

## Excerpts from the Robinson Twp. Historical Society History Book

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

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.

Up until 1795, the overshadowing hazard of pioneer life was the fear of Indian attack. This tried even the stoutest hearts. Raids took place usually in the dead of night or when the men folk were away from the cabin. Some settlers found refuge in the nearby blockhouses and forts if they could but most were without protection. Harrowing tales of Indian terror are part of frontier history in material printed. Women and children were kidnapped and either scalped or forced to live as Indians.

However, in some writing, it was found that the early frontiersmen who paved the way for later civilization aggravated the Indians with their unfair seizure of land, failure to keep promises, and cruelty. The Indians fought back in the only way they knew in retaliation. Finally the white man drove the Indian out of his homeland ever further west. Pioneer farmers bore the brunt of Indian ferocity and protected the older settlements from devastation. Their courage and resourcefulness are among the proud traditions of Pennsylvania. Life was hard, the standard of living was low, the homes were uncomfortable, and dirt was a natural coexistent of pioneer life as the people seldom washed. It was back-breaking work to carry water from the streams or spring and then to heat it in heavy kettles. There was little incentive or opportunity to make the home attractive. Time was fully occupied in providing food, shelter, and land clearance.

The pioneer woman's life was short, full of drudgery and time consuming with backbreaking chores. She cooked with primitive utensils over an open fire, churned and milked cows, made soap from fat and wood-ash lye, helped with the planting, harvesting and gardening, dried foods of all kinds, rendered fat for soap, carried water, chopped wood, spun clothing, made clay lamps and

mothered the ever increasing young. Many women died early only to be succeeded by other and younger wives. The record of their sacrifice is written on the tombstones of rural graveyards.

Some Pennsylvania pioneers suffered from lack of food. At this time of very early settlement, wildlife supplied the food, but pioneers were glad to eat the first potatoes and corn. Farmers had to carry grain for miles over trails to a mill for grinding. In one story, which is documented, a pioneer tells, "Me and the woman came out on foot, driving one little cow and carrying all our effects on our backs. The first difficult year we ate potatoes and slept on leaves. The first wheat I raised I took a bushel of it on my back and walked to Pittsburgh to get it ground and carried back as flour. Seed was so scarce that on one occasion when a hen had eaten some melon seeds placed in the sun to dry, the owner cut open the chicken's crop, extracted the seeds and then sewed up the gash. She could not afford to lose either the seeds or the hen. The hen recovered!"

There were compensations for these hardships. They developed certain virtues and ideals, chief of which were thrift, self-reliance, love of liberty, close-knit family life, and reverence for the creator. Frontier conditions fostered neighborliness. No one could afford to be a poor neighbor when he was so dependent on others for help in raising his cabin, log-rolling, harvesting, corn-husking, slaughtering, and many other ways. This neighborhood cooperation of pioneer days was one of its greatest social assets.

The colonial farmer had particularly heavy requirements to make a living. Often the day began at 4:00 a.m. and ended at 9:00 p.m. There was no slack period in the year. In the winter there was grain to thrash, fence rails to split, new ground to clear, and firewood to cut. The farmer's wife was his helpmate.

They solved their labor problems by raising large families. A tax was laid on bachelors so they did not stay single for very long. The farmers moved from farm to farm helping with the harvesting. The farmer for whom they worked provided the food and liquor so that work was lightened even if they worked from sunrise to sunset. The next day they went on to another farm even if they lived miles apart.

By far, the most important considerations in locating a pioneer home were quality of soil, transportation facilities, and access to spring or other water supply. Sometimes a cabin was built over a spring for convenience and a good water supply in the event of an Indian attack. Chimneys usually smoked after the Revolution when an American discovered that by making the throat smaller than the flue a draft could be created. Unless the door was open, perpetual twilight reigned inside. Only the fireplace light, candles and pine-knot torches provided the light. Sometimes the entire family lived in one room. The beds had trundle beds underneath. As the farmer prospered, log cabins were replaced by one and a half or two and a half log cabins. This improvement was possible 10 to 15 years after the first camp, German farmers built more substantial buildings before the Revolution either of brick or stone. They most often had a better barn before a better home. Flowers surrounded the house and very few were without them. Trees for shade were frowned upon around the farmhouse until after 1780.

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