

Spokane's Loose Cannon

A.M. Cannon's impact on Spokane

by Blythe Thimsen

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A.M. Cannon, Spokane Pioneer & Founder of Bank of Spokane Falls 1879. L93-66.71



Mrs. A.M. (Jennie F.) Cannon. L87-96

WHEN HE WAS BORN TO A POOR FAMILY in Illinois in 1837, there was no way to know that Anthony McCue Cannon's (A.M. Cannon) life would be full of adventure and fortunes made and lost, nor that he would play a pivotal role in the growth of a little town in the Washington Territory named Spokane Falls. That is exactly what was in store for Cannon though, and it was with his hard work, high expectations and brazen arrogance, that Spokane Falls prospered and grew, becoming the city we know today.

After a childhood spent working hard simply to survive, at age 20, Cannon set his sights on a bigger and better life. He headed west, driving a team of oxen to what were the humble beginnings of a relatively unknown town named Denver, Colorado. Offered half-interest in the town of Denver for \$1,000, Cannon passed on the opportunity, believing it "wouldn't amount to much."

Wayward and full of wanderlust, Cannon traveled throughout the west, making and losing fortunes along the way, before he returned to Chicago. Not one to stay put for long, though, he soon gave in again to his sense of adventure and headed to Kansas City. While there he started what would become the largest flourmill in the state, but quickly sold his interest in it, deciding his future was out west. He yet again struck out, traveling out to California, whereupon he set his sights on the Pacific Northwest.

When he arrived in Portland, Oregon, Cannon met Jane Pease, who went by the name Jennie, and whom he would soon marry. Jennie was born in Hudson, New York, on March 30, 1840, and on January 17, 1861, she married Joseph Clarke. They moved to Oregon City, Oregon, and had five children – Marie, Ralph, George, Katherine and Josephine – before Joseph died in 1871. A single mother of five, Jennie taught sewing to Chinese workers in Portland, while Cannon sold Singer sewing machines across Oregon. It may be said this sewing connection brought them together, stitching their two lives together into one. In 1878, seven years after her husband's death, Jennie and Cannon married. While he was testy, arrogant and brazen, she had a warm heart and was known for her nurturing spirit.

Cannon was known to live, play and work hard – hard



Bank of Spokane Falls, A.M. Cannon's Bank on site of Fidelity Bank 1889. L97-1.141

enough that he received doctor's orders to take time off and travel in order to rest his weary self. Leaving his wife and children behind for a while, Cannon set out, and his travels took him to Spokane Falls in 1878.

Cannon and his traveling partner, J.J. Browne, arrived when the town was nothing more than a glorified village, with a smattering of crudely constructed homes. Despite the sparse population (James Glover was already here and running his general store), Cannon saw the potential in building a town in such a well-suited location. He knew the railroad, which would soon arrive, as well as the opportunities for travel and transportation via the river, would bring both people and money to Spokane Falls, ensuring its success, and therefore, his financial success as well. Pooling their money, Cannon and Browne mustered up \$3,200, which they paid to James Glover, thus purchasing for themselves half of the town. They then divided that half of the town into two different areas: Browne's Addition and Cannon's Addition.

"Cannon already owed \$4,000 in Portland. But at 55, rheumatic, patriarchal in a flamboyant white beard, he scorned a picayune debt if he saw a chance to make real money. He was impatient, testy and inclined to splurge," wrote John Fahey in *Requiem for a High Roller*.

When Cannon purchased his portion of Spokane Falls, he got Glover's store as part of the purchase

price. After securing the deal, he sent for Jennie and her five children who made their way to Spokane Falls and took up residence in a lean-to attached to the store.

