

Time Tracs

This is the second in a two part series on the first settlers of Orion Township -- where they came from -- how they got here -- their life experiences.

SW Durant in "History of Oakland County, Michigan" relates an incident which gives clues to the social organization and lifestyles of that early period in Orion Township.

The first frame barn was built by Jesse Decker about 1830. There weren't enough white men in the area to raise it so he engaged a lot of Indians to help him. They worked well until they got warmed up by fire water (whiskey) which was always supplied on such occasions. They then became quarrelsome and indulged in several fights.

Thomas Carpenter, in 1836, raised a frame barn without the stimulating influence of liquor. Inviting all of his neighbors to the "raising," he told them he wouldn't supply whiskey but hoped all would come.

On the appointed day, two sets of men, one to raise the barn on temperance principles, the other to look on with a supply of liquor to keep them in cheer.

The barn was raised without any trouble either from the weight of the timber or from the liquor men, who stayed in the lane, jeering those at work.

That night they vented their spleen by throwing down 40 rods of rail fence which Carpenter had constructed a few days before. The next day the temperance men returned and

helped rebuild the fence.

SB McCracken, writing for the Oakland County Pioneer Society in 1887, describes what daily life would have been like in rural Oakland County circa 1837.

The first cabins were built of logs, hand cut by the pioneers on their property. The floor was very likely made of bass wood logs, split through the center.

A large brick fireplace would have been used for heating as well as cooking. A crane or "lug-pole" with hooks attached was adjacent to allow cooking utensils to be hung over the fire. Cooking utensils consisted of a frying pan, bake kettle, dish kettle, dinner pot and the tea kettle.

Bread was baked in a round iron kettle (shaped very much like a large cheese) with a cover, the kettle being placed on coals drawn out on the hearth with live coals on top.

Spareribs and turkeys were suspended by a tow string before the fire for roasting. A tow string was made from coarse broken flax or hemp fiber and used generally about the house and barn. Tin cups or dippers and the "noggen" (a gourd) were used for drinking.

Fire was of prime importance to these early settlers. Friction matches were unknown; fire was produced by flint and steel. When the fire went out on the hearth, those who were without this devise had to send to the neighbors for a coal or a brand (a burning

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stick of wood).

Children of the pioneers studied their few books either by firelight from the open fireplace or by an open lamp made by placing some grease and a cloth wick in a broken saucer, or at best the light of a tallow candle.

Oxen pulling sheds and a few horses were used for transportation. All grain was threshed by flail (a small manual threshing device) or trodden out by horses on the barn floor. Grain was separated from the chaff by holding up a shovel full in a stiff breeze and sifting it off by shaking the shovel.

Wheat was wholly cut with the cradle which was a great advance on the sickle that proceeded it. The hand scythe was the only means of reducing the grass.

All grain was sown by throwing and boys of that time have vivid recollection of the horrors of riding a horse to plow corn as there were no cultivators.

Most farmers raised flax and hemp from which textile fiber was woven into household linen. Sheep's wool was spun into yarn on the spinning wheel. This yarn was then knit or woven into material for clothing, etc. This work was done by the women in the household.

And now for entertainment and recreation. The boy of that time was happy to possess a pair of indifferent skates that he could strap to his shoes and skim over the crystal surface of lakes and ponds. And many will re-

member the vexation of trying to make the heel corks stay in place.

These children of pioneers used boards to slide down hill in winter instead of sleds and toboggans.

As for music, the jews harp, (a small musical instrument with a lyre-shaped metal frame that's held between the teeth when played and a projecting steel tongue that is plucked to produce a soft twanging sound) was the most common instrument instead of the piano.

India rubber was just coming into use in the 1830s. It was then made into coarse overshoe (boot), wrought into webbing for suspenders and also relieved from embarrassment the modest young lady who blushed to speak of her garters, which thereafter became "elastics."

And the average boy was happy if could get a bit of rubber as a foundation to build his ball upon.

Paper, in 1837, was used only for writing and printing and in a very coarse form for wrapping. There was no telephone or telegraph at that time and no railroad for transportation.

The letter was the only means of communication. Mail was once a week and postage two shillings (25 cents). The letter had to be folded and sealed by its fold, as no envelopes were in use.

Thus we can see the conditions the early settlers endured and conquered. They literally lived off the land with little assistance other than from their own bodies and minds.