

CHAPTER VI

Settlement of the Houlton road and its early settlers: Gowen Wilson, first settler in 1839; story of Mrs. Elmira Day; first school; first teacher; first burial in Fairmount Cemetery.

The earliest settlement on the Houlton road was the family of Gowen Wilson in the spring of 1839. This is so well established by general admission and by the authority of one living today that it needs no further confirmation, for a daughter is living today who has survived all the years between now and then or between the years of 1839 when the family came to the wilderness valley of the Aroostook and brought her with them on this trying journey and started out on their long and eventful trip if not less than 240 miles with no road from Houlton to what is now Presque Isle, by way of Woodstock, N. B., then up the St. John River, coming over to the Aroostook which they followed up to their permit of settlement near the Presque Isle Stream.

What a gloomy and forboding outlook it must have been for a mother with a family of little children starting out on such a long trip facing danger and difficulties of pioneers in a new country when they had reached their destination. This journey was by and thru a vast forest or vast wilderness with no road a part of the way.

From Houlton to Woodstock it must have been accomplished by a fairly easy, though a slow trip, but up the St. John along its banks they made slow and difficult progress, and from the St. John up the Aroostook it was still more difficult and tedious. And at the end of their journey only a log cabin with no roads, no neighbors, and only a little clearing in the dense forest. Do you wonder that the wife and mother as she drew her children around her, as the shadows of a November evening with its chill and dismal prospects, that she turned back to her Newport home and friends in thoughts, while her tears fell ... ? But when morning came and daylight dawned, they pressed on until they reached the log settlements on the shores of the Aroostook. There they found friends, shelter, and encouragement by the few settlers who welcomed the newcomers with outstretched arms of helpfulness and gladness.

This journey was made with a single and a double team with household belongings and perhaps a cow following behind. This was in the fall of 1838, the year before the Bloodless Aroostook War of 1839, "the road birth of Aroostook when General Winfield Scott came to Augusta."

They spent their first winter in Aroostook on the east side of the river in a house with one of the settlers until the spring when they moved to their log cabin house in the clearing near a nice spring of water on what has since become the old Wilson farm, until the present time for the farm is now the property of a son, Charles Wilson.

The story of Mrs. Day as she remembers it while attending the first camp meeting ... Ross Schoolhouse on the Center Line Road and of attending meetings held in this house which was for a long time noted as a place of religious meetings, town meetings, circuses and public meetings. She remembers when there were but three houses in the village, these being the homes of Fairbanks, Reed, and Packard; that they called the first settlers refugees; that her sister Julia Ann Wilson was the first child born in Presque Isle and that two of her brothers died in the army of the rebellion; and that the old stage coach gave way to the Bangor & Aroostook and the Aroostook Valley Railroads.

MRS. DAY'S STORY

Mrs. Almira Day of Presque Isle, now eighty-one years of age, had been so kind as to relate to me the personal experiences of herself and her folks, from 1838 when they made their trip from Newport, Maine to Aroostook, to the present time. I shall place particular emphasis upon those earlier years which mark the time of the Aroostook Bloodless War, at the same time, giving a fair account of the many facts with which Mrs. Day furnished me.

In November of 1838, Mrs. Day's father, Gowen Wilson, his wife and family set out from their Penobscot County home in Newport where they enjoyed every privilege and comfort, to undertake a trip of 240 miles through a country which offered no railroads, no passable roads of any kind for part of the way, and no roads whatsoever from Houlton to what is now Presque Isle.

What a tremendous undertaking such a trip must have been in those days! What careful thought and planning it must have entailed to prepare sufficient food, drink, clothing, material for impromptu shelter, and to be efficiently prepared to sever all connections with the outside world for an indefinite period, cannot possibly be imagined by our present day people! What an outlook it must have been for those of the Wilson family who were old enough to realize and to forecast what the future might bring!

