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COMING UP—ONE MILLION BRICKS (for ‘Old Main’)

The Civil War was over, Dewey Tower, Sergeant in the 23rd Iowa Infantry, was coming home. He had been a soldier and away from his bride longer than he had been with her. He looked forward with great excitement to meeting his first born, little Carrie, whom he had never seen. Eunice, his wife, had written him that Carrie stopped every man on the street and asked, “Are you my papa?” So now he was anxious to pick her up in his arms and say “Hello, Carrie, my dear little girl, I am your father.” How he had yearned to be back home with his bride. He thought of the clean bed he would slip in and the chicken and dumplings Eunice would make. He’d never, never touch another bean and he’d have apple pie every day.

Back in Eldora, Iowa, Eunice was waiting for him. Patiently she checked off the days, then impatiently she watched the clock every hour. She laughed as she thought of the fun they had had during those few precious months before the war; how Dewey was always cooking up some scheme or plan, a wild idea that they’d take off for Texas and settle on a ranch, fix up a covered wagon and move west to stake a claim, or take a slow boat to China and become missionaries. And to this Eunice would shout “Dewey, you clown.” He’d be very serious and give her the old adage: “Nothing ventured nothing gained’.” Then she would come back at him with “A rolling stone gathers no moss’.”

And so it was—Dewey arrived. Eunice had her man, Carrie had her ‘pappa’, and Dewey had his fill of apple pie. He kept the bin by the range well stocked with wood while Eunice kept the kitchen table laden with his favorite dishes.

What Dewey had seen and lived through during the war was too painful to recall. The awful scene was there, close to the surface of his thinking, but he would blot it out with lighter talk. They visited friends and exchanged stories and jokes, avoiding the miserable pictures that kept surfacing in his memory.

They took long walks into the woods and exchanged their hopes and dreams. Dewey was restless. "Let's pack up and go to Chicago, Eunice." "Now Dewey," she said, "this is home. Your friends and my friends are here. Simmer down; you are nervous and wrought up over the war. We'll have a good life here." Then he chuckled a bit and lightly mentioned, "nothing ventured nothing gained'." To which she answered, "'a rolling stone gathers no moss'." Then they both laughed.

That was it: the end of a glorious, beautiful, second honeymoon. It was time to get down to the business of making a living. Dewey had had lots of time to think while wrapped in a blanket on the cold, hard ground in the war torn south. He had thought about home and getting back there. He had recalled the clay banks near the river and how it would be a natural spot for a brickyard. All he had seen was destruction in this war. Making bricks would be constructive. "Perhaps this is what I will do. Yes, I will make bricks if I get back home," he said.

He was home alright. It was so good he had to look around to make sure it was real. It was, and he knew the vacation had to end.

Dewey made arrangements for the land with the big clay bank and began setting up his equipment, building a drying shed and hiring a crew of men. The business grew and thrived, and so did his family. The boys helped and learned the trade, while Eunice and the girls (they hadn't heard of Women's Lib and they thought E.R. stood for Early Risers) performed all the chores that lady slaves did in those days. Feeding the large family and all of the brickyard crew was a big production by itself.

At the same time that Dewey Tower was getting his bearings and setting up his brick yard in Eldora in 1865, Oskaloosa College in Oskaloosa was founded and ready for students. The cost of an education was estimated by \$2.75 a week; 40 cents for sleeping accommodations, \$1.50 for board, and 83 ½ cents for tuition. The cost for 42 weeks was \$115.50. Their catalog suggested that each student

devote one hour each day to sawing wood. It would “promote health and aid the struggling parents to foot the bill.”

Oskaloosa was the only college sponsored by the Disciples of Christ in Iowa. But there were many competitors among the colleges sponsored by other churches. Support from the church was not enough. Financial trouble was brewing on campus. The faculty had to live and the tuition fees were not enough to cover a decent salary for them. In the spring of 1880, three professors declared their intention of leaving the following year if their salary of \$300 per year was not raised. Others of the faculty had already left. They resigned and then President Carpenter resigned. Plans were made to transfer the college to Des Moines.

After much work and financial planning and a pledge from General F. M. Drake for an initial gift of \$20,000, land was secured and a site for building decided upon. The articles of incorporation for Drake University were filed on May 7, 1881.

As to how the exact site was selected, Charles Ritchey, in his book, *Drake University through 75 Years*, tells us this story, true or false, as it emerged from mingled, but relevant, sources.

A group of four or five men drove out to the edge of the city and tied their teams near the present twenty-Fourth Street and University Avenue since no road led farther on. A tract of land, open for sale, stretched north and westward. The men walked through the thick brush and second growth timber, looking for “the height of the land.” They found it at the point where the administration building now stands, then almost a wilderness with no markers for orientation. One of the men, forty-seven years of age, slender and agile, climbed a small tree nearby to look out over the dense growth and to get his bearings. Apparently, the only familiar object he saw was the dome of the state capitol nearly three miles away. He was satisfied, and went back to downtown Des Moines to plan with his associates for a new university out in the woods. The novelty of a college president or chancellor climbing a tree was too good to be kept, and Chancellor Carpenter himself on occasion good-naturedly referred to his stunt.

In order to hold classes a temporary building was constructed where Howard Hall now stands. Soon after the opening of the academic year, President Carpenter gave to the architect, C. B. Lakin, the basic requirements and plans for the main building.

Millions of bricks left the lower brick yards and went into buildings all over Hardin County. Every brick in the Court House bore the initials DAT. It will stand and is often flashed on T.V. under the caption "Around Iowa".