Keeping his eyes open for opportunities, Cannon began storing money for railroad workers in a vault in the store. At that time there was only one bank in Eastern Washington, and it was located in Walla Walla. Tapping into a need, Cannon launched the Bank of Spokane Falls, in 1879. All it took was a handcrafted sign that read "Bank of Spokane Falls: A.M. Cannon" on the front door. Forget a business license or any official paperwork; with a finely printed script and hell-hung sign, the bank was officially open for business. Cannon had no capital when he opened the bank and it was rumored he had to borrow \$1,000 from a "lady friend" to get started.

In 1881, the Northern Pacific Railroad finally arrived in Spokane Falls, and with it Cannon saw an opportunity to help him, as well as the town, prosper. He would travel to Cheney, where the railroad made a stop, greet passengers and recruit them to live in Spokane Falls, instead of Cheney. This was a move that served him well as he also sold land to those whom he convinced to move to Spokane Falls; therefore, he lined his pockets and built up his bank account while also building up the population of the town.

He proved to be an effective salesman, recruiting

many people to Spokane Falls, where they bought land and made him a wealthy man. His wealth became visible to his fellow citizens when he built his own home, as described in John Fahey's *Requiem for a High Roller*:

"[In 1883] Cannon outdid himself. He built a 22-room house in gabled Queen Anne style near his shanty. It had spindled friezes, two-and-a-half stories and a turret rising above. With parquet floors, tapestries, leaded windows, the house was indeed extravagant, heated by warm air and lit by gas – the first in Spokane Falls. The grand house also had the town's first bathtubs, mahogany boxes lined with tin. But with not enough water for a garden, the house stood

in brown weeds for several years. Finally, a water system was installed which enabled Cannon to landscape a full block, erect a fountain in the front yard and place a live seal in its pool, a form of animal life few in Spokane Falls had seen before. Jennie Cannon set a Steinway grand piano in the living room...that is how the Cannons lived."

A political career seemed like the next step as it often is for prominent wealthy men in a community. When Spokane Falls incorporated in 1881, Cannon was appointed to one of seven city council spots. From there, he was elected Spokane Falls' third mayor, serving from 1885-1887.

Being a man of great importance in the city,

A.M. Cannon's home at W 813 Third in 1889 (later W 1400 Third). Hook and McGuire. *Spokane Falls Illustrated*. Minneapolis; Frank L. Thresher 1889.

L86-1395



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Cannon's arrogance often showed, as he demanded to be treated in a certain manner. On April 6, 1892 (exactly 13 years to the day before his death), Cannon and his son-in-law, B.H. Bennett were "arrested and brought before J.S. Gray, Justice of the Peace for examination on a charge of committing the crime of assault with intent to murder," according to a court document of the Territory of Washington. They were held on \$1,000 bail. The cause of the arrest was explained in the following article, which appeared in the April 1, 1882 edition of the *Spokane Times*, the first newspaper in Spokane. (Note the original spelling of Spokane without the "e.")

"A.M. Cannon and B.H. Bennett, of the bank in this city, called at the residence of Francis H. Cook last evening, and finding he had not returned from town, wanted to know where he was, saying they might meet him. The visit was occasioned by articles published in the Times, to which Mr. Cannon took exceptions. At 10 o'clock, to-day Cannon and Bennett entered the Times office on the second floor, while none were present but Mr. and Mrs. Cook, with a babe in the cradle. Cannon demanded retraction, and swore Mr. Cook must sign papers (not then shown) or he would kill him. The editor did not do so, and Cannon drew a revolver to carry out his threat. Mr. Cook took up an iron side-stick (used in the office) and induced Cannon to put away his revolver; whereupon, Bennett drew a revolver, stating that he was going to take part in the affair, even while Mrs. Cook pleaded with him to desist. As Bennett was trying to shoot, Cook took up another iron and knocked the weapon out of his hand. Cannon's aim was again being taken, with Mrs. Cook in line, when Mr. Cook knocked the revolver out of his hand and across the room. Bennett, by this time had regained his weapon, but his left hand was stricked (sic) down by Mr. Cook. Cannon, who had regained his deadly weapon on the opposite side of the room, raised it to fire; but Mr. Cook threw a missile that hit him just as he was pulling the trigger, the weapon discharging and the bullet passing through the stovepipe, glancing to the ceiling. After this

