

## OLD TIMES AT PIETY HILL

One of the prominent citizens of Birmingham, who did much to stamp the community as a religious one, was Deacon Elijah S. Fish, who in January, 1820, established his homestead on the northeast quarter of section 23. He was a staunch Presbyterian, and it was at his barn and house that the first meetings of that denomination were held and the first society organized. His daughter, Miss Fannie E. Fish, presented a paper to the Oakland County Pioneer Society, in 1888, describing "Piety Hill" and vicinity as the Fish family found it in its earliest days, and, although the matter is somewhat personal, it gives so graphic a picture of the region and the times that it is here republished.

"No spot on the face of the earth," she writes, "has for me more pleasant associations than Oakland county. I sometimes wonder if we fully realize how fair a dot on the earthly ball it is. There may be, and doubtless are, thousands of places of more romantic scenery, of more historic interest, but I have seen hundreds, if not thousands of places without a tithe of its attractions. Its almost innumerable little lakes, crystal clear, have come to be appreciated by all lovers of the beautiful. And there is many a wooded knoll and many a country road, fragrant in early summer with brier rose and clover, and later, gay with golden-rod and aster, bitter sweet and sumach, that would delight a poet's heart. But it is not so much to what it is, as to what it was, that I wish to invite your attention. We gather here year after year to recall with loving memory the incidents of the early settlement of this county. Let us spare a moment to glance at some of the beautiful features of that early day that belong as irrevocably to the past as do the sturdy settlers, who, we will believe, at the bottom of their stout hearts, appreciated the beauty it was their mission, in part, at least, to destroy.

"The little opening in the forest north of Birmingham must have suggested the cleared farms that were to be in the future. Though not great in extent, it was dignified with the name of 'the plains,' and was a pleasant break in the monotony of endless trees. The willow fringed brook on the west sang contented on its way, but told no tales of the past, and of the future only remarking that it was fully able to furnish power for sawing lumber or grinding grain, and was quite at the new comers' service. A few oaks had stepped from their dense neighborhood and secured elbow room in this open space. Painted cup and lupine were glad of a little more sunshine and flourished here accordingly.

"And the old road, too, the Indian trail that led from I know not where, possibly Saginaw, to Detroit. Detached fragments of it remained intact for many years. Doubtless it grew in loveliness after it was disused as a highway, for nature has a fashion of taking the discarded things of man, whether it be a deserted house and garden, or a forsaken highway, and clothing them with a peculiar beauty; so here the turf grew thick and soft, clumps of hazel brush sprang up, now at one side, now in the middle of the green road. Birds found here plenty of safe resting places; robin and bluebird, thrush and catbird were all at home. With one such remnant of the old road I was especially familiar, that between Doctor Parke's house and the sawmill road, so near the turnpike that the rumbling of the wagons and crack of driver's whip could be heard, and yet it had an air of perfect seclusion.

"Here there was once a famous picnic; how heartily Doctor and Mrs. Parke entered into the spirit of the occasion. Rowland Trowbridge, fresh from college, or possibly home at

vacation, was there. The Berkshire pig, which formed part of the repast, was much mixed up with quotations from Shakespeare, and it seemed to be a question with the elders that day which they really liked best, the poet or the pig. For the younger portion of the company, besides the delight of eating out of doors and being in the way generally, was the added excitement of finding a nest of young rabbits.

"Few are left now of that pleasant gathering. Rowland Trowbridge, our teacher, Miss Elizabeth Clark, Doctor and Mrs. Parke, Cornelia, Frank and Ira Parke, are all gone. Of those that were the children then, more than half have found homes on the Pacific coast, and two have found their last resting place there.

"Another section of the Indian trail was on the old Blackington place, and was just such another path of beauty. I think it is all gone now, and many a road that went winding through the woods in delightful fashion, turning out now for a stump and now for a mud hole, has been straightened out and compelled to abandon the curve of beauty for the law of right angles.

"No doubt every old resident can remember some such road fraught with beauty and full of pleasant associations. If in any mind I have called up such memories, my object is attained.

"The children of this generation will remember Oakland county as one of the thriving ones, with interesting railway, and telegraph and telephone wires on every hand; of comfortable and even elegant farm houses, of orchards, grain fields, pastures and meadow lands. Here have come not only people from our own eastern states, but those across the wide Atlantic, many of whom brought with them little save sturdy frames and willing hands, and have found here as a reward of their labors, an old age surrounded by every comfort, and have left to their children a goodly heritage of broad acres; but I am not sorry that my memory carries me so far back that I can form some idea of its look to the first settlers.

"I have been asked to say something of the life of my father, the late Elijah S. Fish; especially that part of it relating to his settlement in Michigan. I can only give such incidents as I remember to have heard mentioned. What memoranda there are in the family are out of my reach at present; but as those early days were not an unfrequent topic of conversation, while my parents lived, I am quite familiar with the story of the settlement of Bloomfield, as far as one family is concerned.

The incidents are commonplace enough, and owe whatever interest we may attach to them to the fact that they are part and parcel of the past of Oakland county.

