

The Hall Era: 1937-1981

Introduction to the Halls' Lifestyle

Howard Hall, an ambitious businessman, married Margaret Douglas in 1924. At the time of their marriage, Howard was the president of the Iowa Steel and Iron Works and had just organized Iowa Manufacturing Company. Before moving into the mansion in 1937, the couple lived in the Garden House also located on the estate. They created an atmosphere that emphasized comfort and informality while bringing their own style and new technology to the mansion. The couple did not have children, but they shared their home with many pets, the most famous was Leo the lion.



Many similarities can be found among all of the Bruce more families. Technology played a key role in their lives. Mr. Sinclair's company depended upon railroads and refrigeration. His success allowed his widow to build a mansion that featured the latest technology. During the Douglas period, innovations in household and entertainment technology began changing the nature of work and leisure. Howard's companies depended on technology. Iowa Manufacturing Company produced machinery that paved roads. The demand for more roads was high at the time because of the increased number of automobiles. Howard and Margaret also took advantage of breakthroughs in entertainment, especially movies.

Howard Hall's Businesses

The breakthrough product for Iowa Manufacturing was a portable rock-crushing, screening, and loading plant, or "one piece outfit", introduced in the mid-1920s. A few years later the company developed an asphalt plant and in 1956, an asphalt paver. This equipment helped build roads when there was growing demand for their improvement.



The number of cars increased rapidly in the 1910s and '20s, but the amount of paved roads in Iowa was very low. In 1918, the "Seedling Mile" was paved on what is now US Highway 30 ("Lincoln Highway") between Cedar Rapids and Mount Vernon. This paved mile was meant to create interest in building better roads, but taxation and funding problems delayed further progress. It was not until 1924 that funding existed for a more extensive road paving program. At this time, demand for good roads was high. By 1920 there was one automobile for every 5.5 persons in the state; by 1925, one for every 3.6 persons. Only California had more cars per person. Even after

extensive road paving began to meet the basic demand, world events created more need for Iowa Manufacturing's equipment.

During World War II many industrial plants switched over to producing weapons and tanks. Howard's and other local industries made contributions to the war effort. Iowa Manufacturing's equipment paved airstrips and roads for allied transport. The company's 1944 publicity booklet,

“Cedarapids -- A Contribution to the Future,” describes their aid to the war effort by listing the many air bases and airports built with their machinery. It also included the following text comparing their road-building machinery with the equipment of war:

“Allied for Victory to Crush the Axis”

Here are the big guns of the world’s armies for aggregate production. Day after day machinery like this rolled out of the big plant to do a job somewhere and play Iowa’s part in Crushing the Axis.

Like the tanks they had to be quickly movable so they could be on the job where airport construction and repair or road construction and repair was required to help allied forces keep allied transport moving.

Like the artillery, they must shoot the stuff out and be ready and dependable at a moment’s notice.

Many Cedar Rapids industries took part in the war effort. In 1944, the *Gazette* reported that the “Cedar Rapids industrial area was sixth . . . in dollar value of supply contracts, excluding those for aircraft, ships, ordnance, food and food processing, and those contracts under \$50,000 among fourteen industrial areas in the Chicago region of the War Production Board.” Their \$135,492,000 in contracts between June 1940 and December 1943 surpassed the total value of contracts awarded in Des Moines, Waterloo and Rock Island.

Howard’s interest in civic development went further than helping improve roads and doing war work. He chose the name “Cedarapids” for Iowa Manufacturing’s equipment. This strengthened the connection between the product and the place where it was made. Iowa Manufacturing Company promoted Cedar Rapids in addition to its own products. Like nineteenth century city boosters who praised the city’s many rail connections, Iowa Manufacturing’s promotional material praised Cedar Rapids’ access to many kinds of transportation. For example, one booklet contained the following passage: “Cedar Rapids is the crossroads of four great railroads with necessary connections both to East and West, and to the North and South. Two national highways intersect, and several state routes pass through the city. Modern new airport facilities put Cedar Rapids in a class with the leaders for air transportation. You are only a few hours away -- no matter where you live.”

Another Iowa Manufacturing publication further publicized Cedar Rapids as “One of the World’s Leading Manufacturing Centers of Road Building Machinery.” It included other local manufacturers such as LaPlant-Choate Manufacturing Company, Universal Engineering Corporation, Link-Belt Speeder Corporation, and Iowa Engineering Company. The booklet treats these industries as part of a team rather than as competitors. In addition to promoting the city’s industry, Howard was a director for a number of local businesses including Merchant’s National Bank, Iowa National Mutual Insurance Company, Amana Refrigeration, Iowa Electric Light and Power Company, and The Quaker Oats Company.

