

William H. Miner: A North Country Legend

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William H. Miner has become a North Country Legend, for his legacy suggests a man bigger than life. He could claim many titles: businessman, builder, engineer, entrepreneur, educator, agriculturist, philanthropist, and visionary. He had a Jeffersonian distrust of urban life and a love of rural living, combined with a Hamiltonian belief in the benefits of business and manufacturing. He made his money in the bustling metropolis of Chicago, but put his heart in the rural life of New York's North Country.

William Miner exhibited many of the attributes of the entrepreneurs emerging after the Civil War: unswerving optimism, iron will, dogged determination, meticulous management, and supreme self-confidence. But he departed from the likes of Carnegie, Gould, and Rockefeller; pure in their private lives but shady in their public dealings. Sterling standards ruled both the public and private life of William Miner. He drew a sharp line between right and wrong and permitted no deviation for himself and little for others.

William Miner believed in God and Country and thought that both would judge a man of great means by the good works he did for his community. He built a series of North Country institutions – a school, a hospital, and turned his vision of rural life and scientific agriculture into an enchanting Shangri-La, he called Heart's Delight Farm.

In 1910, his Wife's sisters raved in the Farm's Guest Book:

Milton lost his paradise – we have found ours at Hearts Delight.... I love my Chicago, but oh you Hearts Delight.¹

The recovery of five thousand-glass plate images document the Miner legacy to the North Country by recording the building and operation of the farm, school, and hospital during the first third of the Twentieth Century.²

William Miner's life reads like a Horatio Alger story. He was born in Juneau, Wisconsin in 1862 to William Henry and Martha (Clapp) Miner. His Grandfather Clement Miner was born in Northfield, Massachusetts. After service as a Fife Major in the War of 1812, he migrated to the small hamlet of Chazy, New York, 14 miles from the Canadian border. He married Lydia Dominy of Beekmantown, whose father was of Dutch descent. In the early 1820s, Clement purchased from John Law, of New York, a 150-acre "track of wild land," one and a half miles west of the village of Chazy. Clement had nine children, including William H. Miner, the father of the builder of Heart's Delight Farm. Clement left the farm to his second son, John D. Miner.³

¹ William H. Miner Agricultural Institute Archives

² Institute Archives

³ Farm Book

After the death of his father, a carpenter, in 1873, the ten-year old, Willie, went to live with his Uncle John and Aunt Huldah on the Miner farm [picture] near Chazy. The boy worked the land and learned his lessons at the small one-room school. William Miner later claimed that the hard outdoor work contributed to his sturdy constitution and good health. It also drilled in him attributes of duty, determination, and diligence.

On December 3, 1880, Willie [Picture Young Will] received a letter from his brother in law and stepbrother, John Mitchell of Lafayette, Indiana, who was Superintendent of Bridges and Buildings for the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & Saint Louis Railway Company. Across the left-hand corner of the envelope, William later wrote in pencil: “1880 letter that started me out in the world.”

...Well now, Willie, I don't understand why you want to go to Lowell to work in a mill, for ... \$1.00 per day... Don't you think it would be better for you to come and see Jotie [Willie's Sister] and the children, to say nothing about myself.... Can [put] you ...to work in my carpenter shop, here at Lafayette, board you at home and you can attend night school and if you are as big and strong as your weight would indicate and half as smart you [sic] was when you [sic] was here before, I think I can pay you about \$2.00 or \$2.50 a day and you can stay as long or as short as you please.⁴

This letter set the dual directions of William Miner's future. Like many young men in the late in 19th Century, Willie went west to make his fortune. He began work as a machine shop apprentice for the Walbash Railroad. The determination and hard work, he learned on the farm brought steady advancement, moving him from draftsman, to estimator, to assistant superintendent, and to manager at railroad companies in Minneapolis, Lafayette, and Detroit. He learned the railroad business, from the ground up. His abiding interest in education appeared early. While in Minneapolis, he attended Business College at night and later studied engineering at the University of Minnesota.⁵

