

Yankee Bill Lewis

William Lewis and his family lived in Wethersfield, New York. The Erie Canal was south of their farm. In 1835, Mr. Lewis decided to sell the farm for what he thought was a very good price.

Now, Mr. Lewis needed to find a new place for his family to live. He decided to go west, where many pioneers were starting new farms. First he visited the Chicago area of Illinois, but he didn't think there was much opportunity there. Next he went back east to Indiana. He found some land he liked in Mishawaka and bought it. Then he returned home to New York.

The next year, Mr. Lewis started back west with his family. The children rode in a wagon; their mother rode on her horse. They traveled past Niagara Falls and Lundy's Lane in Canada on their way to Detroit. From Detroit, they followed a road through Marshall, Battle Creek and Kalamazoo to a place called Gull Prairie or Gull Corners.

The Lewis family did not travel on Sundays. So they spent a Sunday at Gull Prairie. They had a lot of time to talk to the minister there. He told Mr. Lewis that people were just beginning to move into the Grand River valley, north and west of Gull Prairie. The road to get there was just a trail, but there were a few settlers at a place called Yankee Springs.

The missionary described the settlers, and the Lewis family realized that one of them was William's brother Calvin. William had seven brothers. Calvin had left New York to go west a few years earlier, and they did not know where he was. The Lewis family decided to visit Calvin before they traveled south to Indiana.

Calvin had a very simple log cabin, but William Lewis liked the location. He thought it would make a great place to start an inn. He would have food and beds for the pioneers and travelers going from Kalamazoo to the Grand River valley. So, he bought the land and the cabin from his

brother. There were no other places to stop along the trail for almost 20 miles in either direction.

The next thing William Lewis needed to do was to get his family's belongings—things like furniture, cooking pots and blankets—and supplies for his inn to Yankee Springs. He went back to Detroit to purchase supplies and make arrangements to send them to their new home. The supplies were bulky and heavy. He shipped them on the Great Lakes and returned to Yankee Springs by road.

The supplies traveled north through Lake Huron and south down Lake Michigan to the mouth of the Grand River. They were carried on a pole boat to the rapids in the river, where Grand Rapids is today. From there they came to Yankee Springs in wagons.

William Lewis bought meat from the Indians and grew vegetables in his garden. His wife was a very good cook, and he knew how to make everyone feel welcomed and special.

The stagecoach route ran right by his inn bringing him a lot of business. People called him “Yankee” or “Yankee Bill” and called his inn “the big oasis of the trip.”

Sources:

George H. White, “Yankee Lewis’ Famous Hostelry in the Wilderness,” *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, Vol. 26, pp. 302-307.

George W. Thayer, “From Vermont to Lake Superior in 1845,” *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, Vol. 30, pp. 552-53.