

## *Sterling-Moorman House*

### *History Narrative*

On December 27, 1880, the original town plat of Cheney was filed with the county auditor and Cheney came into official being (Spokane County Assessor's Office, 1880). The duly appointed agent of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, J. W. Sprague, oversaw the layout of Cheney for the railroad company and filed the plat himself. But it was not until 1881 that the Northern Pacific actually built the roadbed and laid the track. Once the railroad was established, Cheney became a town of stature as population settled and an agricultural-based economy developed. Supplies and building materials came by rail and houses sprouted up among the pine trees.

There are many old homes in Cheney, Washington today but few that date from the beginning of the railroad's presence. The Sterling-Moorman House, originally located at 308 4th Street, was constructed in this era. It is visible on a Bird's Eye Map of Cheney, Washington as early as 1884 (Stoner, 1884). This places the house in very unique company indeed; for few original structures from Cheney's early period are standing today. The significance of this structure, aside from its longevity, is the fact that it is of the Gothic Revival style. Few houses of this type exist in all of Spokane County. It was a popular style throughout most of the 19th century and was developed by Alexander Jackson Davis as a fashionable style for rural homes (McAlester, 1989). Trademark characteristics include an emphasis on height and verticality. Steeply pitched gables and dormers trimmed with lacy vergeboards (unfortunately removed) are also indicative of the Gothic Revival style. Gothic

architecture communicates a feeling of dark romanticism, while the pointed windows and moldings give the house a mysterious air. This building is a true piece of rural American heritage.

At the time of construction, the house did not include the kitchen-dining area and bath. The earliest Sanborn Fire Insurance maps available for the town of Cheney do not extend into the residential neighborhood where the Sterling-Moorman House was located; it first appears on the 1890 Sanborn map, by which time the kitchen-dining area had been added as a 'connection' to a freestanding summer kitchen which was located at the rear of the house.

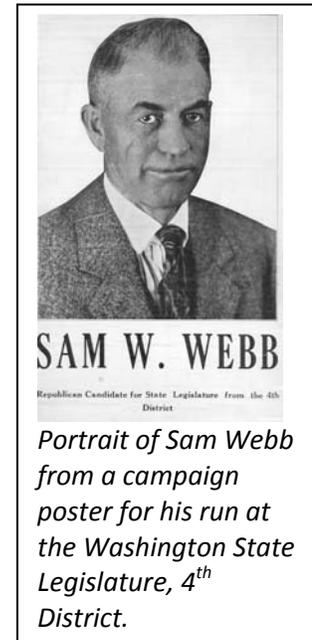
The interior of the house is virtually unchanged from its earliest days: the floral wallpaper is cloth-backed and very old, while exterior wiring laces the walls and ceilings. The main entry opens into a small foyer with the parlor on one's immediate left and the dining room at one's gradual left. The staircase hugs the right wall and curves left overhead with the banister visible directly in front. The dining room leads into the addition that joined the summer kitchen and the main body of the house. This 'connection' contains the "modern" kitchen and bathroom. The second story holds one master bedroom at the front of the house and two smaller bedrooms along the back of the main portion of the house. The home still possesses its original doors, windows, and horizontal wooden cladding. The milled wooden siding is interesting to note because it most certainly proves that the home was constructed after the coming of the railroad. Expensive overland transportation would have precluded its delivery except via the railroad.

The house has had relatively few owners in its 120+ years of existence. The lot was first sold to a Mr. Daniels by the Northern Pacific Railroad Company on March 1, 1881 who then sold it later that year to Joel W. Payne. Mr. Payne was a significant individual in Cheney history, serving as Cemetery Association president, Probate Judge, and County Treasurer but Mr. Payne did not live on the property and sold it just seven days later to Cyrus G. Tipton on December 24, 1881. According to the Inland Empire Polk Directory of 1885, Mr. Tipton was a capitalist.

Mr. Tipton sold the property to Isabella C. Sterling on January 8, 1883. It is interesting to note that the home is in her name. Many times the family home was put in the wife's name in case the husband was sued for some reason. The wife and house would then be protected. Isabella Sterling, and her husband, Frank, owned the property for three years. U.S. Census records show that Frank Sterling was a cabinetmaker, originally living in Detroit, and that he practiced that profession in Cheney, as well. Because Mr. Sterling was a carpenter/cabinetmaker by trade, it requires little imagination to surmise that Mr. Sterling built the home during that time. It is a fact that the house was erected by 1884; and the sub-structure indicates that a true craftsman was at work in the building of it. Photos of the floor joists and main support beams show precise mortis and tenon joinery, with timbers being pegged together with exacting care. Scarcity of information fails to prove that Frank Sterling was the builder of this house, but the clues are as conclusive as can be made. The Birds Eye View map of Cheney proves its construction by 1884 and that aligns with the construction date provided by a contemporary owner, and as indicated on the Spokane County Assessor's records.

In mid-1886 the Sterlings, who purchased the property for \$78, sold the home to Dr. John W. Johnson for \$500 (the increase in value being another evidence that a structure was added during their ownership). It is also known that the Sterlings' marriage ended some time after that, perhaps indicating a reason for the sale. Two more sales in quick succession put the ownership of the property in the hands of the Webb family in June 1887 (also originally to the wife, Etta) where it stayed for almost 50 years. The property was later deeded jointly to their son, Samuel and his wife Flora, and Etta's grandson, Carroll C. Webb.

