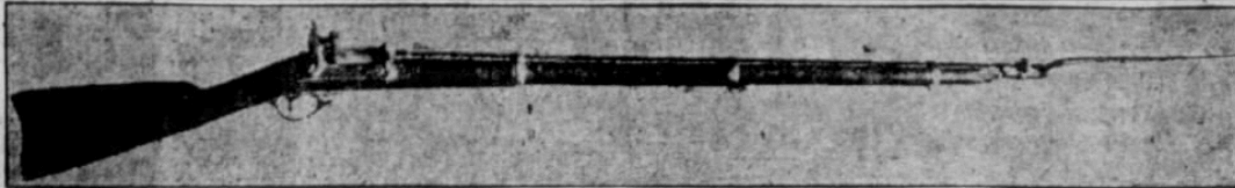


# The Rifle in The Fitzgerald Basement



By Addison E. Sheldon

"How would the historical society like to have one of the rifles which the Catholics had hidden in the John Fitzgerald cellar for the time when they would rise and massacre the protestants?"

The voice was the voice of a well-known citizen living just a few blocks from my own home at Twenty-third and B streets. It came to me over the telephone just after dark one evening some days ago.

I responded that the historical society would be glad to have such an evidence of conspiracy, no matter what the conspiracy was. About half an hour later the rifle was placed in my hands on my own front porch. The person bringing it stipulated that his identity should not be made known, but he said that he would certify upon the Bible, either King James or Revised Version, that this rifle was one of those hidden in the John Fitzgerald home near the present corner of Twentieth and B streets, and that about the time the Fitzgerald home was destroyed by fire this rifle with a number of other similar ones escaped from the Fitzgerald basement and were scattered about the city.

This stirred recollections in my mind of the burning of the Fitzgerald home about twenty years ago. I was among those citizens of southeast Lincoln who attended that fire after it got considerable of a start, and saw the old mansion, for so many years the home of John Fitzgerald and family, disappear in ruins. After the fire it was gossip about town that in the basement of the Fitzgerald home were found the skeletons of a number of rifles burned almost beyond recognition, but giving undeniable evidence of their original status as firearms. From time to time since the Fitzgerald fire, rumors have floated about the city regarding these rifles and the purpose for which they had been stored in the Fitzgerald house.

The old generation quickly passes away and the new generation knows not its story, except by tradition and preservation of historical records. A majority of the

citizens of Lincoln today would probably not recognize a sturdy, energetic figure with a bushy black beard and a piercing eye, once so well-known on the streets of Lincoln and throuth Nebraska. This was John Fitzgerald, Irishman, millionaire by virtue of hard work, ability to handle men and farsighted investment in Nebraska land. He was president of the First National bank; president of the Irish land league for many years, the heart and soul and financial angel of the efforts to free Ireland. So long as the memory and traditions of early Lincoln survive, so long some will remember and retell keen anecdotes of John Fitzgerald, builder of Nebraska and Irish patriot.

But those rifles in the Fitzgerald basement? Why were they there and what had they to do with a peaceful community like Lincoln? How many times the writer has heard from various sources, various suggestions why those rifles were stored in the Fitzgerald home. Having at last in the museum of the state historical society the actual rifle with the word of a reliable man that it came from the Fitzgerald basement. It became time for the historical society to get the truth, if possible, to go along with the rifle and our historical records. There was one man in Lincoln who unquestionably was in a position to know the truth. John P. Sutton, another Irishman, a friend of John Fitzgerald, a brave soldier in the United States army, who had seen actual fighting on the plains in the old Indian days, and a man whose word has never been doubted in the presence of the writer by anyone. John P. Sutton could, if he would, tell the story of the rifles in the Fitzgerald basement. So a letter was sent to John P. Sutton. It was sent just before the day when Mr. Sutton was passing thru the saddest experience of his life, parting with his life long companion for whom he had cherished the tenderest affection for more than a half century. So the historical society letter remained unanswered until the following letter came:

Regarding the arms stored in the house of the late John Fitzgerald



JOHN FITZGERALD.

