DeWitt remembered:

SOME DEWITT KIDS, JUST A FEW YEARS AGO — Pictured (l. to r.) Marilyn (Brownlee) Hiatt, Ike Coin, Marilyn "Molly" Ruble, Jack Wilcox and Janet Lee Hewitt. In the Wilcox side yard at the northeast corner of Dill and Bridge. Courtesy photo.

Parents play a more active role today with their children

KEN COIN

In years past when summertime came to DeWitt it meant two basics for kids: work and play.

We've all been bored to the brink of suicide listening to our parents go on and one about how we (the younger geration) have no idea the amount of work they were subject to as kids. But, for the most part, exagerations aside, kids today have very little concept of the responsibilities that former generations of kids faced. There were fields to be worked, gardens to hoe, berries to pick, more berries to pick, cisterns to clean, outbuildings to paint, clothes to wash and hang on the line (and it all needed to be ironed), chickens to feed (they don't feed themselves you know), eggs to gather and candle, younger brothers and sisters to raise, hay to bail, the list goes on...and on...

Kids of course didn't jump at the chance to perform these chores. But with mom and dad working to scratch together a living these simple chores were what was expected of the kids as their contribution to the household. There was little compensation other than a plate of food and clean sheets. I wonder Molly if you ever bothered to ask your mother, "Excuse me Doris, but just how much are you going to pay me to run this Maytag full of sheets through the wringer?" I'll bet she would have told you quick enough.

The flip side of the hard work was the freedom that was allowed kids when it came to their play. If kids were responsible enough to work farms and run households they deserved and were given pretty much a free hand when it came to play. The rules were unspoken but well understood by all. It could not involve money (either for equipment or damages), it could not involve parents, and you were to come home when you were hungry (unless you could find someone else to feed you).

Only the most foolish parents would make rules like "Stay away from the river", "Don't get dirty" or "Let me know if you leave the yard". One poor DeWitt boy had to move out of state when word got around that he was seen playing catch with his mother in the back yard. Any type of play involving parents was only done indoors with all the shades drawn.

It was a different world for kids a few generations ago. Maybe better, maybe worse, it's all relative. The upside was that children early on learned independence and self-reliance as well as the value of their work and the consequences of their poor judgement. They were able to roam DeWitt's fields and woods and explore its river and swamps at will without fear; letting their imaginations take them much further than their feet (or dad's car) could ever go. And it didn't cost a dime.

For some kids however, the downside was a missed youth. Their childhood was absorbed with being a parent, a housekeeper or a field hand.

Our current generation of parents places a great importance on playing an active role in our children's play. We call this "Quality Time" and we often go to great lengths to involve ourselves and thereby organize and control our children's play. I ponder this a great deal. Do we do it out of guilt for absorbing ourselves in our careers? Out of regrets from our own childhood? Out of fear that they will grow up too quickly? As a means of extending our own childhood? As a means of insulating our children from bad influence and bad people?

Most children today will undoubtedly have fond memories of their parent's participation in their play but will they miss out on the innocent joy of spending a day with their friends completely free of the sight and sound of parents?

And as to learning the responsibility of working, not just for an allowance but for the betterment of the family as a whole, well I just don't have time to open that can of worms — I have five little league games to attend this week.

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

July 17 '93

DeWitt remembered:

A wedding reception at the new DeWitt Memorial Building, 1950 (the bride and groom look strangely familiar, but I just can place them.) Let's see who else is here...the couple dancing on the right, Jake and Barbara (Hicks) Kirchen...on the far left, sitting back against the wall looks like Albert and Janet (Lankford) Shulz. Dead center is Uncle Dorward with one of his wives but you don't know them. Pretty plain surroundings but everyone looks to be having a good time just the same. If you're confused and can't quite find your bearings as to where this is, it's now the library and the Kirchens are dancing right about where the check-out desk is now located. The band is in the adult fiction section with Jim Staub, and Andy and Eleanor Perry sitting against the wall in juvenile non-fiction. Courtesy photograph.

Support the Memorial Building

KEN COIN

It hardly seems possible that the DeWitt Memorial Building is nearing its half-century mark. I bet if I called up Bertha Lennemann and asked her if it was 48 years ago that she attended the first planning meeting her response would be a long drawn-out "Noooooooo, it can't be!" But I'm afraid so.

The war had only been over for a few months when on Oct. 16, 1945, at the invitation of librarian Rhoda (Reynolds) Pierson, a group of townspeople met at DeWitt's only school building to kick around the idea of building a community center as a memorial to the recent veterans. It was at the time a much needed facility. DeWitt people were tired of trying to cram 200 guests into their home for a wedding reception. The scouts were tired of meeting in garages. The Civic Club and Blue Star Mothers didn't mind small teas in each others' homes but if they really wanted to put on the dog, there was no place big enough. And for just a good old bug-stompin', twirl 'till you hurl dance, the Grange Hall was okay but one good riotous polka and people started bailing out of windows thinking the whole place was going to cave in.

After many meetings and much discussion an all-purpose community hall was decided upon. Bill and Gerda (Jayne) Rogerson actually made the first contribution by donating their backyard for a building site. They had long wanted to offer it as a building site for a library but those plans never got off the ground. So, after it was agreed that this new building would also house the library, the offer was expanded. The minutes of these early meetings are interesting in themselves. Posterity will long be indebted to Gladys (Kelly) Walker for her copious notes and attention to detail as she recorded the flurry of ideas, the disagreements and the compromises. But above all else, her minutes overflow with the great expectations and enthusiasm with which these townspeople worked towards their goal of doing something just downright good for the community.

Preliminary cost estimates ranged from $10,000 for a cement block shell with a furnace to $25,000 for the deluxe model, complete with basement. Needless to say, we opted for the bargain plan. Even still, it carried quite a price tag for the time and Vern and Merle (McLouth) Walker started the donations with a cool $1,000. Equal donations were beyond the means of most, what with driving around on bald tires for the past three years, many would have perferred to see their nest egg spent elsewhere. It was unquestionably a good cause and to a generation who knew little else other than sacrifice, $10 or $20 didn't begin to compare to the ultimate sacrifice that several young DeWitt men had recently made.

And so, it was built; block by block. The building was plain and simple to say the least, but good enough for who it was for and just the way the DeWitt people preferred it. Like our white bread, our Ford sedans, out cracked sidewalks, our new pair of good shoes, our dishes that didn't match, our Brownie cameras and our drab area rugs, the Memorial Building was very "serviceable". And over the years it has done this community a great service; both the building and its by-product, the Ox Roast.

But times and expectations are changing and in response to this, the Memorial Association is trying to update the facility to meet our more demanding expectations and return it to its place as an integral part of our community. Their current paving project is about equal to the cost of the original building, which was built as a community monument to sacrifice; a word which has become almost obsolete in these opulent times. If that amount could be raised 48 years ago it would indeed be a sad commentary on our community, on those remaining townspeople from 1945, and especially on our memory of the veterans if we were to fall short of that same goal today.

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

July 12 1993

DeWitt remembered: Celebrations in the earlier years

Ken Coin

In pioneer times, Independence Day, like Washington's Birthday, was one of the few holidays to be celebrated as a community gathering. Washington's Birthday was a good excuse to break up the monotony of the long winter and because the trails were usually well frozen during that time of the year, it was one of the few opportunities the settlers had for easy travel.

Independence Day offered rutted, but usually dry trails and it happened to fall at a time just when the demands of the farms were at a brief lull: usually between haying and wheat harvest.

In 1843, less than seventy years since the beginning of the Revolution, many veterans of that great struggle were still living. But DeWitt was a new settlement, only ten years old, with a young population. Its only known Revolutionary veteran, William Cole, had died in 1839 but there were many residents who, as youths, had witnessed the sacrafice their parents had made for independence and it was to that memory that they celebrated.

