

# Material History *in situ* — Original Furniture at O'Keefe Historic Ranch

KEN MATHER

## Résumé

*La famille O'Keefe habitait au nord de la vallée de l'Okanagan en Colombie-Britannique de 1867 à 1977. Les O'Keefe ont laissé un témoignage de leur culture matérielle, six édifices antérieurs aux années 1900 parmi lesquels on trouve deux demeures familiales. Le présent article examine trois ameublements de fabrication canadienne, achetés entre 1880 et 1911, et présentés dans leur cadre original. Chaque mobilier est étudié pour déterminer les conditions de sa production, son style, l'endroit où il a été manufacturé et le rôle qu'il a joué au sein de la famille O'Keefe.*

## Abstract

*The O'Keefe family lived at the north end of British Columbia's Okanagan Valley from 1867 until 1977, leaving behind a legacy of their material culture in six pre-1900 buildings, two of which were family homes. This article examines three suites of Canadian-made furniture, purchased between 1880 and 1911 and still located in their original context. Each suite is examined in terms of its construction, style, place of manufacture and the significance it played in the lives of the O'Keefe family.*

The historic O'Keefe Ranch, located near Vernon, British Columbia, presents an ideal opportunity for the curator to study artifacts in their original context. This site was continuously occupied by the O'Keefe family from 1867 until 1977 and contains a unique collection of the family's material history. Many of these artifacts are located in the buildings and rooms into which they were placed as much as a century ago.

Cornelius O'Keefe was born of Irish and French-Canadian parents in 1837 near Bytown (Ottawa), in Upper Canada. As one of the younger sons in a family of ten, he left the family farm in 1862 to travel to the Cariboo goldfields of British Columbia in search of his fortune. After working for several years at various jobs, he struck upon the idea of purchasing cattle far south in the state of Oregon and driving them to the various gold camps of British Columbia. In 1867, in partnership with two others and driving 180 head of cattle, he arrived at the north end of Okanagan Lake. Impressed with the lush grasses and favourable climate, he pre-empted 160 acres (65 ha) to start a cattle ranch. Over the next fifty years his holdings grew to total about 12,000 acres (4,856 ha) and his residence progressed from a rough log shack to a comfortable log house to a beautiful Queen Anne style mansion.

With the successful introduction of fruit farming in the Okanagan at the turn of the century, O'Keefe sold most of his land holdings and continued to ranch on a smaller scale. When he died in 1919, the family carried on the operation of the ranch. His second wife, Elizabeth, and after her death, their youngest son, Tierney, continued to run the ranch and live in the beautiful family home, constructed in 1886. It was Tierney O'Keefe's idea to open the ranch's home buildings as a historic site in 1967. Tierney O'Keefe sold out to the Devonian Foundation of Calgary in 1977, which in turn gave the historic site to the city of Vernon. Included in the sale were a large number of the family's original furnishings, many of them dating to the early years of the ranch's operation. These artifacts, some in the same location that they were placed over one hundred years ago, provide a unique opportunity to study items of material history within their original context and in light of the human history in which they were found.

Among the many articles of O'Keefe provenance remaining at the ranch are three suites of furniture, purchased over a thirty-year period of time, that reflect not only the changing styles of the period in question, 1880 to 1910, but also the O'Keefe family's changing tastes and financial capabilities. These three sets of furniture, a bedroom suite, a parlour

suite and a dining-room suite, were all manufactured in Canada and span a time in which British Columbia grew from an isolated province far from eastern Canadian markets to a major economic force in the country. This article will examine in detail each of these suites of furniture, their place of manufacture, their style and the significance that they played in the lives of the O'Keefe family who owned them.

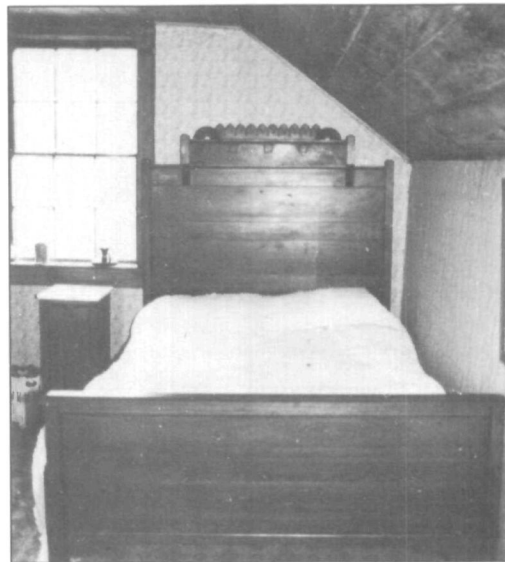
When O'Keefe first arrived at Okanagan Lake in 1867, he and his partner, Thomas Greenhow, lived in a small log shack they had hastily constructed. At first this was little more than a place to lay their bedrolls at night, all cooking probably being done over an open fire in front of the shack. However, as they began to settle in, their living arrangements were improved upon. In later years, O'Keefe was fond of telling his children that, on the first rainy day, he took a break from ranching and constructed a chair from the materials at hand. No doubt, on the first trip to the nearest supplier at Fort Kamloops, a small stove was purchased and the shack became more of a home. Here the two bachelors lived for some years.

