

## THE VERGENNES TOWNSHIP LIVING HISTORY

Dedicated to Stella Bradshaw, whose persistence, “gentle” persuasion and optimism inspired the writers, without whom this document would never have been compiled.

## INTRODUCTION

The history of Vergennes Township, as told by its residents past and present, is as accurate and certainly as interesting as that to be found in published accounts. Most of the stories handed down from parents and grandparents have never before been collected to be enjoyed by others. If one were to depend only upon “The History of Kent County”, published in 1881, the “1907 Michigan Pioneer Collections” or the “Grand Rapids and Kent County History, 1918 Edition”, it would appear that this area was settled almost exclusively by persons migrating from Ontario, Canada and New York State. The rich heritage provided by Swiss farmers and craftsmen has not been recorded in the books available locally. For this reason, the present volume should be of special value to its readers.

The Vergennes Club, on the occasion of its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, is giving the following articles, the result of both research and reminiscences, to the Lowell Public Library for the enjoyment and edification of area citizens. The writers have willingly shared what they know about their homeland in the hope that others will be stirred to add to this document in coming years.

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## A HISTORY OF VERGENNES CO-OPERATIVE CLUB

By Joan L. Beebe

Seventy years ago, on the afternoon of October 29, six ladies gathered at the home of Nellie McPherson, Parnell Road. The purpose was to form a club. Officers were elected and a meeting day, the first Thursday of the month, was chosen. Dues were set at five cents, whether in attendance or not. The ladies were encouraged to expand membership by inviting young, married friends and to bring sewing and fancy work. It was also decided that at each meeting refreshments would be served, two articles of food and a drink. If this were violated there would be a fine of 25 cents. Thus read the minutes recorded at the first meeting of Vergennes Co-Operative Farm Women's Club in the year 1914.

Right from the beginning the club was not strictly social, although it was rumored that it was primarily to give ladies an afternoon out "as their men always seemed to have their social times." A constitution and by-laws committee was set to work. Plans were made to include a yearbook and interesting programs were presented. Membership grew among these farm ladies who were instilled with a deep and sincere love of Vergennes.

The early years of Vergennes Club were also war years. Patriotism was strong. Feelings, thoughts and actions were most often centered on home nursing, gardening, canning and Red Cross work.

The World War II years kept everyone busy. Greetings were sent to Vergennes boys who were in the service; members became "Home Volunteers" and pledged to serve only meals that made sound bodies and minds. War stamps were purchased with pennies from their "prize box" and donations were accepted for the nurse's fund.

Rural life was not easy but by coming together, good things were accomplished for the welfare of family, community and county.

On August 3 in the year 1916, a picnic was held at Murray Lake. Perhaps there were years when, for one reason or another, the picnic was passed over.

However, the picnic has become a tradition and this year, 1984, was held August 5 at Fallasburg Park. For many years an outing at Kropf's cottage at Murray Lake has been held in July.

Over the 70 years of living, this group of ladies has passed on a special bond of friendship and dedication to one another and to Vergennes Township. Many programs have centered on Vergennes history including the early settlements of Alton, Moseley, Fallasburg, Fox's Corners and the families who were early settlers. Every fact, every story and all the "hear tell" tales have perked-up club members every time a Vergennes history lesson was presented.

Euchre parties and holiday festivities, active assistance for the Lowell YMCA, Red Cross and United Fund. All were, and some still are, club activities. In most recent years, the members purchased and donated a flagpole for the Township Hall and purchased and placed "Entering Vergennes Township" signs at proper locations. All monies to cover expenses come from dues, auctions, white elephant sales, bake sales and a mini-bazaar within the group.

Members did compile a club cookbook in 1977, which was sold to family and friends. In 1981 a new section was added.

In the early 30's, a delegate to the Kent County Federation of Women's Clubs was appointed and dues were paid to the Federation. In the time, as the Women's Club of Lowell grew in membership, many Vergennes Club members divided their energies between both organizations.

Meetings were most often held in members' homes, but the Vergennes Township Hall was a favorite place as well. Now meetings are held at Schneider Manor and the Christmas brunch at the Vergennes Methodist Church.

Back in 1963, when glass plates and cups were purchased and later silverware, it was with hopes that after almost 50 years of gathering together, another 50 years of growth lay ahead. Without doubt, these dreams will come true.

Today the Vergennes Club membership totals 46. This has been the average for many years. It is with great pride that several members have been a part of the organization for 45 years. Each year a younger generation has entered and all enjoy and contribute to the real purpose of the club, that friendships are valued above all else. Each lady recalls with fondness the stories and experiences over the years, but the friendships will always remain the most meaningful. The sharing of joys and sorrows, successes and failures, war years and prosperity, births and deaths, none has broken the dreams of a few ladies who felt the need to gather for one afternoon a month to share together, to plant a few seeds, to nourish a kindred ship that has flourished for 70 years.

All the facts on Vergennes Club were taken from secretaries' records and from present members.

## LOOKING BACK AT NINETY

By Ray Onan

(Excerpts from his taped memories)

I can still see in my mind my grandparents sitting there by the old Wagoner Peninsular kitchen stove. My grandma would sit by the stove and smoke her clay pipe after each meal. She said the doctor told her it would be good for her nerves. Grandpa kept busy most of the time chopping wood. He liked to cut wood with an axe and he was good at it. That was the way people cut most of their wood, with axe and crosscut saw, the “arm-strong pair.” We raised corn, potatoes, hay and oats on the farm, as well as pigs and chickens and we had five cows to milk. At that time, the milk was carried to the house and down to the cellar, strained in tin pans and set on shelves made on purpose to put the pans of milk on. After the cream rose to the top of the pans, it was spooned off. When there was enough, it was put in a stone churn and let to go slightly sour and then churned to make butter. My mother and grandmother made excellent butter and got a premium of 2 cents a pound for it.

The Arthur Armstrong’s, our neighbors, had three kids. I loved to play with them for I was kind of lonely at home. There was an apple orchard between my grandfather’s house and their house. I would go across the orchard and lean up against a tree and first thing you know they would coax me over. My mother would see me and she would come through the orchard and get a sprout off an apple tree. She would tingle my ankles every once in a while on the way home.

When I began school they had, at that time, a chart class. They had a big chart that was on a pedestal and you turned the sheets over and would read off of it. “I see a cat.” “I see a dog.” Things of that kind. I had already read all of that and I had a First Reader. I had read most of it before I went to school. I wasn’t smart; I just like to read.

On our way to Hesperia one time, one of the horses cast a shoe. When we got to Langston, we had to stop and have the shoe put back on. My mother and I sat in the old grocery store while it was being done. It took quite a while and it got kind of dark and dingy. After a while, as we went on, we got over the Sand Lake where a man said we had gone ten miles out of our way.

When I was very small, I used to like to go to my Uncle Marion, Aunt Minnie and cousin Ida Week's and they were so nice to me. Aunt Minnie used to take me fishing down at a deep hole by a big rock where we used to catch a mess of fresh bass. When I got a little older, my dad and grandfather took me fishing down to the old dam by Fallasburg. The dam furnished waterpower at that time for the gristmill and flourmill at Fallasburg.

When I was seven years old, my Grandmother Onan died. That was the year 1899. She had been a mid-wife and brought several babies into the world. One of them was the Armstrong's daughter. She was named after my mother, Georgia. The baby's middle name was Alberta.

The year 1900 was an election year and my dad and I went to the Trains Opera House to hear William Arlen Smith make a political speech. He was a Republican and so were we. Senator Smith was accompanied by Augustus Weeks, a State Representative at that time. He also owned the Weeks Dry Goods Store in Lowell for many years. At that meeting, Humphrey Russell sang a song. He had served at Bunker Hill. It was very thrilling for me, a kid of eight years, and I never forgot it.

In all of my school years we never had a nine-month school year. We only went to school six months a year. When I was about 12 years old, Aunt Ida Beckwith said to me, "Why don't you walk over to our place sometime?" So I decided I would. I walked up the road apiece and across the farm where Don Weeks lived for years and on across Benedict Reusser farm and the Sam Reusser place. (That's where the Fallasburg Park is at the present time.) When I got to Aunt Ida's, she was tickled to see me. She said, "Uncle Sid is down by the river

fixing fence. Why don't you go down there?" So I did and he was working on the fence. I said, "Hello Uncle Sid, what you doing? Fixing fence?" He growled at me, "What does it look like?" From that time on there wasn't much conversation. After a while we got on the wagon and rode up to the house and had dinner. After dinner, Aunt Ida took me in the horse and buggy and took me home. I had a wonderful time except for that encounter down by the river. That was just a stone throw from the big Consumer's Power Dam.

I helped build the Park Road. We started about August and in November we completed the road. I worked in the park afterwards and Charley Rogers, a cousin of mine, worked as first caretaker of the park. The park was started in 1928 and in 1929. I earned \$300 working on the road and lived in the John W. Fallas house in Fallasburg. My kids went to school there and Dorothy Vandebroek was the schoolteacher.

James Edward Tower's wife was a Steketee from Grand Rapids. He used to raise melons and lived here for many years. Their graves are in the Fallasburg Cemetery. Art Biggs and his wife worked for Wilbur Moon and Bertha Bryant, their daughter, was born on the Moon Farm.

My grandmother Onan was the daughter of Alex Rogers and she had a sister, Adell, who married Jim Wright, and another sister named Belle, who married James Converse. My great grandfather, Alex Rogers, is buried in Fox's cemetery. My Grandfather Onan came from New York to Michigan in 1856 and that is when he and my grandmother were married. My father's sisters were Ida and Lena. Ida married Charles F. Beckwith and Lena married a Weeks who was a brother of Augustus Weeks who owned the Dry Goods Store in Lowell.

When my Grandfather Rogers first came to Michigan he owned a farm where there was a lot of marsh grass and the Indians encamped there because that was good feed for their ponies. John Wright owned some of that and it is known as the Flats. For 18 years, My Uncle Sid would spend the winter in the pine woods up the river logging and then would float the logs down the river in the

spring. This place here was a stage coach inn and the house way back there where Bill Stauffer used to live was a place where the log-runners used to put up for the night and when Stauffer came there the floor was all chipped up from their spikes in their boots.

When I was 7 years old, I milked two Jersey cows for my grandmother and by the time I was 10, I milked all five cows before going to school in the morning. When I was 15, I finished school and took the 8<sup>th</sup> grade examination in Lowell. School was from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. When I first attended, 12 to 14 children attended the school and Sadie Fletcher was my teacher. She got \$18 a month.

My first date was when John Wright and I went across the road to visit the two girls there. I was about 18 years old.

Max Denny played at the dances that took place in homes by moving the furniture out of the living room. He called the square dances and he was real funny. Another recreation was cards and along about midnight they would bring out lunch.

My dad, Alex W. Onan, married Georganne Austin on November 1, 1891 and bought the farm known as the Curtis Farm. There was a depression then and men worked for 25 cents for a ten-hour day. Butter sold for 8 cents and 10 cents a pound, eggs – 6 cents and 8 cents a dozen, but most men had a job of some kind.

This farm was infested with snakes, mostly Blue Racers, and my mother was deathly afraid of them. My dad killed a Blue Racer more than nine feet long.

On November 10, 1892, I was born. When I was six months old, our house caught fire. I was tossed out of the window wrapped in a shawl and landed in a bank of snow. The house was burned to the ground. The next summer my dad had the house rebuilt.

I was about one year old when I fell into a pail of dirty wash water and I drowned. My mother picked me up, ran through the field and yelled at my dad who came running. He had to work on me for quite a while before I came around.

When I was three, my dad went back to work my Granddad's farm and we lived in part of old John Wright's house. When I was playing in the back yard, I climbed up on the parapet of the well. My mother saw me and was scared stiff. She came up slowly so as not to startle me and grabbed me. The well was over 90 feet deep.

While we lived at John Wright's, John Jr. build the house that is there today. After one year we moved in with my dad's parents and lived with them the rest of their lives.

## MEMORIES – THE GROENENBOOM FAMILY

By Eileen Comdure and Joan Beebe

In 1924, Orie and Carrie Groenenboom purchased the Don Mann Farm, which consisted of 190 acres, an old barn, and a log cabin for the sum of \$8000. As the depression set in they could not keep up the payments. They repurchased it under a new contract for \$6000 and were allowed to cut and sell wood off the land, which Orie did in order to meet his payments. He also started out with two registered Holstein cows, which he purchased for \$77. By the 30's, Orie was one of the largest milk producers in the Vergennes area.

Carrie kept house and raised her family of six in the log cabin. The log cabin was the first, if not the only log cabin, with electricity. With help from Melville McPherson, electricity was brought into the area in 1933. One reason it took so long was because two farmers on McPherson Road refused to have a power pole on their property. It took strong convincing by neighbors. When Consumer Power came through with a contract for every farmer to sign, which would require a monthly minimum payment of \$1.25 that too was met with hesitation by some. In 1950, the log cabin was replaced by a new home.

Following the death of her husband, Orie, in 1966, Carrie Groenenboom found time on her hands. Family raised, unable to drive having never learned, she found her thoughts often dwelling in the past. She decided, with encouragement from her children, to write her memories. All the day-to-day experiences, the big and small things, that went into the life of the Groenenboom family. Her intentions were to pass on to her grandchildren and great grandchildren, this gift of loving and living, and so it truly is. Here are several samples of the wonderful memories Carrie wrote in her memory books.

Around the year 1923, the adults were busy with the potato crop, but Carrie also had two small children who needed tending. So Carrie, being inventive, built

a tent of a corn shock that offered shade, safety and a wonderful playhouse for the little ones.

