

Mary Ann Cheney Marmon (1837-1908)

Mary Ann Cheney was born on July 29, 1837 in a four-room log cabin in Old Town Township to Owen and Maria (Dawson) Cheney. Mary Ann was one of five children born to the couple. However, only Mary Ann and an older and younger brother survived to adulthood.

In her childhood, Mary Ann attended school on the prairie. She had to travel a long distance, which was especially difficult to get to during the winter months. Later in her life, Mary Ann recorded many memories of her childhood. In "Prairie Fires," she wrote that when she was eleven or twelve years old, she rode her horse through the prairie to collect strawberries. She remembered the great diversity of grasses of the prairie, as well as the fires that occurred. In her own words, the fires were "fearfully grand and frightful to behold," but held a unique beauty as "miles and miles of roaring and leaping flames could be seen sweeping over the hills at a **tremendous** speed and lighting the whole heavens with a brilliant glow." She further recalled the efforts of the settlers to protect the valuable **split-rail** wooden fences surrounding the fields from these fires.

In 1848, when Mary Ann was eleven, her father Owen Cheney Sr. died of **typhoid fever** at the age of thirty-eight while **driving** cattle in Ohio. Four years later, in 1852, Mary Ann's mother, Maria, married William Paist and the family moved to Bloomington the next year. In Bloomington, Paist and his business partner Dr. William Elder ran a drug store located at 115 N. Main Street. In 1856, William Marmon (Mary Ann's future husband) bought Dr. Elder out of the business and ran it with his future father-in-law (Mary Ann's stepfather). When Paist died in 1874, William Marmon continued to operate the store alone.

William Marmon was born in Milton, Indiana in 1832 and moved to McLean County in 1843. Marmon boarded with the Cheney family when his future wife, Mary Ann, was sixteen. It was then that he worked as a clerk at his future father-in-law's drug store (the store he would later own). On October 20, 1857, Mary Ann and William were married at the Cheney family home at 307 E. Washington Street. By 1870, the couple made their home at 307 E. Washington and spent the rest of their lives living there. Mary Ann and William had one child, a son named William (also known as Will or Willie). He was born in April 1868 when Mary Ann was 31 years old.

Mary Ann enjoyed an **affluent**, social lifestyle. Newspapers were filled with accounts of her social activities, including her travels, the events she hosted or attended, and her **charitable** works.

Mary Ann regularly entertained guests in their home on Washington Street. A handful of those parties are **notable** because of their unique nature and extravagant style. On July 4, 1881, Mary Ann and her mother hosted a "Pioneer Dinner Party." Guests of this party included only residents of McLean County who had moved to the area before July 4, 1831. The party was well attended and was reported to have been a great success. Attendees reminisced about "olden times" and renewed early friendships.

On October 23, 1882, Mary Ann and her husband William hosted a grand celebration of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The party entertained many members of Bloomington society, including United States Senator **David Davis**. The celebration was unique because of the **elaborate** recreation of the Marmon's wedding. Most interestingly, Mr. and Mrs. Marmon caused a **stir** by dressing in their original wedding clothes for the occasion, with exception to Mr. Marmon's coat which he was unable to wear because he was "a great deal broader across the shoulders now than then."

Outside of entertaining, Mary Ann was active in various organizations and supported charitable efforts. She was a charter member of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and accounts relate that she rarely missed Sunday service. She was also active in the **Daughters of the American Revolution**. The Marmons also donated money to various charitable causes. In addition to donating **financially** to the Lady's Benevolent Society, Mary Ann helped the society find clothing for "Free-Soilers" (people who supported the establishment of Kansas as a state without slavery) who had settled in Kansas in 1860. And in 1883, she was one of many women who donated financially for a floral arrangement of roses and blue flowers to be placed at the head of the coffin of renowned Bloomington opera singer Marie Litta at her funeral.

On November 26, 1893, Mary Ann's husband, William, was found dead of **apoplexy** (a stroke) in the family's home. The family physician, Dr. Elder, who had been called after William's passing, said it appeared that he died without struggle or pain. In his obituary, William Marmon, Sr. was remembered as one of Bloomington's "best citizens" due to his "more than ordinary ability and... the strictest **integrity**."

In her later years, Mary Ann's love of McLean County history, evident in her settler's party and perhaps originating with her unique **ancestry**, led her to membership in and support of the Illinois State Historical Society and the McLean County Historical Society.

The Illinois State Historical Society (ISHS) was founded in 1899. Mary Ann was an active member in it from 1903 until 1907. In addition to her membership in the ISHS, Mary Ann was also a charter member of the McLean County Historical Society, where she was an active member until her death. The McLean County Historical Society was founded in 1892 and is the second oldest county historical society in the state of Illinois.

Mary Ann also participated in a variety of clubs and other organizations. She was involved with the Amateur Musical Club (AMC), which was founded in 1893. Records of the AMC report that Mary Ann was an associate member from at least 1896 until her death in 1908. In 1897, Mary Ann was one of the "students" in a charity play put on at the Christian Church in Normal. Additionally in 1897, Mary Ann served as Vice **Regent** for the Daughters of the American Revolution, and in 1898 was appointed to the 1st Ward Committee of the Women's Army and Navy League.

On January 27, 1908, at the age of 71, Mary Ann Marmon died of pneumonia in her home on Washington Street. She had been suffering from a case of the **grip** (influenza), which turned into pneumonia. Her death was very unexpected, as no one believed she was seriously ill. Mary Ann was remembered fondly as "one of the most interesting personalities among those whose lives span the distance between the very old and the very new order of things." She is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her husband William.

By: Anastasia Ervin, 2021