

EARLY HISTORY OF ST. CLAIR COUNTY,

WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE INDIANS, OKEMOS, MACONCE,
JOHN RILEY AND MOTHERS RODD AND OBEIDIG.
CHIEFLY FROM ORIGINAL SOURCES.

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EARLY DAYS IN ST. CLAIR COUNTY.

It has been my endeavor, in the preparation of this article, not to re-construct that which has been written, but to preserve from oblivion facts and incidents in the memory of those now living.

These reminiscences may reveal to those who come after us some idea of the hardships and privations of pioneer life and lead to a desire to honor the memory of those who made possible the development and civilization of the present day.

On the first voyage up the beautiful St. Clair river Father Hennepin is reported to have observed to his fellow voyager, La Salle, "Those who will have the good fortune to possess these beautiful and fertile lands will be under many obligations to us who have cleared the way."

Though two centuries have passed since these words were uttered, there are those now living who helped clear the way—those whose parents fled for safety, with their families, to the fort at Detroit, for fear of massacre by the savage Indians, those who remember when the Indians seemed to be the proprietors of the soil, when they roamed over it free as the air and restless as the river on which floated their canoe.

For the purpose of bringing to mind the condition of this locality, at the close of the last century I will refer to a chattel mortgage made 19th Sept., 1789, the year of the adoption of the constitution of the United States. It was dated, "Detroit, Province of Quebec." The parties were "Wm. Thorn of the river Sinclair" and "Meldrum & Park of Detroit aforesaid." The amount stated in pounds, shillings and pence, New York currency.

Also to a deed "recorded in land office in Detroit, 13th January, 1796 of land on the river Sinclair, from Alexander Harrone, Esq., to

James Cartwright, yeoman, containing six acres in front, and forty acres in depth, and that there was delivered a piece of soil, on the said premises in the name of the whole thereof" etc. Consideration £200, New York currency, and a paper is found dated Sept., 1802, giving a certified list of taxable property in the St. Clair township. By this list we learn that sixty-four persons were assessed for 93 horses and 216 cows, (no real estate) "a true return of taxable property" signed "Louis Campau." According to a proclamation signed Jan. 10, 1802, by Wm. Henry Harrison, Governor of Indiana territory, and received Feb. 11, 1802, the township at that time must have been included in the county of Wayne, in the northeastern part of the territory of Indiana.

Of these times Rev. O. C. Thompson and Hon. Aura P. Stewart have written full accounts and of the early settlers, which have been already published in the pioneer collections.

Early in this century there was living on the land now known as the Sutherland place on the Canada side of St. Clair river one Wm. Brown, who was born in Detroit in 1784. His wife, Martha Thorn, a year younger than himself, was from what is now Cottrellville and a daughter of the party to the mortgage referred to above. They were married in 1806 and in this quiet home they traded with the surrounding Indians, having bought their land from them. Here were born to them their oldest children, Nancy, now Mrs. Peter F. Brakeman of Marysville, and James D. Brown, living near Marine City. This Wm. Brown is the same who conveyed a number of fat cattle and other supplies to the starving soldiers at Ft. Gratiot in the war of 1812. The commissary at Detroit had much trouble to find a safe convoy, as a short time before a U. S. Lieutenant with a squad of troops was attacked on the river and the officer lost his life. Brown went from Detroit to Pt. Aux Trembles the first night, and the next night delivered the supplies at Ft. Gratiot, a distance of 60 miles.

When the British commander, Gen. Proctor, issued his proclamation requiring "all settlers to take the oath of allegiance to Great Britain," Mr. Brown and his family removed to Detroit, and with his brothers worked in the construction of the stockade fort. After it was completed he removed to Mt. Clemens (now called) and the next year removed to a point on the river a mile below Marine City, and bought land for his farm, being about the first settler in that vicinity. They remained in this place and cultivated his farm, some of the time keeping hotel, until his death in 1874, at 90 years old.

Peace was declared in 1815. The families on the river owning farms, through the intercession of Father Richard with General Cass, were

furnished with rations. Most of the time during the war they could subsist in no other way, for fear of the Indians, who drove off their cattle and committed depredations, as a means of revenge, because the older members of the families were in the American army. Were it not for this fear they would have had abundance. Wild meat was plenty, with corn and vegetables and white fish. But tea was \$1 a pound, flour \$20 a barrel, pork \$45 and meals \$1 each.

