

Ellis Dillon (1816-1899) and Martha Fisher Dillon (1827-1910)

Ellis Dillon was born on March 25, 1816 in Clinton County, Ohio to Jesse and Hannah Pugh Dillon. Jesse was one of seven brothers who all immigrated to Illinois between 1824 and 1825 and settled in and around Dillon Township (near present day Tremont) in Tazewell County. Ellis's father, Jesse, brought his family to Dillon Township in 1825 when Ellis was about nine years old. Dillon Township was named after one of the brothers, Nathan Dillon, who was the first of the Dillon family to move to that area.

The trip from Wilmington, Ohio was made by wagon and took Ellis's family three weeks. When they arrived in Illinois his father built a crude cabin for their first winter. His father also hauled corn from near by Elkhart, Illinois and crushed it into corn meal so the family could make it through the winter. The winter was mild so the family also fished and hunted wild game for food. While growing up Ellis received a limited education in pioneer schools after which he engaged in running a saw mill (his uncle Nathan owned the first saw mill in Tazewell County) and then farming for about seven years.

On September 8, 1836 Ellis married his first wife Mary J. Fisher. They had one daughter, Malinda, who was their only child and died at age 11. His first wife died in 1840 and a few years later he married for a second time to Mary Hudson. They had two children both of whom died in infancy. His second wife died in 1845 after they were married for a short time.

Finally, on February 8, 1845 Ellis married his third wife, Martha Fisher, who was also a sister of his first wife Mary. Martha Fisher Dillon was born on July 10, 1827 in Clinton County, Ohio. She was the daughter of James and Amy Bennett Fisher. Her father James was a farmer and decided to move his family west where there was much land to be had. Martha and her family came to Illinois in 1828 when she was just about a year old and they too settled in Tazewell County. Ellis and Martha had five children: one child that died in infancy, Alpheus who died at age two, Adolphus, Sarah and Emma. Ellis and Martha would also raise two of his nephews, Levi and Isaiah, whose parents died of cholera when they were very young.

Ellis had always been very fond of horses and in the 1840s began to take an interest in stock breeding (breeding horses). He and some other members of his family first began to import English draft horses. In 1843 one of the first horses they imported was Old Sampson, an English draft horse. Ellis began to breed this horse with the mares he already had which helped their personal stock of horses improve. This also helped them begin to establish their reputation in Illinois as having the best horses. While their reputation began to grow, Ellis continued farming until 1857 when the Dillon family began to focus almost entirely on horse breeding.

The breed of horse the Dillon family was the most famous for breeding and selling was the Percheron-Norman horse (later renamed Percheron). Norman horses were a strong and durable breed of horse that was bred as a workhorse. They could pull more weight, withstand the heat better, do the work of two regular horses, had a quiet disposition, and were perfect for farm work. The first Norman horse that Ellis (along with his two nephews Levi and Isaiah) bought was the stallion Old Louis Napoleon. Old Napoleon was bought in Ohio by a man named A.P. Cushman for \$1,500 which would be about \$38,207 today. Cushman brought the horse to Illinois in 1854 and Old Louis

Napoleon was the first Norman horse in the state. He was 16 hands tall, dark, dapple gray in color, and weighed about 1,650 pounds. Levi and Isaiah Dillon bought a half interest in this horse in 1857 for \$1,000 and Ellis bought the other half interest to the horse in 1864 by paying an additional \$2,000 for full ownership.

With the Dillon horse business continuing to grow and the demand for their horses becoming more widespread, Ellis decided to move the family business. It was first decided to move operations to California but it was soon determined that it would be too risky to move their valuable stock on a journey that far. So, in 1865 Ellis decided to move his family and business to Normal, Illinois and establish E. Dillon and Company with his two nephews Levi and Isaiah. Moving the business to Normal would be advantageous because two major railroads, the Chicago and Alton and the Illinois Central, went right through town.

While in Normal, E. Dillon and Company began to become nationally and internationally recognized as one of the best breeders of horses. This reputation grew from not only the high quality of horses they bred, but from their fair business practices. People would pay as much as \$2,000 for one of the Dillon's horses based upon sale catalogues and the family's reputation alone. Ellis and his nephews sold their horses from Maine to California and from Canada to Mexico. Their highly successful business helped establish Normal, Illinois' national reputation for being the home of the French horse in America and for being the greatest draft horse center in the United States.

The Dillon family had many high quality horses. One of the Dillon's best mares was Modesty G for which they won 50 first place ribbons at county fairs across the country. She was the most noted show mare of her time. Ellis's most successful stallion was Old Louis Napoleon. It was said that Old Napoleon sired over 400 successful stallions in the U.S. At the Illinois State Fair in 1869 Ellis displayed Old Napoleon with no less than 112 of his colts and grand-colts. Many of the Norman horses in the Midwest could trace their bloodline back to Old Louis Napoleon. After a very long life, Old Napoleon died in 1871 at the age of 23.