"Elijah S. Fish was born at Athol, Massachusetts, February 22, 1791. Before his remembrance, his parents moved to western New York, and his father built the first home where the city of Rochester now stands. Left motherless when seven years old, he was taken to Vermont and brought up in the family of Gen. Samuel Fletcher, whose wife was his aunt. When of age, or soon after, he returned to the west again, and in 1815 married Fannie Spencer. Their first home was at Black Rock. Here they saw Lake Erie's first steamboat built and launched.

"The thought of going to Michigan may have been suggested by the weekly trips of the 'Walk-in-the-Water' to Detroit; at any rate, the project of going somewhere into a new

country began to be discussed in the family as a possibility lying in the future, and ere long my mother said if we go at all, let us go soon. So October of 1819, just four years after their marriage, found them ready for the enterprise. They had expected to take the steamer but were delayed the last hour by the arrival of a near friend; not liking to wait a week, they embarked the next day on a schooner. They might as well have waited, for they were two weeks on Lake Erie, and reached Detroit only an hour or so before the steamer arrived on her second trip.

"As soon as practical my father, leaving his family in Detroit, set out on foot for a prospecting tour. The oak openings, of which he had heard, was his objective point. Reaching Royal Oak, he wondered if that could be the place and felt quite inclined to go back and try his fortunes in Ohio, but still he kept on, and near sundown came upon the rise of ground where Birmingham now stands, and knew at once he had found the object of his search, and felt amply repaid for his lonely tramp of eighteen miles. The whole country had been kept free from underbrush by the fires of the Indians, and the level rays of the setting sun lit up the scene, making a picture of wondrous beauty, which never faded from his memory. A day or two of looking about confirmed his first impressions. During this time he probably made the acquaintance of the three families then living at Birmingham, Messrs. Hunter, Hamilton and Willets, and of Doctor Swan, who lived on the plains already mentioned.

"Returning to Detroit, he soon moved his family into a house standing now where Mr. James McBride now lives and still known as the Dide Hubbard farm. They did not get a very early start when they left Detroit, and were obliged to camp out one night; some Indians came to the camp and begged for whiskey. The man who brought them out had a keg of the stuff, but he prudently used it as a seat, and would neither give nor sell them any.

"This home into which they moved seemed to have afforded a temporary shelter for a good many of the settlers. While there, Judge Bagley and family, and William Morris stayed over night with them, on their way to their new home.

"The next thing to do was to decide where to locate a home. Section 23, town 2 north, range 10 east, soon took his fancy, and wishing his wife to see it, he borrowed an old horse—at least I presume it was old. It certainly should have been trustworthy, for he mounted his entire family on its back. To tell the story in his own words: 'I put your mother in the saddle, and one child behind her and the other in front, then I took hold of the bridle and we started.' At this point my mother invariably interrupted him with 'Why no, pa, you didn't lead the horse. I knew enough to hold the reins.' But whichever was right, the small cavalcade of three horsemen and one horse made the short journey safely, and after looking around as long as they cared to, sat down by a spring of clear, pure water, which was one of the attractions of the place, and as they ate their lunch in the hazy sunshine of that Indian summer day, and looked out on the peaceful landscape, they said to one another, 'This is good enough; here we will make our home.'

"As soon as possible the land was entered at the land office, and early in January, 1820, a small house was ready for its inmates. It was not a pretentious affair; my father used to say he measured the few articles of furniture they possessed, and built his house to fit them. I do not know its dimensions, but will venture to say it afforded them a comfortable shelter.

What if the walls were composed of unhewn logs, and the floor of the same, split and hewn as smoothly as might be, the roof of stakes, and the window sash whittled out with a jack-knife. A few shelves were fashioned with a hand-saw, axe, adze, and were in existence since my remembrance, not very bad- shelves either. The great stone fireplace may not have been beautiful in itself, but then it left half its ugliness outside, and when filled with a cheerful blaze that shone out upon a spotless floor, and lit up the farthest corners of the little room, it must have been a pleasant sight. I can imagine an economy that at times made its light suffice for a quiet converse or plain knitting.

"A muslin curtain, dainty white,' I imagine, shaded the one little window. The bed, even but partially hidden by valence and curtain, was made a thing of beauty. Early every morning the straw was thoroughly stirred and made to assume a uniform height, and the feather bed and pillows were thumped and stirred and shaken, till each individual feather made an effort to stand up as light and airy as might be; then coaxed, and smoothed and patted with many a backward step to view the effect. At the last the shapely feather bank was ready for sheets and blankets and comforter, and over all was carefully spread the pretty blue and white counterpane, with a border of knitted fringe, and it was not an ill thing to get a glimpse of between the parted curtains. But one thing I must not forget to mention. The door of this house was a red board, brought from Detroit. True, it was hung with wooden hinges, and opened with a wooden latch which was raised by means of a buckskin string, but the door itself was not wholly of home manufacture.

"Soon after the family moved in, it was found the shake roof was not steep enough to shed rain well, and must be changed; as this could not be done in one day, my mother went to Judge Bagley's where Mrs. Rowland Trowbridge now lives, to spend the night. She returned to her home at the expiration of three weeks, bearing in her arms Bloomfield's first white daughter. This year of 1820 my mother always spoke of as the very happiest of many happy years. So many times have I heard that time described that I can see it all now, almost as if I had been there.

