PAPERS FROM THE HISTORY SEMINAR
OF KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

THE HISTORY OF SCHOOLCRAFT
(to the Civil War)

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CHAPTER I
THE PRAIRIE

In the 1680's an explorer by the name Rene La Salle journeyed from the mouth of the St. Joseph River across Michigan to Lake Erie. In so doing, he undoubtedly passed across a vast prairie. The French later called it Prairie Ronde, meaning "the round fire plain." To the Indians who lived and hunted there it was known as Wa-we-os-co-tang-m'-sco-tah.¹

What is now Schoolcraft township was surveyed in 1826 by Robert Clark, Jr.² However, it was not until 1828 that the first settlers arrived at Prairie Ronde.³ In November of that year, Bazel Harrison, with his family and son-in-law Henry Whipple, arrived from Clark County, Ohio. Before them lay an immense plain, in the center of which

3. For a complete history of Prairie Ronde see Jack Rumohr's, History of Prairie Ronde, Papers from the History Seminar of Kalamazoo College, "No. 37."
was an "island of timber." The wood itself was about five to six hundred acres in extent with a small lake in the center, and a range of about six or seven miles of prairie on every side. Upon reaching the prairie, the party was met by Sagamaw, the chieftain of a band of Pottawatomies who lived on the northwest corner of the prairie. The friendly Indians led the group to a small lake on the northern edge of the prairie, later known as Harrison Lake. Here the settlers built crude log cabins, and with the abundance of game and the help of the Indians they managed to survive their first winter.

The prairie soon became a very popular place for settlers. The soil was black and rich with vegetable mold a foot deep. It soon became the boast of Prairie Ronde that a man could plow a furrow eleven miles long without striking a stick or a stone. By

1. Charles Fenno Hoffman, A Winter in the West, New York, 1835, p. 76.
2. From a monument on the banks of Harrison Lake, Prairie Ronde Township.
3. Jack Rumohr, op. cit., p. 2
the spring of 1830 there was a circle of settlers around the border of Prairie Ronde and at the island numbering some sixty families.

CHAPTER II
BEGINNINGS OF A TOWN

Thaddeus Smith was the first permanent settler on the site of the village of Schoolcraft. He had been born in Vermont, as were most of the first settlers at Schoolcraft. In 1819 Thaddeus had moved to Virginia, established a prosperous business, and married. But he was a victim of the financial crash of 1829, and as a result he made a trip west into Michigan looking for "greener pastures." He was captivated by the beauty and advantages of Prairie Ronde and in a letter to his wife he described it as a "Fairy or Enchanted Land" with "more advantages for the farmer than any land I have ever seen. It is the healthiest, or as healthy as any in the United States."¹

Thaddeus returned east, but in 1830 he was joined in Buffalo by some former neighbors from Vermont, James Smith, Jr., Hosea B. Huston, and E. Lakin Brown. From Buffalo the group took passage to Detroit on the steamer "Marie Antionette." From Detroit they traveled to Ann Arbor by stage. Thaddeus Smith and Huston then bought a horse and traveled to Prairie Ronde over the rough Indian trails, since there was not yet

¹. Durant, op. cit., pp. 51& f.
a road into this wilderness. At Prairie Ronde they purchased the claim of a man named Rue for fifty dollars. This claim was located just east of the "big island" and later became the site of the Village of Schoolcraft. Thaddeus then returned to Buffalo where he purchased a seven hundred dollar stock of goods and sent it by boat to Michigan, where Huston took charge. The first winter the goods were kept in the cabin of Abner Calhoun on the west side of the prairie. In 1830 a two story frame building was built on the site of Schoolcraft and the first stock of goods in the county was opened on Prairie Ronde. The store was known as Smith, Huston & Company. The village now began a rapid growth, which would soon, however, be halted by war and disease.¹ In the fall of 1830 Edwin Smith came to Michigan and described Schoolcraft in comparison with Kalamazoo.

