

EARLY MICHIGAN.

SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF OLIVER WILLIAMS AND FAMILY, READ BEFORE
THE MICHIGAN STATE PIONEER SOCIETY AT ITS ANNUAL MEET-
ING, FEBRUARY 2D, 1876, BY B. O. WILLIAMS.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan :

Nothing but a desire to aid in supplying a few links to the historic chain that our society is yearly forging for the benefit of those who will follow us, could induce one fully conscious that a lack of an early education in consequence of having been reared in the back woods, has unfitted him for the task of writing an account of the early experiences of those who through many trials of sickness and the privations incident to all early settlers, with true Yankee energy and enterprize, moved a large family of small children, in the year 1815, from Old Concord, Massachusetts, to Detroit, in the country then called the North-west Territory. That early removal was in consequence of, or rather was hastened by, the destruction and entire loss of a large property and business which my father, Oliver Williams, had built up for himself in Detroit and along the frontiers, in the mercantile and fur trade, by the war of 1812. As early as the year 1808, he had established a business at Detroit, purchasing his goods in Boston annually, and carting them overland in covered wagons to Buffalo, thence to Detroit by water, making generally two trips a year on horseback, home and to Boston. During the winter and spring of 1810 and '11, he built at the River Rouge, a large sloop, naming her the *Friend's Good Will*, and in the summer of 1812, just before the war broke out, went on board of her to the post of Michilimackinack, himself acting as supercargo. At Mackinaw, his vessel was chartered by the government to take military supplies from there to the United States troops at Chicago, and also to bring back to Detroit a cargo of furs and skins from the factor of the government at Chicago; Lieutenant Hanks, in command of the post, furnished him a box of ammunition, twelve stands of arms, a non-commissioned officer and six men, as a guard against Indians who were then manifesting hostile intentions, a declaration of war being daily expected. Upon returning from Chicago a few days after the capitulation of Mackinaw, without information of that occurrence, he was captured, made a prisoner of war, and his vessel condemned as a lawful prize of war by the British in consequence of such charter, cargo and troops. This vessel's name was then changed by the English and called *Sloop Little Belt*, and mounted with three guns. It was recaptured by Commodore Perry and fleet at the battle of Lake Erie, in 1813, and was burned at Buffalo the next winter. M

father was paroled and sent to Detroit in a cartel, was present at Hull's surrender and after Winchester's defeat, sent east through Canada in the winter with most of the business men of Detroit, before the arrival of Gen. Harrison's army. After Winchester's defeat many prisoners were brought by the Indians to Detroit, to be ransomed by the whites, some badly wounded. My father purchased several, either five or seven, from the Indians and squaws, and in 1828, was paid on this account by the government of the U. S., the sum of \$28 apiece for two of those Kentuckeys, being the sum paid the Indians for their ransom, and this sum was not paid until after the affidavits of those living soldiers were duly appended to the military papers properly made out at the time of purchase in Detroit. Those who had died or whose affidavits could not be obtained were never paid for, and these two small sums, thus apparently reluctantly repaid, was the only remuneration he or any of his family ever received from the general government or any other source, for all his losses during the war. His invoices in Boston the year before the war, amounted to \$64,000. At the close of the war nearly all had been swept away.

In 1835, upon settling the estate of my father, I found one bundle of dead notes, and mostly against men then dead, amounting to over \$30,000. My mother, upon my handing them to her, raked open the coals and threw them into the fire at our old homestead, saying that she did not wish to be reminded by seeing them again of the horrors she had passed through.

That devoted mother, in the fall of 1815, left her home in Concord, leaving an aged mother, and with eight children, the oldest not fourteen years of age, traveled with one four-horse team and covered wagon, and another spring carriage and horses, over to Buffalo, (accompanied by a sister and her daughter, a young lady,) and from Buffalo to Detroit on board a small schooner named the *Mink*, arriving at Detroit on the 5th day of November, a beautiful Indian summer day, when she met her husband, and we, our father, who had long been anxiously expecting our arrival in great dread of some accident having befallen us, as a violent storm had overtaken and compelled the vessel to take shelter several days in Put-in-Bay at the Islands, where we lay tempest-tossed.