"In the spring the sweet brier seed which she brought with her came up and its delicate green, giving promise of fragrance and beauty in the future, was watched with living interest, for it was a bit of the old home transplanted here. Every stroke of the axe, every crashing, falling tree, was cheering prophecy of corn and wheat crops. The two little boys played about the door, the fair babe smiled and crooned in its cradle, and the mother, with heart full to overflowing with hope and happiness, went about her household cares. There were hard places no doubt, days of discouragement, and nights of weariness. What life anywhere is free from them? Felling trees all day and tending log heaps far into the night could not have been easy work. One day's work of man and team must be paid for with four days of hard labor, and yet these days were always referred to by both of my parents as very happy ones, and the impression left on my mind by the story so often told, was not of a time of great hardship, but of keen enjoyment, and I believe, when at the close of day they bowed their heads at their humble hearth stone, and my father returned unfeigned thanks for the goodness and mercy that had followed them thus far, they both truly felt that their lives had fallen unto them in pleasant places; yea, that theirs was a goodly heritage.

"My father, with characteristic forethought, brought with him a year's supply of provisions, so there was no fear of actual hunger, though probably their fare was of the

plainest, relieved a little perhaps by maple sugar and syrup in the spring and wild berries in the summer. The canister of tea costing \$1.75 or \$2 per pound was never taken down except in cases of company or sickness, save Sunday mornings, though I doubt it was ever empty.

"That little happy family are all gone. The dear daughter stayed with them eight bright summers, and when she went every heart in that little community seemed to throb with sympathy with them. My mother never forgot this expression, and used to say 'We never know how good people are until we are in trouble.'

"In course of time an addition was built to the first home, fields were cleared, orchards set, and somewhere between 1830-55, the maple grove planted, and in 1836 the brick house built, the ruins of which are still inhabited. And during all these years they found time for social intercourse, for Christian labor in church and Sunday-school. Feeling keenly his own lack of education, my father was deeply interested that his children should not labor under the same disadvantage, though I think no one can really be called uneducated who reads as understandingly and thinks as clearly as he did. It is scarcely necessary to speak of his record as a temperance or anti-slavery worker. He never cast but one vote for a successful presidential candidate; that was Abraham Lincoln, and he died February 22, 1861, just a few days before the inauguration.

"Of those personal traits which endeared him to those who knew him best, perhaps I am not the one to speak; I suppose he had his faults, though they are hidden from my sight by a mountain of love. I will mention just one thing. Mrs. Captain Duncan, a Scotch lady, once said to me 'Your father is the most perfect gentleman I have met in America.' It was not outward polish to which she referred, but to that innate unselfishness, combined with common sense, which makes any man, as my father truly was, a gentleman.

"As I have been preparing this paper, many little incidents of the past have been brought to mind. Of Mrs. Trowbridge, surrounded by her little flock, and, as her busy needle flew in and out, repeating poems learned in happy girlhood and affording pleasure in her still happier wife and motherhood.

"Of Mrs. Goodsell, Lydia Smith then, and not more than ten or twelve years old, riding through the storm. She had come with her parents to visit some relatives near Pontiac who were sick, and finding the case more serious than they expected, they concluded to stay all night; but at home the sheep were out exposed to wolves—besides, a storm was coming up. So Lydia mounted on a horse. 'Now,' said her aunt, 'as soon as you get into the woods, put your foot over like a boy, and ride as fast as you can.' I think it was a brave thing for a girl to do, and no danger but every sheep in the flock was safely housed before she rested.

"The Methodist hymns, too, borne on the midnight air, at the sound of which people turned in the comfortable beds, and said to themselves, 'Oh, that is Doctor Parke. I wonder who is sick'; for the good doctor went at all times of day or night, as cheerfully where he knew he should get no pay, as to his richest patients.

"Ah, it was true, good stuff of which these early settlers were made; none better anywhere.

"Of the immediate neighbors, some, as the families at Birmingham, Doctor Swan and his son-in-law. Esquire Dole, Mr. Baldwin, and probably some others, were here before my

father came; others came a few years later. Those nearest were Doctor Parke, Mr. Blackington, Mr. Rice, Judge Bagley, a man of keen, shrewd sense, who humorously accounted for his title by the fact that 'judge timber' was scarce in those times. Mrs. Bagley is still held in loving remembrance by numerous descendants. Mr. William Morris, full of energy, did a thriving business in his gristmill, store, ashery and distillery. George Morris lived at Bloomfield Center; Mr. John Diamond, his father-in-law, a little west of there; as did also the Vaughn family. Moses Peck must have been here before 1825. I think. He found a wife in Judge Bagley's family, as also did Silas Harris.

"Several of the neighboring families, after sojourning here some years, went west and made themselves pleasant homes in Shiawassee county and other places.

\* "Mrs. Rice died in California, within the past year or two, and Mrs. Comfort, at the age of ninety, has also recently died."

Source: History of Oakland County, Michigan, Volume 1