DeWitt Remembered

Coin questions DeWitt's committment to be historic

By KEN COIN

During the nation's Bicentennial (when many resident's historical adrenalin was really pumping) DeWitt's own Bicentennial Committee took on the project of erecting three historic markers within the city of DeWitt.

One marker noted the site of the New Albany mill complex on Prairie Creek, now the McGuire property at Dill and Locust.

A second, also located within the pioneer town of New Albany, recognized the historic significance of the two buildings (now each over 150 years old) on Webb Drive, which were built as a store and hotel by New York investors.

The third was placed in front of the former Clinton County Jail at 206 E. Washington. It denotes DeWitt's role as the county seat and this structure was built as a jail and jailor's residence in 1842.

Another byproduct of the Bicentennial was the local catch phrase: "Welcome to Historic DeWitt." This phrase has continued to serve various sectors of the community well throughout the past eighteen years but it has just about wore out its welcome in my book.

Quick, somebody grab a soapbox.

If I had a quarter for every time someone asked me, "What's so historic about DeWitt?," I could afford to get a real life. If someone out there has an answer better than "duh?," please forward it to me.

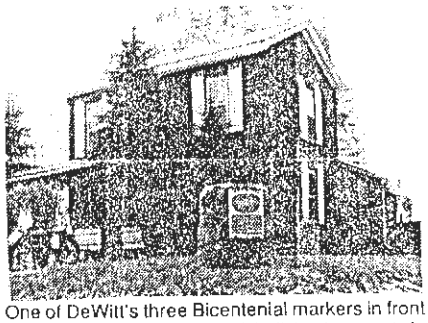
Yes, DeWitt has a very interesting history but so do a ba-zillion other communities from sea to shining sea. No, Washington never slept here and we don't have houses made of scrap lumber from the ark.

But, that is only one kind of historic. Historic is also a state of mind. A pride in our past and in our heritage, regardless of how brilliant or mediocre that past may be. It is also a committment to preserving and promoting that history.

I don't advocate that we all need to sit in our front dooryards hand-dipping candles to the amusement of tourists or that we need to go about our daily business in knee britches, tricorn hats, or whale-bone hoop skirts to prove just how historic we can be. But, I do think its time to put forth just the minutest speck of effort to live up to the slogan or put it out of its misery and take it out back and shoot it.

Local developers have used "Historic DeWitt" for years as part of their promotional material and yet, when it comes to naming new subdivisions or streets, our landscape gets stuck with these names that are direct from "Quaintville, USA" which show no respect for the heritage of the land which is being irreparably altered.

Business associations have been happy to proclaim "Historic DeWitt." We even have a huge sign "out on the pavement" to prove it. In my limited capacity as a historian I have more than once been insulted and consulted as plans were being drawn up to recreate a "historic atmosphere" (Hollywood style with false store fronts) for the "downtown" district. (The term "downtown" alone should have clued me in that these people didn't know up from down. Even the village idiot knows that only birds and crashing planes can come "down" to town in DeWitt.) I was told that a "gas-light" district would be historically correct for DeWitt. I was going to ask from whence was the source of all this gas? (Talking with them, I figured it out.)



One of DeWitt's three Bicentenial markers in front of the old Clinton County Jail, built by the county in 1842 on land donated by Capt. David Scott.

City government has perpetuated the "Historic DeWitt" theme. How much money was allocated last year for any form of historic preservation? Architectural surveys? Applications to the State or Federal Register of Historic Sites? The Michigan History Division suggested in 1981 that several DeWitt homes would be welcome additions to the state register. Are the applications ready to be sumbitted yet?

Was it mentioned in the council minutes or noted by anyone at any point last year that the village of DeWitt was 150 years old as of Oct. 26, 1991? A history-minded town would not have let that slip by unnoticed. Shame on us all; its like forgetting grandpa's hundredth birthday.

New families move to DeWitt every week; many drawn by the quaint hayseed atmosphere and the town's seemingly obvious comittment to its heritage. Are they the ones, the appreciative, who are perhaps seeking a heritage to become a part of it? Will they carry DeWitt's history into the next generation or leave it as the duty of DeWitt's "Old Families?"

In "Historic DeWitt," where the suggestion of removing from the landscape a ninety year-old railroad grade from a city park is taken seriously; where Mrs. Caroline Bement's 150 year-old "Select School" is about to be torn down for parking spaces; where a county jailhouse built exactly 150 years ago is allowed to slowly deteriorate for want of a sympathetic owner; where a classic Baptist meeting house of the 1850's can be stripped of its dignity after the city refuses to accept it as a museum; where every year another beautiful old home or building gets "remuddled" beyond recognition because there is no one to teach historically compatable alternatives; I have a very simple challenge. It's basic enough for even the most historically timid.

Regarding the historic markers mentioned at the beginning, they need help. The one in front of the old jail was recently vandalized and taken into custody for questioning. It has been put back where it belongs but, like the one at the McGuire property, is very much faded and needs replacing.

Perhaps some person(s) or group(s) will take responsibility for "Historic DeWitt."

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

Aug. 3, 1992

Coin has some fun with timeless photograph of Old DeWitt

By KEN COIN

This photograph remains one of my all-time favorites of "Old DeWitt." I don't have a copy wich identifies the people in the picture; perhaps its anonimity is part of its appeal. I can scan the children and pick out several faces belonging to some of DeWitt's current senior citizens. Seventy-six years ago! Ruth? Eleanor? How can it be possible?

But yet, the picture is really timeless. Take scissors and cut away the background. Ignore the hats. (I was told that in 1916, "hats were everything!" But don't look at them now.) Look instead at the faces and poses.

It is simply a group of people, captured in an instant when each had their minds on their own individual thoughts:

Charles is staring straight through the camera, across the street. He's recalling a day in his youth when there were no buildings and he and his pals attended the first county fair in the field where the Baptist Church and Masonic Temple are standing.

Minnie is nervous. She has agreed to sing at yet another funeral tomorrow. She's sang at so many lately, she's used up her best funeral hymns. What's one she hasn't sung in a long time? One that will really bring out the hankies?

Ted has made sure he's dead center but is worried that the hat in front of him is going to obscure his baby daughter. There, that's better, he just hoisted Ruth up a little higher.

Mrs. Wagner looks away just before the shutter clicks. She distinctly heard a disgusting noise from the line of boys sitting at her feet. She means to find out just who it was.

Grandma Gillette was given a place of honor in a large chair, front and center. Her spine quit functioning years ago and the longer that fool photographer takes posing everyone the lower she sinks into the chair. She's praying for the click of the shutter just before she disappears completely out of view.

Jerry and Bert are trying not to draw attention to themselves in the back row, hoping that admist the confusion they will be able to slip away unnoticed to play.

Eleanor is tired of waiting! The sidewalk her mother made her sit on (so as not to get her best dress grass-stained) is much to hard; her dress is irritating because it has too much starch, and the huge bow on the top of her head is too silly looking.

Howard can't understand why his corn hasn't sprouted. Fred's did already and it was planted late.

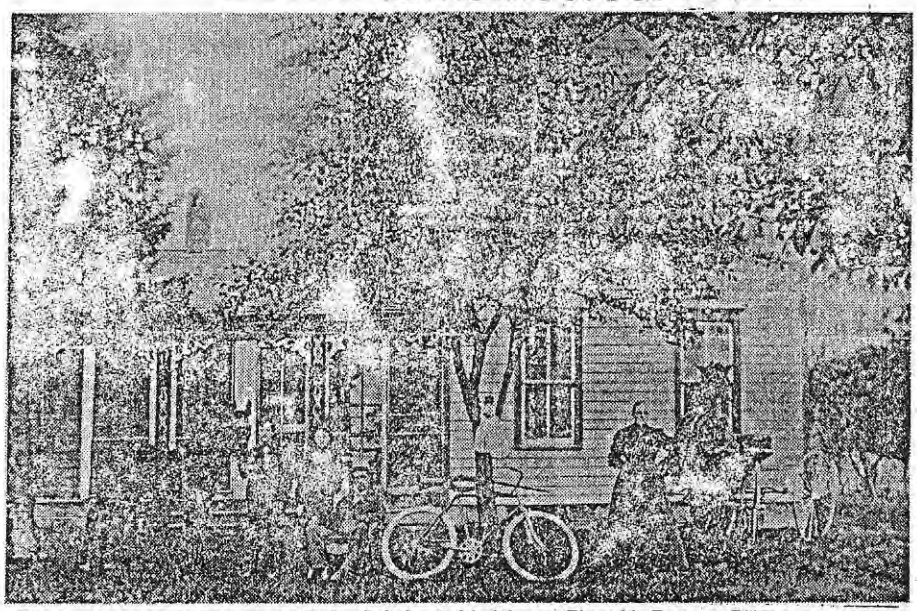
DEWITT METHODIST CONGREGATION, ca. 1916 — This photo was taken in front of the Methodist Church (which burned in 1928) located on the west side of North Bridge Street. Courtesy photograph.

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson are both feeling a little awkward so they are trying to remain obscure in the back. They've never been to this church before. In fact, they've never been to this before. They're only traveling through on the Charauqua circuit.

Some of my charachters are real, some aren't, but it doesn't matter. Show this picture to any minister or priest and they agree, this congregation is the same assortment of faces they see staring back at them each week.

Ken Coin is a resident of DeWitt and the area's primary historian.

DeWitt remembered:



The Omar and Abbie (Hutchins) Dills family in front of their home, Riverside Farm, on Dill Road, ca. 1906. It was typical in that era for every portable possession of any importance to be brought out for inclusion in the photograph. Note the rifle, doll, bicycle, horse, and rig. Courtesy photograph.

Abbie Dills queen bee of 'local brevities'

By KEN COIN

My wife has a tendency to read evey word of any newspaper put in front of her. When we're on vacation, why she cares to read the Bugtussle Bugle is beyond me. I rarely read the newspaper myself. "No news is good news," that's my motto.

But, stick an old Clinton Republican under my nose and it will keep my attention for hours. Often when I'm doing history research one of the last sources I use is old newspapers. Not because they are a bad source; on the c...ary, they're excellent. The problem is, I'm prone to become lost in the abyss know as..."local brevities."

If you don't know what the local brevities are, you must have grown up in a cave. Picture "Chatter by Char," and add a report of everyone who visited anyone or anyone who was visited by anyone, for a whole week plus what everyone had for Sunday dinner; throw in anyone who painted a room, bought a horse, installed a toiler or fell off a roof and you have "local brevities." They were the mainstay of local society. If it wasn't printed in the paper it wasn't worth knowing (unless of course it was gossip just too delicate to print).

The undisputed Queen Bee of DeWitt's correspondents was Abbie (Hutchins) Dills. Other correspondents came and went but it was Abbie who kept the local switchboard operator hopping throughout her many decades as correspondent to The Clinton County Republican News as well as the North Lansing Record, the State Republican, and the Lansing Press.

I have not been able to determine how far back she became a correspondent. In the late 1800's, DeWitt's correspondents used pseudonyms such as "Nonsence" (Charity Pearce), "Mercury," "One-Who-Was-There," etc. Personally, I believe "Mercury" was Abbie but that's just a guess.

Abbie Eliza Hutchins was born in DeWitt July 22, 1857, the eldest daughter of Ezra M. and Helen (Hurd) Hutchins. With the exception of only a few years, her entire life was spent in the DeWitt area. In 1880 she was married to Omar B. Dills. Following their marriage they purchased "Riverside Farm" on what would later be named Dill Road in their honor. Abbie died Feb. 27, 1941. Several descendants, includng great-granddaughter Sue (Sibley) Powers, still reside in the DeWitt area.

The following is a sampling of Abbie's brevities from Aug. 25, 1921:

- Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Brooks ride in a new Ford coupe.
- An 8-pound son was born to Mr. and Mrs. Clifton Wilcox Tuesday afternoon, Aug. 23. He will answer to the name of Clifton Carl. Mrs. Wilcox was formerly Miss Doris Beach.
- Harry Reed is having his meat market shingled.
- The Chautauqua held in the village for three days last week was very much enjoyed, at the close of which arrangments were made to hold a simular event next year.
- C.C. Woodruff and son, Ralph in company with Mr. and Mrs. W. Brown of Lansing started for Detroit Tuesday morning for a few days' visit.
- Mrs. Celia Lorenz and Mrs. Eva Cole spent Thursday at the home of Dr. Wheeler in Lansing, it being the ninth birthday anniversary of Elizabeth who has been ill some time. Elizabeth will spend the last of the week at the home of these ladies and would be glad to ee her former playmates.

