

STORY OF EARLY DAY LIFE IN MICHIGAN

BY MARGARET LAFEVER

Mr. McQueen¹ came to my father in the town of Murray, Orleans Co. N. Y. and in glowing terms gave a description of Michigan. This was in 1836. My father got the western fever and sold his nice farm, for the man said there was plenty of good land near his place that could be had of the government, for the asking. He and his family had been neighbors of ours in "York State" and my mother gave her consent to come. So after I had been duly christened and could stand the sunlight a little, my mother and father took their six children, and started for Michigan. We had two covered wagons, well stocked with provisions, bedding, clothing and cooking utensils also mother's little linen spinning wheel, which she said had once belonged to her mother, and which she would not trust to come with the other goods later on. We had two strong teams of horses, one cow and a nanny goat, the latter to supply us with milk at all times of day. Father was advised to buy a large quantity of dry goods, boots and shoes and provisions and ship them across the lake on a line boat, as the freighters were called. He did so and that was the last he ever saw of them. From Detroit to Dexter and

¹In 1836 J. McQueen entered 160 acres in section 32 and 160 acres in section 33, Eaton County.

thence to Eaton Rapids there were trees, with a chip taken out, every little ways. Two men had gone through and blazed a road to Ionia. The Charlotte road was called the Dexter road for many years.

After three weeks hard work, traveling through dense forests and fording most of the streams, the family arrived at Eaton Rapids worn out and homesick. We occupied the wagons until the shanty was built, which did not take long for kind neighbors soon came to our assistance. The custom was, if any one heard the sound of wood chopping in a new direction, Mrs. McQueen would blow loud and long on her horn and all of the neighbors would come to her to learn where the sound of chopping came from. Then with axes on their shoulders the men would go to the newcomers assistance, clear a patch of ground, and build two shanties, one for the people and one equally as strong for the beasts, for bears and wolves came at night, the latter in large droves. One night the first week of our sojourn wolves were fighting on top of our shanty and two fell down the stick chimney. Father and my brother despatched them with axes.

Father found there was no government land and so had to buy of the man who deceived him. His wife was a noble woman and she and mother could not part again so we settled down and soon had all we could do with ague. Some of the poor sick people were at the starving point when one cold winter day father and brother went to the north lot to get wood and try and get a deer, but came back in a short time bringing on the sleigh an Indian sick and nearly frozen. The children were badly frightened to see him for the white men in authority had given all the Indians notice to leave the country. Some of them who had large families felt very badly and strange to say, thought it was not just to rob them of their land. I shall never be able to see why God permitted those poor peaceable Indians to be driven like wild beasts from their homes. The soldiers came from Detroit and took most of them but a few managed to stay around the country. I only heard of one Indian that was bad and one of our citizens saw him fall from his canoe into Duck Lake.

The Indian father brought home was named Jack and he seemed nearly dead. When my mother had tried all remedies without his reviving, she thought he was dying and taking her rosary and kneeling by his side, began to repeat the prayer for the dying. Soon Jack opened his eyes and reached a feeble hand, took the crucifix and kissed it (an image of Christ was on the cross.) Mother then prayed for the restoration of the living, Jack joining in a feeble voice. He proved to be a Canadian half-breed and a Catholic. A bond of friendship sprang up between Jack and the family and he proved a great blessing to the poor white people some of whom were near the starving point. Jack brought

down with his gun plenty of game and distributed it among the families that were needy. He also took medicines that he had made of roots and herbs, to those who were ill and they were many. He taught our boys and men to make traps to catch game, for ammunition was too expensive to be had at all times. All this was repeated to me as I grew old enough to understand. The first I remember of Jack was one day when he made whistles for brother and me out of bass wood and popple boughs. One night my mother and brother thought they heard a woman screaming down near the creek. They hastened in that direction in the pitchy darkness when a hand was laid upon them and in silence they waited. Soon the screams were heard again and with the report of Jack's gun a large panther fell nearly at their feet. Jack had understood the screams and saved their lives. He taught the boys how to make splint brooms out of hickory saplings. The waste splints were treasured for kindlings as we started fires with flint and steel and punk, by striking the flint on steel and having a piece of punk under to catch the sparks it would soon be all on fire, then the splinters would be added and then the wood. I have known mothers to send a mile to us to get coals to start their fires, not having flint and punk. We always kept ours. Out by a stump was a place made with stones in a hollow of the ground where we kept coals covered with ashes, which we usually made our fires from.