Suffice it to say that they successfully reached the northeast side of the Aroostook River, where they spent their first winter with a family by the name of Johnson. In the spring they crossed the Aroostook River on ice, and had no sooner gained the shore than they saw the ice begin to go out. They took up a temporary abode in a log cabin, conveniently and necessarily built near a spring of sparkling cool water, and some sixty rods back from the present Houlton Road, a spot which Mr. Wilson had selected for their permanent home; thus, the founding of the Wilson homestead, occupied solely today by his son Charles Wilson and family.

The next settlers were John Annis, whose wife was the daughter of Ephraim Clark, and Benjamin Annis, a blacksmith, who built a shop a few miles below on the Houlton Road. It is claimed that this shop became the first schoolhouse in Presque Isle, although Mrs.

Day did not attend this schoolhouse, she said: "The first school I attended was in a log house of two rooms, situated on the Houlton road; the second, a school in the Fairbanks' grist mill, taught by a Miss Todd who later married Joseph Hall (afterward editor of the Star Herald); my third was taught by a Miss Levering who is today Mrs. George H. Freeman, so well known as one of Presque Isle's most intelligent and useful women. Although Henry Wilson, later a prominent citizen of Mars Hill, claimed to be the first teacher in Presque Isle, this claim has never been verified."

These first settlers were quickly followed by Mr. Main and Mr. Bickford of Newport, and the Messers. Rose, Doe, and Wade. Mr. Doe married Mr. Wade's daughter. Then came Benjamin Whidden, father of George F. Whidden who now lives in Presque Isle.

The Whitcomb family and a Mr. Greenwood came from Moscow, Me. They made the Cook farm, now known as the Bean and Allen farm. Mr. Whitcomb's daughter married Mr. Greenwood, and their son, S. B. Greenwood is now a citizen of Presque Isle. The Whitcomb family moved to Easton where they became known as one of the most influential, loyal, and progressive families of Aroostook. Two of Mr. Whitcomb's sons, Albert and Emmons, survived service in the Civil War.

Mrs. Day remembers perfectly having attended the first camp meeting on the Center Line road near the Rackliffe or Goss schoolhouse. She also remembers that this schoolhouse was used for town meetings, religious services, caucuses, and other public gatherings.

As has already been shown, Mrs. Day's father was the third settler in Letter F, (the county was then divided into lettered districts), now Presque Isle, and her sister Julia Ann Wilson was the first child born in Presque Isle. Two of her brothers died in the Civil War, and the mother received a pension of \$2600.00 as a debt of gratitude for her loyal sacrifice.

As one of the earliest settlers now living, Mrs. Day, now in her 81st year, certainly has a remarkable life to look back upon. To few women is given the opportunity to experience such wonderful changes and progression as the world had made in the last three quarters of a century. Never can we of the present generation realize the true meaning of what the settlers of all our towns and cities had to cope with, but we shall always regard them with awe and respect, and a heart full of loving gratitude.

FIRST SCHOOL IN LOG SCHOOLHOUSE

ON THE HOULTON ROAD

The first school in Presque Isle, then Letter F, was in 1841. It was in a log cabin on the Houlton road. Hon. George F. Whidden is our authority for this fact. We consider him a most reliable authority because there is reasonable question as to its certainty,

for the following reasons:

First, he was here at the time; then he saw, heard and knew of what was going on in the little hamlet and settlement to which he had come with his father, Benjamin Whidden just a little before. He was a bright boy of 12 years of age, a good scholar for those days, with a retentive memory, with a keen sense of observation, a great reader, and very thoughtful about the few and new events which were taking place. This being an event of much interest to the settlers, it was easy for him to remember all the details and facts. Then, judging from his habits of life throughout later years there cannot be much doubt but that he kept a record of passing events... as his writings show.

For these reasons and many others, we are pleased that in him we have such a source of information. So reliable, and so accurate, that his opinions and statements are so universally credited.

The building was in a chopping burned a little while before. It was about 20 rods south of the Hugh Jameson farm, and near where the road crosses from the Houlton Road to the Center Line Road.

We will here let Mr. Whidden tell his own story as he relates it:

"The teacher was Miss Amy Doe from Personfield, Maine. The cabin was built and occupied by Benjamin Annis as a blacksmith shop.

