



Portage and Its Past

Grace J. Potts

Portage and Its Past

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Portage, Michigan

Portage and its Past

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Portage Public Schools & Portage Public Library
Portage, Wisconsin

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Foreword

The area that today comprises Portage, Michigan has been a crossroads throughout its history. The very name, *Portage*, was given to this community by early settlers who were aware that the Indians portaged between the Kalamazoo and St. Joseph Rivers using the lakes and streams in the area. That Portage remains a crossroads today is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that two of Michigan's major expressways, I-94 to the east and west and U.S. 131 to the north and south, intersect within the city limits.

The developments that occurred between the portaging by early day Indians and the construction of the vast concrete ribbons that criss-cross our state today are the essence of this book, *Portage and Its Past*. The history of our community is a varied one, filled with a host of colorful characters and marked by the hard work of frugal yankees and the perseverance of Dutch immigrants. It is appropriate that the written history of Portage was undertaken as one of the community's Bicentennial projects. It is equally appropriate that it involved countless members of the community and was co-sponsored by the City of Portage and the Portage Public Schools.

We anticipate that this book will be a source of nostalgic interest through its reflection of the past, as well as an inspiration to present residents who will be introduced to the pioneers of an earlier day. To this end, we offer *Portage and Its Past*, and we dedicate it to the thousands of Portage citizens who have contributed to the development of our community.

Betty Lee Ongley

Mayor of the City of Portage



Gayl F. Werme, President

Portage Board of Education



About the Author



According to his epitaph, Robert Frost had a love affair with life. It could be said that Grace Potts has had a love affair with history. When she was born on the northwest side of Kalamazoo, Michigan, it was a city considerably smaller than the present size of Portage, Michigan, subject of her new book, *Portage and Its Past*. Her relationship with Portage began in the 1920's when she served as student teacher at the new Portage Agricultural School and was renewed years later when she conducted a workshop for student librarians in the techniques of researching and writing local histories.

A graduate of Kalamazoo Central High School, the author earned her AB degree at Western State Teachers College in Kalamazoo and her MA degree at Columbia University. Her teaching career included three years in Battle Creek, Michigan, one year as an exchange teacher in Spokane, Washington, and forty-one years in Kalamazoo, where she taught kindergarten through third grade at five different schools. She also served the Kalamazoo Schools as principal at Hillcrest, Lindberg, Knollwood and Oakwood elementary schools.

Miss Potts' interest in travel has taken her to all fifty states and the major European countries at least once. An abiding, lifelong interest in American history accounts for her knowledge of antiques and her skill in many of the crafts which were essential to the early life of this country. Steeped in local history from early childhood, Miss Potts is the author of two history books written for elementary age children entitled *Kalamazoo Long Ago* and *Kalamazoo Today*. In addition she authored an inservice guide for teachers entitled *Learning More About School in School*.

Although retired from teaching seven years, her energy and enthusiasm belie her age. Her persistence in searching out missing details to complete an historical picture contributed many interesting facts to her chronicle of Portage. Indeed, co-workers never ceased to be entertained by her anecdotes of local characters and edified by an endless stream of artifacts from the past including many old photos, a handmade school slate, bonnets, lace-trimmed aprons, quilts and a variety of other handwork.

After she had familiarized herself with Portage from an historical perspective, Miss Potts took her associates on a series of driving tours of Portage with a running commentary on historic buildings and locations. After one particularly varied expedition, her audience teasingly challenged her to take them, Indian-fashion, on a canoe tour down Portage Creek. When it became apparent that she would accept any challenge, she was thereafter affectionately known as "Amazing Grace"!

Posie Tomlinson
1976

Editor's Note

As far as we know This qualification has surely been offered by all who have participated in the reconstruction of a local history as preface to their offspring. History does indeed change as new sources of information and new facts are discovered. What follows is a first effort to gather together the known facts concerning the development of Portage, Michigan. The story is not complete and apology is made in advance for inevitable omissions and inaccuracies. They were not intended.

The text which follows was written with the dual purpose in mind of providing a readable account of Portage history for local residents and history buffs everywhere and an accurate history to be used at several levels in the public school curriculum.

At every step in the process of producing this book, the help of a host of interested people has been crucial. Senior citizens shared their memories and their memorabilia; the Archives Department and the History Department at Western Michigan University as well as the Kalamazoo Public Library offered information and guidance; the Kalamazoo Gazette and the Upjohn Company supplied valuable photographs from their files; Dolly Polson and Pat Betwee, in particular, and staff members, in general, of both the Audio Visual and Library Services Department of the Portage Public Schools and the Portage Public Library contributed in countless ways; and local citizens generously offered their time and talents to an array of tasks from clerical to research work, from photography to cartography. Most importantly they shared ideas and tendered encouragement.

This project has been a learning experience for all who have worked on it. We hope it will stimulate further investigation and increase interest among Portage citizens in their heritage.

ADVENTURE



1

Portage Country

Portage! What does the name convey? What picture comes to mind? Imagine a canoe or a flatboat carried on sturdy shoulders from one waterway to another. If the boat is especially long, two men carrying it or even three. Carrying it along the deep trodden path through heavy forest, through oak openings, skirting a marsh or over open prairie . . . this is the way the Indians traveled in the days long ago. They carried the boat until it could again be lowered into the water and the Indian braves and their families could be on their way.

In Portage it is so easy to travel by water. This is the township that has more water surface than any other township in Kalamazoo County. This is the township where the waters flow two ways. In the southern half most of the streams drain into the St. Joseph River and in the northern half they wind their way into the Kalamazoo River. Eventually they both empty into Lake Michigan. It is fascinating to trace the rivers on a map. There are many twists and turns, so many lakes to cross, all flowing through what turned out to be some of the richest farm land in southwestern Michigan.

Perhaps it is early spring . . . the Potawatomi Indians have arrived back at their beloved Indian Fields from their winter campground. The warming weather readies the soil so the squaws may plant the corn, pumpkins, squash, beans and gourds needed for winter supplies. The furs from the winter's trapping have been exchanged at the white man's trading post for brightly colored beads, hatchets, knives, colorful cloth and the "firewater" which the white man makes. The braves have been busy hunting and fishing so there is a goodly supply of meat to be dried and made into *pemmican*.

Now, perhaps in summer or early fall, the men

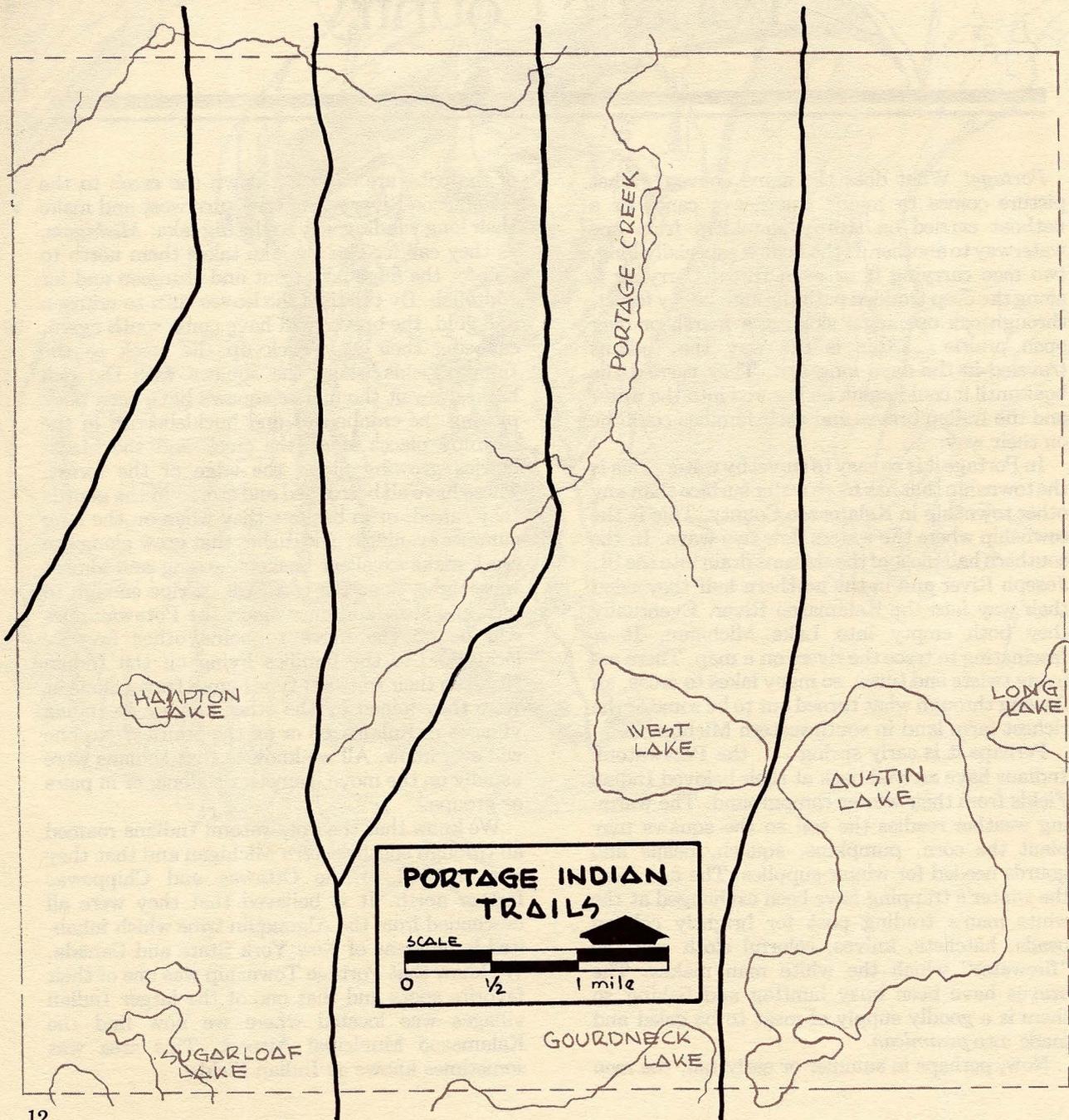
of the tribe are canoeing down the creek to the Kalamazoo River where they turn west and make their long winding way to the big lake, *Mishigam*, as they call it. The big lake takes them north to fish for the huge lake trout and sturgeon and for whitefish. By the time the leaves turn to crimson and gold, the braves will have come south again, canoeing their way back up the creek to the Indian Fields where the squaws with the rich harvest await them. The squaws have been busy picking the cranberries and huckleberries in the swampy places along the creek and the blackberries growing along the edge of the forest. These have all been dried and stored in the gourds they raised, or in baskets they wove on the long summer evenings. The rushes that grow along the creek make excellent baskets, strong and almost watertight. Soon the corn will be ripe enough to pick and store and once again the Potawatomies will be on the move to some other favorite location. Did the families living on the Indian Fields in their wigwam-type homes travel alone or were they joined by the other families in Indian villages in Kalamazoo or on the prairies? No one will ever know. All we know is that Indians were usually on the move, sometimes alone, or in pairs or groups.

We know that the Potawatomi Indians roamed all through southwestern Michigan and that they were related to the Ottawas and Chippewas farther north. It is believed that they were all descended from the Algonquin tribe which inhabited large areas of New York State and Canada. We know that Portage Township was one of their favorite spots and that one of the larger Indian villages was located where we now find the Kalamazoo Municipal Airport. This area was sometimes known as Indian Fields.

Portage was an ideal spot for them. Three well marked Indian trails running north and south must have been in almost constant use. What is now Portage Street was no doubt the longest trail coming north from the old Sauk Trail, later called the Chicago Road and now designated as U.S. 12. In Portage, it went between the two large lakes of Austin and West. Then, after a slight curve around the upper lake, it straightened out again and ran through the hardwood forest for quite some distance. Then it started to curve again, skirting the swamps that were almost continuous, until it reached the great east and west trail known as the Potawatomi Trail, later called the Territorial Road

and now Michigan Avenue in Kalamazoo. This seemed to be the meeting place of trails that came from all directions.

Another popular Portage trail came up from the Chicago Road and the St. Joseph River, passed through what is now Niles and along Route 66 to Three Rivers. It then headed north over the prairie and curved slightly to the east until it reached what is now Westnedge Avenue. On reaching Westnedge, it had to stay clear of the swampy area and creek and just before reaching the Potawatomi trail in Kalamazoo, it had some hilly country to cross, besides skirting a few swamps. What is now Oakland Drive was the third and rather minor trail



going straight across the prairie, then through heavy forest, skirting swamps and then joining the east-west trail as it descended the hill where the old buildings of Western Michigan University are located.

Following any of these trails, we can let our imaginations run riot. Most of the hardwood forests are gone, but there are enough large trees still standing to make one realize how awe-inspiring it must have been. A few patches of the oak openings are still around and wood lots along the way help one to picture the forest. Of course, the creek and lakes are still here and the visible muck land which once was nothing but swamps and marsh covered with tamarack, bushes and sedges.