(A thank you to Thelma Grinold and her sister, Ada Dieter, for proving the old copies of the "Republican.")

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

Coin offers clarification of DeWitt's Charity Pearce

By KEN COIN Ag 17, '92

Several weeks ago I bad-mouthed a former DeWitt pioneer, Charity (VanDyke) Pearce for distorting DeWitt's history with a not so accurate account of its founding. To quote myself: "She could just as well have written her own story as a daughter of a pioneer famoly...as proficient a writer as she was, she undoubtedly could have wrote a fascinating story."

Guess what? She did! (Oh the gentle but precise twists of history.) The following excerpts are from an essay by Mrs. Pearce which was published in The Clinton Republican, Jan. 21, 1892.

My father and mother (William and Sarah VanDyke), accompanied by five children, came from New York state to Riley Township...in 1844. Atwell Simmons, Riley's 1st settler, gave my people permission to occupy a log building used by him as a cooper shop (barrel and bucket maker) until the house could be erected on the land purchased by my father from the government.

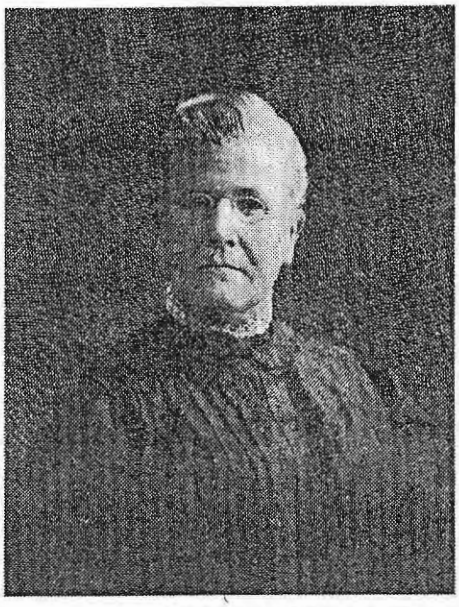
Quilts were hung in place of doors and windows. I heard my mother tell how homesick she was the next morning after their arrival. She arose, pulled the quilt to one side and looked out upon bushes bent to the ground with snow.

Oh, how we enjoyed the sugar-making season; such fun as we children had gathering sap. And does it not make your mouth water to think of the great kettles full of syrup hanging over the fire? (Actually Charity, no, it does not. Frankly, the thought of all that syrup really gags me.)

Perhaps a short description of the first schoolhouse that I attended would not be out of place. Built of logs; size, about 14' x 24'; shake roof; slabs for a floor. The seats were not exactly of the up-to-date affairs of the present. A basswood log about a foot in diameter was split in two, the flat surface up, of course. Large wooden pins or legs were inserted on the underside. These seats reached nearly across on both sides of the house; then holes made in the side of the house, large pins driven, and a plank laid across them. This was our writing desk. The blackboards consisted of three boards about three feet long, each board about one foot wide.

The first sermon I remember every hearing was preached in the same old schoolhouse. Occasionally a minister would stray through our section and give out an appointment to preach. I well remember the disgust of a certain lady who had moved from a certain state more civilized...and the lady came to attend the service at the log school for the first time since her advent into the western lands. She looked out the window and saw the man of God approaching and said, "Oh dear! What would my people say if they should see me attending church services in a log schoolhouse and the minister dressed in denim overalls?"

But it did not take this lady long to fall into pioneer ways. She soon found that people can be honest and respectable if not dressed in fine linen and broadcloth; found that she could ride an ox team. Now she can count her dollars by the thausands. I presume she is no happier than in those days when strict economy was the rule.



CHARITY (VAN DYKE) PEARCE — From Daboll's 1906, *Past and Present of Clinton County, Michigan.*

Charity married Varney Pearce in 1872. They purchased a farm north of town from David Scott, Jr. (currently the Fedewa farm on Chadwick road, west of Norris). They built the large Victorian house and many of the barns which still remain today. In 1904, they retired to the village of DeWitt where the built a comfortable retirement home (currently the Ballard home at 307 W. Main).

The Pearce's were very active in the DeWitt and Pomona Grange as well as the Clinton County and Michigan Pioneer Societies. Both died in 1919. Many DeWitt residents (well, okay, maybe not "many" but at least a few of you) will remember their three children: Alta (Mrs. Fenton Brink) Josephine ("Josie" Mrs. Fred Tucker) and Varney, Jr. ("Dub" and his wife, Gertie).

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the areas primary historian.

Coin points out that DeWitt funerals have had their humor

Aug 24, 92

By KEN COIN

I think the most animated responses I've received about a column was after the one about the funeral group that, shall we say, had a "falling out?" It was so refreshing to know that there were so many other disturbed people out there who could get as much of a bang out of a good funeral story as I do.

Although that incident did not occur in DeWitt, I do know of one that did: You know that really bad drive in the DeWitt Cemetery? Sure you do, the one towards the north end that's all ruts and tree roots? The one that you need a Jeep to get up?

Well, back in the 1920's when Osgood's of St. Johns bought one of the first motorized hearses in the area, they were servicing a funeral in DeWitt. The driver started up that drive but the hearse balked half-way. Wishing to show off what the new hearse could do, he goosed it and as the hearse learched and bounced forward the casket ejected out the back end. Rev. Guilford Northrup, who was there to officiate, laughed about it for years afterwards.

And now, just one more before I let this subject rest in peace:

Years ago there was an older couple in town named Mr. and Mrs. Knagg. Mrs. Knagg (Ima) was an invalid and her husband, Dohnbie A., waited on her hand and foot for years. Everyone who knew the Knaggs marveled at his selfless devotion to Ima and his endless patience and fortitude. For, you see, Ima was not noted for her gratitude. She was a demanding patient who did not wish to suffer her protracted illness alone.

For years Dohnbie continued to attend to Ima's every need until finally, she crossed the river with the angels. Her death was not a surprise to anyone (other than that it was by natural causes) and the funeral, hastely-arranged, was largely attended by those wishing to pay tribute to Dohnbie's unselfish devotion to his beloved.

As the casket bearers maneuvered their way between and around the obstacles in the cemetery one, chancing to catch his foot on the gnarled roots of an old Oak, fell, and in doing so brought the casket crashing to the ground. The entire cortege audibly gasped as the casket broke open and Ima spilled, like so much dish water, out onto the ground amid the wild Daisies and Sweet William.

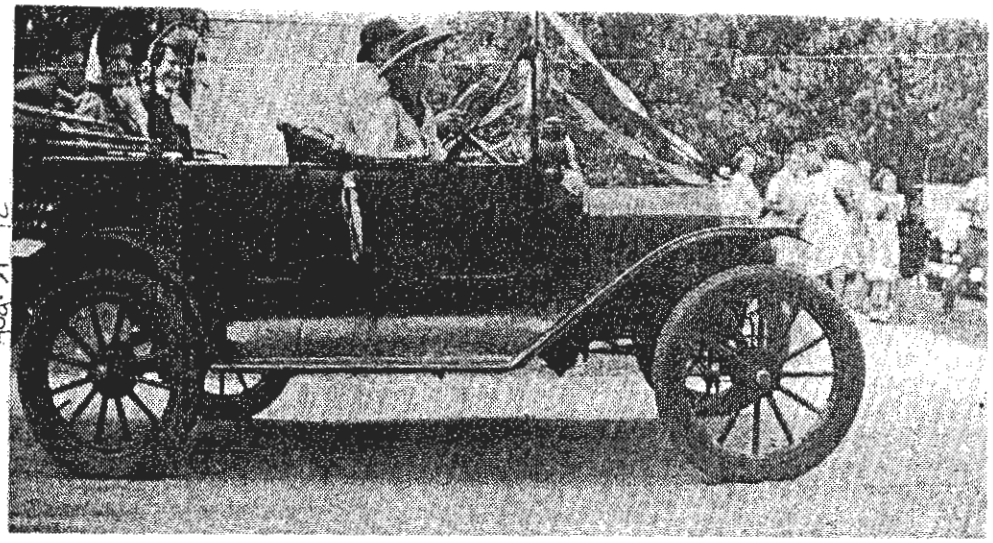
Area doctors were at a loss to explain Ima's sudden return from that distant shore (from which her own obituary claimed there was no return). They mutually agreed that it must have been the sudden jar that brought her out of the feeble sleep which had feigned death.

And so, for nearly eight more years the story repeated itself. Ima, the ever-demanding patient and Dohnbie, her perpetual attendant, until ultimately, Ima again slipped into eternal slumber.

Again the once thwarted cortege escorted Ima's earthly remains to the old cemetery. Dohnbie, directly behind the coffin, with his head bowed, lead the mourners. As they approached the old Oak, Dohnbie suddenly stopped and looked up. Without further hesitation he ran around to the front of the casket, raised his hands in warning and calmly instructed the pall bearers, "Easy boys! Watch your step this time."

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

TOMBSTONE TRIVIA — If this photo reproduces well you should be able to see the outline of a small rectangular nitch cut about one-quarter inch into the top portion of this old tombstone. Its purpose was for a small brass framed daguerreotype (the forerunner of the tintype) of the deceased to be mounted flush on the face of the stone. The next time you visit an old graveyard look for these. Very rare, I have found only two in the DeWitt cemetery. This is the stone of Helen A. (Weber) Allen, wife of Morris R. Allen. Her parents, Renaldo and Samantha Webber, were early residents of Wacousta and later DeWitt.



Aug. 31 '92

1949 Ox Roast — Neil Cutler's 1915 Ford Model T going south on Scott street at Jefferson. Phyllis (Lennemann) Baxter and Joanne Swan, dressed in Victorian clothing, are backseat passengers. Photo courtesy of Bonnie (Cutler) Ward.

Coin says 'hats off' to those behind 46th Oxst Rhose

By KEN COIN

The basic difference between long-time DeWitt residents and newcomers is simply a matter of pronunciation. If you don't want to stick out like a sore thumb, learn to say it incorrectly like the rest of us: "Oxst Rhose."

The best thing about the Ox Roast is its consistency. It's always the third Saturday of August. (So, listen-up "Mint City," that sorry excuse that you didn't know we had plans for that day just doesn't cut it. Pick your own day and stick with it).

Watching the old cars in this year's parade, (which, by the way, scored a 9½ by my tally sheet (deduct a half a point for not having bagpipers) I was reminded of this photograph which proves my point that for at least 43 years we've been lining the streets to watch old cars, floats, and firetrucks. This photo also reminded me that most of the "old" cars in this year's parade were just a twinkle in some engineer's eye in 1949.

Even the idea of just walking around town visiting with relatives and old friends is still more fun than a dozen rides on the Scrambler (and often less nauseating). My mother reminded me of how the late Nina Yanz used to unfold her lawn chair each year by the bank and proceed to sit for the duration of the day. I used to think it a shame that she couldn't get up and take a few spins on the Tilt-A-Whirl. I realize now she undoubtedly had more fun than most.

Without wishing to go off the deep end here sounding like a lemonade commercial, just when parent's feel they can't compete with video games and sophisticated toys for their children't attention, isn't it great to see that a bucket of slimy frogs and a truck-load of little pedal tractors can enthuse hundreds of kids for hours? Let's hope simple pleasures will always remain the best.

One thing I do regret is that we won't again see the likes of Nellie Boyd, with her high-button shoes and best calico dress coming up Bridge Street. Even if she was bent over like a bobby pin with a cane in one hand and balancing a fresh pie for the food tent in the other, she didn't mind stopping to offer anyone who passed her way the warmest smile this side of heaven hidden inside her well worn sunbonnet.

In today's world of ever changing values it's amazing that DeWitt has been able to pull off an annual event, uninterrupted, for 46 years. And, the Ox Roast has been able to endure basically unaltered from its original purpose as a day to leave the dirty dishes in the sink and go up town to enjoy a day with your community.

Hat's off to Roger Brown and the Memorial Association for another job well done. If you're new and maybe didn't know what it was all about, mark your calendar now for next year: the third weekend in August. Pay attention St. Johns. We're doing it the same weekend as we've been doing it every year since 1946, so please pencil us in on your social calendar too. Your mint thing can wait a week, we've got Oxst to Rhose.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt area resident and the area's primary historian.

