



OCTAGON PLACE

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Octagon Place

A crowd estimated to exceed two thousand persons thronged about the famous old Sinnett home on the outskirts of Muscatine when the auctioneer lifted his hammer the afternoon of December 17, 1934. The air was chilly and lowering clouds indicated snow, but the antique collectors, curio hunters, townspeople, and farmers were intent on the articles laid out for sale. Their bargain-hunting and curiosity were tinged with a sense of sadness, for all knew that the owner, the last of a famous family to occupy the home, was dead. All the furniture and family possessions left in the house were to be sold over the auction block.

The house, a two-story brick structure topped by a cupola, was set in a large yard. A winding driveway, flanked by large evergreen trees, led to the spacious house, made even larger by the wide porch. No doubt every member of the milling throng noticed the peculiarity of the house; both

the house and the cupola had eight sides. Because of this unusual plan the Sinnett home had long been known as the Octagon Place. Some persons, familiar with Scotch history, called it "John O'Groat's House".

The story of this unusual home, built on the Iowa frontier in 1855, goes back, perhaps, to Lyons, France, in the year 1685 when Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes. The de Sinnette family, silk-weavers by occupation and Huguenots in religion, fled to Dublin, Ireland, and there carried on the family trade for a century and a half. Apparently they prospered and became influential in Ireland, for William III, of England, presented to one de Sinnette a sword elaborately inscribed with the motto of Great Britain, "*Dieu et mon droit*" (God and my right), and "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*" (shame to him who thinks evil), the motto of the Order of the Garter.

After the legislative union of Ireland and England in 1801, silk manufacturing ceased to be profitable in Ireland and in 1835, the two sons of the French-Irish family, Samuel and John T. Sinnett, came to America. Samuel Sinnett, then eighteen, first bought a farm in Indiana, but by 1840 he had moved to Muscatine County, Iowa, where he purchased a half section of land. On this land in 1855 he built the octagonal house with its eighteen

rooms and spiral staircase in the center ending in the octagonal cupola. One room, it was said, had a secret entrance and was never shown to visitors.

The location of this spacious home was ideal. It stood on a slight eminence overlooking the northern part of Muscatine and a short distance west of the highway known as the Old Telegraph Road. Tiny evergreen shoots were brought in wrapped, it is said, in a handkerchief and planted along the drive. Eighty years later the throng attending the auction saw these as large trees. Inside the house with its shuttered windows the many rooms had the elegant furniture of the period, with rugs and carpets in keeping with a mansion.

The first master of Octagon Place was a man of medium height, with light hair and gray eyes. He was twice married. His first wife died in 1844 leaving one daughter. In 1847 he married Sarah E. Knox who died in 1897. Three daughters and four sons were born of this marriage, and Octagon Place must have been a center of activity and hospitality.

As the years passed Samuel Sinnett developed one of the finest apple orchards in the neighborhood. He located a gravel pit on the land he owned and realized its importance, for he mentioned it in his will. At first a Democrat, he later

became one of the leaders of the Greenback Party and he was strongly opposed to the use of public funds to aid the railroad. He had been well educated in the classical schools of Dublin and he wrote magazine articles on rural mail delivery, agriculture, and the rights of labor. In 1872 he helped organize the Patrons of Husbandry.

During the Civil War he sympathized with the South. On one occasion, hearing that his home was to be raided on a certain night, he gave a party and opened wide the doors of Octagon Place, but nothing happened. Originally an Episcopalian, he later joined the Presbyterian Church to which his second wife belonged. That he was deeply religious is suggested by the fact that he gave a prayer each morning at the breakfast table and read a selection from the Bible.

When Samuel Sinnett died on November 30, 1899, Octagon Place passed to a son, Samuel T. Sinnett, who, it is said, developed the gravel pit and, good roads having become a necessity after the coming of automobiles, netted a neat fortune. He was interested also in improved farming methods. For ten years he experimented with soil building, trying many kinds and combinations of fertilizers. Among his experiments was the application on one field of from one to thirteen tons of ground limestone to the acre.

He worked for years with clover, alfalfa, and other legumes, exchanging loads of soil with another experimenter three miles away. They discovered that clover and alfalfa were almost sure crops, if planted on soil that had been limed, fertilized, and inoculated with the bacteria necessary for development of legumes. In the beginning of these experiments farm neighbors ridiculed hauling dirt from one farm to another, but when Mr. Sinnett produced the finest clover and alfalfa fields in all the neighborhood, men came from far and near to secure his formula.

Other children in the Samuel Sinnett family followed the traditions of culture. Isabella Sinnett was an artist, like her uncle, John T. Sinnett. Her landscapes, flower pictures, and hand-painted china added to the collection at Octagon Place. Another daughter, Georgia (or Georgiana) married Russell B. George and the couple traveled extensively in Europe, bringing back to the old Sinnett home their contribution of souvenirs, art treasures, and curios to add to the Sinnett collection. John H. Sinnett became a physician in New York and died in 1894.

But there is an end to all human activities. Samuel T. Sinnett was the last of the Sinnett family to occupy Octagon Place. He died on September 11, 1934, leaving no children and, since no

other member of the family wished to take over the estate in Muscatine, the house was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Frank Grigg. Many of the pictures, works of art, furniture, and other antiques were distributed among the relatives. Under Mr. Sinnett's will, the famous sword went to a nephew, John H. Sinnett of Los Angeles, California, a son of Dr. John Harris Sinnett, and grandson of the first Samuel Sinnett.

And so it happened that, on the afternoon of December 17, 1934, all that remained of the Sinnett belongings in Octagon Place were sold by a noisy auctioneer. It had been agreed, with unusual courtesy, that in case a Sinnett relative bid on an article, outsiders would refrain from bidding. Even the most enthusiastic antique collector, it is said, respected this rule, and members of the Sinnett family, if present, acquired the heirlooms they desired.

When the auctioneer's hammer fell for the last time and the crowd disbanded that December day, Octagon Place was left empty. The house which had served two generations of a family which had pioneering in its blood was to be occupied by strangers.

JESSE J. FISHBURN