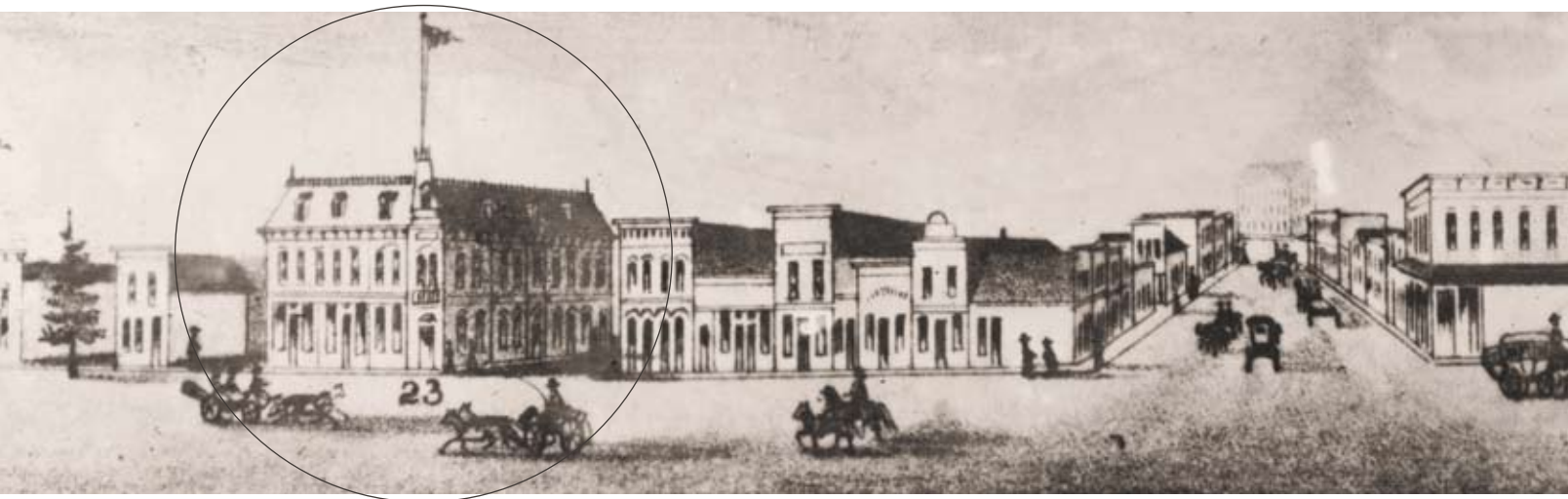
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1884 N side of Riverside Ave between Howard and Mill (later renamed Wall). The prominent building, left of center in the photo is A.M. Cannon's Bank of Spokane Falls. L2003-14.656

the blows fell rapidly, blood was scattered over the room, a case of type was pried, and the men closed in close embrace. Mrs. Cook had rushed downstairs, and a crowd began to gather. By this time Mr. Cook had regained his feet, and the assaulting party had ceased their efforts. After regaining the street, and after Mr. Cook had given up his piece of printing material, Cannon again threatened to kill Mr. Cook, but bystanders interfered. Warrants for the arrest of Cannon and Bennett have been issued: but neither will be able to be out, perhaps, for weeks. Both are under the care of physicians, and the scalp wounds they received, which are very severe, have been sewed up. Mr. Cook was not injured, but was somewhat tired."

The case was soon settled, with neither Cannon nor Bennett serving time, and Cannon was soon back to developing the community and his personal wealth. According to Fahey, "Before 1890, nearly every civic enterprise [in Spokane Falls] involved Cannon in some way."