History tells us that the numerous swamps and lakes in Michigan kept the very early settlers away. No doubt the early trappers and traders had something to do with the reluctance of the pioneers to come to Michigan. They were not averse to keeping the territory to themselves. Many of them were reaping a rich harvest from furs of the animals that roamed the forest and the beavers and muskrats along its waters. The demand for these furs by the European royalty and the wealthy lords was as great as ever. It constituted one of the top exports of America to the European Continent and America was in desperate need of European-manufactured goods.

The Great Lakes were another barrier when it came to crossing into Michigan territory. The Yankee hill farmers and the farmers of New York State and Pennsylvania had every reason to seek first the rich prairie lands of Ohio and Indiana. After the construction of the Erie Canal in 1825, it was a bit easier to reach Michigan Territory. As is always the case there were some who decided to do a bit of exploring on their own, and as they returned to their homes tales of the beauty of Michigan must have been favorite topics of conversation around the fireplaces.

Although Portage was a favorite of the Indians, the early pioneers bypassed it in favor of the prairies and the land on either side of the Potawatomi Trail and the Old Sauk Trail. The Indians continued to occupy the land regardless of the treaty made by Governor Cass in 1817. It is doubtful if the Indians raising their corn and other food on the Indian Fields or fishing in one of the beautiful lakes even realized that according to the treaty they were on American government land. On the whole the Potawatomi tribe was very friendly and quite willing to share what they had with the early settlers. In return they expected the pioneers to do the same. They had no regard for privacy. It must have been a bit crowded in those early log cabins when a group of Indians decided to pay a visit.

Chief Pokagon from near White Pigeon is said to have been a frequent visitor and had a special



Chief Pokagon, a friend of early Portage settlers

Potawatomi hunter



regard for some of the early settlers. He and a small group of the Potawatomi were so well thought of that in 1840 when hundreds of them were deported farther west he and his group were allowed to stay in Michigan. Today there is a monument to the chief at the junction of U.S. 131 and U.S. 20.

By 1840 the settlers had come to Portage and most of the surrounding area. Some of the Indians had become a nuisance to the pioneers. Not accustomed to the ways of the pioneers, and not understanding the treaty and ownership of property, they continued using the land as in former days. This led to a good deal of trouble between the two groups. When valuable animals disappeared or new plowed fields were overrun by hunting braves, there was considerable objection by the pioneers. So the Indians were sent to new lands in Wisconsin and Iowa. As they gathered on the banks of the Kalamazoo River to start the long journey west, there was a great deal of wailing and

rebellion. There was much hardship along the way and many died. Others escaped and found their way back to Michigan to be taken in by Pokagon and his people. There is a marker at the old New York Central Depot today to mark the spot of departure. Today there is an Indian reservation near Athens, another near Mount Pleasant and one near Cross Village. There are descendants of the Indians living on all of these reservations, but the number is small. The large majority of descendants living in Michigan live in the cities and small towns. They follow a number of occupations and are constantly branching out into others. At the last census there were well over 7,000 Indian inhabitants and the number is growing. It would be interesting to know if any of their ancestors ever occupied the Indian Fields in Portage, roamed through the forest or canoed on Portage Creek

A Potawatomi village







Raney 76

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Then Came the Pioneers

In 1830 William Bishop made the first entry in the books of what would become Portage Township and is now the city of Portage. It was then part of Brady Township and later part of Pavilion Township. Mr. Bishop had settled on a small piece of land in the southwest corner of the township north of Schoolcraft Township bordering on Prairie Ronde.

A man by the name of Herring built a crude log cabin on the west of the township that same year. Although it is said he lived in the cabin for a short time, there is no evidence that he ever entered his name for any government land in Kalamazoo County. This was not an unusual procedure among the early pioneers coming into Michigan. As word began to filter down into Ohio, Indiana and back east to New England and New York State, many an adventuresome individual came to explore southwestern Michigan. They often made a deal with the Indians or if there were no evidence of Indian habitation they would erect a *claim shanty*, as these cabins were called.

By 1830 many of the larger prairies of Kalamazoo County had been claimed by the first settlers who came this way. This was particularly true of Prairie Ronde, Gull Prairie and Grand Prairie. Much of this land had been entered at White Pigeon where the government land office was then located, and was claimed by permanent settlers. The prairies had particularly rich soil, and although plowing through the tall and heavy grass was difficult, there were no trees to cut down and uproot. In fact, the tall grass and roots were so heavy that it took from four to five teams of oxen to pull the wooden plow with steel blade through the compact earth. After a day of plowing the blade had to be sharpened at the blacksmith shop before it could be used again. Often this meant a trip of

several miles to the blacksmith shop after a day of hard work. As more of the prairies were settled, some pioneers went into the business of "breaking up." As the threshers did at a later date, the "breakers up" would go from farm to farm with their teams and break up the soil for the owner. It has been said they made as much as \$5.00 for plowing one acre of land. This was big money in those days when an acre of government land cost \$1.25, but the man wielding the plow had to have strong arms, excellent health and be the owner of at least four teams of oxen and a sturdy plow. The plows used by the early pioneers were usually made of hard maple which grew in abundance in southwestern Michigan forests. In addition to keeping their plows in top condition the "breakers up" had to provide for their oxen.

In Portage there was not an overabundance of prairie land to be broken up. It had only 300 acres of prairie land compared to 13,000 in Prairie Ronde and 2500 on Gull Prairie, and it had been by-passed by the earliest settlers as it was in close proximity to several acres of land used by the Indians to raise their crops during the summer months. This land, known for years as Indian Fields, was located in the northeast section of Portage Township which is now the Kalamazoo Municipal Airport.

Dry Prairie was west of this area on the other side of Portage Creek. At this junction the west side of the creek was decidedly swampy while the east side had rather a high bank. The swampy areas were infested with mosquitoes which were anathema to the pioneers. Not only did they cause unbearable itching, they often brought on an attack of the ague, now known as malaria. This caused chills and heavy fevers and left the patient very weak and unable to work. It was no wonder that the adventuresome men and women of the day

stayed away from the swamps and marshes whenever possible.

Then, too, one of the more important Indian trails coming from White Pigeon on the old Sauk trail and going to the Kalamazoo River passed between the two large lakes in Portage. These lakes, surrounded by marshlands, were of little use

for farming. So in those very early years Portage was ignored. But as other sections of land in Kalamazoo County began to be occupied the pioneers coming in the early 1830's gave Portage a second look.

In 1831 Caleb Sweetland and the three Cooley brothers, Thomas, Arad and Benjamin, came from New York State on an exploring trip. After deciding on Dry Prairie, Arad Cooley was left to enter the land and erect some kind of shelter. The other two Cooley brothers and Mr. Sweetland returned to New York, and after settling their affairs, Sweetland and Thomas Cooley returned with their families the following spring during mud time. Benjamin Cooley remained in New York. The trip from Detroit on the *Chicago Road* was so bad they had to leave part of their belongings in Coldwater to be picked up later by wagon and oxen.

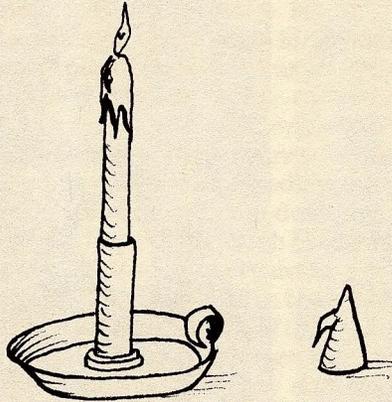
While Caleb Sweetland and Thomas Cooley were collecting their goods and families in New York State a few other pioneers arrived to claim



Clarissa and Joseph Beckley.

Children of Joseph and Clarissa Sweetland Beckley. Standing: Emily Beckley Smith, Mary Beckley Cronkite, Joseph Beckley, Charlie Beckley, Jennie Beckley Buckland. Seated: Lucius Beckley, Marcia Beckley Sutherland, Fannie Beckley Pike.





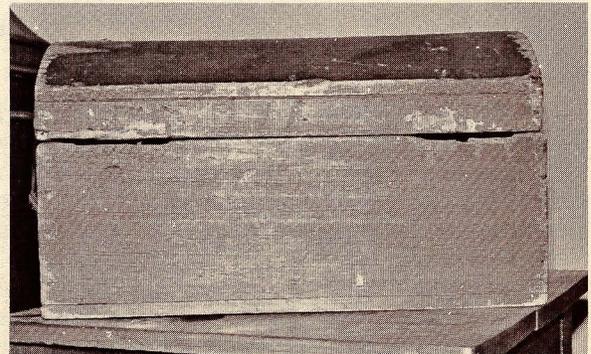
land in what is now the city of Portage. Jonas Woodard, Job Meyers, Ruel Starr, Martin Lathrop and Elijah Root decided to settle in the northeast portion, while John E. Howard and his sons entered land closer to the Cooleys and Sweetland in the northwest portion. Some of this land may have been entered previous to their arrival through a land agent. In the scant historical material available there is not always agreement on the exact date of government entries. Allison Kinne, Isaac Brooks, Prudence Wattles, daughter of John Howard, and her three sons soon joined the northwest group. Joseph Beckley, brother-in-law of Arad Cooley, would have arrived in 1835 but his wife became ill on the trip and they remained in Ohio for a year. They reached Michigan in 1836 with their first-born daughter and settled on the farm next to the Howard family. Mrs. Arad Cooley and Mrs. Beckley were related to Caleb Sweetland. Thomas Chaffee, Otis Pitts, Thomas Blackmer, Enoch French, Joseph Eastland, Frances Downey, Eli Harrison and the Crooks brothers all entered land in the eastern part. Ebenezer Stone seems to be the only pioneer who preferred to settle nearer to the center of the area and he soon erected a tavern.

In the meantime, Moses Austin elected to settle on the northwest side of what is now known as Austin Lake. He arrived in 1833 with his hired man and younger son, Benjamin, in a wagon pulled by a team of four oxen. In a history of Kalamazoo County, published in 1880, the following description of their trip appears: "The trip of the party from New York had been an exciting one, especially for the youth. They made their way through the 'Cattaraugus Swamp,' and at Dunkirk embarked on the steamer 'Sheldon Thompson,' - the first the junior member of the trio had ever boarded. In due time they reached Detroit, and then the real difficulties of the journey began. They had brought along a team of their own, and started with it towards the setting sun; and, indeed, it seemed the sun would set upon their career as emigrants, and leave them fast in the mud of Eastern Michigan. The 'going'

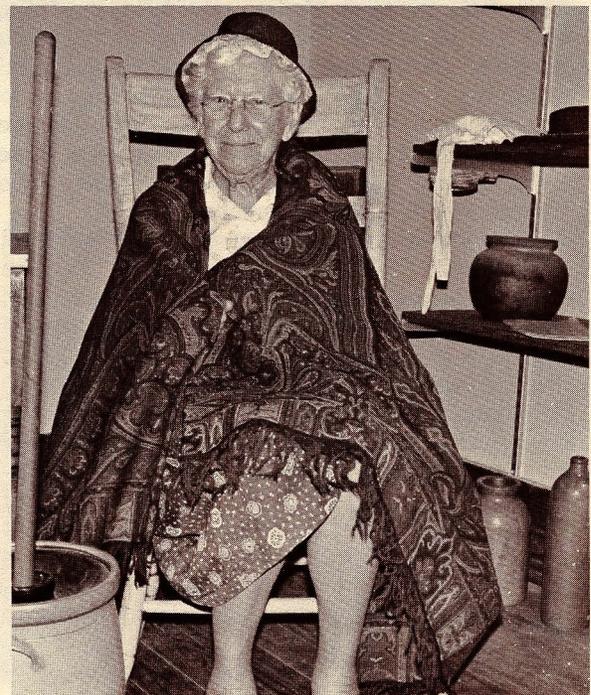
from Detroit to Ypsilanti was fearful beyond description; seas of mud disrupted their advance everywhere; but finally the distance was passed between the two points, and from Ypsilanti westward they bowled along at the rate of thirty or forty miles a day, through woods and openings, and across streams and prairies, reaching the embryo city of Kalamazoo on the day previously stated. According to B.M. Austin's recollection, the place then contained about a dozen houses."

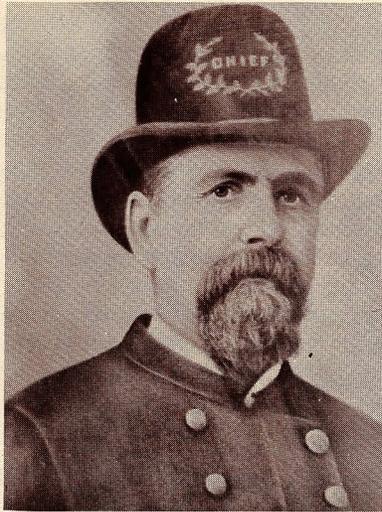
After erecting a crude shanty, the Austin party immediately began building a good sized, two story log cabin. The following spring Austin's

Chest made for Clarissa Sweetland Beckley which came with her on the covered wagon in 1836.