Coin lists his favorite sounds that he'd like to hear again

By KEN COIN

It has only been within the past hundred years or so that we common humans have had the capability of recording our existance in the form of printed words or photographic process. Everyday recording of our sounds is much newer still. More's the pity, for there have been many sounds made in DeWitt in the past 150 years which I would've liked to had captured for posterity.

Someone once shared with me her thoughts that sound waves last forever and that every sound ever made is out there somewhere waiting to be reclaimed. Wouldn't that be marvelous?

Just in case this theory proves true and technology someday gives us that capability; I'm starting my list of the top ten sounds I want to hear:

1. The happy songs of Chief Wahbaskonoquay's Chippewas' who lived here along the Looking Glass; the proud songs of their triumphs, pounding to the cadence of their tribal dances. And the mournful sound of the last song they sang before packing the remnants of their decimated tribe and leaving Wabwahnaseepee forever.

2. Eunice Scott's opinion when her husband, Capt. Scott, parked the wagon in the middle of the dreary little Indian village, one hundred miles from nowhere, on Oct. 3, 1833 and said, "Here's our new home, honey. Isn't this great."

3. A sampling of the comments made in the tavern room of the Clinton House the day after the ballots were counted of the vote which moved the county seat to St. Johns.

4. The stories of the soldiers returning to DeWitt in 1864 while their exploits of the Civil War are still fresh in their minds.

5. The congregation of the German M.E. Church singing at their first Christmas service in their new church in 1875. (Christmas hymns always sound more natural in German.)

6. The DeWitt Maroon Band giving an outdoor concert. I still have a lot of their music but "Mulligan Guard Quick Step" just doesn't sound the same when I play it on my saxophone.

7. The voice of Victor Clavey yelling, "Dancers! Fill the floor" in the ballroom of the Clinton House followed by the strains of his orchestra as they begin the introduction to a lively Virginia Reel.

8. Marc Cutler's booming baritone belt out "Mary, My Scotch Bluebell," accompanied on the piano by his wife, Maud.

MARC D. CUTLER in his stage costume as "Michigan's Own Harry Lauder." Marc Drew large crowds and rave reviews when he performed at fairs and on the Grange circuits in mid-Michigan. "Do you remember? If you remember, then Dearie, you're much older than I." Photo courtesy of Arleta Cutler.

9. Minnie Moon sweetly singing, "In the Garden" at a funeral; reassuring the mourners that everything works to the glory of God.

10. Earl Miller playing "Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider" on his violin; forcing perfect pitch with each note. (I still hear it in memory but I'd like it on tape just the same).

But, before any of these, I'd like to rehear all the stories told to me by my grandparents which, by now, I've perhaps forgotten. Or, even if I do remember, it'd still be bittersweet to hear their voices talking to me again.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

DeWitt remembered:

DEWITT'S HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL TEAM, 1912 — Pictured (back row, l. to r.) are Frank Cutler, Randolph Lorenz, Myron Howe, John Pennell, Don Clark, ???, Tom Staub, (front row) Floyd Parks, Bernard Zeeb, Frank Richmond, Gordon Baldwin, Harold Kowalk, and Carl Gall. Harold Sipley holds the ball which reads "1913" (as in the class of 1913). Courtesy of the Staub Box of Family Stuff.

DeWitt library can put 'Box of Family Stuff' to good use

By KEN COIN

I want to take a little space here to thank all of the readers who have taken the time to comment on how they like reading this column. But, frankly, your enjoyment is nothing compared to the fun I have writing them for you. It's great therapy for me to sit down and allow my mind to whirl through faces and names that I haven't had a reason to think of for years. It's sort of like "Old Home Week" except I'm the only one who's really attending.

As a researcher of DeWitt's past, I know how hard DeWitt memorabilia is to come by. As I continue to help the DeWitt Library build up its local history collection I realize more and more how rare and yet vital these items are and I want to thank those of you who have shared your material.

Regardless of any family's awareness or appreciation for their heritage I think most all families have what we'll call a "Box of Family Stuff." The boxes themselves may range from plain cardboard to finely handcrafted wood or even a large trunk. The contents? Well, there's no limit to the variety of items.

Having come from a long line of professional pack-rats, my Box of Family Stuff includes such items as a WW I sugar ration card, a ticket stub to the 1939 Indianapolis 500, family pictures, newspaper clippings (including hundreds of Edgar Guest poems), hair, more hair, a paper napkin from Dutch and Veda's wedding anniversary, an ancient hymnal, etc. Get the picture?

Each item relates to someone special or some memorable event (except the sugar ration card. I guess we're just saving that in case sugar is ever rationed again and we can take our 1918 card to Meijers and point out that it has no expiration date).

In sorting through this stuff I weeded out many items which I thought for the sake of posterity would be better off at the library: a 1949 DeWitt Ox Roast raffle ticket, an invitation to Bertha Lennemann's 1917 DeWitt 10th Grade Commencement, a photograph of the interior of Lankford's Variety Store ca. 1950, several hundred obituaries and wedding write-ups, a 1927 pledge-card towards DeWitt's first firetruck, etc.

Now these items are tucked away safe and sound, filled in archival boxes at the DeWitt Library. My Box of Family Stuff weighs a little less, takes up less space and, as an extra bonus, Bertha's great-grandchildren can look up and see what kind of announcement her class sent out in 1917 for years to come and the Lankford's can see what Hamp and June's store looked like. Everyone benefits.

So, if you're looking for a good fall project, just drag out your Box of Family Stuff and see what you can contribute to your community's heritage.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

EDWARD AND ELMA LOCHER HOME on Locher Road. Pictured (l. to r.) are Frank Locher, Loren Harris/Hill (Mark and Martha Hill's foster son), Edward Locher, Elma (Moore) Locher, John M. Locher, Mark Hill (seated by porch), and Martha (Locher) Hill. Ca. 1895, Eddie W. Locher (a california nephew), photographer.

Coin sifts through Locher 'Box of Family Stuff'

By KEN COIN

Last week I touched on the notion of boxes of family stuff. The real incentive for that article was due to the thoughtfulness of Lana (Smit) Hardman, who recently lent me a large box of family stuff of the Locher family. It contains many years of family history research done by Mildred (Locher) Kowalk as well as a great collection of family pictures, old views and memorabilia of DeWitt and a nice collection of family letters (written in German script if there's anyone out there who could translate them?) dating back to the 1830's.

Lana was rather hesitant, fearing that she would bore me with her box of family stuff but, frankly, I haven't had this much fun since the hogs tried to eat cousin Billy. Besides enjoying the individual items, I have an underlying fascination with why certain things are saved and able to survive throughout the years.

Edward Locher came to DeWitt in 1874 to visit his sister, Martha (Locher) Hill and her husband Mark who owned a farm in Olive Township. While here, Edward purchased a small farm and then returned to his home in Jackson county. Following his marriage in 1876, to Elma May Moore, they came to DeWitt and took up residence in an old log cabin located on his property.

They continued to acquire more land, much of it still owned by their descendants. The road on which their farm was located was later named "Locher Road."

Edward and Elma had two sons: Francis Locher married Mina Bixby, a daughter of Oliver I. and Flora (Granger) Bixby. Their children were Raymond, Mildred Kowalk, Glenn, Max, and Maxine Smit. The second son, John Locher, married Fannie Norris, a daughter of Aaron W. and Frances (Blood) Norris. They had two children, Edward and Dortha.

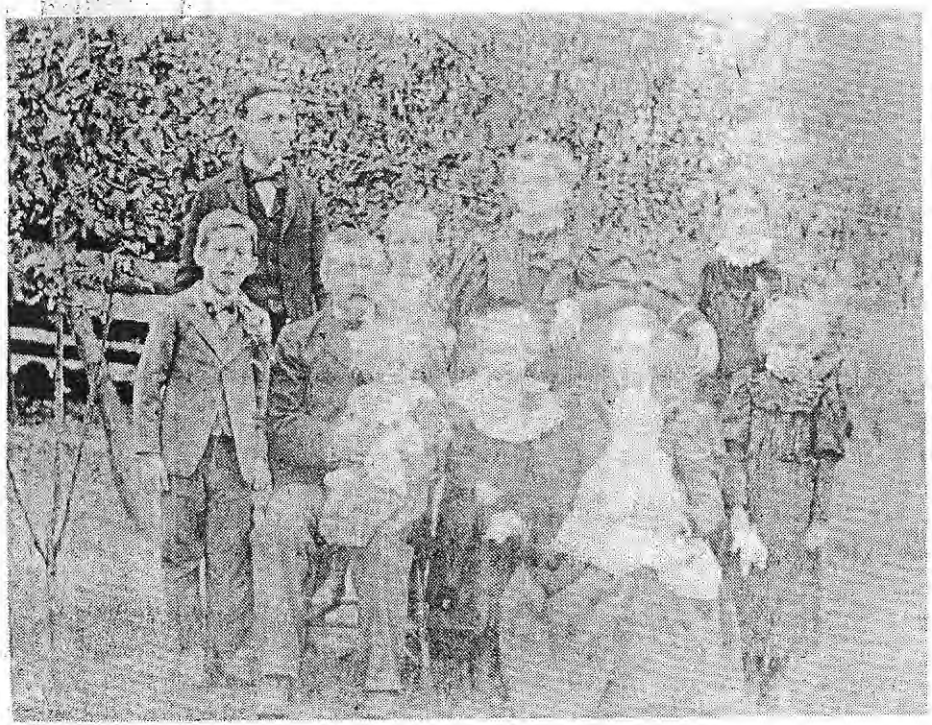
Undoubtedly, in the years to come, the Locher Family Box will pass through many hands among many generations. Through the years there will probably be more items added; more pictures from family reunions, updates to the family tree, more obituaries and birth announcements, and, who knows, perhaps another set of ration stamps from some future war.

Like all boxes of Family Stuff it too could use a little organizing and perhaps a weeding out to allow some items which aren't "family" to go to a library or historical society or possibly to be added to someone else's box of Family Stuff. But hopefully the box will remain basically intact and remain in the DeWitt area.

But just in case it doesn't survive, while the opportunity is at hand, we'll see that many of the items; the family histories, the aged letters (translated or not), the turn of the century views of uptown DeWitt and a number of choice family pictures, are copied and put on file at the DeWitt Library as sort of an insurance policy.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

DeWitt remembered:



MR. AND MRS. YANZ AND CHILDREN, H. J. Newcomb, photographer, ca. 1900. I don't know the occasion but each of the children appears to have a Zinnia pinned to their shoulder. If anyone can identify Mr. and Mrs. Yanz and their nine (count them, nine!) children, please let me know. Photo courtesy of the Locher Box of

Coin searches for the author of anonymous 1930's poem

By KEN COIN

The following was clipped from a newspaper many years ago by my grandmother. She saved it in one of her many little ex-candy boxes, recycled to hold "stuff." It bears no date but judging from the advertisement on the back I would guess it to be from about 1930.

I have read it many times over the years and am continuously haunted by the melancholy beauty of the words.

"He did the best he could with what he had. No man could do more. So a baby lies sleeping in the Old DeWitt Cemetery in a home-made casket, trimmed and fashioned by its young and inexperienced father. The tiny bit of humanity, born into a luckless world, has fulfilled a natural law. Old Mother Earth has reclaimed that to which she contributed. The young father sorrows and the mother, lying patiently ill from her first great effort to maintain the race, also grieves.

"Sunday's rain pattered gently on the new-made grave. The heavens wept in sympathy for the young parents who had hoped to save their first-born. The tiny body — perhaps it was a Providential dispensation that this bit of humanity should not be compelled to live and face that for which it is blameless — reposes in the dignity of Death's sleep. It will never know the pangs its brief burgeoning into the world has cost its grieving parents.

"When the child died after struggling to maintain life for a single day, the father, distracted by troubles, wrought his best with the means at hand. Pressed by sickness of the weakened wife and unemployment, he courageously faced this last blow, the death of his first-born and its attendant expense. Finding that he was unable to buy a regular infant's casket, he made his own plans for his baby.

"He visited a north side merchant whom he had patronized during his short married life and asked for a wooden box. The merchant had none. Wooden boxes are seldom used to pack merchandise in these modern times, paper cartons being substituted. So the young father bought the lumber — it didn't require so much of nature's wood for the purpose for which it was needed. He made the tiny coffin and trimmed and lined its interior himself.

