

## Chapter 34

### Wind Up in Traer

Ray Miller Oakley and Kate Cameron Burks Oakley (my paternal grandparents) had five children: Burks, Elisabeth, William (Bill), Allen, and Thomas. I want to focus on Elisabeth (and her husband Gordon) in the following narrative.

Elisabeth was born on 15 December 1900 in Quincy, Illinois. Her name apparently was Mary Elizabeth Oakley, but at some point she must have changed it to Elisabeth (with an "s"). She always went by her nickname of "Ebby".

Elizabeth Oakley appeared on the 1910 US Census as a 9-year old daughter of Ray and Kate Oakley, living at 503 N. Thirteenth St. in Quincy, Illinois.

Name	Relation	Sex	Race	Age	Marital Status	Years Married	Children Born	Children Living	Birthplace	Father's Birthplace
Theodore H. Hellback										
Lenore M. Hellback										
Ray M. Oakley	Husband	M	W	34	M	13			Iowa	Kentucky
Kate C. Oakley	Wife	F	W	37	M	13	5	5	Iowa	Kentucky
Burks Oakley	Son	M	W	11	S				Illinois	Iowa
Elisabeth Oakley	Daughter	F	W	9	S				Illinois	Iowa
William B. Oakley	Son	M	W	6	S				Illinois	Iowa
Allen B. Oakley	Son	M	W	2	S				Illinois	Iowa
Unnamed Oakley	Son	M	W	1/3	S				Illinois	Iowa
Hanna M. Oakley	Mother	F	W	71	W		2	1	Illinois	Portage, N.Y.

As an aside, the 1910 U.S. census listed Allen as "Allen B. Oakley" - his name was "Allen Miller Oakley". Also, it had their 6-month old son listed as "Unnamed" - that was Thomas Crawford Oakley, who was born in Quincy on 11 October 1909. Finally, it listed Ray's mother's birthplace as "Illinois" - Hannah Mariah Miller was born in 1838 in Portage, New York; her family moved to the Rockford area the following year.

Elizabeth Oakley appeared on the 1920 U.S. Census as a 19-year old daughter of Ray and Kate Oakley, living at 230 S. 24th St. in Quincy:

1920 United States Federal Census for Elizabeth Oakley

Illinois > Adams > Quincy Ward 7 > District 0061

Street	House No.	Dwelling No.	Visited No.	Name	Relation	Home Owned	Mortgaged	Sex	Race	Age	Marital Status	Year Immigrated	Naturalize
	230	4544		Oakley Ray M	Head	1	0	M	W	43	M		
				Kate R	Wife			F	W	46			
				Burks	Son			M	W	21	S		
				Elizabeth	Daughter			F	W	19	S		
				William	Son			M	W	16			
				Allen	Son			M	W	12	S		
				Thomas	Son			M	W	10	S		
				Oakley Mrs Hannah	Mother-in-law			F	W	48			

The household included Ray and Kate, their children Burks, Elizabeth, William, Allen, and Thomas, and Mrs. Hannah Oakley (listed as "Mother-in-Law", even though she was Ray's mother and Ray was the head of the household for the purposes of the Census). And their home at 230 S. 24th St. had but a single bathroom at the time.....

Here is a photo of Elisabeth ("Ebby") from Hal Oakley' book, **Selected Recollections of Allen Miller Oakley**:



By the time of the 1930 U.S. Census, Elizabeth was living in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She was a "Roomer" in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Fredrick H. Graham, along with the Graham daughter and three other women:

1930 United States Federal Census for Elizabeth Oakley

Line No.	Street	House No.	Dwelling No.	Family No.	Name	Relation	Home Owned	Home Value	Radio	Farm	Sex	Race	Age	Marital Status	Marriage Age	Attended School
12		716	164	189	Kranan, Fredrick B	Head-H		\$ 15000-		No	M	W	75	M	53	20
13					Kate M	Wife				V	F	W	57	M	33	14
14					Mary	Daughter				V	F	W	20	S		14
15					Thomas Katherine	Roomer				V	F	W	35	S		14
16					Hunn, Fanny	Roomer				V	F	W	35	S		14
17					Oakley, Elizabeth	Roomer				V	F	W	29	S		14
18					Moss, Laura A	Roomer				V	F	W	20	S		14

Her occupation was listed as "Teacher" in a "Public School" (two of the other single women living there were also public school teachers).