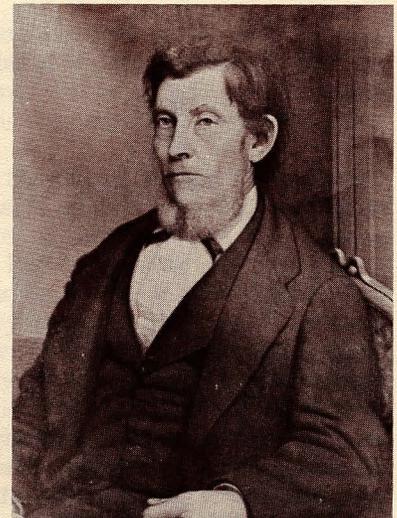


Erma A. Bloom, 92 year old granddaughter of early pioneers, Joseph and Clarissa Beckley.





Stephen Wattles, son of Prudence Howard Wattles, in his Kalamazoo Police Chief uniform.



Catherine and Stephen Howard, early Portage settlers.

wife and older son arrived with their household goods and farm animals. That summer they cleared some of the land and built an addition to the cabin which was then used as a tavern. The tavern did a thriving business as it was on the direct trail from the Chicago Road to Kalamazoo.

The above mentioned people are the early pioneer settlers of Portage. Although changes began taking place almost immediately, they are the families who cleared the land, built homes and barns and, in a few cases, operated some type of business. Most of them were still on the census rolls two decades later. Some of their descendants were still around and running their farms at the turn of the century. Perhaps the following three men should also be included in the list of early pioneers: Daniel Cahill, who bought some land from Arad Cooley; Jacob Van Hoesen, who bought land from his brother-in-law, George Martin; and Alvin Bacon, who bought a large tract of land from a speculator in 1838. John Kilgore settled a few years later.

Three important changes took place as early as 1834. Elijah Root built a sawmill on Portage Creek, Thomas and Arad Cooley bought and improved the gristmill on the northwest corner of what are now Kilgore Road and Lovers Lane, and the U.S. land office moved from White Pigeon to Kalamazoo. At this time land speculation was rife all over the country and Kalamazoo County and surrounding counties seemed to be favorite locations for such activity. What is now the city of Portage was no exception. Some of the permanent settlers began adding to their original purchases but the majority of entries were made by speculators who lived in the village of Kalamazoo and in the East. In 1835 and 1836 Portage had 125 entries.

The village of Kalamazoo became a madhouse. People set up tents along Main Street for shelter. The taverns were crowded. In 1836 alone, 1,634,511 acres of land were sold at \$1.25 an acre. There was more land sold in the Kalamazoo land office that year than in any other land office in the United States. All land in Portage Township was entered including the creek, lakes and swamps. It is doubtful if the speculators in their eastern offices knew what they were buying. Most transactions were handled by land agents.

Then it was over. In the beginning of 1837 only fourteen pieces of land exchanged ownership in Portage Township. The panic of 1837 had started. The U.S. began its first big depression. Banks failed all over the country and the paper money they had issued was worthless. Trading was at a standstill. This same year Michigan became a state.

With the failure of the banks and the worthlessness of paper money, all the country suffered. The industries on the eastern seaboard which had been making rapid strides in weaving cotton and woolens and manufacturing farm implements, transportation vehicles and paper almost came to a standstill. The ports of New York and New Orleans were practically without goods to ship as the European markets would not accept U.S. money. Europe, as well as America, suffered from the depression as few goods from Europe entered the U.S.

The peasants of Europe, always poor, became poorer and all ships that did come from Europe were loaded with immigrants. The East, being in the grip of the depression, had little to offer in jobs, so many of these immigrants of the 1830's and 1840's found their way west. A goodly number of them became hired men and worked hard to help

clear the farms owned by the early pioneers. They were used to hard work, knew how to handle animals and were willing to work for small wages. The food was plentiful, if not varied. They had adequate lodging and were able to save what they made. Salaries were about \$7.00 or \$8.00 a month plus room and board. The married ones often occupied the log cabins abandoned by the owners after they built their own frame dwellings.

So in spite of the panic and with hard and frugal living, Portage Township began to grow and prosper. The land that reverted to the government was gradually acquired by some of the first settlers so they could enlarge their holdings; other farmers coming in from other townships and from New York State bought small holdings and began clearing the land. Soon it was found that the land was excellent and very productive. There were numerous oak openings where the widely spaced trees were girdled or cut around so that they would die and allow sunlight to reach the ground. Crops such as corn and pumpkins could be planted before the ground was plowed. The trees were cleared later as time became available which provided even more productive area. The oak openings were easy to plow as the oaks were spaced far apart and a team of oxen could be led between and around the trees. Then other crops such as wheat were planted.

The hardwood forest was more difficult, but once cleared was found to be most productive. About three-fourths of the area was in timbered land and it carried a great variety of trees. Several kinds of maple and oak, hickory, black walnut, basswood, butternut, black cherry, ash, tulip, sycamore, sourgum, birch, larch cedar and a few pines were found in the primeval forest. In clearing the land some of the trees were burned, but it was soon found that many of the logs were valuable and

the lumber could be used for a variety of purposes. By this time several sawmills had been established in nearby communities and in the winter months ox teams could haul these logs to the mills for lumber. Some of the logs were kept on the farms to be split into rails for the rail fences that surrounded practically every field. Other logs could be used for the frame houses and barns that almost every farmer erected after living in a log cabin for a year or two.

Some of the settlers came to Portage without their families and after selecting their land erected a crude shanty. Then with the help of a carpenter they built a small frame house before returning to the East for their families, animals and furniture. On their return, the clearing and developing of the land began in earnest.

During the next two decades the southern part of Portage Township was settled and names such as Hawkins, Pike, Bacon, Gilmore, Middleton, Meredith, Durkee, Campbell, Matteson, Chubb, Howe, Sheldon and others were appearing on township property deeds. There were now four Lathrop families and one of them had a sizable hotel almost in the center of the township on what is now called Westnedge Ave. Mr. Dunham had started a nursery around 1840. Growing fruit had become a reality. During this time West Lake was called Pike Lake, according to an old map. Two Pike families had farms adjoining the lake shore. Moses Pike came in 1836 and had a large farm east of Portage Center, inherited by his son Nathan. Orange Pike came later but was not a relative.

At least one son of an early pioneer achieved considerable fame as a manufacturer. Benjamin Austin, son of Moses Austin, Portage tavern keeper and farmer, went to Kalamazoo in 1844. There he learned the coppersmith and tinsmith business, then ran a dry goods store for seven

First John Howard home built in the early 1830's as it looks today.



First John Howard home being removed from the newer farmhouse which still stands on Angling Road.





Log Cabin built by William and Sarah Campbell and later incorporated into the house standing on Sprinkle at Centre. Pictured are their children, Alice and Willie. Willie married Flora Milham.



William and Sarah Campbell.

years and later entered the wagon business. He did a thriving business manufacturing Jackson Wagons, selling some to local farmers and shipping many others outside the state. Moses Austin and his other son, William, eventually sold the tavern and moved to Kalamazoo to enter into business with Benjamin; but they left the legacy of Austin Lake in Portage.

It is interesting to note that a great many of the settlers in Portage Township came from Genesee and Canandaigua Counties in New York State. It seems that when word traveled back East about the beauty of the landscape, the productiveness of the soil and the cheapness of the land, several were anxious to sell their farms and join their former friends. Some of them came to see the place for themselves; others instructed their friends to buy the land for them. Whatever they did, it was soon apparent that the barges on the Erie Canal, which had opened in 1825, carried a steady stream of traffic. On entering Buffalo the passengers transferred to the Lake Erie steamer to Detroit and after stocking up on food and other essentials started for Kalamazoo County. By this time the Territorial Road had been somewhat improved and there were numerous taverns, log

cabins and frame homes of early settlers along the way.

Early pioneers were often made welcome in settlers' homes regardless of crowded conditions. At other times they stayed in taverns along the way. Many of the early pioneers chose the Chicago Road and then came north on one of the Indian trails. By 1838 there were from twenty to twenty-two families living in Portage Township, the majority on farms north of the present Romance Road. They paid a total of \$266.11 in taxes.

According to the 1850 census, there were 120 families living in Portage Township. There were seven carpenters, three blacksmiths and a bricklayer, all kept busy building homes and other farm buildings. With the exception of about 400 acres, the northern one third of the township was owned by farmers busy improving their farms. Part of the land still owned by the government was along Westnedge Avenue and was mostly marsh or swampland. The southern one third of the township with the exception of the southeast corner still contained a great deal of government land. Vaydor Pierce and Stephen Vickery owned large tracts of land in the area while Ebenezer Durkee and Harvey Booth had acquired a good many acres in the center section. Some of the early pioneers had bought land in the center as well as some newcomers.

An agricultural report of 1850 lists the total value of Portage Township as \$41,185 (\$35,334 in real estate and \$5,851 in personal property). Tax money raised on this amount was disbursed in the following way: \$219.13 to the state; \$398.55 to the county; \$170.55 to the six schools (with 240

students); \$60.00 to the township; \$66.68 to the highway commission; and \$228.75 for highway maintenance. By modern standards these figures are unbelievably low, but when compared with wages of the day included in the same report, they fit into the picture. A carpenter received \$2.00 a day without board; a female domestic received \$1.25 a week plus board; and a laborer was paid \$.75 a day plus board or \$1.00 without board.

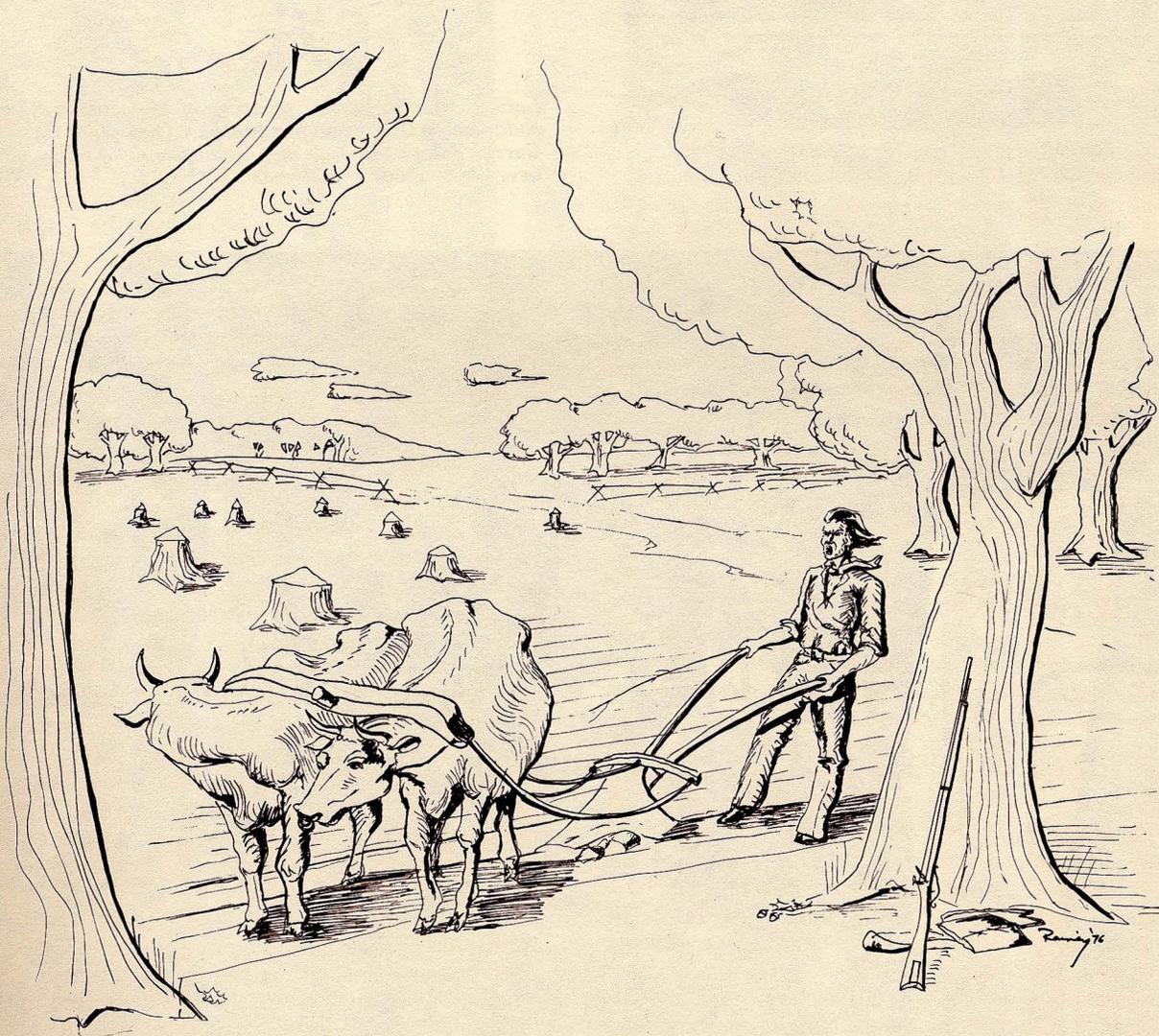
Long before this, Portage Township had been separated from Pavilion Township. In March of 1838, the first meeting was held at the home of Moses Austin and he was instrumental in naming the township after the principal stream which ran through it. At an organizational meeting held later that spring at the home of Elijah Root, Moses Austin was elected chairman and Caleb

Sweetland clerk. The meeting was then adjourned to the tavern of Ebenezer Stone, and Elijah Root was elected supervisor and Caleb Sweetland town clerk. After other officers were elected, it is said considerable whiskey was consumed to celebrate the occasion. Whiskey was supposed to be good for the ague, and perhaps these early township officers were taking no chances with the mosquitoes as warm weather was coming on.