Another noted memory was of the whole family riding to the mill with wagon and team for the purpose of getting a few bags of grain ground. Carrie would bring along a can of cream and a few dozen eggs to sell in payment for having the grist ground. She received 80 cents for her first can of cream. Lula Blaza had the cream station at Moseley and the gristmill was at Alton, which was owned by Bill Miller.

Carrie also recalled, in her papers, when the barn on the Percy Read farm burned down on Christmas Eve of 1924. The following spring all the neighbors gathered to help build the new barn. Orie gave the timber, out of his woods, to help Percy out. In 1942, Orie purchased the Read farm of 270 acres and the barn still stands at 1796 Alden Nash Road.

Carrie Groenenboom passed away in 1982, but her family is devoted to the wonderful memories their mother treasured and kept alive in her notebooks and papers. It is a tribute to Vergennes history to have such dedicated people living within its boundaries.

## MEMORIES OF GOLDIE VAN DEN BROECK CLARK

My grandparents, Rocus VandenBroeck and Sophia Smith, were married February 3, 1845 in Boston, Massachusetts. They both came from Belgium. He was born January 9, 1819 and she was born April 21, 1821. They lived at Grosse Point, Pontiac and then Bowne Township, Kent County. After nine years there, they traded farms with Ira Gardner and came to Vergennes Township, Section 1, in the NE corner. The house is still in use at 14316 Four Mile Road, just west of Montcalm Avenue on the south side of the road. As the years went by and the family grew, he bought more land adjoining him; therefore, the families were all neighbors. His wife died at the early age of 49 leaving him with a family of nine, the youngest only four. He never remarried and died January 30, 1893. He and his wife were Roman Catholics and both were buried in the Parnell Cemetery with the two children that preceded them in death.

The farm my father, Pete VanDenBroeck, got joined Tom and Betsey Condon's (a family with seven children) land on the south. They soon became very good friends, resulting in the marriage of Will Condon and Agnes VanDenBroeck in 1884. Day Condon's wife, Lucinda Hubbel, died in 1899 and in 1906 he married Coletta VanDenBroeck Converse, who had been divorced from her first husband, George Converse. The Converses lived just north of our place and had five children, Edith, Will, Hiram, Mildred (Lena) and Lee, all older than I.

My dad's sisters, Estella, (Essie) and Dell lived across the road from our place. They had one son, Clyde Condon, who was ten years older than I. My dad's other sister, that married Will Condon, lived just one half mile west on Three Mile Road. Three Mile Road ended at the east end across from the line fence between Fred Condon and my dad. Aunt Agnes and Will Condon had Tom, Claude, William II and Mable.

Another brother, Amial, and his wife, Carrie, lived on Alden Nash Road, property now owned by Carl and Julie Rasch. They had one daughter, Nina, and a

son, Ace VanDenBroeck. His brother, Rent, and wife, Ida, lived on Four Mile Road east, across from the farm he grew up on, in the big brick house. Their children were, Sam, Mae and Florentus, Jr. His brother France and wife Rena lived north of us, between us and the corner of Four Mile Road.

The oldest brother, John, stayed on the old place and didn't marry until 1906, to an Agnes Clark. His only daughter, Essie, was born after he died. Zella VanDenBroeck married Charles house and had one son, Delbert, and a daughter Lula. She was the only one to "leave the nest", as they say, for they lived near Sparta.

Peter VanDenBoreck and Ethel Ennes were married April 20, 1891. A daughter, Lillie, was stillborn in April 1892 and their other daughter, Goldie, was born March 5, 1899. I was named before I born. Someone sent my mother a card with the picture of a little girl on it and wrote "Goldie VanDenBroeck" on it. After I came, my dad wouldn't listen to any other name.

My mother came from Lestershire, England with her folks when she was 12. They settled in Day Township in Montcalm County. Everything was woods and just trails. Her oldest brother had come to America first to work in the woods and a tree fell on him and killed him. His mother just thought she had to come and be beside him. As my mother's brothers and sisters married, they all settled next to each other as my dad's folks did. They worked together and shared tools with each other. When people come to a new country, it must be terrifying; they have to be strong people.

As a little girl, I loved to be out in the field with my father, to have him plow the cool earth over my feet. I would run ahead of the horses and sit by the furrows, or ride on the horses. My dad was never too busy to be bothered with me. I also loved it when I could go with my uncle Dell to take milk to the cheese factory. That was by the creek in front of what is now Gerald and Joan

Wittenbach's home at Alton. My mother bought me some overalls – how I loved them.

My mother would hitch up our horse, old Belle, to the buggy and we went over to the Alton Church. One time I had a little friend with me as we had Sunday school. First we asked if we could play out in the cemetery while church was on. After awhile, we tired of that so went to Keech's store just south of the church. My friend told me we could charge some candy and pay when he came through with the grocery wagon next week. We got the candy, then had to eat it up before my mother got out of church. What a terrible week, I hid my pennies under a stone and when I saw him coming, I got there before my mother came out to get him paid. Behold if he didn't give me some more candy and said that I was a good girl to do as I said. Did I ever run down to the fields to my dad, for fear I was going to get it. I stayed as long as I could and as I expected, my mother met me by the water tank. I got my legs switched good and from that day to this I am afraid of a debt.

From Keech's Grocery at Alton, their son, Frank, drove a grocery wagon throughout the country. Women sold their butter and eggs or traded them for other staples. When the railroad came through, it missed Alton, and that was when Mosely was settled. Keech's store was moved up there and I remembered how the stores began to spring up.

Uncle Dell raised a lot of pigs and one day I was over there when the sow had her little ones. One got laid on and its two front legs got broken so he gave it to me. I ran home, thinking I had a prize, but mother, knowing what it would mean to care for it, said, "No, take it right back!" Of course, I won out and kept it. Mother made splints for both front legs, fed it with a spoon and I had a pet for the life of the pig. It slept in the dog coop with the dog and I think that it thought it was a dog for it followed me everywhere.

My folk's farm was in the Alton District, but I was sent to the Valley School. The school was south of the east end of Three Mile Road, about a mile south on the west side of the road. I would beg my dad to take me and my mother would come to meet me. I was six and a half and my dad thought children were sent too young. We had eight grades and 11 pupils. In 1907, the teacher's name was Frances Clark. (Little did I think I would marry a man by the name of Clark). We had our picture taken my second year (see picture). Back row, one to right, Leo Richmond, Jim Wright, and his sister, Donna. (She became Donald Anderson's mother – He and his family still live in Vergennes township). Teacher Francis Clark, John Wright, and Ray Onan. Second row; Goldie VanDenBroeck, Mildred Howe, Arnold Stauffer, and Florence Richmond. In front, Freddy Howe and Dennie Stauffer. The Wrights lived south of the school as did Ray Onan, about one half mile.

I only went two years here for my dad and mother didn't live together after that. Mother and I went to Stanton because all of her folks lived north of there. My folks never had a divorce and from then on I was shared, loved by both and their families, all feeling sorry for me and I just having the best time. I had so many cousins that I never felt alone. My mother and I were baptized in the Methodist Church in Stanton in 1914 and I was married there in 1919. Going to Stanton, the county seat of Montcalm County, where they had just built a new school, from kindergarten to the County Normal, I was terrified. I will always remember the little girl that came to my rescue. I was promptly set back a grade making me two years behind my class. They did that to everyone. I guess they thought no one else knew how to teach. At this date (1984), I still like to go back to reunions. About seven or eight still live there and I always have to by my mother's home that she worked so hard to build. It has been kept up and is still so pretty (on Court Street). I had two homes. I could come down to my dad's whenever I wanted, on the weekends or in the summer. I always stayed with my Aunt Essie Condon, Dad's sister who lived across the road. I liked to go to my

Aunt Agnes Condon who lived on Three Mile Road about a mile west. Mildred Condon still lives there. My cousins Bill and Mable Condon and Florent VanDenBroeck and I were the only young ones, so of course, that's where I liked to be. The Condon's had the second cottage on Murray Lake and Andrews was the first. Helen Andrews and I were good friends as kids and afterwards she and Ted Elhart were married and came back on the farm. The island was a farm and how it has all changed! The trains were running then and I would always stay at the Wingeiers, who lived in the heart of Moseley by the depot, until my dad came for me. When I went home I would also stay there, until the train time, because dad had chores to do. I was nine years old (March 5) when Mother and I went to Stanton to live, so it was the next year, I think, that my Aunt Essie Condon had a big surprise party for me. As usual, my dad met me at Mosely Depot. Pauline and Mary Wingeier ran out to give me a birthday card. I remember my dad hurried me away, but then I never noticed. I think my aunt had invited all the mothers and children my age from around there. We drew names to go to dinner, had music and singing and just a wonderful time. I doubt if at the time, I really appreciated what my aunt did for me, but I have so much since.

Just before my last year in high school, my best girlfriend wanted me to go to Greenville to wait tables during Fair Week. The Fair was on for two weeks, one in August and one in September. I felt I could make up that first week in September, but when I came back, we had a new principal. The other one we had had since grade school and we just loved her. My friend quit in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, second semester, and I went for a while and just quit. My poor mother, I only needed three more credits. How I have regretted what I did. I told my son in later years that if he didn't make it, he and I were going back together. He did. When I moved to Lowell, due to Mary Condon's urging, I went back to night school for the year 1978-79 and graduated in June 1979. It was a lot worse for me then than if I had finished when I should. What mistakes we make in growing up!

I was at my cousin, Ace VanDenBroeck's, one day when four or five men came to build a barn for him. They stayed there during the weeks it took and that's how I met my future husband, Floyd Clark. His home was in Ionia County, east of my dad's place. We were married December 24, 1919 and stayed on my dad's place until April 1, 1922. Our little son, Royal, was three months old when we moved one mile east of the farm on White's Bridge Road in Ionia County. Floyd was one of three operators that ran the Lowell Power Plant. The electricity furnished Lowell with power along with a portion they had to buy from Consumers. Frank McMahon, his boss, was superintendent of the Lowell Power Plant. Floyd worked with Jerry DeVine and Merle Miller. They worked three shifts. Jim McMahon, Mort Sinclair, Charles Houserman, Roger McMahon and Brother Byrne worked on the pole line, keeping the trees trimmed so they didn't touch the electric lines. They came up White's Bridge, as we called it, the pole line. I remember John Jones, Kitty Charles and Mary Walsh worked at the office of the Lowell Plant. The dam was rebuilt while we were there, all remodeled. The house we lived in out to the road was torn down later. Lodie Shear took Floyd's place, then Ted VanNosker. I don't remember the date Lowell decided to do away with the plant, but the man who bought it hooked up the electric and heated his home. I wonder if they ever wished they had kept it up, the turn gas and oil have taken.

The plant was one mile east of our place on the farm. Joe Shears' home faced White's Bridge Road. My dad's joined his in back but faced Fallasburg Road. We moved back to the farm in 1927. Floyd liked the farm best, I guess. We came back in June but farming had to start in the spring. The County Line (Four Mile Road) was just starting to be regarded and graveled and Floyd went up one day just to watch and came back with a job. The road started at Alden Nash and went west to Lincoln Lake Road (wages were \$5 a day, were we ever rich!).

I remember in 1934, I think in July, Clarence Weeks (Mike) and family moved across from us. Lyle was three months old and Mike worked for Clyde

Condon at the time. One time when Floyd told Royal to cultivate across from Mike's, Mike knew Royal had other plans so he came over and told Royal he wanted to do it for awhile. Mike worked for Bill Condon too and we always knew we could depend on him. He and Laura bought their own home on Biggs Avenue from Bill. A tragic thing happened soon after. Their oldest son, Clare, was on the tractor and got too close to the edge of a gravel pit on the farm and was killed. Mike drove a road grader for the County. Lyle often went with his dad so it is no wonder that Lyle does the same thing. Lyle married Errolyn Osborn from Vergennes Township and built a home just north of his dad's. They have a nice family, three girls and a boy. So they, too, have always lived in Vergennes Township. Floyd worked on Vergennes Road when that was graded. He held wheelers and took care of the boss's team. In 1936, it was so hot the men went to work at 1:00 am and got off at 2:00 pm. The horses couldn't stand it, but of course, the men could. One of those hot days, Royal went with his dad, just a little guy. The men kept him busy carrying water for them and he was given a few pennies and thought that was fine. Floyd also worked on Fallasburg Park Road grading the hill by the School.

Royal was born on December 27, 1921 in Vergennes Township, in the same house where I was born. He graduated in 1940 from Lowell High School and went two terms to Michigan State for Agriculture Short Courses. He played in the band while at Lowell and on the Showboat, which all enjoyed. He and his dad farmed ours and Trumble's farm. When Royal worked out, he would run the tractor nights to keep up. He helped Delbert Ford at carpentering. One winter, they built Dick and Essie Baird's place. It was so cold, Royal made a tripod to hang the pails of nails on to warm them. One fall, he and Howard Kropf filled Gordon Frost's Apple Storage at Moseley. They moved every crate by hand and filled it to the roof. He drove the milk truck for Roy Richardson every fall so Roy could go deer hunting. When he was hurt, he was President of the Junior Farm Bureau that met at the Vergennes Township Hall and a nicer group of young

people you couldn't ask for. Don McPherson kept them going. Royal was Phil Davenport's sub on the mail route. Phil kept him on for a year hoping he would get better from his terrible accident, but it was not to be, we found out. Royal was going with a girl from Grand Rapids and they were making plans for the future. He was on his way there when something went wrong with the motorcycle. It was a borrowed bike and he didn't know how to handle it as well as he thought, resulting in changing four lives in a second. I feel I could write a book on it and have a faint feeling whenever I see a motorbike. That was July 28, 1946.

