

An Oral History of Cass Township, Clayton County 1876.

The following speech was given by G.L. Tremain on the street of Strawberry Point, July 4, 1876, and printed in the July 13, 1876, issue of the Weekly Free Press, edited by Delavan & Hoag, and reprinted in the 1936 Clayton County Centennial edition of the Clayton County Register.

Cass Township was named in honor of Gen. Cass by Captain Read of Read Township, this county, in 1847. The first white settler was Joseph Hewett, who came here in 1844 to trade with the Indians—this part of Iowa then being a Winnebago Reservation. Mr. Hewett remained here until 1851, when, the Indians having left and six families of white settlers having arrived, he folded his tent and moved west.

Iowa was fully admitted as a State in 1846. That year the late James Tracy settled here and began opening a farm on which he remained during his life, fully earning by his early settlement and his many deeds of kindness and substantial favors and words of encouragement to other early settlers, the title of Father of the Township.

About 1844, the U. S. Government established a fort and stationed soldiers at Fort Atkinson near the west corner of Winneshiek County. At the same time the government surveyed and established a wagon road from Dubuque to the fort, and while troops were kept there a four-horse post coach was run semi-weekly over that road. In 1850 and even later this road was the most important and widely known thoroughfare in the north half of the state.

Emigrants from east of the Mississippi bound for the northern Iowa and southern Minnesota, expected to make the old Mission Road a part of their route. It was one of the landmarks of the northwest, and as early as 1850 one of the prominent landmarks along the Old Mission Road was Strawberry Point.

The name "Strawberry Point" originally applied to that point of timber where Osias Clark now lives. About 1854 the name was coaxed east to where the cheese factory now stands, and there connected with a Post Office.

As early as 1850 Strawberry Point was known over northern Illinois and even farther east. My information on the origin of the name was obtained of a family named Betts in March, 1850, who lived on the farm now owned by Mr. Axtell. At the time the government surveyed the Mission Road the tradition is, the surveyors camped at the spring near the grove in David Clough's pasture, and there found plenty of ripe strawberries. On looking farther, they found that the timber was a long wedge-like point running out into the prairie. They had just had the strawberries and here was the point, and they entered the name among the records of that survey. There are many residents in Cass who remember portion of the old Mission Road. It ran through the country without very much regard to section lines or anything else, save ground.

My first acquaintance with it was in 1850. Then it was simply two parallel lines, like cow paths, with a ridge of grass between. At that time there was no sign of civilization in sight of the Mission Road between Mr. Axtell's and Mr. Tracy's, a distance of over six miles. Then all the land in Cass township belonged to the government, except the present farm of Giles Ward, which he entered in 1848.

The first frame house built in Cass was the house now owned and occupied by Mrs. Culbertson. It was built for David Merrit, and my father was the carpenter.

The first wedding was in the fall of 1850. James Dickison, now a resident of Clear Lake, married the entire marriageable female population of the township. Lest some of you might think Mr. Dickison had undertaken a big job, I here state that Miss Eliza Allaway was the only marriageable lady in Cass. The wedding took place in a log-house on the Jarvis Baker farm. It was a quiet affair. No cards. The newly wedded couple did not at once start for Europe nor a tour of the east.

The papers did not contain a lengthy account of the affair, or the numerous and costly gifts, or of the bride's elegant trousseau. The groom was not wearing lavender kids nor had a fancy walking cane, nor an abundance of jewelry. It was a plain, honest, substantial wedding.

Yankee Settlement was then supplied with a weekly mail. The next post office west was at West Union.

The first election held in the township was in the fall of 1850. The canvass was sufficiently spirited to bring out all the votes. A Justice of the Peace was to be elected. Two candidates were in the field. The polls were duly opened and one of the candidates went bareheaded all day while his hat was used for a ballot box. On closing the polls it was found that four votes had been cast—each candidate having received two. The perplexing question was then settled by drawing cuts. The long cut was drawn by Wm. Allaway, and let it be said for him that he served his constituents acceptably. He never had occasion to try a case or sign a paper; in fact, my recollection is, he could not write his name.

In those days we had a County Assessor. Once a year or once in two years he would come in this township, stay overnight with some settler, who would readily give him a list of the property in the township belonging to the other settlers, and if he thought any of them deserved taxing he would put them down. The settlers were all on good terms, and the assessor for years let us off lightly.

In 1850 Mr. Woods, familiarly known as Old Man Woods, settled here and took a claim where the village stands. Mr. Woods announced, his intention of opening a large store and was going to bring in a large stock of goods and open a general variety store. I assure you, this news was hailed with delight among the settlers of Cass. We had been obliged to go to Elkader, Yankee Settlement or Hartwick for every article usually had from a store. I am confident there was not a half dollar in the township at that time; nevertheless, we wanted a store; we knew we could look at the goods for nothing. Our circulating medium then was so many acres of breaking, or making so many rails.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will pardon me for saying that in handling that kind of currency I was an expert.

One day the wagon bearing the Old Man Wood's stock arrived. The stock all came in a one-horse wagon and the horse was not overloaded.

I had cut and hauled the logs to build his store which 'stood very near where M.O. Barnes' brick store now stands, and in doing that had opened an account then in my favor. During that summer I broke for him the prairie where the principal part of the village now stands.