The following men held office from 1839 up to the Civil War:

Supervisors

1839-43	Caleb Sweetland
1844	Martin Lathrop
1845-46	Roceter Howard
1847-48	Daniel Cahill
1854	Allison Kinne

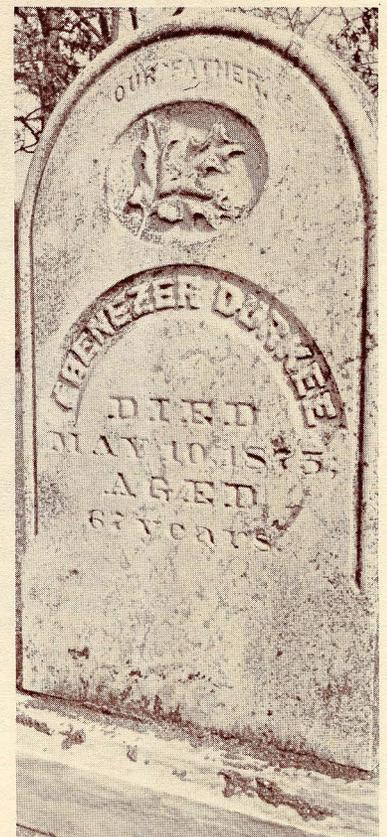
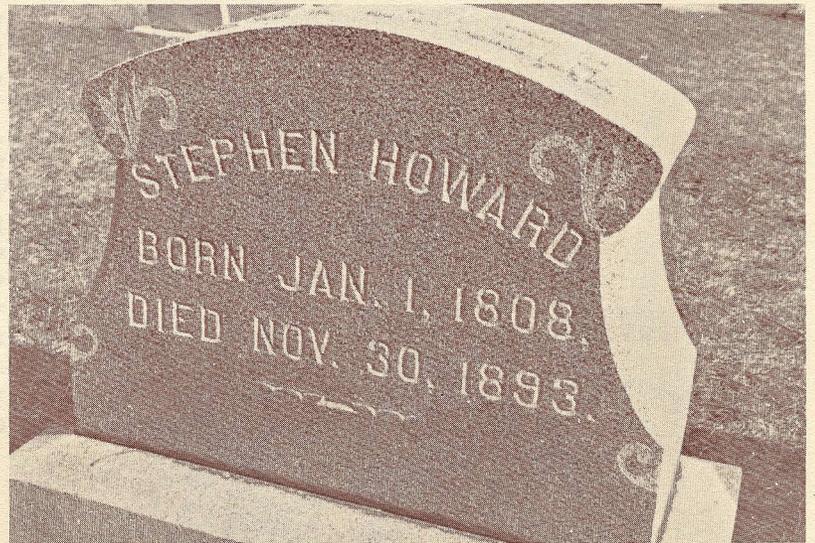
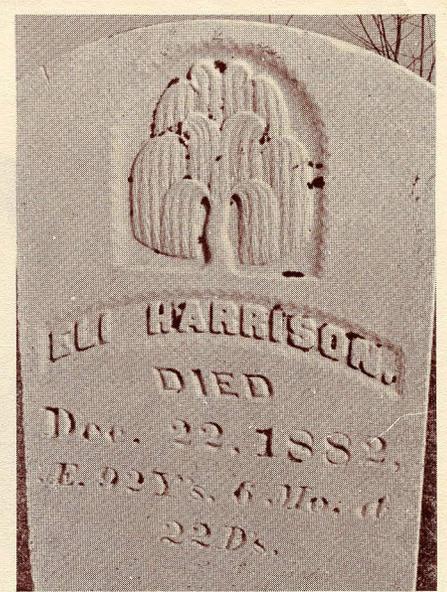
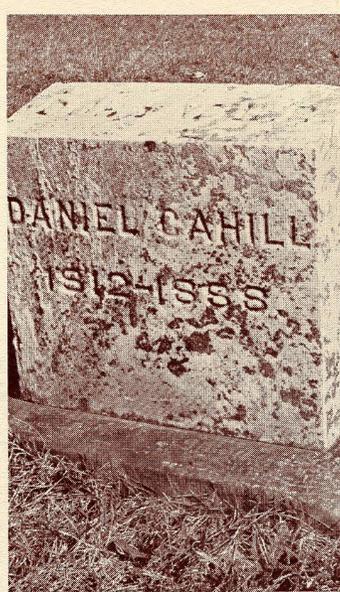
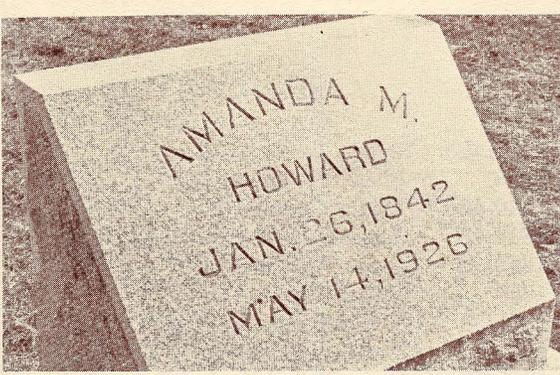


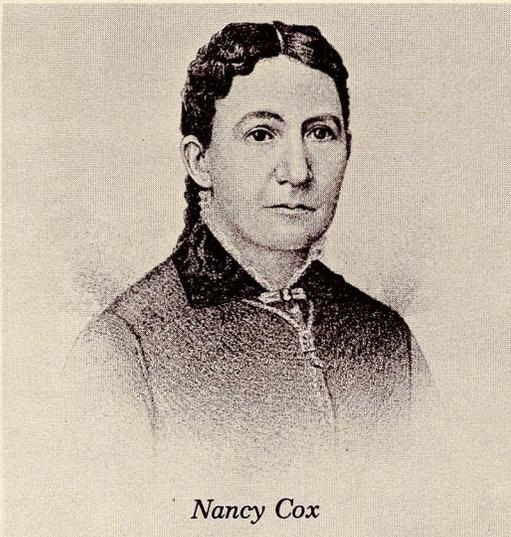


- 1855-57 John Parker
 1858 J. Eastland, Jr.
 1859-60 Daniel Cahill
 1861-65 John Oliver
- Treasurers*
- 1839-41 Caleb Sweetland
 1842-43 Martin Lathrop
 1844-45 Ebenezer Durkee
 1846 William Smith, Jr.
 1847-49 Roswell Page
 1850-51 Roswell Aldrich
 1852-53 George Stone
 1854 Rodney Russell
 1855-56 Hugh Campbell
 1857 George Oliver
 1858 William Trumble
 1859 Reuben Booth
 1859-60 Asa Ingersoll
 1862-63 Leander Bonfoey

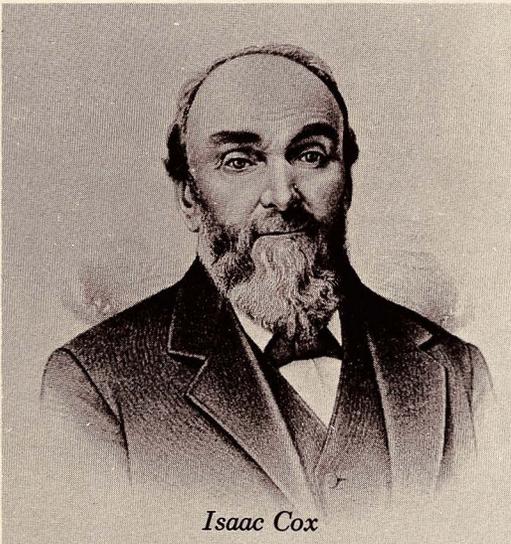
Left: Benjamin Cooley painting of his cousins Gert-rude Cooley Curry and her brother. Owned by Donald Curry. Below and opposite: Tombstones of early pio-neers in Portage cemeteries.



