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Of Kalamazoo College

No. 37. THE HISTORY OF PRAIRIE RONDE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE  .  .  Prairie Ronde in 1830  .  .  1-15

LaSalle, Indians and the British  .  .  .  1-2
Bazel Harrison, First Settler  .  .  .  .  3
The First Settlement  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  4
Indian Reservations and University Lands  5
Smith, Huston and Company  .  .  .  .  .  .  6-7
Commercial Facilities: Ships, Arks, and Corn Mills  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  7-8
Post Offices  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  8-9
The First Township Meeting  .  .  .  .  .  .  9
Roads  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  10
Schools  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  11
Churches  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  12
The Great Black Hawk "War"  .  .  .  .  .  12
The Ghost Village of Shirland  .  .  .  .  .  13
Charles Fenno Hoffman Visits Prairie Ronde  14-15

CHAPTER TWO  .  .  Prairie Ronde in 1840  .  .  16-31

Schoolcraft and Prairie Ronde Townships Are Born  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  16-17
The Moore-Hascall Harvester  .  .  .  .  .  .  18-21
A Short History of Schoolcraft  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  22-30
Lucius Lyon Surveys the Plat  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  22
First Settlers and Buildings  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  23

45544
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Farmer's Bank of Prairie Ronde&quot;</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Railroad That Did Not Arrive</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-slavery Sentiment and the</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underground Railroad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Nathan M. Thomas, Politician</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth of Population</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Territorial Road</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Coaches</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
<td>28-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Burying-Ground</td>
<td>29-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Retrospect</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prairie Ronde in 1850</td>
<td>32-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and Industry</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Improvements: The Railroad and The Plank Road</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and New Churches</td>
<td>34-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Aspect</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Fenimore Cooper Comes to Town</td>
<td>36-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Retrospect</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>40-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>42-43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Based on portion of Soil Map of US Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Soils, Michigan Agricultural Station.)
THE HISTORY OF PRAIRIE RONDE

In the spring of 1680 an intrepid explorer by the name of Rene La Salle journeyed from the mouth of what is now the St. Joseph River in Michigan to Lake Erie. In so doing he undoubtedly passed across a broad, rolling prairie known later as Prairie Ronde, probably the first white man ever to see this subsequently famous spot.

This beautiful prairie was seen after that by only an occasional trapper or trader until the War of 1812. During the war the Michigan Indians were working with the British to keep the United States out of the area, and captured American soldiers were taken to Indian Fields just north of Prairie Ronde. A short distance away was located a British-maintained smithy and ammunition cache, with gunsmiths to help arm the Indians. Records indicate that when these prisoners were released by the British and the Pottawatomies they returned to their eastern and southern homes with enthusiastic reports about the broad prairies of Michigan. Explorers were soon going through the area and in 1826 what is now Schoolcraft township

was surveyed by Robert Clark, Jr., at the behest of the Survey Office of the Government.

In the year 1830 a traveler or settler coming to the then newly settled Prairie Ronde would have come out of the forests and oak-openings of southwestern Michigan into an area of some 27,000 acres,\(^1\) gently rolling and roughly circular in shape. In the middle of it stood a grove of trees called the "Big Island", just west of the site of the present village of Schoolcraft. In its middle was a small lake or pond and the grove contained maple, basswood and ash trees, with many oaks here and there around the "Island". The soil was black and rich, with vegetable mold a foot in depth.\(^2\) One of Prairie Ronde's proudest boasts was that a man could plow a furrow eleven miles long without striking stick or stone.

On the northwest corner of Prairie Ronde a band of about 250 Pottawatomies and Ottawas, under the leadership of one Sagamaw, had a village and cultivated fields.

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1. This is the combined acreage of Prairie Ronde and Gourdneck Prairies, since the two are nearly contiguous. See map on page III.

The Indians called Prairie Ronde Wah- we- os- co- tang- m'sco- tah, which is supposed to mean "the round fire- plain." The first settler on Prairie Ronde, Bazel Harrison, who came from Clark County in Ohio with a party of twenty-one and arrived November 28, 1828, was hospitably received by Sagamaw. Sagamaw was described by Bazel Harrison as a "magnificent specimen of his race". The Harrison name must have held considerable fascination for Sagamaw, since Bazel was the cousin of General William Henry Harrison, who had won fame at the battle of Tippecanoe and at the Thames River, and who was later to win the presidency in the hard cider campaign of 1840. Sagamaw had been on the losing side at the battle of the Thames and was supposed to have helped carry away the body of the great Tecumseh. Taking leave of Sagamaw, Bazel and his party started the "Big Island" and settled on what is now section 2 of Prairie Ronde Township, beside a lake later named after him. It subsequently

1. Bazel Harrison is supposed to be the bee hunter, Ben Boden, in James Fenimore Cooper's Oak Openings.
3. Charles A. Weissert, Southwest Michigan, p. 142. (No Date)
dried up, due to a drought and other natural causes.