The 1940 US Census asked people their residence in 1935, and Elizabeth listed Quincy, Illinois.

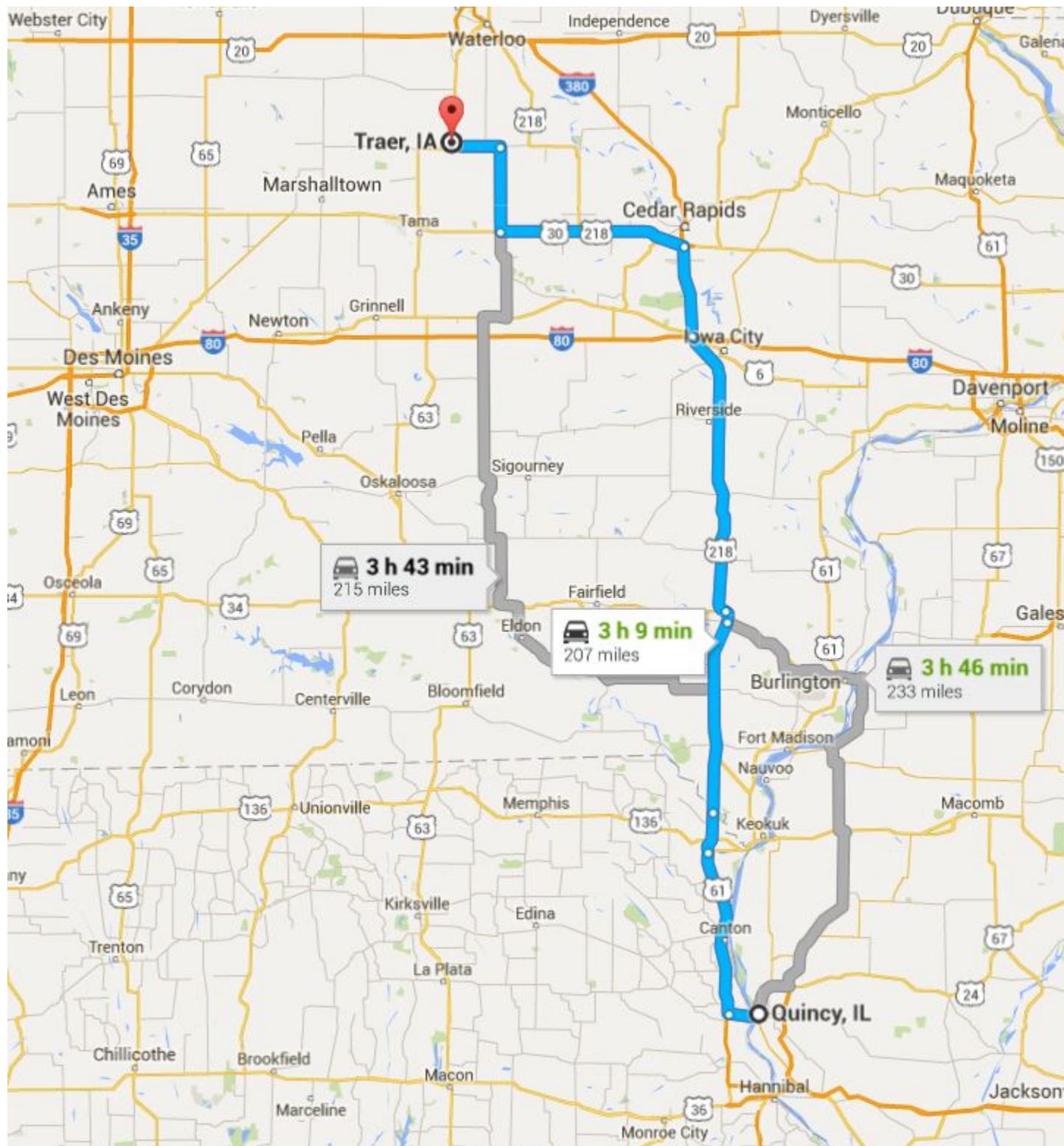
Elizabeth married Gordon McCornack Smith on 23 May 1936 in Quincy, and they appear in the 1940 U.S. Census living in Sioux City, Iowa, where Gordon was a branch manager of a general brokerage house:

1940 United States Federal Census for Elizabeth O Smith

Line No.	Street	House No.	Visited in Home	Home No.	Farm	Name	Relation	Code A	Sex	Race	Age	Marital	Attended	Code B	Birthplace	Code C	Citizenship	City	County	State	Farm	Code D	Private	Public	Seeking	His & Her	Other	Code E	Hours	Hours
48	Doan					Gracett	Wife		F	W	54	M	1901		Iowa			Quincy	Scott	Iowa	No	116	No	No	No	No	S	6		
49						Barbara J	daughter		F	W	14	S	1925		Iowa			Quincy	Scott	Iowa	No	54	No	No	No	No	S	1		
50		256	45	2	40	Smith, Gordon M	head		M	W	35	M	1905		Iowa			Quincy	Scott	Iowa	No	54	No	No	No	No	S	1		
51						Elizabeth O S	wife		F	W	37	M	1903		Ill			Quincy	Adams	Ill.	No	146	No	No	No	No	H	5		
52		257	10	2	28	Grandy, Meta E	head		F	W	73	S	1903		English			Quincy	Adams	Ill.	No	146	No	No	No	No	H	5		
53		250	15	2	28	Boetje, Mary L	head		F	W	52	S	1904		New Jersey			Quincy	Adams	Ill.	No	146	No	No	No	No	H	5		
54		252	15	2	15	Beech, George	head		M	W	60	M	1906		Holland			Quincy	Adams	Ill.	No	146	No	No	No	No	H	5		

Note that in the 1940 Census, her name was clearly "Elisabeth". And the census form states that she completed four years of college.

At some point, Elisabeth and Gordon moved to Gordon's birthplace of Traer, Iowa - where Gordon took over his father's drugstore [Gordon's father, Ray, died in 1957 at the age of 78, so it is likely that they moved to Traer a number of years before 1957]. Traer is north (and a little west) of Quincy:



This drugstore was unique, in that it had an outside spiral staircase that went up to the second floor:



When I was a child, my parents and I would make an annual trip (by car) from our home in Cleveland, Ohio, to visit my father's family in Quincy (Allen and T.C. and their families), and Elisabeth and Gordon in Traer. I have great memories of climbing on the winding stairs:







[As an aside, it is interesting that in addition to Quincy, Elisabeth lived in

Eau Claire, where QNI operates WQOW-TV; Sioux City, where QNI operates KTIV-TV; and Traer, Iowa, which is in the service area for QNI's KWWL-TV in Waterloo, Iowa. She sure knew how to pick where to live!]

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So why was this building built with an OUTDOOR SPIRAL STAIRCASE?