For our review, Olivia (Stowell) Baker included in her 1877 essay of DeWitt, a brief yet enlightening account of Independence Day in DeWitt one hundred and fifty years ago:

"In 1843 we celebrated the anniversary of American Independence, picnic style, on the Indian Green. We had our own flag of bleached shirting, sewing all the long seams and stitching on the strips and stars by hand. It was 60 feet long and seemed a wonderful work to us, when it floated out upon the breeze. Officers for the day, Chaplain, Elder Coburn; Orator, DE Chapin; Reader of the Declaration, Dr. Hiram Stowell; Marshalls, William Utley and Judge (David) Sturgis.

Levi Townsend had charge of the choir and there was martial music by the Cook Brothers. The tables were loaded with all the luxuries obtainable at the time while the forest echoed with merry laughter, and the song mingled with the booming of the heavy anvil joined by an occasional shout or whoop from the dusky sons of the forest who seemed to feel little less joy than ourselves. All were fed, the last table having been filled by Indians who did ample justice to the good things set before them, and all slacked their thirst at a brimming bowl of lemonade dipped with the time-honored tin dipper. All lingered as if loath to leave the place and pleasure of the first general holiday (*) of the pioneers of Clinton County."

Reading between the lines this tells us that DeWitt's first Fourth of July celebration was celebrated by a community picnic, east of town near the site of the former Indian village. They observed it with prayer (by DeWitt's first resident preacher), with a political speech by DeWitt Chapin (one of our first attorneys) and a recitation of the Declaration by the Judge of Probate, Dr. Stowell (the writer's father). There was choir music as well as instrumental music by George and Joseph Cook.

The "booming of the heavy anvil" was the settlers' improvising attempt at making noise. In 1843 there were no firecrackers to be had. There was not even a church or schoolbell in the whole county. There were, however, a few blacksmith anvils at hand which, when struck, could produce a pretty good din.

I wish Olivia would have expanded her memory. She fails to quench my historical thirst. A hand-made sixty-foot flag? Such a thing would even today be regarded as a wonder. Was this a misprint when her essay was published in the Clinton Republican in 1877?

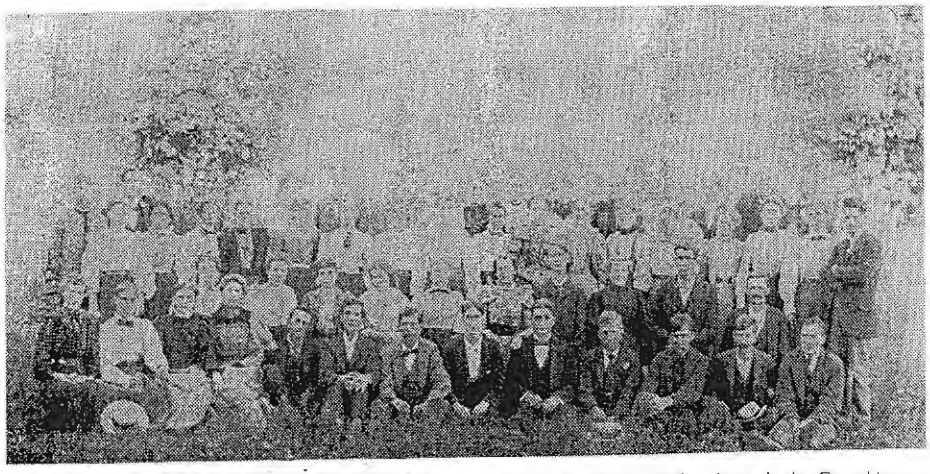
And who were the "dusky sons of the forest" who joined the DeWitt settlers in their celebration? Were there still Indians living at Wabwahnahseepee? Or were these Indians the forerunners of the transient bands which made regular appearances in later years?

(*) Mrs. Stockwell's recollection of July 4, 1843, early as it may have been, was not the first. Celebrations had been held in previous years.

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

July 26 '93

DeWitt remembered:



MYSTERY PHOTOGRAPH — This is a mystery photograph that has been in the Faye Hanson Public Library's collection for many years. It may have been purchased from the Maud Cutler estate in 1956. It was taken on the Washington Street schoolyard about 1895 by H.J. Newcomb.

Coin seeks information on photograph from 1895

By KEN COIN

It's been a little too humid for research and writing these past few weeks. And besides, I'm up to my elbows in making jelly (I live for the berry season) so, I'm going to play hookey this week and just pull something out of the grab-bag.

This is one of those mystery photographs which has been in the library's collection for many years. I believe Faye Hanson purchased it from Maud Cutler's estate in 1956. It was taken on the Washington Street schoolyard about 1895 by HJ Newcomb. On the back is very old writing, "DeWitt, Mich. Summer Normal". None of the individuals were identified but I have been able to pick out three young men: Marc Cutler, George Pike and Harry Moon.

Summer Normal was like a summer school for wanna-be teachers to get certified prior to the coming year. I have never been able to find any record that "Normal" of any kind was ever conducted at DeWitt but this shows some proof that it must have been held here at least once. If you don't know what "Normal" was (and we've had this discussion before,) all I can say briefly is, it was somewhat akin to Community College; it also usually involved teacher training.

I doubt that these young people were all from DeWitt proper; there weren't this many young people living in DeWitt then. In fact the presence of Marc Cutler and George Pike goes to show how far afield some of these people may have come to attend. At that time Marc Cutler lived at the corner of Francis and Cutler Roads, and George Pike lived on Airport Road north of Chadwick Road. Harry Moon? Well, he was a home-boy.

A closer study of the faces reveals also that all of these people were not quite so young. There are several middle-aged people present but whether they were members of the faculty or themselves teachers receiving a refresher course, I don't know.

PS: I have a few things in the works for future articles but need some old pictures — So, if you DeWitt natives happen to know the whereabouts of any of the following, please let me know:

- Corner of Round Lake and US-27 taken in the 1920's or 30's.
- The George Keck farm on Wood Road.
- The Tucker farm at US-27 and Herbison Road.
- William H.H. Knapp.
- The Ed Klaver farm on Round Lake Road.
- The Dills farm at Cutler and DeWitt roads (with cupola please).
- The Gunnisonville Store.
- A peppermint still.

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

Courtesy photo

THE WOLVERINE CONNECTION – Pioneers of a later generation, the log homestead of Mark and Emma (Moon) Scott still stands guard on a hilltop north of Wolverine, Michigan. (1983 photograph).

Michigan town Wolverine has family ties to DeWitt

By KEN COIN

If your vacation takes you to the far north of the Lower Peninsula you might be interested in knowing that DeWitt has much in common with the small town of Wolverine, located abut 40 miles south of Mackinaw City.

A close look at road signs and gravestones of the area's cemeteries give clues that the connection is "family" - many of them but too long ago for most to remember.

In the early 1880's, with the loggers leaving much of northern Michigan cleared and available for sale, many second and third generation descendants to DeWitt pioneers were leaving this area to experience for themselves pioneer life in the great north woods. A few, like brothers Elisha C. and Jacob "Sidney" Pike, had earlier joined in the logging operations and through their travels saw first hand some of the land that would soon be made available.

As to the high concentration of DeWitt folks who made their way to the Wolverine area, the Pike brothers appear to be the first and it was probably through their influence that so many more followed. Their sister Altie had married David Scott Jr. and her two maverick sons, Mark and James Scott, soon followed their uncles' lead and each established a hilltop homestead on opposing sides of the Sturgeon River at the settlement of Rondo, north of Wolverine. After them came many more DeWitt folks with names such as Webb, Osgood, McKee, Marshall, Briggs, Thorp and probably many others.