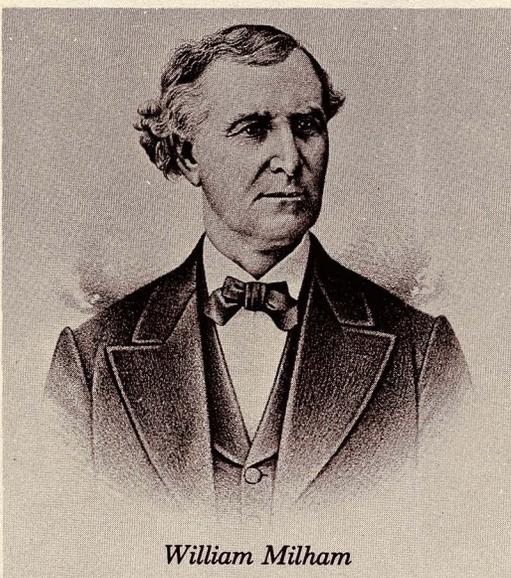




Nancy Cox



Isaac Cox

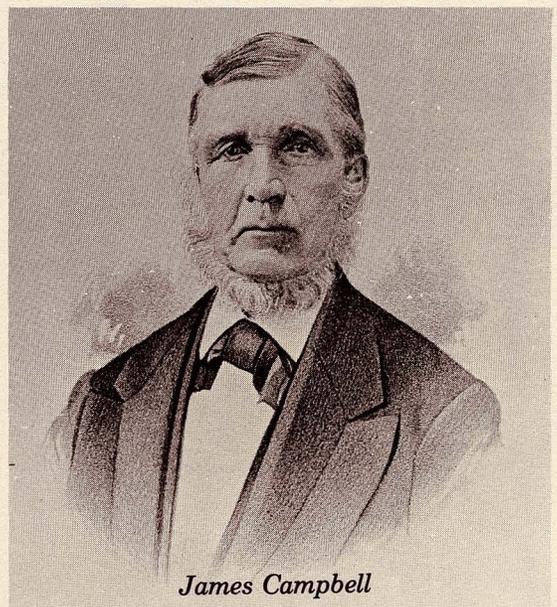


William Milham

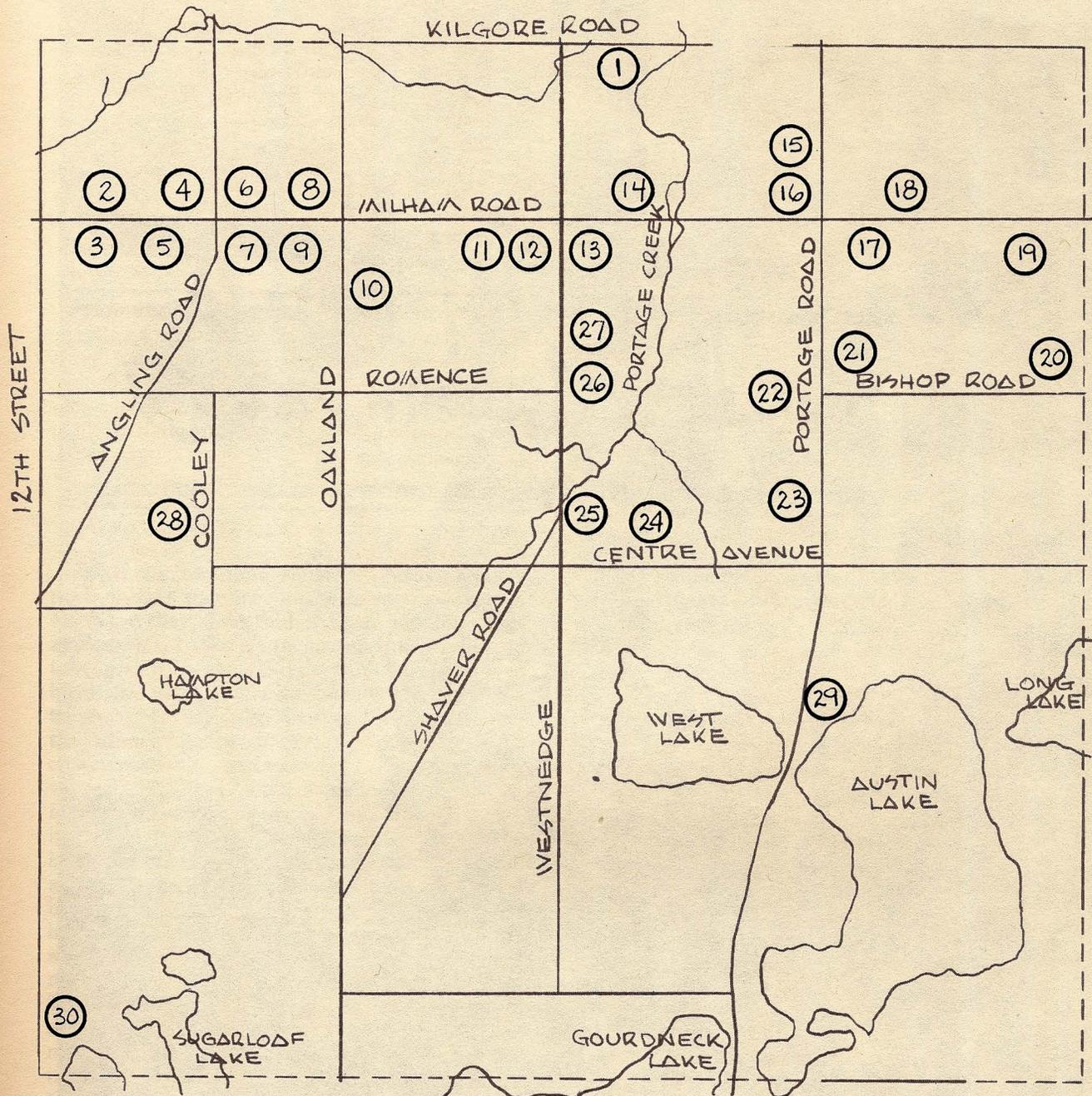
Township Clerks

1839	Martin Lathrop
1840-46	Daniel Cahill
1847-48	Joseph Eastland, Jr.
1849	Isaac Brooks
1850	Isaac Hope
1851-53	J. Eastland, Jr.
1854	Roceter Howard
1855-58	George Sheldon
1859-60	John B. Taber
1861	Daniel Jones
1862-63	Ebenezer Durkee

As can be easily seen the early officers were all chosen from the first settlers. It was not until the mid-fifties that a few new names appeared and it was in the sixties that names began to appear of residents living south of Centre Street. Before that time all elected officers lived in the northern half of the township. In addition, in those early years the majority of the farmers held more than one office. Township offices included Justice of the Peace, Assessor, Commissioner of Highways, Drain Commissioner, School Inspector, Overseer of the Poor, and Constable. There is no doubt that the pioneers of Portage Township and their sons controlled the political destiny of the area. They did a good job. Besides being excellent farmers with their holdings showing constant improvement, they built new homes and farm buildings, started schools, and provided neighboring farmers with a gristmill, two sawmills, a nursery and a post office.



James Campbell



EARLIEST PORTAGE SETTLERS

- 1 John Kilgore
- 2 Allison Kinne
- 3 Prudence Howard Wattles
- 4 Stephen Howard
- 5 Caleb Sweetland
- 6 John Howard
- 7 Isaac Brooks
- 8 Joseph Beckley
- 9 Arad Cooley
- 10 Thomas Cooley

- 11 Joseph Eastland
- 12 Daniel Cahill
- 13 Ebenezer Stone
- 14 Elijah Root
- 15 Ruel Starr
- 16 Job Meyers
- 17 William Milham
- 18 Thomas Blackmer
- 19 Otis Pitts
- 20 Samuel Crooks

- 21 Jonas Woodard
- 22 Francis Downey
- 23 Eli Harrison
- 24 Ebenezer Durkee
- 25 Henry Tuttle
- 26 Martin Lathrop
- 27 David Ingersoll
- 28 Alvin Bacon
- 29 Moses Austin
- 30 William Bishop



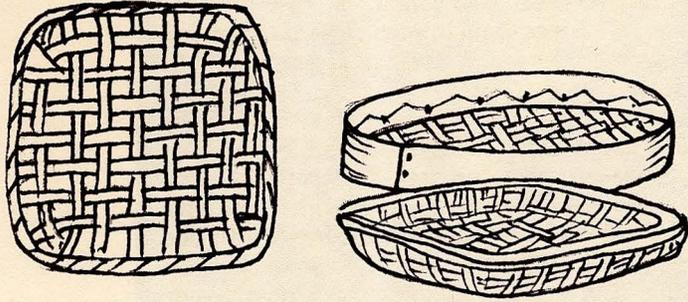
3

How the Pioneers Lived

When the very first would-be Portage settlers packed their wagons for the long trip west to Michigan they knew that clothes, bedding, farm implements, cooking utensils and dishes had to take priority. The heavy quilts, hand woven blankets and linen sheets usually went into the trunks with the Sunday dress and suit. Next came the barrels filled with clothing, dishes and the small breakable stoneware jars. The larger jars were often filled with seeds, smaller tools and food for the animals and people. The plow, ax, saws, hammers and sickles were fitted in among the large iron pots, the wooden tubs and buckets and smaller wooden and tin articles used for cooking, baking and gardening. Most of the farmers brought their grindstones, as keeping their tools sharp was a prime necessity. If there were any room left a few pieces of furniture were included. These usually consisted of a few chairs, a chest of drawers, a bed and some type of homemade mattress, either corn husk or feather. Most of the men were handy with tools, and a rough wooden table, benches without backs and shelving for cupboards were often constructed during the long evenings of the first winter. The pieces of furniture that came in the covered wagon were the prize pieces of the family. Today they are valuable antiques and a few of them grace the homes of descendants of Portage pioneers.

The men of the family usually walked beside the wagon or drove the cow, sheep and pigs which followed behind. Some farmers had more than one cow; sheep were the most numerous. A few chickens, ducks and geese were usually visible at the rear of the wagon housed in rough crates. It was not unusual to see a few buckets dangling from the side and the back or a wooden wash tub tied securely to the frame.

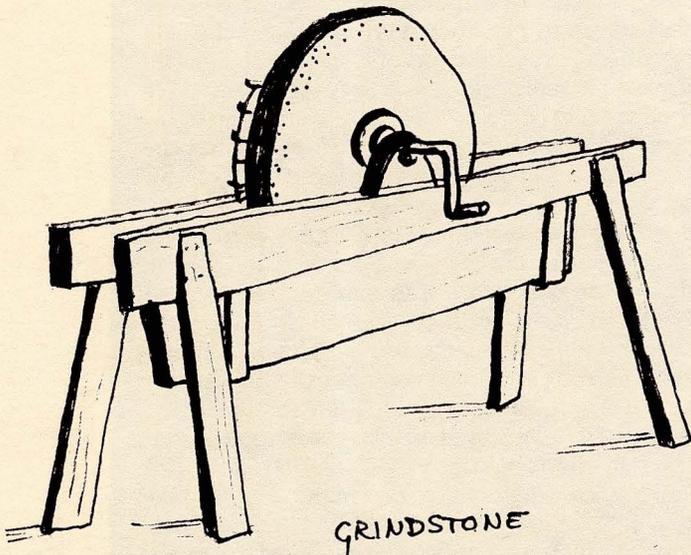
As soon as they arrived at their chosen property, the pioneers began to work, usually from daylight to dusk. The very first settlers were lucky in that their land happened to be on the prairie or on the Indian Fields. No doubt most of the land was planted in corn for that was the staple crop of the pioneers. As soon as sufficient land was cleared, buckwheat and oats were planted and later wheat. The land was excellent for raising corn which was food for both man and animals. However, preparing corn for eating took a great deal of time. In the fall it had to be picked, then all the husk had to be taken off. After that the kernels had to be removed. If the family were going to use the corn it had to be winnowed. This had to be done on a windy day so that all the chaff could blow away as the farmer slowly let the corn fall on a clean cloth laid on the grass. Sometimes women did this job. Some farmers had what they called a winnowing tray made of wood. This was a large oblong tray open on one end so that when the clean kernels fell in the tray they could be tipped into a barrel where they were stored for household use. Much of the corn was left on the cob and was stored in a corn crib near the barn. The winnowed corn was used by the family. Sometimes the kernels were ground in a coffee mill and sometimes a wooden bowl and pestle were used to make corn into meal. Cornmeal was one of the main sources of food for all early pioneers. It was made into cornmeal mush, corncakes and corn bread usually called "Johnny-cakes." Cornmeal mush was eaten for breakfast after cooking all night in an iron pot hung over the embers in the fireplace. What was left after the morning meal was usually fried in iron skillets and eaten for lunch. Indian pudding made with cornmeal, molasses and salt made a dessert. It



WINNOWING TRAYS



STONEWARE POTS



GRINDSTONE

cooked all day over a very slow fire and pioneers thought it was delicious. Unfortunately molasses was not always obtainable.

By 1835 about two thirds of the northern half of Portage Township had been entered at the government land office. This land was rapidly being cleared by pioneers who planned to settle there, and most of it would be planted in corn, the staple crop. The grinding of corn by hand was of short duration. Thomas Cooley took over the gristmill on Portage Creek on the northwest corner of what is now Lover's Lane and Kilgore Road. He and his brother Arad operated this mill for several years. Besides running the mill they also farmed. It is said that the settlers in nearby farms were accustomed to carrying a sack of corn on their backs to the Cooley mill, having it ground and carrying it home again. Later the Cooleys acquired more land for farming, and Hiram Kilgore bought the gristmill.

After the country recovered from the bank failure of 1837 some of the rest of the township began to be occupied by permanent settlers, first the oak openings and then the heavily forested areas. A man could plow between the trees in the oak openings and plant some corn and potatoes. In the forested areas the settler had to clear the land of trees before it could be farmed. Many of these places were cleared by holding logging bees. The farmers who lived in the vicinity would come with their oxen and axes, wives and children and begin a day of hard labor. The much valued ax began chopping away in earnest with each farmer trying to see who could chop down the most trees. The women and children would stay in a cleared spot cooking up a good meal over the open fire and having a good visit.

As the trees were felled teams of oxen would pull them to the edge of the field where they would be put in separate piles to be used for other purposes. The branches and twigs would be burned but the logs on the whole were valuable timber. Portage was fortunate in having a great variety of oak and maple trees which were used for building purposes. There was a ready market in nearby Prairie Ronde where trees were scarce but the building of homes, stores and farm buildings was proceeding at a rapid pace. The black walnut, black cherry and hickory trees were also abundant and these were placed in a different pile. Black walnut and cherry were cherished by cabinet makers and hickory was used for all sorts of handles on tools because of its strength and durability. There were several cabinet makers in Kalamazoo village. Other wood could be used for fuel or taken into the iron smelting factory on the Kalamazoo River. At that early date iron ore was melted by using charcoal and charcoal was made of wood. It has been stated that more forest trees were used for making charcoal than for building houses.

While the logging bee was going on the whisky jug was passed around. This seemed to be a common occurrence in those days and was supposed to give the men strength. After all the trees were felled, a few games were sometimes played; but the big event came with the substantial supper. Every good thing the wife had available in her rather meager pantry was brought for this purpose. Included were roasted meats, baked potatoes, berry pies, and all kinds of corn bread; and if there were any special food obtained at the general store it would be generously shared on these special occasions. Sometimes the settlers sat around a fire and sang songs. "Yankee Doodle," "Shenendoah," "Old Dan Tucker," "Turkey in the Straw," "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Old Folks at Home" were some of their favorite songs.