About a mile above Malden, thousands of wild Indians were then encamped, where they annually gathered to receive valuable presents from the British, in payment for their services during the war then just ended. It was late in the afternoon, and the Indians were holding war dances, sending forth over the water, hideous yells, when all at once pop, pop and whiz, whiz, came bullets of rifles or muskets over our heads. One was said to have passed through a sail of our vessel, while the war whoop rang out more horrible than before, which caused our captain to swear great wicked oaths, and us little folks and the ladies to scamper below into the cabin, expecting the tomahawk and scalping knife soon to be after our scalps. This was said to be the work of drunken Indians, and no doubt was so.

We cast anchor one mile below the Fort at Detroit, the wind having died away, when we were met and taken off to shore by my father and a

brother of the late Hon. Shubael Conant, who was with us on board the Mink from Buffalo. We walked up the river bank, passed the guns of the fort with pyramid piles of cannon balls, the muskets of the sentries and soldiers gleaming in the rays of the setting sun, passing up the principal street, now Jefferson avenue, to our home near the upper end; where it was entirely closed up by a great block-house and a strong stockade, before which stood some open mouthed big cannon and a sentry, and another on the block-house, the guns pointed ready to sweep the street.

We were all glad enough to find a resting place. The people seemed to have all turned out to see the Yankees, and as we passed along in front of the quaint French one story and story-and-a-half houses with dormer windows and strong, tight outside blinds, we little folks were warmly greeted with a kiss and an "Ah! *Mon petite Bostonien*," by the kind hearted French ladies. At Buffalo we had found but one house of any pretensions that had been left standing by the fire, and that on the site of the Mansion house, and at Detroit but three brick buildings, with a resident population that did not exceed probably one thousand, exclusive of the military forces.

In 1816 many families who had gone east previous to, and during the war, returned, and Gen. Cass brought his family to reside in Detroit, also my uncle, Alpheus Williams, brought the rest of his family there. The extremely cold summer of that year had raised the price of produce to rates before unknown. Potatoes were worth two dollars a bushel, and whisky the same price per gallon. Potatoes were retailed at two shillings per dozen. The currency was largely cut money, a Spanish dollar was cut into nine and even ten pieces, which passed for York shillings.

On the 14th day of August, 1817, James Monroe, President of the United States, arrived at Detroit, and was received with public honors by both the civil and military authorities. It was a proud day for the little frontier town, which was everywhere illuminated in the evening. My youngest brother was born that day, and of course was named James Monroe.

The summer of 1818 brought the first steamboat, *The Walk-in-the-Water*, and when she began to blow off steam, the Indians in some cases fled to the woods in real fright, their credulity having been made a source of amusement by some waggishly inclined Frenchmen.

I wish here to correct an error to be found in Charles Landon's Red Book of Michigan. On page 80 he states that in 1819 this "steamboat first made her appearance on Lake Erie," and again on page 126 says, "the Walk-in-the-Water, Capt. Jedediah Rogers, arrived at Detroit May 20, 1819, and occupied a week in making one trip to Black Rock." Those statements are incorrect. The boat certainly first came to Detroit in 1818,—our family all saw her on her arrival; and in 1819 we were in the interior. There must be somewhere a correct date of the day and month.

In 1818 the first of the interior settlements made in the territory, were commenced in Oakland county. Early in the month of September of that year, my father and mother, uncle and aunt, with two gentlemen

friends, all on horseback, with a French guide, followed the Saginaw Indian trail out into the section now called Oakland county. These two ladies were then considered to be the first English speaking American women who had ever voluntarily slept in the back woods of Michigan. After reaching the lake country north and west of Pontiac, finding those beautiful plains covered with a luxuriant growth of grass and flowers, splendid open forests free from underbrush, abounding with deer and birds, the lakes alive with fish, and covered with water fowls, all so tame as scarcely to fear the presence of man; the little party fairly clapped their hands with joy for having found a place so beautiful for their homes.