I don't know the real reason the Scott brothers set out to try their hand at pioneer life. If Mark and James went to search of the same excitement and self-fulfillment which their father David and grandfather, Capt. Scott, had experienced in settling DeWitt, I doubt if they ever found it – their "frontier wilderness" was much different. Much of their homesteads had already been cleared by the logging industry which had also left in its path a network of roads, railroads and telegraph lines - all within sight of the Scotts' cabins. Yes, the Scott brothers each built their home of logs, but that was certainly by choice rather than necessity as sawn lumber was then abundant in northern Michigan. And whereas, the Scott settlement at DeWitt in the 1830's was a two-day trip from any form of civilization, these Wolverine homesteads had relatively easy access (by horse or train) to the commerce of Petoskey or the high society of Harbor Springs and Bay View.

James Scott's home at Wolverine no longer stands but that of Mark and Emma (Moon) Scott is still standing in remarkably good condition. A photograph of the house (now in the possession of Helen Moon) taken nearly 90 years ago by Harry Moon (the Scott's nephew) while visiting there with his parents shows virtually no change over the years. It has been well taken care of and the farm itself, interestingly enough, is the winter home to many of the Mackinaw Island draft horses.

I have been to the house on several occasions, walked its grounds and tried to interpret its message. As a well-preserved example of a late-19th century northern Michigan homestead, it is very beautiful but a remarkable fraud. Yes, it's undoubtedly of that age but I'm afraid that rather than an example of what a northwoods family would have constructed by necessity - this is a well-planned design of what Mark (and possibly Emma) desired. I think it's quite possible that this was their clever way of achieving their interpretation of the lifestyle they had heard so much about as children but had been born just a little too late to remember themselves.

If that sounds a little too calculated consider how many of us remodel our homes to give them an older, more "established look"; fill our china cupboards full of Depression-glass and Jewell Tea china; dress in poodle skirts and leather jackets and go to a "50's Dance" (even if we're to young to remember the songs or the dance steps); buy brand new oak furniture styled "just like Grandma had". Like many people today who try to convey an illusion of wholesome country lifestyle I think it's probable that the Scotts' could afford to maintain a preferred illusion of the simple pioneer life.

It is private property but if you want to see it for yourself: follow Old 27/Straits Hwy north out of Wolverine - after about a mile you come to Scott road but don't turn on it - another mile on 27 and you turn left at Haakwood (it might be called Watson road, then again, it might not) - go about fl of a mile until the road ends at Bilder road. Turn right on Bilder, downshift, squeeze the steering wheel, hold your breath and drive straight up the hill. There really is a top to the hill and Mark and Emma's old home is there at the end of the road. (If you wait until the fall color is full you get a double delight.)

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

Aug 93

Photo courtesy of Faye Hanson Public Library

A summer scene of about 1901 (at Alward Lake?) Only the couple on the right has been identified: Floyd Furgason and Olive Averill (they later married). Photographer unknown.

Coin specializes in wildflowers

KEN COIN

Hasn't this been a marvelous summer for wild flowers/weeds? I know the pigweed in my garden has never done better. Just out of curiosity I looked up some of the more abundant weeds in my garden to find out specifically what they were and I made a startling discovery - most of them are foreigners!

The pioneers who first came to DeWitt brought with them several things which altered the landscape forever, including disease and the broad axe. The former decimated the Indians and the later leveled the great forest. Something else they brought, which had never before occurred to me, was a profusion of weeds which were not native to either this area nor this continent.

We've all been told that the dandelion originated in Europe; that's old news. But when the settlers came here they quite unconsciously brought many other seeds snagged in the oxen's tails, tucked in the crevices of the wagon bed and clinging to their clothing.

I can only imagine the Indians' reactions the first season when a six-foot burdock sprung up in the middle of their corn field. Did they join hands and pray to it? Did they form a committee to investigate what its possible uses could be? Did they draw straws to see who would be the first to try eating it? Judging from the list of now common weeds which made their presence known within a short time-span, and judging from the Indians' nack of finding a use (or meal) out of every known plant - I'd say they kept themselves pretty busy running from one out-break of new weeds to the other.

Curious to know what wildflower/weeds began dotting DeWitt's fields in the 1830's? Well, I'm no botanist but the following is a listing of some of the European immigrants: Sowthistle, Teasel, Wild Carrot, Queen Ann's Lace (Yes Virginia, there really is a difference between the two), Chickory, Bull Thistle, Devil's Paintbrush, Pig weed, Goat's-beard, Northern Bedstraw, Common Yarrow, Chickweed, Loosestrife, Ground Ivy, Catnip, White and Yellow Sweet Clover, Common Hound's-tongue, Common Motherwort, Flannel-plant, Hairy Vetch, Knapweed and Common Tansy.

Some of these names are familiar, while some sound more like ingredients from some old crone's Medieval cookbook. But if you saw the actual plant you'd certainly recognize most as the stuff you spray with weed killer every spring. Yet, their obnoxious fortitude aside, they're here to stay and many offer a pleasing texture to the summer landscape - the intricate white netting of Queen Ann's lace; the unequaled shade of violet of the thistle; the soft blue blur of chickory along the roadside and the added beautiful aroma of sweet clover in the ditches.

Until I learned all this, I was embarrassed by my disgusting weed-patch garden. Now, I think I'll hold my nose high and tell everyone, "I'm specializing in European wildflowers."

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here bi-weekly on a rotating basis with Reflections of Bath by Gene Wilkins.

Aug 30 '93

DeWitt remembered:

Courtesy photo

EAST MAIN STREET, 1918 – The two unidentified children here are standing in the front yard of the new fieldstone house of the Treadwell family (now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Chet Church). The barn to the right, which proudly announces "Arbaugh's – Lansing's Greatest Store," is about where city hall is now located. Far in the background, where the narrow dirt street curves to become Round Lake road, you can barely make out the roof tops of several barns on the south side which I believe were later moved by Del Rose to be incorporated with the stockyards of the Rosevale plant further east. Only the windmill (faintly visible to the right of the barn roofs) remains on the site and still stands in the front yard of the Pioszak home. In the left background you'll no doubt notice the absence of the pine trees of the Retreat house. Those now stately trees weren't even pine cones when this picture was taken.

DeWitt library receives donation of old photos

Recently, I got a call from Don Harnish who said he had a bunch of old photographs he wanted to find a new home for. The result of his thoughtfulness is a treasure chest donation to the DeWitt Library of several hundred photographs dating from the 1860's to the 1920's - enough to keep me busy cataloging and writing about for a very long time.

The pictures are a conglomeration of postcards, snapshots, tin types, school pictures and studio portraits. Amazingly, only one picture is a duplicate of anything currently in the library's large collection.

The majority of the pictures are tin types of the ancestors of the ancestors of Mr. Harnish's late wife Delma, which include the DeWitt pioneer families of Young, Dunham, Treadwell and Case. But intermingled among these are many pictures of other pioneer families including the Lemm, Blood, Dills, Furgason, Rouse and Gillett clans. These will undoubtedly become much appreciated by future DeWitt genealogists.

In terms of general interest, the gems of the collection are the snapshots (like the one above) from the album of the late Reva (Treadwell) Derham. Before she left DeWitt in the early 1920's, she captured for posterity numerous street scenes and houses in DeWitt as well as several outlying farms. Her photographs illustrate the quaintness of old DeWitt that words such as mine could never adequately describe: ladies in white cotton dresses catching the breeze on a wide shaded porch; the relaxed lollygagging of the Methodist congregation as they disperse on Sunday morning; the parking lot of the "Club Roma" in 1925; the youthful exuberance of a road trip in two of DeWitt's first automobiles and even something as simple as a DeWitt matron hanging out her wash.

I hope Mr. Harnish realizes just how much these photographs will be appreciated by future generations who go to the library to see (rather than read) what DeWitt was like many years ago.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and one of the area's leading historians. His column appears here biweekly.

