

EARLY FARMERS IN EXETER

Elizabeth Moore Wallace

Extracted from Wisconsin Magazine of history, Volume 8, Issue 4, 1924-1925

I was born in Knockahollet, County Antrim, Ireland, on May 13, 1843. We were a village of weavers and small farmers—the Lynns, Moors, Hughys, Wallaces, and Cains. All of these families except the Cains finally became related by marriage.

Ireland was just emerging from that distressing period known as the potato famine. While I do not recall any shortage of rations in our little village during my childhood, I have no doubt the restlessness and discontent of the young people, which I distinctly remember, was due to the hard times. They were keen to be off over the sea to either America or Australia, while the conservative older heads of the families were against such a change. There were many heated arguments of the question, but it was not until my mother's oldest brother, John Lynn, returned after stealing away surreptitiously and roving about the world for seven years that the young people won and the exodus began. So completely was Knockahollet depopulated that not so much as one stone of the many stone houses now remains. Two families of Hughys clung to the old site until about twelve years ago; but at last the buildings have all been razed and the land turned back into the commons.

It was in the fall of 1848 that Uncle John returned to Knockahollet with a deed to three hundred and twenty acres of Wisconsin land in his pocket and a glowing description of its hills and valleys on the tip of his tongue. He had been a soldier in the Mexican War, and bearing his own land grant, and another purchased from a comrade, he had wandered west in search of a farm. Jeremiah Avery with his large family was already located on a farm on the banks of Little Sugar River in Exeter, Green County, Wisconsin. It was due largely to his kindness that Uncle John decided to locate in that section.

By March 1849, John was back in Wisconsin with his cousin-bride, Elizabeth Gambel, to help him grub a home out of the wilderness. On the

same ship with them came many other young people from Knockahollet. All of them, except Uncle Elison Lynn, remained in New York State, where the good wages offered by the railroads and mills enabled them to lay by the price of a farm. Elison accompanied his brother to Wisconsin, where he found work on a farm near Mineral Point.

These Scotch-Irish were industrious and thrifty and it was not long as time was reckoned in those days—perhaps a year or two—before many of them had saved the fifty dollars necessary to pay for forty acres of Wisconsin government land.

My parents, Joseph and Mary Lynn Moor (or “Moore” as our name was written in the new world) arrived in Wisconsin early in the spring of 1851. I was then eight years old and my sister Nancy (Mrs. Thomas B. Richards, of Belleville, Wisconsin) was two. My mother’s parents, James and Nancy Ellis Lynn, and my father’s only brother, William, accompanied us to Exeter.

Before we left York State Uncle Robert Lynn, who was unmarried and working in a paper mill, told mother to write him if she needed money and he would help her out; but she never had to call on him for help. With fifty dollars out of their scant store my parents purchased forty acres southeast of John’s farm. That, with other forties added from time to time, has been the home of the Moore’s ever since. My youngest brother, Joseph Leslie, still lives in the old house which Uncle Elison started to build in the early fifties.

The Swiss settlement of New Glarus lay five miles beyond the wooded hills to the northwest. The old mining town of Exeter, three miles to the southeast, was the most pretentious village, but it was beginning to run down at the heels, since the mining industry had practically ceased and the clearing of the ground for farms had only just begun. There was no post office at Exeter, but mail reached us through Joe Brayton, the hotelkeeper, or _____ Witter, the proprietor of the only general store.

James Hare was living on his forty-acre farm about half a mile southwest of us, and Jeremiah Avery was his neighbor about a half-mile farther on. Across the river, half a mile from the Hare cabin lived _____ Kesler. The Matthew Edgar farm lay off to the south, with the “Jimmy” Gaines farm bounding it on the east.

Speculators were fast buying up the unoccupied land. In 1859, when Samuel Patterson and his wife Sally Wallace with their eight children arrived, they had to buy from Ira Baxter. The price of land had advanced from three dollars to six dollars per acre. The Pattersons were the last of that early group of relatives to come from the old country. Samuel Wallace became the eponym of the school district. Of his large family, six boys and two of their sisters owned farms in "Irish Hollow," as that section of Exeter was called. Of Grandfather Lynn's family, five boys and their two sisters were established there. All of these except Samuel Wallace, Jr., who returned to New York, and Elison Lynn, made permanent homes on their farms.

Alexander Wallace and his wife Nancy Lynn, my mother's only sister, with their two little girls, Mary and Anna, came from New York in 1852 and settled just east of us. His father soon followed. "Grandpa," as everybody called the old gentleman, was a Covenanter in belief. Duty was the first law of his household. He was a zealous reader, the Bible and a Covenanter magazine being his favorite volumes. Blessed with a retentive memory, he had committed much of the Bible. His wife, Ann Bailey, was counted by those who knew her best a spoiled, pretty little woman. With them lived their youngest daughter, Ann Jane, who soon married Matthew Edgar, and William, their youngest child, who later became my husband.