Here the party erected crude cabins, divided the land among the children and entered it at the land office in Monroe. Bazel and his sons plowed and planted corn and buckwheat the following spring, with seed obtained from White Pigeon, where they also bought sheep. The next year seed wheat was hard to get and worth about seven dollars a bushel. They had to go to Fort Wayne for it and their corn had to be ground at Toland's Mill in Elkhart. But the abundance of game and the friendly Indians made it possible for the little colony to survive the winter easily.¹

In the winter of 1829 Abram I. Shaver, Erastus Guilford, William Duncan, George Brown, John Insley, David Beadle, Abner Calhoun (or Calhoon), and others came to Prairie Ronde, with Christopher Bair coming the following spring. By the spring of 1830 there were some sixty families around the border of the prairie and at the Big Island.²

The news about the rich prairie lands in south-

¹. Durant, op. cit., p. 439.
². Ibid., p. 440.
western Michigan spread rapidly; when the government lands in Kalamazoo Country were opened for entry and sale at Monroe in May of 1831, all the available land on Prairie Ronde and Gourdneck prairies was sold by the end of the month.¹ Enough land was retained for an Indian reservation of ten square miles, including the eastern two tiers of sections in what is now Schoolcraft township, all of Brady, and the western two miles of Wakeshma. The Indians thus owned nearly half of Gourdneck and during their tenure the settlers used various means of conciliating them, sometimes even cultivating a field for them. The Indian's title was extinguished and the Indians removed west of the Mississippi in 1840. Several sections and parts of sections in the area had also been selected by commissioners appointed to choose University Lands. Although it was decided that the University could not hold "broken sections", the land was not sold for some time.²

The tremendous crop yields of Prairie Ronde soon made it the granary for a large area and its trade began

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¹ Thomas, op. cit., p. 80.
² Ibid., p. 81.
to increase rapidly. In the summer of 1830 H. B. Huston, James Smith and Thaddeus Smith organized Smith, Huston and Co., brought in the first stock of goods on Prairie Ronde, and set up a temporary store in part of Abner Calhoon's cabin. In the spring of 1831 they built a log store east of the Big Island, with a dwelling attached, and added stock and a partner, Joseph A. Smith. This company built the first frame building in Kalamazoo the same summer. The building was afterwards occupied by a branch of the State Bank, and still later was used as a music store. The following winter Thaddeus Smith left and E. L. Brown took his place. Later James Smith, Jr., arrived with his family and became a partner in the company.¹

This same winter of 1831-2, Smith, Huston², and Co.

2. A. H. Scott made this comment about Huston: "I recollect in 1833 that some Indians came to Schoolcraft from Kalamazoo and complained to Addison Smith about H. B. Huston. They said he put so much 'bish' (water) in his whiskey that it made them sick before they could get 'squibby' (drunk)."
and Johnson Patrick erected the building known as the "Big Island Hotel", kept two years by Patrick and subsequently by John Dix. The frame of this building, built by Nathan Foster, is one of the last known instances of the use of the "scribe rule" or cut and try method.¹

The commercial facilities available to Prairie Ronde were of a primitive and inconvenient nature. Goods were transported by sailing ships by way of Mackinac to St. Joseph, then boated up the St. Joseph River—later also the tortuous Paw Paw River—, and landed at some convenient spot on the bank, without shelter or guard, until they could be hauled in on wagons. Wheat, the only exportable item, was hauled the same way to temporary storehouses on the bank, and then sent by ship or ark down the river. The latter were simply plank boxes ten or twelve feet wide by sixty long. When the cargo was landed at St. Joseph the ark was either sold or abandoned and the crew returned on foot.² In spite of the primitive

¹. This was simply a method whereby the uprights were set "by eye" and the cross pieces were trimmed to fit. A rule or measure was the only instrument used.

². Thomas, op. cit., p. 83.
facilities, Smith, Huston and Co. enjoyed a brisk traffic not only from the county but from Three Rivers, Paw Paw, Otsego, Allegan, and even Marshall and Battle Creek.

The first mill for grinding grain in the county was built by John Vickers on Rocky Creek on the west side of the prairie sometime in the spring of 1830. The mill ground corn only. Vickers sold out to Colonel Abiel Fellows in the fall of 1830 and went to what is now Vicksburg, where he built a better mill. Colonel Fellows built a sawmill later, which he operated in conjunction with the grain mill.

Colonel Fellows was appointed postmaster of the Prairie Ronde post office in 1830, the first in Kalamazoo County, and had a contract for carrying the mail between there and White Pigeon. The story is told that the colonel kept the mail in a basket under the bed in his house. In 1832 this office was moved to Schoolcraft, the name changed to Schoolcraft, and Joseph A. Smith was appointed postmaster.