The most graphic description of that section I have ever seen is to be found in a book entitled "Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis De Tocqueville," written in 1831, and perhaps I cannot do better than to give you a short quotation from his "Fortnight in the Wilderness."

"After we left Mr. Williams, we pursued our road through the woods. From time to time a little lake (this district is full of them) shines like a white table cloth under the green branches. The charm of these lonely spots, as yet untenanted by man, and where peace and silence reign undisturbed, can hardly be imagined. I have climbed the wild and solitary passes of the Alps, where nature refuses to obey the hand of man, and, displaying all her terrors, fills the mind with an exciting and overwhelming sensation of greatness. The solitude here is equally deep, but the emotions it excites are different. In this flowery wilderness, where, as in Milton's Paradise, all seems prepared for the reception of man, the feelings produced are tranquil admiration, a soft melancholy, a vague aversion to civilized life, and a sort of savage instinct which cause you to regret that soon this enchanting solitude will be no more. Already, indeed, the white man is approaching through the surrounding woods; in a few years he will have felled the trees now reflected in the limpid waters of the lake, and will have driven to other wilds, the animals that feed on its banks."

Our little party of explorers selected their farms, searched out the surveyors' lines and marked corners, returned to Detroit and entered the land at the U. S. land office. The price was two dollars per acre, only part being required to be paid down. That fall and winter (which was a very warm and open winter, scarcely any frost or snow until March,) my father built on his farm at Silver lake, a double house of hewn logs, 20x50 feet, one-and-a-half stories high, and in March moved his family from Detroit into it.

The next fall Gen. Cass made the Saginaw Treaty with the Indians, and on the return of the party, stopped over night at our house. Our family, comprising thirteen persons, had all been sick for months with shaking ague—you all well know from experience what it was. The mother of the Indians who brought me the war club which I have shown you, came daily for weeks and sympathized with my mother, bringing us medicinal roots and herbs, also fresh venison, birds, honey, and every species of berries the woods afforded, a free offering of real friendship and kindness. Her husband, a great hunter, was killed in 1824 by a

bear, and was buried on our farm. That old woman died near Chesaning about three years ago. I had the pleasure of giving her from year to year articles of clothing, and paid the last act of gratitude I could to her on earth, by furnishing her funeral shroud.

In the fall of 1820, the Indian chief and tyrant of all the Saginaw bands,—the dreaded Kish Kor Co, encamped on our farm, and accompanied by his old men counselors, and a body guard of armed braves, came to the house and demanded to be furnished with two barrels of flour and one of pork, which we did not have. But after a smoke from a pipe of peace (one of which my father had) and a few speeches that were interpreted by a Mr. Riley, my father freely offering them what the Great Spirit had given us from the earth, consisting of corn, potatoes and pumpkins then in the field; Kish Kor Co ordered about twenty men and squaws to go with Riley and my oldest brother and gather what was necessary to feed them, and then proceeded to name my father, calling him Che Pontiock and adopted him as a brother, saying our family should belong to his people, which was solemnly confirmed by a shaking of hands by all the old men, with every one of the family, and kissing each on the left cheek. After another smoke all around, including father, each taking a few whiffs from the two long stemmed pipes, one of which was Kish Kor Co's, both passed around by his pipe bearer, each of the old men was presented with a plug of tobacco by Pontiock, and the chief with a double portion, and some more for distribution among his braves. Then this solemn council broke up, and from that day no member of our family ever lost anything by theft or was treated with any indignity by Indians from the Saginaws, although we became the pioneer settlers of Genesee, Saginaw and Shiawassee counties, in Genesee county in 1824, Saginaw in 1826, and in Shiawassee in 1831.