

Fitzgerald, Irish National League and Mount Emerald

John L. Fitzgerald was born about 1828 in Limerick, Ireland. He moved to New York 20 years later, working first as a laborer then as a contractor. In 1869 Fitzgerald moved to Plattsmouth, Neb., and primarily acted as a contractor but in 1872 became one of the original incorporators of the State Bank of Nebraska at Crete, the first bank in Saline County.

Still calling himself primarily a contractor, Fitzgerald owned a quarter of the townsite of O'Neill, Neb., in 1875.

In 1878, Fitzgerald moved to Lincoln, where he served as railroad contractor for the Lincoln & Northwestern, Brownville & Fort Kearny, Atchison & Nebraska and portions of the Burlington & Missouri River railroads.

His various business interests led to a third interest in Plummer & Perry Wholesale Grocers in 1879 and a



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partnership with A. Butcher in the Antelope Brewery east of Lincoln, at about 25th and O Streets. His other scattered interests included 14,000 acres of farmland, development of the city of West Lincoln Brick & Tile Co., Lincoln Rapid Transit, Nebraska Stockyards and serving as the president of the First National Bank of Lincoln, First National Bank of Greenwood and First National Bank of Plattsmouth.

In the 1880s, Fitzgerald acquired a tract of land described as 17th to Fitzgerald Avenue (now 20th Street)



Courtesy photo

from A to D streets. Here he built Mount Emerald, a stone mansion, on Fitzgerald Avenue between B and C streets. To the north of the house were his apple orchards, which spread northward through the present site of First-Plymouth Congregational Church.

In 1882, the Irish Land League was suppressed and reorganized as the Irish National League, whose goal was to gain home rule for Ireland. In the United States, an organization with a support goal formed as the

Irish National League of America. Lincolnite Patrick Egan became president of the organization and moved its headquarters to Lincoln in 1884. In 1886, Fitzgerald succeeded Egan as president.

At the same time, Fitzgerald formed an interest in local politics, running for mayor of Lincoln in 1885 against C.C. Burr, a prominent attorney, and furniture store owner H.W. Hardy. Burr won by 30 votes, and Fitzgerald filed a suit which proved unsuccessful.

This engraving shows the front of the Fitzgerald mansion on what is now South 20th Street, looking to the east. All that remains are a couple of aging catalpa trees.

In the 1890s, Fitzgerald sponsored a volunteer fire company known as the John Fitzgerald Hose Co., or Fitzies. When the 18-member group was invited to a competition in New Orleans, Fitzgerald bought the team new uniforms, rented a private railroad car and accompanied them to the contest in Louisiana. When they triumphed over second-place Omaha, the returning victors were met by 3,000 cheering fans and a parade with a brass band.

Fitzgerald died "at his suburban home" on Dec. 30, 1894, after a long-standing illness of "brain trouble and a complication of other diseases." His wealth, once estimated at over \$3 million dollars, was virtually gone, probably the victim of the then-prevailing recession.

After his death, his widow, May, continued to sell off the estate to pay outstanding debts. May then

built a smaller home at 1971 D St., moving into it on Aug. 28, 1907. The following day, the Mount Emerald mansion mysteriously burned to the ground. In its basement were the remnants of a storehouse of munitions intended "to mount a raid on English forces in Canada" or to be shipped through Canada to Ireland to attack the British.

Quite naturally, rumors abounded, with questions surrounding the man who sponsored a volunteer fire brigade but whose home was consumed by flames. Today, nothing save a few aging catalpa trees remains of the grounds, though many Lincolnites recall Fitzgerald's grandson David Doyle, who starred as John Bosley in the long-running TV show "Charlie's Angels."

Historian Jim McKee, who still writes with a fountain pen, invites comments or questions. Write to him in care of the Journal Star or at jim@leebooksellers.com.