"The baby, an expired hope of the young parents, was lovingly placed in the home-made casket. Funeral services were brief. The child's pain-racked mother could not be present at the brief rites nor could she console, with her presence, the sorrowing father. He was alone with his troubles and responsibilities. With a friendly local undertaker, the lone young man was driven to the old DeWitt cemetery, the sleeping babe in its crude pine cradle, resting upon the father's knees. Probably he had often dreamed, during that interesting period before the child was born, of holding his first born in loving arms, rocking it to sleep and cuddling and loving it as do all real fathers. He had never, however, envisioned such a journey as this.

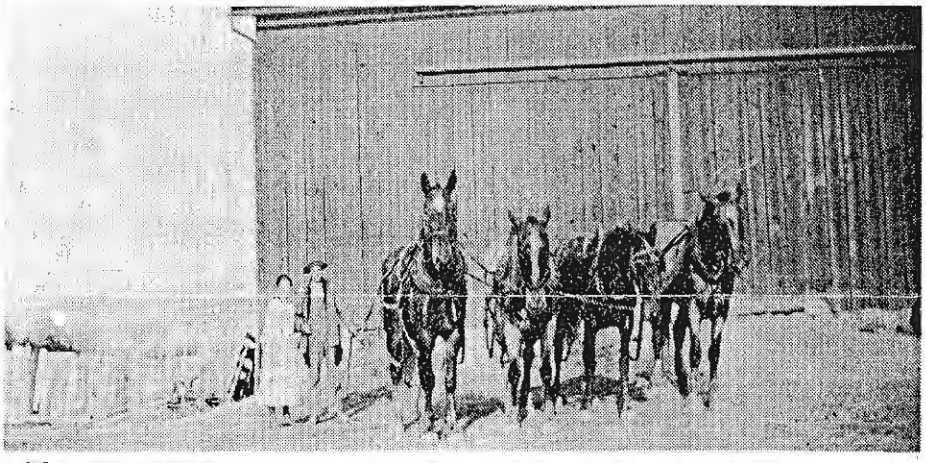
"The child was laid gently in earth to return to the dust from which is sprang. But in its crudely fashioned death cradle, wrought with loving and tender hands, its sleep will be as sweet and peaceful, no doubt, as in the more formal commercial casket which the poor young father could not afford for his first born.

"But even though the child knew, she need not be ashamed. Her daddy did his best for her, his very best. Let it be a consoling thought. There have been unloving, hardened, neglectful parents who do not even try."

In many respects the beauty of this prose lies in its anonimity. It speaks for all those who have lost a child and contains a message to all parents. From a historical perspective, however, I would be interested in learning the identity of the parents and or the author.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

DeWitt remembered:



TOM AND MATIE STAUB with the team (that's Tom and Matie on the left). Just two DeWitt teenagers having fun. Ca. 1917. Courtesy photo.

Teenager attitude problems certainly aren't anything new

By KEN COIN

Oct. 5 '92

"Ish Ka Bibble" was a catchy bit of slang used by teenagers during the WW I era which roughly translates today to "Big Deal," "Who Cares," "I Should Care," or "Get a Life." Having trouble with your teenagers? Ish Ka Bibble; find something new to whine about. That problem's as old as dirt.

If you need proof that teenagers have always stayed out late at night, had no respect for their elders and generally misbehaved, the following should be of some comfort to you. These are actual excerpts from my grandparent's "love" letters.

May 4, 1916...Stopped the clock Sunday night and set it back to eleven but what did mother do but look at dad's watch. Some scheme huh?...

May 23, 1916...This afternoon Ma sent me to work so I went out and crawled in the buggy and went to Sleepy-by.

June ?, 1916...Haven't got my (report) card signed yet and Mr. Bird said we have to have them in by this noon. Often sign it myself but not today as I want him to send me home after it. Won't come back if he does. Guess I'll skip tomorrow P.M. anyway. Ish Ka Bibble.

June 2, 1916...If you walk in your sleep, you know my address.

June ?, 1916...I got home just at 3 o'clock. I slept all the way but one mile...

June ?, 1916...My brother is coming home again in the morning, what don't you know. He is looking for a tip from my father. But he won't get a tip if I can get the pocket book first.

July 5, 1916...You don't need to worry about our dog barking anymore when you drive in. Fellow run over her this morning. I didn't shed any tears over it.

July 26, 1916...The folks never heard me as I was awful still and got to bed all OK. Didn't know nothing until 6:30 this morning when Ma hollered and there I was laying on the bed with my coat and cap on the floor, the rest I had on. Bet I was in a big hurry to get undressed.

My brother just called up. He says, "Tell Dad to put some straw in a stall for my horse." I just says, "#*&"%, can't you put your own straw in?" He says, "I guess so." So, I hung up. Ish Ka Bibble.

Babe (Bertha Lennemann) is squalling cause she wants to go away but Ma won't let her. It is good enough for her. She just goes all the while.

Sept., 1916...My daddy has forbid my driving Nancy (the horse) for two weeks as she caught cold...and ain't feeling good...I didn't have much time Sund. eve. to blanket Nancy so now I must suffer.

January, 1917...I thought last night I would get in without my folks hearing me, but Ma, she was awake so it did me no good and Babe even heard me come home. They don't sleep very good anymore, I don't know why. I guess I'll sleep in the barn next time it is so late when I get home.

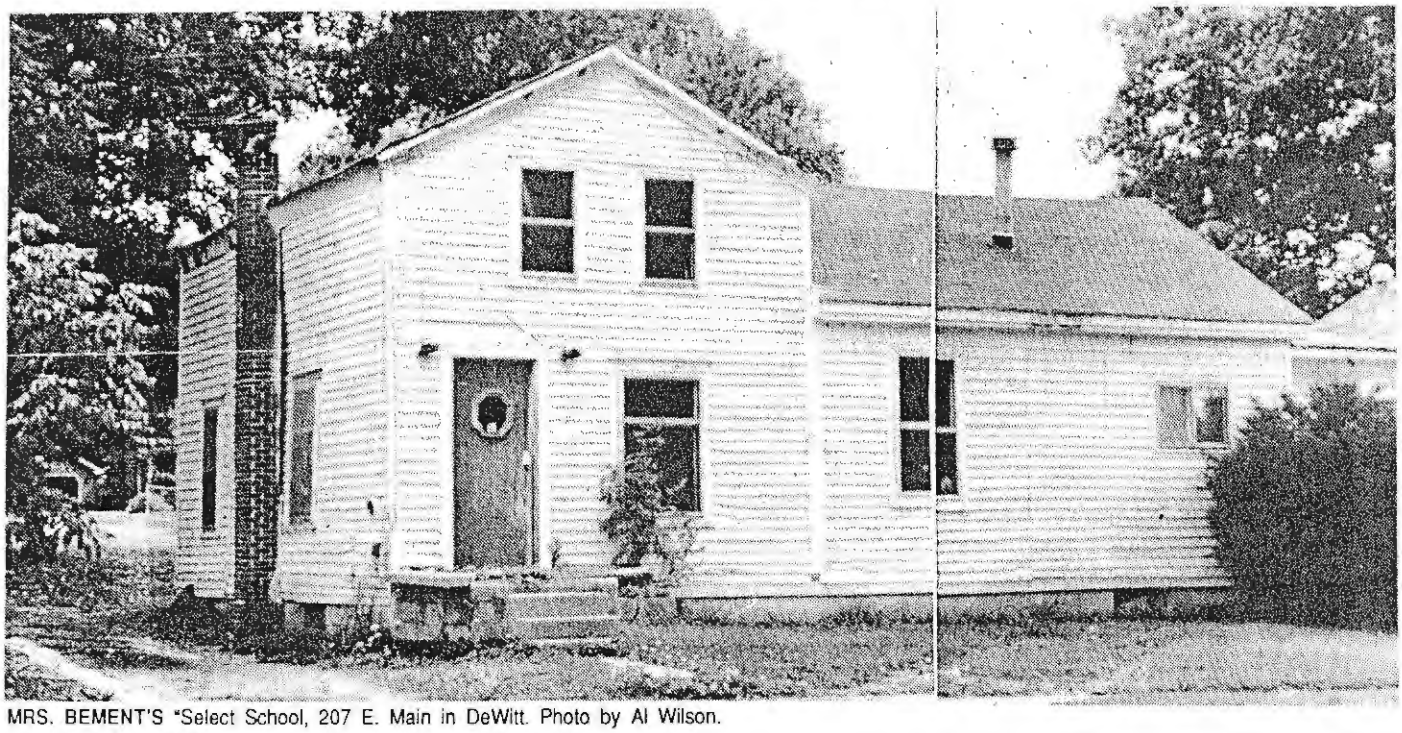
January, 1917...Had a deuce of o time at the dance to Do-it but Ma says she bettor not catch you bringing me home that late again. "Ish Ka Bible." I said, "Next time you won't catch us."

If any of this sounds familiar with your teen-agers today, don't worry about it. (On second thought, maybe you should. Within a few weeks of this last letter, these two teen-agers took the Interurban to St. Johns and eloped.)

P.S. If you happen to be passing the DeWitt Cemetery and see the earth moving; it'll most likely be my grandparents rolling over in their graves because I exposed their personal letters to the whole town. But, Tom, Mattie, as you yourselves said. "Ish Ka Bible."

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

DeWitt remembered:



MRS. BEMENT'S "Select School, 207 E. Main in DeWitt. Photo by Al Wilson.

Oct. 12 '92

Coin sketches lives of historic DeWitt couple

By KEN COIN

I was rather disappointed when I heard of the plans to tear down this old structure. Always an optimist, I still saw potential in the 150-year old building. Historic sites don't just grow on trees and I'm still in mourning over the loss 15 years ago of its former neighbor to the west, the old "Boston House" hotel. But even I must concede that the structural problems of the two-story section of the building are more than I could remedy even in my wildest of historic pipe-dreams.

The little one-story section, however, with its vernacular Greek Revival styling, now that's a different story. I thought it would be great to move it and add it to my own house as a family room. I asked my wife if she'd like to look into it; she asked if I'd like to look into a divorce.

When it was built in the early 1840's by Andrew J. Bement, DeWitt, as we know it, was only a few years old. Bement made a good choice in the site for his home and shop. The block to the west had been set aside as a "Public Square" with the intent of someday raising a courthouse in its center. Prime building lots at that time encircled the square and his, aside from its close proximity to the square, was also advantageous in that it faced the main street, then the freeway of the frontier, the Pontiac-Grand River Trail.

Bement was a native of Ontario County, NY, born in 1815. Prior to his emigrating to Michigan in 1842, he achieved the title of "master" boot and show maker. A letter from him to fellow cobbler George Cook, dated 1848, has survived to the present and gives much insight into the importance of DeWitt's early shoe industry. (But, that's another story.)

Andrew Bement offered the frontier community much needed boots and shoes but, boots and shoes soon deteriorate. The legacy to the community which originated in this house was knowledge and the guest thereof. When she arrived in DeWitt on Oct. 2, 1842, Caroline Bement, Andrew's wife of two years, brought a satchel of books, an ability to teach, and a gift for encouraging children to thirst for knowledge.

Caroline was born in Waterbury, Conn. in 1818 and perhaps it was the tradition of the New England finishing schools which inspired her in later years to transplant that ideal among transplanted New Englanders here in DeWitt.

She is recorded as one of the early teachers when the public school in the village was organized in 1842 (the same year as her arrival — coincidence?). But public schooling in DeWitt at the period offered education only to an eighth-grade level. Hence a need for higher learning.

Clues to as when she struck out on her own with a private school to teach beyond the grade eight are scant and can only be pieced from scraps. The obituaries and biographies of the early residents who list her "Select School" among their credentials pushes the date back to the early 1860's. It is known that Andrew had closed his boot and shoe shop by 1863 and it is my belief that in the early 1860's she took his vacant shop (the 2-story section of the present house?) and converted it into a classroom.

Appreciative parents from near and far were only too happy to pay the tuition and the students found room in the households of family friends or relatives in which to board during the weekdays of the school terms.

How many nights did Caroline sit by the flickering light in the modest parlor of this home working on study plans and correcting papers? We'll never know but her obituary states that she taught for 56 consecutive years in DeWitt, "more than any other teacher in the United States."

In a time when much of the world remained unexplored, most of nature unexplained and the majority of Michigan uninhabited, with the few tools she had at hand, Caroline Bement taught the eager teen-agers of DeWitt that the best classroom was experience and the most profound lesson was to seek one's own answers.

