

The Douglas Era: 1906-1937

The Douglasses Move

When the Douglas family became the owners of Fairhome, the estate passed from one prominent business family to another. The Douglasses turned Mrs. Sinclair's country home into an estate similar to those owned by the wealthy on the east coast. Through their changes, the Douglasses left lasting marks on the property. They created a home that reflected their interest in the arts, technology, and the country estate.

When the Douglasses moved in 1906, they had two daughters, Margaret and Ellen. Their daughter, Barbara, was born shortly after they moved to Bruce more. George B. Douglas had married Irene Hazeltine of Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1892. The four Douglas women became a major influence on the shape the estate took during the Douglas period. The Douglasses named their new home "Bruce more," after George's middle name and a reference to the Scottish Moors.

A Family Business

George B. Douglas' father, George Douglas, Sr., came to the United States from Scotland. After moving to Iowa, he became involved in several important projects in Cedar Rapids. He helped build the railroads that transported goods and people to and from the state. He joined fellow Scotsman Robert Stuart to open the North Star Oatmeal Mill. It later merged and became The Quaker Oats Company. Iowa led, or was second, in the nation in oats production between 1889 and 1909. This combination of a rich source of oats and the rapids of the Cedar River created one of the world's largest oatmeal mills. However, the cereal needed a new public image if it was to sell as anything besides animal feed.

Oatmeal had long been a staple in the Scottish diet, but others believed it was a food only for horses and sick people. Quaker Oats convinced consumers that it was a satisfying food for healthy people through their packaging and advertising. The company was the first to offer oatmeal in an individually wrapped, sanitary package. After appealing to the consumer's through a conveniently packaged, pure product, the company further promoted its product. Quaker's far-reaching campaigns included signs, billboards, magazine advertisements, free samples, premium coupons and a special all-Quaker Oats train that made trips between Cedar Rapids, San Francisco, and Portland. Today, over a hundred years later, The Quaker Oats Company still operates a large plant in Cedar Rapids.

George, Jr. worked for the company until it merged, and then opened a linseed oil business with his brother Walter. By 1906, when he became the owner of the Sinclair home, he had already sold the linseed oil company to

American Linseed for a great profit. George and Walter founded Douglas & Company, the largest industry in Cedar Rapids and one of the largest starch works in the US. At its peak, the starch works employed over 400 people and produced cooking starch and oil, laundry starch, animal feed, and soap stock. In 1919, the starch works suffered a devastating explosion, the worst industrial accident in Cedar Rapids history. The blast was heard at least six miles away and shattered window glass in nearby buildings. Forty-three men died in the accident, and many others were injured. Shortly after the explosion, the factory was sold to Penick and Ford and rebuilt. It is now known as Penford Products.

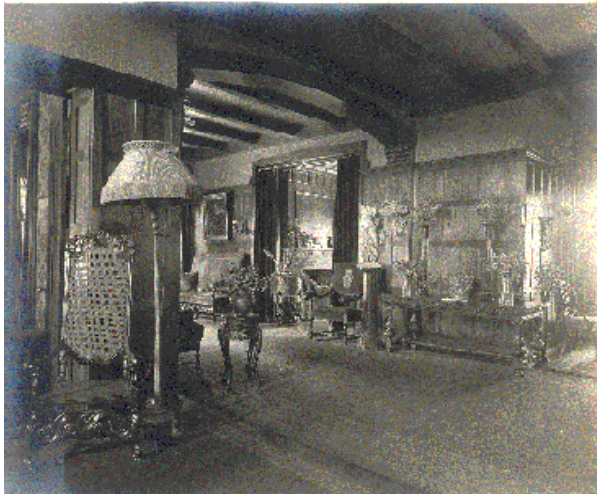


Remodeling at Bruce more

Besides the new name, the Douglasses changed things inside the mansion to reflect their interests in the arts. Remodeling of the great hall took place between 1906 and 1910. The main entrance was moved to the south side of the house and butternut paneling was added to the walls and beams to the ceiling. They also added a mural illustrating Richard Wagner's four-part opera *The Ring of the Nibelung*. This mural, painted by an unknown artist around 1925, is an important symbol of the Douglasses' interest in culture that was less readily available in Cedar Rapids.

