

History of the Hartley Colby Family

Collected and Presented by Charlotte Thorne during Summer Fest, 2012

(My great niece married a Colby. Her father-in-law provided the following information to my brother. Charles Iowa Colby had dictated some family history to his secretary in 1965. There is a book titled, *Colby Family in Early America*, published by Fredrick Lewis Weis--Colonial Press, 1970. I think it was mostly for the family.)

Gideon Colby was born in 1842, in McHenry, Illinois, now a suburb of Chicago. He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1886, at age 44, and is buried here on land he once donated for the Hartley Cemetery. His headstone gives the date as 1888, but that is incorrect. Gideon, daughters Beth and Mabel, sons William and Charles Hayden, and Charles' wife Flora are buried in this plot.

His wife, Mary Etta Merchant Colby, was born 1845, and died in 1927, in Van Nuys, California. Mary Etta had begun to teach school at the age of twelve and was married at fifteen, a normal age at that time; Gideon was eighteen years old. They became the parents of nine children. Mary Etta never stopped mourning her husband. For the 41 years after his death she dressed in black, and wore a little flat black hat with a long black train in the back, the kind the Methodist deaconess used to wear.

Gideon and Mary Etta Colby came to Hartley from McHenry, Illinois around 1879, before Hartley was incorporated in 1888. They started the Hartley State Bank, developed a booming land business as well as town site sales, and other ventures. The Colbys owned one of the few houses in Hartley, a large Victorian home three blocks from the bank. When Mary Etta left Hartley in 1918, she sold the house to Dr. W.C. Hand who had it remodeled and converted into a hospital. City Hall is now at that location.

One old O'Brien friend, who knew Mary Etta well, was Judge Scott Ladd from Sheldon. In later years he commented, "I have never known a woman with more knowledge of business and law, with the ability to assist her council, than Mary Etta Colby."

Their son, Charles Hayden Colby, was born in 1870, and died in Des Moines in 1935. His wife Flora May Clark was born in 1873, and died in 1946. Both are buried here. After Gideon's death, Charles, the oldest son, came home from Cornell College to help with the family business. Gideon

owned a considerable amount of land southeast of Hartley, along the Rock Island Railroad that ran down to Des Moines. As it was five and a half miles from Hartley, Charles thought it would be a good idea to start another town.

He wished to name the town Colby, but there was another town in Kansas with the same name. The Rock Island Railroad Company would not stand for two towns with the same name on their route. It would be too confusing. Then Charles wanted to name the town Marietta after his mother, Mary Etta. She thought it sounded too Italian for a mostly German community, so she finally came up with the name, Moneta.

The Colbys have always been Methodist. They were active in getting a church established in Hartley and gave the organ for the first Methodist church on North Central Avenue. They were also instrumental in building the Methodist Church in Moneta. Advertising in church was not thought to be unethical, and the paper fans in the church advertised the Hartley Funeral Parlor. Since the Colbys donated the song books, they had stamped on the inside of both front and back covers this advertising: "Go to the Colby Bank for Land and Loans."

While O'Brien, Clay, and surrounding counties did have some of the world's best farm land, much of it was wet and covered with ponds. Charles taught himself to survey and laid out many hundreds of miles of ditches and tile lines. When the land was usable, he had it divided and fenced in 160 acre parcels. Buildings were erected and these parcels were sold, or sometimes traded for others things, including more wet land. Good land was worth \$24 an acre, a big jump from the \$1.25 homesteading price; and the next year, it would be worth a few dollars more.

Charles was always trying to expand his business, so he began to buy land in Canada. He took Iowa and Illinois farmers there by train to trade their farms for the ones in Canada. In October of 1898, he was in Canada when he got a telegram from Hartley that his son was born. When asked what to name the boy he said Charles Iowa Colby. He said he would come back to Iowa and stay there for good. He

hoped in the future there would be many more Charles Iowa Colbys. Three are alive today and are listed on the internet as living in the Des Moines area.