In 1901, Caroline retired from her lifelong career. Perhaps it was the success of the County Normal system (and if you don't know what "Normal" was, that too is another story) that made her form of education obsolete. Perhaps it was the opening that same year of the Interurban which offered DeWitt students easy access to the high schools of St. Johns and Lansing. Perhaps it was merely that at the advanced age of 83, she knew it was time to rest and leave it to another generation to take up the reins.

She went to live with her son, Dr. Benton Bement, a dentist in Lockport, NY. She died Sept. 8, 1906, at his home but was brought back to DeWitt and buried alongside her pioneer companion who had died 30 years prior. Her funeral was among the largest ever recorded in DeWitt; a tribute to her enormous contribution to the community.

Perhaps someone will now step forward and contribute to the community by saving this old structure. Perhaps it's an appropriate project for the DeWitt School System. But if Caroline's old home and school can no longer stand as a monument to her efforts, we have only to look at the present school system which she helped form or to the young faces of the hundreds of descendants of her former pupils who now learn by methods and in classrooms unimaginable in Caroline's time. And if these are too abstract, there's the Bement Public Library in St. Johns which was founded in 1939 following a bequest from the estate of the Bement's son and daughter-in-law, Edward and Louisa (Huston) Bement.

So, before it's gone from the landscape, drive by it once more. Point it out to your children and tell them that once, long ago, when the Indians still migrated along the river valley, when black bear and wolves were common neighbors and to walk straight north of DeWitt meant not seeing another farm or town until you reached the Straits of Mackinaw, a very wise lady named Mrs. Caroline Bement lived in this little house. She taught the youth everything she knew and did the best she could with what she had and that was enough.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the

Oct 19 '92

DeWitt remembered:

NORTH SIDE OF WEST MAIN, ca. 1915 In DEWITT — Of the five buildings pictured in the block only the small building on the far left, now the Family Barbershop, remains. The building to its right was razed in the 1960's; the remaining three were destroyed by the 1930 fire. That's Harry Moon sitting in a chair in front of his general store. "Hi Harry!". Photo courtesy of The Locher Family Box, originally taken by Hewitt Photo Company, photographers.

Coin delves into DeWitt's native American history

By KEN COIN

One aspect of DeWitt's history which tends to perk the most interest among the most people is that of the native inhabitants of the area. But factual information on this area's Indian heritage is shamefully scant.

I've always had an interest in the area Indians but that interest was really sparked earlier this summer, before the soybeans had the audacity to sprout and obstruct my view of the dirt, when I was thrilled to find my first (and second) arrowhead (we're suppose to call them "projectile points") in the field behind my barn. I also found a large hand-held scraping or chopping tool, a net weight and a few other "what's its."

But, before you all beat a path to my backyard, let me explain that what I found in my back yard is merely common of what lies underfoot throughout the whole river valley.

For the next few weeks I'd like to share with you what little I know about the area Indians. I don't have any interesting photographs to accompany the articles, but that will just give me a chance to also run various old DeWitt pictures for which I don't have an accompanying article. It should work out well.

The pioneers who settled here in the 1830's and early 1840's, when Indians were still present, wrote very little about them. That's probably just as well; their impressions and understanding of the Indians would be much like our going to Russia today and trying to describe Russian culture. The pioneers did not see the Indians before the destruction of their culture — we would not see the Russians prior to the destruction of theirs'.

One area pioneer, William Henry Harrison Knapp, who came here in the 1840's, wrote a most profound statement regarding what he saw of the Indians:

"If we cannot say the country is no better because they were here, we can also say it is no worse."

His inference here was that the Indians did nothing to destroy the land the way he saw his own contemporaries doing. That's a rare bit of insight considering the pioneers who came here had a common ideology of purpose which they took to be a directive from God (Genesis 1:28 - "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it..."). In other words, the frontier was their oyster and they had no patience with anyone who didn't share that mandate. They viewed the natives as unworthy of this land because of their inability (mentally or physically) to adequately exploit it.

What the pioneer essays are able to tell us today include examples of the depths to which the Indian culture was reduced by its association with the whites and, geographically, the locations in the DeWitt area which were populated by Indians, either as acutal villages or merely as itinerant camps.

So, if you are out and about enjoying this Indian Summer keep your eyes peeled to the ground — you never know what you might find. There's a whole lot of history out there under your feet.

DeWitt remembered:

EAST MAIN STREET LOOKING EAST IN DEWITT, ca. 1915 — On the north side of the street (left) Homer Brazee's general store, Brazee's storage barn, DeWitt Township hall, the pool hall, Gardner's Public House (don't know what it was in 1915), and nestled in the trees — the porch of the old Boston House Hotel. On the south side (right), Melvin Brooks drug store, Norris and Eldridge implements, Calder's blacksmith shop, the Feed Mill, Woodman Hall (the meetig hall of the Modern Woodmen and Royal Neighbors)). Today, only the Woodman Hall (now Keck's Appliance) and Brazee's store (now Foo Ying Restaurant) are still standing. Photo courtesy of the Locher Family Box, originally taken by Hewitt Photo Co.

Where was Wabwahnahseepee?

By KEN COIN

When the Scott family arrived in what is now DeWitt on Oct. 4, 1833, they lived among the Indians at the village of Wabwahnahseepee for over a month while their log cabin was being built in what is now the back yard of Ted and Cathy Mitchell's home on Scott Street.

Where exactly was Wabwahnahseepee? Beats me. Many of the early settlers referred to it but none pinpointed its exact location. But, if I had to make an educated guess, I would pinpoint it to be between East Main Street and the river, south of the point where Main Street begins to curve to the northeast. That guess is based on basically three things:

- All the settlers mention it as being upriver from the village of DeWitt.
- David Scott, Jr. (and he should know, he lived there) said it was in section 9 of the township and section 9 doesn't begin until quite a distance east of City Hall.
- My location would fall along the original route of Round Lake Road (the old Pontiac Grand River Road which was merely an improvement of the orignal Indian path) which instead of curving to the west to form Main Street, instead took a sharp cut to the south crossed the Looking Glass and then continued west along the south side of the river. It would make sense to me that the village was the purpose of the path.

Anyway, Wabwahnahseepee (don't hold me to that spelling) was the Ojibwa (also known as Chippewa) village of Chief Wahbaskonoquay (said to translate to "Whitelocks") and his son, Chief Canorbway (which may translate to "Pike") when the Scott's arrived. It was a fairly old village which had been of good size. Unlike many other Indian sites in the area this was a rather permanent villge opposed to a seasonal or itinerant camp.

Corn, bean and pumpkin fields of the village dotted the area and while this designation as a farming village usually meant only seasonal (summer) occupancy, this village is known to have remained occupied from the early spring of 1833 through to the late winter of 1833-34.

Th village of Wabwahnahseepee did not long survive the coming of the Yankee settlers. The Scott family and those who followed brought with them the Asiatic cholera which devistated the Indian village in 1834. This, compounded by the outbreak of small pox in 1837, brought an abrupt end to Wabwahnahseepee. If there were any survivors of these Indian epidemics the settlers did not bother to record it.

Many early accounts refer to a place called the "Indian Green" which became a favored picnic area for DeWitt residents well into the later half of the 19th century. Some have stated that this area was the abandoned village of Wabwahnahseepee but more records pinpoint this to be where McGuire Park is now on West Main Street.

Indian camps designated for for fishing, hunting or sugaring were abundant in this area well into the late 1850's. One was located on the southern shore of Muskrat Lake in section 18 of Olive township; another in the area of U.S. 27 and Clark Road. An 1873 map of the township notes a site "Kanobuay Spring" (Chief Canorbway?) on the north side of Clark, a quarter mile east of US-27. Another camp was near the intersection of DeWitt and Alward Roads. And then there was the hunting camp on "Lowery Plains" in section 1 of DeWitt township. It was here that Chief Okemos died in 1858. (But that is another story which will have to wait until next week.)

Ken Coin is the area's primary historian.

Nov 2 '92

DeWitt remembered:

Chief Okemos frequented area around DeWitt

By KEN COIN

Last week I mentioned the Indian camp at "Lowery Plains" and although very little has been documented, it was the scene of a singular event which gives it a significance in Michigan's Indian history.

The land currently located at the southeast and southwest corners of Krepps and Round Lake Roads (in sections 1 and 2 of DeWitt Township) was purchased from the government in 1835 and '36 by "Captain" John Lowery (or Lowry). Lowery, assumed to have been an officer in the War of 1812, was a resident of Watertown Township and had purchased this government land as an investment. Although he did not live here, the DeWitt lands soon took on the name "Lowery Plains" by the locals.

Th term "Plains" was a designation given to what were thought to be natural clearings, a rareity in this heavily timbered area. In actuality, most of the natural plains were merely areas which had for years been under cultivation by local Indians.

In 1837, Dr. Hiram Stowell (Clinton County's first probate judge) came up from Ann Arbor with his family and for a time lived in a log cabin on Lowery Plains, located on the south side of the Looking Glass. It is from the writings of Stowell's daughter, Olivia, that I first learned of Chief Okemos' death which occurred there years after her own departure.

OKEMOS.

CHIEF OKEMOS, from a lithograph published in Ensign's 1880 History of Shiawassee and Clinton Counties. Courtesy photo.

Her chronicles fail to make any mention of the status of the camp during her childhood there, but judging from the numerous ancient stone relics found on the old Keyes farm (located on the south side of the Looking Glass) it must have been a well-used site for many years prior to the arrival of the whites.

In 1858, with the onset of another winter, Chief Okemos, one of Michigan's most celebrated Indian leaders, was nearing his end. A common sight in greater Lansing, the newspaper had reported that his health was failing. Area photographers clammored for a chance to photograph the battle-scarred hero. A participant in Tecumseh's great uprising, he also fought with the British during the War of 1812.

Okemos was born about 1770-80 at the Indian village of Ketchewandaugoning near what is now the town of Bancroft. His youth and much of his adulthood were spent at this village but the encroachment of the whites after the 1830's forced Okemos and his "mixed" band to relocate. The area they chose later became the village which took on his name — Okemos.

By the 1850's disease and whiskey had decimated his small band and to add insult to injury, they were again loosing their fishing and hunting grounds to white settlers and also the state's new college. Dams along the rivers and the quick introduction of water pollution added to the decline of fish and game for the "Red Cedar band".

Local historians noted that the camp at Lowery Plains on the Looking Glass was Okemos' "favorite" hunting grounds. I would put it more realistically that it was probably Okemos' last alternative. But perhaps it was his "favorite", it was afterall not too far by river from the place of his birth and in all probability he had come here in his youth.

He and his few followers were here on Dec. 5, 1858 when Okemos died. There were no whites there to document what transpired but it was probably simular to the funeral of Okemos' daughter in 1852 for which there is an account. The Chatterton family who lived near the Okemos settlement attended the night-time ceremony for the daughter at which the mourning Indians danced about the campfire until dawn. A drum, constructed from a deer hide stretched over the end of a hollow log, kept the cadence intended to attract the Great Spirit to the girl's lifeless body. The Catterton's provided a coffin for the girl but the Indians objected to the nailing down of the lid as "she could not get out".

The day following Okemos' death his small band made a procession into DeWitt with their Chief's body on a crude sled. At DeWitt they purchased necessities for Okemos' afterlife: tobacco, gun powder and bullets. They also purchased a coffin in which they placed his wrapped body.

That night (the 6th) the procession entered Wacousta and the casket was placed in the hotel livery barn. The following day the prosession concluded their trek, arriving at the ancient village of Shimnecon (often spelled with many variations near Portland where the Looking Glass and Grand Rivers converge.

Why was he buried here? His biographers make no mention of any kinship with the Looking Glass Indians (although I suspect there was some and the only clue they give is that his daughter (mentioned above) had been buried here in 1852. But whether that was based on kinship or an association with the Indian mission and school at Shimnecon* is still unknown. (*The Indians living at this mission had been removed by the government to the Isabella reservation two years prior to Okemos' death.)

At this remote spot, out of sight from the curiousity of the whites, Okemos was laid to rest — but not for long. It was widely reported that his remains were later unearthed by relic hunters and placed in a glass case by a private individual for the public's viewing pleasure. The assumed site of his burial remained unmarked until 1921, when a large engraved boulder was placed there by the S.T. Mason chapter of the DAR.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

DeWitt remembered:

DEWITT REMEMBERED — The east side of Bridge Street, ca. 1910. From left to right, the old Baptist Meeting House (now Mrs. Ely's Collectibles), Homer Brazee's general store (now Foo Ying Restaurant), Melvin Brooks drug store (burned in 1930), Scott and Linn hardware (still standing), no idea, but it's gone now, and Rouse's (later Reed's) meat market (torn down about 1960).