After fifteen years in one spot, Dewey was getting restless. He was ready to 'venture.' He had been to Des Moines to attend a veteran's meeting at Camp Dodge and had heard rumors that a permanent building was to be built for Drake University. (By now, there were three colleges: Literature and Art, Law, and Medical). Also a number of families were planning to build their homes in University Place development. There would be a big demand for bricks. "This is the moment," thought Dewey, "to have a chat with Eunice." He started by telling her about his trip, the activity in University Place, plans for the building of a permanent structure for the University, and for the building of homes in the area. "This will be a big opportunity for us, Eunice. I want to have a part of that building and the new development. I want us to move to Des Moines. We've exhausted our supply of clay at this spot. We'll have to move and I want it to be to Des Moines. 'Nothing ventured nothing gained, Eunice.'" She was tired, too tired to attack him with the 'Rolling stone' bit. She simply answered, "Alright Dewey, we'll roll."

There was lots of rain in the early spring of 1882. It was wet, soggy, and cold with the Tower family prepared to leave their home and friends. High across two posts was mounted the large bell that had become a necessary part of the town's life. Its clang could be heard from some distance. It was rung every day at the stroke of noon and heard ringing for special occasions and all holidays. It summoned the volunteer firemen, and when rain threatened, Dewey ran it to call back his crew to move the drying raw bricks into the shed.

Dewey kept giving the bell a side-glance as began dismantling and loading up his wagons with machinery and household goods. Teams of horses would pull

them to Des Moines. He took on final look up at that bell that meant so much to all of them, then shook his head and gave up the plant to take it. Be common usage the town had a greater claim. It would stay.

After a long trip over terrible roads the wagons ‘bumped’ into the capital city and to a prearranged place for his business, which, of necessity, was in a clay area, clay being the main ingredient for bricks. There are three kinds of clay in Iowa. In the Des Moines area, it is shale, and most of it mined in this area is Red Burning.

When his machinery was set up, his drying shed built, and his kiln in order, Tower and his crew of men began filling Drake’s order for a million bricks. Rainy weather slowed them down since the bricks had to dry out before going into the kiln for burning. When it rained, all the bricks had to be moved under shelter or into the shed where stoves helped in the drying process. There was lots of good timber and they burned wood by the cord. The bricks were burned for five or six days; the men staying up all night to keep the fire going and controlled. Another five to six days was required for the bricks to cool before removing from the kiln.

Soft brick sold for \$2.50 per thousand. Hard brick was used on the outer surface and cost slightly more. The contractor laid the brick for \$10.00 a thousand.

The family settled in a rented house nearby and while the men were burning bricks in the yard, mamma and the girls were busy baking beans and potatoes and pies and bread in the kitchen. The bricks began to make a showing, but the food disappeared in no time flat. With the crew of men and nine in their own family, it was necessary to eat in shifts. The other domestic chores had to be sandwiched in between. The hours were long for everyone.

Cold weather set in and with it a variety of ailments and problems. The previous occupants of the house had left behind a whole army of virus and bacteria. As soon as they realized they were not alone in the house, they came out the cracks and crevices and attacked the invaders with assorted diseases, small pox, measles, chicken pox, and whooping cough. The children were all sick with one or more ailment, and mamma was just plain **sick**—sick and tired of it all. She longed to be back in Eldora among friends.

One night she cornered Dewey, tipped his chin up so that she had a good shot at his attention, and issued her ultimatum: “Dewey Tower, I’ve just about had it. When the Drake order is filled and the others you have promised are taken care of, I am going back home with the children. Stay if you must, but I’m not going to stay another winter.”

In the fall of 1883, Dewey Tower stood still and took a long, satisfying look at “Old Main”, well on its way to being completed; that project whose walls, brick by brick, were a part of his creation, his venture turned into gain. He knew it would stand and it would serve one generation of students and another and another. “Perhaps,” he thought, “my little Alice may someday stand here and say, ‘my papa made those bricks.’” He may even have dreamed that one of his future generations would walk through the door of that building and say, “I’m here to register.”

It was worth it, he thought, all the hassle with mamma, the moving, and now all the work to get back to Eldora. His venture was gain—a new experience, accomplishment, satisfaction! Now he would turn to mamma; he would take her home.

So it was in 1883—Dewey Tower, the brick maker, the ‘rolling stone’, husband of a tired but happy lady, waved goodbye to ‘Old Main’, Drake University’s first building, HIS building, and with his family, his wagons of possessions and the teams to pull them, “bumpling” along over those terrible roads one again, he was heading home.

The family was welcomed by all their friends. They came with wagonloads of vegetables and canned goods to tide them over the winter. Dewey was soon back in business. Twelve years later, he again ventured, this time to go modern. He sent an order in for all new machinery. Alice was fifteen. One day while she was at school a friend came and told her that her pappa was dead. The day after the funeral, his machinery arrived.

A few years later a young baker named Harvey Drake delivered a wedding cake at their door. Whether it was the name or the man that first attracted her attention, it was the beginning of a romance that led to marriage.

Like a fairy tale, their children heard the story of ‘Old Main’ many times. They thought of it as their institution. They, as well as Alice, thought they might go to Drake someday. Madeline’s high school graduation came with a crash, the Crash of ’29. The winds of change blew away her plans for college. The dream lingered.

In 1945, she moved with her family to Des Moines and bought a home. Where? Where else would a granddaughter of Dewey Tower buy her home? In that once-upon-a-time-timber-land, Section 139, University Place, conveniently located six blocks from ‘Old Main’.

It is October 1977, ninety-four years after Dewey’s dream. His granddaughter, senior citizen, Madeline Pritchard, “walked through the door.”

Her oldest son had two years at Drake, her youngest granted with the class of 1970. She is enrolled for one course—that’s what counts. It was HER DREAM.

**Written to entertain and to add one man’s name to the list of those who had a vision and gave us Drake University. It satisfies a desire to tell a story that has long been in the writer’s heart and head. He WAS her grandfather.*