

Written by: Judy A. Totts of the Medina County Gazette, April 3, 2007

Mary Nye drew her bench closer to the doorway to catch the late morning light. The scent of freshly baked bread wafted through the cabin, and a pot of rabbit stew bubbled in the iron kettle suspended over the fire. If she hurried, she had time to finish the dress she planned to wear to the Fourth of July celebration tomorrow at the Chapmans' home. Timothy wouldn't come for the midday meal for at least an hour.

She gathered up the folds of bright calico cloth she'd brought from their home in the east and smoothed down the wrinkles. She threaded a needle, fished a hand-carved wooden thimble from her sewing basket and began to stitch the sleeve. Her needle glinted in the sunlight as it dipped in and out of the cloth. Every so often, Mary stopped and looked around the room. The men made a good job of it, chinking the logs, hanging a sturdy door. One day she'd have a frame house, with lace curtains stirring in the breeze at the windows, she thought dreamily as she knotted the thread close to the cloth and bit off the extra.

There might be dancing, like Polly Cook's wedding last month, when the music lasted well into moonrise, and many people made their way home by torchlight. She smiled and pushed the needle faster through the fabric, enjoying the sound of the little clicks when it bumped the thimble.

Independence Day 1819 dawned hot and bright, and the Nyes rushed through their chores. Mary's dress swirled around her ankles as she walked beside her husband on the dirt path to Chapmans' homestead. She waved to the other wives standing near the cook fires and made her way over, putting her basket of bread on one of the plank tables. The women stood in the shade and fanned themselves.

"They're going to talk forever," grumbled Jane Morton, hoisting her 1-year-old daughter, Fanny, to her hip, as the men traded news of progress on the organization of the township.

Mary smiled and held her hands out to Fanny. "Maybe," she said, "but I see Richard Marshal brought his fiddle. We'll be dancing after the meal."

Jane sniffed. "Yes, but see there, the whiskey's deep in that jug."

The women clapped when Marshal finally tucked the fiddle under his chin and set the bow on the strings. The notes quavered and skipped as he drew the notes out. He paused between numbers to raise his cup, and the music grew more interesting after each swallow.

"Richard, why don't you come down heavier on the bass?" George Collier shouted over the crowd.

"I can't do it, Collier; and danged if you can, either, unless you do it with an ax!" Marshal responded, swaying a little bit as he spoke.

The laughter continued as the men left politics behind and swapped stories.

Timothy Nye slapped Hanmer Palmer on the back. "Tell the one about the 'panther.' "

Palmer grinned. They'd heard it before, but the whiskey loosened tongues and memories, and the men grinned foolishly over their cups as Palmer recited his adventure. It happened six

months after he'd come to the township, on a fine October day. He set out on foot to visit Isaac Ford, following the blaze marks cut in the trees along lot lines.

"But it got dark before I reached Isaac's place," Palmer said. "I hollered, figuring I was close, but Isaac there" — Ford lifted his cup in a mock salute — "heard me, but thought I was some kind of panther. He buttoned himself into his cabin good and tight, leaving me to fend for myself in the woods."

The men snorted as Palmer finished.

"Let me tell you, as soon as the sun rose, I headed for home."

After supper, families began to head for home, too, as late afternoon stretched toward nightfall. Some had a cow to milk or animals to feed.

Storytelling filled the hours of many winter evenings, and settlers kept their families' adventures and misadventures alive. Lettie Henry Ward, born in Westfield before the Civil War, reminisced in a presentation for the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1936 (History of Medina County, 1948).

"Our house (like most of the houses in Westfield Centre) was painted white with green blinds. I remember sitting on the broad board on top of the front fence to say goodbye to the boy who marched away to enlist in the Civil War. Some of them never came back.

"I was especially interested in them because my father had organized a company and drilled it; he had had military training in Massachusetts, It was the greatest disappointment of his life that he himself was not accepted on account of physical ability.

"I recall what a shock it was to the community when the report of Lincoln's assassination reached here. How the men with blanched faces gathered in the Post Office and store to hear all about it.

Ward also reminded people of many family-run businesses in the area although she admitted the growth of the township was "due in great measure to the continued prosperity of the Ohio Farmers Insurance Company." Her own father, J.C. Henry, "made boots and shoes by hand, almost a lost art nowadays. He went to Akron to select his leathers, and I well remember how the beautiful colors of the fine morocco leathers, used for trimmings, fascinated me. We had to wait until every one else town was supplied, but the boots and shoes he made for us were the envy of all the other children."

She remembered her own work, drying apples with her brother and sister.

"My sister Josie and Brother Sammie pared them on apple paring machines. Mother cored and sliced them, two at a time, on the corer which worked with a foot lever, and my job was to look over the 'snits' and cut out all bad spots.

"We had a kiln with stove and sliding racks. My father tended the kiln, as it was near his shop. When dried, the apples were stored in a vacant room — piled on the floor — sometimes reaching to the ceiling. Here the merchants came to inspect and buy them."

Children, Ward wrote, learned a trade early, "especially necessary if they contemplated pioneering in Ohio or frontier life anywhere." She held up her grandfather Henry's family as an

example, with men and women learning shoemaking, farming, teaching, mercantile business practices, tailoring and dressmaking.

Although most women knew how to handle needle and thread, it also was the age of Godey's Ladies Book and Petersons, and Clara Ellis held court in her LeRoy millinery and dress-making shop. Ellis was clever, Ward recalled, at taking styles from those fashion books.

"We could wear the same straw hat year after year. Mrs. Ellis would sew the straw over, bleach it with burning brimstone and reshape on a plaster of Paris hat block, which had to be replaced with a new block every season to keep up with the styles."

No homestead was complete without a kitchen garden, and it was not uncommon for at least one woman in the settlement to raise herbs as well, like Grandmother Daniels. She "made a study of the native plants and herbs as to their medicinal values so she could doctor her own family or help a neighbor who was ill. A letter from Mariam Daniels Gaylord states 'she very early won the good will of the Indians by her unfailing kindness to them. She taught them many things, such as how to make maple syrup, and they exchanged knowledge about different herbs. She set apart about three acres of land with a creek running thru (sic) it, for an herb garden. The Indians would bring choice plants and set them out for her. This garden I have seen many times and it was in existence until recently.' "

To close her wanderings through the past and stories of grandmothers smoking small clay pipes and using snuff, Ward quoted a poem: "Let him who will, go wander/To distant towns to live,/Of some things I am fonder/Than all they have to give./The gold of distant places/Could not repay me quite/For those familiar faces/That keep the home-town bright."

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