In Detroit, William became acquainted with officials of the Hutchins Refrigerator Car Company, then inaugurating shipment of fresh fruit in refrigerated rail cars from California to the Midwest and the East Coast. Difficulty with draft gear failures on Hutchins railroad cars resulted in heavy damage from fruit spoilage. Draft gear used springs to prevent the wooden cars from crashing together. The Company moved Miner to Chicago to deal with this problem and put him in charge of car maintenance and operation. In 1891, at 29 years of age, he received his first patent (U.S. Pat. NO. 461,443) on spring draft rigging (picture). Three years later, in 1894, he decided to begin business for himself and rented a small room at the Rookery Building in Chicago. Although it is said that he had to borrow money for the office rent, success came swiftly. By 1898, 15,000 cars, owned by 16 railroads, used draft gear produced for the William H. Miner Company, which continues today as the William H. Miner Enterprises, Inc.

⁴ Alice T. Miner Collection (ATMC)

⁵ W.H. Miner, Inc, *50th Anniversary Year 1894-944*.

William Miner later obtained patents on improved draft gear and his company furnished power hand brakes, roller side bearings, safety lock pins, and door fasteners for rail cars. He personally held over thirty patents and his Company over one hundred.⁶ Other companies recognized his success and eventually he became a director of some of the leading businesses of his era: the American Telephone & Telegraph Company, Western Electric, Equitable Life Assurance, and Illinois Bell Telephone. Clearly, he had made his fortune.⁷

Two events in Chicago during the 1890s shaped William Miner's future: the Colombian Exposition of 1893 and his courting of Alice Trainer. The World Fair announced Chicago's coming of age as the quintessential American city, resurrected from the ashes of the devastating fire of 1871. Chicago became a center not only for business and railroads, but also for architecture and the arts. It was big, brash, bold, and bustling. At the center of America, with 24 railroad terminals, the City moved the nation's population westward and sent produce eastward.⁸ William wrote Alice in 1893 from Omaha during a national recession: "There is certainly more business in Chicago than anyplace I have seen in this country. The Fair is helping more than we realize until we see how other towns are suffering from dull trade."⁹

The Chicago Exhibition shaped the future for America as well for Miner. It would show, if not flaunt, bits of everything that America thought it had been culturally and historically – and what it would become technologically. It looked at the past and gazed toward the future. William Miner clearly felt the optimism and energy that infused the Fair and imbibed the wonders of electricity that lit the "City of Light" and the technology that drove American industry to world leadership.

In a series of letters to Alice, his "dear heart," he wrote optimistically about his own future and that of his country. William reveled in recounting his successful negotiations in selling his innovative ideas to railroad officials. From Council Bluff, he wrote Alice in 1893.

Well girlie, have been busy today and have obtained a concession from the Ry Co which will be of large benefit to our Co so I feel pleased with the days doings.

I shall be glad to return to Chicago and will appreciate yourself and the City more than ever. I feel like an exile almost in this place. It is so quiet and stagnant regarding business.¹⁰

⁶*Miner Institute Archives.*

⁷ W.H. Miner, Inc, *50th Anniversary Year 1894-944.*

⁸ Donald L. Miller, *The City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

⁹ ATMC

¹⁰ ATMC

These letters are filled with his longing and love for his “Dear Heart” Alice. [picture]

Your dear letter of Tuesday eve was received today and was a pleasant and welcome surprise.... It was an oasis in the desert of our [sic] absence from each other, and sounded just like your dear sensible self.

Two years later, in 1895, they married. Alice was a year younger than her husband and had come to Chicago with her brothers and sisters from Goderich, Ontario¹¹

In 1903, William H. Miner returned to his roots in New York’s North Country. [Picture] The death of their only child a week after birth in 1902 may well have reminded him of the peace of the North Country. He began the swift development of Hearts Delight Farm on the old homestead, where he worked as a boy. In six short years, he built or renovated over 300 buildings. [Photograph of the central farm buildings] In time, the Miner domain grew to over 15,000 acres. Its owner brought the latest techniques and technology, which he had observed at the Chicago Fair, to his Heart’s Delight farm. Land once thought poor for farming was drained and tiled, producing bountiful crops of corn, wheat, vegetables, and fruit.