Another office was established in the northeast part of Schoolcraft and kept by a man named Coe. Clark Bird

1. Durant, op. cit., p. 443.
kept the "West End" office just north of Nesbitt's Corners. About 1836 a post office, called the "Westfield" office, was established on the west side of the prairie, of which James S. Cowgill was apparently the first postmaster. Abram I. Shaver followed Cowgill and under him the name of the office was changed to Prairie Ronde.¹

The first township meeting was held at the house of Abram I. Shaver on December 6, 1830. It was voted to hold a meeting on December 14, 1830, at Abner Calhoon's house for the fourfold purpose of (1) choosing a moderator to preside, (2) choosing a township clerk, (3) electing three commissioners of highways, and (4) electing five commissioners of common schools.

The meeting was held and the following officers were elected: township clerk, Christopher Bair; highway commissioners, Stephen Hoyt, Bazel Harrison, and William Duncan; school commissioners, Joel Clark, Stephen Hoyt, Abiel Fellows, and Abram I. Shaver. (Who the moderator or the fifth school commissioner was is still a mystery.)²

On April 4, 1831, a "legal meeting" was held at

¹ Ibid., p. 444.
² Thomas, op. cit., p. 77.
Abner Calhoon's house at which several offices were filled, and, among other things, a committee was appointed "to select a site for a public burying ground" and it was voted "to raise a bounty for wolf's scalps".

On January 1, 1831, a petition for the building of a public road to unite with a road leading from White Pigeon Prairie to the county seat in Kalamazoo was filed with the Brady township clerk (Prairie Ronde township was then a part of Brady). It contains the following interesting note: "To convince you, gentlemen [the highway commissioners], and the public that we are not under the influence of sinister views or private interest other than united with publick good, we wish you to act discretionary in making any deviation from any specified point in the above direction the interest of the community

1. Durant, op. cit., p. 444.
2. An act of the Legislative Council for the Territory of Michigan, approved November 5, 1829, provides that "the counties of Kalamazoo and Barry, and all the country lying north of the same which are attached to and comprise a part of the county of St. Joseph, shall form a township by the name of Brady, and the first township-meeting shall be held at the home of Abram Shaver, in said township".
may require".  

These early roads were apparently little more than paths made by driving wagons back and forth, with perhaps some of the stumps pulled and a few of the worst holes filled. There were no first class roads in Prairie Ronde until the plank road was built from Kalamazoo to Schoolcraft in 1851.

Probably the first school in Prairie Ronde was that taught in the summer [1] of 1830 by John Wild in his home on section 26. In the fall of the same year a log school house was built and the redoubtable Reverend Thomas Merrill taught there that winter. The following winter Stephen Vickery took over the teaching at the school.  

By 1832 another school had been established on what is now District No. 1 of the present township of Prairie Ronde with a Miss Laura Stanley in charge. A frame school house was built there shortly after. The widow of one John Williams opened a school in 1833 in her own home. In the fall of 1831 E. L. Brown, a Vermonter just arrived in Schoolcraft, was asked to take charge of a school in the Clark neighborhood, formerly

1. Durant, op. cit., p. 450.
2. Ibid., p. 451.
taught by Ambrose Searle, and the date set for the beginning of the term. Mr. Brown was rather surprised and more than a little put out to find a man, noted for being somewhat of a toper, already teaching there when he arrived on the date set. When the usurper proved quite unsatisfactory, efforts to reemploy Mr. Brown were unsuccessful.¹

There were no organized churches in Prairie Ronde during the early period, and apparently worship services were small, informal, and held in various homes. In the late fall of 1831 the Reverend E. Felton was appointed by the Ohio Methodist Conference to work on the Kalamazoo mission. He got as far as Prairie Ronde and formed a class on the south side of the prairie.²

No history of the early years of Prairie Ronde would be complete without a mention of the part it played in the famous "Black Hawk War" of April, 1832, in Illinois. Militia of Kalamazoo were among those called. The men mustered at Schoolcraft under the command of Dr. David E. Brown as Colonel and soon marched for the scene of battle. They had gotten as far as Niles when they received orders to disband, owing to lack of provisions.

1. Ibid., p. 451.
2. Thomas, op. cit., p. 84.
for them and the probability that they would not be used. After a day or two the militia came back covered with glory from a bloodless conflict where no sign of an enemy was ever seen. ¹

Prairie Ronde township also has a ghost village of sorts—Shirland. It was laid out on the southeast corner of the west half of the northwest quarter of section 25. Lots were numbered from 1 to 39 and a portion of the plat (9 by 16 rods) was designated as a public square, the north half of which was to be "given for a meeting house, and the south half for a school house". ² The owners of this plat were Christopher Bair, William Duncan, Samuel Hackett, John Insley and Edwin Kellog, who acknowledged it September 8, 1831. However, the site was never built upon, and soon was forgotten.