Kalamazoo had only two houses and those merely log huts while Schoolcraft boasted quite a number of dwellings a store or two and a tavern entitling it to the distinction of being the oldest town. ²


The lands of Schoolcraft township which had been surveyed in 1826 did not go on sale till May of 1831. Prior to 1831 a settler could secure pre-emption rights to the land, being allowed a claim of 160 acres. In May of 1831 the lands of Kalamazoo County went on sale at the land office in Monroe. By the end of the month not a single 80 acre plat of Prairie Ronde remained unsold. Most of the settlers now owned their land.\(^1\)

During the winter of 1831-32 a hotel was built at Schoolcraft, called the Big Island Hotel. It was quite an institution in its day. It was framed by Nathaniel Foster, who followed the old "scribe rule."\(^2\) The owners were Smith, Huston & Company and Johnson Patrick, who was also the proprietor for the next two years. After that John Dix took it over and ran it for quite a number of years. In 1833 a large addition was built and it became one of the finest hotels in Western Michigan, having a

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2. This was the practice of "cut and fit."
good barn and convenient surroundings. After the main street of the village was changed, the hotel, which was located on the old main corners, was sold to E. Lakin Brown, and in 1847 it was destroyed by fire and never replaced. After that the Schoolcraft House, a transformed dwelling on Grand Street, served as the town's hotel until the 1870's when the well-known Troxel House replaced it.1

The first post-office in the region had been kept at Insley's Corners on Prairie Ronde. Colonel Abiel Fellows was the first postmaster. With the growth of Schoolcraft during the first two years of the 1830's, the post office was moved from Insley's Corners to the village. In 1832 Joseph Addison Smith was appointed the first postmaster there, and the village now had a postal service.2

On Oct. 5, 1831 the original plat of the village of Schoolcraft was received for record. The survey was made by Stephen Vickery for the proprietor, Lucius Lyon. Lyon named the village in honor of his personal friend Henry R. Schoolcraft.

1. Ibid, p. 520.
2. Ibid.
In 1836 the plat of Schoolcraft had to be changed by a circuit court order. A strip of land on the east reverted to the government and as a result the village had to be expanded to the south. This addition was called "Bull's Addition," after Albert E. Bull, the man who laid it out. The business and buildings were transferred from the main corners of Center and Eliza to the new main street, called Grand. The highway south off the end of Center Street was closed and as a result the whole township became involved in a litigation "in the course of which a jury rendered a verdict of $2,720 damages by the highway which, years before, the complaining proprietor, Lucius Lyon, had himself designated and opened, through land, the whole body of which, at the time of the verdict, could not have been sold for one half that sum."  

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1. Ibid., p. 519.
CHAPTER III

COMMERCE

As has already been noted, there was a band of Indians who lived on the northwest corner of Prairie Ronde. In the early years of Schoolcraft they were quite numerous and were frequent visitors to the Smith, Huston Company store for purposes of trade. They came frequently in companies of a dozen or more, men, squaws, papooses, and ponies. They brought furs, cranberries, venison, and sugar to exchange for calicoes, blankets, tobacco, and whiskey. When they received their annual payments from the government they would come to town with considerable money, all in silver half dollars. The fur trade was of considerable value. The Smith, Huston and Company store often collected many hundreds of muskrat, coon, and deer skins. At that time muskrats were always rated at 25¢ and coons at 37½¢. The Indians also made sugar and traded this at the store. The squaws would bring the sugar into town in birch-bark baskets called "mokuks," carrying one of these thirty to forty pound baskets on each side of their ponies.

The Indians were generally peaceful and honest in their dealings. When under the influence of whiskey, however, they occasionally became dangerous. On one
occasion a drunken Indian entered a settler's cabin and without provocation stabbed the man to death. The Indians gradually became more and more unruly and in 1840 they were removed west of the Mississippi by the government. ¹

The trade with the Indians was only one facet of the trade of Schoolcraft. Prairie Ronde, with its rich cropland, soon became the granary of the whole country for miles around and therefore its trade rapidly increased. The Smith, Huston and Company store soon served regular customers from as far away as Three Rivers, Paw Paw, Otsego, Allegan, and even from Battle Creek and Marshall.

