

OLD TIMES IN CLINTON COUNTY.

BY MRS. M. J. NILES.

[Written for the pioneer picnic held in Eagle, August 20, 1885.]

In the long ago when Clinton and its surrounding counties were described as a desert of swamps and sand knolls, and grassy lakes, and low, dark forests, fit only to be inhabited, as it was, by Indians and wild beasts and snakes, in that time and with this reputation of the country some of our brave pioneer forefathers pushed on to the drear howling wilderness, which, some said, lay to the far end of the west, and whither, if they went, they never, never should be seen or heard of more.

When this wilderness region was first penetrated by white explorers they found it traversed by bands of Indians from the Saginaw tribe, and bands of the Ojibway or Chippewa nation mixed with a few Ottawas and still fewer Pottawottamies, which latter two had perhaps become allied by marriage with the dominant Chippewas. Some of these people occupied the country along the Looking-glass and Grand rivers. They were generally friendly to the settlers, and some bought from them venison and maple sugar to eke out their own scanty supplies.

But Clinton, so far interior, was not the first county to be settled, and, indeed it was not "Clinton county" until March 2, 1831, but previously had been included with other counties under different names. The first settler the county received was George Campau, who established a trading post at Maple Rapids in 1826, for the purpose of trading with the Indians. Campau became a prominent settler and entered government land in the

township of Essex as early as 1832. About that time Hiram Benedict settled in the same township. In the fall of 1833, David Scott located on the Looking-glass river in the present township of DeWitt, and I am sure some stories more interesting than fiction could be written of David Scott. The first township meeting in the county, and the whole county was then embraced in one township under the name of DeWitt, was held at his house.

In the month of February, 1834, the families of Anthony Niles and Steven B. Groger started on their weary wilderness journey to find their new homes somewhere in the forest. After untold hardships they found a desirable location and built their cabins in what was afterwards the township of Eagle.

In the fall of 1834, John Benson and Herman Thomas settled near them, four families now, and a mile or so to the east two young men, Daniel Clark and his brother Henry were chopping and clearing for another home. The next year the fifth family came, Jonas Clark, the father of Daniel, Henry and David Clark. The next family was that of John Shear, brother-in-law of the young Clarks, and the seventh family was that of Henry Rowland.

Now my purpose is to tell you something of what they did, and how they lived, and believing that it could be better told by one who passed through it all, I went to Henry Rowland, who is now seventy-five years old, and asked him to tell me about pioneer times; he said, "Just fifty years ago my father, Oliver Rowland, and I came here, in June, '35, and after looking well about we located on the south bank of the Looking-glass; went on to Bronson, afterwards called Kalamazoo; entered my land and paid for it, and went back to York State for my wife and goods. During my trip to New York, Daniel and Henry Clark had come to the little settlement, and had put up a log shanty, and when we arrived they opened their doors and made us welcome. Oh we were all brothers here fifty years ago. I then went to work to build me a house; cut the logs, hewed the ends a little, and piled them up house shape; made the roof of bark; split some logs in two and laid the flat sides up for a floor; took the boards from one of our goods boxes and patched up a door; built the indispensable fireplace of stones, with flatish ones laid for the hearth; built sides and back up the jams; put in the tramel with its hooks, and went on building the chimney-back of stones, then farther up we built of sticks and clay to the top. We had one little window of six panes of 7x9 glass; put that in, then the house was done, and we went to making furniture. First a bedstead—I built it of poles and crossed it with basswood bark instead of the customary bed cord—poles driven into the sides of the house; one post was all it had. When that was finished,

my next work was chairs; I split a short log in two, bored four holes in the round side with a two inch augur and put in four stout sticks for legs and set it up, and I had a chair for two people, and then I made another and had enough. For a table we used a chest, and made a broom out of a pole—a splint broom—a half a yard from the large end of the pole we sawed into the wood for an inch or so all around; took the bark off and shaved down long slender shavings or splints till near the end; lapped them over and tied them down, and we had a broom. After a while I took some box boards and made me a good old-fashioned cross-legged table, such as you have seen. Now it seemed quite like home with my wife and father with me. We brought a year's provisions with us and a yoke of oxen and two cows.