In the winter of 1833 a famous poet and journalist of the day, Charles Fenno Hoffman, who hailed from New York, visited Prairie Ronde. In a book which he later wrote he alludes to this experience in the following interesting fashion:

"The wood itself [the Big Island], though only five

¹ Durant, op. cit., p. 457.
² Liber A, Deed Record of Kalamazoo County, pp. 92-93.
or six hundred acres in extent, has a small lake in the centre; and the village of Schoolcraft, if not the whole settled part of the prairie, is distinguished by the number of fine running horses, blooded dogs, and keen sportsmen it has in proportion to the population. Fox-hunting on horseback, with full packs of hounds, is the favorite sport; though wolf, bear, and badger-baiting have each their active followers. The soil is easy of culture, and so generous in its product, that the settlers, after attending to their necessary avocations, have ample leisure for their many recreations. Prairie Ronde, though like all parts of Michigan, in a great measure settled by emigrants from the State of New York, is said to count still a greater number of its residents from natives of the south and west."

Hoffman stayed at the Big Island Hotel one night, and this is his account of it:

"Could I refuse to drink with such a company? The warm glass is in my frozen fingers... It is touched by the rim of the red-horse [Kentuckian] smartly, - it is brushed by the hooshier, - it comes in companionable contact with the wolverine, - "My respects to you, gentlemen, and luck to all of us." ..."From the eastern side, stranger?"..."I'm told it's tolerable frog pasture."

(14)
Now here the soil's so deep one can't raise any long sarce— they all get pulled through the other side. We can winter our cows, however, on wooden clocks, there's so many Yankees among us."

This, then, was Prairie Ronde in 1830— a prairie richly blessed with fertile soil, with good natural resources of water and wood, and, above all, with men who were energetic and ambitious. The prairie was to grow at a tremendous rate in the next few years, and there can be no doubt that it was due to an unbeatable combination of good men and good land.

PRAIRIE RONDE IN 1840

By 1840 Prairie Ronde had become a well established region. Agriculturally it was very advanced, and its wheat production was famed throughout the Midwest. The Indian reservation lands and the University lands had all been sold by 1840 and the settler's cabins were giving way to permanent farmhouses. Fields were being fenced, roads were being built, and the prairie was beginning to assume the form which it bears today.

On the 23rd of March, 1836, the township of Prairie Ronde was set off from the original one of Brady and provided with a separate government. The first township meeting was directed to be at the home of Abram I. Shaver. Prairie Ronde was the first township organized in the county which consisted of but a single Congressional district.1

"At a meeting of the inhabitants of township No. 4,

1. Heretofore, as in the case of Brady township, all the townships had comprised more than one township district as provided by act of Congress. Brady, it will be remembered, originally covered an area greater than the present area of Kalamazoo County.
now called Prairie Ronde, holden at the house of Abram I. Shaver, on Monday, the 4th day of April, 1836, the organization of the township took place by the election of the following officers: Abram I. Shaver was appointed moderator, and Preston J. McCreary, secretary; Supervisor, William Duncan; Township clerk, Preston J. McCreary; Assessors, Edward S. Moore, Abner Mack, Marsten Alexander; Constable and Collector, Ransford C. Hoyt; Road Commissioners, William Bates, John Knight, Ambrose Searle; Justices of the Peace, Samuel Hackett, Isaac Gould, Abram I. Shaver, Delamore Duncan; School Commissioners, Abner Mack, E. S. Moore, Samuel Cory; School Inspectors, Preston J. McCreary, William Duncan, Sr., Ambrose Searle; Fence-Viewers, Joel Clark, Abner Calhoon, Ransford C. Hoyt; Directors of the Poor, Darius Wells, Abram I. Shaver.¹

On February 16, 1842, the name of Brady Township was changed to Schoolcraft, and the two townships east of Schoolcraft were given the name of Brady² (now Brady and Wakeshma).

Thus, by 1842 the original Prairie Ronde was now a

1. Township records, Prairie Ronde Township.
2. Township records, Schoolcraft Township.

(17)
part of two townships. The pioneer days were over and the people of old Prairie Ronde settled down now to perform their duties as citizens of Prairie Ronde and Schoolcraft townships, Kalamazoo County, State of Michigan.

Agriculturally speaking, Prairie Ronde had become quite well diversified by 1840, but the biggest crop was still wheat. The wheat of the prairie was shipped all over southwestern Michigan and increasing acreage was planted to it to satisfy the mounting demand. The primitive harvesting methods and equipment used at that time presented a real problem when confronted by this ever-growing demand for Prairie Ronde wheat. But a man by the name of Hiram Moore had an answer to the problem—a combine harvester.

Moore had patented the basic principles of his harvester in 1836, but problems of construction occupied him until 1839. He was a resident of Climax prairie but found it necessary to go to Rochester, New York, to construct the machine, because only in Rochester could the required gears be made. Lucius Lyon,

of whom we shall hear more later, invested in the machine and arranged to have it shipped to Prairie Ronde on board the brig Virginia, via the Great Lakes route to St. Joseph, and thence by wagon to the prairie. Hiram Moore came to Prairie Ronde and he and Lyon's agents conducted extensive tests of the harvester all that summer and fall. The tests were in the main successful.