The Sam Webb family was prominent in Cheney history and remains one of the oldest pioneer families in the area. In a 1954 Spokesman-Review article, Samuel Webb recalled memories of his family arriving in Cheney from Chicago in 1883 on the first passenger train on the Northern Pacific Rail line. His father came with a large number of blooded Clydesdale horses which he bred on the land he also farmed. He shaped the community in many ways, including serving on the City Council. He started the first stage (bus) line in Cheney in the early 1920s, as well as a motor freight line between Cheney and Spokane in 1917. The ticket office for the bus line was the (Interurban) depot located on Second Street which had been used for the electric train



that connected Cheney and Spokane. He also dabbled in politics, serving in the Washington State Legislature and as a Spokane County Commissioner from 1930 until 1936.

The property stayed in the Webb family until 1935 when it was sold to Bessie F. Dunham, who sold it to the James Madison Moorman family in 1937. James Moorman, born in 1875 in Missouri, homesteaded in nearby Adams County in 1900, and married Cleora V. Cummings in 1913. He was a wheat farmer near Cunningham, a community in unincorporated Adams County located between Hatton, until 1940, when he moved his family to Cheney. It is assumed he retired as a farmer at that time, but he worked as Cheney High School's custodian until a few years before his death in 1965. Mrs. Moorman also attended Cheney Normal School and taught for a number of years. The property passed to Dorothy E. Anderson, their daughter, in 1992.



*By 1996, the house had fallen into disrepair.*

Utility records and anecdotal information indicate the building has not been inhabited since the early 1970s, and possibly longer. It may have been used for summer visits by Mrs. Anderson and her sisters, but was not occupied year-round for many years. By 1996, when Mrs. Anderson initiated the listing of the house on the Cheney Register

of Historic Places, it had fallen into a dilapidated condition.

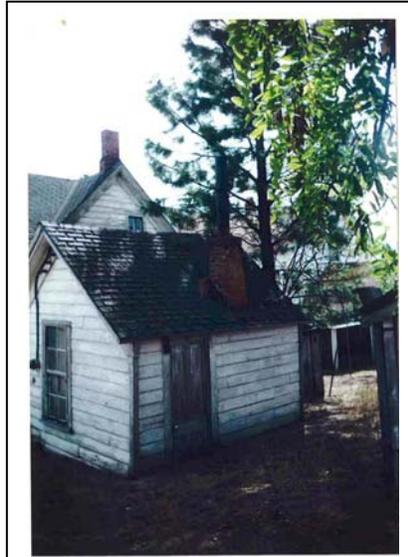
Mrs. Anderson began a careful restoration of the property and invested a substantial amount of money in repairs, qualifying for the Special Valuation Tax Incentive Program in the amount of \$22,063. Her application for the Special Valuation program lists the following improvements which were made in the summer of 1996:

Spears Construction: Repaired front porch; installed footing under original home, 22x26' approximately; new foundation of pressurized treated 2x4; jack up the house, level post and beam. Roof was removed and replaced with fiberglass composition three tab shingles, 20-year. Tear down and haul off barn and summer kitchen. Total cost: \$19,078.33

Ruud Painting & Contracting: Replaced 15 glass panes, scraped wood surfaces around windows to remove old paint; disposal of broken glass, broken trim strips and debris. Total cost: \$477.00

Robert Strampe Painting: Pressure wash, sand and scrape; prime whole house with oil, caulk cracks and nail house siding. Apply two coats finish paint, SW satin. Total cost: \$2,508.00

The summer kitchen, a shed-roofed structure located at the rear of the house, was constructed as a separate building which was connected to the main house sometime prior to 1890, according to the building footprint



*The summer kitchen. Photo: 1995*

shown on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. The 'connection' became what is now the kitchen/dining area. The original summer kitchen was deteriorated beyond repair, and was removed in the summer of 1996. A barn, located at the back of the property, was also removed at this time.



*The summer kitchen was originally a separate structure, but was joined to the main house prior to 1890. It was demolished in 1996. Photo: 1995*

The Sanborn maps indicate that the front porch is not original. It does appear to fit aesthetically and in terms of mass and bulk so it is difficult to imagine how the house would look without a porch. The house would appear naked and more asymmetrical than it already does. The maps also disclose that the shed-roofed addition in between the main body of the house and the summer kitchen originally had a porch over the door and show that perhaps the entrance was recessed. That is, the porch was flush with the walls of the house.

The 1996 foundation of concrete blocks replaced the original foundation of rough basalt rock, which had remained quite solid. The porch was sagging, apparently having been constructed on dirt and not the same rock base that the main house rested on. The porch was repaired and steps were replaced.

Mrs. Anderson lived in the town of Des Moines, in western Washington, and failing health put a stop to restoration of the building before needed repairs were completed on the interior. She sold the house in 2004, thus ending her family's ownership of almost 70 years.

By 2005, the partially restored house was threatened with demolition, as new owners made plans to develop multi-family housing on this double lot located near the Eastern Washington University campus. Cheney's Historic Preservation Commission was active in publicizing the availability of the building, and while many people were interested in acquiring and restoring the building, the lack of available lots within the city made moving costs prohibitively expensive.

In 2006, literally days before the building was slated to be the subject of a 'practice burn' by the Cheney Fire Department, the City of Cheney acquired the house by donation from Michael Nation, and moved it from its original location near the northeast corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and G Streets to a vacant city-owned lot just two blocks to the southeast.

The new site is comparable in character, and adjacent houses, while not as old as the Sterling-Moorman House, still date to the 1910-1920 era.

Under the City's ownership, the Sterling-Moorman House looks to a restored future as an example of life in pioneer Cheney.



*The Sterling-Moorman House at its new location at 304 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, just 2 blocks down the hill from where it stood for 122 years.  
Photo: September 2006.*