**Famous Winding Stairs** -- see:

<http://www.traer.com/Default.aspx?id=11495>

The reason we say, "Wind up in Traer"

Visitors can't help but notice our Famous Winding Stairs on Second Street in historic downtown Traer. The iron staircase, it's catwalk and the attached building are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

E.E. Taylor (who started the present town newspaper at the ripe old age of 16) was faced with replacing his newspaper office in 1894, after fire destroyed his office in the spring of that year. Taylor decided to rebuild a two-story structure, and to situate the newspaper office on the second floor. He would then rent out the first floor to other businesses for extra income. Most of the business buildings at that time were made of brick and were 20 feet wide. The lot where the Star-Clipper sat were only 18 feet wide. Because of the narrow space, Taylor decided to build an outside stairway to his business on the second floor, leaving the two rented business spaces on the sidewalk level with more floor room.

Burlington Iron Works of Burlington, Iowa was employed to build an iron stairway to the public entrance at the front of the building. The stairway makes 1 1/2 revolutions and weighs 2,000 pounds. It consists of 23 steps.

Originally, the stairs stood closer to the building, and there was a smaller landing outside the entrance on the second floor. In 1916, Traer voted to widen the sidewalks. Some members of the town council of the time wanted Taylor to remove his stairway from the sidewalk. He agreed, if the council could figure out another public entrance to his upstairs. Since no solution was found, it was decided to move the stairway to the curb, and employ the Burlington Iron Works again, this time to construct a catwalk to

run above the sidewalk from the stairs to the entrance of the building.

Many prominent and famous men and women climbed the Stairs in the sixty years that the Star-Clipper was located at their top. Iowa governors, senators and congressmen made the climb to talk to E. E. Taylor, who was well respected as a journalist. And even after retirement as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, "Tama Jim" Wilson visited the Star-Clipper office by way of the stairs to discuss political matters with Taylor. (Wilson served as a cabinet member longer than any other American.) The Williams Brothers (the youngest being Andy), came to town to give a concert and insisted on dressing in the Star-Clipper building so they could use the Winding Stairs as their grand entrance. Salesmen enjoyed coming to Traer on Thursday so they could watch the people lined up on the Stairs, waiting to pick up the newspaper.

In 1953, The Traer Star-Clipper newspaper moved its operations a block east into a ground floor site. The building with the Stairs attached was sold to Gordon Smith, one of the tenants in the lower level. From 1953 to 1973, the Chamber of Commerce continued to keep the Stairs in good repair as a community asset. Many offers came to purchase the Stairs. In 1973, twenty-two local citizens formed the Traer Winding Stairs Association, Inc., and bought the Stairs and the Star-Clipper building.

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For some reason, the winding stairs in Traer actually were featured on the **front page** of the ***Chicago Tribune*** on 22 November 1966:

# Traer's Boast Has a Twist

## Spiral Staircase Called Only One of Its Kind

BY RICHARD ORR  
(Chicago Tribune Press Service)

Traer, Ia., Nov. 21—A visitor isn't likely to be allowed to light in Traer more than 5 minutes before one of its citizens calls attention to the old spiral staircase on Second street in the center of the business district.

"It's the only one of its kind in captivity and our most distinctive feature," said Elmer Taylor Jr., business manager and one of the owners of the Traer Star-Clipper, one of Iowa's leading weekly newspapers.

### Printed on Checks

Folks here are pretty much impressed with their spiral staircase, built of iron in 1894. They'll tell you it's the only one of its kind in the world that stands out of doors on a public sidewalk with a catwalk that leads to a second floor en-

[When you "wind up in Traer," Ia., you're likely to be going up what the citizens believe is the only spiral staircase in the world that stands completely out of doors, uncovered, on a public sidewalk. THE TRIBUNE's farm editor, Richard Orr, wound up in Traer and found folks are particularly proud of the staircase, a landmark built in 1894. In fact, they launched an investigation when they heard that Weaverville, Cal., has three spiral staircases, and emerged still claiming the championship. This is another of a series of articles on interesting people and places in Iowa.]



Orr

trance to a business establishment.

So taken with it are they, in fact, that the chamber of commerce alludes to the spiral de-



sign in its slogan, "Wind Up in Traer." The First National bank prints a picture of the stairs on match covers and some of its checks.

