

The Bonine Family

(adapted from research by Barbara Cook, Cass County Michigan historian)

Isaac Bonine Originally the Bonines were French Huguenots. After coming to America, the family lived for some time in Pennsylvania, Eastern Tennessee, and Indiana. Isaac and his wife Sarah (Talbot) were Quakers and settled in Wayne County, Indiana in 1813. After losing most of his money due to a Richmond IN bank failure and a loan default, Isaac and Sarah Bonine migrated to Cass County, Michigan in 1842. Between 1836 and 1845 Isaac Bonine purchased 1,040 acres of land near Young's Prairie in Penn Township. Isaac and Sarah were staunch Quakers and abhorred slavery. Isaac donated an acre of land across Penn road from his farm for the Prairie Grove Quaker Church and Cemetery. They had eleven children. They both died in 1872 and many of their children settled in Cass County.

Several of Isaac's male descendants became community leaders with a number serving as Republicans (the anti-slavery party) in the Michigan Legislature and as Niles mayors. Also, several were successful farmers or farmer's wives, became doctors or married doctors.

Isaac's oldest son, James E. Bonine was born in 1816 in Wayne County, Indiana. He moved to Cass County in 1843 and acquired about 1600 acres of land; 800 acres of prairie and 800 acres to be cleared and farmed. James raised hay, sheep and Indian corn. He married Sarah Ann Bogue, daughter of Stephen and Elva (Elliott) Bogue (d.1828) (Stephen Bogue had settled on the edge of Young's Prairie in 1839 with his second wife Hannah (East) Bogue. Their home became a Underground Railroad stop and Stephen Bogue became a well know URR conductor.)

James E. built a Greek Revival farmhouse in the mid-1840's. He remodeled and enlarged his home after the Civil War into a picturesque Italianate home. He also had two large barns, a twelve-acre Elk Park, a chestnut orchard of 100 trees, thirty acres of fruit trees, neatly cultivated fields, and beautifully landscaped grounds. He was responsible for constructing the brick Quaker Meeting House in Vandalia, that later became a Masonic Lodge. James was on the bank board for the First National Bank of Cassopolis and his widow, Sarah, became the bank's largest stockholder. James and his wife had four children: Issac A, Evan E., Mary E., and Elva E. James E. lived with his daughter Mary and her husband, who was a doctor, in Niles for seven years before his death from cancer. After he died in 1897, title to the Elk Park Farm passed to his wife Sarah (Bogue) Bonine and their three children: Isaac A. Bonine, Mary E., (Mrs William T. Dougan) and Elva E. (Mrs N.B. Hammond of Sheldon, North Dakota). James E. and his wife were buried in Niles as were the descendants listed below.

Isaac A. Bonine, son of James E., married Alice Wilkinson of Niles. Isaac initially owned a farm south of his father's and later became the sole owner of the Elk Park Farm. Both the elk and the chestnuts proved to be quite profitable in addition to the other agricultural products. In later life Isaac A. moved to and died in Niles. Isaac A. and Alice had only one child, James Gordon Bonine.

James Gordon Bonine was born in Niles and married Margaret Gage of Niles. They had four children. James studied medicine and practiced in Cassopolis in addition to spending several years as a private physician to Daniel Reed of New York City. While living in the Cass County family home, he served one term (1931-32) as Republican State Senator, on the first Liquor Commission as well as on the First National Bank of Cassopolis Bank Board. During his life he owned and managed Michigan's only Elk Park and farm that his grandfather James E. Bonine had established.

Bonine House Memories

A Cass County resident recalls visiting the Bonine mansion. "I remember visiting the Bonine home and the highly polished floors, and the light streaming in the front windows covered with sheer curtains in the parlor. The wonderful smells and big stove in the kitchen made a lasting impression on me. The formal dining room was lovely with it's high ceiling and chandelier...the flower gardens behind the house were a sight to behold during the warmer months of the year.

We always looked for the elk as we drove to our cottage at Birch Lake via M60...the roadside park next to the elk with the Underground Railroad Historical Marker was the first MDOT highway park established in the state..."

(the marker was relocated to Vandalia after the Elk park was abandoned by the State).

One afternoon Mary Charlotte Bonine and I climbed the back, barbed-wire fence into the enclosure with the elk and were promptly escorted out by an angry cow protecting her calf. I never did tell my mother how I ripped by new jeans."

Elwood had lost an arm in a farm accident with a corn picker and wore a hearing aid. My sister Carolyn asked him what was in his ear, and he told her he was deaf. She then asked 'Are you dumb too?' My parents about fainted, and Elwood responded, "Some people in Lansing think so." Everyone laughed and the conversation resumed. Elwood Bonine had been an accomplished pianist before his farm accident and was a frequent visitor to our home, often arriving Sunday morning for coffee and political conversation. He encouraged my father to run for his Senate seat when he was contemplating the end of his term.

A house seems to lose its spirit if not lived in and cared for. It has been sad for me to witness the gradual demise of such a stately and proud house that was home of one of Cass County's leading families."