The first frame building on the O'Keefe Ranch was constructed in 1872 to house the newly established Okanagan post office and general store, the first in the Okanagan Valley. In August of that year, the British Columbia Express Company, known universally as the BX, inaugurated a weekly stage coach and freight service to the ranch. At that time the O'Keefe Ranch was located at the end of the wagon road into the Okanagan from the north, it being some five years later that the road was extended to Okanagan Mission, near the site later known as Kelowna. With its general store, post office and later grist mill, the ranch became the centre of activities in the North Okanagan. As their fortunes improved, O'Keefe and Greenhow began to yearn for the more comfortable things in life. Sometime during the early 1870s they constructed new log houses, side by side.

Structural evidence in the O'Keefe log house, still standing at the historic O'Keefe Ranch, suggests that it originally consisted of an upper and lower floor with no room dividers. Sometime shortly after its construction, a lean-to kitchen was added, after which the entire building was covered over with drop siding, giving it a more "civilized" appearance. It was to this new home that O'Keefe's bride, Mary Anne, came in 1876. Her arrival brought the number of white women in

the Okanagan Valley to three. The new Mrs. O'Keefe, like any bride, began to look for more suitable furnishings for her house, and before long her husband took her to Victoria where the couple were able to shop for more sophisticated furniture.

They purchased a three-piece bedroom suite, consisting of a bed, a dresser and a washstand (figs. 1, 2, 3). The design of the suite is unpretentious, and aside from the more elaborate pediments on the dresser and bed headboard, the elements are extremely simple. The entire suite is of a simple rectilinear design with incised lines giving the overall effect of solidity. The primary wood is walnut, while the interior parts consist of less-expensive softwoods.



**Fig. 1**  
Bed manufactured by John Weiler, Victoria, B.C. (Collection: O'Keefe Historic Ranch, acc. no. K.572.5)



**Fig. 2**  
Dresser. (acc. no. K.572.4)

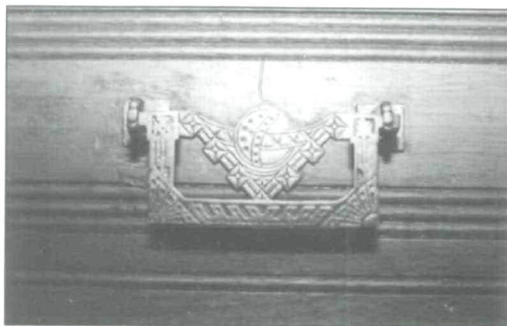


▲ **Fig. 3**  
Washstand. (acc. no.  
K.572.2)

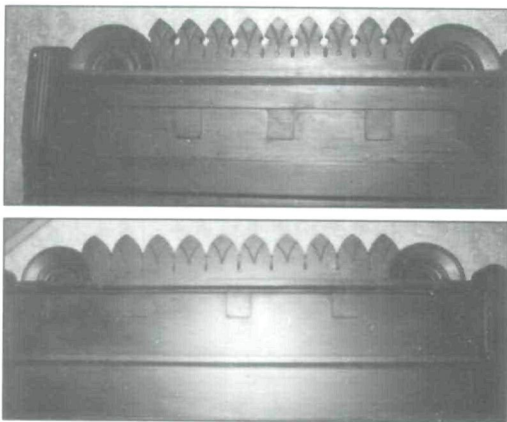
The washstand and the dresser have white marble tops which remain in excellent condition to this day. An interesting element of these two case pieces is the brass drawer handles, which are of a rectilinear design based upon geometric shapes (fig. 4). This is consistent with the other design elements, which because of their relative simplicity suggest that the pattern could be easily manufactured by machinery.

