

Excerpts from the Robinson Twp. Historical Society History Book

"Ancestors' Lifestyle in Moon, Fayette and then Robinson Townships, Part III"

Each issue will feature an excerpt from the Robinson Township history book. This excerpt continues with an overview of the frontier families and the pioneers' challenges in the late 1700's.

The typical frontier family was young and poor. A majority of young people traveled on money borrowed from parents, as there were no banks to extend their credit. They worked hard to develop their land which rarely supported them until the second or third year. Living for the first years came from forest, streams, and the meager supply they brought with them. Most of the time they were hungry.

Trans-Allegheny pioneers had a difficult time. The forest was so dense that no one could see the sun for more than twenty feet ahead. After traveling through this mountainous area, today's resident could never understand terrain. The first pathways cut through the forests followed Indians trails and military roads. Forbes Trail is now the Lincoln Highway Route 30 and Braddock's Trail is the William Penn Highway, Route 22. The pioneers could not use wagons past Carlisle and only packhorses could follow the narrow trails. So only absolute necessities were carried. The very young, weak and sick rode and all able-bodied walked with the men in front and women and children in the rear. In April 1773, a frontiersman's diary described the determinedness with which pioneer families met the hardships of the trail, "One family of 12 plodded along with the father carrying the all important axe and gun on his shoulders. The wife carried the wheel of a spinning wheel and a loaf of bread. Each child carried a bundle to suit his size. There were two poor horses each heavily loaded with necessities, top of the baggage of one, an infant rocked in sleep in a wicker basket-like cage lashed to the horse. A cow bore her portion, a bed cord wound around her horns and a bag of meal lashed to her back. The cow furnished the morning and evening milk. They stopped occasionally for the horse and cow to graze for their food."

Often the back of the pioneer bore all

his effects, for he did not own a horse.

Traveling was hazardous not only for the footing and lack of comfort, but sometimes Indians would attack. Sleeping was in the open on pine and hemlock boughs. The food they ate was the game they caught. Plants and berries were gathered along the way.

The early pioneers were of three types. First, there was the hunter who blazed the trails, built a rough shelter, and cleared land for a small stand of corn. When he sold enough pelts, he bought a horse and cow. He survived because of his ability with the axe and rifle. Eventually, he disposed of his clearing to a new settler and moved on. The new settler, or second type of pioneer, enlarged the cropland and made minor improvements on the cabin. He lived hand to mouth, planted a few fruit trees, grew rye and wheat. However he was not a good farmer. He was easily discouraged and soon moved on. His successor, or the third type, had what the others lacked -- a sense of permanence. He made improvements on the farm and the home. He increased the livestock, constructed good barns, built a permanent home, planted buckwheat, vegetables, fruit, and reinforced his fences. The third type cultivated farms that were lasting and handed them down from one generation to the other. By far the most important tool the pioneers brought with them was an axe and then the crosscut saw, drawing knives and auger. The only farm implement brought from the older settlements was a plow; other tools were homemade.

Since farms had to be carved out of the forests, the pioneers were obliged to devote a large portion of their time to clearing the land. Here the settlers followed adopted homeland procedure. The English and Scotch-Irish adopted the Indian method of girdling a tree near its base. A wide belt of bark was chopped off and this killed the tree. The dead

branches, underbrush and saplings were grubbed out. Eventually the trees blew down after a period of years. These were piled together and fired. The blackened portions were left and the farmers invited the neighbors for a "log-rolling." Two groups were formed. Each group tried to see which heap of logs was larger. Whiskey was freely used and great hilarity prevailed. Then the logs were burned and the potash was sold to buy necessities. When the trees blew down, the roots came out. The chief disadvantage was the inconvenience of having to cultivate around the trees for a number of years.

The Germans and some English cleared the land by the Yankee method. They cut down the trees, grubbed out saplings and underbrush and pulled and dug out stumps. They cut the wood into the size they needed for cabins, rails, and firewood. The small wood and brush was burned. The advantages here were the immediate use of the land, greater facility in plowing and the soil benefited from the wood ash.

The first pioneers built a "first camp" by anchoring two forked posts on each end with stacked logs on the side and bark to fill in the cracks to keep out the rain. They stayed in this crude shelter until the crop was planted. Corn was the main food and it was used in different ways -- corn-meal, the cooked ears, dried corn, hominy and Johnny cake. After the crop was planted, the pioneer hunted the plentiful game: deer, elk, moose, wild turkey, geese, bear, wood buffalo, plentiful passenger pigeon and fish in the stream. Then the pioneer built a permanent home, usually 16 feet by 20 feet. All the neighbors for miles came for the raising of the home.

Excerpted from the Robinson Township Bicentennial Book. Complete copies of the book can be purchased for \$25 by calling 412/264-2733.