DeWitt remembered:

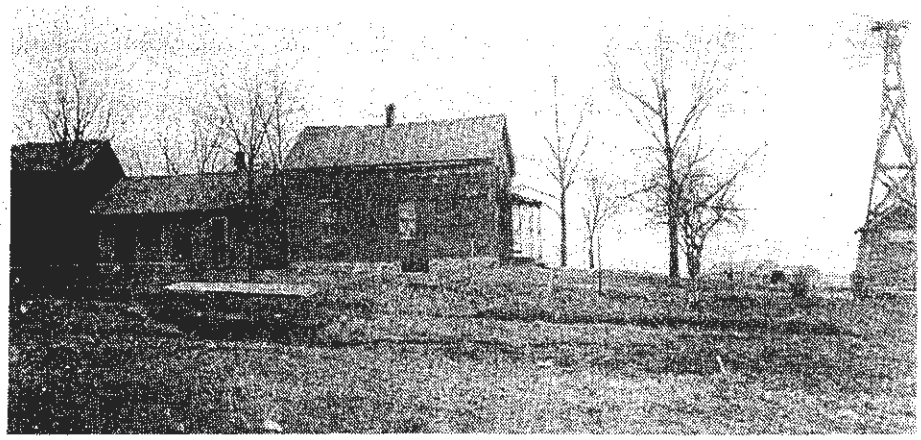


Photo courtesy of Don Harnish

THE TREADWELL FARM ON EAST MAIN STREET IN DEWITT, ca. 1918. The vantage point of the photographer would be standing in the driveway of Chet Church's house looking west across the lot where Edith Hayner's new home is now located. This photo is from the snapshot album of Reva (Treadwell) Derham, courtesy of Don Harnish.

Edith Hayner's new home isn't the first on this land

By KEN COIN

Something's happening on east Main Street in the wooded lot between the Catholic Retreat and Edith Hayner's new home.

Trees are coming down and dirt is being moved: a sharp-eyed excavator might find something interesting there besides the rock piles and old foundations. This small lot just happens to be one of the oldest home sites in Clinton County and as the above photo shows, it has gone through quite a change in the past few generations. It just goes to show how quickly we humans can turn a woodlot into a building lot and in turn, how quickly Mother Nature can reclaim her own.

Before Capt. Scott put his plat of DeWitt on paper there were other platted villages in the vicinity. One called Middletown was located on the north side of the river and exactly east of the old plat of DeWitt. Without putting you to sleep with exact legal descriptions of the placement of Middletown, just imagine that it was roughly the property which now incorporates the Catholic Retreat, Earl and Esther Klaver's farm and the new homes along the south side of east Main.

Middletown did not survive the economic panic of 1839 and when the "village" was sold by the state for back taxes in 1842, David Sturgis, DeWitt's first merchant north of the river, was one of the buyers at that sale. He soon added to this purchase by buying the entire east portion of Capt. Scott's platted village, which included the lands this house would occupy. Judging by the tax rolls, Sturgis built this house (or substantially added to it) between 1847 and 1852.

When the whistle of the first locomotives lured Sturgis to St. Johns in the mid 1850's he sold this house to JW Gardner, who used it as home base for his large farm. His farm was bordered on the south by the river, on the north by Cutler Road, on the west by DeWitt Road and on the east by the farm now owned by Jim Wadel.

In 1868, Gardner reduced the size of his farm by selling off everything on the north side of Main Street/Round Lake road.

The new owners of this old house was the family of Orrin and Lorana Pennell. Forty years later it passed to their youngest son, Mark (John and Marjorie's father) who lived there until about 1910 when he built a retirement home at 210 E. Main and sold the farm to the Treadwell family.

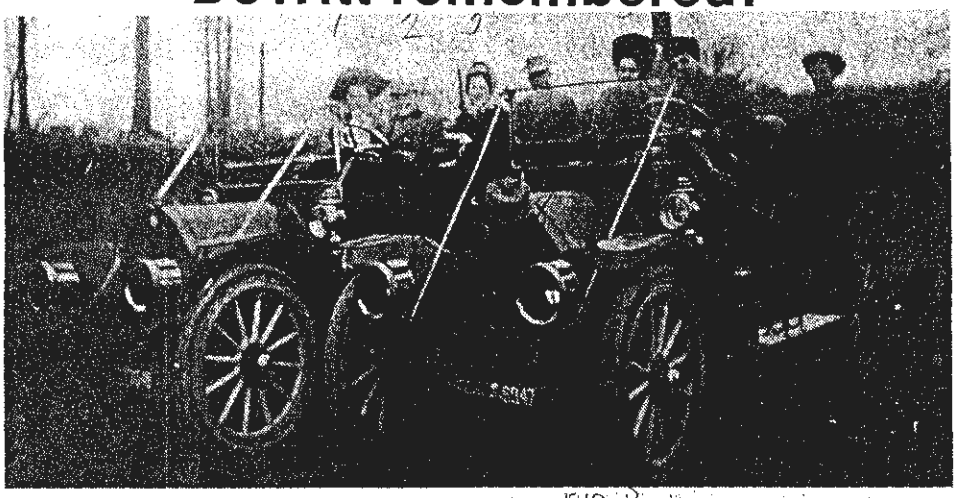
It was Charles Treadwell, a thresher in the DeWitt area for many years, who purchased the house and farm on the north side of Main street, with brothers John and Edward Treadwell buying the lands along the south side.

Charles and May (Dunham) Treadwell, with their two daughters Ila and Reva, lived in this house until 1918 when they moved to their newly-built stone house on east Main now owned by Chet Church. After that date the old house fell into disrepair. What happened to it? I can't find the answer. As is too often the case it's the more recent history I have trouble with. It appears in an aerial photo of DeWitt of the mid-1920's but after that? I've asked many people who remember the house and barns being there, then remember them not being there but don't recall how they came to "not be there". Judging by the size of some of the trees in that lot, I'd say it's "not been there" for a very long time.

As to the farm lands which would later become the Catholic Retreat, the Surratt family bought Charles Treadwell's farm in the 1930's and slowly transformed the rolling fields with the planting of pine trees.

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

DeWitt remembered:



1910 Reo's Model H

Photo courtesy of Don Harnish

ROAD TRIP – Ca. 1915. Dyle Linn photographer.

The automobile changed DeWitt like nothing else

KEN COIN

Among the hundreds of photographs recently donated to the library by Don Harnish, this one stands out among my personal favorites. It is a perfect illustration of a new generation embarking on a new age; the age of the automobile. Nothing had an impact on the structure of DeWitt which matched the introduction of automobiles.

Dyle Linn, the photographer, is generally regarded as DeWitt's first auto dealer. He opened his Ford garage about 1914, possibly in conjunction with his father's livery and feed barn. He remained in business until 1920 when he sold out to a partnership under the name of Pennell and Coverdale.

But let's not spend any more time talking business history - let's gossip a minute about the names and faces. The big hat identified as #1 in the picture rests atop Reva Treadwell, the original owner of this picture. She's the one responsible for writing the numbers on the face of the picture. A daughter of Charles and May Dunham) Treadwell, she later married a DeWitt fella, Jack "Ray" Derham, a young lawyer from Corunna who had come to DeWitt to practice law but worked at the post office to earn a living. He later distinguished himself in two world wars and was, for a time, a state legislator. Not wishing to remain big fish in a little pond, they followed the bright lights to become littler fish in a much bigger pond.

Number 2 Lawrence Woodruff and his sister Lorna (#5) were children of Clayton and Clara (Lorenz) Woodruff. Their father was the town banker, so nice auto's quickly became a way of life. I don't have any good gossip about Lawrence or Lorna, (they've got too many relatives in the area for me to repeat it if I did) but I do have one "pearl" relating to Lawrence's wife, Elsie. Years ago DeWitt's social scene consisted of town dances. At one particular dance at the Grange Hall my grandfather, who evidently had not been told that there was national prohibition on alcohol, had about two too many. He asked Elsie for a whirl around the floor but imagine her surprise when he began teaching her how to do the Black Bottom! What an unfortunate situation. Poor Elsie: How could she ever explain this spectacle next Tuesday at the DeWitt Women's (and molded Jello) Club. Poor grandpa: don't think for a minute that grandma wouldn't hold this little social faux pas against him for the rest of his life.