It was much trouble to get their corn ground. There were but two mills within reach. One a small wind mill at the mouth of Clinton river, and another on the Canada side ten miles up the Thames river. Going to mill often occupied eight or ten days. With surroundings like these the childhood days of the Browns were passed. Mr. James D. Brown remembers the first steamboat that was on the river, and well named "Walk in the Water." Her speed was not much like the ocean flyers of the present time.

The first schoolmaster on the river was Jacob G. Street, father-in-law of Folkert C. Folkerts, of Alpena, Mich. Capts. John and Albert Stewart, Mr. Abraham Smith, of Algonac, and sisters, and Mr. Angus Smith of Milwaukee, all attended this school. Capt Peer was also a pupil.

In 1826 and 1827 Mr. Peter F. Brakeman taught school in Algonac; there was then no school house, no school director, no school laws, no school books. Mr. Brakeman was of German descent, his grandparents coming from Hesse Darmstadt, and at ten years of age, he could speak no English. He was clerk in the first store opened in Algonac, and learned the Indian language. The Indians both loved and feared him. In 1832 he married Miss Nancy Brown, oldest daughter of Wm. Brown before mentioned, who still survives at an advanced age. Possessed of a most retentive memory and familiar in her youth with much that transpired at that early day, and having become acquainted with the Indians in their friendly visits, and their trade with her father, and husband, Mrs. Brakeman is able to contribute much from her rich stores of memory. From Mrs. Brakeman and her daughters, Misses Anna and Hannah Brakeman, has been gathered some of the material for the accompanying short sketches of Indians well known to all early settlers in St. Clair county.

FRANCOIS MACONCE,

chief of the Pottawattamies, lived at Swan creek or Salt river, where for many years he kept hotel and traded. His father, Maconce, or Cum-e-kum-a-now, was chief of the tribes on the reservation and was

much beloved. His nod was will for the tribes. But this man of commanding will power was himself held by a greater power, that of the white man's whisky. And so it came to pass that one evening after drinking very freely, he hurried down to the water and jumping in committed suicide. His rapid tread had attracted the attention of Mrs. Stockton and Mrs. Clemens and they heard the splash in the water. His body was found the next day and was wrapped in blue broadcloth, bound together or clasped with silver brooches, his hat ornamented with bands of silver, a string of sixteen silver crescents and armlets decorated his body, and he was buried in the orchard of John Tucker, in the southeast part of Chesterfield. This was in 1816, and Francois then became chief and lived here till 1830, when he removed to Kansas with most of his tribe, where he died but a few years ago. Mrs. Maconce's housekeeping was quite remarkable. The lawyers from Detroit on their way to the county seat stopped on the way and passed a night at the Maconces. There were judges Witherell, Sibley and Whipple and Chancellor O'Keefe. They traveled on horseback. Mrs. Maconce dressed like a white woman and was neat and tidy in person and in her housekeeping. Immediately on the arrival of the travelers they were ready for a meal. Mrs. Mc. would be seen washing her hands preparatory to making the shortcake and frying the venison. All relished the meal thus prepared and pronounced it most luxurious and appetizing. The beds also were nice and clean and the blankets of the purest, cleanest white. Next morning they resumed the journey, and the next night was passed at Billy Brown's near what is now Marine City. Chancellor O'Keefe was always very well dressed, and one night he is remembered to have become so hilarious as to have danced with his silk stockings fallen down over his slippers much to the amusement of the children of the family.

The first wife of Maconce was remarkable for the beauty of her hands—they were handsomely formed and soft as those of gentle-folk—so I am informed by Judge Albert Miller of Bay City, at whose house she stopped with her husband, the chief at the time of the sale of the Saginaw lands. They then went on to London, Ontario, where she died. A sister of Maconce was the wife of chief Wawanosh of Sarnia, whose descendants are now on the reservation and many of them are highly educated. Maconce was a Free Mason. He died in Kansas, whither he removed with most of his tribe in 1830.

