

Early Recollections of Pioneer Life in Michigan

By Mary Lewis Hoyt

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Mary Lewis was born in Weathersfield, New York, on October 1, 1832. She came to Michigan with her family in the fall of 1832 and settled in Yankee Springs. Her father was the first hotel-keeper between Kalamazoo, Battle Creek and Grand Rapids. She married Henry E. Hoyt on January 21, 1851. They had three sons.

How did people travel?

On the afternoon of a summer's day, August 26, 1836, nearly sixty-eight years ago, there might have been seen a covered wagon containing a stalwart man of thirty-five years and five children, between the ages of eleven and two years, driving through the then unbroken wilderness of Barry county, in the Territory of Michigan.

Accompanying the wagon was a woman on horseback, carefully guiding her gray saddle-horse over the rough roads of the new country. She had in this way performed nearly the whole of the journey, we having started from Weathersfield, Wyoming County, New York, three weeks before, taking in Canada on our route. . . .

Were there a lot of people in Michigan?

I was a child of four years at the time, so the words of my mother will best describe our coming into Michigan:

“After leaving Detroit, the road was mostly through dense woods, Marshall, Battle Creek, and Kalamazoo being marked by little clusters of houses surrounded by forests. After leaving Battle Creek we passed through Gull Prairie, now Richland, and there met Leonard Slater, located on the Indian Reservation as missionary to the Potawatomie tribe of Indians. Leaving this place we plunged into the wilderness and, the road having disappeared, we followed an Indian trail marked by blazed trees and journeyed eighteen miles farther through the woods without seeing a single habitation. . . .”

. . . means something in the original was left out

A **habitation** is a place where people live.

What were frontier houses like?

A welcome was given us by our relatives, and the log cabin of two rooms was shared together. A quilt was hung over the door space and the windows were boarded. . . .

A **speculator** buys a lot of land hoping to make money by selling it to others.

We were on the direct line of the great Indian trail running from Detroit to Grand Rapids. . . . The fur trader and the speculator were abroad in the land, and to fill the increasing demands of the weary traveler, our little cottage of two rooms was extended, building after building, until we occupied “nine stories on the ground,” seven distinct buildings in a row in the front and two additional in the back. They presented neither an imposing nor a graceful appearance, but were the hurried creation of a backwoods life, when there was no time to waste on architecture, symmetry or beauty. . . .

How did people talk to people who lived somewhere else?

Letters were luxuries in those days, rare and costly. Envelopes and postage stamps were unknown. We wrote on three pages of the paper, folding it so the name could be written in the middle of the fourth, and sealing with a wafer, directed it and then paid our twenty-five cents postage on it or left it to me collected by the person to whom it was addressed, just as we chose. Sometimes it was difficult for the old settler to produce the twenty-five cents to pay postage and he had to earn it before he could claim his letter. . . .

What did people eat?

The first Thanksgiving celebrated at Yankee Springs tavern was in the fall of 1838. My father sent out invitations to all the new settlers for miles around and later sent men and teams to gather them in. My mother meanwhile was superintending the first Thanksgiving dinner in the new country, which consisted of wild turkeys brought by the Indians from Gun Lake woods, two immense spare ribs cooked to a turn before the great open fireplace, as were also the turkeys. Mince pies such as only my mother could make, also pumpkin pies and puddings, were baked in the large brick oven by the side of the kitchen

How did they cook?

fireplace. Cook stoves there were none. The turkeys and ribs were suspended by stout tow strings and slowly turned before the open fire and some one had to burn their faces while constantly basing the meats with their rich gravies, brought out by the heat of the fire. Cranberries were brought by the Indians and were about the only fall berry. Not a fruit tree or berry bush had yet been planted. . . .

What did people do for fun?

An old violin was pulled out of some corner and all began dancing and kept it up until morning, when breakfast was prepared for them, after which they were conveyed back to their homes.

The doings on the Fourth of July, 1846, beat everything on record before or since, so far as I can remember. A tamarack pole was spliced until it was of the desired length and a flag was flung from it to the breeze with much hurraing from the corwd that had collected from everywhere. . . . Twenty-six girls, all in white, representing the states—then twenty-six in number—and a Goddess of Liberty in red, white and blue, were loaded into a monster wagon drawn by twenty-six yoke of oxen. . . . We went above the hill to form the procession and came down into the crowd in fine style.

How did travel change?

[] means something was added to the original

We were ten years in advance of the Michigan Central Railway. We heard rumors of its approach, but so slow was it in coming that the old stage coach kept right along its undisputed way for many years. The [rail]road started from Detroit in 1836, when Michigan was a territory. It reached Kalamazoo February 21, 1846, and six years later, May, 1852, the road reached Chicago. . . .

What did Mary think about the Indians?

I believe they [the Indians] were our friends. They were strict in their deals and if they made a promise they kept it. They brought us berries of all kinds from the woods and constantly supplied us with fresh venison, never bringing any part of the

What food did the Indians provide?

carcass but the hams, which were always twenty-five cents, no more nor less. They brought us fresh fish from the lakes, and the muskallonge from Gun Lake were enormous. They made a great deal of maple sugar. In 1840 these Potawatomes were removed by the United States Government beyond the Mississippi, and very reluctantly they left their homes among the lakes and oak openings and the silver streams of Michigan. Noonday, the chief of the Potawatokies, greatly impressed me by his dignified bearing. Six feet tall and well proportioned, he was at that time nearly 100 years old. His face was painted and a great circlet of eagle feathers was around his head. He looked kind and he laid his hand on my head. . . .

How much could children explore on their own?

There was no underbrush in those days, the annual fires consumed it, leaving the forests free from obstruction, and one could walk, ride or drive anywhere as freely as in a beautiful park. . . . We lived only two and one-half miles from Gun Lake—that inland gem of Barry county. My first view of it will never be forgotten. Scouring through the woods one day on my little pony—born of the gray mare ridden by my mother when we came to the country—we came suddenly out on the shore of this lake and I gazed in silent wonder on that broad sheet of water, flashing and dimpling in the sunlight where no white man’s boat had ever been, and only the Indian’s canoe had disturbed the calm serenity of its waters. Not a tree had been disturbed and the dark forest clear around was reflected on the glistening surface of the water. As I silently gazed a feeling of awe stole over me. The solemn stillness of lake and forest frightened me. I turned my pony and fled and never drew rein until my home was reached. . . .

Is this where you thought the state capital was?

My father represented the counties of Allegan and Barry in the State Legislature in Detroit in 1846. He came home for a short time during the winter and when he returned was

accompanied by his two youngest daughters, who took their first ride on the new railroad. . . .

What was it like to ride a train?

The ride to Battle Creek was duly performed by stage coach and four horses and from there we took our first and never-to-be-forgotten ride on that new railroad we had heard so much about. We were nearly frightened to death with the almost constant scream of the engine whistle and the clanking of the cars over the rough road, which was about equal to that of cattle cars at the present time. We wished ourselves back in the old stage coach many times before the journey ended. . . .

What was Michigan's biggest city like?

The Wales Hotel, on Jefferson avenue, East, just thrown open to the public January 1, 1846, we thought very fine. . . . The dining room was large and nearly square and was frequently used for entertainments in the evening, balls, fancy-dress parties and concerts. . . .

The photographs were called **daguerrotypes.**

We visited a daguerrean gallery and had our pictures taken. This room had just been opened in Detroit and the art was considered something wonderful. . . . We thought it very tiresome, as we had to sit still five minutes to get a picture.