"The chopping, shop and all, was bought for \$100 the spring before. Mr. Doe had five acres of wheat on it that season. He offered the cabin for a school room, and the teacher for three months for \$12 per month, and board herself.

"The neighbors accepted his proposal. They laid a single board floor, hung a door, built a stone fireplace, and cut a chimney; they put in three windows, and seats around the walls with rough boards, board desks, with legs bored in for holes, with stakes driven in to hold them up. All the expense was paid by subscription voluntarily contributed.

"As well as I can remember," says Mr. Whidden, "about thirty pupils attended. Two came from Fort Fairfield; their names were Albion Whitney and John Johnson, well-mannered boys of 16 or 17 years of age.

"The condition of their admittance was that they would build the fires. They slept in the chamber, cooked in the school room. The wood was hauled by the neighbors and so were backlogs from the rear of the chopping.

"It was really an advantage to all as the room was always warm, and they were advanced scholars, and always ready to help the others.

"The school books were of all kinds of geographies, two kinds of arithmetics, two kinds of grammars, and anything for readers, English and American.

"I read alone the History of the United States. The declamations we had were: The Columbian Orator, the speech of the robber to Alexander; Bruce's address at Banneckburn; Warren at Bunker Hill; and Mark Anthony Caesar's funeral were the declamations by the boys. The girls wrote essays and read them. This school was the attraction of the winter in the woods. The teacher was a fine scholar, and very proud of her school."

THE FIRST CEMETERY

When the first cemetery in town was selected, if a star had guided them as did the Star of Bethlehem the wise men, no better choice could have been made of a location in all the wilderness surrounding.

It was in a high elevation sloping toward the setting sun and closing day, a fitting emblem of the ending life. Just high enough to be dry, and just far enough from the young and coming village; also to accommodate the wants in all sections of the rapidly increasing plantation or village.

The exact date of the location of this early burying ground is unknown so it is impossible to fix an exact date. But the first two buried, I am able to write of with some accuracy.

The first man buried in what is now known as the Fairmont Cemetery was a man who driving a team heavily loaded with furniture and belongings...when descending the steep pitch in Westfield just beyond the Charles Allen farm, the heavy load slipped, suddenly pitching the teamster forward onto the pole between the horses and killed him. His name was unknown and no record kept. He was buried on the farm opposite the South Presque Isle Grange Hall, then the home of George F. Whidden's father, now the well-known Edwin Norton farm. When the graveyard lot was laid out, this man was the first to be buried in it. This is the story by the authority of George F. Whidden, which no one will question.

Julia Wilson, sister of Mrs. Day, now living on the Houlton Road, respected and loved by all who knew her as the daughter of the first settler on this road. Her sister, Julia, being the first child born on the Houlton Road in what is now Presque Isle, was the first child buried in the Fairmont Cemetery.

CHAPTER VII

Settlement of the Center Line Road and its early settlers: the first settlers on this road: first schoolhouse in town built by taxation: the DeWitt schoolhouse: where the first votes in Letter F were cast.

It is an additional pleasure to me as the writer of this work that we are able to relate the early settlement of one of the most valuable and desirable farming sections of our town by giving the story of a daughter of the first settler, Mrs. Elbridge Gardner, who is living in our village on Mechanic Street.

Mrs. Gardner was three years old at the time her father's family, John W. Goss, moved into Plantation Letter F in 1842. This would make her age now in 1917, 81 years old.

We regard her narrative of great value to the writer in obtaining the facts as they were and of the people who made the first clearing and homes in the wilderness less than a century ago where now are to be seen so many beautiful, costly, and valuable farm residences and homes.

Fortunately, this history began while she's with us and able to recall the scenes of her childhood with a clearness and accuracy both wonderful and valuable. She is healthy and smart for one of her years: is a very intelligent and fluent conversationalist, and is bearing her infirmities with ease and grace.