Brucemore also hosted the brainstorming sessions of Howard’s “Sunday School Class.” This group of influential Cedar Rapids businessmen met on Sundays to discuss local issues. The Square D Manufacturing plant, the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, and the Hall Radiation Center at Mercy Hospital all benefited from the work of this group.

The Halls at Brucemore

The Halls’ informal lifestyle seemed to inspire more conservative management of the estate. Although the Halls had the means to make major changes to Brucemore, they were content with maintaining the estate. They replaced furniture and carpeting as it wore out. They updated the décor of the mansion to reflect modern styles. Some changes were also made to interior woodwork finishes. The paneling in the great hall and staircase was stripped of the original dark color and lightened. The woodwork in the library was “antiqued,” a paint process thought to make the wood look aged. In the

late 1930s, Howard replaced double-hung windows in the library, dining room, and second floor bedrooms with large picture windows. The size of the estate also decreased. The Halls sold seven acres from the Forest Drive area, bringing Bruce more to its current size of twenty-six acres.

The Halls also made changes to the estate during World War II just as other Cedar Rapidsians made adjustments to their lives.

Articles from the *Gazette* during the early and mid-1940s provide a taste of how people dealt with local shortages. Rationing of everything from food to gas to shoes started in 1942, and reports concerning supplies of certain goods appeared often. Advertisements often emphasized products' cost-effectiveness or their flexibility. The Cedar Rapids city bus line boasted of its ability to "keep rolling despite tight restrictions. Many articles encouraged people to grow victory gardens or promoted the month's "victory foods," of which there was a surplus.

Even though the Halls were financially secure, they were affected by shortages. Based on their letters, it appears that some regions of the United States were worse off than others. Margaret wrote several letters to Howard from Florida describing the scarcity of some items and thanking him for sending her staples such as butter and bacon. Some letters indicate the difficulty of hiring servants. At Bruce more, the squash court/bookbindery, which received little use after Irene's death was converted into a residence at the beginning of World War II. Margaret and Howard were unsure whether they would be able to keep the mansion open due to shortages and thus arranged for an optional home. The building later became the residence of their head housekeeper. She was given life tenancy in Margaret's will, and still lives there today.

The somewhat minor changes made by the Halls indicate a lifestyle that might be labeled as "conservative." They did not have children to occupy extra bedrooms, so they could have put in a billiards room, a music room, or whatever happened to strike their fancy. Instead, these rooms were made into guestrooms. At some point, the Halls had discussed whether they should close off the third floor rooms. Since they sometimes had a house full of friends and family, keeping them up turned out to be a good decision. Occasionally, the Halls entertained special guests. Herbert Hoover and his friend Harry Truman visited in 1962 prior to the opening of the Hoover Presidential Library. The estate continued to evolve throughout the Hall period, reflecting entertainment and new technologies that were developed in the twentieth century.

The Tahitian Room and Grizzly Bar

The decoration of the Tahitian Room and Grizzly Bar in the basement was the most dramatic change the Halls made at Bruce more. During the Douglas period, the basement was used mainly for storage and laundry. But by the mid-to-late 1930s, people had discovered they could find other uses for this space. Basements tended to be damp and dark, so the increasing use of linoleum and electricity also made this area below ground more pleasant.



The Tahitian Room and Grizzly Bar are important examples of housing and culture in the pre- and post-World War II era. One can imagine Howard using these rooms as the ideal place to entertain business associates informally. This introduction of a specifically male domain into an upper-class dwelling was certainly nothing new. Many country houses had a room dedicated to the “man of the house.” That the Douglases had never included such a space at Bruce more was somewhat unusual.

The Tahitian Room also represents much of what the Halls accomplished during their years at Bruce more as well as who they were. The informality fit in with their more casual approach to entertainment at the mansion and their cottage at the Palisades. It also provided a comfortable place for discussion of the civic growth projects that interested Howard. Sutherland Cook remembered it as part of the way Howard promoted himself, “Howard had a kind of exotic side to him -- he had self-promotion skills. People would visit Cedar Rapids and they’d see his home, and the animals, and they’d go back and talk about it. It was smart promotion.” This comment is supported by part of a letter that Howard received from Joseph Judge, president of the Judge Motor Corporation:

I only wish you could see the enthusiasm shown by my hometown friends during my description of your homes. Started with the city home and not only walked them over your fifty acres, I explained all the beautiful sights, and of course, to make good one what you called me on Leo’s and Howard’s photograph -- (from one lion tamer to another) I said I posed with Leo on my shoulders just like Howard did in their photograph and as soon as they were finished I would gladly autograph some for them -- let’s hope they forget that promise.

Next, the basement, I had or have the pictures to show -- we will have to go to Honolulu to get up on the proper talk -- but well done on the bar and old scenes of the gay nineties. . . .

It will be funny if half of Rochester does not come to Cedar Rapids in the near future. . .