When we came back in 1927 to the farm from the plant, we went to the Alton Church on the north side of Three Mile Road, the old church where my mother and I used to go. A minister came and went but Delbert Ford and his wife, Cora, saw to it that there was a Sunday School always, even when he had to pick them up. Royal was baptized there on November 5, 1933 along with Ashel Kellogg, Dorothy Kropf, and Howard, Norma and Virginia Eddy, by Reverend Wenger. I remember on Christmas when Royal, Wayne Blaser and Gerald Tornga, a boy that stayed with Al Blaser's family, were the Three Kings. All were good singers, but Gerald was exceptional. One year, Reverend Wenger came out to preach from the Lowell Congregational Church. We met at 9:00 am and Floyd sang in the choir. For farmers, that made it a hurried time. As time went on, his church thought Reverend Wenger was spending too much time away from the Lowell Church. That, and the depression, made it hard to keep going so the church closed in 1934 or 34. We, along with the Frosts, Elharts, Robert Wingeiers, and Fritz's (I can't remember who else), went down to the Congregational Church in Lowell. We joined the Church there in 1951 with our friends, Richard and Reta Martin from Keene Township. Reverend Woon was the minister and he was with the church for 17 years.

After Royal's accident, we realized how much he had done for us. It was hard, so we had to cut down or cut out. In 1949, Ed Mueller came over and asked me if I would take the township Treasurer job. I felt I never could do it for I had

all I could handle, but in the end, I said I would try. I guess I did as I had it for 18 years.

I want to share with you some things from my scrapbook. Vergennes Township's early population was only 19 families. Set off from the old town of Kent in 1838, Vergennes also included what now are Townships of Lowell, Grattan and Bowne. In 1838, Caledonia became a township and attached to Bowne. In 1846, Grattan set up a separate township and in 1848; Lowell was organized, leaving Vergennes with its present limits. Lowell and Vergennes were always very close as Lowell was the center of Vergennes at one time. Vergennes still extends into Lowell from the north, past the doctor's office, takes in Attwood, and the cemetery to the east line and Keene township, west to Ada Township or Boynton Avenue, while the northern boundary is Four Mile Road and Grattan Township.

When I first took the treasurer's job, Vergennes was all farmland. I was \$150.00 besides the one percent. There were no paved roads. I remember when the township hired my husband to take care of Fallasburg Park Road with a float. I can't remember how far he went. It was just all graded gravel. Ed Mueller was the supervisor and he told the county they were charging too much to tarvy. They said, "prove it if you can," so he quick thought where was the best piece of road to try it on. Three Mile Road had just been graveled and graded so they did it, just from Fallasburg Road to Lincoln Lake Road. It was my first day at the bank to collect taxes so Ed came to help me. That noon, someone proceeded to give Ed a piece of their mind, said that road didn't start from nowhere and didn't go anywhere. Those on Three Mile Road didn't even know it was going in but got blamed for it. I just put this in to show how sometimes we are judged so wrong. Ed was saving the township just as he did his own.

Fred Roth was voted in his place when Ed was voted on the Road Commission. He also did much for the township. When I first went it, Rhea Rickner was the Clerk; she lived the third house south of me. One day Ed asked

Rhea and I if we would have the books all balanced for settlement day. Before that, they went to the bank with the Board to get them ready. Sometimes they were two or three days at it, going out to eat, and just a long time at it. We got a little extra for that. After Rhea quit, Arvil Heilman was Clerk and he and I did it. While Rhea was in, we knew they were going to tarvy from Lincoln Lake through the Park and Rhea called a Board Meeting to see if we couldn't get them to come to Three Mile Road. Fred was then Supervisor and he got it up to the hill north of us. I was so surprised and glad. Clyde Condon and Elmer Wittenbach were Trustees when I went it. The next term, Clyde resigned and Adelbert Odell took his place. It was a very good group to work with and I want to say right here that Ed Mueller and Fred Roth were always working for the township. They gave of themselves for a good many years tirelessly. It's the end of the road for complaints, faultfinding, and all that goes with it. I can assure you that it was not for the money, for then it wasn't much.

In 1959 Lowell got a new fire engine under the Kent County purchasing pool. Lowell paid one-fourth, Lowell Township one-fourth, and the County one-fourth. It was for Lowell and Vergennes, Lowell to house it and that made Vergennes feel more secure. Vergennes paid into the library too, so we felt close to Lowell. Later, Vergennes bought a used fire truck. First it was housed at the township hall and Theo Bailey ran it, but heating was a problem. So Floyd had a tool shed built and housed the truck in half of it, Floyd then drove it.

One year I took the Farm Census in September and got the Tax Roll the first of December. I wonder how I did it all! A man from Grand Rapids brought the Drago (?) farm and proceeded to plot it out in ten-acre strips, having a road front for each piece. The farm was on McPherson Road and in the Waters School District. The Board wondered what that would do to the school so that resulted in a zoning ordinance. Of course that too has been changed many times as the township grew. I remember we had a few basement homes and that included them. They had to be built above ground. I was Treasurer from 1949 to 1967. I

saved all the records until I moved to an apartment in 1977 and now I don't remember so good. Rhea and Fred were on a fishing trip one time at an election so Rhea asked me to take charge. It was so close a vote a recount was asked for, so I experienced that. I also took registrations for her one time. When she didn't want the job anymore, Arvil Heilman was voted in he and I worked together on the books. He moved into Lowell and Irene Osborne was voted in as clerk, but I was out of it by then. I went to the Lowell Bank every Saturday to collect taxes and also took them anytime at the house. Reta Martin, Keene Township Treasurer, was at the bank too and the workers there were so nice to us, we always felt welcome. Martins moved to Grand Rapids and Maxine Gasper took her place and we were together for a while. I think she is still Treasurer of Keene Township.

In 1942, my mother was taken ill, her home in Stanton was sold and she came to the farm to be with us. Before Royal was hurt, we hired Adelbert Ford to help us build her a little home next to us, but she lived only a year after that. Aunt Essie and Uncle Dell moved over to the house they built, where Allan and Judy Baird live. Later they moved to Lowell, then Clyde and Selene moved there. The house across from us was rented to several different people as the years went by; one family was there only a year. The Hugh VanderVeen children had never been on a farm so everything was so much fun, especially riding on the hay load, and all that goes with farming. We sold eggs too. They bought off us. One day I remember Hugh coming over to ask me how to pick up an egg that had dropped on the floor? Good question, if you never have.

I was harder all the time for Floyd to keep going. We talked to the Baird boys about the farm but before anything was done, Floyd's heart just gave out. On September 19, 1965, Royal and I sold the farmland to my cousin Clyde Condon's grandsons, Allen and Bruce Baird, and sold the cattle, and tried to keep going. We did for 12 years after, but then Royal wanted me to sell the two homes and three acres. He didn't want to be left with it, so in June of 1977, we had a sale and sold

to Gary Papke. After 78 years, that isn't easy. We got an apartment at Birchwood, were there until February 9, 1979, when we got an apartment at Schneider Manor. It is a delightful place to be. Everyone is so nice. It is now February 7, 1984 and with God's help, we hope for a few more years.

Vergennes will always be my home, regardless.

Goldie R. VanDenbroeck Clark and Royal

## THE CONDON FAMILY

Thomas Lafferty Condon and his twin, Samuel Cox Condon, were the only sons of Bryan Lafferty Condon and his wife Susanna (Cox). Each named for a grandfather; they were born October 22, 1827 at Binbrook, Wentworth County, Ontario.

Their Father died when they were only three and they were raised by their stepfather, Amos Hill, on a farm near Paris in Brant County, Ontario. Susanna had seven Condon children, Amos had seven children and they had seven more after they were married.

Amos Hill had purchased land from the government in 1838 on Section 12, Vergennes township, Kent County, Michigan and his sons Amos, Jr., and Bryan L. Hill farmed there for some years. In the spring of 1859, Tom and Sam Condon traded their farms for the Hill Brothers' land in Vergennes, bringing their wives and several young children. The Flat River forms the east boundary and Woods Creek winds through the property, separating the two farms before it empties into the river.

Sam Condon sold his land in 1877 and moved to a farm south of Smyrna where he lived the rest of his life.

Tom and Betsey Condon's farm has been continually owned by their family for 125 years. They sold to their son, Fred, in 1898, and after he passed away, his widow sold it to their son C.O. in 1951. Since 1975 this 160 acres has been part of the dairy farm of Allan and Bruce Baird, great-great grandsons of Tom and Betsey. The Baird children are the sixth generation to reside on the land.

The children of Tom and Betsey were: Agnes (Trumbull), Bryan L., David R., William T., Adelbert, J. Lyle, and Fred. They have many descendants in the Lowell area.

## RECOLLECTIONS OF ALTON AND MOSELEY

By Adelbert Ford and Cora E. Ford, Age 82

In the early 1800's as people from the eastern states began moving west in larger numbers, many settled in the lower part of Michigan, entering the state in increasing numbers from Ohio.

Most of these came by horse and wagon, bringing what they could. Most settled in the southern part of the state, and south of the state's largest river, the Grand. As these settlers began moving north with the hope of finding a new life in this new land, they crossed the Grand River and settled above it.

The area of most interest to us was the township of Vergennes, named in memory of Charles Gravier Vergennes, as officer in the French government who was active in bringing the French to the colonies in the war for American independence. At that time, the township of Vergennes included what is now the township of Grattan.

Settlers moving north took what is now the Lincoln Lake Road and when they came to Woods Creek, some recognized the possibility of using the waterpower from the creek. Today this is called the Alton Creek. The land north of the Grand River was not for sale until after 1840, but the settlers could lay out their farms with the right to buy them after that date.

My great grandfather, Ira Ford, was one of those who loaded his family and what else they could into their wagon and came from Ohio to settle in Vergennes. On the way, one of his children was taken sick and died. The child was buried outside the road and they came on to lay out a farm of one hundred acres of land on what is now Four Mile Road. They bought the land from the government at the going price of \$1.75 per acre. The first house on the new farm was built there since they settled here in 1838. The farm was covered with hardwood timber and the trees were girdled and killed, and when dry, were cut down and burned and the

land cleared to be planted to crops. A short time after they had cleared the land, they had to buy ten acres of timber to get the wood for fuel.

When young, I enjoyed the stories of the old neighbors. One was by an old gentleman by the name of William Cooper who had come with his father from Pennsylvania. Before leaving their home there, he had borrowed money to buy a farm. During the following summer he had received enough to pay his debt and in the fall after his work was done on the farm, had taken his dog and gun, walked back to Pennsylvania and paid the load, then walked back, reaching home here in the spring in time to do the spring work on the farm. I also recall that my own grandfather had taken a bag of wheat on horseback to Grand Rapids and returned the next day with the flour.

In 1846 the township of Vergennes was divided and the south half was still called Vergennes and the north half, which contained a large Irish settlement, was named Grattan after the Irish statesman, Henry Grattan, who was recorder of Dublin for many years. The center of the Irish community was named after another Irish statesman, Charles Stewart Parnell. The Irish, being of Catholic faith, built their church here. The first church was rather small and soon had to be replaced by another. The second church burned shortly after being built and plans were made for another. The new church was much larger, being 50 feet in width and 138 feet long, with a steeple reaching 186 feet above the church floor. The new church, still standing, is the largest wood frame building east of the Rocky Mountains. The new village also had a general store and the church school. The church cemetery is also there.

In the efforts to use the waterpower of Wood's Creek, two dams were built. One was the short distance south of what is now Three Mile Road on Lincoln Lake Road. A flour and gristmill was built by Thomas B. Woodbury and operated for many years. The last owner and operator was William Miller. The second dam, which was about three fourths of a mile west of Lincoln Lake Road, was used to operate a sawmill and wagon shop. There was also a small rake factory

built and owned by Edmond Ring. Mr. Porter operated the upright saw. The wagon shop turned out the wagons used by the farmers and the wooden rakes were used by the farmers to rake the grain that had to be cut with the cradle into bundles.

A blacksmith shop was built in what is now the cemetery on the corner of Three Mile Road and Lincoln Lake. This was built and operated by George W. Fullington. There was also a cider mill next to the blacksmith shop. In addition, there was a cobbler's shop where the people could go to have their feet measured and new shoes made. Henry Keech built and operated a general store that also housed the post office.

The new village, which was built by Wood's Creek, was called Alton, possibly after the urban district of Alton in South Hampton, England, which was noted for its agricultural fairs and makers of farm products.

The township of Vergennes was organized in 1838 and there were 19 families in the township at that time. The first family to settle in the township was that of Sylvester Hodges, who came from New York in 1836.

The first church to be organized was to be called the First Christian Church and a society of Vergennes was organized on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of January 1843 by Elder Newcomb Godfrey, with Reverend E. Mudge as acting pastor missionary of the Michigan Christian Conference. The Wesleyan Methodist congregation was to have use of the church when it was not in use by the first two denominations.

On April 11, 1925, the First Christian Church sold all rights to the church and lot to the Alton Church Society for the sum of \$1. At a meeting on August 24, 1925, Clarence Ford and Doris Church were appointed to secure a new charter for the church. The charter was secured and the transfer was registered with the State of Michigan and Kent County on April 25, 1925. The church of Alton was built in 1868 and became the property of the people of this community forever under the perpetual charter.

The Alton Ladies Aid took the responsibility upon themselves of the care of the building and did so for many years. In 1927, they decided to put a basement under the church to be used by the people for any social gathering, such as receptions, birthday parties, etc., and the ladies held more suppers to raise money to pay for the upkeep and improvement of the church. In 1927, I was engaged to put the basement under the church and completed the work soon thereafter. The Ladies Aid placed the tables, cupboards, counters, chairs and all necessary dishes for preparing meals in the basement to be used by the people of the community.