The dresser, like the bed, has a pediment consisting of a series of machine-made leaf-

► **Fig. 4**  
Drawer handle of  
washstand.



► **Fig. 5**  
Comparison of two  
pediments, dresser and  
bed.



shaped motifs in a line with concentric half-circles at either end (fig. 5). The details of these two pediments vary slightly, with the dresser showing more detailed work in the leaf motif than the bed.

The suite of furniture was obviously factory manufactured and intended for a mass market. The variation in detail with regards to the pediments indicates that the set was not exactly en suite and each piece was probably one of many similar pieces produced in the same factory. This was often the case with more modestly priced suites, the individual pieces being similar in design rather than identical in detail. Even more indicative of its mass production is the fact that the upper drawer in the washstand is not perfectly square, betraying a haste and a lack of attention to detail that would not have occurred in the more sophisticated cabinet-maker's shop. Nonetheless the suite has a consistency of design that gives it an appeal and, considering its intended market, is functional and unpretentious.

Another interesting aspect of construction that demonstrates the evolving techniques of factory production is the method in which the drawer fronts and side are joined (fig. 6). Instead of the traditional dovetailing technique, the sides of the drawer fronts have been cut to form a series of circular pegs like dowells which fit into corresponding holes cut into the drawer sides. This technique of joining, called "scallop and dowell," was produced by a machine developed by the Knapp Dovetailing Machine Company of Northampton, Massachusetts. The machine was demonstrated and won medals at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. It was improved after 1881 so that a single operator could produce up to 200 drawers in one day.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, the suite of furniture was designed in the "Eastlake" style, which achieved popularity in the 1870s and 1880s in North America.<sup>2</sup> There is no question that Eastlake's dictates of good taste—rectilinear form, relative simplicity of outline and detail, and shallow carving or inlaid ornamentation—are all present in this suite of furniture. The basics of Eastlake's style were closely adhered to by the manufacturer, partially to reflect the fashionable tastes of the day, but also because they lent themselves to machine manufacture so well. There is evidence of a strong influence from American manufacturers, possibly via the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, which featured a large number of Eastlake-inspired pieces.

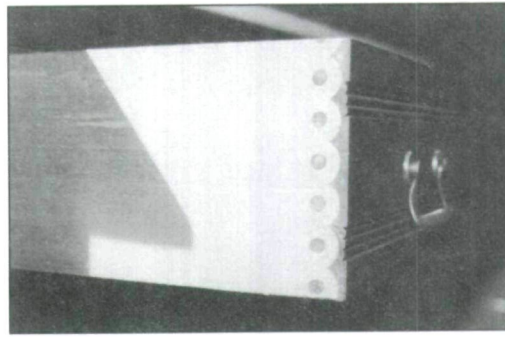
The three-piece bedroom suite in question is an example of mass-produced furniture, well made and probably moderately priced. It would have been constructed from designs borrowed and slightly adapted from furniture manufacturers in the American West or mid-West. Sir Charles Locke Eastlake, while probably not overly impressed, would have agreed with the basic design considerations, which give the pieces a simplicity of line and form without sacrificing sturdiness or functionalism.

The back of the washstand bears a manufacturer's shipping label with one corner torn off. What remains of the label has the handwritten name "...eefe, Okanagan" and the maker's name: "JOHN WEILER Dealer in, Furniture, Crockery & Glassware. Fell's Block, Fort Street, Victoria, B.C." The manufacturer, John Weiler, came to Victoria in 1861 and set up business with Louis Stemler, an upholsterer. When Stemler left the business in 1862, Weiler carried on and before long was the largest manufacturer of furniture in Victoria, if not in all of British Columbia. During the 1870s, Weiler was joined in business by his eldest son, George, who had studied furniture design and upholstery in San Francisco and possibly been exposed to the Eastlake style when it reached the West Coast. The Weiler firm, soon including the three younger sons, Charles, Otto and Joseph, moved into a large three-story building on Fort Street in 1879 and occupied these premises for the next six years. A contemporary newspaper article describes the building:

The ground floor contains utensils, glassware, crockery, and plateware, much of which was imported from England...adjacent cabinet-making room contains a zinc-lined oven to heat wooden joints for gluing. Furniture furnishings...on the second floor...baby carriages to office furniture. Upholstering on the third floor and there was a staff of 17.<sup>3</sup>

It was these premises that Cornelius and Mary Ann O'Keefe visited some time in the early 1880s to purchase a suite of bedroom furniture. This suite was shipped to their small log house in the Okanagan, probably by the British Columbia Express Company. While the suite of furniture was far from the finest available from John Weiler and Company, it would have been considered quite elegant in the sparsely settled Okanagan of the 1880s.

