

## History of the THE MAGILL BROTHERS

Hugh Magill was born about 1800 in Northern Ireland. He emigrated to the United States in 1816 and settled in Middlebury, Vermont, where he farmed, met, and married his wife Eliza, also an Irish emigrant. They were the parents of seven children, four boys and three girls. These boys were destined to become early Clinton's powerhouse businessmen, the Magill Brothers.

In 1841, the Magills moved to Malone, New York, where the successful farmer switched occupations, owning and operating a cotton mill and a general merchandise store. William and Samuel helped their father in the operation of the mill, while their brother Henry became a clerk in the general store at the age of 14. Business prospered so much that the elder Magill turned down an offer of \$80,000 for the mill. One day, the accumulation of years was swept away, as the mill was destroyed in a fire. Although insured, the insurance company refused to pay for the loss.

Poorer than when they arrived in New York, the entire family moved on to Michigan City, Indiana, in 1851 when Hugh Magill and his eldest son William contracted for grading and tiling the Michigan Central Railroad bed from there to Chicago under the firm name of Emery, Magill and Co. Eventually all four sons, including the youngest, Robert, joined in this work.

Following this, in 1853, the Magills moved to Bloomington, Illinois, where they took on a contract to build the Chicago and Alton roadbed from Bloomington to Lexington and then sixteen miles of the Illinois Central from Bloomington to north of Hudson. The four brothers became partners in the firm, with Samuel and Henry managing the large store the firm owned in Bloomington, while William and Robert assisted their father in the railroad contracts.

In 1854 the family moved to Clinton, bringing with them their stock from the Bloomington store and opened a store on Main Street. In 1855, they sold out the stock to Emery, and then bought out the Clinton firm of Phares and Shores, establishing a thriving dry goods business on the east side of the public square. In the meantime, doing business as Magill, Denton (a brother-in-law), & Co., they built part of the Dubuque and Sioux City railroad bed. In 1858, Mason, Magill, Denton & Co. built a large portion of the Minneapolis and St. Paul road. The elder Magill died in 1864, leaving his sons to carry on the businesses the family had built up.

Their railroad contracts ended for a time, until 1870, when Magill & Co. graded, tied, and ironed the Gilman, Clinton, and Springfield Railroad from Gilman to Clinton. Henry Magill was instrumental in seeing that Clinton benefited from the railroad and the Magills helped raise the money which secured the

location of the railroad machine shops in Clinton, an enterprise that provided jobs for many Clintonians for nearly a century to come.

In the meantime, the family was putting down roots in the DeWitt County area, quite literally, as they expanded into farming and livestock, eventually owning several thousand acres. William and Robert managed the farms, improving each substantially, while Samuel and Henry managed the business. Business, too, thrived and expanded to include banking, particularly the acquisition of an equal share in the John Warner Bank. Samuel ran the general store, which was the premiere retail business in Clinton for many years, while Henry managed the financial and banking interests.

In 1872, the Magill brothers purchased half a block on the northwest portion of the public square, intending to put up two or three two-story buildings. Each was to have a store below and offices above. The editor of the Clinton Public, as well as several of the town's leading citizens, asked them to revise their plans and instead build a hotel, since the town had great need of good accommodations, especially with the traffic the railroad brought to town.

The Magills agreed, on the condition that \$10,000 of the \$35,000 cost be raised by the citizens of the town. Nearly 80 townspeople contributed, including prominent lawyer C.H. Moore, who "primed the pump" with \$2,500. The rest ranged from a high of \$1,000 from banker John Warner with others contributing

\$500 to \$50. The names of subscribers and the amounts contributed were published weekly in the paper to encourage others to meet the challenge.

The resulting magnificent three-story structure included forty rooms for travelers, as well as dining facilities, a laundry and barber shop in the basement, a bar and billiards above. Three stores faced on the square, one of which was only one story to allow ventilation from windows for the hotel rooms above. The stores opened early in 1873, while the hotel's grand opening was April 1, 1873.

The youngest brother Robert died in 1874, and his share was withdrawn to provide support for his widow and two young children. The three remaining brothers continued to combine talents and capital, with regular cattle buying trips out West, a thriving general merchandise store, the bank's capital growing by leaps and bounds, and the hotel business booming. The net worth of the Magill Brothers doubled over the next ten years to more than \$800,000.

They were not the only Clinton residents to prosper during these boom times. The business the hotel and railroad brought to town, and the look of prosperity the fine brick hotel building gave to the square inspired others to put up brick buildings. The building boom of 1872-1873 saw prices of lots in the business district rise from nearly nothing to \$100 per front foot. Soon, nearly the entire square was ringed with brick buildings, in many cases replacing operations housed in nothing more than "shanties," according to one city councilman.

Henry, the financial expert and youngest of the three brothers, became an invalid in 1881, with his health declining for the next three years. The year 1884 saw the demise of an empire: all three brothers were to die within months of each other, beginning with Henry in February. William became ill and lingered through most of the year, with Samuel spending hours at his bedside while still trying to keep the complicated business interests running smoothly. William died in September, and Samuel, overworked and despondent, passed less than two months later.

After Henry's death, the fine hotel was sold by the Master of Chancery as part of the liquidation of the partnership, and Samuel's son Alfred "Allie," at 25 the oldest of the brothers' children, became executor of the complicated estate. Allie was an honors graduate of Wabash College in Indiana, had clerked for the store, and at the time of his father's death was involved in banking at the John Warner Bank. He had accumulated more than \$100,000 in net worth in his own right, with an income of \$5,000 per year, a considerable sum at the time. In spite of his ability, the responsibility was overwhelming. He had nearly wound up all the affairs of the estate that had taken his family over a quarter of a century to build up, when Allie, like his father, committed suicide just three years later.

*(information taken from obituaries of the Magill family)*