The old church has become a wonderful landmark and has served seven generations, many of who spent their lives within the sound of its bell and in the end, have been buried in its shadow. During its 119 years, it has served its people well and has been a wonderful influence on its people.

In the late 1970's, the church was partially dismantled inside, the entire original contents removed and the basement made unusable for the purposes for which it was intended. The Church has not been used for several years. Although it retains its exterior beauty, it is a shell of its former self.

At some time in the early 1840's, some arrangements must have been made to set aside a piece of land to be used as a cemetery, although it was not until the first day of June, 1854 that a group was organized to take care of the business of the cemetery. This group was called the Alton Burying Ground Association. The officers of the association were Abel Ford, President; John Cover, Secretary; Walter White, Treasurer; and Elijah Godfrey, Sexton. The piece of land, 12 rods wide and 16 rods long, was to be laid out in lots, the lots to be sold at \$1 each.

In 1843, Barney Ford was the first person to be buried in the new cemetery and several more were buried there before it was organized into an association.

On November 13<sup>th</sup> at a meeting of the association, it was noted that the Sexton could charge \$1.50 for digging and filling a grave.

At a meeting of the association on August 31, 1917, Stephen Rennels, then President, resigned and Clarence Ford was elected president. Mr. Ford held this

office for the next 27 years until he resigned the office on August 1, 1944. His son, Adelbert Ford, was elected President at that time and held the office for the next 38 years.

In 1924, the Ladies Aid had a well drilled in the cemetery and bought a windmill and supply tank. They also bought pipe to supply water to all parts of the cemetery. Several parcels of land have been added to the cemetery and today we have five acres and 25 square rods. About one and three-fourths acres have not yet been opened up for use.

After being so closely associated with the cemetery during the past 38 years, the thing that has given me the greatest satisfaction is that in working the books, I have found that in the first years of the cemetery, about 30 to 35 percent of the graves were of children while in the last years only about two or three percent of the graves have been those of children.

At the time my wife and I left our office in the association, we had 90 years of service between us and there were 888 graves in the cemetery. Our new President, Kenneth Kropf, I am sure will receive the same help and co-operation as I have enjoyed for the last 38 years. I am sure this co-operation will also extend to our new secretary, Joan Wittenbach, who replaces my wife, Cora E. Ford, who served for the last 52 years; Donna Jean Ford, who replaces Mildred Condon who served as treasurer for 37 years; and Jerald Wittenbach, who replaced his father as Sexton.

In 1839 the first schoolhouse in Vergennes was built in what is now the Alton Cemetery. The building was also used for funerals upon occasion. The first teachers were Jane Hendricks Church and John L. Covert. The school burned in 1845 and the new school, which still stands, was built east of the old one and on the south side of the road. The original school was called the Godfrey School, but that was changed to the Alton school when the new building was built.

At about the turn of the century, a railroad was built at the north edge of Alton. The plans were that the depot would be next to Lincoln Lake Road, but it

was found that the grade of the track was so steep it would be difficult to stop and start the heavy freight trains. It was decided to build the depot north on Four Mile Road.

Shortly after the railroad was completed, the Moseley Brothers from Grand Rapids, who were producers, built a potato warehouse on Four Mile Road next to the rail track. Within a very short time, the building was found to be too small and it was doubled in size. The brothers also built a house on the south side of Four Mile Road for the manager of the new business. They also gave the new village its name of Moseley, later shortened to Mosley.

A little later Fred Condon built and operated a grocery store west of the warehouse. When Mr. Condon left the store, it was operated by George Whitten for several years.

In 1908, Charles Jakeway built a warehouse north of the Moseley Brothers building. He bought potatoes and some beans, and also had a stockyard and bought livestock. He also built an office on the road where his wife, Ella, did the bookkeeping for his business. In addition, he also built a house some distance west of the office for his son-in-law, Clyde Francisco, who managed the business for some time.

At this time, the Gleaners built a rather large hall west in Condon's store. Not long after this, the Gleaners sold the hall to Frank Keech, the son of Henry Keech and he closed the store in Alton and moved his grocery business to Moseley. Mr. Keech did business there for some time and then it was decided to move the building to the corner of Four Mile Road and Lincoln Lake. The building was moved but burned before the job was completed. Mr. Keech then built a new building on the site and the new store was operated by his son, Lee, until 1946. After Lee Keech left the store, Harold Collins and his wife operated it for a few years. Then Mr. Trapp took it over briefly but it was soon closed. The building was rented as living space for a short time and then torn down.

The railroad handled many carloads of potatoes and beans as well as passengers for many years, with Frank Blazo as the stationmaster, until the farmers turned to other crops and the automobile replaced the passenger trains. With improved roads and the use of trucks, it was found necessary to close the station and remove the depot. During the time when the station was in operation, a crew of four to six men worked full time on the tracks for many years under the direction of Ben Huffman, and during the last few years, his stepson, Ralph Kiste, was in charge of the crew. Many will remember the time when six people were killed by the trains in one week.

Due to the decrease in the number of potatoes raised in the community, the Moseley brothers sold their warehouse to Gordon Frost, who transformed it into apple storage. Mr. Frost used it for a few years and then sold it to Carl Rasch, who is still using it for that purpose. The Moseley brothers also sold their house that now belongs to Ruth Onan who still lives there.

The warehouse and stockyard built by Charles Jakeway was sold to C. H. Runciman who used them for a short time and then had them torn down. The office building built by Mr. Jakeway was also torn down. The elevator built by Patrick Norton stood several rods south of the road along the railroad and across the tracks from the section house. It was also bought by Mr. Runciman and managed by Peter Petersen for several years and later by Eugene Kropf for a short time before it was removed.

Herb Jakeway built and operated a saloon next to Condon's store, which he kept open for several years. After he closed it, Lou Wingeier opened a grocery store there for a short time. The building was then empty for a few months and Mr. Wingeier was about to reopen it when it burned down.

The new Gleaner Hall was built on the south side of the road and used for dances for a short time, but as people lost interest in these activities, it too was torn down.

The blacksmith shop in Alton was moved to Moseley and was operated for several years by Ralph Ford. When he was no longer able to work there, his brother, Fred Ford, operated it for several years. It was then torn down and the site sold to R.B. Davis and Frank Keech who built a large building to house a new blacksmith shop and Ray Weeks operated the garage for several years. After Mr. Weeks left the garage, it was used by Dave Garfield and Earl Brown for a short time as a base from which they sold farm machinery and ground feed for the farmers. Shortly after this, due to lack of business, the building was torn down. The house Ralph Ford built, directly west of his blacksmith shop, was used by several families until it was destroyed by fire. A small house was moved from Alton and placed on the site and is still being used.

An apple dryer owned by Nelson Lewis was one of several in the community and of course, these have been out of business for many years.

The farmers of the community organized a co-operative and built a creamery and engaged Harlie Pickens to operate it. The creamery was kept in operation for several years, but when Mr. Pickens left and a Mr. Black took over the management, it went down very fast and in a short time it closed. Later a group of Swiss farmers used it to make cheese. Abraham Blaser directed the cheese making operation until that too, was forced to be discontinued.

After Frank Keech moved his grocery store, he bought both the creamer building was torn down, as was the store building a few years later. The Pickens house, constructed of cement blocks, is still occupied.

A school was built on the southeast corner of Lincoln Lake Road and Four Mile Road and was called the Barto School. Two log schools and one frame building were built here. The first log school was built by Charles Francisco in about 1846 and his son built the frame structure to replace the old log building. This frame structure was burned in the fall of 1914. A new brick building was built in the summer of 1915 and was then called the Mosley School.

I served as director of the school board for 19 years and in the old records, was the contract with my aunt to teach the school for the sum of \$5 per month. When I started going to school in 1907, the teacher's salary was up to \$35 per month. The records of the first years told of the board asking for \$24 to cover the year's general expenses, but the people in the district felt it was too much and voted it down. At this same time, the parents were requested to furnish one cord of wood for each child they had in school.

When the Moseley school district was annexed to the Lowell school system, the building was sold to Kropf Orchards to house transit workers and a market was built on the school grounds where fruit and vegetables were offered for sale.

Today you can walk along Four Mile Road from Lincoln Lake Road about a half mile east to the railroad tracks and pick out the ruins of a few old foundations beside the road, all the remains of many of the buildings that once made up the little village of Moseley. All that remains intact is the old Moseley school, the Pickens house, which later became the home of the Keech family, the Moseley Brother's house now occupied by Ruth Onan, the old potato warehouse now owned by Carl Rasch, and the John O. Wingeier home just west of the warehouse. Even the name has changed over the years from Moseley to Mosley.

## THE VILLAGE OF FALLASBURG

By Ferris Miller and Irma Richmond

Fallasburg was settled in 1838 and the nucleus of a village was formed there while Lowell was still an Indian village with a population of 110. Sylvester Hodges is accredited with being the first settler within this town, planting the first apple trees and helping to build the first house in Lowell. Vergennes Township was detached from Kent and organized under a separate government in 1838 when there were only 19 families in the township.

In 1840, a gristmill was erected by J.W. Fallas on the Flat River. The old Hecox sawmill was put up the previous year. Later, the flouring mill was operated by Harry Champlin. There were three blacksmith shops operated by Frank Miner, Leva Phillips and Allan Willett. S. S. Fallas owned and operated the General Store. From 1851 to 1901, a post office was operated in what is today called the Boynton Cottage.

The village flourished until the Civil War, then gradually diminished when the railroads were built through Lowell, until only a handful remained by the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More people are buried in the village cemetery than are living members of the village today.

The Fallasburg Covered Bridge, as it stands today, was 100 years old in 1971. Jared N. Brasee and Co. constructed it from white pine cut near Greenville. The bridge is 100 feet long and the roadway is 14 feet wide between the trusses. It is 12 feet high from the floor to the top chord bracing. Construction cost of this bridge was \$1,560. During the winter of 1944-45, the Kent County Road Commission put in new bracing timbers and new flooring at a cost considerably more than the original amount. The original sign on the bridge still warns that a fine of \$5 will be levied on anyone riding or driving through the bridge at a speed faster than a walk. Of course, today's automobiles tend to ignore this warning. Even children dare to run rather than walk when passing through! Vandals have

destroyed the centennial sign donated by the local Historical Society. It was installed near the west entrance to the bridge. The present bridge is the fourth bridge built on this site. The first was swept away during the floods caused by the spring break-up. Another was weakened by repeated floods and was replaced during the Civil War years. The water volume in the Flat River today is considerably lower so spring floods are no longer a threat. The bridge, one of only four remaining in Michigan, still attracts tourists.

## THE SWISS IN VERGENNES

By Marion Roth Yates

The first documented records we have of the Swiss migration to Vergennes Township are in 1881 when the Bieri and the Roth families came to settle. There were two Bieri families. John and Sam Bieri, brothers, had married sisters, Elizabeth and Susanna Roth. The John Bieris came with married children and grandchildren. John Bieri was Louise Bieri Schneider's grandfather. My father, Carl Roth, was a young man of 17, the youngest of a large Roth family in Swartzenegg, Switzerland. Having lost both parents, he had an opportunity to immigrate with his sisters and their families.

The John Bieri family settled at the corner known as Fox's Corners and the Sam Bieri's settled on Three Mile Road, about a mile east of the Alton Church. Fox's Corners is the intersection of Lincoln Lake Road and Vergennes Street.

Carl Roth went to work as a farm hand for many of the Irish families that had settled earlier in the northern Vergennes Township and adjoining Grattan Township. He said he received \$14 a month and his keep. After working for about four years he returned to Switzerland. In 1888 he married Marie Althaus, but he was very discontented there after having become used to the flat, open spaces here. Soon after their marriage, my parents came to Vergennes and rented a farm in the western part of the township.

Between 1881 and 1890, there was many other Swiss settling here. The Gotlieb Roth's (Carl Roth's brother) and the first of the Kropf's came in 1887 and the rest of the Kropf's in 1888. It was about 1890 when the Althaus family came from the village of Swarzenegg, Canton Bern, Switzerland. The nearest city was Thun (pronounced "tune"). Anna and Elise often told this story about themselves. They were then about 15 and 16. They had new dresses and shoes made for the trip, as they were to spend a few days in Paris before taking the boat train to the embarkation point. When they got to Paris, they wouldn't leave their hotel

because their clothes looked so different. The Swiss are noted for doing a lot of walking and hiking and, at that time, most of them had hob-nails in the soles of their shoes. (My father told of wearing shoes with wooden soles.) The hob-nails made the shoes heavy and not very good for city streets. Their dresses were made of heavy material that was half linen and half wool and they were too proud to be seen in them.

Some of the Swiss that finally settled in Vergennes went to Ohio first, but as relatives and friends came to this area, they followed. As most of them at that time spoke little English, they built their own German-speaking church. While they spoke a common Swiss dialect, their education had been in German. There was already an established German Methodist Episcopal Conference in the United States and the district headquarters for this area was in Grand Rapids. They built the Zion, or as most people new it, the German Methodist Church in Lowell. Many of them had moved into Lowell and the church was built on the corner of Hunt and Lincoln Lake Streets. Many of Louise Schneider's and my generation were baptized and received our early religious instruction there. Catechism classes on Saturday for two years were a must! As our generation grew up and left the area or married outside the Swiss community, the congregation grew too small to support the church. Some of the members went to the United Methodist Church, some to the Congregational Church, and some to the Apostolic Church on Wingeier Avenue south of Lowell. The parsonage was sold to the last minister that served the church. He had reached retirement age and he and his family continued to live in Lowell.