Number 3 Hazel Bray is one of those people who could probably be noted as "ahead of her time". That is unfortunate because I think she was right on cue. She was a professional woman who never married and had a career in Lansing. She lived in a big house on the corner of Madison and Franklin and day after day, smartly decked, she would drive to her office in Lansing. For years DeWitt housewives with four loads of laundry already on the line and a sink full of greasy breakfast dishes to wash would look out their windows with the corners of their mouth turned down and say to themselves, "There goes Hazel, poor woman, hasn't got a living soul to be subservient to." About 40 years ago she retired and moved to Lansing. She died only a few years back, over 100 years old.

Number 4 Fred Vail went into partnership with Del Rose prior to 1920 to form the Rosevale Packing Co.

Number 6 John Hunt's family owned the drug store at the southeast corner of Main and Bridge prior to the Brooks family.

Number 7 Bessie Webb was among the last of Capt. Scott's descendants to live in DeWitt. After her marriage to Dyle Linn, they began building the house on Scott street which is now owned by Ted and Cathy Mitchell. (It was, coincidentally, only a few feet from where her great-grandparents had built DeWitt's first log cabin in 1833.) But the Linns' left DeWitt to follow their dream to Hollywood. Dyle's dream was not to become a movie star but to become a furnaceman to the stars with his brother-in-law Bert Scott. It was the Linn's twin sons Carrol and Traverse who had visions of stardom. Billed under the singular (and clever) stage name "The Linn Twins", their short career consisted of a bit part (actually two bit parts, if you'll pardon the pun) in an RKO western that I had never heard of and forgot the name anyway. Ralph Woodruff saw it and told me he liked it, but only because it had Andy DeVine in it.

Who would have ever imagined, Capt. David Scott's offspring sharing the silver screen (if only for a moment) with Andy DeVine. Just goes to show what the automobile age has done for DeWitt history.

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

DeWitt remembered:

Photo courtesy of Faye Hanson Public Library

THE WILLIAM MARZKE FAMILY OF RILEY, 1902 – Pictured (back row, l to r) Emma, Theordore, Martha, Albert and Anna, (front row) Otto, Marie, William F. (father) and Minnie

Clinton County history book being republished

In 1980, several individuals under the leadership of the Clinton County Historical Society completed several years of work with the publication of an enormous county history. The original purpose was to account for what had happened in the county in the 100 years since the last major history book of 1880. It met its objective, and the 1,100 page book, already a prized collector's item, is impressive in both weight and content. Not only does it cover that 100-year span, it goes beyond that into areas of the more distant past to cover areas omitted in 1880 (and corrects a few untruths). But perhaps the best part of the book is its several hundred family histories, all written by amateur genealogists and included at no cost to the contributors.

The ink was barely dry however, when a great moan was heard across the land. There was wailing and gnashing of teeth, tearing of garments and smearing-on of ashes – in short, there were a whole lot of folks who were plain disgusted with themselves for not getting it in gear and submitting their family histories. Well, take heart – you don't have to wait another 100 years. The Clinton County Historical Society has reactivated plans for nnother book. So get out your pencils, scrap books, photo albums and family bible and get to work. And please, don't think you need to belong to one of the county's "old families". Histories are being accepted from any family currently living in the county or who have lived here in the past.

Often, just a simple obituary will give the basics for a good family write-up. By coincidence I happened upon one last month for William Martzke, pictured above with his children:

(June, 1904)

Killed by Horse

Lived in Riley 21 years

"Last Saturday evening William Martzke, of Riley, fed his horses some grain and then removed some setting hens for the stable. One flew from him against the horse, which reared and kicked Mr. Martzke twice in the breast. A doctor was called and his injuries were not regarded as dangerous. On Sunday evening he began to grow worse and continued so until 1 o'clock when he died. He was conscious until death and he kept wishing that he could have seen his daughter, whom he had not seen since her wedding day two years ago, and who was coming to visit him in two weeks from her home in the upper peninsula. His sudden death came as a great shock to the family as well as the community. He was a kind father and an upright honest man.

"William F. Marzke was born in Alt Malzhow, Stolp, Germany, Dec. 15, 1845. He served three years in the German standing army and fought one year in the French and German War. He was married to Miss Hannah Yanz and after moving to Ohio they moved to Michigan and settled on the farm where he was killed. Thirteen years ago his wife died of cancer at Orion. Seven years ago lightning struck his barn and killed one of his horses and a year later his son, Paul, was drowned at Merle Beach. At the death of his wife he was left with nine children and an aged father...Mr. Martzke was a member of the German Lutheran Church of Lansing."

Mr. Martzke has a good number of descendants still living in DeWitt and his grandchildren, I'm told, get together once a year. This should give them a good basis for a great family history. Helen, you've been elected family secretary – the others will fill in the details. Start writing!

For more information or guidelines send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Family History Forms, P.O. Box 174, St. Johns, MI 48879.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here bi-monthly.

DeWitt remembered: Coin points to other historians

KEN COIN

There's one thing that bothers me- being termed "DeWitt's Historian". It conjures up in my mind an image of some over-the-hill doofus with uncombed hair, ratty old clothes and cheap shoes who gets confused over which century he's living in. Well, okay, maybe that is me, but that's beside the point... I'd like to introduce to you a few individuals who I consider to be DeWitt's real historians

David Scott, Jr. was probably the first to make a definite effort to record the great transformation he had witnessed here in Dewitt. He had a lot to say; after all he was here from the very beginning in 1833. Much of what was published in the 19th century dealing with DeWitt and early county affairs was unmistakably based on interviews with Scott. He was a wealth of information but unfortunately he wrote only one essay himself, published by the Michigan Pioneer Society in 1890. It gives good information as to the settlement of DeWitt but remains disappointing in that he reveals so little of what he knew. When he died in 1895 his world had not yet turned upside down with the introduction of electricity, telephone and automobile into daily life. What we know relish as historical treasure was still commonplace and taken for granted in his world.

A close look at David's life and its easy to come away with the opinion that he was a jinx. His whole life seems to be surrounded by tragedy. Beginning in 1838 when he is rumored to be the one who threw the lever at the new sawmill which ended minutes later with his brother's decapitation, the remainder of his life is filled with people going off the deep end or dying or both. Perhaps that's why he didn't throw himself into writing his experiences. But he did lay the groundwork for future historians.

William H. H. Knapp, of whom I've written before and who you will undoubtedly hear from again, was a terrific oracle of history in his day. Most of his written history he kept to himself and it was not until after his death that his journals were discovered, published in the county newspaper, and then (I assume) lost again. Having seen the wilderness of his youth swept away by technology his keen insight motivated him to document facts which he felt should be preserved for posterity. His writings deal with firsthand accounts of subjects found nowhere else: how the surveyors marked off the land, eyewitness accounts of the Indians, the operation of the first schools, the pioneers' desperate thirst for religion and the common desolate plight of the settlers. As his writings were never intended for genteel publication he did not soft-soap his sometimes candid opinions.

William tried in vain to hold to the old ways and warn of bad times to come. He detested automobiles, had no desire to ride in one and expounded on their being Satan's chariot. But he set an example of the importance of recording change as it was happening and of documenting that which seemed ordinary.

Agnes Pike, who was married three times but I'll refer to her by her maiden name so as not to confuse you, was probably the first that I've come across who wrote from research rather than experience. A descendant of numerous pioneers and related to nearly everyone in four townships, Agnes early in life began a comprehensive genealogy of most of DeWitt's earliest families. Besides various historical essays her genealogy manuscript is chock-full of folksy tales of pioneer times.

Photo courtesy of Faye Hanson Public Library.