Delbert Boldt, a tavern owner, is having a picture of them engraved on his 72-ounce beer pitchers and giving a new twist to the slogan, "Wind Up in Traer at Del and Betty's Sunnyside Tavern." The postoffice department once put a picture of the stairs on a commemorative stamp.

"You'll meet people wherever you go who say, 'I know Traer, that's the town with the stairs,'" said Gordon Smith, who runs a sundry store and

[Continued on page 2, col. 2]

# Traer's Boast Has a Twist

## Spiral Staircase Called Only One of Its Kind

[Continued from first page]

owns the property that includes the staircase. "We've always been smug about having the only free standing, outdoor staircase in the world, and our claim still stands up.

"It's a tenuous fame, but it's one item, anyway."

### An Obstacle, Too

Gordon Reynolds, a barber who is president of the junior chamber of commerce, said, "Folks here are very proud of the stairs, altho they're an obstacle in a way because once in a while somebody bumps his head on them."

Now, it isn't precisely accurate to say the staircase leads to a second floor business establishment. It leads to a largely vacant storeroom over Smith's store, but that's a trifle that doesn't stop a lot of people from climbing them just to say they've done it.

Almost every day in summer a tourist or two pauses long enough to go up a few steps. Photographers have photographed them; artists have sketched and painted them, and youngsters frolic on them and sometimes chute-the-chute down the twisting railings.

"Your heart's in your mouth every now and then," said Smith, "but to date no one has ever fallen off them in 72 years that I know of."

### Regular Thing, Once

Virtually every citizen of Traer, young and old, has climbed the stairs at one time or another. They used to go there regularly to pick up their paper during the 60 years the stairs led to the second floor offices of the Star-Clipper.



In Traer, Ia., this spiral stairway which leads from sidewalk to second floor of business building, is landmark in town dating from 1894.

[TRIBUNE Staff Photo]



Gordon Smith

wedged among the twists and turns.

### Mightn't Be Just

But Taylor says that suc-

staircase and Smith would furnish the paint.

That was several years after Traer, with a population of 1,600, was aroused on hearing that Weaverville, Cal., with a population of 700, had not one but three spiral staircases. For all the Traer people knew, the folks of Weaverville were going around saying something like, "Only one spiral staircase, eh?" and sniffing a bit in disdain.

### Causes Some Surprise

So Smith got off a letter and some photographs to the Weaverville Commercial club. Back came a reply, accompanied by photographs, that revealed that word of Traer's staircase had created "considerable surprise" in Weaverville.

See the original article at:

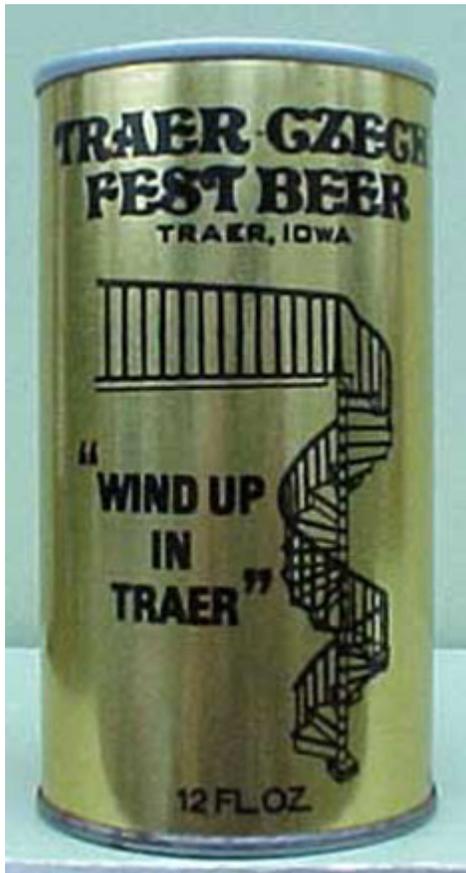
<http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1966/11/22/page/1/article/masthead-1-no-title>