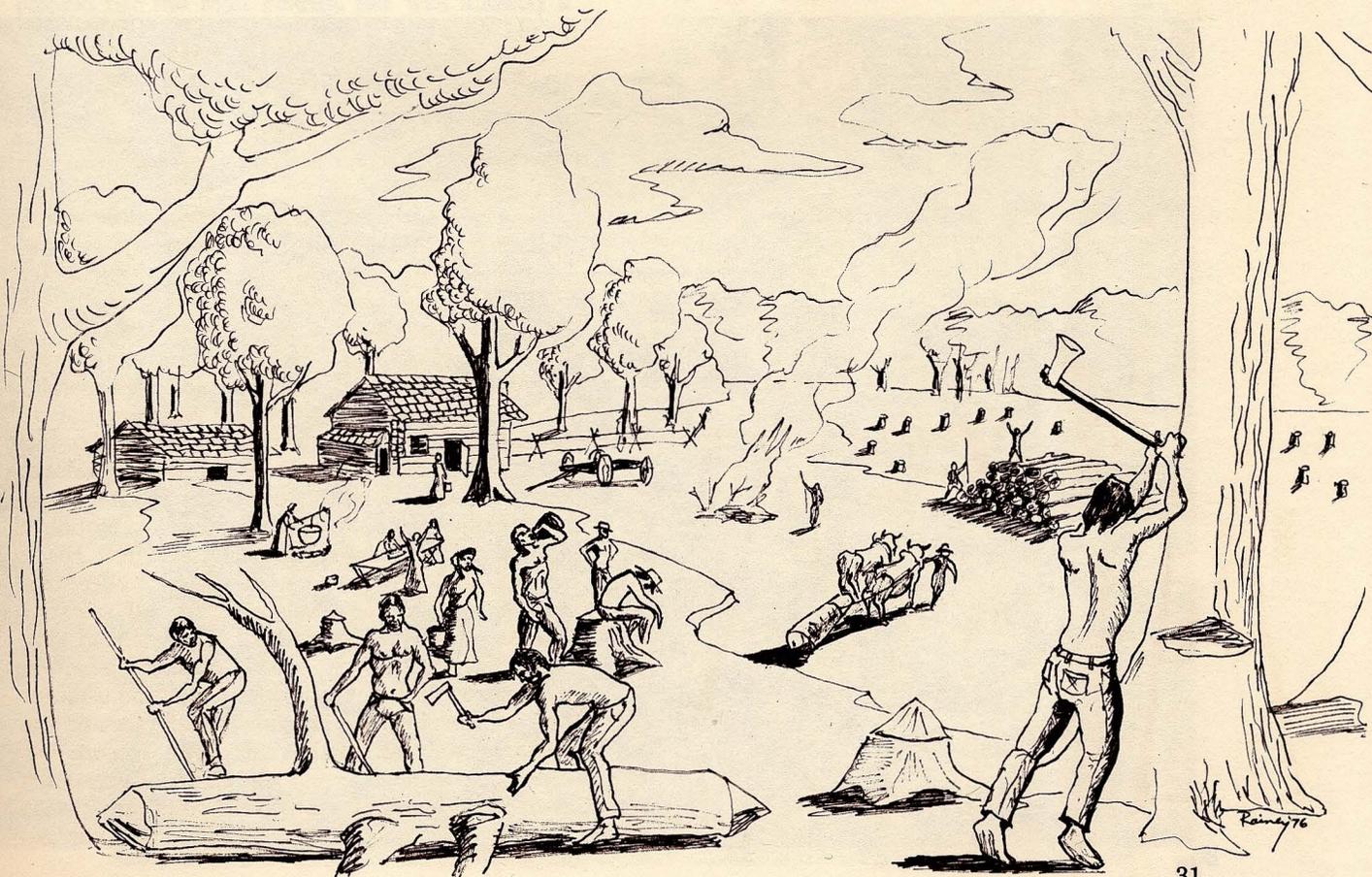
After the logging bee was over the settler had plenty of work to do. If he had not built some sort of shelter for himself this was his first job. It is rather interesting to note that many of these later settlers in Portage Township followed the example of the very first settlers and did not bring their families with them until they had some type of home ready for them. Several of them erected a

small frame house rather than a log cabin. This was no doubt due to the fact that Elijah Root in early 1834 had erected a sawmill on the west side of Portage Creek near what is now Milham Avenue. With a sawmill in such close proximity it is no wonder that few log cabins appeared on the landscape.

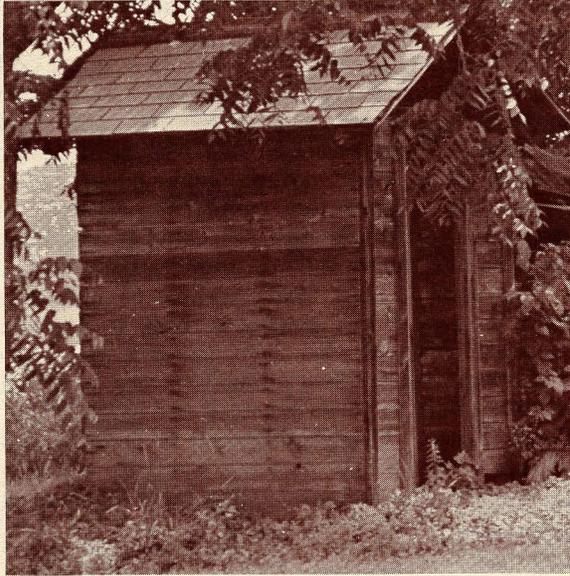
After establishing a house of one kind or another the pioneer brought his family to Portage. Since many of the very first settlers came from the same counties in New York State and were good friends or at least acquainted with one another, they helped each other. Some settlers, on arriving in Portage, would stay with relatives or friends while their houses were being built. Regardless of where they came from, most families who settled in the township were hard working and determined to improve their farms.

This was no easy task. Besides clearing the land, plowing it and getting it ready to sow the seed they brought with them, the settlers had to make provision for their animals. Every farm had to have a barn to house livestock and to store hay. Some type of chicken house had to be built and place provided for the pigs and sheep. In addition to these buildings almost every farm had a corn

Logging Bee



crib, a well or spring house, a hay rick, a tool shed, a woodshed, some type of root cellar which was often built underground near the kitchen, and an outdoor toilet called a privy. Sheep had to be fenced in to protect them from the wolves. To obtain water a well was dug and, if possible, a



pump installed. If there were no pump, a wooden bucket was lowered into the well, filled with water, and hauled up by a rope. Many of the pumps used by the pioneers were made of wood.

Erecting adequate buildings for the farm did not end the work for the farmer. In the summer there was hay to be cut, dried and stacked on a hay rick for winter use; weeds had to be cleared out of cornfields and gardens; and in the fall wheat and corn had to be harvested and potatoes had to be dug. Digging potatoes with a spade was hard work, but after they were dug the children usually went down the rows of potatoes, picked them up and put them in baskets. After they had dried out, some were kept in the root cellar and some were sold or traded at the general store or farmers' market, although in the early years not many potatoes were raised to sell or trade. The farmers' market was held every Saturday in the village of Kalamazoo at what is now known as Farmers' Alley. Behind the alley where Gilmore's Parking Lot is now located were long rows of sheds where the horses were stabled and wagons

Root cellar on the George Howard farm on Milham Road, one of the few remaining in Kalamazoo County.

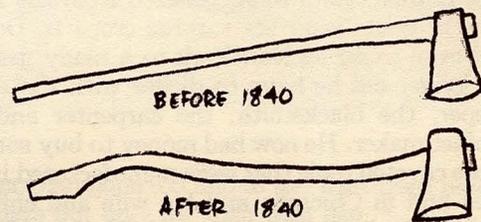


were put under cover. Here the farmers sold their wares to the villagers or they traded or dickered with other farmers for what they needed. *Dickering* instead of trading was the word commonly used and to make a *good dicker* was a most satisfying reward to the early settlers. Wives often came with their husbands to dicker at the store or with the villagers using the eggs, butter or cheese they had brought from the farm. Some farmers' wives had steady customers for butter and eggs in the village and received cash for their wares.

Harvesting the corn was another big job. After picking it at the right time it was brought to the barn to dry sufficiently well to be husked. Corn husking brought an evening of fun and frolic. Almost everyone had a husking bee and farmers, wives and young people came in their wagons, drawn by their teams of oxen and horses, to pull the husk from the corn. Everybody worked fast because when the corn was husked the evening was spent in square dancing followed by a huge supper supplied by the housewives attending the husking bee. Participants always looked forward to finding an ear of Indian Corn. Indian Corn is the reddish brown corn or mixed yellow and brown which we use now to decorate our doors in the fall. In pioneer times finding an Indian ear gave the man a chance to kiss the girl of his choice, or if it happened to be a girl who got the colored ear the man nearest her was allowed a kiss. Of course everyone hoped to get a red ear of corn.

After the harvest was over and winter came there was still plenty of work to be done. Logs had

to be chopped for kindling and firewood, fence posts and rails had to be sawed or split for fencing and every now and then a visit had to be made to the sawmill or gristmill. Planks and boards were needed for repair work and additions to buildings. A sack of corn did not last long when cornmeal was in daily use. In the long winter evenings many a farmer would carve out a new handle for his ax, pitch fork, spade or shovel. Some farmers were quite clever at making simple furniture such as chairs, stools, small tables or candle stands and small chests of drawers. If not needed by the farmer these pieces of furniture were excellent for dicker. One enterprising farmer built a small building on his farm where he made barrel staves for a barrel manufacturer, called a cooper, in Kalamazoo village. Staves are long curved pieces of wood for the sides of a barrel. They are put together with hoops that are firmly fastened and a strong, thick piece of wood is fitted in for the bottom. Barrels were used to store practically everything imaginable including nails, salt, flour, fruit, root vegetables, pickles and a great many small articles that were shipped in from the East. In the 1850's there was a cooper located on Carpenters Corners.



This rope bed with feather tick and hand woven coverlet belongs to a member of the Campbell family. These narrow beds were a luxury in early homes.



In the early spring the farmer would start collecting maple sap from the sugar maples found in the surrounding wood lots. The syrup made from this sap and the honey obtained from his beehives were about the only satisfactions available for his sweet tooth. Sugar was expensive and a jug of molasses could not be used lavishly.

In spite of all the hard work, or because of it, the Portage Township farmer prospered. Within two decades of those first settlements two things happened that made life not only a bit easier but also more financially rewarding. First, in 1837 Cyrus McCormick moved his McCormick Reaper factory to Chicago, and after the Panic of 1837 was over began to manufacture reapers in large enough quantities to make them more available to the Michigan farmer. No longer did he have to reap everything by hand using his long handled scythe and rake. Now his horse could pull the reaper over the ground and he was able to complete the job in a fraction of the time. The McCormick reaper was first tried out in Climax Prairie where there is now an historic landmark commemorating this event.

The second event which hastened prosperity for the Portage farmer was the arrival in 1846 of the first railroad train to Kalamazoo from the East. Now he could send his surplus crops to Detroit and even as far as New York to a ready market. No longer did he have to dicker with the storekeeper, the blacksmith, the carpenter and the cabinet maker. He now had money to buy some of those coveted tools that were manufactured in the East and in Chicago; and his wife and children could afford to have some clothes from *store bought* cottons, a cook stove to use in the kitchen, and a small Franklin Stove for heating the parlor or sitting room. These stoves came into general use about 1840.

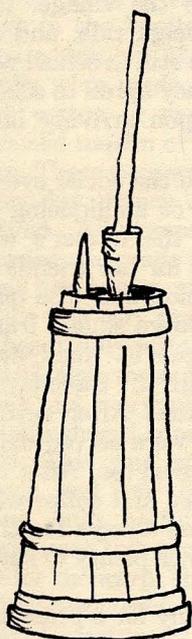
No doubt the wives welcomed cook stoves. As may well be imagined the wives of the early pioneers had a great deal to do and were busy from early morning until late at night. Cooking a meal over the coals in the fireplace was a difficult job. First, those iron pots were exceedingly heavy to lift. Then the crane had to be adjusted properly over the burning embers so the food would not burn. Finally the heavy pots and skillets had to be cleaned with water heated over the same fire. The first iron stoves were built close to the floor so stooping was still required. It was several years before a stove and oven were combined and the cooking area was raised to waist level.

Every bit of water had to be hauled or pumped out of the well and brought into the house in buckets. This was one job the children were usually required to do, but if there were not any children old enough it was the task of the wife. Then there was the washing to be done. Again the water was heated in huge iron kettles out of doors

over an open fire whenever possible. The clothes were scrubbed on a tin scrub board in a wooden tub which stood on three legs or was placed on a crude wooden bench. Soap was made in a large iron kettle over an open fire. Enough soap was usually made to keep the family supplied for several months.

Besides the daily tasks of cooking, scrubbing and getting in the water supply, the early pioneer wife fed the chickens and pigs, gathered the eggs, and milked the cow or, if they were fortunate, two or three cows. The milk was carefully strained through a cloth, then poured into large shallow tin pans in the dairy where it was left for the cream to rise until it could be skimmed off and made into butter. The buttermilk that was left was fed to the pigs. At the time of the early settlers most of the wives had a round wooden churn with a wooden paddle fastened through a hole in the top. This was thumped up and down until the cream turned to butter. Butter and eggs were both articles the farmer's wife used for dicker. She could trade these at the general store for calico, sewing





BUTTER CHURN



thread, needles, salt, sugar and, if she were lucky, some China tea or coffee beans.

Of course butter making and egg gathering went on all year long, but in the spring besides her usual chores the wife took care of the setting hens and the young chickens they hatched. These had to be watched carefully and enclosed at night in the chicken coop so that some animal on the prowl would not get away with them. In the fall she had special tasks as well. From almost the very beginning she began preserving food for winter. Cabbage was made into sauerkraut; green beans were cut and salted down in crocks; carrots turnips and parsnips were pulled and stored in the root cellar with the potatoes and some of the late cabbages, pumpkins and squash.