The Wittenbach's also arrived in 1890. Harold and Lee Wittenbach live in the family home on Bennett Road where Christian Wittenbach, who had married Anna Althaus, finally settled. Between 1890 and 1900, many others arrived; these included the Blasers, the Wingeiers, the Oesches, the Reussers, the Ruegseggers and the Geigers. The Balsers and Reussers came to Vergennes. Some of the Wingeiers settled in Grattan and Lowell Township.

From about 1900 to 1914 immigration from Switzerland tapered off. There were a few individuals who came to join families already here, but it was in 1914 that another group came here together. The Fusses were in this group. Rosetta Fuss was my mother's sister. She had married and remained behind when the rest of the family came. The Fusses bought a farm on the Vergennes side of Foreman Road.

A few of the farms where the Swiss settled are still in the family. In addition to Harold and Lee Wittenbach, who lived in the old Christian Wittenbach home, a grandson of Rudolph Wittenbach's lives in the old home on Three Mile Road. Edith Roth lives in the Carl Roth home on Parnell. Some of the Roth family has lived their entire lives in this area, while others of us have left, but after retirement returned.

Our parents told many amusing stories of their first years here. One that went the rounds in our family was about Uncle Gottlieb Roth. It seems he wanted a pair of long underwear and there was none that spoke English to get them for him. He was not to be denied. He went to Coons Clothing and got what he wanted. When he got home, Aunt Kate asked how he managed when he couldn't speak English. His answer was, "Eh! Pants!" (The Swiss word for pants was "hussy" and he had discovered its English meaning.) The Kropfs tell the story of John and Chris spending a night in a hotel in New York City. They were very cold all night and the next morning discovered that they had not opened the bed enough. There were sheets and a feather bed to sleep on and one for a cover. They proceeded to tear the bed apart so the chambermaid wouldn't see what they had done.

School was difficult for the children of these families. School was, of course, in English and many couldn't speak English when they began to attend. Most, however, learned to speak it without an accent. By the time I arrived, my older brothers and sisters were speaking English and my parents understood it so

we became bi-lingual. Our parents spoke to us in Swiss and we answered in English. That was true in most families and didn't seem to cause any problems.

Louise Bieri Schneider

Marion Roth Yates

## VERGENNES AND THE INDIANS

By Dorothy H. Randall

Prior to 1761, before the arrival of the first white man in 1829, the Vergennes area included what are now Lowell, Fallasburg, Vergennes, and Bowne Townships in the Grand River Valley. There were three Indian tribes, kindred in blood, tradition, habits of life and general appearance who migrated from the Ottawa River in Canada to Michigan. They fought three bloody battles along the Grand River with the Prairie Indians. These tribes, known as the “three brothers”, separated. The Chippewa settled in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula. The Potawatomi, south of the Kalamazoo River, while the Ottawa chose the central part of the state. Hence there were probably more than one thousand Ottawa Indians living within the present limits of Kent County in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Ottawa chief who commanded the Flat River Indians was called “Noonday”. Cub-bah-moo-sa, (meaning “the great walker”) the name was shortened to Cobmoosa, at some point in time lived around what is now Murray Lake. He was a sub-chief under Noonday. There were between two and three hundred inhabitants in his village, which was one and a half miles north of the junction of the Flat and Grand Rivers. They raised corn, melons, pumpkins, squash and beans, to which they added the game of the woods and the fish from the streams. They had a burial ground one half mile west on the Ada road. In 1765, a battle was fought thereabout, when the Potawatomi attempted to dislodge the Ottawa.

They lived in villages, often covering several acres in area, surrounded by a stockade of two and even three rows of posts. The stockade was pierced with loopholes, and provided with platforms on which were piles of stones for the defenders to hurl on the heads of their enemies. Sometimes the structures which formed the village were wigwams – rude structures made by driving poles into the ground in a circle, drawing their tops near together and then covering them with

bark skins. Sometimes the dwellings had rudely framed sides and roofs were covered with layers of elm bark. Usually these structures were 15 or 20 feet wide by 100 feet long. At each end was a door. Along each side were ten or twelve stalls, in each of which lived a family, so that one house held 20 or more families. Down the middle at regular intervals were fire pits where the food was cooked, the smoke escaping through holes in the roof.

All families living traced descent from a common female ancestor, and formed a clan. Each clan had its own place name, usually that of some animal, as the wolf, the bear, or the turtle, its own sachem or civil magistrate, and its own war chiefs. They owned all the food and all the property, except weapons and ornaments, in common. A number of such clans made a tribe, which had one language and was governed by a council of the clan sachems. Each tribe had a place name according to where he was established in his clan. These place names would have been invaluable today if records had been preserved. Mrs. Betty Wakefield, one of the persons interviewed for this chapter, stated that Mr. Francis Wakefield, her husband, a full blooded Ottawa Indian, tried very hard to get a grant from the University of Michigan and other sources to study and record these Indian place names as he knew them all in this area but all doors were closed to him. After all, the white man had bought up this land for \$1.25 an acre. They didn't want to talk about it. Francis Wakefield was a United States Government Civil Services Commissioner, his ancestors settled around Egypt Valley area called "Little Egypt".

An interesting note here was, the writer asks how a fair English girl married a full-blooded Indian? The story Betty related was that her father wanted her to get into Civil Service. This was during the depression years and women could more readily get a job in Washington through Civil Service than men. Women worked cheaper and harder than men. Betty had gone in to find out when the next exam took place. Her sister already had a good job in Washington and this was the way to go. Mr. Wakefield apparently took a shine to her and asked her out to

lunch the next day. He asked her what nationality she thought he was? She said, “Japanese” because his eyes were different. He nearly died – but told her he was a full-blooded Ottawa Indian. They married in 1940; the rest is history. Francis Wakefield died in 1971. What a pity we could not have the valuable information at this time that he took with him to the grave.

The Ottawa Indians, in going through the undeveloped land to the Vergennes area would sometimes travel for days without meeting a human being. The truth is that the Indians cannot be said to have occupied the land; they simply possessed it. To them, it was mainly a hunting ground to roam over or a battlefield to fight on if necessary.

Columbus called the natives, Indians; but they called themselves simply “men” or “real men” which they certainly often proved themselves to be. They were a tall, well-made race, with a color usually resembling that of old copper. Their hair was like a horse’s mane, course, black and straight. Their eyes were small, black and deep set. They had high cheekbones and prominent noses.

The women let their hair grow long. The men cut theirs off close to the head, with the exception of a ridge or lock in the middle. That was left as a point of honor. It was called the “scalp-lock”. Its object was to give an adversary, if he could get at it, a fair grip in fight, and also to enable him to pull his enemies scalp off as a trophy of the battle. That lock was the Indian’s flag of defiance. It waved about his head as the colors to over a fort, as if to say, “take me if you can!”

They lived by hunting, fishing and agriculture. Their farming, however, was of the crudest kind. For weapons, they had bows and arrows, hatchets made of flint, and heavy clubs.

The Ottawa Indian believed in a strict division of duties. He did the hunting, fighting and scalping; his wife did the work. They built the wigwam, or hut of bark or skins stretched on poles. In others, they were built of logs rafted down Flat River. She planted and hoed the Indian corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins, ground the corn meal by rubbing it between two stones. She made

deerskin clothes for the family. In summer, they went almost naked. In winter, they wore clothing of skins from fur bearing animals and hides of deer. When they moved, she carried the furniture on her back. Her housekeeping was simple. She kindled a fire on the ground by rubbing two dry sticks rapidly together, and then she roasted the meat on the coals or boiled it in an earthen pot. There was always plenty of smoke and dirt, but none complained. Housecleaning was unknown.

As these Indians were researched, it was found the most ingenious work of the Indians was seen in the moccasin, the snowshoe, and the birch bark canoe. The moccasin was a shoe made of buckskin, durable, soft, pliable and noiseless. It was the best covering for a hunter's foot that human skill ever contrived. The snow shoe was a light frame of wood, covered with a network of strings of hide, and having such a broad surface that the wearer could walk on top of the snow in pursuit of game. Without it, the Indian might have starved in a severe winter, since only by its use could he run down the deer in that season. Later on, the white man was amazed at the rapidity with which the Indian followed the most obscure trail over the most difficult ground, at the perfection with which he imitated the bark of the wolf, the hoot of the owl and the catlike tread with which he walked over beds of autumn leaves to the side of the grazing deer. The birch bark canoe was light, strong and easily propelled, sewn together with thongs of deerskin and smeared at the joints with spruce tree gum. It made the Indian master of the Flat River and streams. He could travel quickly, silently and with little effort. Some of the canoes were made by hollowing out logs.

Politically, these Indians were free. Each tribe had a chief, but the chief had little real power. Councils settled the important matters. The records of these councils were kept in a peculiar manner. He could not write but he could make pictures that would often serve the purpose of writing. It is said, the treaty made by the Indians with William Penn was commemorated by a belt made of "wampum". It was made of white or colored shells strung on strings; after the

coming of Europeans, glass beads were used. But quite independent of any picture, the arrangement of the shells and their colors had a meaning. When a council was held, a belt was made to show what had been done. Every tribe had its “wampum” interpreters. By examination of a belt, they could tell what action had been taken at any public meeting. The shells, and later beads, of these “wampum” strings had another use; they served for money, a certain number of them representing a certain fixed value. For instance, a hundred white beads, or fifty colored ones, would buy a certain quantity of corn. But back in 1761 the Indian rarely needed these shells for this purpose. The forest supplied him and his family with food, clothes and medicine.

Socially, these Indians had little liberty. He was bound by customs handed down from his forefather. He could not marry as he pleased. He could not sit in whatever seat he chose at a council. He could not even paint his face any color he fancied; for a young man who had won no honors in battle would no more have dared to decorate himself like a veteran warrior than a private soldier in the U.S. Army would venture to appear at a parade in the uniform of a major general.

Each clan had a “totem”; the animal or other object represented by the “totem” was held in reverence by the tribe. They believed that they had descended from its spirit, and that it watched over them and protected them. It was used as a mark on gravestones and as a seal. Old deeds of land given by Indians often bear these marks, just as grant of land made now by the U.S. has the government seal on it.

Just a bit of history on the religion and character of these Indians. He usually believed in a Great Spirit – all-powerful, wise and good; but he also believed in many inferior spirits, some good and some evil. Often he worshipped the evil spirits most. He reasoned in this way; the Great Spirit will not hurt me, even if I do not pray to him, for he is good; but if I neglect the evil spirits, they may do me mischief. Beyond this life the Indian looked for another. There the

brave warrior who had taken many scalps would enter the happy hunting grounds; there, demons would flog the coward to never-ending tasks.

It has sometimes been said, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" but judged by his own standard of right and wrong, these Indians were conscientious. They would not steal from their own tribe, they would not lie to their friends, and they did not become a drunkard till the white man taught them. The Indians rarely expressed their feelings in words, but they frequently painted them on their faces. You could tell by his color whether he had heard good news or bad. He sometimes laughed and shouted; he seldom, if ever, wept. From chief hood he was taught to despise pain. Living an outdoor life, and depending for daily food, not so much on the corn they raised, as the fish they caught and the animals they killed, they were expert woodsmen. They were swift of foot, quick witted, keen sighted and most patient of hunger, fatigue and cold.

During the spring of 1806, young Joseph LaFramboise and his courageous wife traveled by canoe from Mackinac and established a trading post one and a half miles west of the present site of Lowell, on the bank of the Grand River. Eventually a cabin was built of logs chinked with clay and bark and was about 30 feet long. In the spring of 1809, the LaFramboises were returning from their winter quarters at Mackinac with their usual retinue of French voyagers and Indians. With dusk coming on, they encamped on the lakeshore midway between the present cities of Muskegon and Grand Haven. That night, Joseph LaFramboise was murdered by a drunken Pottawatomie Indian wanting more "fire water". The Indian was never so happy as when in the dead of night, he could rouse sleeping victims or catch them unaware such as Monsieur LaFramboise as he was kneeling to pray, they gave an unearthly yell, plunged a knife deep in his breast and vanished because the religious LaFramboise would not give him liquor. Sometimes they would massacre them by the light of their burning wigwams. Madame LaFramboise carried on the work at the trading post so efficiently that the Astor Fur Company made her the official agent in place of her deceased

husband. The Indians held her in high esteem. She became wealthy and in 1821, resigned her commission in favor of Rix Robinson of Ada. This man was born in Massachusetts and August 28, 1792, received a legal education, was admitted to the bar and came to the junction of the Thornapple and Grand Rivers in 1821. It took him 26 days in route from Buffalo to Detroit. He built a little cabin home where Ada Village is now and married an Ottawa Indian woman by Indian rites. Afterwards, he succeeded Madame LaFramboise as an Indian trader in 1834. A huge boulder at his home in Ada was erected in 1927 and bears the following inscription; "In Memory of Rix Robinson, born in Massachusetts, 1792, Founder of West Michigan. He died in this house January 1875".

When Europeans first set foot on our shores, they found the country inhabited, and adopting the name given to the men of the New World by Columbus, they called these people "Indians". They were not "Indians" or natives of Asia, but a race by themselves, which ages before the time of Columbus was spread over all North and South America.