OGEMOS OR OKEMOS,

was a nephew of the great chieftain, Pontiac, and like him was a

bold and daring warrior. He was in person fleshy and short, was full of life and ambition, and was buried in Ionia county, December 5, 1858, and was not less than one hundred years old. On one occasion, on his way to Sarnia for the purpose of obtaining his annuity, he, with his wife and children stayed over night at Mrs. Brakeman's. His wife at the time was very ill with consumption, and he manifested toward her much sympathy and kindness, himself dressing her feet and waiting upon her, much like an attentive white husband, and carried her in his arms to the canoe in which they were to cross the St. Clair river. When near the middle of the stream he hoisted the British flag, but he did not receive the payments for which he made the trip. He said he had much trouble; his wife died on the way, and he returned to bury her, taking her body to the Riley settlement, and afterward went down to Malden to straighten out the annuity business.

How he succeeded I do not know, as he had given in his allegiance to the United States, after the battle of Sandusky, in which he was engaged, and which was the great event of his life, having been left on the battlefield as dead, for two or three days.

He with other Indians had enlisted under the British flag and had formed a scouting party for American scalps. His story as told by himself is already recorded in the county histories of Saginaw and of St. Clair, and I will not now repeat. After his recovery from his wounds he saw he was on the wrong side and took the oath of fealty to the United States which he faithfully observed. But I have not satisfied myself of his entire honesty in claiming the protection of the British flag in 1814. Perhaps his poverty knew no law. At the time of this visit of Okemos at Mr. Brakeman's, which was Dec. 21, 1844, they conversed together in Indian the whole evening. Okemos stated he was well known in Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, Dexter, Jackson and Pontiac, and pulled his shirt up over his head and showed the scars of the fearful wounds made by the tomahawks and the indentations of the bullets in the battle of Sandusky.

A picture of him was taken just before his death which in 1881 was in possession of O. A. Jenison, of Lansing.*

His totem was the bear.

- JOHN RILEY OR RYLEY,

one of the leading spirits among the Indians, was an Ojibway chief and for many years resided on the south side of Black river, Port

* This picture (photograph) is now the property of The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society. Mr. Jenison had it framed and presented it to the society, and it now hangs in the society's room in the State capitol.—G. H. G., Cor. Sec.

Huron (now called), near the corner of the present Military and Water streets. He was a half-breed, a man of commanding appearance, quite courtly in manner, with very good features, almost white, considerably educated, and spoke English very well. He was here in 1813, and may have been earlier. There was only one other house, that of the Frenchman, Auselm Petit. The father of Ryley was James Van Slyck Ryley, incorrectly given by Saginaw county history, son of Philip, born October 3, 1861, and died January 8, 1848, aged 86. J. R.'s mother's name is mentioned three times in the treaty of Saginaw, 1819, *Me-naw-cam-e-goqua*, a Chippewa woman, and his brothers, Peter and James.

Art. 3. Treaty of Saginaw. "There shall be reserved * * *. For the use of John Riley * * * six hundred and forty acres of land, beginning at the head of the first marsh above the mouth of the Saginaw river on the east side thereof." Also the same number of acres respectively to Peter and James of same mother.

Signed by Lewis Cass and by the chiefs and warriors of the Chippewa nation of Indians, September 24, 1819.

The location of John Riley's land is now Bay City. Among the witnesses at signing, I notice the name of James D. S. Riley.

In a letter just received from Isaac D. Toll, one of the vice presidents of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, he writes, "The Rileys by heritage came from an excellent stock," and also states that he had several papers concerning Judge James Ryley, also one concerning one of the Rileys (John perhaps), guiding Gen. Cass, Judge Moran and others in repelling hostile Indians in suburbs of Detroit in 1812. And of Riley's shooting a hostile Indian in the advance.

"The Rileys were of great help to us in the war of 1812, aiding everywhere with loyal fidelity." So wrote Judge Witherell. The father was a most fearless man of great strength and resolution.

Mr. Toll writes that he knew the father at Schenectady, New York. His grandmother's half brother, and Judge Thompson the father of the late Deacon Edwin Thompson of Port Huron, also knew him, as postmaster at that place. Judge Witherell said no man was more honored and respected, and relates an incident when Ryley as a youth, on his entrance into Detroit refused to work on the King's highway, as ordered, and the soldiers were drawn up to flog him, but Ryley dared them to do it, and, Major Antrim of the British army was so dazed by his Herculean mould and courage that he let him go. The assistance the Rileys had been able to give to the United States Government was no doubt the cause of the generous reservations of land for their individual use, in the Saginaw treaty of 1819. James Riley's grant was

where East Saginaw now stands, and Peter's was on the west side of the river.