The St. Joseph River was the main artery of commerce between Schoolcraft and the outside world. Goods were shipped by sail vessels around the Great Lakes via Mackinac to St. Joseph. Here the goods were loaded on smaller boats and brought up the river where they were unloaded at some convenient place, usually just below Three Rivers,² or on the Paw Paw River, just above Paw Paw. The Paw Paw was not used

¹ Brown, op. cit., pp. 459 f.
² Durant, op. cit. p. 519.
as frequently as the St. Joseph, since it was narrower, very crooked, and full of logs and obstructions. When the goods arrived at the unloading place they were piled on the bank of the river until they could be hauled to Schoolcraft by wagon. The goods were often left on the bank, unguarded, for several days.

Wheat, the only exportable product of the prairie, was transported in wagons to the river, where it was left in log storages until it could be loaded on the arks which carried it down to St. Joseph. These arks were ten to twelve feet wide and about sixty foot long, holding nine hundred to a thousand bushels of wheat. They were nothing more than a large plank box, and when the trip ended at St. Joseph they were torn apart and sold for lumber. The crew would then return on foot.

River boating was not without its dangers, and sometimes expensive cargoes were lost to the river. E. Lakin Brown tells us of one of these misfortunes. In 1831 Smith, Huston and Company contracted with a Captain Michael Beadle to carry a load of wheat down the river on his ark, the "Argo." To allieviate the long, hard hours of work, the crew decided to buy a

barrel of whiskey to take along. They purchased the "fire water" and placed it at a spot called McIntaffer's Ripples, where they would pick it up after they had started the voyage. Arriving at the point of pick-up, the ark was guided in near shore, and a line fastened to the stern was thrown to the bank and secured to a tree. The ark, however, under full headway, and feeling the increasing force of the current, passed on, leaving the stern fastened to the tree. Nearly a thousand bushels of wheat sank slowly beneath the river.1

1. Durant, op. cit., p. 519.
CHAPTER IV
A PERIOD OF STAGNATION

In the Spring of 1832 the prospects for the growth of Schoolcraft were very bright. In April of 1832, however, the village of Schoolcraft was shocked by a messenger from White Pigeon. He came with orders to call out the county militia, for the Indians in Illinois had risen and were "slaughtering the inhabitants." A meeting was immediately held at the Big Island Hotel, and a messenger dispatched to Bronson and Gull Prairie late the same night. Excitement was at a high pitch next morning when the settlers of the community collected at Schoolcraft. Addison Smith was having a "pow wow" with Sagamaw, chief of the Pottawatomies, for it was feared they might become hostile. Dr. David Brown, colonel of the county militia dismissed the men giving them orders to hold in readiness.

After a few days orders came for the Kalamazoo County regiment to march. The group met at Schoolcraft, organized, and started south. Dr. David Brown was the colonel in command, Hosea Huston of Bronson was a major, and Isaac Barnes of Gull Prairie was assistant colonel. Ephraim Harrison of Prai-

rie Ronde and James Noyes of Gourdneck Prairie were captains of the "prairie troops" and there were probably two other companies from the north part of the county. Thaddeus Smith went along as fifer.