In 1829, along came the first white man to settle in the Vergennes area, an 18-year-old Frenchman from Detroit by the name Daniel Marsaque, or Marsac. He was tall, straight, athletic and well liked by the Indians. He made his home with Chief Wobwindego. Marsac came through the wilderness by Indian trails and carried on a fair trade with the Indians until the spring of 1831 when he built a small log cabin trading post on the south bank of the Grand River directly opposite where the Flat River empties into the Grand. There, the Indians would exchange fur pelts, berries and maple sugar for cloth, beads, ammunition and whiskey. Marsac married a beautiful Indian girl, Jenute, according to the ceremonies of the Ottawa Tribe. She was a true and loving wife and had one daughter, Marie. When the child was five years old, Marsac insisted that she be sent to his relatives in Detroit to be educated. This nearly broke Jenute's heart. Nevertheless, the husband took Marie away, but in a short time the child had taken ill and died. When the white settlers began coming into the Grand River Valley, Marsac

became ashamed of his squaw, so he went to Detroit and married a French woman by the name of Collette Beaufait, and brought her back to his trading post. This was too much for Jenute and she died soon after. Obviously, Marsac lost the respect of the local tribe. So he turned his attention to farming. He sold or traded his land on the south side of the Grand River and bought an 80-acre plot on the north side of the river, east of Flat, where he later planted a portion of it and called it Dansville, later known as Lowell.

In the summer of 1831, Lewis Robinson, who emigrated from New York State, came with his family and settled on the bank of the Flat River in the south part of what is now the Village of Lowell. However, at that time, it was known as Vergennes. His brothers, Rodney and Lucas Robinson soon followed, but they traveled up Flat River to the present township of Vergennes. Later, another relative, Philander Tracy and his family arrived and built a high pine log house, 40 feet long and 30 feet wide, with the aid of Indians at a total cost of \$1,000.

By 1836, white settlers were coming to the area. It was hard to imagine the inconveniences, hardships and privations the early settlers had to put up with. Indians were not always friendly and one had always to be on the lookout for bears, wolves and rattle snakes. The air was filled with “vapors” making every settler ill some time or another. Even the dogs shook with the ague. Consequently, Quinine became a household necessity. All supplies had to be brought from Kalamazoo County through a country utterly devoid of roads.

A one-room log schoolhouse was “raised” by the Robinsons in 1838 on the west bank of the Flat River. The building was 18 feet by 26 feet and stood due north and south. Miss Caroline Baird, a relative of the Fallas family at Fallasburg had come from New York on a visit. She was hired by the Robinsons and Philander Tracy to teach in this new one room log school. The salary was not a stated amount, but she was paid so much a scholar for the summer term of three months. If sufficient money could be guaranteed, the teacher was hired for a winter term. Miss Baird boarded around with families who had children in school.

However, she evidently became tired of this and conceived the idea of living in the schoolhouse, boarding herself. Her cooking was done in the fireplace. The only approach to her chamber in the loft was by a ladder, which she drew up for safety upon retiring at night.

It was May 1, 1838. Miss Baird rang a pony bell and nine white and five Indian pupils responded to the call. Some of the teachers who followed Miss Baird at the log school were Marie and Harriett Winslow, Laura Bates, Harriet and Henry Patrick. In October 1839, Miss Baird and Mr. Caleb Page were married in the log schoolhouse. A circuit rider, the Reverend Mr. Richards married the couple.

The lumber for these buildings now going up was transported up Grand River to the mouth of the Flat on a scow. For several years previous to that time, lumber had been rafted down Flat River to Grand Rapids and Grand Haven. At Fallasburg, the Hecox saw mill was built in 1839. That same year, George Dickinson passed through Vergennes with a raft of 30,000 feet of pine lumber bound for Grand Haven. The rafting of cut lumber continued until 1870 at which time the Grand River Booming Company was formed by saw mill owners of Grand Rapids and Grand Haven and that organization brought down the river vast drives of pine logs from the entire northern reaches of the Flat and its tributaries.

The first bridge over Flat River was built at Fallasburgh in 1840, the second in 1844.

A Methodist circuit rider by the name of Frezee followed the Reverend Richards and preached in the one room log schoolhouse. Dr. Arba Richards was the first physician in the Vergennes-Lowell District. His daughter Octavia married the Congregational minister D.L. Eaton.

The Vergennes Methodist Church was built in 1843. As a note of interest, told to the writer by the late Don McPherson, who heard it from his ancestors. One night they were having a church meeting at the new Vergennes Methodist Church and Indians kept peeking in the windows all around the church. Finally,

one brave Indian entered the church rudely interrupting the meeting and in a strong voice said, “name Solchris, me want whiskey”. The outcome is not known.

About 1847, Timothy White of South Boston, rented his farm and moved to the Vergennes area. A stagecoach had started to make the run from Grand Rapids to Portland carrying mostly “land-lookers”. Mr. White saw the need for a place for travelers to put up for the night so he built and managed the first tavern where the Pullen block now stands, just east of City Hall in Lowell, which was the Vergennes area at that time. It was in this same Tim White’s tavern on Monday, April 3, 1848 that the first township meeting was held for the purpose of organizing the settlement of Dansville, heretofore known as Vergennes, and now it was going to be called Lowell. The following 25 voters were present: John C. Chatterdon, Daniel McEwen, George Post, Henry Church, John Monks, Ira A. Danes, Samuel P. Rolf, Porter Rolf, Noah Burch, Jessie Van Deusen, Henry Alden, Harry Wickham, Thomas Wickham, Thomas Camaford, Samuel Johnson, Isaac Fairchilds, J. Francisco, Charles Marsac, Francis Nauta, Cyprian S. Hooker, Stephen Denny and Timothy White. The name for the new-formed township was suggested by Mrs. Timothy White, who had just returned from a visit to Lowell, Massachusetts.

Daniel Marsac sold the remainder of his lands to Abel Avery in 1850 and left Lowell. At this time, on the east side of the Flat River, north of Oakwood Cemetery, there still remained approximately some 500 Ottawa Indians in a small village.

Trading continued with the Indians but conditions were changing. In 1846, Cyprian S. Hooker and family moved from Saranac to Vergennes and bought nine acres of land from Daniel Marsac. Mr. Hooker built the first frame house in the settlement. His son, John S., a sixteen-year old lad, was well schooled in the Ottaway language and customs and acted as interpreter and clerk from Alfred Dwight, who opened the first white man’s store. Young John also worked for Daniel Marsac, trading with the Indians. Since the nearest mill was at Kalamazoo

and it took one week to go there and back by ox team after a supply of flour, the settlers were overjoyed when in 1847, C.S. Hooker built a dam and grist mill on the Flat River across the road from his home. (Note: the grist mill at Fallasburgh was built in 1840.)

Around the late 1700's and early 1800's the Indians were being pushed out of the area, their records destroyed by the French who were coming with their Jesuits acting as agents to the Frenchmen and they acquired territory. They would convince the Indians that they were coming to save souls. While they were bowing their heads in prayer and teaching the Indians to love thy neighbor, the French would steal the land, food, and belongings and set up missions where they could conduct their business of trapping, hunting and taking over the land. This was told to the writer as sort of a joke but actually it shows how ruthless these French were and how determined they were to gain this land. Of course, the English came next and were fast encroaching on French possessions. In 1761, Chief Pontiac, from eastern Michigan visited the Grand River Valley and spoke at a meeting of some 3,000 Indians. He urged them to volunteer to go to Detroit to fight the British. Pontiac was here again in 1762 and 1763 for the same purpose. After the French had established trading posts at Mackinac Island and Detroit, daring fur traders traveled down Lake Michigan and inland by the various rivers that emptied into the lake. The first permanent settlements by Father Marquette at Sault Saint Marie in 1668; St. Ignace in 1669; Detroit was founded as Fort Pontchartrain by Cadillac in 1701 and named Detroit in 1751; this region was ceded to the English in 1763, to the United States in 1783, it was part of the Northwest Territory in 1787, and became a Michigan Territory in 1805. Michigan became a state January 26, 1837.

Vergennes did not become a township until after 1837 as the government began surveying everything and forming townships at that time. Count De'Charles Gravier Vergennes, born in 1717, was a French Statesman and diplomat who strongly favored the American Revolution and concluded the treaty

of alliance with colonies against the English in 1778. He was a French Foreign Minister under Louis XVI of France. France now recognized the independence of the American Colonies and formed an open alliance with them after this clever Foreign Minister persuaded the King that England was about to make peace with the colonies and join with them to seize the French West Indies. (Battle of Saratoga 1777)

This new alliance made it possible for Congress to borrow an immense sum of money from France. French troops were sent to take part in the war and they fought to the end at Yorktown. The French Navy blockaded Cornwallis' forces in Yorktown, thus hastening his surrender. Count Vergennes was also able to induce Spain to make war on England in 1779. He was truly a great diplomat. So great, in fact, Vergennes in Vermont, located near New Haven and Butter Bay off Highway 7, was so named in recognition of the help the Count had given the colonies in their fight for independence.

When Michigan became part of the Northwest Territory in 1787, many New England settlers began moving in. These settlers came from Vermont carrying the name and deeds of Count Vergennes with them. Some came even before 1787. This area of Vergennes was given its name in honor of the masterful Count who had helped so many of his ancestors during the Revolution. Some of his descendents came here from Vermont through Canada into this area.

It bears repeating that Vergennes originally was composed of the area that included the present townships of Vergennes, Lowell, Bowne, Grattan and part of Ada. In 1838, there were not over 19 families. In 1860 it held its greatest population of 1,844. Ten years later this number fell to 1,342. By 1874, the actual population was down to 1,148 but there were enough people in the original area to divide it into the four townships of Vergennes, Grattan, Bowne and Lowell.

When speaking of Vergennes in early times, it must be remembered that its center was Lowell; that its settlers were mainly there or in that part of Vergennes that is contiguous. The two towns lived together as one for a period of ten years.

Vergennes was one of the first towns organized. By an Act of the Legislature in 1838, the four Townships, 5, 6, 7, 8, north, range nine west, Bowne, Lowell, Vergennes, Grattan and part of the present day Ada Townships were established.

The following wish from Count De' Vergennes hung on the wall in the living room of Don McPherson's mother's house for many years. It is a fragment of the past that might interest you as it did the writer. Count Vergennes died in 1787. It's regrettable we have no record of the meeting at which the people chose the name of this famous statesman for our great township of Vergennes.

On this page, there is a copy of a letter written in French on January 13, 1783, interpreted as follows:

I am very flattered, Gentlemen, by the best wishes that you are very kindly offering to me for the New Year. I would like you to know of my deep interest in the prosperity of your town and in your satisfaction in particular and that it would indeed be very pleasant for me to have the opportunity to contribute to it.

I remain, with perfect consideration, Gentlemen, your very humble and obedient servant.

De Vergennes

Hopefully the writer has tried to show the progression of events, with a certain amount of continuity, from the time the Indians came down the bubbling rapids and foraged through the very rough Michigan area. Later the white man, the French and English, slowly cleared and built greedily and deviously acquired land and possessions from the courageous Indians who were becoming extinct or pushed to other parts of the United States.

We owe them such respect, which they didn't enjoy at the time, for blazing the way to our rich present America with all its freedoms, conveniences, technologies, societal developments and education, to the present days in Vergennes Township.

Perhaps discrepancies, which may show up in our collection of facts, will be noted by someone we missed in our interviews and can be correctly stated and more superbly written in the second edition of Vergennes history whenever the need occurs, whether in this generation, or the next. This is a start.

Note: Good sources for referral on how the Indians got here in the first place through the Ice Age, etc... read Vo. 156, No. 3 – September 1979 of the National Geographic, page 330 “The Search for the First Americans”, by Thomas Y. Canby with photographs and paintings by Kerby Smith and Roy Andersen. Also, the epic story of America's little known “Chapter One” in the American Heritage Book of Indians.

## THE SCHOOLS OF VERGENNES TOWNSHIP

By Irma Richmond

Vergennes is bounded on the north by Grattan, on the east by Ionia County, on the west by Ada and on the south by Lowell.

Sylvester Hodges was the first white settler. He was born in Jefferson County, New York. He came to Kent County in 1836 and “took up” 160 acres from the government. He is credited with being the first to plant apple trees in the township and also assisted in building the first house where the city of Lowell now stands.

The township of Vergennes was organized in the year 1838. The first town meeting was held on April 2, 1838. The following officers were chosen: Supervisor, Rodney Robinson; clerk, M. Patrick; assessors, Lewis Robinson, T. J. Daniels and John M. Fox; collector, Porter Ralph; school inspectors, Everett Wilson, Lewis Robinson and George Brown; director of the poor; Everett Wilson and Charles Newton; highway commissioners, Lucas Robinson, Henry Dainer and P.W. Fox; constables, Porter Ralph, A.D. Smith, O.H. Jones, and James S. Fox.

Vergennes had good educational facilities. Its schools were well organized and were supplied with competent teachers. The school buildings were generally good, though not costly. They presented a “tidy appearance”.

Vergennes was originally divided into 13 school districts, each headed by a director, a treasurer and a clerk. These were usually men, although, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some women were also nominated.

The school boards hired the teachers, and were responsible for keeping the school buildings in repair. After 1900, teachers were usually women with third grade certificates earned by attending a six-week course at Normal School.

Teachers taught grades beginner – eighth. They were expected to build the fires, sweep the floors, and keep order among the pupils, some of who were young men in age and often unruly. Reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, spelling,

geography, physiology, orthography and civics were the subjects they were expected to teach.

The number of pupils in these one-room schools varied in numbers from less than a dozen to as many as thirty or more.

Schools began the day after Labor Day and usually closed in May. Some schools observed a week of potato-digging vacation in the fall to permit children to help with the fall harvest of potatoes in their districts. Schools usually ran for nine months although some closed earlier depending on the voted funds for that particular district.

Each school provided a dictionary and most tried to have a number of library books. Parents were expected to provide the necessary textbooks.

The Kent County Superintendent of Schools made periodic visits to these rural one-room schools; Allen Freeland was the earliest one I recall. Others called to mind were Arthur Guenther, George Van Wessep, and Lynn Clark. Lynn Clark taught at Lowell High School for several years before being elected as Kent County Superintendent of Schools.