Pottawattamie Indians fled to DeWitt enroute to Canada

KEN COIN

To profit from the past one has to take the good with the bad. If history is a process of learning where we are by knowing where we've been — and we learn best by our mistakes — it's important to own-up now and then to the bigger blots in our past.

In 1833, by a treaty with the government, the Pottawattamie Indians ceeded the last of their lands in southern Michigan and agreed to leave within three years. They didn't leave and private contractors were hired by the government in 1838 and again in 1839 to round up the Pottawattamie for transport to the far west. These efforts proved of little success so, in the autumn on 1840 the government took matters into its own hands and sent out federal troops from the Garrison at Detroit, commanded by General Hugh Brady, to rid the forests of these Indians.

This particular removal pertained only to the Pottawattamie of southern Michigan — not to the Ojibwa of the Grand, Looking Glass and Maple River valleys. But, due to their activity in the fur trade, the Pottawattamie were no strangers to the Grand River country and it is to here that they fled enroute to Canada.

DeWitt's small role in all of this began when the federal troops reached Ingersoll's Mill (now Delta Mills). John Nichols of Charlotte, who had been recruited by Gen. Brady to serve as a scout, went ahead of the troops and followed the Indians' movement down the Grand to Portland where they picked up the Indian trail which led to Clark's Mill (the McGuire property between Dill and Webb). Nichol then went back to Ingersoll's and led the troops cross-country, directly to DeWitt which was then known only as "Scott's".

Still behind the Indians by several days, Brady and his troops missed all the excitement recounted in later years by Sophronia Scott (Capt. Scott's daughter-in-law). The Scotts were no longer strangers to Indians; they had lived with them and traded with them for a number of years. But with the apprehension of facing hundreds of panic-stricken Indians, the Scotts temporarily abandoned their outlying farms, opting instead to "hold-out" in the Captain's newly constructed hotel and store building (located where Brent and Linda Newman's house now stands at the southeast corner of Washington and Bridge).

From Sophronia's account: *"A body of 500 or thereabouts came through the little village, stopping to beg and clamor for whiskey. Captain Scott was a man of iron will, and perhaps, feeling that the safety of his own household as well as the homes of his neighbors lay in hazardous means, he thrust forcibly and not very tenderly, the most troublesome Indian out of the house. One Indian, bolder than the rest, picked up a stone and twirling it about his head, rushed toward the Captain, making terrible threats....(I) will never forget the terror-stricken and blanched faces of the women in the house at the time. Mrs. Grilley, and old lady and sister to the Captain, said if it were not for her invalid husband, she should go out into the wheat field for the night hiding herself in the tall grain, feeling that it would be the safest place.*

The discouraged Indians set up a temporary camp at the abandoned Ojibwa village of Wabwahnahseepee and in the morning resumed their march. The latch-string was no doubt pulled in that night at most of the cabins up and down the Looking Glass. When the troops arrived a few days later they set up the camp at Scott's and the General and his staff reportedly "dined" with the Scotts.

John Nichols was again sent on ahead to Rochester Colony (in Duplain township). He convinced the minister there to walk a letter back to Scott's uring Brady to pick up the pace as the gap was closing. It took several more weeks of pursuit but after making a full arch through Shiawasse and Genesse counties, the troops finally caught up with the last of the Pottawattamie in Oakland county.

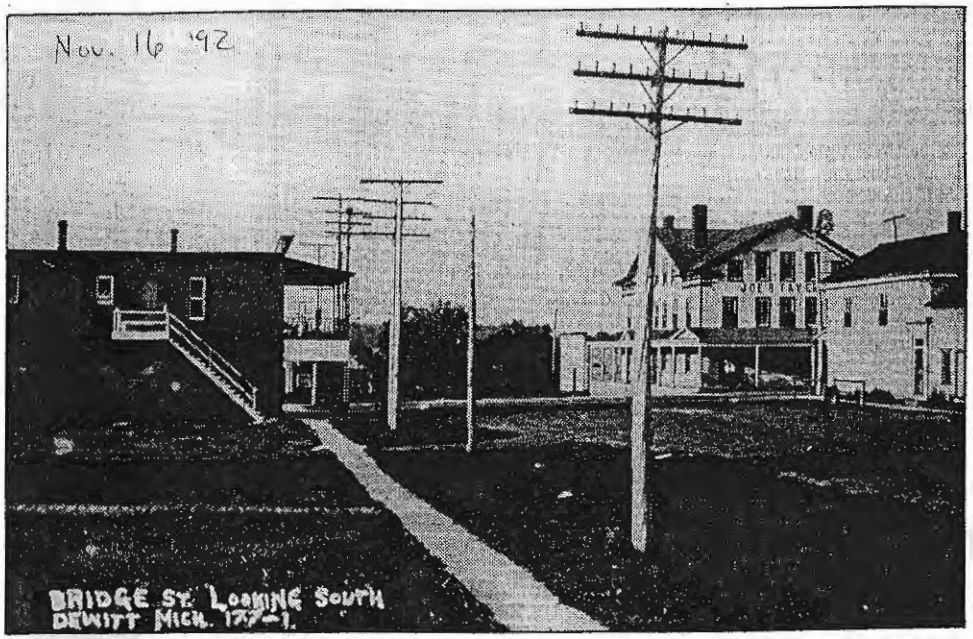
Their attempt to flee to Canada was thwarted and Chief Muckemoot and his tribe were herded back to Owosso to be imprisoned in a hotel and a log cabin which had recently been built as a meeting hall for supporters of Harrison and Tyler in the "Tippencanoe and Tyler Too" presidential campaign of that year. After a considerable length of time the Pottawattamie were transported (some in wagons, some on ponies and many on foot) to reservation lands west of the Mississippi.

It is obvious from reading the settlers accounts of this incident that they reflected on it with mixed emotions. At the time they viewed the Indians as an obstacle to progress which needed to be removed but the deed was not done nor witnessed without some feelings of guilt and most all noted that their absence left a void in their wilderness world.

Even young John Nichols, who took on his task as scout with much enthusiasm, later changed his mind after a "stranger than a soap opera" type coincidence:

In 1850, he and his brother took the overland route to the California gold fields. While traveling on the Missouri River their boat made a landing. Upon stepping off the Nichols' saw a group of Indians but took no particulr notice until one of the Indians approached them. It was an old Pottawattamie named Pete-na-wan and he was soon joined by Si-mas and See-bas and many others. In broken dialects they all conversed, each asking as to the welfare of former adversaries. It was a short and joyous but bitter-sweet reunion.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian



DEWITT REMEMBERED — Bridge Street looking south (from the steps of the Baptist Church) towards Main Street, ca. 1915. Courtesy photo.

Coin offers last word on Indians

People often say "We learned a lot from the Indians." That's a bit condescending considering "we", as a culture, were barely able to scratch the surface of what we could have learned from them. Yes, we all recognize a canoe when we see one and most of us can pronounce Tahquamenon without swallowing our tongues but few of us have any concept of what was really at the heart of Native American culture.

Of their lives here in the Grand River area I could tell you many things — how they buried their maple sugar in bark containers to preserve it, how they poisoned the river with walnuts to stun the fish, how they boiled liquids by tossing hot rocks from the fire pit into large wooden troughs, how they made their exquisite stone tools and how they made portable homes from poles and sheets of bark. These methods of accomplishing fundamental tasks are interesting but when dwelling on these things only, one misses the essence of their lives and our knowledge remains somewhere between the gift shops of Mackinaw and the Saturday Matinee westerns.

We cannot depend on the pioneer for insight into Indian lives. They saw only tattered remnants of a vast network of cultures and they took little notice.

The whites thought it amusing when the Indians suddenly, for no apparent reason, would abandon a village or camp and flee in terror. They did not know the extreme importance the Indians placed on the spirits of the dead — and many of those spirits had a score to settle. The Chippewa had not come to habit this area very honorably. Generations earilier, after a well-laid plan, they had swooped down from the far north and massacred the Sauks who lived here. Their booty, this game-abundant region, was now theirs but it would be many generations before they felt it was safe enough to enter this area. Even then, the wrong turn of a leaf could start a panic that would see the ghosts of slain Sauk warriors lurking behind every bush.

The whites had mixed emotions about Indian honesty and loyalty. The Indian practice of walking into the settler's cabins unannounced, uninvited and asking for food, warmth or shelter was tolerated as an unavoidable nuisance of uncouth heathens. What most whites did not realize was that the Indians were accustomed to obtaining their sustenance whenever and wherever it was needed and taking only that which was actually needed. In a reverse situation their longhouse, hearth or food would have been available without reservation to any white in need of the same. For nothing "belonged" to the Indian — they were merely the custodian, the user and the sharer of the earth's bounty.

Many settlers related how they were often surprised at finding a dressed-out deer, a mess of cleaned fish or other game laid out at their doorstep as a repayment for recent or distant hospitality. But this was not done intending to win favor with the whites; it was simply a necessity in their culture to repay kind for kind. And it could go either way — a favor for a favor, a mistreat for a mistreat. It was law and it was fair, honest and just.

The Indians did not understand why the whites restricted their God to somewhere off in the universe or, more closely, to the atmosphere, like a warm vapor. The Indian's God was in everything; rocks, trees, seeds, earth. God had made everything — God was in everything and everything was in God. It was God who was pushing the streams and the wind. God told the game when to appear and when to hide. A tree was filled with reverent necessity for they were tampering with God. A stone was chipped into a spear point with respect, for that was an alteration of God. Each animal was an individual — some with a purpose of becoming food, others might be a messenger of God and one had to be mindful not to kill the messenger.

The Indian culture, more so than ours, recognized the necessity of death for the possibility of birth. And each death, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, was praised as a spiritual transformation — God's ever-repeating cycle of birth through death and death through birth.

The Indians spirits still haunt this river valley. They may not be the ghosts of slain Sauk warriors with the power to terrorize but they are powerful spirits none the less. In the dry corn fields I see them smiling as they hand-picked their harvest, thankful that the bounty will see them through another winter. Along the river I see them tossing their nets, envoking those fish who should, to fulfill their destiny and swim in. A scrub apple tree at the edge of a clearing finds the elder Indians gladly feasting on the over-ripe windfalls: their teeth long gone (having been ruined by being used as tools in their prime) the rotten fruit is all that's available for needed nutrition.

I can see them dancing around the night fire — their movements telling the stories of their ancient heritage. I see their collective determination as they band together and, one basket full of dirt at a time, generation after generation, build the great earthen mounds for which this county would one day become noted and which, as intended, would endure long after the builders had vanished.

And the spirits are not silent — when I see a deer I hear the Indian's two-part prayer, one part to the deer for appearing and the other, to the God that made it.

Yes, we've learned a lot from them but the more we learn of their reverence for this earth and the more we begin to understand its fragile nature, the more we appreciate that we have a lot of catching up to do.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

Nov. 23, 92

DeWitt remembered:

Clarence Fahnestock Memorial Park

Thanksgiving column reminisces about an older, quieter DeWitt

Once upon a time in the midwest there was a little town which we'll call "DeWitt" (because that was its name). Few people lived in DeWitt on purpose — most were born here and saw little reason to leave. A few people chose to move here for no apparent reason. That usually kept the barber shops buzzing to debate if the "new folks" opted for here as a step up or simply ended up here as a slide down. But, for most all who lived here, Dewitt offered plenty:

Heritage — In DeWitt everybody knew everybody (not by choice but, you just couldn't help it). Everybody in DeWitt was related to somebody else but nobody was quite sure how because every time somebody tried to put it down on paper a blood vessel in their brain would burst.

Professions — Not everybody in DeWitt was a farmer but if you weren't a farmer everybody else knew what you did for a living because you did it in DeWitt (examples; grocer, butcher, bootlegger, etc.). Some people worked in Lansing but their neighbors hoped that someday a real job would come along. If someone asked, "And what do you do?", one would respond, "When?". (Other insipid questions could include "What are you driving?" Response— "A car.").

Ecology — DeWitt didn't need junk pick-up; we recycled nearly everything into something else. The system worked fine until the day the men came to wire for electricity. That's when all the trouble started because Momma (who had "Waste not — want not" embroidered on her forehead) couldn't bear the though of throwing away the dead light bulbs. Those exquisite little orbs of crystal; they had to have some alternate purpose.