On the second day the regiment arrived at Niles, where they met the militia under General Jacob Brown. But because of the lack of provisions the Kalamazoo regiment was ordered to return home. So the militia returned without ever having seen the enemy. The troops did, however, receive a month's pay and later they received bounty warrants which could be applied on land.¹

After the war people again expected a flurry of settlers. But that summer of 1832 the scourge of Asiatic cholera swept the territory, although it had no victims in Kalamazoo County.²

In 1834 a survey of the Detroit and St. Joseph railroad was made through Schoolcraft and hopes were high in the village. But the final location of the railroad was through Kalamazoo, making it the nearest market for the immense agricultural produce of the

². Doctor Nathan Thomas had two cases in which the symptoms very much resembled cholera.
prairie. This contributed much to the growth of Kalamazoo, while Schoolcraft itself grew very little.¹

Still another reason for Schoolcraft's failure to grow, was the establishment of the village of Brady² about five miles east of Schoolcraft. Having very good water-power, a grist mill was soon built there by John Vickers. The village began to grow, and it was soon a place of considerable business.³

The late thirties was truly an interval of stagnation for the village of Schoolcraft. It began to take on that unthrifty and dilapidated appearance which accompanies a period of stagnation in business.⁴

It was during this period that the system of "wildcat banks" sprang up around the country. The legislature had passed a law authorizing any company

2. Later named Vicksburg, after John Vickers who built the first grist mill there.
3. Ibid., pp. 83 ff.
4. Ibid. p. 86.
of persons to organize a bank and issue bank notes
founded upon mortgages of real-estate, a certain
amount of specie to be paid in. Banks sprang up
all over the state, almost every little village
having a bank.

In the latter part of 1837 a bank was organized
at Schoolcraft, called the Farmer's Bank of Prairie
Ronde. The necessary stock was subscribed and the
requisite ten per cent was paid in. Smith, French
and Company were the largest stockholders. Having
subscribed most of the stock, they expected to con­trol the business. When E. Lakin Brown was elected
president "they withdrew in disgust." Mr. Brown,
seeing that the enterprise would not be possible
without them, subsequently resigned, and James Smith
was elected president. H. G. Wells, a young lawyer,
was dispatched to New York to procure the engraved
bills. Everything was soon in readiness for the
grand opening, but by this time "wildcat banks"
were failing all around. Nobody knew what money was
good and what was bad. The result was the failure

1. The old Smith, Huston and Company had now been
reorganized. The new owners were James Smith,
Robert French, Samuel Robb, and John Parker.
of the whole system and "wildcat money" was everywhere refused. So the bank at Schoolcraft closed before it opened. The directors voted to distribute the capital among the stock holders, less expenses.¹

¹ Brown, op. cit., pp. 468 ff.
CHAPTER V
THE MOORE-HASCALL MACHINE

In the 1840's there was an increased demand for wheat and, since Prairie Ronde was so well adapted to this crop, more and more wheat was planted. The primitive harvesting methods presented a real problem at harvest time. However, a man on Climax Prairie had invented a harvester, and during the early 1840's he was trying to bring it to perfection.

In 1842, the man, Hiram Moore, came to Schoolcraft and lived there for some time. E. Lakin Brown described Moore as "a very ingenious man and a most genial and entertaining companion." In 1843 Moore bought the Bates farm near Schoolcraft and operated his machine on this land until 1853 when he shipped it to California. Lucius Lyon, the original proprietor of the village of

Schoolcraft, owned a farm nearby, and being interested in cutting the costs in wheat production, he invested between three and four thousand dollars in the machine.¹

James Fenimore Cooper, who lived in Schoolcraft during the latter 1840's while he gathered material for his novel Oak Openings, described the operation of the machine in this book.

"This machine is drawn by sixteen or eighteen horses, attached to it laterally, so as to work clear of the standing grain, and who move the whole fabric on a moderate but steady walk. A path is first cut with the cradle on one side of the field, then the machine is dragged into the open place. Here it enters the standing grain, cutting off its heads with the utmost accuracy as it moves. Forks beneath prepare the way and a rapid vibratory of a great number of two-edged knives effect the object. The stalks of the grain can be cut as low or as high as one pleases, but it is usually thought best to take only the heads. Afterwards the standing straw is burned or fed, upright."²

² James Fenimore Cooper, Oak Openings, n. d., pp. 473 f.
The development of the machine soon ran into financial difficulties. Also, since Moore had only a blanket patent on his machine, others soon copied the details of the machine. Soon the harvester was replaced on Prairie Ronde by the "reaper," which was cheaper and much more easily operated.¹

¹ Rumohr, op. cit., p. 21
CHAPTER VI
RAILROAD FEVER

As was mentioned earlier, a survey had been made through Schoolcraft in 1834 by the Detroit and St. Joseph Railroad. But this railroad's final location was through Kalamazoo, much to the disappointment of the residents in Schoolcraft.