She recalls the incidents happening during their long and tedious journey from their native town or parish, as they called their former place of residence in the Province of New Brunswick, County of Charlotte, New Brunswick. (I may be wrong in the spelling of this residential place of the Goss family, just as they did, but I have tried to twist the alphabet and divide the syllabification of the word into its greatest ease for our pronunciation--dear old word to all natives of New Brunswick who has given so many of the very best blood and stock to people of Aroostook and New England.)

She recalls the places and people where they stopped overnight for entertainment and rest on the way. Also the condition of the roads as they reached the new country, making her story more than ordinary value to the people of today.

She remembers things which occurred before they left their old home in New Brunswick, the day and night before they left their home and neighborhood, they spent as was very natural, with a sister and her family, the stories they told of the country to which they were going and what the children, their cousins, did. They had a cake of maple sugar just made, for it was in the spring of the year and sugar-making time also. The children cut the cake into parts and divided it saying, "Way up in Aroostook you'll have no maple sugar." But that spring, the Goss family reached their cabin in the

wilderness of Letter F or Presque Isle, they made gallons of the nicest and sweetest maple sugar they had ever made, which came very acceptable for the coming season for sweetening to go with "Puckwheat fritters" when "for six successive weeks they were without flour."

We speak or write of this to show how little things impress the child mind, where matters of much greater importance will be forgotten.

They were nearly a week coming. They stopped at the old Gould Tavern in Monticello. Here they found a good pioneer home and word of cheer and encouragement, as did many others on their way to the upper plantations of Aroostook Valley.

The day following their night's rest at Monticello, they reached Thron's Tavern in Westfield. There they tarried for another night. The next day they got through to the log house her father had built the summer before in 1841, on the lot he had bought from Fairbanks where they were to make their future home.

In reaching their home, they had to shovel and tread snow four feet deep in March 1842, from the Fort Fairfield Road. At this time there was no road and not a settler nearer than the village, and no way of reaching their cabin but by the cut out road over Mason Hill, which is now the fine home of Hardy's, through to the road which forms the junction road, near the Chandler and Asa Bishop farm.

What heroic ambition and bravery! What faith in the future of Aroostook must have animated the minds of this family! What hope for the future in moving into this vast wilderness without a clearing beyond for miles and miles, and no road! What must have been the thought of that young wife and mother as she rode over the almost pathless way to their log house! What did she think as she unpacked the dishes from boxes and baskets as they were unloaded and brought in! What as she prepared the table with clean linen and provisions prepared and filled at dear old Magaquauvie, N. B., before their long and tedious journey! ... But they had come to stay to face hardships and endure privations. The sound of the ax in the Gowen Wilson clearing over the way on the Houlton Road may have broken the monotony of their dreariness, and brought a ray of cheer and glad news to their hearts that among them, and not far away, were other pioneers and the voices of other children were raised in their play and glee.

I wish it were possible to here present to the readers of these pages a picture of this first log cabin in the wilderness on the Center Line Road: that fireside and table with its home-sown linen, washed, ironed and packed with a mother's thoughtfulness and care days before their start; with bread and beef, and other fixings for their first evening or morning meal.

But alas! These log cabins in the wilderness and even the forests are things of the past, long since seen no more. They have given away to beautiful houses, lighted with electric lights, heated by hot air, and favored with the telephone to communicate with the

village now almost a young city and to be social with the neighbors.

The scene of their first morning in the wilderness was not to be of long duration.

Mrs. Gardner has lived to see and enjoy all the changes from the wilderness without a schoolhouse, church, mail, post-office, a store, railroad, telegraph, to what is now said to be the wonderland of the State and New England, and to be one of the richest counties of the country in which we live. Is not such a life worth living? ...and to be called one of the mothers who gave it birth? I wish that Mrs. Gardner with Mrs. Jacob Weeks, Mrs. Almira Day, Mrs. Niles, Mrs. Amasa Howe and Mrs. George Freeman may or could live to ride as guests of honor when in 1920, the Centennial of the first settlement of the town of Presque Isle, and also the Anniversary of the State Organization shall, may or ought to be celebrated.