In November, 1839, Lyon wrote to his friend, Harry Ellsworth, commissioner of patents, that "there is no longer any doubt of the success of the Moore and Hascall's harvesting machine. Mr. Moore has had a machine in the field on Prairie Ronde in this county during the last summer which harvested and threshed 63 acres of wheat in very superior style and could have harvested 250 acres with the greatest ease, at the rate of 20 acres per day, had it not been for one or two trifling accidents.¹... Twenty of the 63 acres were harvested on my farm and every expense attending it does not exceed one dollar per acre. ... I have, within the last three or four years, advanced to Mr. Moore between three and four thousand dollars to enable him to bring the machine

¹. This would be quite good even today for the ordinary combine.
as near perfection as possible, and am much gratified at the results of his labors."

Moore, a year later, transferred the major share (9/16) of all subsequent improvements he might make in the machine to Lyon and Rix Robinson as security on his investment. In 1841 Hascall\(^2\) assigned the entire interest which he possessed in the harvester to Lyon for $100 cash, $200 in personal notes, and a promise of $5000 from the profits of the sales of the machines.

By 1841 several machines had been built and were in use on the prairie. The operating cost was described by Lyon as being about three dollars per acre, compared to five for the old method.\(^3\)

The machines were used rather extensively on Prairie Ronde, with its large wheat acreage, until 1850. James Fenimore Cooper saw one of the harvesters in operation and described its process quite accurately.\(^4\) At the time

2. Hascall was a business partner with Moore.
that Cooper saw the harvester it was a machine which cut a ten-foot swath, was pulled by sixteen horses, and cut, threshed, cleaned and bagged the grain in one continuous operation. The harvester required a crew of seven to operate it. While rather cumbersome for Michigan farms, they eventually found a wide use in California.\(^1\) James Thomas tells of having 600 bushels cut and threshed in one day by a harvester.

Lyon, as the result of speculation, and the default of an Ionia land agent for which he was held responsible, hit rock bottom financially and had to give up his interest in the harvester. Since Moore had only a blanket patent on his machine, others soon pirated the details of his invention and he was forced into litigation over the patent rights. He finally moved to Wisconsin, where he operated one of his machines on his farm for many years. The last harvester was used on Prairie Ronde in 1850, and was afterwards replaced by the cheaper and more easily managed reaper.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Those in California were often pulled by 33-horse teams. Higgins, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 426.

\(^2\) Thomas, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 88.
After the pioneer period of Prairie Ronde was over, the village of Schoolcraft became increasingly the center of the prairie life. In addition, much of the timber was being cut for lumber and the prairie was beginning to lose its unique identity. People began now to think of themselves as residents of Prairie Ronde and Schoolcraft townships. Schoolcraft was growing steadily and its prairie trade increased in proportion. Thus it is well to include a short history of Schoolcraft.

The original site of Schoolcraft had been bought by Lucius Lyon, then Surveyor of Public Lands, in October of 1831. He laid floating claims on the southwest quarter of section 18 and the east half of the northwest quarter of section 19 [in township 4 of range 11, now the township of Schoolcraft]. He then proceeded, by his agent, Dr. David W. Brown, to lay out the whole east half of the southwest quarter of section 18 and the north part of the east half of the northwest quarter of section 19 into a village plat, which he named Schoolcraft in honor of his friend, Henry R. Schoolcraft, noted

1. The original plat description in the registration office at Kalamazoo simply states that the village is located "east of the Big Island on Prairie Ronde".

(22)
Indian agent and explorer.¹

The first permanent settler in Schoolcraft was Thaddeus Smith, who settled there in June, 1830.² In 1831 the only buildings in Schoolcraft were Smith, Huston \ and Co.'s big store and a little frame cabinet shop owned by a New Hampshire man named Edwin Fogg.

The village grew rapidly thereafter and many new buildings were added. The famous Big Island Hotel has already been noted. A large addition was built on it in 1833 and it was thus one of the best hotels in southwestern Michigan, with a large barn and convenient surroundings. The building was destroyed by fire in 1847 and was not replaced. Another hotel, known as the "Schoolcraft House", was later built on the approximate site. This building was subsequently replaced by the well-known Troxel House.³

In 1832 the Schoolcraft post office was opened with Joseph A. Smith in charge. He was succeeded by John

¹ Thomas, op. cit., p. 78.
² E. L. Brown, in an address before the Pioneer Society at Vicksburg in 1875, gives this date as 1833, but the other accounts say 1830.
³ Durant, op. cit., p. 520.
Beals, who was in turn replaced by A. H. Scott in the winter of 1840-41.