Yes, many are the hours she sat in the solitude of the outhouse, contemplating her past achievements and planning strategy for her future. She couldn't allow those bulbs to be her undoing — after all, she had a reputation to uphold. Any Dumb Dora could save used celophone ribbons and bows — but hadn't the Every Other Tuesday Card Club squealed in unison when she casually announced during Pedro that used gift wrap, if carefully smoothed and trimmed, could be steam-ironed and then rolled back onto a card board tube for repeated use? And she nearly busted a gusset in her cotton housedress, swelling with pride every time she recalled the incontinent rapture of the other 4-H leaders as she demonstrated how two bandannas, given a little bias tape and strategically placed darts, could be transformed into a very smart looking summer top for some lucky young Miss.

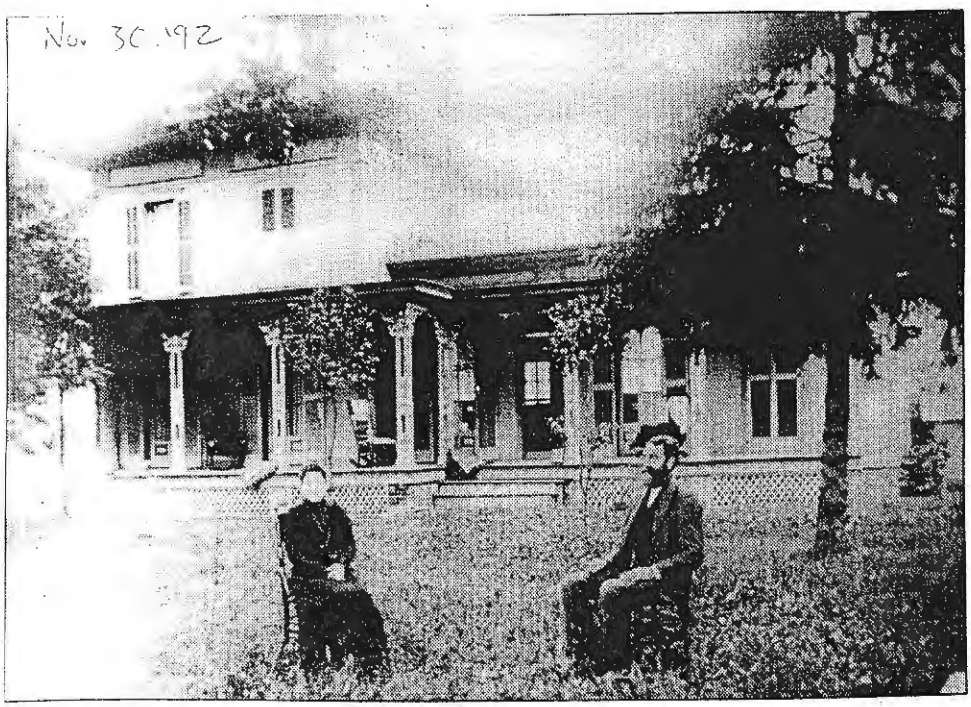
Homes — DeWitt had two types of homes: Small but new... or old but large. Both could be prefaced by the word "too" and neither was preferable but they were good enough for who they were for. In later years they would all be warmly remembered as "home". The family room was the kitchen, the bathroom (if it was indoors) had probably been traded off for what had once been a pantry and the basement — designed by Edgar Allen Poe. If you had a garage it was either a converted carriage barn or a "sleeve", almost (but not quite) big enough for the car.

Community Awareness — Privacy was a rather rare commodity in DeWitt. What one couldn't read between the lines in the local brevities of the newspaper, one could easily pick up from eavesdropping on the party line. But the tricky thing about privacy was that if you had it, people assumed you were doing something immoral and/or illegal. If you didn't have it, you had to be very discreet and watch your P's and Q's. DeWitt teachers were especially encouraged to live in town so that we could have an opportunity to watch their P's and Q's for them.

Culture — Public dances were close to the top of DeWitt's cultural heap. They were family affairs. Even the little kids would go and be tucked-in to sleep in a coat room or hallway. When it came to dances at the Grange, you just couldn't have more fun if you tried. In fact, Daddy and Mommy had a little too much fun at one. Come time to leave, they scooped up thier sleeping beauties, packed them into the Ford and chugged home. Wasn't until the next morning at diaper changing time that they realized their community standing had take a sharp turn for the worse — the little fellow in the crib was not their darling daughter. Momma knew a few discreet phone calls were in order but first why not listen in on the party line — just to see if word had gotten around town yet.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

Nov. 30, '92



MR. AND MRS. DAVID SCOTT PIKE ("Scott and Ola") awkwardly pose for a photo in front of their Chadwick Road farm in Riley (now the Zichke Farm). H. Bradley, travelling photographer. Photo courtesy of Gerald Pike.

Coin gives mind-bending example of DeWitt's intricate family ties

Last week I mentioned the intricate network of families ties in old DeWitt... Well, a while back, Freddie (Tingay) Ford wrote me a note asking for some information on how her ancestors were related to DeWitt pioneers. So, until I have a chance to help her out, the following scenario will illustrate what I meant when I said, "Every time someone tried to put it down on paper a blood vessle in their brain would burst."

Pay attention now, cause I'm only going to go through this mind-bender once. Then I'm going to have to take a nap.

The story starts in the late 1700's in Londonderry, Vt. in the household of Elisha and Abigail Cook who had recently moved there from Providence, R.I. Abigail was a Williams and a direct descendant of Roger Williams, the Separatist whom Gov. Winthrop's Pilgrims kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the founder of Providence.

Among Elisha and Abigail's twelve children were four who connect to current DeWitt: Safety, Joseph, Edward and Nancy Alta.

Safety, the oldest of the twelve, married James Cochran. She died in New York state but her husband and children soon moved to Michigan and settled at Eaton Rapids. Her son married a Naracong (a sister to the Naracongs and Knapps of DeWitt) and two of her grandchildren married one another. Their decendants, the Tingays, later moved to DeWitt.

Joseph and his family moved to DeWitt about 1840 and settled northwest of town. His daughter Abigail adopted her cousins orphan, David Scott Pike. David married Viola Cook, Abigail's brother Amori's daughter (they were second cousins) and his grandmother was Nancy Alta (mentioned further down). Now, Viola had a sister (Ida) whose daughter Edna married Viola and David's nephew George Pike (they too were second cousins by way of their

Who's got a headache? Raise your hand.

Edward settled in southern Michigan but his wife was connected to DeWitt because she was an Utley. Their son Addison (a veteran of the Toledo War) came to DeWitt and married an Antoinette Alexander from north of town and they settled here. Their descendants apparently had a dispensation to marry outside of the family; their daughter Ada married Edward Bedell and some descendants might still be located in Bath or Lansing.

Nothing exciting there — but get out the aspirin for this last one.

Nancy Alta married Mark W. Pike (raised by the same Utley family that Edward Cook married into) and they followed the Utleys from Vermont to DeWitt in the 1840's. Their daughter Alta married David Scott, Jr., a son of DeWitt's founder, and the Scott's son married a Moon (but that's another story). Another of Nancy Alta's sons, James, died young leaving several orphans who were farmed-out to friends and family. One of his orphans was David Scott Pike (see up above). Another was Millard Filmore Pike who was raised by his father's cousin, Amori Cook. Millard later married Amori's wife's neice, Ella Simmons. Ella's mother was her fathers school teacher (now there's a new twist). Millard and Ella's son George married Edna Randall, Amori and Amina's granddaughter. Amina's parents (Ella's grandparents) were Atwell and Lovina (Knapp) Simmons (Riley township's first settlers). Lovina's brother Samuel married one of the Naracong sisters and her uncle, Ebenezer Knapp left a widow who later married Lovina's husband's (Atwell's) father, Ephriam Simmons. And, Atwell's sister Lillis married her own step-brother (Lovina's cousin), Henry Knapp.

Thank you Freddie for that thought provoking question (a SASE will get you a diagram of the whole mess).

Joseph and his family moved to DeWitt about 1840 and settled northwest of town. His daughter Abigail adopted her cousins orphan, David Scott Pike. David married Viola Cook, Abigail's brother Amori's daughter (they were second cousins) and his grandmother was Nancy Alta (mentioned further down). Now, Viola had a sister (Ida) whose daughter Edna married Viola and David's nephew George Pike (they too were second cousins by way of their mutual great-grandparents, Atwell and Lovina Simmons, as well as third cousins on the other side of the house by way of their mutual great-grandparents — Elisha and Abigail Cook. Joseph's son Amori (already mentioned) married Amina Simmons (they weren't related that we know of but, the both were related to the Naracongs'). Descendants in DeWitt from this branch include: Gerald Pike, Wally Cutler, Martha Reed and Bonnie Ward.

DeWitt in the 1840's wasn't a backwoods, dirtwater town

This is the first installment in a two-part column by Ken Coin. The second segment will appear in next week's issue.

One of the most rewarding aspects of researching local history is to be able to take something from the local history books, do some further research, and come up with the rest of the story which the books ommited.

DeWitt in the 1840's was not exactly the backwoods dirtwater town we often imagine. It offered a lot of poteatial for the adventurous Yankees flocking into the then, Far West. Among the typical pioneer wanna-be's, DeWitt attracted a large number of very industrious, well-educated young people, looking for the right opportunity to seize life by the tail.

Open any history of Clinton County and you're sure to find individual mention of three young girls, the Gooch sisters. (No, they weren't a Vaudville act!) They started life in the state of Maine, the pampered daughters of a successful lumber dealer, Benjamin Gooch. The War of 1812 had dealt him an unfavorable hand and trying to regain some of this former wealth, he wagered all he had left on government land in the Territory of Michigan.

The year 1834 finds the Gooch family on a packet boat on the Erie Canal, traveling through New York enroute to Michigan. The journey did not agree with the wife and mother, Lucy (Boyington) Gooch. She had the misfortune of falling overboard one night and was never seen nor heard from again. Undaunted the Gooch's pressed on. The father's destination was Wayne County where he temporarily settled. The three sisters, sticking together, soon moved further and within a few years arrived at DeWitt.

Betsey Gooch (our first sister) arrived in DeWitt just in time to gain the distinction of the being the first teacher at the first school in the county — the Goodrich school which opened about 1836 in a log hut at the corner of Schavey and Howe roads. Shortley thereafter she was woed and wed by another rising star of DeWitt's social elite, Dr. Seth P. Marvin, who had come to DeWitt in 1835 after completing his medical studies ia Macomb County. His parents, "Deacon" Calvin and Deborah Marvin made the first settlement in Watertown Township (now the Lietzke farm on Airport road) and now Seth, upon hanging out his shingle, became the first practicing physician in Clinton County.

Shortly after Seth and Betsey's marriage they moved from the Marvin homestead to the new village of New Albany near the corner of Webb and Bridge street. Aside from his medical practice, Seth pursued local politics and in 1839 (when Clinton County was established) was elected the first county clerk. He went on to become county register of deeds and later Judge of Probate.

Mary Gooch (our second sister), like Betsey, was also a pioneer teacher in this county. Teachers and schools being both a rare commodity then, she taught not only in this area but also in Eagle and Victor townships. But in 1851, she caught the eye of a promising young attorney named Randolph Strickland (I suppose he could have caught her eye.) They settled in DeWitt where he had recently started his practice and built the home where Dan Matson now has his practice on Washington street. Like his brother-in-law, Seth, Randolph also stepped into the arena of politics and after several years as county prosecutor was, in 1860, elected to the Michigan Senate.

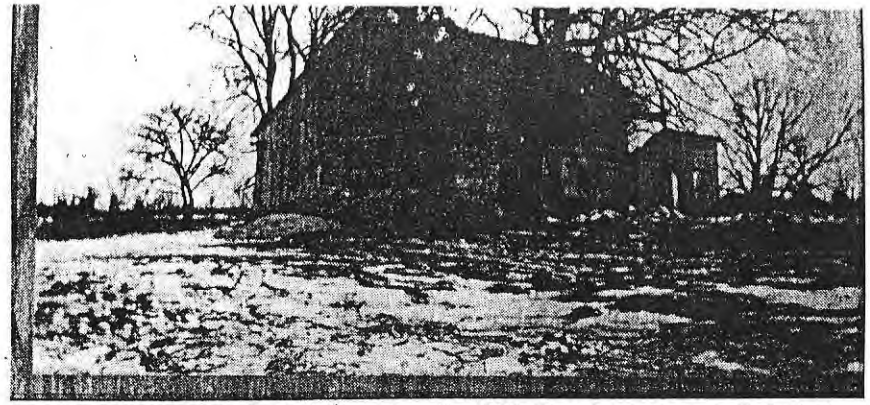
With the county seat being moved to St. Johns in 1856, the Stricklands went too and built one of the town's first "mansions" (it was located where St. Joseph's Catholic Church now stands, on the Courthouse Square). In the early years of the Civil War, Randolph was appointed by the Governor as Commissioner to Superintend the Draft and in 1863 was appointed by Abraham Lincoln as Provost Marshall. In 1868 he was elected to the House of Representatives and the Stricklands moved to Washington.

