

THE HOMESTEAD FAMILY



GAZETTE



Vol. XVI, No. 3

JAMES MILLIKIN HOMESTEAD, INC., DECATUR, ILLINOIS

November 1992

History — Hill House, Homestead Form Dynamic Duo

Immediately proclaimed one of Decatur's finest dwellings after its construction in 1875-76, the James Millikin Homestead did not stand alone in its grandeur for long.

It was very soon joined on the north by another Victorian residence which also faced on Pine Street, the imposing home of H. W. Hill, otherwise known as "Hog Ringer" Hill. Like James Millikin, Hill grew up as a farmer but made his fortune through the invention of the hog ring. This small, homely product was placed through the nose of a porker to keep it from rooting up dirt; it worked very well and achieved international success. Its manufacture became a leading Decatur industry.

From news articles of the time, it appears that the Hill house was erected in 1878. It stood with the Homestead on the slight rise in the landscape which provided to the community an impressive view of both commanding homes. The two dwellings were said to be located 100 yards apart. The Homestead's address became 125 N. Pine, and that of the Hill house, 219 N. Pine. Hill's plans to build were announced in a news story of April 1, 1878, under the headline, "Beautiful Homes," the report reads:

"The land belonging to James Millikin, Esq., and lying west of Pine Street and north of West Main, has long been look-

ed upon by good judges as among the most desirable building property adjacent to the city. Since the erection of Mr. Millikin's fine residence . . . we are glad to learn that another elegant residence is to be build in this neighborhood the present season. Mr. Millikin has sold to Mr. H. W. Hill the half block lying north and fronting on the projected line of Prairie Street, west of Pine. It is the intension of Mr. Hill to erect on this ground a splendid residence. Prairie Street is not to be opened, but instead the ground will be laid off in walks and drives, and no fences will mark the boundries between neighbors. This park will also embrace the half block lying north of that purchased by Mr. Hill, and when another good house or two is built on the ground, trees planted, lawns graded and set in grass, walks and drives graveled, and other improvements made, the neighborhood will be one of the most attractive in Decatur."

Exact construction time required for the Hill home is not known. After the announcement of April 1, the next news account located is for September 14, 1878;

"Since the improvement of Prairie Street it is one of the finest thoroughfares in the city. It has on either side a good-number of cozy-looking residences and pleasant grounds, which are adorned with shade trees, shrubbery and flowers, with the fine residence of Mr. James Millikin looming up just beyond the western terminus, the fine new dwelling of Mr. H. W. Hill in full view."

Contradictory information on the home's construction timetable surfaced in Mr. Hill's 1906 obituary, which stated that the home was begun in 1877 and that Hill moved into it in May 1878, but the contemporary 1878 account seems the more trustworthy.

Two pictures of the Hill house exist to give us an idea of its exterior, but nothing is known of its interior, not even the number of rooms. In Mrs. Hill's obituary, there is a reference only to her "beautiful home." A master's thesis written about the Homestead in 1972 by Leslie M. Barber mentioned that Hill had erected a home and stable quite similar to the Homestead, "the only difference being the lack of a central cupola" on the house. Even the tile design of the roofs was said to be the same. Also mentioned was similarity between the Hill home and the Dr. Catto residence at W. William and Edward Streets (now the Decatur Day Care Center), an indication it was said, that the plans for both might have been picked out of a design book.

A picture of the Hill home, showing both it and the Homestead in the same shot, reveals that each had a similar gazebo at the rear, with a long trellis or arbor seeming to connect the two. One actual relic of the Hill house survives, according to Homestead board member Lucien Kapp. This is the low cast iron fence that still stands bordering No. 1 Millikin Place along Pine Street.

Beyond these all too brief glimpses of the Hill home, the only other meager description is found when the house was to be town down in 1909. A newspaper account reported that the house was constructed "of all first class materials," but "it is neither artistic or convenient and the style of the house does not fit in with ideas of building today and it will have to come down."

As a matter of fact, a syndicate of prominent Decatur businessmen had purchased the house and grounds and had plans to build a group of substantial new homes of their own on the site. The Hill house was said to be directly in the way of the E. P. Irving house to be erected as No. 2 Millikin Place.