In 1837, influenced by the General Banking Law, a company was organized in Schoolcraft under the name of "The Farmer's Bank of Prairie Ronde", the required amount of specie ($50,000) paid in, bills engraved, books and furniture procured, and the bank was prepared to open as another of the "wild cat" banks which plagued the era. But somehow saner heads prevailed—notably that of E. L. Brown—and the bank was never actually opened. This was fortunate, for the whole wild cat system was rapidly sinking in the panic of 1837.¹

Schoolcraft resident's hopes had been high in 1834 that a railroad would soon be built through their village, thus making it a shipping center for the prairie. A preliminary survey for the Detroit and St. Joseph Railroad had been made through the village in that year. However, its final location was through Kalamazoo, and it did not reach that point until 1846. Thus, the grain and other products of Prairie Ronde still had to be

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¹ Thomas, op. cit., p. 86.
shipped from Kalamazoo, and this meant that the laborious hauling back and forth of goods had to go for some little time yet.

Anti-slavery feeling was beginning to run quite high in 1840, as was evidenced by the presence of a considerable underground railroad traffic through Schoolcraft. The railroad was "running" as early as 1838, and was to carry over a thousand "passengers" during its existence. The route ran by way of Schoolcraft, Battle Creek, Marshall, Jackson and Detroit. During the Civil War many of these escaped slaves, who had settled in Michigan, were mustered into the Union Army. The story is told of four young Negroes who came to Schoolcraft in 1856 and settled there. When war came they all enlisted, but due to racial prejudice they were placed in four different regiments. They met at the capture of Charleston and marched through the streets of the city singing Julia Ward Howe's famous anthem "John Brown's Body".¹

One of the most influential men in Schoolcraft

¹ David Fisher, Compendium of History and Biography of Kalamazoo County, Chicago, 1906, p. 69.
associated with the anti-slavery party was Dr. Nathan M. Thomas. He had come to Prairie Ronde in 1830 and had moved to Schoolcraft in 1832. He soon had a thriving practice, but spent much of his time writing letters to influential people about the anti-slavery movement. In 1837 he and 422 others sent a petition to Congress asking that it oppose the admission of Texas to the Union as a slave state. In 1840 Dr. Thomas was instrumental in forming the Liberty Party in Michigan. In 1845 he ran as the candidate for lieutenant governor on the Liberal ticket. The party was absorbed by the Free Soil Party in 1848.¹

While many of the settlers on Prairie Ronde had originally come from the South and thus formed a strong pro-slavery element in the area², Michigan was generally anti-slavery and Prairie Ronde was no exception. By 1840 the population of Kalamazoo County had more

¹. Ibid., p. 68.
². There had been a "Virginia Corners" just north of Bazel Harrison's farm during the early years of Prairie Ronde, but most of the Virginians living there had moved elsewhere by 1840.
than doubled—from 3,124 in 1834 to 7,380 in 1840.\(^1\)
Schoolcraft's population figures are not available, but it is safe to say that it shared in this increase. According to the State Census of Michigan for 1837\(^2\), there were a total of 665 people on Prairie Ronde at this time, which lends color to the statement that there were about 400 people in Schoolcraft by 1840.\(^3\)

In the matter of roads and transportation the residents of the area still had only poor facilities. A Territorial Road had been authorized from White Pigeon to Grand Rapids via Prairie Ronde and Kalamazoo in 1832, although it appears not to have been built for quite some time.\(^4\) There were a good many township roads, but apparently the quality of them had not improved appreciably since 1830. Schoolcraft was obliged to ship goods

3. Fuller, op. cit., p. 351.
from Kalamazoo down the Kalamazoo River or to Detroit as always. Those who wished to travel did so in wagons, on horseback, or by means of the S. B. Davis Stage Coach Line, which had begun operating on the Territorial Road from White Pigeon as far as Kalamazoo in 1834. The old Concord and "through brace" coaches were a familiar sight on Prairie Ronde and in Schoolcraft for many years.

The religious situation in and around Schoolcraft was improving rapidly by 1840. The Baptists had convened a council on June 10, 1837, and had organized the "First Baptist Church in Schoolcraft", with the Reverend Jeremiah Hall as the first pastor. He preached the first sermon the next day, in a building erected by Elder William Taylor, the first Baptist minister in Prairie Ronde, in the north part of town. Evidently Reverend Hall did not stay there long, for the record goes on to tell of "Father Taylor's "faithfulness. 1 The church was not finished inside and was evidently a rather dismal place in which to worship. The story is told that "Father Taylor" never missed a single meeting, even if there was

1. Durant, op. cit., p. 530.
but one listener; on a few occasions nobody came, and at such times he would offer a prayer and go tranquilly home, having fulfilled his duty. At this time there were no other churches in Schoolcraft and one sometimes wonders if the religious spirit of our forefathers was all it was reputed to be.

On page 172 of the record book for Schoolcraft, originally Brady, is the plat of a burial ground, and beneath it the following description, which does nothing to enlighten one as to its location: 1

"The Burying-Ground in Schoolcraft Township, of which the above is a plan, was surveyed and laid out April 22, 1843. The whole ground is 262 feet square, being the whole of two acres purchased by the Township for that purpose, except a strip two rods wide on the east and south sides, left for public highway. The 2 centre alleys, running east and west, north and south, are 12 feet wide; that outside of the lots is 6 feet; all the other alleys

1. The next church, Congregational, was organized in 1844.

2. The present location is just west of the highway as one enters Schoolcraft from the north on U. S. 131. This location agrees with the one described above.
are 8 feet wide. All the lots are 10 1/7 feet [!J in width by 3½ 1/3 in length." It is to be hoped that the residents of Schoolcraft were able to decide upon the location of the burial ground without too much trouble.