"Grandpa" bought the old Sabin Morley place, between the Hare and Avery farms; but being a Covenanter, he could not take an oath and so could not become a citizen of the United States. In some way he had conceived the idea that a foreigner could not legally hold property in this country. He proposed to take no chances with the title to his farm, so he had the deed executed in the names of his sons James and John. John never came from New York to live in Wisconsin, although he furnished money and joined with James in the purchase of the farm just south of their father's place.

William bought the eighty acres lying across the marsh south of us. When in 1864 he enlisted in the army, James and his wife, Eliza Annett, came out from York State and took over the management of the three farms and the care of the old folks. William had been paying the taxes on all of them; this expense with the continuance of the war became quite a burden, especially since there was so little of the land yet cleared for cultivation.

Eliza Annett Wallace was one of four orphan children who had been

left to the care of their relatives in Ireland. She and her brother Willie had been brought across the ocean when very young, while the two other brothers had been left in Ireland. Willie was several years younger than his sister, and after her marriage made his home with her. They entirely lost track of the brothers; in fact, they could not remember that they had any near relatives, and it was long after Eliza's death that Willie bethought himself and wrote to the clerk of the parish in Ireland where he remembered he had been baptized. In this way he was able to locate one of his brothers, an old lake captain then living in Michigan.

Robert Wallace and his wife, Margaret Stinson, bought a farm joining the "Jimmy" Gaines place. Margaret was a woman of fine sensibilities and a beautiful singer. My father had known her father in Ireland and she used to enjoy visiting our home. She would sometimes bring Robert over there, where he would be free from temptation while he was sobering up from a "spree." Robert was the only man in the "clan" who let the liquor habit get the better of him.

Thomas Wallace at first bought eighty acres up in the hills to the east. It is now part of the farm of his grandson, Roy Staley. Thomas, like many others, found difficulty in getting water on that eighty, so he soon bought and moved down between William and his father. There was something strange about the underground veins of water in those limestone hills. Some of the farmers struck water without any difficulty, while others, on a lower level, would dig many wells and finally give up and carry water from the springs or go to some place where there was a well. In some places there seemed to be underground reservoirs of water instead of running streams. Springs might gush forth in any ditch or mineral hole; and again a man might dig several wells on a farm and get no water. Perhaps it was the lack of money to pay for a drilling machine that made them dig all wells by hand. I do not know about that, but I do know that money was very scarce and hard to get in those antebellum days.

Uncle James Lynn and his wife, Nancy Moore (no relative of my father) bought the Kesler farm. One day in late summer I went with Aunt Nancy to gather cranberries in the marsh not far from their house. I pulled up some of the plants which I carried home and reset in our marsh. They took root but did not thrive in the higher, more sandy soil as they did in the black muck of the river bottom.

Aunt Nancy was counted a capable woman with a strong character. She certainly had a will of her own and a great deal of pride, which served her well when she was left a widow in 1866 with five little boys and two girls, on a heavily mortgaged farm out there in those woods. Uncle James had driven to Monroe, fifteen miles distant, to get oak planks from which he and William were to make the beams for a long sleigh the next day. They had arranged it all the day before, when Uncle stopped at out house on his way home from Exeter, where he had bought the long oak runners. A Swiss farmer found his lifeless body lying in the “Monticello woods.” His team and wagon, on which were the oak planks, were standing in the brush some distance off. There was a small hole on his forehead from which the blood oozed. He had been a quiet, sober man. His purse remained untouched in his pocket, and although the citizens investigated as best they could, no solution of the accident was ever arrived at. Aunt Nancy remained on the farm, educated her children, and laid by a competence for her old age. George is a prominent lawyer in Lynnton, South Dakota; John is at the head of the accounting department of the city light and water plant of Tacoma, Washington; Leslie owns a large ranch in the Northwest; James lives in Kansas. The other members of the family have passed on after living useful Christian lives.

Uncle Robert Lynn and his wife, Catherine Lyons, bought the “Jimmy” Gaines farm. Uncle Elison Lynn bought the forty acres just west of us and brought his bride, Rosa Scott, from Charles City, Iowa, to live in the house he was building about 1854. He soon sold out to father and took his family back to Charles City, where he was killed in less than a year by a drag falling on him when he was unloading it from a wagon. He left two little boys—Josiah and Elison. Father borrowed \$200 from Ottis Ross of Dayton at twenty per cent interest to help pay Elison for the farm. In two years father had cleared off the debt.

William and I built our house on his eighty acres and began housekeeping in 1865 after he had returned from the war.

Mr. And Mrs. Hare were especially good neighbors, and having no family of their own—their two children having died in infancy—they could easily “pick up and go visitin’” of an afternoon or evening. I recall one winter evening when they walked in on mother, carrying a carefully wrapped bundle. I thought at first that it was a baby and wondered where they had got it. It proved to be two small loaves of bread in a tin pan, which

were put to bake in mother's oven while they visited.