Nothing was too good or too costly for Heart’s Delight Farm or William Miner. From its humble beginning as a small homestead, it grew into a modern magnificent agricultural enterprise with massive barns and stables, water towers, gristmill, smoke house, steam plant, natatorium, fish hatchery, and houses for farm managers, named endearingly “Happy Hours,” Shadynook,” “Shadow Lawn,” and “Sunshine Cottage.” The Farm raised purebred Percheron and Belgian horses, Guernsey and Short-Horn Durham cattle, Dorset Sheep, Yorkshire and Chester White swine, White Leghorn poultry and squabs. But as was nature with William Miner, Heart’s Delight was a business as well as a farm, selling eggs, chickens, butter, cheese, lard, hams, bacon, fish, and Canadian melons to the best restaurants and hotels in the country, including the Waldorf Astoria in New York and the Palmer House in Chicago. At one point, the Miner operations employed 800 workers.

William Miner was not the usual gentleman farmer; he built his 46-room summer home [Picture cottage], called Hearts Delight Cottage, right in the middle of the farm complex, not far from a piggery. Though many of the buildings are gone, some remain. From spring through fall, a historical exhibit recreates the buildings, work, and life on Hearts Delight Farm and you can still see some of the original buildings at the William H. Miner Agricultural Research Institute.

William Miner’s continuing interest in technology led to the building of a series of dams on local rivers that supplied hydroelectric power and brought electricity to the Farm and the Village of Chazy. The Heart’s Delight dairy has electric light in 1908 before the Governor’s Mansion in Albany.

¹¹ Miner Institute Archives

William and Alice did not neglect the aesthetic side of life. The shelves of Hearts Delight Cottage held many books on history and literature as well as technology and agriculture. They contained the works of Dante and Shakespeare, and the writings of his two beloved presidents, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Along wooded paths around the Farm, Mr. Miner had placed large rocks covered with bronze plaques bearing quotations from Emerson and others that evoked his beliefs: the bounty of the Creator, the beauty of nature, the joy of farming, and the benefits of country over city life. Mr. Miner filled the woods with deer and elk brought from Europe, buffalo from the western plains, and a variety of imported birds from many lands.

Visitors from throughout the country and the world, including Russia, came for happy sojourns at Heart's Delight Farm. They stayed not only in Hearts Delight Cottage with its 10 bedrooms but in Harmony Hall, [picture] a four-story building with 20 guest rooms and an auditorium.

Visitors filled the Heart's Delight Guest Books with rave reviews of the wonders of their stay. Poetry—often amateurish, but always heart felt – fill their pages.¹²

In July of 1914, J. G. Dunn of Omaha waxed poetic about his visit.

*When Gabriel sounds his trumpet
To resurrect us from the sod
To take us to His Kingdom
To meet our heavenly God*

*I'll ask him for a favor
To drop me out of sight
& let me dwell for evermore
At Dear Old Hearts Delight*

Clearly, William and Alice knew how to mix pleasure and business at Hearts Delight Farm, for the Guest Books show that visits made businessmen sing like poets.

Motivated perhaps by the loss of their only child, the Miners focused on the educational and cultural development of children in the area. William Miner led the merger of 11 small schools into the first centralized rural school district in New York State, Chazy Central Rural School. [Picture] He financed and managed the building of a huge "California Mission Style" structure in 1916 at a cost of \$2 million, nearly \$36.5 million in today's dollars. The building included thematic classrooms (English taught in the Shakespeare Room), two swimming pools—one for boys and another for girls – a dining room, a resident doctor and dentist, athletic facilities, library, and auditorium seating five hundred. It must have been the only school in the country where students ate lunch with monogrammed hammered silver ware.