Agnes Pike, DeWitt's former "primary historian", all gussied-up to serve as bridesmaid at the wedding on Minnie Norris and Loren Hill.

Agnes is probably better remembered as the woman who didn't understand the importance of preheating her oven. The result was a three-layer cake only two inches tall (but darn moist!) Yet she was able to see the tremendous importance of the wisdom of the elderly. And her organizational skills allowed her to sort and document one of the most tangled and interwoven family genealogies that ever was.

Faye Hanson, DeWitt's long-time librarian, was rarely a researcher but instead concentrated on collecting. Pictures and documents went to the library; oral history, who-was-related-to-whom and pioneer gossip were all filed in the back of her mind. Probably her most important but least known contribution to our preserved history was her efforts in 1956 to obtain the Cook family letters- a collection of several hundred correspondence between members of an area family between 1841 and 1913, including a vast amount of letters written by four members of that family who went off to the Civil War. She is probably better remembered for being the first to bring local history to the public in her weekly column in the old DeWitt Advertiser.

Faye was just Faye, a blunderbuss in polyester. A tremendously versatile woman she could go from lunch with Ma & Pa Kettle to tea with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and be just as comfortable as an old shoe at both houses. She was criticized for collecting more old "dirt" than an Electrolux sweeper but it's that personal trivia which adds splashes of color to the dreary grays that too often suffocate history.

Each, during their lifetime, were respected for their historical knowledge among the local gentry-loved by some, avoided by others. So, if we meet and you ask me if I'm DeWitt's historian and the only response you hear is the grinding of my teeth... It's really not so much the title that I mind but more the reputation that goes with it of being "one bubble off plump".

Development is covering the real old stuff in DeWitt

By KEN COIN

Who would've ever thought we'd live to see cross-walk signals at the intersection of US-27 and Clark Road? And a mall? And five (count'em, five) traffic lights between Clark and Round Lake roads?

I can't handle it.

So what did we give up in exchange for this progress at the four corners? Well, not too much in recent years, but it's the old stuff, the very oldest, which concerns me. What time and nature have been so carefully burying over the past 150 years is now being plowed away be earth movers.

Some of DeWitt's oldest residents will remember when Clark and US-27 was known as Livermore Corners. That was a rather recent name, given after US-27 was opened in the 1920's and a gas station sprung up. Prior to the turn-of-the-century, it was not a four corners at all. What is now US-27 was only open between Webb and Clark. The mile and half south of Clark Road, though the marsh, was merely a section line on the map. And north of Webb Road, the road did not pick up again until north of Round Lake Road.

DeWitt Road was the main thoroughfare and stage route which connected Lansing to St. Johns, via DeWitt. That is why it is called "DeWitt Road."

A few of the earliest settlers to this intersection commented (without giving any detail) that Indians used the northeast corner for a camp. This was somewhat substantiated 20 years ago by the extraordinary amount of stone and pottery artifacts which were unearthed when the highway department was kind enough to carve out the road bed for US-127. Whatever may have been left at the corner itself has now been pretty much hauled away or paved over by the mall's parking lot.

I believe the Samuel Smith family were the first settlers to occupy that corner. Later, and for nearly 100 years, it was known as the Livermore farm.

The southwest corner was first settled about 1850 by the Hockenbury family. Their house and barns faced Clark Road and were located on the small rise just west of the corner. This was later to be the Edwin Hewitt farm before it was split into small parcels. Later still came the Northway Sporting Goods store which remained in business until recent years.

Both the northwest and southeast corners were settled in the 1840's by Edward A. Gunderman. The southeast corner offered little except a sharp decline into the marsh. The northwest corner, come to think of it, didn't offer much better prospects. Perhaps that's why it took the federal land office nearly 20 years to unload it.

The property on the southeast corner eventually became part of Paul Dunham's substantial (albeit untillable) farm. His house and barns were actually much further east on Clark Road near Gunnisonville. The old four-square house currently at the corner (in front of the mobile home park) was build about 70 years ago and became the Bradley filling station after US-27 was put through.

Gunderman's property on the northwest corner was eventually split into smaller parcels and perhaps 40 years ago, a motel was built on the corner. This went though several ownerships and under several names. All traces of it, including the old Gunderman homestead, were removed several years back.

A one-time feature of this intersection was a cemetery. Its exact location I have not been able to pin-point, but Alta Gunnison Pierce mentions in her 1939 essay of the area: "There was once a cemetery at Livermore corner, across from where Bradley's Oil Station is now..." This would indicate the site where the old Northway store is now, but as there was no road there in pioneer times, I would tend to shove the location a bit further north to the vacant area between the former store and Clark Road.

Those graves which could be identified were dug up probably 90 years ago and some were moved to the Gunnisonville Cemetery and others to DeWitt. (But that's another story..)

And so, the reality that time races on. Though we humans tend to build things with the idea that it will last forever, like the cars which fly through that intersection a mile a minute, nothing remains the same - gone in a heartbeat.

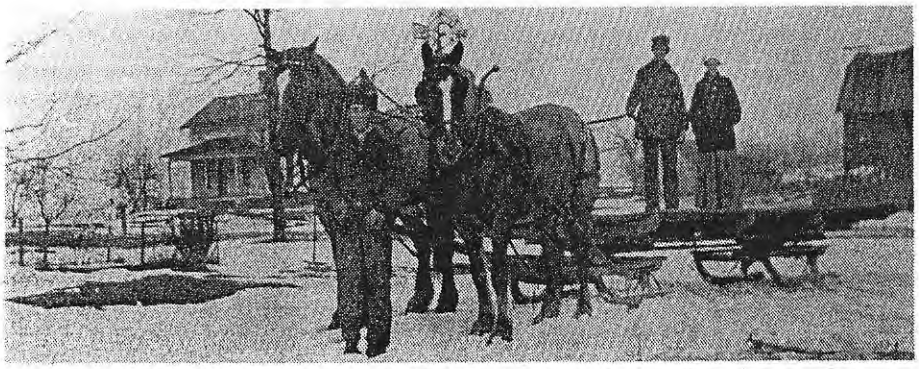
Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian.

Courtesy photograph

I recognize some of the people but I can't place the house. Perhaps you can identify the location. Postmarked Sept. 30, 1911, it is a meeting of sorts of the DeWitt Rebekah Lodge No. 201.O.O.F.

Nov 22 '93

DeWitt remembered:



A COMMON CONVEYANCE 80 YEARS AGO – a dray fitted with bob sleds or "bobs". My great-grandparents, Carl and Min Straub are standing on the sleigh. My grandpa, Tom, is in front leaning against the "~~evener~~". They are in the drive of their Chadwick Road farm. Beulah McGovney's farm is in the background. Ca. 1915. Courtesy photo

Memories of Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma's house

We're going to Grandpa and Grandma's for Thanksgiving. Grandpa called just before we left to tell us their road's not plowed yet so he'll meet us at the Brown School. There's other cars parked there already for at Thanksgiving, like any holiday, there's no division of which "side" of the family is going to be there. There are no sides, just "family".

There he is, waiting at the corner! He's got the Percheron and the Belgian hitched to the sleds to take us the last half mile. It's a cold ride but we're wrapped tight in the old horse blankets.

As we come up the hill to their farmhouse it's obvious from the outside that there's plenty of activity going on inside - all the chimneys are belching smoke and the windows wear a thick frost from the steam rolling off Grandma's stove. Coming in from the back porch the greetings are cheerful but cut short. "Get inside!", "Get your coats off!", "Get busy!"

As to the cooking, well, Grandma is sort of a one-women-band in the kitchen. She's fixed most of the food in advance but getting it all hot and ready to go at the same time requires disciplined choreography and she has little patience for amateurs. For her symphony she is performing on three burners of the kerosene stove in the kitchen with cameo appearances at the woodstove in the dining room. Keep out of her way; she's got a big spoon and she knows how to use it. If you want to be useful, go shoo the kids away from the coal stove in the parlor.