After 1874 Vergennes was divided into four townships: Grattan, Ada and Lowell being separate townships. This left Vergennes with the following schools: Alton, Bailey, Bennett, Boynton, Fallasburg, Foxes Corners, Moseley, Valley and Waters.

Boynton became a two-room school for a short time before this district was absorbed by the Lowell Area Schools.

Foxes Corner, Bennett and Bailey schoolhouses were razed; Boynton, Alton, Waters and Moseley became family homes; Fallasburg School is the headquarters of the West Central Historical Society, and plans are underway to make it a historical monument. Valley School became a barn.

All these school districts were absorbed by the Lowell Area Schools during the 1940's. Pupils are now transported by bus to the schools in Lowell. Children

from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade are receiving a broader education there though not necessarily a better one.

The one-room schools produced good citizens, as many in Vergennes can assure you. Vergennes is still pretty much a rural area. (Hodges' first apple tree has grown into several large, well-known orchards.) Many former Vergennes teachers still live in this area. Most are retired but still are active in the community.

## A DAY IN FALLASBURG SCHOOL

By Harry Vaughn

The typical school day at Fallasburg School began at 9:00 a.m., after a rain, sleet or snow, mile long hike. Sometimes I was late, but it was usually my goal to get there early, for then I got to ring the school bell. If I rang it hard enough, it would tip over and my teacher, either Irma Richmond, Dorothy Vanderbrock or Bernice Burns would make me climb the belfry, thus delaying school, to right the bell.

The one-room schoolhouse had wood desks for about 25 students in eight grades, a large wooden desk for the teacher at the front of the room, alongside which there was a bench where we students would recite our previous day's lessons and receive new ones. The teacher would usually say, eighth grade spelling, stand and pass, and all the students in that grade would go to the bench, recite their words and then go back to their seats. Then she would call seventh grade and on down to the first grade.

Other fixtures in the room were a round oak wood stove, a large pendulum clock, the standard picture of George Washington and a large crockery water container, which had to be filled from the well outside the building. The task of refilling this crock was also a favorite of mine since it gave me a little time away from the watchful eye of the teacher.

Lunch and recesses would be filled with games like Anti-I-over. Sides were chosen and went to either side of the schoolhouse. A ball was thrown over the roof and whoever caught it would run to the other side and try to hit a member from the other team. If successful, that person would join the other side. We played until one side was wiped out. Other games were Fox and Geese, softball and snowball fights.

The Christmas play was a big event for the school. We all decorated a tree, which the older boys cut down and a stage was built from lumber, which was

hauled across the frozen Flat River from Dave Garfield's. Each student in the play always had at least one thing to do, usually to sing a song or recite a poem for the other students and their parents who came to the performance.

All the fun at the Fallasburg School of the early 1930's was home made, but the education was at least as good as anything available today.

## VERGENNES UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

By Donald A. McPherson

Historically, the beginning of the church meetings was in the spring of 1843. The first meetings were held in the log house of Anthony Yerkes with a Reverend Bush preaching the first sermon. The first quarterly conference was held in the new Yerkes log barn. The first members of the church were the Yerkes, Charles Collar, Joseph Wright, Mrs. Amos Hodges, Mrs. Anna Van Deusen, and Ebenezer Smith. Shortly, the Yerkes (Bennett) school was completed and services were held here for a time. The Circuit for the church consisted of Grand Rapids, Plainfield, Boston, Cortland and Otisco. The new members in 1844 were the Smith Baileys, Mrs. Collar, the Burtis Hoags, the Wells, the Gilberts and Mrs. Krum.

Next, church was held in the new log schoolhouse or on the Smith Bailey farm. The location is still marked by a pine tree near the front of the new Van Spronsen homes. Here many more became affiliated in 1845 with the names of Kerr, McPherson, McLean, Artemas Hoag, Soules, Hiler, more Krums, Collar, Odell, Westbrooks, Fairchild, Knapp, Anderson, Fullington, Fuller and Crakes taking a place on the rolls. The Lyons were also added at this time.

Again, class meetings were held in the new frame Yerkes School and then back to the new frame Bailey School. Here meetings were held until the new church was built on land donated by the Smith Baileys in 1864, hence comes the early day designation as the Bailey Church but it was officially listed in the First Methodist Church of Vergennes.

Much activity revolved around the church for years with names like Mrs. Edward Bennett (Mary Yerkes), Mrs. Merriman, Mrs. Peter McPherson, Mrs. Blanding, and countless others making their appearance.

During these years the church was in a Circuit with Keene and Fallasburg with the parsonage at Fallasburg. During the pastorate of James Westbrook (a

Vergennes Church Boy) the parsonage burned and shortly our church became one with Lowell in the Lowell Vergennes Charge. This charge lasted until 1961 and enjoyed a very pleasant alliance with Lowell. We received some very excellent pastors, and the Lowell church attained a status in the church rating, much higher than the size of Lowell warranted. Lately, we have either been a church by ourselves or with the Snow Church as the Vergennes Snow Charge or with Trinity.

The years accordingly have come and gone. We have been graced by many distinguished and able Pastors and District Superintendents. We have been especially blessed by Drs. Keith Avery, Carlos Page and Bob Smith, who, with the support of Bishop Loder and the cooperative Trinity Church, we have accomplished much. Today we are proud of our church addition and happily give Reverend Phil Carpenter the credit for producing such a friendly, hard working and truly Christian group.

Donald A. McPherson

## POLITICAL HISTORY OF VERGENNES TOWNSHIP

By Melville Peter McPherson

I have been asked to write a brief history of the township. I know this history largely through conversations with my father, Donald, who both lived the history of the township and learned from my grandfather, Melville, and my great grandfather, Peter. My father would have been able to provide the full detail. Unfortunately, he died a few months ago and I can only give the history in large part by recounting activities of my family. Of course, this is an incomplete story but will provide a flavor.

My great, great grandfather came to the community with his relatives in 1840. About that time, the township was organized as a political entity and by the end of that decade there clearly was an active political system with vigorous contests for local township offices. I suspect the family, school, church and community relationships probably dominated political allegiances. More research is necessary to determine what, if any, role the national and state parties had in township election. We have records of elections and vote tallies as early as 1848 but as yet I have not been able to find party affiliations for those candidates for local offices.

The line drawing events came as the Civil War approached and occurred. The Republican Party was formed in the late 1850's and I believe that Republican Protestant supervisors were elected by the end of the decade. The Irish Catholic community in the township, with its spiritual center in Parnell, was strongly against the war. This was true of many Irish Catholics throughout the country, e.g., there were draft riots in New York with several people killed. Many people saw the Civil War as a battle to protect Protestant establishment business interests in which they had little at stake. The township's supervisors throughout Michigan had the responsibility of registering young men for the draft and so the war became very much of a local issue. The Irish Catholics did not want to be

registered but, nevertheless, the township supervisor did indeed register them. As a result, the political lines in the township were drawn for the next few decades. The Protestants were generally Republicans and the Irish Catholics were generally Democrats. I should note that the Civil War had the same type of political polarization in much of the rest of the country. Political commentator Kevin Phillips, in books and columns over the last 15 years, has done an excellent job in detailing how the Civil War had a more or less permanent impact on how states and local communities have split politically.

In any case, I was told that the Catholic Democrats tended to control the township for the decades after the Civil War. There were some close and tough political battles. For example, in 1894 Democrat Fred Hodges defeated Republican Peter McPherson (my great grandfather) by 105 to 101 votes. The full Democratic slate carried with names like McGee, Quillin, Cary and Denny. See attached sample ballot from that election. Great grandfather was convinced that “the vote count was not right” but nevertheless two years later Fred Hodges and his slate defeated the Republicans even more decisively.

Through these years great grandfather Peter, despite his public office defeats in the township, became a very prominent Republican in western Michigan. He was a delegate to the Republican Convention that nominated William McKinley for President in 1896 and worked closely with Mark Hanna that year. Mark Hanna was probably the last national political boss of the Republican Party and the man who put together the McKinley nomination.

In the early years of the new century, Republicans began to have more victories in the township. I believe that my grandfather Melville was a prominent part of putting this together. His first real important political battle was in 1912 and involved Republican Party politics. That was the year that President Taft, the incumbent, was seeking re-nomination for the Presidency by his Republican Party, and ex-President Teddy Roosevelt sought a comeback. Roosevelt had selected Taft to be his successor but had become unhappy with Taft’s un-aggressive style

of leadership. Grandfather Melville, then a young farmer, was a delegate to the Kent County Republican Convention from Vergennes and he was the chief organizer for Roosevelt. He put together a number of other farm townships and succeeded in beating the Taft forces whose power was in the Grand Rapids business community. Later Taft beat Roosevelt for the nomination after a very bitter national Republican Convention. After that defeat Roosevelt formed the Bullmoose Party and ran for President. Melville ran on that ticket for state representative and lost.

In the years that followed, Melville became the dominant political force in the township, probably until his death in 1944. He first became township treasurer, then township supervisor and the chairman of the tax committee of the county board of supervisors. Upon his appointment to the state tax commission in the 1920's, his wife Nellie became the township supervisor. Later she became the chairman of the Kent County Board of Supervisors. As such, she was the first woman Chairman of the Board of Supervisors in the State.

Republicans generally continued to control the township in the decades that followed grandfather's death in 1944. Many fine and good men and women served in this period. Space does not allow me to go into the detail of this recent history. In any case, it is of course much better known than that of earlier times.

Preparing this brief article has stimulated my interest once more and I look forward to reviewing old township records and talking with people who have lived this history. Roger Odell, my brother Bill and I expect to explore this whole topic more thoroughly in the time ahead.

(The next three pages contain a copy of the ballot mentioned earlier in this article, as well as a copy of the by-laws of the Vergennes Detective Association.

## EARLY AGRICULTURE OF VERGENNES TOWNSHIP

By Marsha Wilcox

There are a few life-long farming residents of Vergennes Township who are still actively engaged in agriculture. Frank Ryder is one of them. His great grandfather, Morgan Lyons, took up the land from the government. He began farming in a natural clearing created by beavers damming up the creek on a neighboring property. Then he just cleared land around that every year. He built a log cabin and granaries and grew wheat. When the Civil War came, wheat was worth about 50 cents a bushel, so he just saved several years of crop of wheat in his granaries. When he sold it after three or four years, it had gone to \$3 and he profited several thousand dollars.

Frank Ryder remembers that most farms were a couple hundred acres in size, but one farmer, Melville McPherson, owned 1200 acres all in the township. Frank's father had his grain ground at a mill across from Alton Church. It had a stone mill, and he much preferred the stone-ground grain to the roller-milled grain from the mill in Lowell. When the railroad came through, it "put Lowell on the map."

The Ryder family often butchered 10 or 12 hogs at once, hanging them on a pole and working at getting them ready for an entire day. They then sold them in Grand Rapids, hauling them there in a horse-drawn wagon. This was usually done in the winter so the meat would not spoil. However, Frank remembers one year when the hogs were ready in August. He couldn't sell them in Grand Rapids because of the heat, so he put them on a train to Detroit and the market for hogs went up substantially that day. He made a good profit on that transaction. Breeds of hogs raised at that time were Chester Whites, Durocs and Poland Chinas. The sows often had huge litters of 15 to 20 piglets, but some invariably died.

The Ryders never sold milk from their farm, although they always had dairy cows. They sold cream and butterfat for 15 cents a pound. Frank

remembers that eggs were 9 cents a dozen at one time. When asked what breed of cows he had, Frank said, “just cows”. He said times were always hard and sometimes he didn’t know whether or not to “keep a goin’”. One very dry year, he had 20 acres of navy beans. He started to disc them up but decided to pull them instead. He paid \$10 to get them thrashed, and there was only \$12.50 worth of beans on the whole field.

There was a one-room schoolhouse on Bailey Drive, about one-half mile east of Parnell Road on the south side, called Bailey School. It was the only school Frank Ryder ever attended. It went to the eighth grade. The school and land were leased from the Collar family. There was a little fence around the schoolyard. When it ceased being used for a school, the property reverted back to the Collar family.

Self-sufficiency was the outstanding characteristic of early Vergennes township farms. Every farmstead had cows, chickens, pigs and horses. Crops were grown to feed the family and livestock and the extras were sold for cash. All fieldwork was done by hand or horse drawn equipment and there was no electricity. About \$1 worth of kerosene would last all winter.

Crops were very diversified. Potatoes and navy beans were the main cash crops. These were grown in rotation with corn, wheat, oats, speltz, barley and clover-timothy hay. Adelbert Odell remembers how corn was grown. His father had a one-horse walking plow. About one acre a day could be plowed this way. Some neighbors had riding plows. The field was then dragged with a three-horse, three-section drag. Ten acres or less could be worked in a day. A horse-drawn marker was used to make rows both ways across a field. It was called check rowing. The seed corn, saved from the previous year, was then planted in hills (more than one kernel in one spot), with a hand planter. Several people would be working in the field at once. The rows were then cultivated both ways to control weeds. To harvest the crop, a corn knife was used to cut the stalks, which were then stacked into bundles called shocks.

Those were husked by hand in the field before cold weather set in. The leftover stalks were tied up and hauled back to the barns to be used as livestock fodder. Wheat was cut with a scythe, bundled and threshed with a stationary threshing machine. The scythe was also used to cut big weeds around the farmyard because no one mowed the lawns. Odells said that with big farm families, no one needed their yard mowed.

Cattle and horses were pastured during spring, summer and fall months. For additional winter feed, hay was cut with a scythe and raked with a dump rake. They put the hay in piles called haystacks. Those were then loaded onto wagons, hauled to the main barn and lifted up into the mows with a hayfork. The hayfork was on a track which ran along the inside peak of the barn. Hay was lifted on the fork by a horse and rope over a pulley.