During the 1850's the town was once more struck by "railroad fever." There was much popular enthusiasm and agitation for a railroad. The first "railroad meeting" was held on Feb. 13, 1855 at the school house. There were many following meetings brought about by the growing enthusiasm. ¹ On April 19 a meeting was held, at which time the Schoolcraft and Three Rivers Railroad was organized, for the specific purpose of building a railroad from Three Rivers to Schoolcraft.² E. H. Lothrop was elected president of the company.

The Three Rivers and Schoolcraft Railroad would

² Henry P. Smith Journals, vol. VI, April 19, 1855.
connect with the Michigan Southern at Three Rivers. A meeting of the M.S.R.R. Board of Directors at Toledo drew up an agreement whereby the Three Rivers and Schoolcraft Railroad upon completion of its proposed line, would receive the road from White Pigeon to Three Rivers. Conditions were favorable and a commission of stock solicitors was appointed. However, subscriptions for the proposed railroad were slow in coming, and many people became somewhat discouraged. Henry P. Smith mentioned in his diary that some of the richest people in town would not buy stock and he referred to them as "poor penurious brutes." A few months later things began to look a little brighter. The entry for Nov. 23 reports, "Railroad fever raging again. Prospect that the Sturgis and Grand Rapids Railroad will go through. Some of our tight pursed citizens have bought stock." The entries for November and December show that

2. Smith Journals, op. cit., April 7, 1855.
3. Ibid., Nov. 23, 1855.
the railroad "excitement was increasing" and that "railroad fever was still raging." On December 7 two thousand dollars was subscribed and hopes were high that the railroad would reach Schoolcraft by the fall of 1856. But this was wishful thinking and Schoolcraft was to wait quite some time for the railroad.

After the organization of the company, they proceeded to have the line surveyed and located. The right-of-way was secured as far as possible, and it was then graded and ties procured. Here the project stalled. Iron cost sixty dollars a ton and this large sum could not be secured. E. H. Lothrop, President of the Company, became discouraged and resigned. E. L. Brown took over, but still money could not be raised and so the project remained at a standstill. Finally an agreement was made with Ransom Gardner, an old railroad man, whereby for a certain bonus to be given by the townships of Schoolcraft, Prairie Ronde, and Flowerfield, and the surrender of all interests and rights, he would build the line.

1. Ibid., Nov. & Dec., 1855.
2. Ibid., December 7, 1855.
This he did, but it was not until 1866 that the first passenger car arrived at Schoolcraft on this line. This line was later extended to Kalamazoo, Allegan, and Grand Rapids.¹

¹ Brown, loc. cit., pp. 484 ff.
CHAPTER VII
SCHOOLS AND CHURCHES

Probably the first school in the county was built at Insley's Corners on Prairie Ronde as early as 1830. The first year this school was taught by the Reverend Thomas W. Merrill and the following year Stephen Vickery took over the teaching duties.¹

In 1834 a school was built in Schoolcraft. In the summer of that year Pamela Thomas, wife of Dr. Nathan Thomas, taught the first public school in Schoolcraft.² In 1846, Reverend William Taylor erected a building, and opened a public school called the Cedar Park Female Seminary. Originally it was supposed to be for girls only, "but both sexes have always been admitted." According to James Thomas it was a school "which varied much in character and usefulness ..." Previous to his death in 1852, Reverend Taylor conveyed the Seminary property to the trustees of Kalamazoo College, under whose auspices it was conducted until 1869 when it was purchased by School District No. 4 of Schoolcraft.³