The Wagnerian mural was not the only change that highlighted the Douglasses' passion for the arts. In 1929 Mrs. Douglas commissioned a Skinner player pipe organ. The Skinner Company built eighty-one residence organs between 1901 and 1931. This was only a small part of their business. They also built many organs for churches and theaters. Although there were many companies at that time that built residence organs, Skinner's were considered among the finest.

Owning a Skinner residence organ illustrates the Douglasses' good taste in instruments, but also the importance of music in their daily life. This was not the first organ the family owned; a pump organ once stood in the space near the old north entrance. Margaret wrote during her spring break in March 1912, "All the boys came up after dinner and we pumped the organ most of the afternoon." Barbara was the family musician, but all three daughters took music lessons. Given the musical talent in the Douglas household, the Skinner organ most likely had serious practical use as did the family piano in the great hall.



In addition to their love of music and the performing arts, the Douglasses also enjoyed the visual arts. The family's appreciation of art had a Midwestern flavor. Mrs. Douglas had the money and ability to buy paintings from New York painters and galleries, but her collection shows she was more interested in supporting local artists.

In 1925, Mrs. Douglas hired Grant Wood to decorate Barbara's sleeping porch. The pale green plaster is decorated with raised animals and arabesque vines and leaves. The style of the porch is much softer than the hard-edged lines of *American Gothic*. Mrs. Douglas also purchased a painting from Wood and two paintings from his friend Marvin Cone, *Thunderheads* and *Banking Clouds*.

Technology in the Mansion

Besides making their home a haven for the arts, the Douglasses also updated the mansion's technology. The Douglasses had telephone service at Bruce more as had the Sinclairs before them. They also had telephone service at their Second Avenue home. When they moved across town they brought their phone number, 50, with them. Only a small percentage of Cedar Rapids residents had telephone service. It was more common for businesses.

Bruce more had electricity by 1909, if not earlier. A picture of the nursery shows two electric lights hanging from the ceiling and the light switch just to the left of the open door. Cedar Rapids was progressive when it came to providing electricity. In June 1882, the Barnum and Bailey Circus brought electric arc lights to town. Two months later, the Cedar Rapids Electric Light and Power Company was incorporated and began providing arc lights. In 1887, the company adopted Westinghouse's alternating current technology, only Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had it earlier. Cedar Rapids was also one of the first cities to have meters, which made the cost of electricity much lower.

Once electricity became more widely available, new household appliances were marketed. Electric vacuum cleaners, irons, and refrigerators promised to make people's lives easier. The Douglasses purchased an electric refrigerator around 1927. Owning a refrigerator at this time put the Douglasses in a very elite class. Most households at that time lacked any refrigeration, even ice.

Life on a Country Estate

At the turn of the century, cities began to get more crowded and dirtier. Those who could afford it moved to the country, where they could enjoy what was considered a healthy outdoor lifestyle. These estates generally featured a large house as the centerpiece of a substantial piece of land. A small farm, recreational facilities, and formal gardens were also part of the property. Although sale of the produce raised at these estates did little to support wealthy lifestyles, the goal was to give the illusion of self-sufficiency.

The magazines *Town and Country* and *Country Life in America* taught their readers how to furnish and maintain country houses. These publications also included advertisements for appliances, furniture, greenhouses, and leisure items that were part of upper-class culture. Smaller ads highlighted services, livestock and breeders of purebred dogs. The Douglases were among the many country house owners who sought its advice. The Brucemore estate at its height had much in common with the Eastern estates seen in issues of *Country Life*.



During the Douglas period the estate increased from ten to thirty-three acres. Several outbuildings were also added between 1909 and 1912 – the carriage house, servant’s duplex, the greenhouse, and a bookbindery/squash court. This collection of buildings created a small village like those found at other country estates. A guest house, called the Garden House, was also added near the mansion.

Its small farming operations included chicken coops, vegetable gardens, and orchards. Irene’s “Garden Book” describes the production and sale of eggs, grapes, apples, strawberries, cabbage and cucumbers. Many country estates featured model farms much

larger than those of the Douglases. These farms gave the families easy access to fresh food and provided an opportunity to enjoy the outdoors.

