

(from *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society Collections* Volume 28 (1897) pages 145-148)

THE JOURNEY OF IONIA'S FIRST SETTLERS
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[Read at Ionia May 27, 1893, on the Sixtieth Anniversary of Their Arrival.]

Some recollections of my father, Samuel Dexter, and the pioneers that first settled in Ionia, of their journey and arrival at Ionia.

My father visited Michigan in the fall of 1832, and, through letters which he published, others were induced to come to Michigan.

He and Mr. Erastus Yeomans bought a canal boat, a scow, and fitted it up to move the families, and as many of our household goods as possible, to Buffalo.

We started from Frankfort village, Herkimer county, N. Y., April 22, 1833, with three families, Mr. Yeomans', Oliver Arnold's and Samuel Dexter's, using their own horses to draw the boat.

The boat's name was "Walk-in-the-Water," but some one wrote on the side of the boat with chalk, "Michigan Caravan."

I think at Utica Mr. Joel Guild and his brother Edward and families embarked with us. We traveled by day and at night had to go ashore to sleep at hotels. At Syracuse Mr. Darius Winsor and family cast their lot with the rest.

The boat was a motley sight, as the deck was piled with wagons taken to pieces and bound on, and every conceivable thing that could be taken to use in such a country where there was nothing to be bought.

From Buffalo to Detroit we came by steamer Superior. Of our trip on the lake I remember little besides sea-sickness.

At Detroit we procured oxen and cows, and as much cooked provisions as possible and started on our journey through the wilderness. There were sixty-three people all told in the party.

The first day out from Detroit we could make but seven miles because the roads were so heavy.

At Pontiac we stayed one night. This was at that time a very small place and had rather a hard name, so much so that, if any one wanted to send a person to a bad place, he would say, "You go to Pontiac."

About twenty miles west of Pontiac we stopped one night with a Mr. Gage and his young wife and baby. I think they had no neighbors nearer than Pontiac and he complained that neighbors were getting too near; their hogs bothered him.

From this time we had to camp out nights. At Shiawassee there was one French family, also two brothers by the name of Williams who were Indian traders. One of them my father hired to pilot us through to Ionia.

From Shiawassee there had never been a wagon through, and much of the way we had to cut the road as we went along.

At Shiawassee there were three children sick with canker rash or scarlet fever, a son of Edward Guild, myself and younger brother, Riley Dexter. We staid over one day during a heavy rainstorm. The Guild boy and myself soon got better, but little brother grew worse, and when we were in the heavy timberland about thirty miles east of Ionia, the dear little boy died about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Mr. Guild had a small trunk which he let us use for a coffin and he was laid in the grave by the light of the camp fires which were burning. My father made a feeling prayer before the coffin was placed in the grave. They piled the grave high with logs to protect it from wolves, and also carved his name, age and date of death on a large tree before leaving the place.

There was a French trader living in Muir who had a squaw for a wife. His name was Generaux. There was also a white man living at Lyons by the name of Belcher. Those were all the inhabitants on the river, except Indians, until you reached Grand Rapids, and I think there were but two white families there.

I must tell you that most of the teams that brought us through from Detroit were ox teams. We had much trouble in crossing marshes and fording streams.

Many women walked, and sometimes when we got stuck in the marshes the men had to carry them ashore.

At night where we camped the men would build great fires by a log and the women would cook the meals. They had to bake biscuits in tin bakers set up in front of the fire. I think those were times that tried women's souls.

When we arrived at Ionia there was a large company of Indians living there. They had planted corn, melons and squashes, and did not like to leave; but through the aid of our interpreter father was able to pay them for their improvements and they left peaceably.

There were five wigwams built of bark. Four of them were down by the river. They were very small-not more than ten feet square. Each had two bunks on one side, one above the other. The other wigwam was a few rods south and east of where the Novelty mill now stands, in the midst of the cornfield. This one was twelve or fourteen feet square, with a doorway at each end, at which we hung up blankets for doors. My father's family occupied this one. On two sides of this wigwam was a low platform wide enough to lay a bed. On this we made up four beds and had a little space between the foot of the beds to tuck in the little ones.

In the center the earth floor was hollowed a little where the Indians had had fire. The roof in the center had an opening for smoke to escape. It also served to let in the rain, and one morning after a heavy rain when the creek had overflowed and run down the path into the wigwams, mother's shoes were floating on the pool in this fireplace.

Our goods were mostly sent around the lakes to be left at Grand Haven, together with provisions, and as there was no transportation except by pole boat, it was a long and tedious task to get the goods up from Grand Haven. For a table the men drove stakes in the ground and put sticks across them. They then laid the sideboards of our wagon box on for a top. So you see we had the first extension table in Ionia.

Joel Gould and family went directly to Grand Rapids to live, but the rest of us lived in the wigwams until they could build big houses to live in.

The first corn raised was pounded in a large mortar the Indians had dug out in a large hollow stump.

The same fall my father brought from Detroit a large coffee mill, with two handles, with which two men could grind the corn. All the settlers had their corn ground in this coffee mill that winter. The next year father bought a small run of stone and put it in his saw mill to run by water, and with this the first wheat raised in Ionia county was ground. It was unbolted flour.

Later my father built a grist mill, which has been remodeled and is now known as the Novelty mills.

Mr. Winsor had a little daughter sick with consumption who did not long survive after our arrival. Eugene Winsor was born that first fall and was the first white child born in Ionia county.

I want to pay this tribute to the Indians: They were very kind and peaceable, and seldom gave us any trouble, never any serious trouble.

HYMN

The hymn composed by Erastus Yeomans, to celebrate their safe arrival at Ionia, which was sung to the tune of Arlington, is worthy a place here.

We'll praise thy name, O God of Grace,
For all Thy mercies shown;
We've been preserved to reach this place
And find a pleasant home.

In journeying far from distant lands,
We've been Thy constant care,
Have been supported by Thy hand
To shun each evil snare.

Through dangers great and toils severe,
Thou, Lord, hast led our way;
Thou art our Keeper evermore,
To guide us day by day.

Help us, O God, to raise our song
Of gratitude to Thee;
Great God to Thee all praise belongs,
In Heaven, on earth, on sea.