The winding stairs are quite the symbol of Traer, Iowa. Each year, the town has a Winding Stairs Festival:



This year's festival will be held on 6-8 August 2015 - see:  
<http://www.traer.com/Default.aspx?id=11509>

The winding stairs can even be found on beer cans:



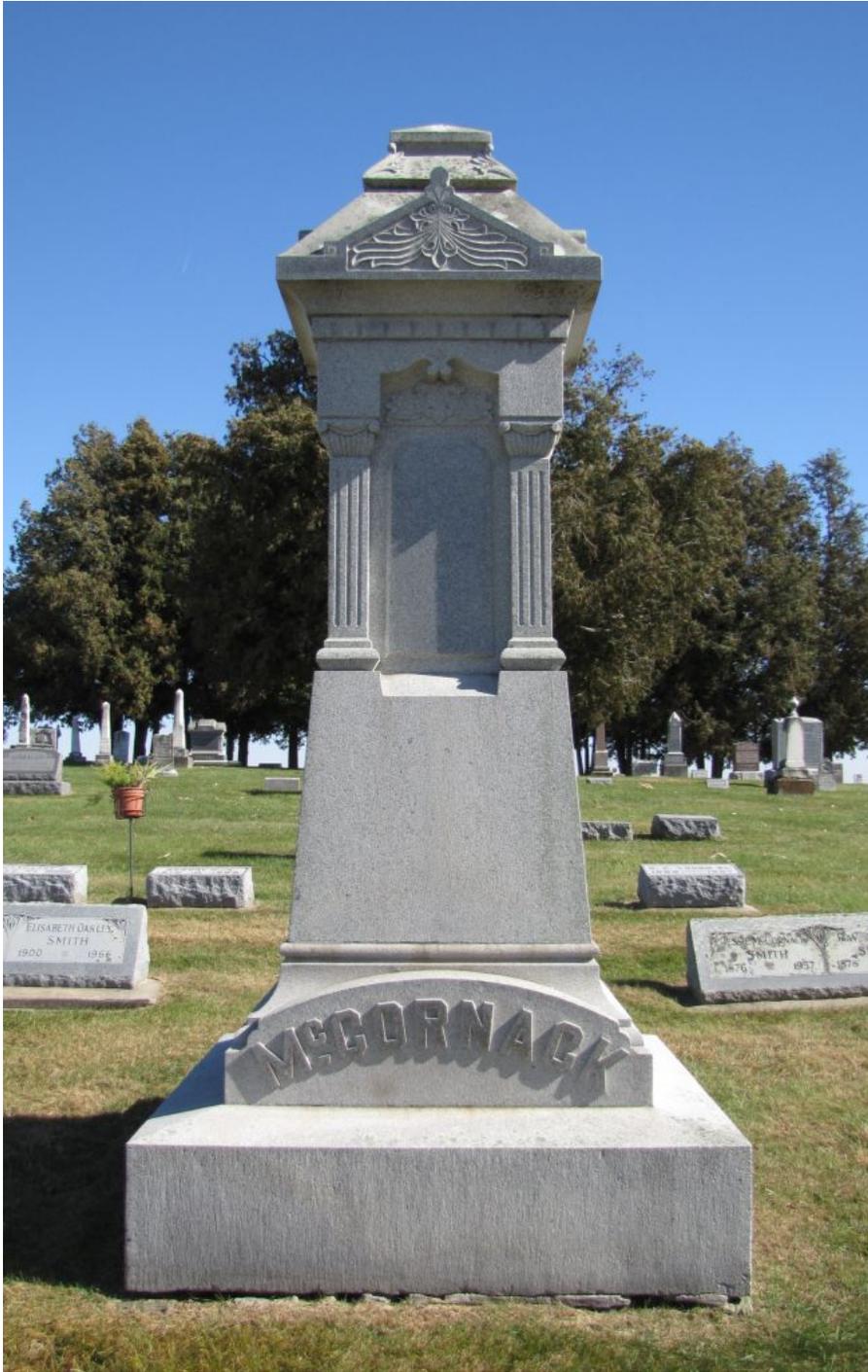
Gordon and Ebby gave my parents a set of glasses with the "Wind Up in Traer" motif. Unfortunately, I only kept but one:



"WIND UP  
IN  
TRAER"

Elisabeth died on 22 January 1966, in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. Gordon married Doris Kahler on 17 January 1970 in Mt. Pleasant, IA. Gordon died on 26 December 1986 in Traer, Iowa. Elisabeth and Gordon are buried in Buckingham Cemetery [named for Buckingham Township in Tama County] outside of Traer, Iowa, in the McCornack family plot [Gordon's mother was a McCornack]. The McCornacks were successful farmers, businessmen, and bankers for a number of generations in Tama County. Here are some photos of their gravestones from the [findagrave.com](http://findagrave.com) website:





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## OBITUARY

GORDON SMITH (1904-1986)

Funeral services for Gordon Smith, 82, of Traer, were held Monday, Dec. 29, 1986, at the Overton Funeral Home in Traer with the Revs. Jim and Susan Faunce-Zimmerman officiating. Burial was in Buckingham Cemetery, rural Traer. He died Friday, Dec. 26, at Covenant Medical Center, Kimball Avenue, after having become ill on Thursday.

Organist for the service was Beulah Whannel and vocalist was Jean Staker. Casket bearers were John S. Bauch, Reg Reuman, Robert Ralls, Leland Owens, Stan Hladik and Donald Gates. On the flower committee were Mr. and Mrs. Robert Davis and Mr. and Mrs. Bill Bohnsack.

Gordon M. Smith was born October 24, 1904 in Traer, the son of Ray and Jessie (McCormack) Smith. He received his education in Traer, graduating from Traer High School in 1921. He attended Grinnell College and Northwestern University. He worked as a broker for Lamson and Son Brokerage Firm in Chicago, IL.

Gordon married Elisabeth Oakley on May 23, 1936, at Quincy, IL, and they made their home in the cities of Mason City, Sioux City and Aberdeen, SD, before returning to Traer where Gordon operated his father's drug store.

After Elisabeth's death in 1966, Gordon continued to make his home at 801 Second Street in Traer.

On January 17, 1970, he married Doris Kahler at Mt. Pleasant, IA, and in 1972 Gordon retired from his store and spent his free time traveling with Doris.

Gordon was a member of the Ripley United Church of Christ.

He is survived by his wife, Doris of Traer; one stepson, KayDon Kahler of Shelton, CT; one stepdaughter, Mrs. Dean (Nancy) Degner of Traer; one brother, Russell of Edmonds, Wash.; one sister Jean Carlson of Mt. Pleasant, as well as seven step-grandchildren and nine step-great-grandchildren.

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Gordon's family had been in Tama County, Iowa, for some time. Here is an interesting item about his maternal grandfather, Robert C. McCornack:

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=kIA0AQAAAMAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en>

From "A History of Tama County, Iowa, Volume 2"  
edited by J. R. Caldwell  
Lewis Publishing Company, 1910



*Robert C. McCornack*

ROBERT C. MCCORNACK, who died June 1, 1896, as cashier of the Traer State Bank, was but fifty-five years of age at the time of his decease, but had the finest results to hand down to the future—accomplishments of consistent credit to his marked ability and high honor as a man and which had materially advanced the prosperity and well-being of Tama County. He was an Illinois native, of Knox County, born in 1841, and was a son of Andrew and Elizabeth (Kelley) McCornack. The family is of ancient Scotch origin, the parents mentioned being natives of Ayrshire, who emigrated to the farm in Knox County in 1839, which became the birthplace of Robert C. during the following year. They had seven children (five of whom are still