While in the small shanty that was our home for nearly two years, all the new arrivals came to us and how the shanty held them at night is a wonder to me as I think of it. One man tried to claim relationship with mother but she told him "no you are not even Irish." "Well" said he, "my wife's cousin married an Irishman." All the neighbors were good in those days and when sorrow, sickness and death came, all were ready to render assistance and comfort them in their affliction.

McQueen told father, who was suffering with ague, that he would go to Detroit and get the goods for him, taking his son and father's two teams. Father gave him the receipts for the goods and after a long three weeks had passed he came back and said that he had lost the receipts and that the goods had not yet arrived in Detroit. After waiting a time father went to Detroit and was shown the records where a man claiming to be him took the goods away. It was a great loss to us.

Mother tanned and made our shoes of deer skin, made large and lined with coon fur in the winter. Each child had to knit so many rounds on the plain part of their stockings every evening, mother putting in the heels and narrowing off the toes. She had to knit for the store both linen and wool. Father built a new house nearer to the road. It was of split logs and was large with good chamber room and board parti-

tions. Mother began to hope to have all the comforts of home as she had them in "York State," but ague followed my father.

A doctor² at last came to settle in the village. I will give a brief history of the first three. Dr. Sumner² was tall and nice and very dignified. He would enter a house hear the patient's story of shaking and suffering in perfect silence. Then he would say, "yes, I see, all run down, very weak, bilious, debilitated. We must draw off all the bad blood and give you a chance to make new and get strong again, give me a bowl and a bandage." They were brought and the poor victims gave up poor thin blood that was merely keeping the heart beating. The charge for a visit was a dollar, and fifty cents extra for bleeding. So every one in the house, who were ailing, sometimes a whole large family had to be bled. The doctor forgot his lance one day and so took his jack knife and sharpened it on his boot leg and bled all of the family of Mr. Reagan. When he came to little Susan the hurt and fright were so great that she died in his arms. He came to our house but mother would not let him touch one of her children. Father was growing worse and tried the doctor's remedy, in fifteen minutes he was dead. Another doctor came who said that was no way to do, he never bled his patients, he wound them in a wet sheet. A promising young man, one of the very best, Sumner Hamlin was wrapped in cold, wet sheets and died. Yet another doctor came and he sent a man and team down to Grand Ledge to get a load of hemlock bark which he would steep strong and give them hemlock sweats when they were so weak that they died from the heat and exhaustion. You may ask did these doctors get rich. Oh, no, they got the shakes, took some of their own medicine and soon died. They lie in our cemetery among the unknown dead that were removed from the old burial ground.

Now about our preachers.⁴ One day Mrs. Benjamin Knight with Mrs. Conklin in her wagon came through our neighborhood and stopped at every house. Mrs. Conklin went in and invited every family to meet at her home on such a date to hold religious services and bring the children, sure. Enough responded to the call to more than three times fill her house so we all went out and sat on the grass in the yard. Mrs. Conklin read some from the Bible, prayed and preached. All sang and

²Mrs. H. Amella Webb, of Williamston, said in 1842 they were obliged to either go to Dexter or Argentine to mill, a distance of thirty-five miles, to Howell for a doctor, to Detroit, Ann Arbor or Dexter for merchandise, carrying it on the backs of Indian ponies. The mail was carried once a week from Howell to Grand Rapids on a pony, over what was called the Detroit and Grand River trail.

³A. Sumner entered 156 acres in section 26 in 1836. No mention is made of Dr. Sumner's name as physician in any of the records we can find, and undoubtedly he could not be called a regular physician.

⁴Long journeys were taken to attend meetings. One woman rode ten miles on horseback carrying three children with her. Often a man would take an ox team, travel many miles to attend the first service at nine a. m. and two other meetings and reach home before dark.