Sporting activities were a very important part of the country estate and were well represented at Brucemore. The grounds included a squash court, a pool (1927), and at one time a tennis court. The Douglases were also avid golfers. Irene and Margaret’s diaries often wrote in their diaries about golf games in Cedar Rapids and at their summer and winter homes. George and his brother Walter helped found the Cedar Rapids Country Club and are credited with bringing golf to the city. The first golf course in Cedar Rapids was located just north of the Brucemore estate.

The grounds were an important part of the country estate. Irene played an integral role in gardening at Brucemore. Her diaries document both her own activities in the garden and the development of the plants themselves. In the 1920s and ‘30s she wrote to her gardener Archie White to make suggestions for the garden while she was away from Brucemore. The family spent just enough time in their Cedar Rapids home to enjoy the gardens at their peak; they returned from Santa Barbara, California in mid-spring and left for Charlevoix, Michigan in mid-summer.

O.C. Simonds, Landscape Architect

The estate’s grounds consisted of more than the gardens, and the Douglases carefully considered the appearance of the estate as a whole. They had begun working with the landscape architect O.C. Simonds by 1906, and he continued to do work for them at least through 1927. Simonds’s office was in Chicago, where he designed Graceland Cemetery. He also worked on parks in Springfield and Quincy, IL, Madison, WI and several private estates and parks in Chicago’s north shore suburbs. By choosing Simonds, Irene further supported a midwestern aesthetic just as she had through her support of Wood and Cone. Simonds was a

founder of the Prairie School of landscape design, which like Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie architecture attempted to create a style that reflected the character of the midwestern landscape rather than using European styles. Some of Simonds' recommendations included the use of local plantings, ponds, and the construction of outdoor "rooms" within a landscape.

Servants at Brucemore

Servants during the late-nineteenth century were considered workers who should be neither seen nor heard. They lived in a separate side of the house, closed off from the public and family parts of the home. Often, servants were young immigrant women who had recently come to the United States. They also came from families that needed an extra wage earner.

At least five people worked in the mansion at any given time: a butler, two maids, a cook and a nanny. Of all the house servants, the most is known about the nanny, Ella McDannel. Known to the family as

"Danny," she was hired as a nurse for the Douglas girls in 1909. In addition to taking care of the girls, she was companion to Irene and aided her in the bookbinding, played squash, and took walks with her.

Danny's diary from between 1910 and 1914 also tells us about her life. She mentions doing light housework, mainly related to laundry and mending. Naturally, her job as the nanny also required a lot of interaction with the children. Her entries are brief, but taken as a whole, they depict her great compassion for the Douglas girls. She took them to school and music lessons, washed their hair, and took care of them when they were sick. She made note of their birthday parties, their absences from home and that by January 23, 1910 Barbara had "a vocabulary of twenty-one words and stands alone." Danny's diary tells us about the Douglasses' lives from a different point of view. It also shows a close relationship between a servant and a family member.

Danny lived in the mansion near the family unlike other servants who lived in the servants' bedrooms on the third floor the working part of the estate.

Many historic records give a picture of Danny's life both before and after her work at Brucemore. The census is one useful resource that is taken ten years when the United States government counts the number of people in the country. Census takers also gather basic information about the population. Using these records, we can learn more about Brucemore servants, including Danny. She was born in Montgomery County, Iowa, circa 1871 and had an eighth-grade education. She later attended a nurses' training school in Cedar Rapids. Danny was the same age as Irene Douglas, which may have been one reason why the two became rather close companions, despite their differences in education and social status. Although Danny may not have had much more formal education than other servants in the house, she was able to do things the others did not, such as take French lessons and get manicures. She worked for the Douglasses for twenty years. Danny continued to write to and visit with the family even after she moved to California and got married.

The Douglasses and Opera

One of the most important examples of the Douglasses' passion for opera is the *Ring of the Nibelung* (or *Ring cycle*) mural they added to the great hall, the mansion's most public space. The family greeted their guests and did most of their entertaining in this room. By placing the mural in the great hall, the Douglasses identified the *Ring cycle* operas as valuable parts of their lives.