The newspaper announced, however, that "much of the old materials (from the Hill house) will be used again in the new house, and "no better materials can be found than the white pine joists and flooring." The radiators and piping were all in good shape, practically new, put in just two years before. They were to be re-

worked into the new house. The bricks were to be cleaned and re-used. The barn, of brick and "of good size," would also be razed. It was located on the next lot, sold to J. A. Corbett.

The well-constructed Hill home had stood just 31 years, 1878-1909. Why was it town down? The answer lies both in the spirit of the times and happenstance. After the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Hill, in 1906 and 1902 respectively, the house had been willed to their only surviving child, a son, John N. Hill, then living at 647 W. William, who announced that he would



Old box and contents show "hill-type" hog ring. Photo, Courtesy Paragon Graphics.

move into the family home and had no intention of cutting the land into lots. It seems that covetous eyes may already have been cast in that direction. For whatever reasons, Hill did change his mind and in 1909, just three years later, he sold to the syndicate. His father had bought the land for \$7,500 from James Millikin, and it sold to the syndicate for \$75,000.

The Victorian era was passing. There was a new spirit of enterprise and energy arising from industrialization and inventions. Decatur businessmen and manufacturers looked to build homes reflecting both the new era and their prosperity. Yet custom and convenience kept their interest in the core of the city. What location more tempting than the open space of the Hill house, no longer in the hands of the original owner? And so the Hill house fell.

What of the original owner? It seems that Hugh W. Hill — Hog Ringer Hill — might have had much in common with James Millikin. As indicated, both grew up on the farm and were particularly involved with livestock. James made his initial fortune in raising and selling cattle and sheep. A feature story about Hill, when first in Macon County, focused on his herd of 129 Angora sheep. Both men and their wives were affiliated with First Presbyterian Church, and when the Hills died, James Millikin was an honorary pall bearer at both funerals.

While the Millikins had no children, the Hills did have a good-sized family of one son and four daughters, including John and daughters Mrs. Alice Guess, Gussie Hill, Mrs. Clara Biddle and Mrs. Catherine Bone. There were nine grandchildren: Charles N. Hill of Macon, Hugh J. Hill of Canon City, Colo., Edgar E. Hill of Walker, and Edith and Grace Hill of Decatur, the children of John Hill; also, Mrs. L.A. Mills, Mrs. J.D. Johnson and Emma Bone, all of Decatur and Hugh M. Bone of Crowley, LA, the children of Catherine Bone.

Mr. and Mrs. Hill, the former Eliza J. Stevenson, were both natives of North Carolina but were married in Missouri in 1843. Hill was born in 1822. To attend school, he walked three miles a day each way to and from a log school house. Even then he was able to attend only in winter when farm chores permitted. ***

In 1866 Hill came to Macon County, with nothing but a few debts. He rented a farm and eventually devoted attention to the breeding and raising of hogs. A problem with his hogs arose; they would root and he wanted to stop them because they were injuring his pasture lands. Incensed at one hog, he punched a hole through the snout and inserted a piece of wire, twisting the ends together. This proved effective against rooting, and he studied how the rings could be made more easily.

Hill patented the hog ring and a tool for insertion, but had to search for capital to begin manufacture. He formed a partnership with Charles B. Housom, the attorney who helped with the patents, under the firm name. H. W. Hill & Co.

They started their factory in 1872 at a building at W. Main and Church. The company entered heavily into advertising, for which effort Housom was credited. The business expanded to mammoth proportions, with sales all over the United States and elsewhere in the world. By 1876 it was estimated that 30,000,000 hog rings had been sold and that three tons of printed advertising was being distributed annually. Hill added to product lines with other inventions.

In 1894 Hill sold his interest in the firm. He had made judicious investments in valuable farm land, including over a thousand acres near Casner, and had a third interest in the Decatur Coal Co., of which he served as president. He lived into his 80's and, left an estate valued at over \$300,000, including the home which still piques our curiosity.

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