Charles's daughter Beth is buried here. She was born on August 9, 1895 and died on April 17, 1900. Beth's father and mother had taken her with them to Winnipeg, Canada, where she contracted diphtheria and died choking and convulsing in her mother arms. At least once a week and many times more often, the mother would drive to the cemetery and sit at the Colby plot. They erected a monument for little Beth, made of white bronze/zinc. The quotation on the marker is in raised letters.

There is no death an angel form walks over the earth with silent tread.

He bears our best loved ones away and we call them dead.

In 1907, Charles decided to sell the Moneta bank and move to Des Moines. He was, at the time, what you might call Iowa rich. That meant he had a lot of clear land, considerable liquid assets, and a desire to expand his land promotion operations.

When the Depression hit, corn was ten cents a bushel and cash rent was \$2.00 acre. Tenant farmers and land owners alike were dazed and bewildered. Individual farmers led a long revolt that was climaxed in Le Mars, Iowa, in the attempted hanging of Judge Bradley.

New farm laws and government relief of many kinds finally turned the tide. Charles, his mother, brothers, and sisters owned about 100 farms and parcels of real estate. They lost much of their land during the Depression, but they did keep some land around Des Moines—a 160 acre farm at East 29th Street and Aurora as well as land down by the levy and north of Highland Park.

Mary Etta Colby firmly believed and often said that as far as able men and women were concerned, no one owed anyone anything in this wonderful country. The opportunity to work extra hard, to save, to live clean and advance yourself, and to protect your family was wide open to everyone. Her philosophy is still valid.

Excerpts from *The Hartley Journal* about the Colbys

January 17, 1895--O. A. Colby, Dealer in Shelf and Heavy Hardware- Sporting Good and Ammunition. We have about \$2,000 in machinery that we wish to close out by fall time at 6 per cent interest. Remember that when our 100 by 24 foot brick is completed, it will be filled with the finest exclusive hardware stock in northwestern Iowa. When in need of anything in our line give us a call.

C.H. Colby & Company Bankers -General Banking –Business transacted- Good loans negotiated, write insurance and all paper left in our care will receive prompt attention. On small payment, long time and low interest, you can select from 3,000 acres of the finest land in northwest Iowa owned by Mary E .Colby, C.H. Colby and Co., Mangers of M.E. Colbys Lands.

Colbys bank, the third in the city, is by no means unworthy of and extended notice in these columns. This institution is among the most solid in Iowa and has a barrel of money with which to transact a general banking business. The business is in the charge of Charles H. Colby who has grown from childhood in this city and who is very popular in business circles. But recently this bank was removed to its new quarters where it is thoroughly equipped to handle its large business.

In the Same Paper in Another Column

Ora Colby, (son of Gideon) one of the rustling young men of this city has but recently established a hardware store in this city. He has a fine line of heavy and shelf hardware. Mr. Colby has spent a good share of his life in Hartley. It is useless to enumerate his good qualities; everyone knows Ora and knows him to be a straightforward, rustling young business man.

April 7, 1897--John Shinkle this week sold his fine quarter section farm adjoining the incorporation of C.H. Colby the consideration being \$40.00 per acre.

June 15, 1898--The boat used the past few years on Okoboji Lake at the Colby cottage was brought to the home of Mrs. C.H. Colby, where it will be filled with plants.

September 24, 1903--A 5 ½ pound boy was born to Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Colby Friday.

Aug 29, 1935-- Those from out of town who came to attend the funeral of Charles Colby last Thursday P.M. were Mrs. Colby, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Colby, Fred and Hayden Colby, Mr. and Mrs. Cronk, Mrs. Larabee and daughter, and Ed Evans--all from Des Moines, and John Craven of Sanborn.

July 28, 1949--Dr. Fred Colby and Fred Jr. visited Hartley. Dr. Colby was a son of Charles H. and Flora Colby. Mr. Charles Colby and his mother Mary Etta built the house that is now the Hand Hospital.

Charles Iowa Colby believed that family was the foundation of everything and strongly believed in the proverb: *One stick might be broken but a bundle of sticks tied together has great strength.*