With regard to schools in Schoolcraft, or on Prairie Ronde in general, the records are very fragmentary. The first school in Schoolcraft was held in 1832 in a small frame building afterwards used as a hat shop. About 1836 a small office was built by James Smith, Jr., in which Mrs. Thomas (sister to E. L. Brown) and a Cambridge graduate named Brown taught. The school districts Nos. 1 and 2 had been formed in 1837 in the old township of Brady. No. 1 included sections 17, 18, 19 and 20 in what is now Schoolcraft township, also taking in the village itself. District No. 2 included sections 16 and 21, the southwest quarter of section 15, and the west half of section 22. The school commissioners at this time were Benjamin Taylor and Isaac Briggs.¹

The village was not incorporated until 1866 and thus it is not possible to tell what officers, if any, held sway in 1840. Also, there were no societies or clubs in

¹. Durant, op. cit., p. 520.
1840 which left any records. Evidently the village was still too small and too young to show any such cultural manifestations as yet.

Thus by 1840 a definite pattern had set in on Prairie Ronde. The struggle of getting started was now past and a more routine life had taken its place. The pioneering days were gone from the prairie and the organizational trends of a more modern life were in abundant evidence. The primitive commercial facilities which had been the plague of Prairie Ronde were now beginning to give way to better and more permanent installations. In the next decade the life of the prairie was to take on more of the polish of culture and to lose, in the process, most of the remaining traces of its pioneer beginnings. Yet, in 1840 the stranger was still received with true pioneer hospitality and locks on the doors were still rare. All in all, life on Prairie Ronde was good.
By 1850 Prairie Ronde was well established as the foremost grain center of southwestern Michigan. Nearly two decades of magnificent wheat crops had spread the prairie's fame afar. A man who owned a farm on Prairie Ronde had a good one and knew it. In the main, nearly every type of crop was raised on the prairie, but the main crop was still wheat.

In 1850 reapers were making their appearance on the prairie in increasing numbers. There was still one combine harvester operating, but it could not compete with the reaper. The harvester required a minimum of sixteen horses, the reaper but one or two. There was more work connected with the latter, but its low cost and ease of operation meant that more farmers could have one.

Industries had not taken root in Schoolcraft or on Prairie Ronde generally in 1850. The next year a distillery was built in the village, but it was small. Most of the industry was located in Kalamazoo, close to the Kalamazoo River, where water power was to be had. There was no good water power source on the prairie; Rocky Creek was far too small to be suitable. ¹

¹ It runs across the prairie southwest from Schoolcraft.
Commerci­ally, Prairie Ronde had seen vast improve­ments by 1850. It was no longer necessary to ship goods down the Kalamazoo River in arks or cart them any con­siderable distance in wagons. On February 2, 1846, the Michigan Central Railroad was completed to Kalamazoo.2 This meant that goods could be shipped much more quickly and with less expense, and thus forecast an increase in the trade of the prairie. The railroad was sold later by the State to the Michigan Central Company. There was a rapid surge in business after this and the line soon was carrying a heavy traffic. Shipments of grain and other produce from Prairie Ronde were numerous and heavy.

Five years later, in 1851, the plank road was com­pleted from Schoolcraft to Kalamazoo.3 This road gave the residents of Schoolcraft and Prairie Ronde an all-weather route to Kalamazoo and greatly facilitated the shipment of grain and other produce to and from the prairie. Formerly, the roads were all but impassable in

1. It was owned at that time by the State.
3. Ibid., p. 168.
spring and fall. The relatively good travel facilities now available expedited the break-down of the rather extreme provincialism of Prairie Ronde. People were able to get around a little more without undue trouble. The cultural graces began to appear in the prairie.

Religiously speaking, Prairie Ronde was growing fast these days. The Baptist Church of Schoolcraft has already been mentioned. On April 28, 1844, a Congregational Church was organized in Schoolcraft by the Reverend John S. Kidder, who had held services there since the previous October. The church began with just ten members, but had increased to 25 by the end of the year. Services were held in the school house at first and later in the public hall until it burned down.

