

## Amasa James Kennicott



Amasa James Kennicott, Dr. John Kennicott's third son, was born on July 19, 1838,<sup>1</sup> at The Grove, in West Northfield, Illinois. Amasa, called "Major" by his family, was the first of John and Mary's children born at The Grove. According to Amasa's obituary,<sup>2</sup> he "followed closely in the steps of his father" the distinguished pioneer horticulturist.

On October 11, 1861, near the outbreak of the Civil War, Amasa Kennicott mustered into the 39<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry, Company F,<sup>3</sup> known as Yates Phalanx, as a captain. Amasa's obituary indicated that Captain Kennicott's "company was quartered on the old homestead until mustered into service." This Regiment was active from 1861- 1865,<sup>4</sup> and saw action at the Siege of Petersburg and the Appomattox Campaign, among others. On May 24, 1862, Amasa wrote from Camp in the Field, Fredericksburg, Virginia that "[y]esterday we had quite an excitement in camp. Old Abe & the secty of war<sup>5</sup> visited the camp and in the p.m. we had a grand review of our division. Abe tho't we looked pretty tough." Amasa resigned from military service due to illness on August 7, 1862,<sup>6</sup> and came home.

Amasa met Mary Elizabeth Seley, and they married on May 7, 1864, at the 1<sup>st</sup> Methodist Church in Savannah, Missouri. The minister was Alfred H. Powell. Mary was born on July 6, 1846,<sup>7</sup> in Brookfield, Wisconsin, the daughter of Edwin and Lucinda Cushing Seley. She died on August 15, 1918. They had six children. The first was Mary Seley, affectionately known as "Bunnie." She was born on February 20, 1865, and tragically died on June 22, 1866. Avis Adelia, Amasa's second daughter, was born on October 25, 1866, in Savannah, Missouri. She was a teacher in Evanston, Illinois until her death on February 10, 1892. She died from gripp<sup>8</sup>e which turned into typhoid fever and then pneumonia. Next was Ransom Eugene who was born on January 9, 1869. He was the first Chief Forrester of the Cook County Forest Preserve. Ransom died on June 24, 1939. Walter Cushing followed. He was born on May 16, 1873, and he died on April 15, 1959. Frederick was born on February 29, 1876, and his life sadly ended in 1878, at the age of two. Their last child was Harrison Kennicott, affectionately known as "Uncle Tat." He was born on October 2, 1879, and remarkably lived to be 106 years old, having died on August 31, 1985.

We know that Amasa Kennicott set up a nursery in Savannah, Missouri, on May 1, 1865, under the name Kennicott & Company. On April 17, 1866, The Grove Nurseries (in West Northfield) sold

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<sup>1</sup> Per his obituary, his year of birth was 1837; however, the year of birth on his headstone reads 1838.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately no newspaper name or date is recorded on the article.

<sup>3</sup> Company F originated in Lake and Cook Counties.

<sup>4</sup> The organization of this Regiment began as soon as the news of the firing on Fort Sumter reached Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin M. Stanton.

<sup>6</sup> The Grove Archives contains Mary Elizabeth Kennicott's widow's pension papers and Amasa suffered from Rheumatic fever and "pleuro-pneumonia." This was diagnosed by the 39<sup>th</sup>'s surgeon.

<sup>7</sup> Her year of birth has also been seen as 1847.

<sup>8</sup> The gripp<sup>8</sup>e is an acute febrile contagious virus disease; influenza.

Kennicott & Company a two foot Norway spruce and various fruit plants (plum, rhubarb, currants, etc.) so it seems that Amasa was growing the same things as his famous father once grew.

There is no written evidence as to why Amasa and his family returned to the West Northfield area<sup>9</sup> but we do know that in 1881, Kennicott Brothers Company was founded.<sup>10</sup> Amasa's obituary states that he persuaded his brother Flint to enter the floral business so they could have an outlet for The Grove's fresh flower production. For a while the brothers ran a retail store; one of their first customers was George Mangel, who operated a flower push cart outside the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago.<sup>11</sup> Soon the brothers opened a wholesale store, the first in the Midwest. It seems that Amasa preferred to grow flowers and in time he was growing peonies so successfully that he became known in the Chicago market as "the peony king."<sup>12</sup> Peonies were one of their largest crops. Amasa discovered that he could improve their longevity by refrigerating them in an icehouse. "In 1884, Amasa built a wood cooler insulated by sawdust and cooled by blocks of ice from Lake Michigan. He was able to keep his peonies fresh for weeks."<sup>13</sup> "Customers were willing to pay double the price for his peonies—2 cents per stem—up from one cent per stem. From the late 1880's, over 360,000 peony stems were annually harvested at The Grove and shipped all over the USA by rail from Chicago by Kennicott Brothers."<sup>14</sup>



Amasa's obituary noted that "this spring [he] secured new varieties of peonies" and he also bred the Fairy Iris.<sup>15</sup> In September 1883, Amasa was appointed Postmaster at The Grove by the Postmaster General of the United States and in 1885, was appointed schoolmaster at The Grove School. "Old-timers still remember him trudging up the road, a bushel basket full of his own books for the school library in his arms. These were years when blackboards were made of real slate, when erasers were made at home of cork and wood, and when children made valentines out of colored pages torn from seed catalogues."<sup>16</sup> Finally, his obituary indicated that he was "identified with life insurance, meeting with considerable success, having written several policies for a large number in the local trade." Amasa was a hardworking man with incredible energy. His obituary noted that "as late as last spring he worked 20 hours a day for a continuous period of six weeks."