Mr. Woods did not sell his goods as cheap as some of his successors; he did not hang out any signs, "Good Prints at Six Cents." He sold from profit and got his pay. I well remember cutting, splitting and stumping four hundred rails for him in payment for a common axe.

I find no evidence of any export of the products of Cass earlier than 1851. The nearest railroad station was about 160 miles distant.

In the fall of 1851, an emigrant told me of the high prices potatoes were bringing in Dubuque. I loaded a wagon, put on two yoke of oxen and departed for that place. Just before I got there some enterprising chap had hurriedly dug a few hills, gone in and glutted the market. I sold mine cheap, was gone from home five days, and by trading oxen with Mr. Little, who then lived on the Dubuque road, and getting some boot, I managed to get home owing nothing, and nothing to show for Cass township's first export.

I will never forget the first bread I earned in Iowa. My father and family landed in Cass in March, 1850. We had a small stock of breadstuff and two and a half dollars in money left. My father's eyesight was so poor that he worked little of the time, and most of the work devolved upon me. One day my mother informed me that another baking would bring the bottom of the flour barrel in sight. I went in Lodomillo township and here broke two acres of big hazel brush land, for which I got \$2.00 an acre—\$4.00 in all. At the time breadstuffs were higher and scarcer than I have ever known them since. My \$4.00 would buy too little wheat.

So I started for Ead's Grove and paid old man Harding my four dollars for two bushels of corn, and got small measure at that. Early the following day, with two yoke of oxen, E. L. Gardner and myself started for Elkader to get it ground. We cut and blazed the road very near where it now stands from near the Jewett House down to Cox Creek. He had previously cut out a road down to the Jewett schoolhouse to haul house logs over. The meal of that two bushels of corn cost me six days' work, besides the use of my oxen equal to one yoke 13 days.

Meat was plenty, not in the shape we now find it, not in beefsteak, mutton chops, or sugar-cured ham, but mostly in venison. Wm. James and Asa Alloway were both good hunters and as clever men as ever lived. When they killed a deer all of their neighbors got a piece, and they killed as often as required. In the winter of 1850-1851 Asa Alloway killed sixty deer in this immediate vicinity. Then one could see a hundred deer in the sight of where I now stand. In 1850 James Alloway killed a bear very near where Charles Row now lives. That was the last of the tribe of Bruin I ever heard of near here.

Prior to the fall of '51 we went to Elkader or Hartwick to mill. That fall David Mann built a mill on the spring branch on the farm next above Thos. Alderson's on a place now owned, I think, by John Childers. This was the first mill built in Cass township and it was an object of curiosity even in those days. It was intended for corn, and like the traditional mill of the gods, it ground slowly. A person would tire waiting to count the grains as they came from the hopper on their way to the ponderous stones.

One grain would drop and the machinery would wrestle with that until it was converted into meal; then running empty the motion would increase and dislodge another grain to meet the same fate. The miller, David Mann, was as much of a curiosity as the mill. He was very illiterate and eccentric and it was said he never washed his face or hands while in this township. One day a newcomer hearing Davy talk of his mill, asked him of its capacity. "How much do you grind in twenty-four hours?" Well, by comin' here right through, I reckon about two bushel." The capacity of Davy's mill is well illustrated by a story told of

it. Each stone stood upright, one stationary and one revolved. The grain from the hopper and shoe dropped into a hole that ran through one edge of the stationary stone. Davy kept a good many chickens that found liberty in the mill. His custom was to pour a half bushel or so of corn in the hopper, hoist-the gates, and go about some other business, or perhaps lie down for a nap. One day he started a grist in this way and lay down to sleep. Presently he heard the mill running empty, and looking in he saw an old hen perched on top of the stationary stone, watching the shoe shaking down the corn, which she quietly picked out before it got to the drop. Knowing as we do how fast the grains came, it was difficult to believe that Davy had so patient a hen. I here introduce the identical store that ground the first grain in Cass township. Many a time have I taken a sack of corn on a horse or an ox, and thus gone to the top of the hill, hitched my horse or ox, and carried the corn to the mill, where it was converted into meal, out of which my mother made an excellent johnny-cake.

I think it was in the fall of 1851 that we were able to make up a horse team. Prior to then our team was oxen, and well they served the purpose. No matter whether it was to go to a dance, go to meeting or what, the oxen were in order. The settlers were all intimate and friendly and were young in feeling, if not in years. The arrival of a newcomer was hailed with delight, and the invitation that soon followed his arrival, to assist in raising him a log cabin, brought out very settler, male and female, and if his wife or daughter happened to wear over a number seven shoe, or her pin-back was not the most approved style, no one said anything about it. If the best they could give us for supper consisted of corn bread, corn coffee, turnips, potatoes and hulled corn, we said it was good, good enough, and none of us could have done much better.

There are many excellent people closely connected with the early history of Cass -- I might name them by the dozen, but fortunately for them, they came here not so early as some I have named, but their being here has been a blessing to the country.

Fellow citizens, I have had your attention my share of the time and will only add that Cass township is about as good a place to stay as I know

of. Be content to stay here. Do your duty, and, though you were not the earliest, you will be rewarded in the years yet to come. I thank you.