The suite of furniture, looking very little the worse for wear, is still in the building, over one hundred years later. The upstairs room in which the suite was placed has very limited



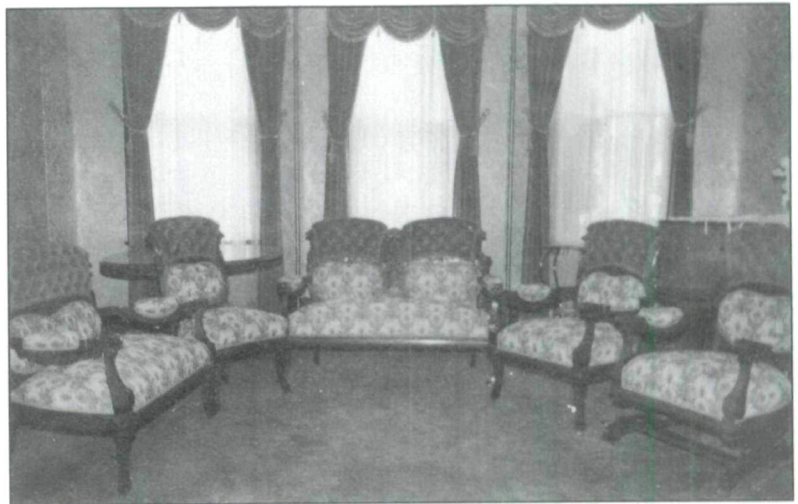
**Fig. 6**  
Drawer in dresser showing scallop-and-dowell joining.

wall space because of the roof line. The bed's headboard just fits in the space left between the window and the side wall. The O'Keefes could not have purchased a suite of furniture any larger in their rather cramped quarters.

This purchase of the Weiler furniture reflects the changing economic circumstances of the O'Keefe family. As construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway progressed east from Burrard Inlet and west from Calgary, agricultural producers such as O'Keefe in the fertile North Okanagan were lifted out of the doldrums of post-gold-rush British Columbia. Beef cattle and other agricultural produce found a ready market among the railway construction crews and resulted in money in the pockets of settlers like O'Keefe who used their new wealth to purchase more consumer goods and more land.

Cornelius O'Keefe amassed huge land holdings, which once the railway was completed and access to eastern markets assured, could be used to produce a wide variety of agricultural products. O'Keefe became involved in growing wheat and raising hogs and sheep in addition to his already-established occupations of cattle rancher, grist miller and postmaster. His economic prosperity became

**Fig. 7**  
Five-piece suite of parlour furniture manufactured by Harris and Campbell, Ottawa. (acc. no. K.3)



even more assured when in the early 1890s it was established that the Okanagan was especially suited for fruit growing. O'Keefe, who personally owned close to 12,000 acres (4,856 ha), found himself holding a fortune in land. His future was assured and his place of prominence in the community unquestioned.

As the O'Keefe family grew, the small log house became too crowded. In 1886, O'Keefe began the construction of a new residence, one that would incorporate the finest materials available. The new building, which was added on to the front of the original log house, was classic Queen Anne in style, with "fish-scale" shingling in the gable areas set off from the drop siding on the lower sections, all tastefully ornamented in true Victorian fashion. The Kamloops *Inland Sentinel*, the only newspaper for hundreds of miles, called the house "one of

the finest in the inland country." The O'Keefe family's new home was completed for Christmas of 1886 and the family, consisting of five children with another on the way, settled in.

The interior of the new house received as much attention as the exterior. A craftsman was brought in from eastern Canada on the newly completed Canadian Pacific Railway to fabricate the woodwork for the building. This woodwork, which survives to this day with its original finish untouched, was primarily of British Columbia fir with the more detailed pieces of maple and hemlock. The rich brown tones gave an overall feeling of luxury to the interior. All that was lacking was the fine furniture to complete the setting.

As the showpiece of the house, the O'Keefes purchased a five-piece suite of parlour furniture, consisting of a sofa, love seat, platform

rocker, gentleman's chair and lady's chair (fig. 7). This suite is still located in the parlour, where it has remained since the day it was brought to the house. It is manufactured of butternut, with each piece finely carved. The tapestry and rose plush fabrics are not original but probably represent the combination of heavy and plush fabrics originally used. The seats and lower back cushions are covered in a heavy tapestry weave and the upper backs in a rose-coloured tufted cotton. The entire suite is stuffed with horsehair and the seats are supported with ample springs. All but the platform rocker have identical cabriole legs with brass casters (fig. 8).