THE FIRST SETTLERS ON THIS ROAD

Mrs. Gardner continues her relation of facts: "Soon after my father's family came Alanson Rackliff came and settled upon the lot just above, which has since been known as the Rackliff farm for miles around, and has always been in the family name. The Rackliff family has always been known and respected among the early and useful settlers. Soon the Benish Pratts came from Phillips, Maine, as it is commonly reported. Soon after Fernand Stevens, who built on the Foster farm, came but stayed only a short time. Then Silas Ireland came in the spring of 1847 and settled further down the Center Line Road. He had twelve children and all came but two. His coming was quite an accession to the population: then when his son, Silas II came, it was still larger for he was the father of nineteen children, having three wives. Freeman Hayden and family were the next who came, and settled where John E. Fayden now resides and where his father D. E. Hayden lived and died only a few years ago. Freeman Hayden also came in 1847 from Corinna, Penobscot County. Soon after Marcellus Foster arrived and settled where the Foster family have since resided. They were followed by new settlers, Nelson Turney and later Judge James Cloudman came and settled on the hill nearer the Houlton Road, and became a prominent and influential citizen.

FIRST SCHOOLHOUSE IN TOWN BUILT BY TAXATION

Here was the first schoolhouse in town built by taxation of the inhabitants in 1844. This schoolhouse, though a little rustic at first, was the pride of the people in the wilderness. After the schoolhouse was built, which soon followed the coming of the Goss, Rackliff and Benish Pratt families...no doubt in the year of 1844. This place in the Center Line Road became somewhat a noted center. It was a place of influence and attractive associations. It was spoken of and known far and near as "The Red Schoolhouse." It was the place to which the boys and girls of Letter F or Fairbanks Corner came to school for long distances, also the place for religious services.

Here the travelling preachers held meetings and sowed the seed of the Gospel. Here the scattered inhabitants came to worship. It was here that the first ministers were heard and probably here Rev. G. S. Pitcher and Nugent preached.

It was here near this schoolhouse that the first camp meeting was held. Here John Allen preached at one of those meetings. Here Rev. Rogers of Fort Fairfield and the Houlton Naod pastor was heard.

THE DEWITT SCHOOLHOUSE

The DeWitt schoolhouse was built in 1859 and Amilla F. Cleaves taught the first school. Harriet Cleaves Wardman commenced the next school the following summer in 1860. She died before it closed and Caroline Cleaves finished it. Jefferson Sawyer, years afterward of Easton, taught the next winter. Christina DeWitt taught the following summer in 1861. Then Joseph Winter, formerly of Carthage, Maine taught in the summer of 1862.

America Bartlett taught the winter school of 1862, and Christina DeWitt the summer of 1863; F. M. Brown the winter and Amanda Lyons the summer of 1864. Lilius Graves taught the winter of 1865 and Helen M. Cleaves the summer of 1865.

Helen M. Cleaves also taught the first school in lower Egypt in the log house of Wetts in the summer of 1869. Thomas Whittaker came into this part of town from Fort Fairfield in 1843. Settling on the Isaac Whittaker farm, he built a log house which was occupied by Mr. Benjamin, who settled here before the Aroostook War.

WHERE THE FIRST VOTES IN LETTER F WERE CAST

It was in this schoolhouse that the citizens of Letter F cast their votes for President, Governor, members of Congress, and the State Legislature. It was here they elected their first plantation and town officers after its incorporation.

Without doubt, it was a great day and occasion when the early settlers voted for the first time in their own plantation rather than being obliged to make the long trip to Houlton as they had done for years.

How many stories were told of what they did at the meeting ...
(a repetition of page 14)

There are just a few now living among us who remember that day and historic event. Then young men and women, today honored mothers and fathers of our town, like George F. Whidden, J. Frank Whitney, Mrs. Amasa Howe and Mrs. G. H. Freeman, Mrs. Almira Day, Mrs. Miles, and her brother, Wheeler Ireland, Mrs. Oakes and Mrs. Weeks, the others are all gone.