The *Ring cycle* mural also represents the family's ability to enjoy the operas in ways most local people did not. The Douglasses often spent time in New York City. Irene usually went there several weeks every year and Margaret and Ellen both attended boarding school in New York City. Margaret often wrote in her diary about seeing Wagner's operas. For example, on January 9, 1915 she wrote, "Miss Brown took us to the opera



‘Siegfried.’ Simply marvelous. Recognized loads of music. All new scenery.” This comment suggests that she may have seen *Siegfried* in New York before. Other references to seeing Wagner’s four *Ring* cycle operas at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House may be found in many of the Douglasses’ letters and scrapbooks.

However, the *Ring* was probably not performed in its entirety in Cedar Rapids. Greene’s Opera House served as a local venue for music and theater. Many good travelling theater companies performed there in front of large crowds. However, Wagner’s operas were too complicated to stage at Greene’s. Although people in Cedar Rapids could enjoy recordings or performances of pieces of Wagner’s work, they could not see a full live performance of the *Ring* without going to a bigger city. The Douglasses’ mural was one way to bring the experience of seeing the *Ring* into their Midwestern home.

Music and Technology

An example of the earliest type of sound recording was found in the Douglasses’ study – the Edison phonograph. This first “talking machine,” introduced in 1877, involved recording sound onto the grooves of a wax cylinder. The Douglasses’ phonograph is a later model; it was made around 1908. These later machines had fancier horns and could play either the four- or two-minute cylinders. The family had a collection of forty-eight four-minute cylinders. Only four years later the Douglasses upgraded to the gramophone or Victrola (which played flat disks).

On September 14, 1912, Margaret noted in her diary, “My Victor came.” Less than a month later Ellen wrote to her mother about her excitement over going to Niles Music Store and getting her own Victrola. Popular forms of entertainment made an early impression on the Douglas daughters.

The Douglasses also benefited from technology that allowed their organ to automatically play rolls of music. The Douglasses owned one hundred rolls, including popular songs and selections from symphonies and operas. Wagner naturally was common. An average roll cost between \$3.50 and \$5.00, with some priced as high as \$18. These rolls allowed the family to enjoy music on a purely recreational level. The mural and the music from the organ scrolls essentially recreated a box at the Metropolitan Opera House within the comfort of the Douglas home.



Visual Arts in Cedar Rapids

Cedar Rapids had a very active art scene in the early twentieth century. The local arts boom in the late ‘20s and early ‘30s was partly due to the opening of the Little Gallery. The Gallery was an “experimental art station” funded by the Carnegie Foundation from 1928 to 1933. The Little Gallery turned out to be much more than a showplace for the work of local artists. After it moved from a storefront to a larger space, the gallery featured classrooms, displays for books and manuscripts, and traditional gallery spaces. One of the more interesting and unusual concepts was the “Better Homes Room.” It featured displays of tasteful interior decoration using local merchandise. The Douglasses often went to see exhibits and hear lectures at the Little Gallery.



Grant Wood and Marvin Cone contributed much to the energy of the local arts scene. Before *American Gothic* made

him famous, he spent much of his time living and working in Cedar Rapids. Several members local businessmen hired Wood to do paintings and interior decorating during the 1920s

The End of an Era

After adding the Skinner pipe organ in 1929, the Douglases made no major changes to Brucemore. Although the stock market crash did not greatly hurt the family's holdings in The Quaker Oats Company, their letters from the mid- to late-1930s reflect a concern for the stock's small dividends. The Douglas women most likely sought to support the lifestyle they were used to, rather than make additional changes.

George Bruce Douglas died in 1923. After his death, Irene took charge of managing Brucemore. In fact, she was responsible for most of the major changes to the mansion and grounds. Irene also took over George's position on the Coe College Board of Trustees after his death. When she died in 1937, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* reported her death as front-page news. Her obituary highlighted her work with organizations such as the Junior Service League (later the Junior League), the Cedar Rapids Garden Club, and the Art Association. After Irene's death, her daughter Margaret Douglas Hall inherited the estate and moved into the mansion with her husband Howard. The Halls had been living in Brucemore's Garden House since their marriage in 1924. When the Halls moved into the mansion they continued many of the Douglases' traditions. They also brought a simpler style to Brucemore.

Conclusion

The Douglases turned the Sinclairs' country home into a country estate that reflected their tastes and needs. In the process they put themselves on par with their peers on the East Coast. However, by including regional artists and influences at Brucemore they gave it a Midwestern character.

