

Avis Ann Rouse Cochran: Generous benefactor

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

Both "Avis" and Shore, once called Oak "Cochran" are familiar names in our area. Cochran Primary School bears the family name, as does Williamsport's American Legion Post, dubbed the Garrett Cochran Post in honor of one of Avis's sons. The town of Avis, a few miles west of Jersey



ROUSE COCHRAN

Grove, was renamed for Avis Rouse Cochran and her daughter also named Avis. In the mid-19th century, Avis Rouse and her future husband, J. Henry Cochran, each lived with their respective families in Calais, Maine. Calais is a small



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown, above left, in this photo courtesy of Edward Lyon Jr, is the Cochran Home Driftwood. Above right, in this photo courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society, is 1005 W. Fourth St., the home of Avis Cochran from 1885 until her death in 1935.

town across the St. Croix River from St. Stephen, New Brunswick. It was home to many Irish immigrants who had fled from the great potato famine, among them the Cochrans and the family of my own great-grandfather Edward McMunn. The Rouse family, on the other hand, had been in this country for generations. Avis's father was (See AVIS, Page E-3)

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Dr. James Rouse, whose family, according to Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northeast Arkansas (1899), had "noble" ancestors, including members of Cromwell's government and soldiers in America's Revolutionary War. James Rouse himself was a captain in the War of 1812. A renowned physician, he traveled the world practicing medicine.

Early years

Avis was born on May 30, 1854, in Rockland, Maine. She had an older sister, Helen. When their mother, Avis Louisa Hancock Rouse, died in 1857, James Rouse remarried, relocated to Calais and had six more children.

Around 1861, J. Henry Cochran, then 16 or 17, came to Pennsylvania — where his brother Joseph already was living — to cut lumber. Accompanying him on the trip from Calais, according to the McMunn family oral history, was Edward McMunn, also a lumberjack. They worked in Driftwood, Emporium and then Williamsport.

J. Henry eventually went into business with Joseph, and soon they began acquiring land, mills and invested in the lumber industry.

A more prosperous J. Henry Cochran went back to Calais and, on July 17, 1870, married Avis Ann Rouse; they returned together to Driftwood. Driftwood today has a population of about 100, but in the 1860s and 1870s, it was a lumber boomtown. The Philadelphia and Erie Railroad ran through the town, and it boasted three hotels, two banks, two churches and its own newspaper.

Move to Williamsport

The young family lived in Driftwood until about 1885, when they moved permanently to Williamsport. By that time there were four children: Joseph, Charles, Garrett and Avis. The youngest daughter, Helen, was born in 1886 in Williamsport.

Louise McMunn Morin, my late aunt, was fascinated with the Cochran family. Since both the Cochrans and the McMunns originally were from Ireland, the two families lived in Calais, and according to family history, the young men came together to lumber in

Pennsylvania, she was sure that they were cousins.

Aunt Louise's school years were spent at St. Joseph's School, associated with the former Annunciation Church. Aunt Louise and her older brothers and sisters walked to school each day from their modest home on Scott Street.

West Fourth Street was their favorite route for the mile-long walk, and Aunt Louise loved looking at all the "mansions," but especially at 1005 W. Fourth St., the home of Avis and J. Henry Cochran and their family. Their large English Victorian home with grand verandas and arched windows, at the corner of West Fourth and Park streets, was magnificent. Plus, Aunt Louise told me, she was sure that she resembled the Cochran daughters, Avis and Helen.

Louise wondered what her life would have been like if her grandfather had taken up J. Henry's invitation to enter his lumber business. But, according to the story handed down, Edward McMunn demurred. He had just gotten a good job with the United States Postal Service.

J. Henry Cochran prospered. According to John Meginness's history of Lycoming County, "for many years (J. Henry Cochran) was the recognized leader of the lumber industry in the West Branch Valley." When the lumber was gone, J. Henry began investing in other enterprises, including railroads, finance and real estate. He was the leader of the Democratic party in Williamsport. Elected a state senator in 1894, he served for 16 years.

Known for charity

The Cochran family was known in the community for their charity (mostly anonymous), and Avis herself was very active. She was on the board of managers of the Home for the Friendless and made many gifts, including 45 yards of sheeting, noted in the May 12, 1914, Gazette and Bulletin.

Avis was an early member and director of the Clio Club, founded in 1897. In the summer of 1914, Avis held a children's carnival on her front lawn, a fundraiser for the Clio Club Civic Committee project to establish the first day care center in Williamsport, which was opened and operated by the YWCA.

What was considered by the community her most "splendid gift" was a fully-equipped field service

ambulance sent to France in 1917. It was appropriately named "The Williamsporter."

Avis also was on the board of the Training Home for Girls and a member of the original 1893 Board of Directors for the YWCA. In 1926, she gave a major gift of \$5000 toward the construction of the "new" YWCA building on West Fourth Street. And the National Guard Armory on Penn Street was built on land given to the state in the 1920s by Avis in honor of her son.

Avis had lost her husband in 1911 and their son Charles died in 1917. Their son Joseph was seriously ill for several years and once was treated by Avis's father, Dr. James Rouse, at the Rouse Springs Sanitarium in Clay County, Arkansas. Joseph died in 1916 and Helen in 1933. Sadly for Avis, she lost her husband and four of her five children before her own death in 1935. Only her daughter Avis survived her.

Travels

The social pages of the Williamsport newspapers often featured stories of Avis's travels, both before and after J. Henry's death. In 1899, she took a six-month tour of Egypt. She was on a six-week tour of France and Italy when the war broke out in 1914. She also traveled extensively in Europe and visited Bermuda, the Caribbean and Havana.

In addition to their home at 1005 W. Fourth St., bought from Annie Weightman Walker, the Cochrans had a summer home called "Rosemary," a magnificent stone cottage in Mosquito Valley. They also had a home in Virginia; J. Henry was vacationing there when he died.

When Avis Ann Rouse Cochran died on April 6, 1935, at her Williamsport home, she left daughter Avis and 10 grandchildren. The bulk of her estate, estimated at \$500,000, was bequeathed to them. Her funeral was held at Trinity Episcopal Church, and she is buried in the family mausoleum in Wildwood Cemetery.

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