There is a stylistic unity to the suite, with the same design motifs adapted to fit the different sizes of furniture. The lower back cushions are kidney shaped, but in the love seat this shape is elongated to cover the entire back. The decorative relief carving in the suite adheres to a stylized floral design using rosettes and a smoothly flowing leaf motif (fig. 9). All of the pieces have identical designs along the sides of the back cushions (fig. 10). The carving above the kidney-shaped cushions

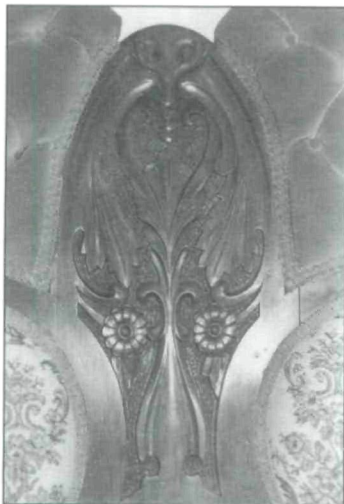
in the backs is the same, but slightly elongated in the love seat to match the extension of the cushion shape.

The suite demonstrates the stylistic influence at work at the time of manufacture. While it is primarily rococo revival in its

**Fig. 8**  
Sofa showing cabriole legs with casters. (acc. no. K.3.1).



**Fig. 9**  
Stylized floral design on sofa.



**Fig. 10**  
Detail of chair back.

intricate carving and cabriole legs, it also shows an influence of the art nouveau style, especially in the carved asymmetrical curves based loosely around a floral motif. These style elements are remarkable since the style, only later called art nouveau, was not popular in North America until after the Paris international exposition of 1900. This indicates that the cabinetmaker was aware of the European, primarily French, style trends of the 1890s and incorporated them into his work.

The manufacturers' mark, stencilled on the bottom of each piece, identifies the firm of Harris and Campbell of O'Connor Street in Ottawa. Robert T. Harris, upholsterer, and Thomas Campbell, cabinetmaker, had a partnership with a long history in Ottawa, dating from the time of Confederation. By the 1890s the firm appears to have been taken over by the sons Robert T. Harris Jr. and William J. Campbell.<sup>4</sup> This fine suite of furniture was likely made by W.N. Barry, whose handwritten note on the bottom of the lady's chair clearly establishes date and place of manufacture: "W.N. Barry Ottawa, Ont. Dec. 8th, 1897." W.N. Barry was a cabinetmaker for the company and eventually became co-owner in 1906, when the firm was dissolved and reopened under the name of Harris and Barry Ltd.

The suite was expensive and manufactured individually by Harris and Campbell, who also imported furniture for sale in Ottawa. Harris and Campbell advertised "Art Furniture" and it was undoubtedly their well-earned reputation for "the very latest" that attracted the O'Keefes to their O'Connor Street showrooms. The O'Keefe Ranch archives contain a cancelled cheque for \$900 cashed at the Bank of Montreal in Ottawa in November 1897. It is interesting to speculate just how much of this sum went towards the suite of furniture, but unfortunately the receipt for the actual purchase of the furniture has not survived.

The O'Keefes placed the suite in a well-lit parlour with windows on two walls. The other items in the room, including a loo table, a marble plant stand, and a candelabrum and clock combination, reinforce the smooth flowing curved lines of this suite of furniture. Even the woodwork in the room is stained to a colour very close to the parlour suite. Possibly the furniture was chosen to match the existing woodwork in the room.

The purchase and shipping of this furniture from the East reflects the O'Keefe's growing sophistication and financial independence

and perhaps their need to demonstrate it to the people of Vernon and area. Certainly the influx of English gentry into the Vernon area, notably Lord Aberdeen, then Governor General of Canada, gave the O'Keefes added impetus to furnish their fine house with the best of Canadian craftsmanship.

The O'Keefes were not to enjoy their new furnishings for long. Mary Ann O'Keefe died in 1899, leaving her husband, Cornelius, now in his early sixties, with eight children. But the rancher surprised everyone when he returned from a trip to Ottawa with a new bride, Elizabeth, who, at the age of twenty-three, was the same age as his eldest son. Over the next thirteen years, the O'Keefe family grew by another six children, the youngest daughter being born when her father was seventy-six years of age.