Mr. Kidder left in 1846 and the church was without a regular minister until 1848, when a Reverend Hollis Russell came. On April 21, 1849, a meeting of the church was held at which a resolution was introduced to change the church organization to the Presbyterian form. Those who dissented were outnumbered and asked for letters to the Congregational Church in Kalamazoo. The

1. Prairie Ronde is seldom mentioned in the Kalamazoo Gazette of the period.
resolution was then passed unanimously and the First Presbyterian Church of Schoolcraft came into being. In 1849 one of the four village plats designated as a public commons was leased to the Presbyterians for 99 years and in 1850 a church worthy of the name was erected.¹

In 1851 The Reverend S. Clements built the Methodist Episcopal Church of Schoolcraft. The first organization of this church had been on Gourdneck Prairie in 1840 by a local preacher named A. J. Eldred, who lived there. Early in the spring of 1840 a class was formed in Schoolcraft by a brother Shaw, who was then the preacher in-charge. The class originally had nine members. After the erection of the church the membership was further increased by the addition of the people from the Prairie Ronde Methodist Church.² (See appendix.)

At this time Schoolcraft had several stores, but no industry except the aforementioned distillery, and possibly a sawmill. It was to experience its real growth when the Civil War brought a tremendous demand for the

¹. Durant, op. cit., p. 529.
². Ibid., pp. 530-31.
agricultural products of Prairie Ronde, which were channeled out from Schoolcraft.

Politically the prairie was generally Free Soil, at least anti-slavery. There were usually several escaped slaves living in and around Schoolcraft at any given time after the opening of the underground railroad and they were seemingly welcomed.¹

In 1848 occurred an incident which gave the residents of Schoolcraft and Prairie Ronde something to talk about for some time—James Fenimore Cooper came to town. His primary concern in coming to Michigan was property. He had acquired eighteen lots in Kalamazoo for which he had paid $2500. He was speculating in land, hoping to recoup his fortunes, which had taken a turn for the worse of late. He was naturally interested in Kalamazoo, for his niece was married to General Horace Comstock, enterprising young promoter of the town of that name; there is reason to believe that the little village of Cooper was named for Cooper's brother. He could have easily learned of the coming land boom from them.²


The story is that Cooper wrote his novel "The Oak Openings" while in the county, although his journal indicates that he wrote it while at Cooperstown, New York, in 1848. The last chapter of this book is a bold piece of promotional literature—a brochure to induce people to come to Kalamazoo. Cooper expected to make a profit on his land and he was trading on his literary fame to accomplish it.¹

What Cooper said about Prairie Ronde deserves attention, for it testifies to the rapid economic and mechanical growth of this western area. Speaking of his arrival on Prairie Ronde, Cooper wrote:

"And celebrated, and that by an abler pen than ours², does this remarkable place deserve to be! We found all our expectations concerning it fully realized, and drove through the scene of abundance it presented with an admiration not entirely free from awe...."

"To get an idea of Prairie Ronde, the reader must imagine an oval plain of some five and twenty or thirty thousand acres in extent, of the most surpassing fertility,

¹ Cooper, op. cit., p. 471.
² Probably he meant Charles Fenno Hoffman.
without an eminence of any sort; almost without an inequality. There are a few small cavities, however, in which there are springs that form large pools of water that cattle will drink. The plain, as far as we saw it, is now entirely fenced and cultivated. The fields are large, many containing eighty acres, and some one hundred and sixty; most of them being in wheat. ... Farm houses dotted the surface, with barns and other accessories of rural life. In the centre of the prairie is an oval "island", containing some five or six hundred acres of the noblest native trees, we remember ever to have seen.¹ In the centre of this wood is a little lake, circular in shape, and exceeding a quarter of a mile in diameter. The walk in this wood, which is not an opening, but an old-fashioned virgin forest, we found delightful of a warm summer's day.²

Cooper goes on to describe the Moore- Hascall harvester, which he saw in actual operation. But this picture which he presents permits us to take leave of Prairie Ronde. We have seen a primitive country grow up

¹. The size of the "Island" evidently fluctuated according to the estimate of the size of the prairie.
². Cooper, op. cit., p. 472.
almost overnight into a bustling, cultivated, fenced, and quite civilized rural community. The country bore but little trace in 1850 of the pioneer era of twenty years ago. It was a settled and well developed area and was continuing to grow. The prairie, which once was so famous has lost its identity today and is commemorated only by the township which bears its name. Prairie Ronde richly deserved its fame and continues to make a real contribution to Michigan agriculture. The matchless fertility that had enabled the prairie to become a settled area so quickly still serves as one of the best wheat-growing regions of this state.
APPENDIX

In the summer of 1837 a frame building had been erected on section 12 of Prairie Ronde township to house the Methodist Episcopal Church. Who the minister was is not known, but meetings were held there for a few years, until the organization of another church of the same denomination in Schoolcraft, and then the site was abandoned.  


Further excerpts from A Winter in the Far West by Charles Fenno Hoffman:

"The ground became higher and firmer as I approached Prairie Ronde; and then after riding for a few miles through the openings, when I expected to descend upon a broad meadow, somewhat resembling the many I have seen in Michigan, fully answering to my preconceived ideas of a prairie, I came suddenly upon an immense piece of cleared table-land, some fifty feet above a pretty lake in its vicinity. The scattering of houses around its borders, with the island of timber in the centre and the range of

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