I was anxious to get to chopping. It was no light task to clear the land of the heavy, dense growth of timber upon it. We chopped about ten acres that first winter. In the spring our axes were pretty dull for there was not a grindstone in the settlement, but we knew that an Englishman had one ten miles down the river. I can't remember his name, but he said he came directly from England here. He was a bachelor and lived absolutely alone; his house was half a mile or so this side of Philo Bogue's. Bogue was the first settler at Portland, you know. I think this Englishman must have had quite a property for he had many more comforts than the rest of us. Well, our axes were dull, and early one morning in the spring of '36, Henry Clark and I went down before breakfast, following an Indian trail along the river. We took some johnny cake in our pockets. The best kind of johnny cake we used to bake then. It was made by wetting corn meal with cold water and adding a little salt, then we spread it on a board and roasted it before the fire. Some of this we ate for lunch as we walked rapidly down the trail. We ground our axes well and got back about noon, and were ready for breakfast and dinner too, I guess—twenty miles to grind our axes. The Englishman did not stay there long. He got homesick and sold out and went back to his native land. Nearly all who came here to make new homes stayed here, for they were too poor to move back east even if they had wanted to, and most were satisfied that good farms and homes here would result from patient toil. William Deits and Valentine Cryderman and Andrew Shadduck came in the spring of '36. Deits and Cryderman settled on the north bank of the river and Shadduck south of me. You can't tell how warmly we welcomed their coming. That summer we raised little patches of potatoes and corn, and when the corn was ripe we picked the ears and dried them and ground the corn in a little hand mill which was owned by a company of four. It was such a mill as the slaves used to grind their corn for hoe cake and hominy. A man, if he worked hard, could grind a half bushel in an

evening. There were two handles and usually two turned at a time. Old Captain Scott, near DeWitt, used to keep a supply of flour and pork, which he hauled up from Pontiac, I have known Stephen Groger to walk from his farm to Scott's, 12 miles or more, and do a day's work; would stay sometimes and work several days and take his pay in provisions, carrying them home on his back at night, after he had worked hard all day. One night I remember he brought 100 pounds of flour, a quarter of vension and several other articles. He nearly always stopped for a few minutes' rest at my shanty. Very few men could even stand under the burden that Groger could carry. Anthony Niles was his equal in strength. No one was ever found who could beat him at chopping, and he would walk farther, with a load on his back, than even Groger. But few could compare at all with either of them in physical power.

The first minister who visited our little settlement, held his services at the home of Anthony Niles in the fall of 1835. There was a Methodist class formed of six members. The first wedding was celebrated in the same house. Anthony Niles' daughter, Elvira, was married to William Cryderman, in 1837. The first school meeting was also held at Mr. Niles' house, in the spring of '37. We voted to have a school, and soon after built a rude log school house, and started the first school in the county, with about a dozen scholars. I harvested my first wheat in '37, cut it with a sickle, built a threshing floor of cut logs—many threshed on the ground; flailed out the wheat—you have seen a flail. I might tell you it was like a heavy pole ten feet long, broken in two in the middle and fastened together again with a leather string hinge. Well, we pounded the wheat with that and threshed it, then winnowed it with a hand fan; those you have not all seen. They were the shape of half this round table, with a box like side eight inches high, running around the rounding edge. The fan was of tightly woven splints, for lightness, and it had two handles on the rim. I put on about a peck of wheat at a time, took hold of the handles, put the rounding side against me, then tossed it up and down with a sort of flapping motion, and the wheat falling quicker than the chaff would lie on the fan and the chaff float off on the floor. The first mill was built at Portland by the Newman's in '37, so I took my wheat down in a canoe and had it ground. New clothing? Well, we patched our old coats and cobbled our shoes and made us some buckskin pantaloons, and now and then sent to Pontiac for a yard or two of calico, at two shillings a yard, just to please the women. One spring my niece, Mary Ann Calder, 13 years old, came to stay awhile with my wife, and across the river and a quarter of a mile up stream Cryderman's folks had a house full of girls, and one day Mary Ann was very lonesome and

wanted to go over to Cryderman's. Wife told her no, the river was too high, she would drown if she tried to cross; but in half an hour she missed her, and passed the day in much anxiety. At night Mary Ann came back drenched to her neck. She had waded or swam the deep river twice for the sake of girl company; a great wonder she had not been swept down stream. We took lots of comfort visiting then; used to go with oxen and sled many miles for an evening visit. Often the only light in the house would be the bright blaze on the old fire place. The men would talk and women would knit. Yes, knit and talk too; and the children played games in the dim corners behind us. At ten o'clock or so we would have supper. The fire gave light enough to get supper by. Bake some shortcake in the bake kettle set among the hot ashes, with its iron cover loaded with hot coals; hang the teakettle on the trammel over the flame, and if a bee tree were found in the neighborhood, we would have some honey. Oh, yes, we had good visits then. I believe I'd almost be young again to enjoy them over."

Then he sat musing until I said, "You've told me nothing about the wolves. Did you have any adventures with them?"

"Well, not much. One morning I went out to work on the road; Joseph Eddy was pathmaster; had my ax with me; a few rods from me I heard the yelping of wolves and the squealing of a hog. I dropped my ax and crowded through the thick brush until I could see the combat. A large hog belonging to Mr. Clark was backed up against the roots of a fallen tree—a wolf on each side of him—one would bite him on the side and the hog would spring at him with open mouth most savagely, and as he turned the other wolf would spring and bite. I jumped on a log and yelled and screamed my best. The wolves looked at me and slunk away. I thought I could drive the hog home, as it was not more than three quarters of a mile from Mr. Clark's, but the hog was badly wounded and mad with pain and fear, and he dove at me as he had at the wolves. I sprang back, barely escaping the clash of his jaws. I turned and ran over to Mr. Clark's and got the boys and gun and we hurried back, but the hog was gone, and we failed to find any trace of it. Perhaps, hearing the wolves coming back, it had run out and been chased into some covert which he failed to find."