¹² **Guest Books**

William Miner left nothing to chance and little to others. He actively participated in designing the curriculum, which followed the Jeffersonian ideal of theoretical and practical studies, including modern language, history, science, and literature but also agricultural science, animal science, and woodworking. He often hired the teachers, himself. Once he traveled to The Peabody Institute in Nashville, Tennessee, to interview a young female graduate as a French teacher. Satisfied of her good character and presumably her French accent with a Tennessee lilt, he hired her on the spot and gave her train ticket to Chazy.¹³ She lived in a Teacherage, which he built across from the School, with the understanding that she, like all women teachers, had to resign, if and when she married. At the Teacherage, this young transplanted Southerner, along with her female colleagues, would serve tea most Thursday afternoons to Mr. and Mrs. Miner when they were in residence at the Farm. A visitor to the school in 1916 from Buenos Aires claimed:

The Chazy Central Rural School – which will shelter many a mother’s hearts delight – will be a lasting monument to its benefactors.¹⁴

William H. Miner also funded and supervised the construction of a modern medical facility [picture] in Plattsburgh, N.Y., that remains today as the Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital. Built in 1926, it cost \$4 million, the equivalent of over \$42 million today. As always, it was a hands-on operation for Mr. Miner. When he visited the construction site early one morning and found the men not working and the manager not on the job, he wrote a stinging letter, castigating the laggard for laziness and failing to meet deadlines. The letter gave the manager fair warning to reform or face swift dismissal.¹⁵ In all of his projects, others may have held the title, but no one ever doubted that Mr. Miner was the boss. Even the hospital building, designed by a Chicago architect, bore unmistakably Miner’s mark, with its tall Doric columns and its massive and majestic facade.

Along with many wives of prominent industrialist of the era, Alice T. Miner began collecting American artifacts, initially ceramics. Alice and two Chicago lady friends, Emma B. Hodge and B. Bennett, laughingly recounted in the Guest Book at Hearts Delight Farm one of their collecting jaunts in January 1915

While the snow was softly falling
And the logs were burning bright
Three china collectors
At the farm of Heart’s Delight
Installed both jugs and platters
In case all painted white.

¹³ Interview with the former teacher

¹⁴ Guest Books

¹⁵ Miner Institute Archives

These Ladies hunted far and wide
Ransacked all the country side
From deerpark unto crossing Lake Champlain
And the treasures they collected
Are now to be inspected
By friends who happen in from off the train.¹⁶

Alice's collecting expanded to paintings, furniture, textiles, silhouettes, and historical documents, letters, and even more china. Their volume soon exceeded the available space in Heart's Delight Cottage. The Miners purchased a 1824 stone building in Chazy. In the early 1920s, they reconstructed it to conform to their conception of a colonial building and expanded it to accommodate the burgeoning collection. [Picture] The Alice T. Miner Colonial Collection officially opened in 1924—the same year as the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Clearly, Alice was also a visionary. Like her husband, she wanted to preserve the past for the future. The Museum included period rooms, with a colonial kitchen so beloved by exponents of the Colonial Revival Movement of the late 19th and early 20th Century. Today, the Museum holds over four thousand objects -- most of them collected personally by Alice or her friends. A photo album from 1924 shows that the Museum rooms today appears much as they did at its opening.¹⁷

Even the greatest things and beings end. William Miner died in 1930 in the hospital, which he built. The irony is that this man—who always decided for himself and made so many great decisions—died during an operation he demanded to remove his tonsils. Alice lived for twenty more years till 1950, but her life was never the same without her beloved “Will.” Both are buried along with their infant son in a lovely mausoleum, still maintained in a small cemetery in Chazy.

But William Miner always the visionary built for the future. Before his death he created the William H. Miner Foundation, which continues to provide funds to the Chazy Central Rural School, The CVPH Medical Center, and the William H. Miner Agricultural Research Institute, which continues the tradition of Heart's Delight Farm in agriculture demonstration, research, and education. A special endowment created by the Miners also funds the Alice T. Miner Colonial Collection.

Very few creations last and prosper after a century. But today, a visitor to the Institute, the School, the Hospital, and the Museum could write in a North Country Guest Book: “William Miner has gone, but his legacy lives on.”

¹⁶ ATMC

¹⁷ ATMC