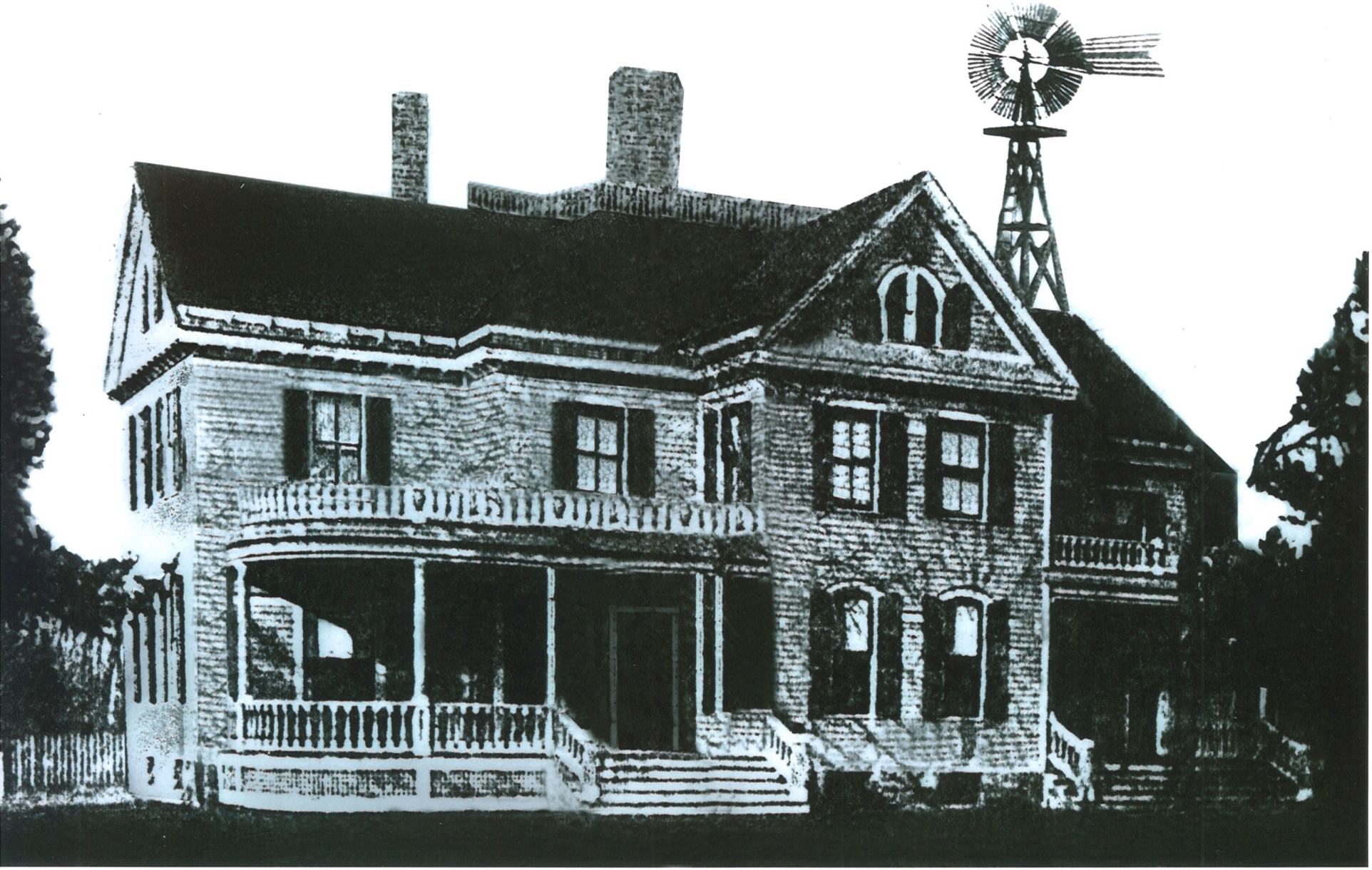
The out buildings on the grounds, modern for that era, included a very large barn, a chicken house, a corn crib, and a granary that had its own power supply. The lane was lined with Elm Trees and there was a large Walnut Grove on the farm as well. The farm had a gravity flow water system supplying well water to the house and out buildings and most likely utilized gas lamps for lighting.

Over time, the farm passed through a number of owners and was eventually purchased by Henry Bents in 1916 and owned by his family until 2006. The building site was sold in 2006, however, the land is still owned by local resident Kenneth Bents.

This mansion exemplified an elegant and unique structure having modern conveniences that were well ahead of its time. Although the mansion still stands today, it has been modified, remodeled, or added to over the years. Consequently, although still standing, it is far from its original condition.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Marlen Bents of Ceylon, the only person born in that old mansion, for his efforts in researching, documenting, and providing the basis of this historical account. Without the efforts of people like Mr. Bents, local history could easily slip into the past unnoticed by current generations and be thereby lost forever.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont or contact Marlen Bents in Ceylon.



HOME OF CHARLES ANTHONY, FAIRMONT, MINN.

STOCK BARN OF CHARLES ANTHONY, FAIRMONT, MINN.