Ellis and his nephews would continually try to improve the quality of the horses which they bred. This often required them to travel to France to acquire new horses to breed with their own stock. Ellis and his nephews Levi and Isaiah (his son Adolphus joined the company in 1872) began making trips to France to import more Norman horses. Their first trip to France was in 1870. Ellis and his nephews continued to make regular trips to France to purchase new breeding stock. The trips were made almost every year until 1882 with some years having two trips. In all, Ellis made twelve trips to France to purchase new horses for the family business.

The Dillons would not spare time or money in securing horses that best suited their needs. Whenever they found such an animal they considered would be a successful breeder, they purchased it regardless of the price. They would then ship these horses back to the U.S., which was a serious undertaking. The horses were placed on one of the lower decks of the ship in specially constructed stalls which were made large enough to allow the horses to sway with the motion of the ship. Also, the stalls of the ship were arranged so that the heads of the horses faced the center of the ship. The floors of the stalls were reinforced with heavy lumber so the horses could place their feet firmly. This would help them from being thrown down by the rolling and pitching of the ship. The horses were watched constantly during the entire voyage and if one of them happened to

fall, the attendants had to exert all of their strength and resourcefulness to get the horse back up again.

Because of the Dillon family, the Norman horse enjoyed a large popularity in the late 19th century. The height of the horse business in Normal was between 1889 and 1890 when there were six horse trading businesses in Normal. All of these were situated within two blocks along the south side of the Chicago and Alton Railroad beginning just west of the Illinois Central Railroad tracks and extending east of Linden Street. Also in 1890 Illinois had 203 American breeders of Percheron-Norman horses with 44 of them in McLean County alone. Ellis' involvement in the breeding of Norman horses was not limited to just within McLean County or Illinois, it extended nationally. He and his nephews were so committed to this type of horse that they helped found the American Percheron-Norman Association. Ellis was elected the first president of the association.

Even though his business was very successful, Ellis decided to retire from the horse breeding business and his company, E. Dillon and Company, was dissolved in 1882. The company was then reorganized by his two nephews Levi and Isaiah as Dillon Brothers, and continued to produce world renowned horses until 1893 when the company finally dissolved. Members of the Dillon family kept some of the horses privately after this but the last Norman horse was sold by them in 1919. The Dillon family probably got out of the horse business because the horse trade was beginning to slow down in the 1890s. One of the reasons for this was because it had to compete with the growth of the electric streetcar system. In an article from the *Daily Pantagraph* in 1895 a local horse breeder was quoted to have said that the "streetcars used to be their [meaning the horse breeders] best customers for horses" and now the breeders were competing with them after the cars were becoming electrified, forcing many of them to quit the business.¹

Ellis was involved in more than just breeding horses. He was also very active in the communities in which he and Martha lived. He served five terms as supervisor of Dillon Township and was an efficient member of the town board. He served three terms as school director in Tazewell County as well. He also served on the McLean County Agricultural Committee and Advisory Committee and was appointed as a delegate to the State Agricultural Board at Springfield.

He was also highly involved with the Christian church. Ellis found the Christian faith in 1838 and remained a very active and devout member of the Christian church until his death many years later. His wife Martha was also a very active member in the Christian church being that she was the president of the Ladies Aid Society from 1872 until 1910 at First Christian Church in Normal where they were both members.

Ellis was also a staunch Republican and supported the principles of the party throughout his entire life. Along with his strong support of this party, he and his wife were both strongly against slavery. They both believed it was morally wrong and should be abolished. They did all that they could during the Civil War to help African Americans. It had also been said that Ellis had been against slavery since he was a boy and that during the time of the fugitive slave law, he and his family helped slaves escape over the Underground Railroad.

Even after slavery had ended, Ellis and Martha continued to help African Americans in Bloomington and Normal. In the 1880s Ellis was instrumental in organizing the all African American church, Second Christian Church on north Linden Street in Normal.

¹ "The Horse Market," *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 4, 1895

Even after the church was established it was said that he was always willing to lend a hand.

On April 3, 1899 Ellis Dillon died quietly at his home in Normal. His funeral was held at First Christian Church in Normal. In his obituary it was said that with his death, the colored people of Normal had lost their best friend. Martha continued to live for another eleven years after Ellis's death. Shortly before her death, she became ill with stomach problems. She then passed away on February 15, 1910. They were both buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: Candace Summers, 2008