He died on April 8, 1907.<sup>17</sup> He was remembered in his obituary as "a man greatly beloved by all his neighbors and acquaintances, and his business associates had a more than friendly feeling for him. Sturdy, honest, industrious and tender hearted, he was all that a husband, father, friend or neighbor could be."

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<sup>9</sup> The Kennicott family took heavy personal losses between 1863 and 1872: Dr. John died in 1863, Robert died in 1866 and Charlie died in 1872. It may be as simple as Mrs. Kennicott needing help with the nursery and at home.

<sup>10</sup> It is still in business today.

<sup>11</sup> Eventually Mr. Mangel ran flower shops in most of the major hotels in Chicago.

<sup>12</sup> Per his obituary.

<sup>13</sup> Red Kennicott in an interview with Bobbi Ecker, found in Recollections Of The Chicago Floral Industry, Kennicott Brothers.

<sup>14</sup> Kennicott Kountry, Spring/Summer 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Classic Irises And the Men and Women Who Created Them, by Clarence E. Mahan, Krieger Publishing Company, Florida, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> From an unidentified newspaper article (no newspaper name or date) located in The Grove Archives.

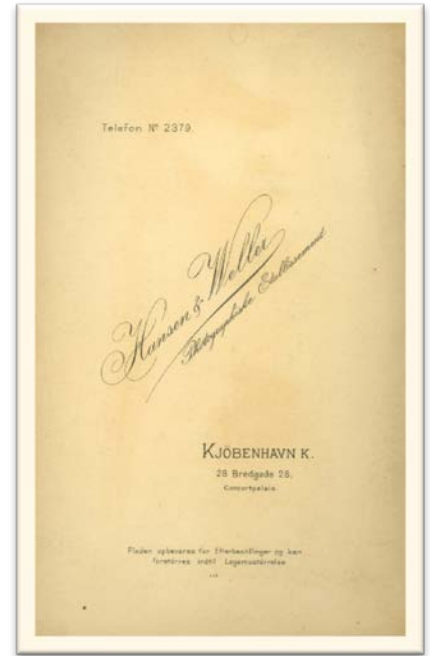
<sup>17</sup> His obituary lists his date of death as April 7, 1907.

## *Do you recognize this man?*

Do you know this handsome, uniformed young man? I selected him for one reason. He was photographed at Hansen & Weller, 28 Bredgade, Kjobenhavn. K., which we know as Copenhagen, the capital and most populated city in Denmark and more importantly, the home of Bertha Dreier Redfield, Robert Redfield's wife. Mrs. Redfield was photographed at Hansen & Weller as well as some of her relatives.<sup>18</sup> This leads me to wonder whether this gentleman is her only brother, Otto Albert Dreier. Does anyone know?



Hansen & Weller was a prestigious photograph gallery in Copenhagen. In fact, Georg Emil Hansen was one of Denmark's pioneering photographers in the second half of the 19th century. He had his own studio in Copenhagen and later became a successful court photographer taking photographs of royalty in Denmark, England, Russia and Greece. He was particularly successful in selling cartes de visite of the Danish royal family. It is estimated that he sold 37,000 prints of Princess Alexandra when she married Crown Prince Edward on March 10, 1863.



Hansen was born in 1833 in Naestved, a city about an hour from Copenhagen, where he learned the art of daguerreotyping from his father C.C.

Hansen, who began producing daguerreotypes in 1849. Georg studied photography in Germany, and in 1854, returned home to help his father set up a studio in Copenhagen using new equipment he brought with him from Germany. In 1856, he opened his own studio. In 1867, Georg joined with his brother Niels Christian Hansen<sup>19</sup> and Albert Schou<sup>20</sup> to create the celebrated studio that (with the addition of German native Clemens Weller) would be known as Hansen, Schou & Weller. Hansen won photography awards in London in 1862 and in Berlin in 1865. Interestingly, noted Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen<sup>21</sup> was very interested in photography. From his earliest days, he had invited photographers to take his picture. He posed on many occasions for Hansen between 1860 and 1874. In his diary entry for July 19, 1862, Andersen wrote: "Went to Hansen who photographed me; got 24 portraits." Georg Emil Hansen died in 1891.

So readers, I hope you enjoy a safe and healthy New Year! Please let me know if there are any subjects you may wish to read about in future issues.

"Adieu, dear reader, and expect me again."

**Elizabeth Kopp**  
**Grove Archivist**

<sup>18</sup> Two of the photographs donated by the Peattie/VanderMey family were photographed at this studio.

<sup>19</sup> A portrait painter.

<sup>20</sup> A businessman.

<sup>21</sup> Mr. Andersen was a prolific writer of plays, travelogues, novels, poems and fairy tales.