The Indians, Mr. Rowland! Did you know the Chippewa chief, Okemos?

"I have seen him. Well I remember that he came one bitter cold night to my father's house stiffened with cold and very hungry. He lifted the latch and walked in and went to the great fireplace without saying a word. My father placed an easy chair for him and cared for his wants as if he were a distinguished guest. He was an old man then. Okemos died at his camp on the Looking-glass, above DeWitt, in the year '58. They placed in his

coffin his hatchet, knife, pipe and tobacco, and some provisions, and thus equipped for the happy hunting grounds, he was carried to the old Indian village of Shimnecow and buried there near the bank of the Grand river. His son, John Okemos, is now a farmer in Montcalm county."

I wish someone would tell me about the exile of the Pottawattomies in 1840. I know they were hunted among the swamps and captured in little squads, and imprisoned and guarded at Owosso, waiting for the rest to be hunted down and brought in. They captured the chief, Muck-a-Moot, and two hundred or more of his miserable people, and then this wonderful remnant of the Pottawattomies, closely guarded by troops, moved on to the land beyond the Mississippi.

"I can tell you no more about that than you already know. The white man's fire-water wrought great harm to the Indians. Those I knew were peaceable except when drunk; we often traded with them. That brings to my mind a scene of my early childhood. Three half drunken Indians entered our little cabin when only mother and three young children were there. They demanded food. Mother went to the cupboard and one brawny fellow followed her, swinging his arms and talking what we could not understand. We little ones were much frightened and huddled in the farthest corner. Mother offered them a variety of food, but nothing would satisfy them.

"I seem to see her now, with one hand on the cupboard to support herself; she was feeble; it was just before her long sickness of fourteen years, in which she never walked a step. The Indians became noisy and more violent, taking down dishes and bottles. They at length seized the tea canister and a few other articles and turned toward the door. Mother told them they could not have them. Oh, how scared I was. Just then father opened the back door and walked in with his gun on his shoulder. He brought his rifle down with a sharp bang on the floor, and with flashing eyes and angry voice, commanded the Indians to 'Go! or——.' They did not wait for the rest, dropping the things they had in their hands. I have an idea they were looking for whisky." We don't see many Indians now, do we?

"No," said Mr. Rowland, "those times were so long ago, so far from now that sometimes they hardly seem to belong to my life—so long ago."

After a slight pause I remarked: "You lost your wife a few years after you came here, didn't you?"

And he replied slowly, "My wife died by my side in the wilderness; the boy died first. She was a good woman, an excellent woman. She had but one fault, she was weakly; but young folks don't think of that when they

marry. She tried hard to help, but she died of consumption." Here Mr. Rowland relapsed into silent meditation, and I quietly bade the ladies good night and turned toward home.

Now, who shall tell the untold tale of the pioneers? Frail women and timid children in the desert of woods and swamps. The men were brave and good, but they could not give what they could not get. This woman, sick and needing the comforts of her York State home, pining for the heart friends of her youth, hungering for accustomed foods and fruits, getting faint and weak, though she fought against it, day by day getting more feeble, though she told herself over how she must go on with her work and so help her husband, bracing up to labor through the days and lying down to restless nights, the wearing cough, the longing for the dear one sister, the darkness made more lonely by the sense of impassable distance from her very own folks. We will not try to tell it, only "she died in the wilderness and the boy died first." Timid children, as night came on, sent off in the woods to find the cows. I know one little girl who always trembled with fear when she started, and whose terror increased the farther she went in the woods. How the ears were strained to catch the far off sound of the bell, and darkness was coming. She must find them—fear is awful pain—what swamp was this she was entering—but I have talked too long. And this was fifty years ago; so long from now.

Now, instead of a dense and trackless tangle of forest and swamp, we look over our great green meadows, our broad acres of waving golden wheat, rolling in the breeze like the surface of our own magnificent lake, then we turn our eyes to the great fields of emerald corn, tall and stately, topped with yellow plumes (what can compare in beauty with the growing corn), riches of wheat and smiling meadows and flowing brooks, and lazy willows on the water's edge, and clumps of shadowy trees, and herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep, and roomy barns, and wonderful machinery, and comfortable dwellings, some of them palaces in very truth, compared with the pioneer shanty. A land that abounds in wells and streams, and minerals, and woods, and grains, and fruits, and homes, and schools, and churches, a land to be proud of and a land to be happy in, given us by the stern bravery of our pioneer fathers. Given us by the courageous toil and steadfast endurance and strong purpose of our noble pioneers, a few of whom are here today, thank God, but look about you and count how many are gone. They have been forced to embark in the silent ships and sail away, and all of us are going on together toward the same great sea.