There's a big oak table in the dining room. It's an extension table with cornucopia of extra leaves. It compliments the dining room which also seems to have extension capabilities. No matter how far out the table expands, the room adjusts. The oak buffet too has magical powers. It's more like the clown car at the circus - so small yet, open the doors and the dishes and linens just keep coming and coming and coming.

Her good set of ironstone china are family heirlooms. A service from 300, it has been passed down from Biblical times when it was first used to feed the multitudes at the famous Fishes and Loaves dinner at Galilee. The individual pieces of the place settings are clues to its age: bone dishes, butter pats, waste bowls and deep saucers. (Drinking from the cup is just a passing fad, you understand. We will drink our coffee and tea properly; poured from the cup into the saucer.)

The linens are real and paper substitutes are a blasphemous suggestion. Why waste the money when for only four or five hours labor of dampening, starching and ironing you can use the real thing for a 30-minute meal? They don't all match but 20 to 25 white linens napkins all look pretty much the same.

Someone outdoors is ringing the dinner bell for the kids to come in, but we know the real signal for dinner is when the call goes out for chairs. It's an all out scavenger hunt as straight chairs are brought in from every room of the house. Some come back boasting that their find was in the most obscure area while others ignore the braggarts and simply maneuver towards the best seats at the table.

The food is plentiful in its variety but simple. The basic menu has been derived at from years of cooking for field hands and threshers - but spiced up a bit for the special occasion. The four food groups are all represented in abundance: lots of salt, loads of sugar, gobs of fat and tons of cream.

The meat is the centerpiece, but its not necessarily a turkey. Sometimes it's just whatever barnyard animal(s) win the lottery. There's always a fight between Grandpa and the uncles to see who gets dibs on the best parts like the turkey neck, the gizzards or that big slab of fat from the back of the pork roast. The rest of us are content with trying to snatch up that tasty bit of marrow from the ham bone.

With dinner over everyone sits in numb silence for a long time. Under the table, girdles are secretly being unhitched; belts, unbuckled; and pants, unsnapped. Shoes are pried off as if even our feet are bloated. Each says a silent prayer for that therapeutic belch which we trust will relieve our agony and, perhaps, give just enough room in our gullet for one more slice of apple pie. "Just a thin one, please! And could I have a sliver of that cheese to go with it?"

Continued on page 7

Coin column...

Continued from page 6

In his stupor, Uncle Phil mutters something about corn not being worth damn this year and with that, he and his cohorts are all rolled into the parlor to arue the farmers' plight with cigars, cider and sleep.

Meanwhile, back at the table, we can count on Aunt Millie to say, "I'll wash." They know she doesn't really mean it, but it gets the other women motivated. Aunt Millie is quick to add, "Just let me get these rings off."

You see, Millie wears opals and if you don't know, she will gladly point out to you that "Opals simply can't get wet!" She wrenches and squeezes at her fingers and everyone figures it would be quicker just to order new dishes from the catalog in the outhouse than to wait for her rings. Some of the nieces have visions of getting Grandma's good paring knife, just to help Aunt Millie along.

With a collective sigh the others call off their own preferences as they head for the kitchen: "I'll start"; "I'll clear"; "I'll rinse"; "I'll heat up the water"; "I'll put away"; "I'll wipe"...

"I'll be right there girls - I swear, I just can't get these rings off." ..."I'll get the knife!"

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here twice monthly.

Photo courtesy of Ken Coin

BOB AND SANDY HILL'S PRESENT HOME at the northwest corner of Main and Logan streets. Built by pioneer cabinetmaker and merchant Riley Woodruff, it went through several owners before becoming the retirement home of George and Elizabeth (Tucker) Simmons in the late 1800's. Ca. 1905, George Simmons, photographer.

Pike.
Dec. 6 '93

We've forgotten a few fall chores that were common

By KEN COIN

Do you have all your fall chores finished yet? Ready for a long, cold winter? Seasonal chores haven't changed all that much over the years, but there are a few, common in olden times, which we have pretty much forgotten.

Several years ago Gerald Pike lent me a number of diaries which his great-grandfather, George Simmons kept during his years of living in the house pictured above. The daily entries are brief but wonderful in their simple commentary on everyday life. I found no mention of raking leaves or putting up storm windows, but the following are a few chores George Simmons had to contend with in preparing for winter.

Heating Stoves – Those beautiful cast iron coal and wood stoves which graced the parlors of most DeWitt homes were not a year-round feature like the wood range in the kitchen or the laundry stove in the woodshed. No, in a properly run household, the fanciest stoves with their nickle-plated trim and mica-paned doors were disassembled in the spring, cleaned and stored. The nickle-plated trim pieces were carefully wrapped to prevent scratching and tarnishing. The long networks of stovepipe, often routed up through the ceiling and through the second floor bedrooms (to give off heat) before connecting with the chimney were also disassembled and stored. The holes in the bedroom floors were plugged with temporary grates and the holes where the stovepipes entered the chimneys were covered with a decorative plate.

Come winter, you didn't dare gamble that you could stall cold weather, for back then it wasn't a matter of simply turning up the thermostat. The stoves needed to be hauled in and put together and the stovepipes, well, that was often like putting tent poles together, trying to remember which pieces went where.

Cistern – For those of you unfamiliar with the word, a cistern was a holding area for water and in DeWitt these usually took two forms, either a small room in the basement with no door into it or a well-like hole under the house, usually capped off with a dome top. These were filled with water, rain water, routed to them by the eaves trough on the house roof. The water, not used for drinking but for washing, could be pumped by hand from the cast iron pump located in the room above the cistern.

Anyway, these cisterns needed to be cleaned periodically, and while it was not necessarily a fall chore, Mr. Simmons chose to clean his in the fall. Now, if you had a new-fangled basement cistern the job was a bit easier; just hoist yourself up over the cement or stone wall and drop yourself down into the cistern and sweep and scrub to your heart's content. But if your's was a well-type cistern you usually conned some kid (small enough to fit through the hole in the floor but big enough not to be scared out of their wits) into being lowered down into it by a rope tied around their chest.

Fences – Before the advent of wire fences, split rail was all the rage. An advantage to rail fences was that they could be dismantled in the fall. Woe be unto the farmer who failed to take down his fences in the fall for it was considered rude and anti-social. Why? Because winter was the social season, the season of easiest transportation via sleighs and cutters. Without fences, a sleigh cutting across sections (square miles) could reach a destination in nearly half the time as a sleigh traveling by road.

Back then the roads were barely distinguishable from farm lanes, and with too much traffic they often became useless for sleighs. No, cross lots was the only sensible way to travel and farmers who failed to accommodate the sleigh traffic were, well, simply put, they were not highly thought of.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here twice monthly.

Dec. 20 '93

DeWitt remembered:

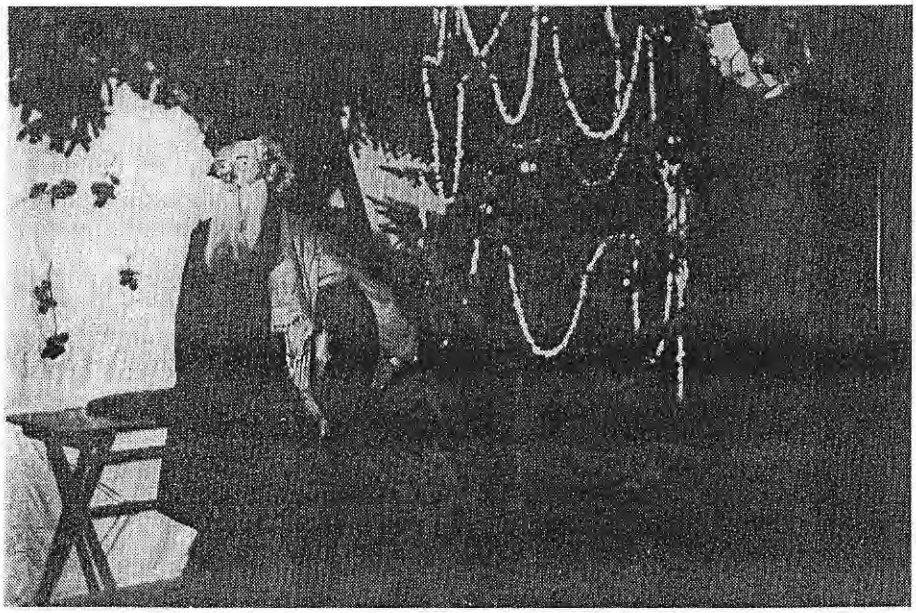


Photo courtesy of Gerald Pike and the Faye Hanson Public Library.