Winton Wilcox remembers his father, Reuben, growing the first alfalfa in Kent County. As a small boy of eight or ten, Winton summer-fallowed the field to prepare it for the new crop. He was too small to fasten the harness tugs up on the horse's harness, so he drove the animal to and from the field with the rugs dragging on the ground. To inoculate the field with nitrogen-fixing bacteria necessary for alfalfa to survive, bushel baskets of soil were brought in from an established alfalfa field in Ionia County and spread by hand over the field. It turned out to be a beautiful stand of alfalfa and he remembers people from all over the county coming to look and take pictures of the field.

No commercial fertilizer was ever used on crops. Manure was spread on fields with horse-drawn, wheel-driven spreaders. Lime was spread the same way and was hauled from marl pits located on neighboring farms around the township.

Much more could be gathered and written about the early farmers of the township. They were hard-working people. Their homes were not fancy as were the homes in surrounding towns. They only went into those towns a few times a month, and the children never went to a town unless they needed new shoes. But

from those industrious settlers came the lovely rural flavor of our township and the prosperous agriculture we see today.

## PEOPLE AND HOMES AND WHEN IT BEGAN

By William Schreur

First stage of human life: The earliest stage began with the appearance of the first wandering human beings, presumed to have been the same sort of nomads who followed the grazing herds of prehistoric animals as they passed to and fro through the entire North American Continent. This region in which we have found artifacts that reflect or are associated with cultures which of centuries past and way of life prior to the period when Columbus discovered America.

Results of archaeological study of this part of North America in this region, illustrate the nature of such prehistory sequence of cultures. Broadly speaking, there were five culture stages in this one area. Each stage had its typical ways of living and each stage showed advancement in complexity and variety of the adjuncts of living.

Second Stage: called the “Archaic” stage seems to have begun about 8000 B.C. and to have continued until about 1000 B.C. It was a period when the men were beginning to wander less and multiply more, although they continued to be simple hunters and gatherers of food.

Third Stage: called “Woodland” was somewhat complicated in this stage. The Indians had learned agriculture, which induced them to adopt a sedentary life. They lived in permanent villages, cultivated foodstuffs and tobacco, learned to make pottery, developed the practice of building mounds over the graves of their dead and hence were known to pioneer anthropologists and remembered as the “Mound Builders”. The Indians were notable for their fine craftsmanship and artistic skills, evidence in the artifacts with their dead, or what they otherwise left behind.

Fourth Stage: called the “Late Woodland” stage lasted from about A.D. 400 to A.D. 1000 and was less localized than the three previous stages, where

there was continuous contact, much travel and imitation of neighbors and discoveries of ways and changes of form in artifacts and in living itself.

Fifth Stage: called the “Fort Ancient” culture was the stage that saw the beginning of adoption and adaptation of white men’s artifacts and customs. It began about A.D. 1000 and its somewhat violent breakup is set at about 1825 to 1835. Since then the culture in the region and this local area has been that of the conquering Europeans, progressing from the pioneer stage with its log cabins and muzzle loading rifles.

This part of Vergennes township history is quite like what could be written in similar sketches of successive ways of life in other areas of North America.

In our woodlands and this local area, the Indian life was wasted away and they were driven out, or were pushed around with little interest taken in their cultural patterns until it was too late to record much about them. The area of this time was dominated by the Chippewa and Ottawa Indians. Their only tools for survival were made of chipped flint or similar stone, for such purposes as agricultural, hunting, building of their simple structures which we now refer to as a tent, wigwam or teepee. These were the first types of homes Indians made from animal skins and birch bark. The tools of that time we now know as the banner stone, bird stone, the stone axe, tomahawk, belt axe, Indian arrowheads, spearheads, stone drills and stone chisels. Fleshing stones, stone splitting axe, poison war points, these were used for the purpose of hunting and fishing, and for battles among their tribes and the white man, and served as their only tools for canoe building.

The early 1800’s saw a new birth to civilization. The beginning of the white man in this locality brought the log cabin. Housing of this sort came to serve for the latter few days of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians as well as the white settlers, as small settlements appeared in this locale.

This early period of the 1800’s, settlers were busy cutting trees, gathering them to clearings and chinking together the logs to build these early homes, the

log cabin. This period marked the beginning of this type of housing. From the 1800's to 1984, log houses are home to more than a million Americans.

The most widely used tool for log cabin construction of this period was the broad axe.

In the middle 1800's, the steam engine became the source of power for lumbering; thus the log cabin soon became almost obsolete and housing required the standard sized materials for all framing demands for home building as studding, floor joists, timbers, ceiling joists, rafters, siding, roofing boards, etc.

In the middle 1800's, homes were built with lumber cut from the local properties as government land grants became numerous. During these early days of 1850 to 1875 the original inhabitants of this area, the Ottawa and the Chippewa Indians were gradually being forced out of the area with the increasing stream of immigrants from Europe.

The log cabins of early 1800's soon were being replaced or added to with the more modern method of cut lumber. The rough sawed lumber for farming was producing new homes throughout the township. The era of the broad axe for building the log cabins of that day had now become obsolete.

Virgin pine timber was a great source for home building in the later 1800's. Quality materials of that day can be of great pride to the homeowners of Vergennes Township that have preserved these structures of that era. We now refer to them as the Centennial Homes in Vergennes Township. Some are still preserved in full and maintained to their complete framing and architectural form of 100 years or more ago. Many have had major remodeling and renovation. The most necessary was the poorly constructed basement, referred to then as the Michigan cellar. They were built with gathered up fieldstone off the local farms and a crude masonry wall. The foundations were so poorly built that only a few of the homes of the 1800's did survive over time.

Fallasburg is the township's most concentrated area of Centennial homes and earlier development. Housing appears now throughout the township, though

Vergennes has not seen near the residential growth as the other townships in Kent County. The largest residential growth concentrated in the southeast portion of Vergennes Township, known to the local community as Schreurville, is being built and developed by William Schreur of Vergennes Township. This area with desirable accessibility to the Lowell community tends to show moderate growth to this period of 1984.

## THE CEMETERIES OF THE TOWNSHIP

By Claude Booth

These are the cemeteries in Vergennes Township:

Alton

Althaus

Bailey

Blanding

Fallasburg

Foxes Corners

The Fallasburg Cemetery has a big monument that took two teams of horses to pull it up to the cemetery. All of the cemeteries are kept up very good. There is a catholic cemetery at Foxes Corners also. I have no knowledge as to how old these cemeteries are.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF FOX'S MILL

By Priscilla Lussmyer

My parents, George and Dana Johnson, moved from Grand Rapids to the Flat River Valley, the western half of Section 26 in Vergennes Township, on what is now known as Burroughs Street, in 1939. They bought the 80-acre parcel in 1933 from Dexter Look of Lowell, who then was dying of cancer. I was only six, but I remember their working out the details of the purchase included three fourth's mile of river frontage and a decaying house situated in a beautiful valley. My mother had fallen in love with the property at first sight.

The house, obviously once a rather nice one, stood directly in front of the "mill pond", protected from floods by a high bank and further slope upward to the front door. The present stone house stands on its site. As we cleared brush and had fields again cultivated for gardens and hay, we discovered that other houses had once stood in the valley; small ones marked by outlines of foundations and pottery shards. I still have a saltshaker recovered intact. We also knew that a mill had once stood at the millpond; huge rotting timbers lay in the water and two even projected a few feet in the air at a slant. As we swam in the deep water and waded the shallows, we also discovered rock formations, and, in the mill pond, we brought up kerosene lanterns from sadirons, and most exciting, a millstone much like the one that stands in front of the former King Milling offices on Main Street in Lowell.

Therefore, we could deduce that this had once been a settlement built around a mill; it remained to flesh in the details, and my mother set about doing so. As we became acquainted with the neighbors around, we found the Algers, Ed and his daughter Ina, were lifelong residents. They lived in the house now owned by Walt and Betsy Stevens on Burroughs Street. Ed was already elder and he loved to tell about his early days on the river. With the passage of time and many

of his listeners, much of that history has unfortunately been lost; I can relate a small part that I remember.

There was a mill, a three-story lumber and gristmill in the valley during roughly the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course there was a dam and spillway. The present owner of the property, Tom Meines, dug up two of the huge gear wheels that helped change waterpower to grinding and sawing power. Mother acquired the information that the grinding stone we had pulled out into the bank was fashioned from rock ballast from ships from France (how did it get this far inland?); the stones were chipped until they could be made to fit together, then an iron band was fitted around the outside. Perhaps our Michigan glacial stones were not the right type and uniformity required for grinding. Ed Alger had been a tall and muscular young man and he told us of swimming the mill race (and living to tell about it!) and other adventures.

The house directly to the west of the mill was the main house; we finally tore it down in about 1936, preparatory to building the new one. True to the depression times, we used as much of the old as was practical, thus, the present stone house incorporated a full stone-walled basement and part of the outside stone facing, all from the old basement, which was a full five feet wide at the bottom. This amazing mass of rock tapering on the earth side to a mere foot wide at the top; all the wood lath in the “new” house comes from the old, some pieces being over 20 feet long. I do not remember whether any of the old lumber or square nails were in good enough condition to be reused.

There were indeed other houses in the valley; apparently the main one (I am not sure of this) was the Fox house. I remember even now the locations of four of the houses, two stand side by side a little to the northeast (facing south) of the big house, one little to the southeast, and one near the road about halfway up the hill. On the hill to the west, which still had a few trees on it when we moved there, had stood vineyards, from which tons of grapes were harvested in good years. In the

valley, no doubt, had been gardens. An apple orchard has been planted recently enough to have still-healthy full-grown trees for our use.

What happened to this thriving little settlement of Fox's Mill? Fire. On a windy day, probably in the 1880's, the mill somehow caught fire. When one thinks of a wooden mill, with sawdust, lumber, grain dust, combined with kerosene lanterns, it seems all but inevitable. The mill burned out of control, collapsing into the river and millpond where the old timbers were visible for years; and the wind carried sparks and firebrands which set the other houses in the valley on fire; so I recall Mr. Alger's words. The big house, closest to the fire, was saved by pouring water on the roof.

Note: Ed Alger was the engineer in charge when the historic iron and plank bridge across the Flat on Burroughs Road was built. Except for the planks being replaced, the bridge still stands. The nameplate bearing his name should still be visible.

## FALLASBURG POWER PLANT AND ANTON KALLINGER

By Irma Kallinger Holmes (Mrs. Richard B. Holmes)

Trying to remember back to the early 1900's has been a truly mind-searching experience, but rewarding. It brought back many memories of my growing up years, our family and especially my father, Anton Kallinger, who came to the United States in 1892 to learn the newest ideas about hydroelectric power at the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri.

He hitchhiked on to Lowell, Michigan after the Fair to see a friend who had come to the States years before. A few days after his arrival he watched two men working on a light pole on Lowell's Main Street, trying to make some repairs. The men had worked for two days and still hadn't been able to solve the problem. My father, who couldn't speak a word of English, told someone who was watching that he could fix it and the word was passed on. He took the challenge and made the repairs in a short time. A few days later, Father was contacted and asked to work for the Power Company. From that time on, he worked with some power company until his retirement.

The plant known as Muskegon Electric was about a mile north of Lowell, on Flat River where an earthen and wooden dam had been built. The water above it was impounded to make a large lake that covered many acres of low land between Plant #1 and Plant #2, now known as the Fallasburg Plant.

My father was given time off to make a trip back to Austria in 1902, while the present plant was under construction. This was a big job, and all the dirt was moved by horse drawn equipment and men with picks and shovels. The plant sent its first electricity to Grand Rapids in 1904. At that time, this was one of the longest transmission lines in Michigan.

The #1 Plant was shut down following a heavy spring rain that caused an early thaw of snow and ice. The resulting ice-jam against the dam wall released

all the backed up water in the lake and the river returned to its original bed where it still is today flowing from the present Plant.

The lake above Plant #1 was a popular recreation area for young people and families who came out from Lowell to go fishing, canoeing, swimming in summertime, and in winter, ice skating and ice-boat sailing. Also, the lake in winter provided ice that Mr. Collier cut and stored in a large icehouse on the bank. In the summer, he delivered ice to the residents of Lowell.

When my father came back from Austria, he brought with him a large package of “silver poplar” tree seeds. He learned while abroad that these trees grew quickly and had a wide deep root system. They were planted in Europe to prevent erosion on hills, roadsides and along streams. He planted all the seeds and they proved to be a real conservation measure on the sides of hills and slopes around the Plant, in the early days.

In the fall before the snow fell, my father took our car to the Plant and stored it inside, taking off the wheels and jacking it up on blocks. This kept the car from freezing and ready to go in the spring. No one ever dreamed of driving a car once the weather got to freezing and snow was on the ground.

My father married Rosetta Wittenbach of Alton, Michigan in 1899. The Wittenbach family came from Bern, Switzerland in 1888 and settled in Alton. Many of their descendants still live in the area.

Until his retirement in 1937, my father worked for Consumer’s Power Company. In the early 1940’s, Plant #2 was made fully automatic and was checked by an engineer from Consumer’s Power Company in Grand Rapids only two or three times a week. After a few more years the Plant was completely phased out.

I moved to Donna, Texas in 1928 and now I live in Weslaco, Texas. Though I left Lowell in 1918, I visit my hometown are whenever I get back to Michigan and have many fond memories of my childhood and growing up around Plants #1 and #2, and of the lake.

My brother, Imbert Kallinger, lives in Grand Ledge, Michigan. My sister, Agnes Kallinger Casten, passed away in 1970.