Olive Gooch (our third sister) had a less glittering life. She married her father's hired man, Stephen Hill, in 1835 and two years later they came to DeWitt, settling a homestead at the southwest corner of Lowell and Herbison roads in Watertown Township. Their beginning was not unlike that of her two other sisters but while the other sisters (and husbands) chased fame and fortune, Olive and Stephen took on the long laborous task of carving a farm from the wilderness.

Here the Hills remained for the rest of their lives, content with raising their six children and step by step, year by year improving their homestead into a productive farm.

Next week: The Rest of the Story.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.



DEWITT REMEMBERED — A typical log homestead of the 1840's, this one was located on the East side of US-27 south at State Road (original settlers unknown), ca. 1920. Photo courtesy of DeWitt Library.

Coin explains The Rest of the Story of the Gooch Sisters

A visit to the DeWitt cemetery will tell much of the rest of the story of Betsey Gooch. Her small white tombstone is there showing she died in 1860, at the young age of 44 years. But the real clue is almost hidden on the back side — the six children she buried within an eleven-year period; all dying at various ages from two months to nine years.

If the premature deaths of his six children weren't enough, the death of his wife proved too much for Seth Marvin. He experienced periods of deep dispondency and depression for which he could find no relief. He remarried and had more children — it didn't help. He changed careers by becoming a druggist — it didn't help. He relocated to Corunna — it didn't help. In 1864, while visiting his former in-laws at the Strickland Mansion in St. Johns, he unceremoniously went into the carriage barn, wrapped a bed cord around his neck, tied the ends to a peg above his head, then sat down on a box and by mere gravity and determination allowed himself to be strangled.

Mary Gooch was once described as "one of the bright lights of St. Johns society" and there are many glowing (no pun intended) memories written of the elegant parties at her stately home and the impressive rosters of dignitaries who were entertained there. She and husband Randolph were the cream of Clinton County society to be sure. But fame is fleeting and Randolph's poor health led him to the state hospital at Battle Creek in 1881 where he soon died. Mary remained mostly alone in the big house for the next 23 years and soon after her death in 1904 it was torn down.

For as many warm accounts that survive of Mary and Randolph Strickland there are an equal number of the not so kind accounts of their three daughters. In a nutshell — they were universally viewed as (to put it kindly) pampered and indulged. Maybe so, but at least one, Martha, perhaps just too many years ahead of her time, shocked the county with her out and out suffragette notions. She became an attorney like her father and is said to have been the first woman to appear in a Michigan courtroom as a defense attorney in a murder case. And if that didn't make one's eyebrows arch up to the hairline, when she married she was brazen enough to retain her maiden name. She was also suspected of smoking little cigars, wearing pantaloons and being paid as a public speaker. "Indecent", some said.

As to Olive Gooch — well the history books leave us feeling somewhat sorry for her. Hitched to a dirt farmer in the country, she seems to have missed out on all the fun. But going beyond where the books leave off we find that she and Stephen Hill shared a life together for fifty years. Yes, they too endured personal suffering; they buried two of their young children and a third died in the Civil War. But at the end of their lives' journey they were surrounded by children and grandchildren and every improvement to their farm was a personal triumph.

Their early home was not of mill-cut lumber like the sisters' and even their last home couldn't compare to what the Stricklands had acheived, but a memory written by their son describes the situation best: "a log shanty, its floor of split logs, with but one window and two doors, it was still home and within it hunger and want were never felt."

There's a lesson to be learned here: Things are not always as they appear — even in the history books.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

CORRECTION: Several weeks ago in a Christmas article I featured a winter photo of the homestead of George and Elizabeth Simmons on the west side of Airport Road. Where was my head? It is (and always has been) on the east side and is now owned by Bob and Lori Welton. Luckily, two readers with a vested interest noticed the error and questioned me. Gerald Pike phoned and Joyce (Phillips) Leach wrote to each tell me that they had grown up on that farm, and last time they checked, it was still on the east side. Joyce and her parents, Winnie and Edna Phillips, lived there "several" years ago. Gerald and his parent, George (the photographer) and Edna Pike lived there "many" years ago.

DEWITT REMEMBERED — The George and Elizabeth Simmons homestead, on the ~~west~~ east side of Airport Road north of Chadwick Road, ca. 1905. George S. Pike, photographer. Photo courtesy of Gerald Pike.

Christmas expectations have changed for us over the years

One Christmas, as we were all sitting around the table belching on our third piece of pie and, as we passed around the platter of cookies and fudge, swearing that we couldn't possibly eat one more bite, we got on the subject of Christmas trees. I asked my grandmother how her family decorated their tree when she was a little girl. She wrinkled her lips and said, "We didn't have Christmas trees when I was a girl."

"You mean there weren't such things, like 'We didn't have TV' or just you didn't have a tree?"

"We never had a tree. We were too poor. Sometimes the neighborhood men would cut a tree for the schoolhouse but we never had one at home."

Then, after digesting for a moment, she went on to tell us about the very first time she saw an actual Christmas tree in a house. She was very young; the year, about 1905.

Her great-grandmother, deciding the she wanted one last Christmas hurrah, invited all the family to her small Airport Road farmhouse for a good old fashioned family Christmas. The immediate family all lived within a few mile radius so that was no problem. She has about a dozen sisters who all lived in Ohio who were (and are still) simply referred to as the "Ohio People". They too were summoned, along with her own mother (who, then about 140 years old, declined).

And so the day came and my grandmother and all her other little red-headed brothers and sisters were piled onto her dad's bob-sleigh, along with the food, the presents and much good cheer. Off they swooshed to great-grandpa and grandma Delp's.

The little farmhouse was busting at the cornerposts with people. There was little room to sit, let alone eat and the childen had to be stacked like cordwood — but the children weren't allowed to go upstairs to play like usual. Great-grandma said that some of the "Ohio People" had spent the night and she didn't want the little ones making a mess of things. So, great-grandpa Delp entertained the kids with his stories of the Civil War.

From the kitchen came a continuous stream of food and treats (real oranges from Aunt Mate in Florida!) until everyone was properly stuffed. Then, the children were lined up, youngest to oldest, in front of the stair door and with a little extra ceremony they were told to go on upstairs. Oh, how they all scrambled up the steep steps to see what was waiting for them.

In the bigger front bedroom, all the furniture had been removed and in its place stood a big fat Christmas tree, all trimmed and with candles glowing. That alone may have been enough of a present but surrounding it was a huge mound of gifts.

My grandma's mother got a box of quilt blocks that day from her great-aunt Sadie in Ohio. In the box was (and still is) a little note: "Dear Maud, hope you can use these". Evidently she thought they were too pretty to use; that same box is now in my attic.

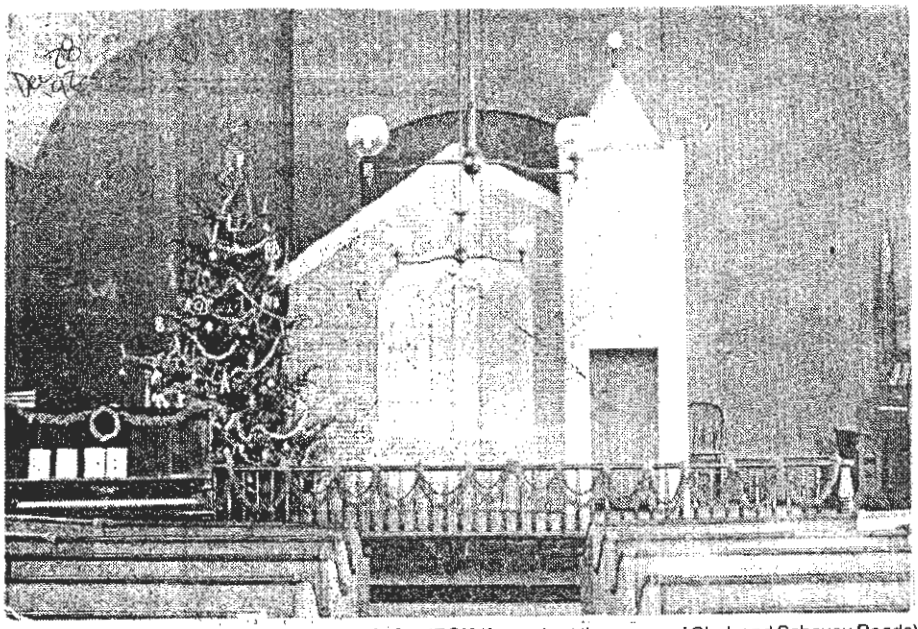
My grandma got a paper fan from her grandmother's aunt in Florida — an advertisement giveaway from an Orlando grocery store. I'm lookin at it right now, on a shelf by my desk. From her uncle Frank she got a tiny blue notebook with gold trim. She spent much of the rest of that Christmas day going from person to person and writing down everyone's name and birthdates on the little blank pages. It's now in my desk drawer.

There is now no one left living who enjoyed that special Christmas at the Delp farm on Airport road. No video games were given that year, no whats-her name's "Dream House" — nothing that even required batteries. In fact, there probably wasn't a gift in the whole lot that cost more than a dime but everyone went away saturated with good memories which have continued nearly ninety years later and on into other generations.

If your Christmas has lost something — don't blame it on Christmas. It hasn't changed one bit — we and our expectations have changed.

May each of you enjoy the gift of a good old fashioned Christmas.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.



THE INSIDE OF THE OLD GERMAN M.E. CHURCH (formerly at the corner of Clark and Schavey Roads) at Christmas, ca. 1910. Look at the fantastic tree; that's no fiberglass imitation — and real candles to boot! As to the church used as a prop on the stage — in your mind's eye put the towered doorway on the other side and see if it doesn't look suprisingly like the church built by the Methodists on Bridge Street 20 years later. A very special holiday thanks to Sandra (Balderson) McDaniel for hand-delivering this picture all the way from Indiana.

Coin brings back memories from a German Christmas

As someone in the back slowly turns down the gasoliers in the sanctuary to quiet the congregation, a lone timid little boy (I think it's one of the Bauerle boys) walks to the center of the stage. He waits for his cue from his teacher sitting hunched in the front pew before saying his part which he's been memorizing for weeks:

"The stage is all set for our Christmas play — we're ever so glad you could join us today."

Only after he's finished does he allow himself to break a proud smile as he quickly takes a seat beside his teacher.

The play is set to a familier theme; the birth of the Messiah. It's a drama that's been reenacted probably more times, in more places, than any other. Yet, as often as we've seen it, and even though we already know the ending, we never seem to tire of it. Especially when it's acted out by children.

The highlight of our play comes of course at the end as Mrs. Hepfer ushers all the youngest children onto the stage. She tries to get all the little angels lined up in a straight row but they keep getting tangled up in each others wings of starched gauze stretched on wire. Tinsel halos bob and sway as the heavenly hosts twist and squirm but their little faces, freshly scrubbed to a bright Christmas red, are cherubim and seraphim incarnate. At last, satisfied, she nods to Mrs. Henning at the piano who softly plays the introduction: (Sing along if you know the words)

Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!
Alles schlaft; einsam wacht.
Nur das traute heilige Paar.
Holder Knabe im lockigten Haar,
Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh, Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh.

Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!
Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht
Lieb' aus Deinem gottlichen Mund
Da uns schagt die rettende Stund,
Jesus in Deiner Geburt, Jesus in Deiner Geburt.

Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!
Hirten erst kundgemacht
Durch der Engel Alleluja
Tont es laut bei fern und nah:

Jesus der Reter ist da! Jesus der Retter ist da!

When the gasoliers are again turned up the room is deafened by mere smiles. Christmas for the German Methodists has again been celebrated.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.