Before the organization of a church in School-

1. James Thomas, op. cit., p. 79.

(25)
craft, the people used to hold church meetings in the old Smith, Huston and Company store. In the early 1830's there was no building in town for holding meetings except the store, and since it was quite spacious, boards would be brought in for seats and church would be held there on Sundays. In the early days of the village Benjamin Taylor or some other clergyman would preach to the people who came from miles around to worship and exchange a few words with one another.¹

In 1839 the First Baptist Church was organized at Schoolcraft. William Taylor, the founder of the Cedar Park Seminary, was the first pastor of this church. Two years later another church was organized in the village, known as the Methodist Episcopal Church. This church had originally been organized on Gourdneck Prairie in 1840 by a local preacher, A. J. Eldred. In the Spring of 1841 a class was organized in the village consisting of 12 members. In 1851 both the Baptists and Methodists built new church buildings at Schoolcraft.

¹ N. M. Thomas, op. cit., p. 109.
A third church was organized at Schoolcraft in April of 1844 by the Reverend John S. Kidder. Organized as a Congregational Church, it later changed its form of government to Presbyterian. This church started with two members and by 1850, when a new church was erected, it numbered fifty-five members.¹

¹ James Thomas, op. cit., p. 86.
CHAPTER VIII
HEALTH AND MEDICINE

In writing of his grandfather's journals, Stanley Smith says that, "Uncorrected, it (the journals) would lead us to believe that the early society on the prairie was a society of more or less chronic invalids dragging out a joyless existence." This however was not so, for the people were a very gay and hearty lot despite the sickness and disease. But the fact remains that sickness and disease were very prevalent during most of the year. Such diseases as malarious fevers, dysentery, rheumatism, pneumonia, pleurisy, cholorea infantum, and croup were present among the early pioneers most of the year. In winter there was usually a constant and unvarying succession of inflammatory diseases, while during the remaining three seasons of the year malarious fevers of varying severity were quite common.

Malaria or ague was the bane of the early pioneers and as late as 1881 malaria was still believed to constitute over 50% of the illness in the state.

3. Ibid., pp. 59 f.
In Schoolcraft malaria was very prevalent, almost everyone having it at one time or another. One of the chief causes was probably the large pool of stagnant water which formed at the foot of Eliza Street. This, along with that in the drainage ditches along West Street and Eliza, was an ideal breeding place for large swarms of mosquitoes. During the spring the water was usually one or two foot deep and was usually covered with a thick green scum from frost to frost.¹

A violent intermittent fever was characteristic of malaria. Henry P. Smith describes one of these attacks in his diary as having a case "of the real old fashioned shakes" which lasted for about two hours and the fever about the same.²

In 1834 there was a cholera outbreak in Detroit. It apparently was brought in by the steam boat Henry Clay.³ Dr. Nathan Thomas states that during the month of August "there was a cholera atmosphere at Schoolcraft and many cases partook more or less of cholera symptoms." Thomas had two cases which very strongly resembled cholera. One of these

¹. Smith, op. cit., pp. 139 f.
³. Kleinschmidt, op. cit., p. 69.
cases, which was in the last stage, he describes in the following excerpt.

"When I arrived at his bedside I found him to be in the last stage. He had been vomiting, and everything taken into the stomach was rejected; there were frequent discharges from the bowels, cold extremities, and a cold sweat over the whole surface of the body; the pulse was almost imperceptible, and he was sinking rapidly. Opiates and stimulants were given freely internally; externally local stimulating applications were made to the extremities and over the stomach and bowels - but without effect, and he died in a few hours."

We have mentioned some of the major sicknesses. The people were also plagued by numerous and common ailments such as colds, sore throats, and toothaches. It's surprising that many people lived through this "gauntlet" of sickness and disease, but it's even more astonishing when we look at the treatments which were used.