Cornelius O'Keefe sold off the majority of his land holdings in 1907, at the height of the Okanagan land boom, and realized a small fortune. Now in a state of semi-retirement, he was content to reinvest his money in a variety of projects and to leave the management of the household to his wife. Elizabeth O'Keefe, whose artistic talents are indicated by her excellent oil paintings that still remain in the house, had virtually unlimited resources at her disposal in redecorating her new home. Her good taste can be seen throughout the house, especially in the dining room, which to this day exhibits an elegance and refinement that amazes the visitor.

At the height of the Edwardian period, around 1911, Elizabeth purchased a dining-room suite consisting of a sideboard (fig. 11), a glass-fronted china cabinet (fig. 12), a side table and a dining table with five leaves capable of expanding it to fourteen feet (4.3 m) in length.

**Fig. 11**  
Sideboard  
manufactured by  
George McLagan  
Furniture Company.  
(acc. no. K.70.14)



►  
**Fig. 12**  
China cabinet. (acc. no.  
K.70.15)



►  
**Fig. 13**  
Side view of sideboard.



The suite is constructed of white oak, quarter sawn to reveal the "flake" or "silver" grain, and stained black to highlight the grain. This dark-stained oak was common in the early years of this century and may have been an attempt to match the effect that age has on English oak, which turns a rich black-brown over the years.

The entire suite of furniture is in excellent condition, having never left the dining room in which it was first put.

According to an original shipping tag attached to the bottom of the table, this suite was constructed by the George McLagan Furniture Company Limited of Stratford, Ontario, and sold by Campbell Brothers Furniture in Vernon. The McLagan Furniture Company had been established as Porteous and McLagan in 1886. George McLagan became sole proprietor in 1900 and the company grew to be one of the largest manufacturers in Canada in the years before 1920. It specialized in fashionable furniture for the middle-class and had a network that extended across Canada.<sup>5</sup> Around this factory, a number of other furniture factories were established, making Stratford one of the major furniture centres in the country. In fact, the twelve chairs that form a complement to the suite of furniture were manufactured by the Stratford Chair Works and were no doubt shipped and purchased together with the suite.

The long curved elements that sweep down the sides to form the legs and which are matched by the supports on the upper structure of the sideboard (fig. 13) are typical of the late Empire period and after. This represents the George McLagan Furniture Company's line of "Grand Master Furniture," which carefully copied the designs of the past. An advertisement for the McLagan Company dating from the period in question is for a "Vanity Dressing Table" which is "an ideal McLagan Grand Master adaptation of the refined simplicity which Marie Antoinette's influence spread over furniture making of the Louis Sixteenth period." The description of the piece's "beauty chiefly of straight lines, graceful proportion and chaste ornament" might well apply to the dining-room suite under examination and reflects McLagan's appeal to the upper middle class's well-developed sense of style and refinement typical of the Edwardian era.

Family tradition has it that this suite was purchased in 1910 or 1911 and this is borne out by a cancelled cheque in the O'Keefe Ranch archives, dated 5 June 1911, from Cornelius O'Keefe to Campbell Brothers Furniture in Vernon for \$399.70, a substantial price to pay at the time for a suite of furniture.

The dining-room suite and the opulent dining room in which it was placed reflect the O'Keefe's expanded social position in the community. The fact that the table seats twelve indicates that formal dinners were not

uncommon. O'Keefe, now recognized as one of the "Fathers of the Okanagan," was well respected in the community and his home was the frequent host to a variety of important visitors, from the Catholic Bishop of British Columbia to Provincial Minister of Lands, Price Ellson, another early Okanagan settler.

Cornelius O'Keefe died in 1919, leaving a luxurious home very much as it appears today.

The house and surrounding buildings, now a popular historic site, are a monument to the dedication and commitment of this man and his family to the Okanagan and its potential. The furniture remaining, especially in the two homes, faithfully reflects the changing life styles and economic status of this remarkable family and the times in which they lived.

#### NOTES

1. Connie Morningstar, "Finally Antique: Factory Furniture of the 1880s," *The Antiques Journal*, December 1981.
2. Mary Jean Smith Madigan, in her excellent article on Eastlake's influence on American Furniture in the *Winterthur Portfolio* 10, has traced how Charles Locke Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste* influenced North American furniture manufacture in the years 1870 to 1890.
3. *Victoria Colonist*, 15 March 1879.
4. Information on the firm of Harris and Campbell was supplied by Christine Grant of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.
5. Information on the George McLagan Furniture Company was supplied by Christine Grant of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.