In 1836 the father revisited Detroit and met John there, whom he advised to sell his lands for a sum not less than \$30,000. They were bought by Andrew T. McReynolds and F. H. Stevens as were also the lands of the other Rileys.

John Riley lived near the mouth of Black river in a block house of two rooms. The front and larger room was used by the Indians of his band, of whom there were not less than twelve—often twice that number—sleeping on the floor in their blankets; their cooking was done outside in the open air. The chief, and his wife, occupied the smaller, and rear room. They had a bedstead in one corner; but my informant, Mrs. Col. Davis, says as a little girl she often peeked into the room and the bed was neither nice nor clean looking.

The Riley band of Indians settled the town of Riley, which received its name from the chief. He engaged in trade there and had a fine store, the towns people making especial mention of his good qualities. One morning he visited the house of Mrs. Ezra Hazen of Memphis, she addressed him in Indian, "Bon-jour," and was much surprised when she received a most correct salutation "Good morning, madam." He was not successful as a merchant, trusted the Indians too much, and failed to make collections. After the sale of the lands in Riley, in 1836, I have not pursued my investigations, except to learn that he died at Muncie Town, on the Thames river, Canada, and was buried in 1842 by Rev. H. P. Chase.

Peter Riley married an educated French woman named Delno, and lived at Belle River. After his death she married Mr. Achan Roselle.

Nancy Riley, a sister of Peter, James and John, married an Indian named Shaw-we-naw-cob-way, who was the grandfather of James Sage the interpreter for the government and for the missionaries. Nancy's daughter also married an Indian whose name was Pe-nasche-we-quom, who again after the death of his first wife married Katicho, the second daughter of old Mother Rodd. They lived at Swan Creek.

At the age of twenty, Nancy Riley's daughter, Mrs. Pe-nasche-we-quom, gave birth to her first child and died. Her funeral was witnessed by the Brown children. Their father said to them, "See that you sit still, you must not act bad when the old man talks." They sat near by partly hidden in the bush.

A long procession of canoes came up the river bearing the tribe and the dead body of the young woman, Nancy the grandmother, with the new-born son in her arms, wrapped in blanket after blanket.

The entire company with faces marked on brow and cheek with charcoal, all clothed with their oldest garments and blankets, a sorry looking company, in sack cloth and ashes, with not a single ornament. They surrounded the open grave and before the body was lowered, the father made a speech. The speech made frequent use of the name of God, which the children could understand.

The grave was in David Cottrell's orchard. Nancy, the grandmother, took the babe and put it to her breast and though for twenty years the fountain had been dry it now furnished nourishment and sustenance for the grandson. He grew to manhood, was educated by the missionaries and given by them the name of James Sage, and served as interpreter for the Indian chief at Sarnia, Ontario.

OLD MOTHER RODD.

In the State Library at Lansing, is hung a portrait made in oil, of this Indian centennarian. It is a gift of the late Hon. D. B. Harrington, a former vice-president of the State Pioneer Society, and your secretary has invited me to give some description of this quaint character, so long seen upon the streets of the towns lying upon the banks of the St. Clair. Her name was by many thought to have been derived from the long staff or rod she always had with her in her travels, and many an impertinent or insolent boy has felt its persuasive power, by a gentle blow upon his head or arm. Mother Rodd was of full Indian lineage, but I will trace it only to her grandfather, May-zhe-ke-osh or Falling-Snow. He had four sons. Wimekee or Thunder; Muck-e-ta-moosh-na, or Black Kerchief; Che-kin-a-bick or Serpent and Pe-tauch-ne-nouk or Running Brook, the youngest and father of Mother Rodd. Her husband, Alexander Rodd, was a half-breed, part French, and his Indian name was She-she-pe-anee or Little Duck. He lost his life near what is now Port Huron. Several Indian families were encamped about five miles up Hauviere deludes or Black river for the purpose of making maple sugar. One day Rodd went out from the camp for a hunt and shot a deer, breaking its leg. The next day he went out in search of it, to bring it in to camp, taking with him a cousin of Mother Rodd, named Mass-e-nec-ke-zhick, Mixed Clouds, a son of her uncle Serpent. Wapoose, Wawanorh and two other Indians, had talked the matter over and decided to kill Rodd, and so were on the lookout for him, one shot him in the side, one in the back and one in the head, the last killing him. A Sarnia Indian said not long ago that it was a Saginaw Indian named Shah-ne-schaw-pe-nace or Green Bird, who was the murderer. They buried him where he fell. His coat and gun

were brought to Mother Rodd, the coat had a bullet hole in the back. From that time the poor woman despised the whole tribe of Saginaw Indians. After this she was twice married, but was always known by the name Rodd. Her totem was the *turtle*. Among her possessions was an oblong wooden dish, made to represent a turtle, given to her by a friend, who made it, an Indian from Walpole Island. Upon the corner of her white blanket, which she wrapped around her in cold weather, could often be seen the figure of a small turtle worked with red yarn.