I can only give you the story as it was told to me by men who personally knew how the arms came into John Fitzgerald's possession.

The rifles were the old Springfield breechloaders, the same as served out to us of the old regulars in 1867. They were the old muzzle loaders converted into breechloaders. They were stored in the basement of the capitol.

It was in the days when Governor Butler presided over the state government. Some disturbance broke out in the province of Manitoba, Canada one of Louis Riel's rebellions. Some Irishmen, whose hearts were as warm as their heads conceived the idea that they could help to free Ireland by sending volunteers to join the Manitoba half-breed rebellion. They needed arms and learned about the rifles stored in the state house. Believing that Governor Butler was of Irish descent, as his name would indicate, he was approached in the belief that he would lend the rifles for such a good purpose. It was a time when England's attitude towards the United States during the civil

war still rankled in the hearts of the American people. As might be expected Governor Butler declined to commit himself to such a breach of neutrality as lending arms to help rebellion in Canada or elsewhere. In conversation however he jokingly said that if he was one of a party wanting the arms he would know how to get them. This remark was conveyed to the would-be volunteers, and it was optimistically taken as a diplomatic hint that he would not object to their getting the rifles as long as no responsibility was shouldered upon him. A few nights afterwards parties unknown simply opened the store room door and carried off the rifles. They were shipped to a point in Minnesota, to order, freight to be paid on delivery.

The rebellion fizzled, the volunteers movement collapsed, and no one called for the arms. Knowing John Fitzgerald's zeal in the cause of Irish liberty, he was told he could get the arms by paying the freight, and could hold them for another day. John paid the freight, had the rifles shipped to him at Lincoln, and in due time stored them in the cellar of his residence. They were never claimed, and as a matter of fact the metal breechlocks had become oxidized and practically worthless for anything but display. That is the whole and true story.

I was reading in the Journal a few weeks ago your paper on old Fort Kearney. I was mustered for pay there in May, 1866. We were about 1500 strong. I wonder how many, like myself are living today?  
JOHN P. SUTTON

So here are the portraits of John Fitzgerald and of one of the rifles stored in the Fitzgerald basement to accompany the story written by a man who knows and whose word is regarded as good by those who know him best. Strange memories of the old days when Ireland was in a chronic state of rebellion against England and Ireland in America constantly planning to free the old motherland home. Today the Irish Free State looks across the channel at Old England and across its northern boundary at Ulster Land, trying to solve its

own problem of self government and reconciliation with its old enemies and make an honored place for itself in the world federation. Fitzgerald and Fenianism sleep. The old Fitzgerald orchard, so often visited by Lincoln school boys in the early autumn time when apples were ripe, has vanished to make room for fifty of the finest homes in Lincoln. And the Fenian rifle stands in the historical museum with this story by its side. If anyone, man or woman, knows anything to the contrary of this account, let such person speak or be silent hereafter.

## Making the Colorado Useful.

Norman McLoud, in Current History: Transformation of a thousand miles of landscape will be the result of a government project for controlling the Colorado river and subduing the capricious temperament for which the stream is notorious, with the threefold object of flood control, reclamation and electrical development.

The project calls for a series of thirteen huge dams controlling the waters of the Colorado for practically the entire distance between Green River, Utah, and the eastern boundary of California, thus creating thirteen lakes of an aggregate length of almost 1,000 miles.

In profile the great dams will form a giant staircase down which the river will step in its journey to the gulf of California, and in the 3,682 foot drop there will be less than 100 feet distributed among the small fragments of river left unaffected by the artificial obstructions. The dams will represent, in aggregate height, 3,588 feet of the total fall which occurs along the entire course.

The lake reservoirs will extend from dam to dam with little or no interruption. To accomplish this transformation government engineers have mapped a program of construction of startling magnitude. Most spectacular, perhaps, is the chain of dams within the Grand canyon.

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