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The Prairie House
A Dean Calls Home

By Carol Shellenbarger, H. Ec. 3

Nearly a century ago, a large red brick house served as stage coach stop in the middle of Iowa's prairie. Today, the same building, now covered with gray stucco, serves as the home of Iowa State's dean of agriculture.

"Farm House" is the oldest building on the Iowa State campus. It is located on Knoll Road between the Dairy Industry Building and the horticulture greenhouses.

The house was built in 1861 as part of a model farm which was the beginning of Iowa State. It was occupied by W. H. Fitchpatrick, first farm manager.

Dr. Charles F. Curtis, the first Dean of Agriculture, lived in the house for 50 years. In 1948 it was remodeled for use as a home management house. It became the dean's residence once again when Dean Floyd Andre and his family moved in.

Used As Inn

The red brick house was one of the few on the prairie and was used for an inn on the stage coach line through Story County. The coach running between State Center and Boonesboro made a stop at the Farm House for passengers and mail until the Northwestern tracks were laid in 1865.

A tablet embedded in a stone in front of the house reads:

"This tablet marks the site of the Old Tavern and Trail through Story County in pioneer days. The tavern later became the Farm House."

Passages Help Slaves

Legend is that after Fitchpatrick left to fight in the Civil War, Negro slaves on their way to freedom took refuge in the secret pass in the basement.

Dean Andre's daughter, Jackie, H. Ec. 4, recalls the mystery of the "secret passages" in the basement. She said, "Our wine-cellar with its crude dirt and brick floors and stairs leading to nowhere was always an attention-getter for my grade and high-school friends. The boys would come over, flashlights in hands, ready for an adventure in the cellar looking for the 'hidden room' down the dark tunnel. However, because of a cistern we patrolled the adventures quite rigidly."

"One time my sister had a Halloween party down there, and the party was pretty well broken up when the 7th grade girls got hysterical with fright."

Some say that every man who came to Ames shortly after Farm House was built ate his first meal and spent his first night there.

Governors Are Guests


The house has undergone many changes in a century, but many of its features have remained the same. You can still see the handmade copper nails, antique door handles and solid walnut staircases nearly a century old.

Since 1861, Farm House has played an important role in central Iowa's history. Once an inn for a stage coach line, it also served as a refuge for fugitive slaves.