When the apple trees which had been planted from almost the very beginning of the settlement began to bear, the farm wife made apple butter. Again the big iron pot was used over an open fire and the apple butter was stirred with a long wooden paddle. Other fruit that was raised on the farm was also preserved and this activity increased from year to year as sugar became more available. Apples were also dried to be used in winter. In 1836 T. W. Dunham had started a nursery. He had taken his ox team into Ohio and brought back fruit trees and berry bushes. Other

pioneers had gone to Ohio to get fruit trees before that date but only for their own use.

In winter when a pig was butchered, the pioneer wife would be busy taking care of all the meat and fat on the animal. Hams and bacon were salted and hung in the smokehouse. Hocks were salted and kept to boil with the sauerkraut. Much of the fat was fried out in the black iron kettle and the lard stored in crocks to be used for frying doughnuts, making pie crust and baking cakes. The rest was used for salt pork which was cut in slabs and placed in salt brine, the meat to be used on many a cold morning for breakfast. The meat was cut in small pieces, slowly fried very crisp and the fat used to make milk gravy or to fry any leftover boiled potatoes. The remaining meat was usually cut up and kept in a freezing place to be used when needed. The back kitchen, not used in winter, was usually cold enough to keep the meat frozen.

Whenever the farm wife had a moment to spare she was kept busy with her spinning, sewing and knitting. In the spring when the farmer sheared his sheep the wool was washed and sometimes carded; however, there were four carding mills in Kalamazoo village where the wool was usually taken to be carded. Next to nearly every fireplace or cookstove stood a spinning wheel which was

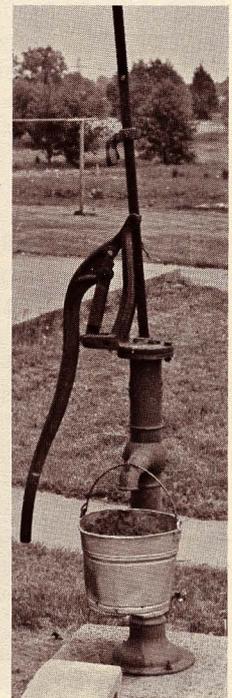
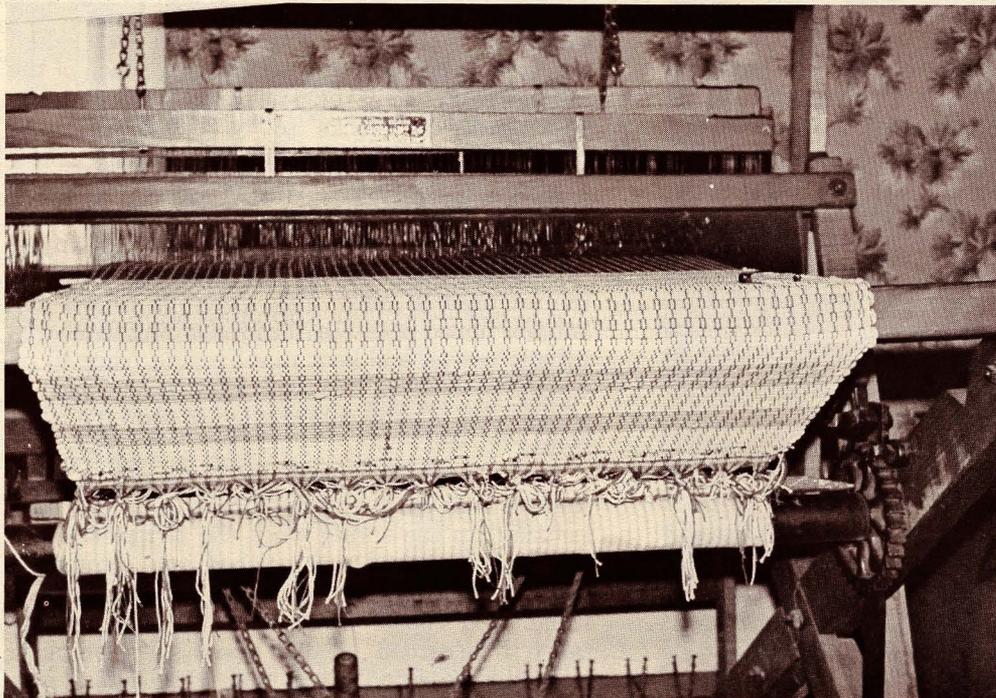
kept busy many an evening spinning the wool that would be knitted into garments or woven into material for the family. All the family wore knitted, woolen stockings or socks through the cold winter months. Men, women and children had heavy sweaters; the boys usually had knitted under vests; and the girls often wore knitted petticoats with woolen tops. Dyeing the wool was another chore for the housewife. Dyes made of elderberries or hickory nut shucks were the favorites, particularly the bluegray dye which the elderberry produced. The homespun wool was apt to be scratchy especially when worn next to the skin. Children in school would sometimes use the itching which their woolen clothing produced as an excuse to engage in excessive scratching to disrupt the lesson. Perhaps the famous *hickory stick* was used on these occasions.

All the family's other clothes were usually made at home as well, except the best suits for the men and boys. Farm women would sometimes trade certain jobs. One would sew or knit for a family while the other would weave the wool into cloth. Not too many wives had the large looms required for weaving. Other women made weaving a specialty and would weave material for five or six cents a yard. An unmarried daughter who was clever at sewing would be asked to spend several weeks with a family to do the sewing. She would receive room and board and a small amount of money. Calico dresses and aprons were usually worn by the women and girls during the summer, but woolen dresses were worn in the winter with a calico apron to keep them clean. The usual

wardrobe consisted of three dresses including one best dress for Sunday and special occasions, one second best dress to wear to the village, to a husking or sewing bee or a sleigh ride, and one dress for work. Girls who were still in school wore the second best dress and a fancy apron to school; they changed immediately upon arriving home from school.

Sewing or quilting bees were the social events for the women. After piecing or appliqueing an especially intricate quilt top, the farmer's wife would send a message around for her friends to gather at her home for a quilting bee. The quilt would then be mounted on a large square frame and beautiful, intricate designs in small even stitches would be sewed through the three layers of material pinned on the frame. After several hours of sewing, refreshments were served using the best china and the much loved tea. After the railroad came to Kalamazoo, tea and coffee were made more available, but it was always tea that was served at these functions with plenty of sugar and cream.

These fancy quilts were usually for a bride and the piecing or appliqueing was done before the quilting bee by the young bride and her family, with perhaps a friend or two giving a helping hand. Some of these quilts had quite imaginative names; others were named after ordinary objects in the environment. Some had more than one name, depending upon the section of the country where they were made. Quilt names include *whig rose*, *mosaic*, *flower garden*, *melon patch*, *tulip*, *nine patch*, *Ohio star*, *saw tooth*, *turkey tracks*,



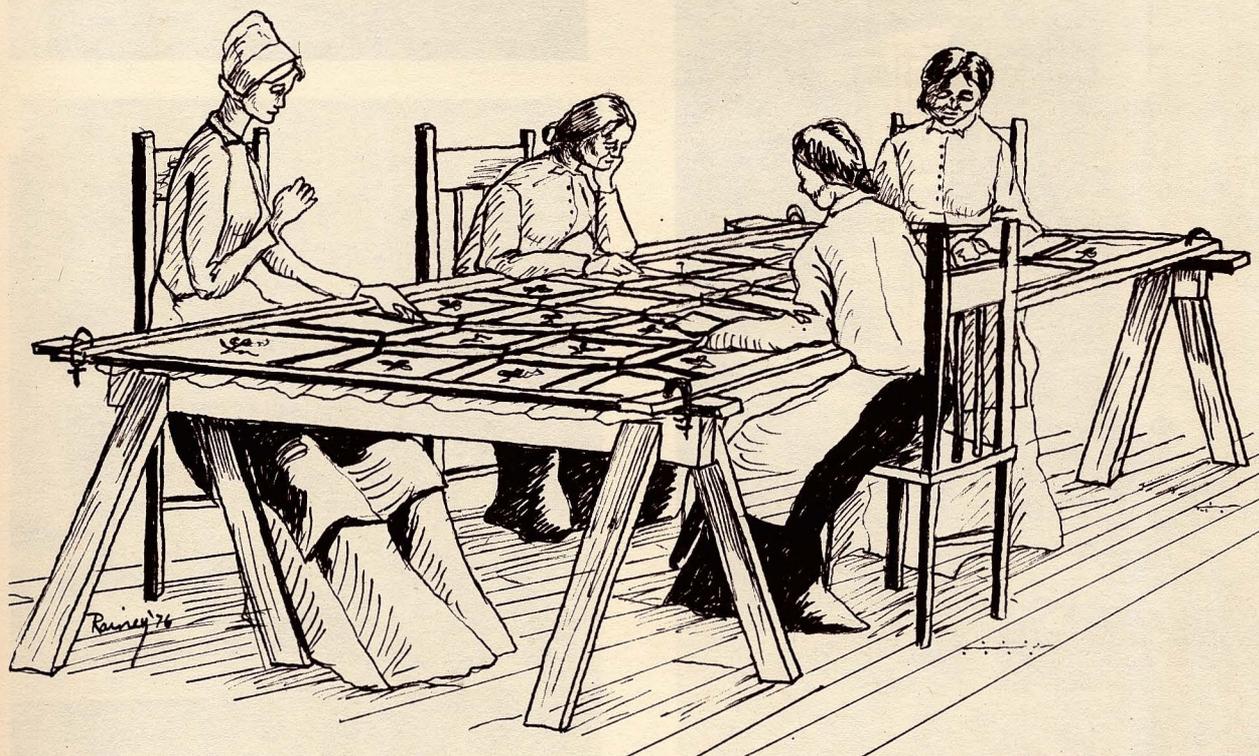
Jacob's ladder, goose tracks, hen and chickens, morning star, duck paddle, bear tracks and many others. Some of these quilts have been handed down in the family and may be found in quite good condition. Most of the other quilts in the family were made of ordinary patchwork, lined with cotton or wool batting, backed with unbleached muslin or tow cloth and tied with wool yarn. These were warm and practical and used for every day. Fancy quilts were used when guests arrived. All scraps of material were carefully hoarded and made into quilts; even the wool was made into heavy quilts for freezing winter nights. Calico was very precious and used in the quilts to be beautifully stitched at the quilting bees.

Although most of the farmers kept a flock of sheep, not everyone raised flax. The ones who did usually shared some of the flax with their neighbors. This was spun into linen thread, fairly heavy, and was then woven into sheets, pillow cases, quilt backings and shirts for the men. Sometimes this thread was used with wool yarn, one for the warp, the other for the woof. This was called *linsey woolsey* and gave exceptionally long wear. Unfortunately it was not very comfortable and was apt to scratch.

When clothes wore out they were never thrown away. They were torn into strips, sewed together and rolled into a large ball. When enough balls