The Tahitian Room also reflects the Halls’ fascination with Hollywood. It is a stage set of sorts, a created world tucked away in normally unseen areas of the mansion.

Hollywood Connections

Howard and Margaret were among the first generation to grow up with the ability to enjoy recorded music in their homes. Motion pictures also became popular when Margaret was growing up. Early movie theaters were called “Nickelodeons” since many cost only a nickel. Because they were inexpensive, working-class people made up a large part of movie audiences. However, between 1910 and 1915 larger movie houses were built to attract more middle- and upper-class patrons. Margaret’s boarding school diary has many references to the movies.



The 1930s was an important decade for motion pictures. Hollywood produced a large number of movies throughout the Depression and into the war years. Despite the country’s economic slump, movies were extremely popular and provided a means of escape during an emotionally stressful time. Although the Halls did not suffer the same severe financial hardship, Margaret’s 1933 diary tells us that she was part of the crowds that flocked to the cinemas during the Depression.

Howard was also fascinated with Hollywood and its stars. His letters home to Margaret depict a different use of leisure time than those she had received from her mother. Irene frequently wrote from New York about attending theater and opera. Howard’s letters often described seeing movies or

“going to the show.” Although his taste in amusements was more middlebrow than the Douglas family’s, his wealth and position allowed access to a side of movie culture unavailable to the average fan. Howard’s business often sent him to California where he met movie stars and went behind the scenes. In a series of letters from the late 1930s, Howard described these brushes with fame to Margaret:

Paul said Ann was working with the “Gone with the Wind” Co. in a big set at Busch Garden Pasadena -- so after lunch we drove out and it certainly was a sight -- 400 extras in costume -- hoop skirts etc. . . . I met Gable -- Miss Leigh (Scarlet) Leslie Howard -- and had my picture taken with DeHaviland and a long talk with her. She is really very nice -- Met Victor Fleming the Director -- two Asst. Directors -- and then Paul and I spent all afternoon taking pictures -- color movies which no one are [sic] even allowed to do -- it was warm and sunny and the place reminded me of Brucemore.

We fished all day and late in the afternoon went to the other end of the island where they were having an annual Yacht Club celebration -- at a beautiful little cove where there were 550 yachts from all over -- a spot where they take all the movies . . . a million movie stars there and Doc knew them all -- Visited with Errol Flynn again and his wife Lily Donita . . . Met a hundred others some interesting, some not.

Howard also made images of these experiences. With his home movie camera, he captured the scenes from *Gone with the Wind* mentioned in the letter above. He had his picture taken with Errol Flynn. He also kept a collection of photographic portraits on the staircase walls between the first and second floors. By Howard’s death in 1971, this collection totaled over a hundred photos of celebrities of his time such as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Gordon and Sheila McRae, and Art Linkletter.

A Lion Named “Leo”

Howard’s Hollywood connections gave him the opportunity to acquire animals that became some of Brucemore’s most legendary residents. At some point, Howard met Billy Richards, the Vice-President of World Jungle Compound, a business promoted as the “Home of the Motion-Picture Animal Actors.” Richards’ company handled “Jackie” the famous MGM lion. The year before the Halls moved into the mansion they purchased the first of their lions, all named Leo. Based on the Halls’ letters, Leo I does not appear to have lived very long. The cause of his death is unknown. The Halls got Leo II sometime in 1937. He lived until 1950. This is the lion that appears in family photos and home movies and is the only one buried in the pet cemetery. Leo III was the final lion to live at Brucemore between 1951 and early 1953.



A Tradition of Giving

The Halls supported Cedar Rapids through their extensive philanthropy. The Hall Foundation (later renamed the Hall-Perrine Foundation) was the source of many good works. The Halls made many donations to Mercy Hospital, often anonymously. Each year they invited the Sisters of Mercy to spend an afternoon enjoying the Bruce more estate, especially the pool. The Hall Radiation Center opened in 1957 bringing local technology into the atomic age. It brought new radiation treatment for cancer to the state of Iowa.

The Hall era and the residential period of Bruce more came to a close with Howard's death in 1971 and Margaret's in 1981. Margaret arranged for Bruce more to become a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This gift of her home to the public is but one final and lasting symbol of her family's dedication to the city of Cedar Rapids. Throughout their lives, the Douglasses and Halls had the privilege of being able to travel frequently, and to have other residences that allowed them to avoid Iowa's blazing summers and bitter winters. However, their diaries, letters and actions continually repeat their commitment to their *home*. These activities ranged from supporting local artists, opening the estate to the public for the annual garden show, serving on the boards of area businesses, and giving numerous gifts of money and time. However small or large their actions and words, today they echo not only through the halls at Bruce more, but in the memories of those who remember the Bruce more families as more than images in a photograph.