FATHER CHRISTMAS visits the Simmons Schoolhouse on Chadwick Road. The jolly old elf pictured here (excuse the dark photograph) is rather short and thin. Dressed in a plain overcoat and trousers, only the bearded mask and tinsel-trimmed fur hat give away his identity. His bundle of presents is merely an old worn feedbag. The tree to his right of him is sparingly trimmed with no more than a dozen glass ornaments; but yards and yards of strung popcorn. Further decorations in the school room include an abundance of pine boughs and a seemingly endless strand of paper chain. George S. Pike, photographer, 1905.

German immigrants brought us Christmas as we know it

It was the German immigrants who brought much of Christmas as we now know it to America and particularly, DeWitt. Here it was celebrated from earliest pioneer times as a religious holiday and an important social season, but it was the Germans who came to DeWitt in the second half of the last century who introduced us to Santa Claus, Christmas trees, Christmas cookies and ornaments of glass and paper.

As much as I've scoured early letters and diaries, I've found only a few brief mentions of Christmas celebrations in early DeWitt. Of these, all were limited to merely hints of prolonged family gatherings. Another indication of the importance of the holidays as a time of social get-togethers can be surmised by the large number of pioneer era weddings which took place between Christmas and New Years. One of the most surprising discoveries for me was that stores and even the DeWitt Post Office were often open for business-as-usual at least part of the day on Christmas.

When Christmas trees first gained popularity in the DeWitt area in the late 1800's, they were usually limited to public buildings such as schools and churches. Back then however, Christmas trees were not a fixed decoration but, rather, an event which was often mentioned in advance in the local breveties of the newspaper. Like, "There will be a Christmas tree at the Lott School, Friday evening at eight o'clock." Trees did not commonly make appearances in homes until the turn of the century and even then they continued to be more of a social event.

As most species of pine were not native to this area, (and no one had yet thought of tree farms) the usual source for pine Christmas trees was to cut out the top of a mature tree. More often however, cedar trees (then common in the area swamps) were substituted for pine. These had their advantages in that they had a nicer smell and were easier to clean up. But just like pine, should a candle tip over, it could burst into flames with equal enthusiasm. Artificial trees were really nothing new. A clever (and now highly-valued) substitute to the real thing was another German invention – an artificial tree made of turkey feathers.

I have an old hymnal from DeWitt's Baptist Church dated 1862. It predates most of the Christmas songs we now think of as old standards and surprisingly, it contains only one Christmas carol. Perhaps that was enough. One of the verses seems to say it all:

"Joy and Peace" the angels sang,
Far the pleasant echoes rang,
"Peace on earth, to men good will!"
Hark! the angels sing it still
On the Christmas morning.

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

JAN 3 04

DeWitt remembered:

Ken resolves to finish the arduous task of cataloging

I've made a New Year's resolution to finish something I started well over 10 years ago – to complete the cataloging and indexing of the photograph collection at the library.

Shortly after librarian Faye Hanson's death in 1982, I volunteered to help organize the scattered local history materials at the library. Much of that has been accomplished, but it's the photographs that have continued to escape me; mainly due to the fact that since that time the collection of photographs has continued to grow from approximately 300 items in 1982 to well over 1,000 at present.

It's no coincidence that the holiday greeting pictured above is of Helen (Dills) Stampfly; she's largely responsible for the beginnings of the library's photo collection. Helen was born in DeWitt in 1889, a daughter of pioneer stock Omar B. Dills and Abbie Hutchins ("O.B. and Abbie"). Her parents' farm was east of DeWitt on the road named for them, Dill Road.

As a young woman Helen got a job at the DeWitt post office, which was then located on the south side of west Main Street in Webb's Jewelry Store. Also working there as a mail carrier was a man names Mark Norris, who happened to be an amateur photographer. Many of his photographs of local scenes were printed on post card stock, which were then sold as novelty items in the post office. Of these, Helen collected quite a number and in later years turned many of them over to the library.

In the 1960's it was Helen's collection of uptown scenes which constituted the majority of the local photographs in the library's collection. During Faye Hanson's years as librarian the library occasionally acquired more photographs, but it wasn't until the 1970's, during the nation's bicentennial, that the historical importance of old photographs, as items of public interest, began to take hold and the library's collection began to grow in earnest.

Since that time many hundreds of pictures have been added to the collection. Sometimes it's been just an individual picture or sometimes, like the recent donation from Don Harnish, they've come in batches of several hundred. Often times, too, it's not been the original photographs but, rather, good quality copies that are acquired by the library. Such was the case with the family photographs of cousins Gerald Pike and the late Neil Cutler. From their combined collections of family photographs nearly 100 pictures were copied, including many rare photographs of some of DeWitt's earliest settlers.

Although original photographs are usually preferable to copies, it's the visual documentation that's important for the library's purpose. And, as the picture above illustrates, most photographs offer documentation of more than one subject matter. Want an example of a 1910 Christmas card? There it is. Want to see what a well dressed woman might choose for winter-wear in 1910? There it is. Or, if the Sibley kids want to see what their grandmother looked like in 1910, there she is.

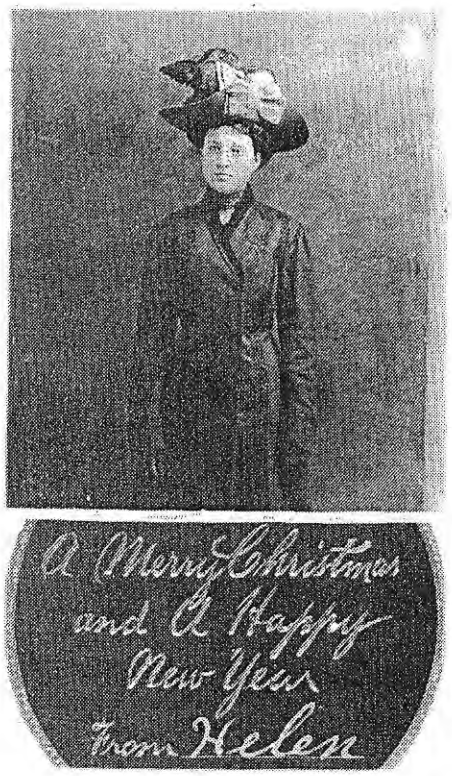


Photo courtesy of Faye Hanson Public Library

"A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR - from Helen." A postal Christmas card sent from Helen Dills to her friend Reva Treadwell. Ca. 1910.

To date, all the photographs at the library, with the exception of school-related pictures (and that's another kettle of fish), have been assigned an individual identification number and then cataloged as to what kind of photograph, original or copy, who donated it and when, photographer, subject matter and approximate date. Each is then photo copied (it's the photo copies that are put in the binders for the public to look through) and placed in an individual acid-free protective sleeve or folder and filed by their number in archival boxes.

It may not sound like it, but that has actually been the easy part. Now all that is left for me to do is finish the alphabetical index to the whole conglomeration. Guess I'd better get busy; it's going to take some time. By the way, how would you index a photograph of a horse named "Birdie" standing in the middle of Bridge Street?

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here twice monthly.