

Dromore Farms: When Young Lords Played Polo in Le Mars

Go up the gentle hill west of LeMars sometime. Take a right when you get up the rise, and you'll find an abandoned place with an old house square enough to be a dorm.

Once upon a time, it was.

Up there, you could well be on top of the world. East, the Floyd River snakes around the city of LeMars, which was far smaller back in 1880 when Captain Reynolds Moreton built the place where you're standing, a place he called Dromore Farm, named after a castle in Scotland. In his day that house was twice as big, but it's still lordly, although silent now, abandoned.

Captain Moreton once looked over the sea of grass all around and couldn't help remember the British warship he commanded for almost a decade. Moreton once rode the high seas. In his retirement, he put a house the size of a warship on a hill and enlisted a whole crew of Brits.

Once upon a time, Captain Moreton, fifth son of the second Earl of Ducie, put a telephone line in--the first in Plymouth county--from the Dromore Farm to a pub in downtown LeMars, the House of Lords, where his English crew occasionally went overboard in ale. "Pups," short for *pupils*, people called them; young lords born an ocean away to great privilege. Once there were a thousand Brits right here.

In 1880, the Close Brothers real estate empire, a corporation that once owned most of northwest Iowa, found the kind of man they needed for the scheme they were creating. That man was Captain Moreton, who loved work and could preach up a storm, a regular Billy Sunday, an aristocrat (think Downton Abbey) who wanted an American adventure.

In that old house behind you, Captain Reynolds Moreton ran a school of agriculture for young English gentlemen who, had they stayed back in England, would have been doing nothing but "aimlessly pursuing leisure," as Curtis Harnack puts it in *Gentlemen on the Prairie*.

From the front door of Dromore Farm, 150 years ago you would be looking over an ocean of land owned by English gentry, an kingdom that stretched from beyond Sioux City, north into Minnesota, the finest agricultural land in the world, an empire.

Moreton bought the place for a jaw-dropping 34 dollars an acre, but money was no object. He stuck 20 thousand more (a half a million today) into remodeling, creating 17 rooms: "the dormitory," he called it, and a billiard room and a library stocked with the latest Brit periodicals, and then he fed those pups "generous meals" of pure English fare, so wrote a visiting English journalist:

"No young English gentleman could work hard on a diet of beans and bacon, such as he gets in the house of the western American farmer. So the captain keeps a generous table, and his boys are certainly a credit to his system: clear-eyed, bronzed, and muscular, in the highest health and spirits."

Today, from up there, the view is as grand as ever. LeMars is bigger, and a host of farm acreages punctuate the rolling hills once naked in the wind.

And the mansion is abandoned, windows boarded, and the barns—all four—are long gone. Wagon loads of Sunday School kids once climbed the hill for picnics in the grove of fruit trees Captain Moreton planted. They're gone too.

If the rumors are sound, it won't be long until the remnants of Dromore Farm will be found only in yellowing pages of old books. The old house is coming down.

Way up there on that hill, what little remains of Dromore Farm creates a sadness deeper than the artesian well Captain Moreton was once so proud of, because you can't help wondering what's the most important story here? Is it the kingdom created by an English aristocracy who played polo and rugby downtown LeMars, or that all of it has just about vanished?

Maybe the real story is the one a writer from Jerusalem told an audience here last month at *Ode*, a line I heard on the radio as I drove away: "we are all visitors here."

Have a look yet before that house is gone. Won't cost you a dime, but there's a wealth of stories from which to choose.