Strictly honest in all her dealings, she was also industrious and did her work well—her brooms, baskets and mats were always well made. She would often scold about the lazy Indians, saying it was their own fault, if they were poor and hungry.

In the winter she would camp in the woods, and in the summer on the bank of the river. She would then gather berries and exchange them for provisions of which she always had a full supply for herself and youngest daughter, who remained with her. When she peddled she was dressed in her best and had her berries in a bright tin pail, saying she made a more ready sale for them by so doing. She made good maple sugar and would mold it into cakes to give to the children of her friends, always expecting some present in return. She was a good doctress, using herbs and roots. A peculiar application of her skill I will give as narrated by Miss Anna Brakeman.

"I remember when I was quite young that there was an Indian, a son of Mrs. Obeidig, and a grand-son of Serpent, Wahn-go-he-zhe-get by name, who, although he had a wife, had fallen in love with a young squaw and wished to have her for his wife. Mother Rodd at that time had her camp on the back of my father's farm, about one mile south of Military street bridge, Port Huron, and half a mile west of where the tunnel is building. My sister and myself visited her camp and found the Indian above mentioned undergoing treatment, Indian fashion, for desiring to leave his wife. He looked very sober, sitting on the ground in her tent, as if in a fit of sickness. A person unacquainted with the circumstances would have supposed him very ill. His head was bent over an old fashioned frying pan containing water, and a large stone, heated, was placed in it to produce a steam. A large Mackinac blanket was placed around him to keep in the steam. In this way she was sweating the evil, or devil, out of him. The treatment was successful, as he continued living with his wife until his death which occurred after about two years."

Before she became too old and infirm Mother R. made yearly visits

to her Indian friends on Walpole island, always traveling in her canoe and paddling it herself. She would there receive large presents of corn, always of the white flint variety, which is much the best for hulling purposes, and she hulled it both for soup and for hominy, pounding it in a mortar made by hollowing out the trunk of a hardwood tree about three feet long, using a wooden pestle.

She was always very fond of the Americans, but her home was on the Sarnia reservation, and her children resided there. She, also, regularly received an annuity from the British government.

One day she started to cross the river in her canoe, and meeting a squirrel swimming across the water, she killed it with her paddle, saying it was a British squirrel and she did not want it to land on the American side.

Twenty-two years before her death, she lived to be a hundred and fifteen (some think), she had her grave clothes made and placed them in care of Mrs. Brakeman. The leggins were of bright red cloth, such as the British government furnished the Indians at that time, and were trimmed with ribbons and beads and were very gaudy. During her last sickness she expressed a wish to be baptized and Rev. Allen Salt, an Indian preacher, administered to her the ordinance of christian baptism. She lies buried in the Indian cemetery at Sarnia. Her grave is marked by a head board painted white on which in letters of black paint is inscribed her name. Her death occurred in 1870.

A historian should make only faithful representations, and truth compels me to write that in her later years, she was often under the influence of whisky, and roamed around, visiting only at the homes of her friends, who *never* refused the hospitality of their kitchen floor. So sad the influence of fire water. Two of her children are still living, very aged, blind and infirm, on the Sarnia reserve. They together lived for twelve years with the Moran family of Detroit, and when conversing with each other always use the French language. Their names are Mrs. Charlotte Dupre, and Antoine Rodd.

Andrew Yates, a cousin, who was a son of Serpent, was at the school of Messrs. Hudson & Hart, missionaries of the American Board, and has acted as interpreter for the British government, is still living, very aged. He was present at Washington at the treaty of 1836. His sister, Mrs. Obeidig, was very gentle, lady-like in every way—used a rocking chair—and was well known to many of the best families of Port Huron and vicinity until quite recently.

Both Mother Rodd and Mrs. Obeidig retained the use of the Indian blanket and the moccasins as long as they lived.