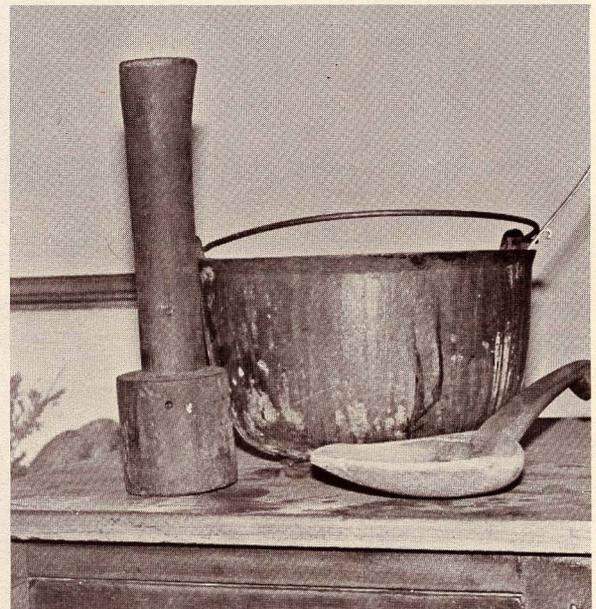
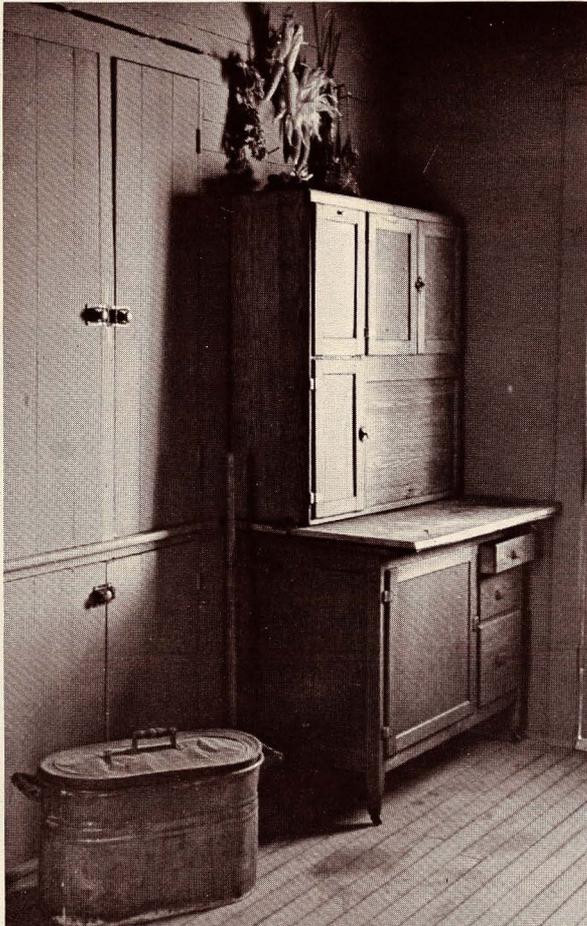
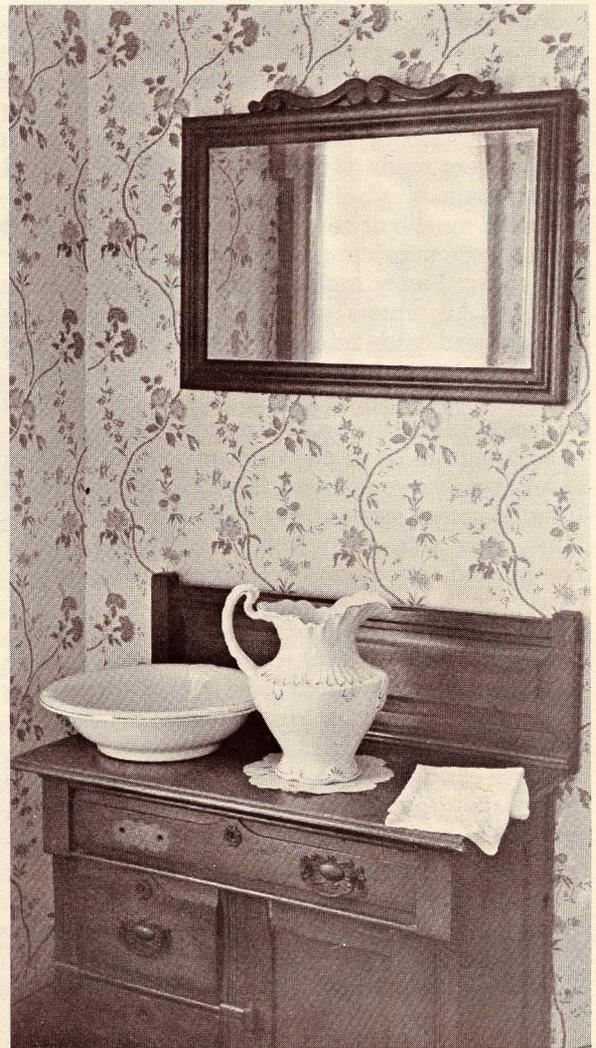


Quilting Bee



accumulated they were woven into rag rugs. If there were enough material, several strips could be sewed together into a rag carpet for the sitting room. Wool material was cut into wider strips, sewed together, folded over, then braided and sewed into rugs. These were usually in an oval or a round shape. Sometimes the oval became so large it would almost cover the sitting room or parlor floor and was especially beautiful in bright colors. The lighter pieces were often dyed red. Dyeing was done at home with vegetable and root dyes. Black walnut hulls made a rich, brown color. It was quite a feat to braid a rug and have it lie flat, and the lady of the house who had such a carpet or rug had reason to be proud. Sewing and braiding rags was usually done at home. During the winter a few farm women would sometimes get together and do some fine sewing, embroidery, crocheting or knitting. They would perform such tasks as adding some crocheted or knitted lace around the bottoms of their best petticoats, which were worn only on very special occasions. This may have been the beginning of sewing societies, and tea was always served.

If there were some small girls in the family they were taught to sew when very young. First they



learned to make very small stitches and then were given some patchwork squares to sew together. Their first embroidery was usually a sampler and they were taught to do different kinds of stitches on the sampler. Some were quite complicated and can be seen in museums. Sewing was just one of the many things the girls learned to do. They were usually called upon to peel the potatoes and other vegetables for dinner. They washed the dishes, swept the floor with their handmade, rush brooms and scrubbed the kitchen table. The tables were



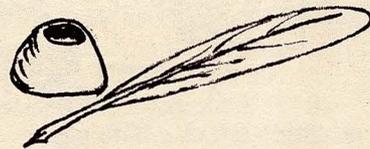
usually long and narrow with a solid oak or hard maple top from one to two inches thick. Because every housewife was proud of having an immaculate table, they had to be scrubbed hard two or three times a day.

The boys were not excused from work. At quite an early age they had to fill the wood box which was near the fireplace or behind the cookstove. The wood was kept neatly stacked in the woodshed which was usually right next to the kitchen and often attached to the house. As soon as a boy was old enough he was expected to chop the wood and kindling and stack it in the woodshed. He also kept the buckets filled with water and on wash day filled the tubs before he went off to school.

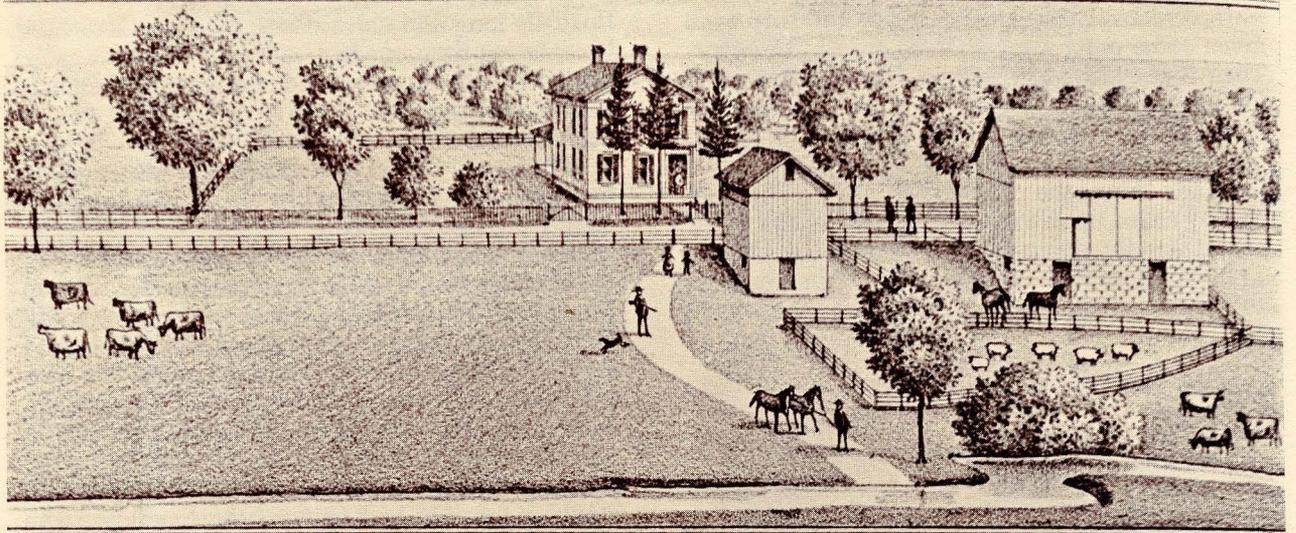
On Saturday he had a rather backbreaking and tedious job. He had to turn the handle on the grindstone while his father or older brother sharpened the tools. First came the knives, then the axes, the sickle, the scythe and sometimes the spade. The spade needed a sharp edge to cut through the rich, heavy soil of Portage Township.

In the summer both the boys and girls picked berries, helped their mother weed the garden and pulled or picked vegetables. In the fall they picked up potatoes, gathered pumpkins and squash, pulled the carrots and turnips and went to gather black walnuts, hickory nuts and acorns.

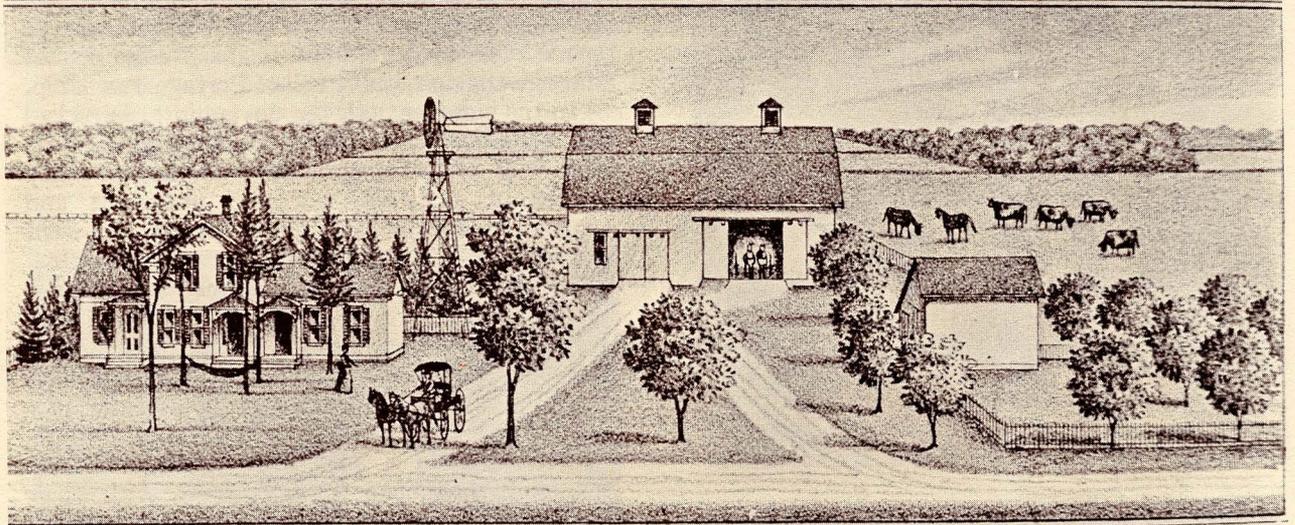
When their work was finished they could have a good time. They could go to the woods to pick wild flowers or to a nearby brook to go wading or sail their little homemade boats. It was always fun to jump in the hayloft, race around the barn with the dog, go sliding on their sleds in the winter or build a snowman. If some of the neighbors happened to come over with their parents the boys usually had some rowdy games in the barnyard, but the girls might have a make believe tea party under a shade tree or in the kitchen. Just as their parents worked very hard and then enjoyed their square dances, sleighride parties, barn raisings and husking and quilting bees, so the children enjoyed their play on the wide open space of Portage Township.



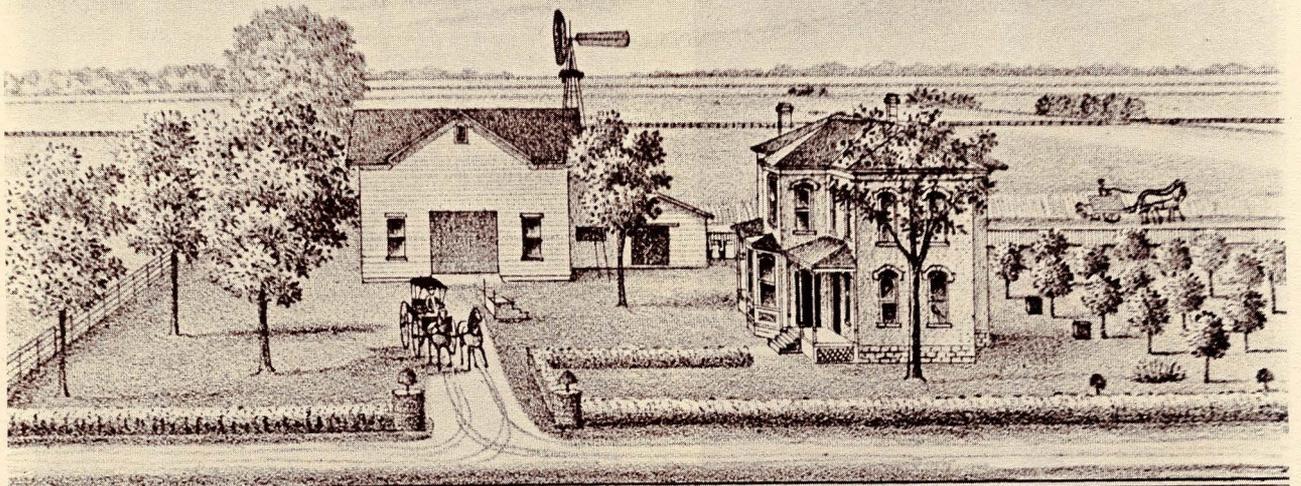
QUILL PEN & STONE INK WELL



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