That was the evening father asked Mr. Hare the meaning of the term "Yankee."

"Who are the Yankees?" asked father.

"Well," answered Mr. Hare, "when you see a fellow who is always playing jokes and telling lies, he is a Yankee."

Then they both laughed, but it was several years before I understood what they meant.

Mrs. Hare, like many another pioneer woman, had formed the habit of smoking before her first child was born. Chewing or smoking tobacco was frequently recommended in those days as a cure for indigestion, irrespective of the cause. She considered it an unladylike habit and said she often prayed for the strength to overcome it. Her prayer was answered by a long siege of sickness. For weeks and weeks she lay in a delirium of fever. When she recovered, the appetite for tobacco was gone and she never again took to the pipe.

After they had disposed of their farm and moved to Dayton, the Hares frequently came back to visit in the Hollow. I recall that Mrs. Hare was at my house for dinner the day in June, 1876, when William returned from Monticello with a weekly paper that contained an account of the Custer Indian massacre. Mr. Hare died and was buried at Charles City, Iowa, while there visiting a daughter by his first wife. After his death Mrs. Hare lived at the Fess Hotel in Madison. Her body lies in the Fess lot in that city.

I had attended school in Ireland, but of course there was no school in Irish Hollow for me to attend in 1851. My father had bought new schoolbooks for me before we left Ireland, and for some time he taught me at home as best he could. The first schoolhouse in the Hollow was a little log building on the west side of the river not far from the Kesler cabin. A collection was taken up among the settlers to defray the expenses of the school. Frances Dutcher was our first teacher for a short time. Then her cousin, Frances Corey, taught the school. There were seventeen pupils representing six different families. It seems to be but yesterday they sat there on those rude benches: Henry Wesley and Hazard Zwingli Roby; Watson, Daniel, Malvina, Violet, Elize Jane, and Milton Avery; Emma,

Myranda, and Irene Kesler; Lavintia and Abigail Corey; Samantha Morley and her two little sisters whose names I have forgotten.

I spoke and read with a broad Scotch brogue, and my spelling greatly amused the other children, much to my embarrassment. My “a’s” were “à’s,” my “e’s” were “a’s,” and my “j’s” were “gaw’s.” You can imagine the teacher’s surprise when she asked me to spell “Jane” and I promptly—for I was a good speller—replied: “Gaw-à-n-a.” But since I did not like to be laughed at, I soon learned to pronounce both words and letters in the accepted English of the time and place.

It was not long before the log building was razed and the logs were used in constructing another schoolhouse on the east bank of the river near the Morley cabin. Because my memory of school days in that location is so very hazy, I think they must have been few. Sanford Scott was using the building as a cooper shop when it burned down.

All of this must have happened before 1854, when the state legislature by special act created Joint School district Number 4 of Exeter and New Glarus towns, and the Wallace school came into existence. Most of those early pioneers had large families of keen-witted children. It was not long before the Wallace school demanded teachers of exceptional ability. In its spelling schools, singing schools, and literary society this army of young people was given training far above the average in district schools in those days. I can count sixty-five teachers who were trained in District Number 4 before the Swiss finally bought out most of the Scotch-Irish farmers.

But let us get back to 1854 and the school building itself. A little ten by ten frame structure was at first set up at the foot of the hill across the road from the present schoolhouse. In this, that first summer, school was in session long enough to entitle the district to a share in the public school fund. In the meantime the permanent building was under construction a short distance to the east. I think the men hauled the lumber from Janesville. When completed it housed the school until the present building was erected. The little temporary room was sold to Uncle Elison and became the nucleus of the Moore house on the old homestead. The sand from the hills washed down and filled in around the building in that location; so in 1870 it was decided to move it to the opposite side of the road. That has been the schoolhouse site ever since.

Sarah Thayer, the first teacher in the new building, came from New York City to visit her uncle, _____ Lee, in Exeter village, but remained to teach our school. She bought us many eastern ideas: she made leather flowers into bouquets covered with dome-shaped glass receptacles; she wore short sleeves and low necks in her dresses. I recall her introductory speech the first morning and how stylish we big girls thought she looked.

Abigail Corey, Malvina and Violet Avery, and I were the “big girls,” and we made life miserable for the next teacher. He was a mere boy, Earl Richmond, of Dayton, and such a bashful boy! We were cruel and heartless, but we may have done him a good turn, as he gave up the unremunerative work of teaching and became a successful merchant in company with his brother, Ransom.

Some of the other very early teachers were Mahala Woodruff, Hiram Heistand, Mary Hitchcock, Melissa Ellis, Minnie Ray, Anna Broderick, and Emma Thomas.