alive), and in 1864 the family settled in Perry Township, Tama County, where the parents of Robert C. and the grandparents of William G. McCornack spent their remaining years. (A biography of the latter, who succeeded his father as cashier of the Traer State Bank, is published following). After coming with the family to Tama County, as a young man of twenty-three, Robert C. McCornack associated himself with his brother Peter and they farmed in partnership until 1868, after which each one occupied his own farm until 1873, when they embarked in mercantile pursuits at Traer under the firm name of McCornack Bros. Large and successful dealers in coal, lumber and agricultural implements for fourteen years, in 1882 they purchased the lumber yard at Gladbrook. Robert C. then moved his family to that place, managing the business there until its sale five years later, which also terminated the partnership between the brothers. Mr. McCornack subsequently spent three years in California, returning to Tama County in 1890. In that year he organized the Traer State Bank, of which, as stated, he was cashier at the time of his death six years later. During that period he undoubtedly represented its strongest personal force, and his death also deprived the community of a staunch moral influence which had always been exercised for the highest good of the city and county. In 1868 Mr. McCornack wedded Miss Jennie Gordon, who was born in Scotland sixty-five years ago, and is a daughter of William and Jessie Gordon, who brought her to the United States when she was but an infant. When in his native land Mr. Gordon was a weaver of the celebrated Paisley shawls, the first years of his residence in this country being spent in Connecticut, whence he migrated in the sixties to Tama County. Locating on a farm near Traer, Buckingham Township, he was an agriculturist for many years, his wife dying on this homestead. The remainder of his life was spent with his daughter, Mrs. Jennie McCornack, in Traer. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon were people of sincere religious convictions and consistent members of the Buckingham Church. Five children were born to the union of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. McCornack, as follows: F. A. McCornack, of Sioux City, Iowa, who has charge of T. F. Clark's interests in the northwest; William G., already mentioned; Dr. Peter McCornack, a graduate of the Northwestern University Medical School, Chicago, and a practitioner of Spokane, Washington; Jessie, now the wife of R. J. Smith, a Traer druggist; and Margaret, Mrs. George E. Delevan, whose husband is an attorney of Los Angeles, California. The honored mother of this family is still a resident of Traer. It should be added as a final testimonial to the

broadly useful and Christian character of her husband that he was one of the charter members of the United Presbyterian Church of Traer; that he had been previously identified with the church at Tranquility, Tama County; and that he had been an active elder successively in each denomination for many years.

In looking at Gordon's family tree, it becomes obvious that he had three last names - Gordon, McCornack, Smith:

The screenshot shows a genealogy software interface with the following details:

**Gordon McCornack Smith**  
 Spouses: 1 ▼ b: 24 Oct 1904 in Traer, Tama County, Iowa  
 Parents: 1 ▼ m: 23 May 1936 in Quincy, Illinois (age 31)  
 d: 26 Dec 1986 in Traer, Iowa (age 82)

Navigation: Pedigree | Family | Descendants | People | WebSearch | Timeline

**Father:** 1  
 Ray Jackson Smith  
 b: 4 Jul 1878, Waukon, Iowa  
 m:  
 d: 27 Jun 1957, Traer, Iowa

**Father's Parents:**  
 Jackson Smith  
 Mary A. Smith

**Mother:** 1  
 Jessie McCornack  
 b: 15 May 1876, Traer, Iowa  
 d: Jul 1957, Traer, Iowa

**Mother's Parents:**  
 Robert C. McCornack  
 Jenni Gordon

Children	Sex	Born	Birth Place	Died	Death Place	Relation	⚠
1 Gordon McCornack Smith	M	24 Oct 1904	Traer, Tama County, Iowa	26 Dec 1986	Traer, Iowa	birth	
2 Russell Jackson Smith	M					birth	
3 Jean Marie Smith	F					birth	
+ Click to add a child							