I think it must have been the best as well as the first religious service held in Eaton Rapids. Meetings and a Sabbath school were organized by this brave woman. In one short year they met to show the respect and love they bore her and then followed with the sorrow stricken husband and placed her in her grave, dust to dust but the spirit to God who gave it. On her tombstone this meeting is recorded. You may read it, but uncover your head for her ashes and her memory are sacred to every old pioneer. She was only twenty-one years old when she died.

Amos Spicer's⁵ family and brother and Samuel Hamlin and family with Benjamin Knight⁶ and family were here when we came. Ed Knight was the first white child born in this town and the second in the county, the first being a Mrs. Rogers⁷ who resides in Bellevue.

A skein of thread cost five cents for cotton, ten for linen. It would measure three yards. Mother with her little wheel spun flax into thread and colored it with walnut shucks and supplied people for miles around, for women only used cotton on baby clothes and making their husband's dickies, a front piece like a shirt bosom tied in place with a string around the neck and waist and worn under the vest on their marriage day and on other grand occasions. No white shirts were then worn. When a man died they had a shroud without any back for bleached cotton was from fifty cents to one dollar a yard, calico fifty and colors that would fade. It did not wear long either, so our mother got unbleached cotton, the coarse kind, for thirty-five cents and colored it with sassafras and butternut bark, a sort of brown, for our summer dresses. We got sheep and mother made our dresses of wool in winter, paying Mrs. Morse for weaving by spinning for her and giving her linen thread. She never received money for her thread but Indians would come and exchange fur for it. White folks would bring a calf or pig or some hens and exchange for linen cloth or thread. Mother had brought some flax seed with her and had sown it near the marsh the first year we came. Our boys wore tow cloth in summer and our bed ticks and bags and towels were all made of linen. Mother worked hard.

⁵Amos Spicer. See Vol. XXII, p. 505, this series.

⁶Benjamin F. Knight was born in New York state, July 12, 1807, son of Joseph and Martha Knight. When fifteen years of age he removed with his parents to Roscoe, Ohio, where he grew to manhood. On April 17, 1834, he married Alethea Spicer, daughter of Amos and Lucretia Spicer. In 1836 he went with his family to Michigan and settled at Eaton Rapids. Mr. Knight erected the first sawmill in the county and built three small board houses. He formed a land company and laid out Eaton Rapids. In 1852 Mr. Knight went to California, but returned on January 9, 1854. A year from that day he died. He had five children: Amos, a doctor; Edwin, a resident of Eaton Rapids; Lucretia, widow of Joseph Earl; Martha, wife of Benjamin Slade of Ypsilanti, and William, who died when forty-three. Mrs. Knight married for her second husband John H. Waldron, of New York state. *History of Barry and Eaton Counties*, 1891, p. 818.

⁷In Mr. Foote's *Sketch of Early Days of Eaton Co.*, Vol. III, p. 384, this series, he states that Sarah Fitzgerald, wife of John A. Spaulding, was the first white child born in the county.

Many times after our father passed away I have wakened wrapped in a blanket in a fence corner with mother and the boys near by gathering and piling stones to get the field ready on time for the fall wheat, so by moonlight they piled them for mother had to have the daylight for her spinning.

The first pigs we owned mother got by exchanging a new black silk dress with Mrs. Leader. The dress was made before she had thought of moving to Michigan. She had no use for it, but did have for the pigs. You who would like to hear more of the pioneers, come some pleasant day and go with me to the cemetery and I will tell you of Mr. Hamlin and his good wife, how cheerful they were although sickness and sorrow came and how much they did for others. Also of the Gallerys^s and Spicers and Winns, liberal hearted good people, and of Mr. and Mrs. Knight whose many acts of kindness it would take years to tell. It lives in the memory of all the old settlers. Many more I might mention but will close.

Sorrowful memories come to me of my mother's struggles to keep her six children together. Five years to a day after we lost our father just as spring came with a warm gladdening breeze and robins were chirping around our door the worst stroke came to us poor children. Our mother passed to the great beyond. Our home was broken up and we were scattered never more to meet under one roof.⁹