One example was the Spokane and Palouse Railway, of which Cannon was in charge. He also was part of the Northwestern & Pacific Mortgage Co., with his friend and fellow townsman, a Dutchman named Herman A. Van Valenburg, who formed the company in 1885. This was an extremely profitable company that made more than 550 loans in four years worth \$1.1 million. With between eight and twelve percent interest charged on each loan, it was a cash cow for Van Valenburg and Cannon. Due to the success of the business, Dutch investors from Amsterdam became intrigued and put up a great deal of money to be a part of the company, making it an international venture. As a result, the name was changed to Northwestern & Pacific Hypotheekbank, and Cannon was appointed to one of only two bank director positions in the U.S. for the company.

According to Fahey, it was Northwestern & Pacific Hypotheekbank that helped fund much of the rebuilding in Spokane Falls following the Great Spokane Fire of 1889, which destroyed nearly the entire city.

Though the fire was devastating for the city, it provided a way for Cannon to prosper. After the fire, one of Cannon's brothers, (much of his extended family had moved to Spokane Falls by that point) Aniel Cannon, was supervising the rebuilding of the Auditorium theatre, which was to become a jewel of the city. Seizing his desire to make Spokane Falls an enviable place to live, Cannon instructed his brother to go all out for the Auditorium.

"The Auditorium suited Cannon fine: he preferred the gaudy and ornate," wrote Fahey. "Its 90-foot entry hall from Post flickered with gas torches illuminating Turkish rugs and plaster statues in niches. Stained glass windows played colored lights across the box office. One window showed facing portraits of Cannon and Browne."

Good times were not to last, though. The panic of 1893 hit Cannon particularly hard. The Bank of Spokane Falls faced a run, as depositors demanded their money in fear. In order to cover the depositors, Cannon turned to other bankers for help, but they were not willing to lend him any money. He owed \$80,000 to Hypotheekbank on the Bank of Spokane Falls' building. It was a marble building with a Corinthian roof held up by pillars and accessorized with two marble reclining lions by which depositors and customers would have to pass as they climbed the steps from the street. All of Cannon's land was held as collateral for other loans. Simply stated, he was over-extended. As a result of the financial crisis and his debt, he lost his job at Northwestern & Pacific Hypotheekbank.

The greatest loss for Cannon was not his job, his

land or his wealth. It was the loss of his wife, Jennie. According to the September 8, 1893 issue of the *Spokane Chronicle*, in an article announcing her death, "In June 1892, Jennie underwent a very severe surgical operation which confined her to her bed for sometime... in November, Dr. Ludlam of Chicago was called to this city and the operation was repeated."

Jennie suffered from a mysterious condition for nearly a year, confined to her house and then her bed. Her final weeks were fitful, with the last days spent slipping in and out of consciousness. She was said to manage a lucid moment or two, during one of which she offered a few words to one of her sisters who had come to Spokane Falls to sit by her bedside.

Jennie died in 1893, leaving Cannon financially broken as well as broken-hearted. The sympathy others felt for him dissipated when, six weeks after Jennie's death, Cannon suddenly and secretly married a young widow named Eleanor. The lack of an appropriate amount of mourning was considered scandalous, and Cannon's friends and family disowned him, horrified by his actions. Remarried at age 66, six weeks after his wife died, Cannon was abandoned by friends, family and society.

If it was love that led him to marry Eleanor, it was short-lived because he soon left her and her children in Spokane Falls and headed east for New York. This was a brief stop before continuing on to South America, where he was on a hunt for some new venture that would net him instant and intense wealth. He never found it though, and he never again saw his beloved Spokane Falls, nor his new wife: Cannon died alone on April 6, 1895, in his hotel room in New York city, after returning from South America.

Cannon's death was a sad end to a life that had much adventure, successes and some failures as well. He was arrogant, and self-serving, and yet at the same time he helped create the foundation for a strong city, which is what Spokane Falls grew into. Cannon was a proud and arrogant man, and yet one to whom we owe our thanks. ■

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