The most common medicine for checking ague was quinine. It was given in very large doses, both to young and old. In the Smith Diary we read of...

3. Ibid., p. 140
small baby being given four large doses of quinine in one day. In pulling teeth, a common occurrence, and in treating stomach aches and neuralgia, opium, morphine, and chloroform were used. For relief of costiveness and dysentery, also quite common, salts, castor oil, aloe, or a mercury compound was used. Calomel was also used, chiefly as a laxative but also in the treatment of neuralgia. Other medicines mentioned include blue pills, blue mass, oils, and spirits of nitre.

The first doctor to set up practice at Schoolcraft was Dr. Nathan Thomas, who came from Jefferson County, Ohio, in June of 1830. Soon after Thomas arrived, another physician, Dr. David E. Brown, located on the northeast edge of the prairie and set up a practice there.

2. Smith, op. cit., p. 140.
5. Ibid., Sept. 29, 1855.
7. N. M. Thomas, op. cit., pp. 41 f.
By 1832 Thomas had a very extensive practice in and around Schoolcraft, and during the sick season, August, September, October, he got very little sleep. He was on the job both day and night and between 1832-37, he applied himself so closely to business that he never was away from his practice for more than twenty-four hours at a time. In 1838 his brother Jesse Thomas came to Schoolcraft, and assisted him in his practice. They were now able to carry double the amount of practice with less strain then before. The practice in 1838 amounted to four-thousand dollars, more than in any year before or after that time. It extended from the west of Prairie Ronde to Scottown (Scotts).

Thomas described 1838 as "the most sickly season ever witnessed in West Michigan. However, after "38" the amount of sickness and disease declined on the prairie, mainly because most of the prairie sod was now broken up, eliminating the breeding place of the mosquitoes."

1. Ibid., p. 63.
CHAPTER IX
SOCIAL LIFE

After 1831, when the Kalamazoo County lands were put on the market, most of the settlers around Schoolcraft became owners of their rich, prosperous farms. "A more independent, jovial, and hilarious company never congregated than used to meet at the old "Smith store" or the Big Island Hotel." A large segment of the settlers were from the newer settlements of Ohio and Pennsylvania, with some from Kentucky and quite a few from Virginia. Their habits, characteristics, and even their dialect were quite distinct from those of the Vermon ters.

Schoolcraft became the business center and gathering place of the surrounding prairie. Every Saturday was a gala day at the Big Island Hotel. The settlers would come to town looking for a race or a fight. The fun was fast and furious and liquor flowed quite freely.¹ Wolf, bear, and badger baiting were also popular entertainments in the early days of the village.²

There was a pleasant circle of friends and ac-

quaintances, mostly from Vermont, at Schoolcraft in the early 1830's. Their tastes were a little more refined than some of those from other sections. Among this group social parties were frequent, and the largest and jolliest were held at James Smith's, who occupied the old log store. He was hospitable to excess, and was delighted to have all the friends he could possibly accommodate at his home on festive occasions. "Thanksgiving Day, in the fall of 1835," reports E. Lakin Brown, "was celebrated in the jolliest manner. As many as could get into the house were fed and feasted. I wrote a Thanksgiving Hymn for the occasion which was uproariously sung to the tune of the "Missionary Hymn..."¹

The entertainment and social activities came chiefly from the people themselves; they had no other choice. The people, especially the Vermonter, liked to read and also enjoyed music. The main social life of the community hinged around small parties. During a five year period covered by the Smith diaries, there is record made of over one-hundred visits and private parties.

There were other forms of entertainment also. In the diaries, we find record of balls and oyster parties at the Schoolcraft House, and also at Vicksburg.

¹ Brown, op. cit., p. 457.
Rivers, and at the Prairie Ronde House. On different instances there were circuses in town and there was also a performance by "Swiss Minstrels."

There were also the higher forms of entertainment such as "donation parties," an exhibition at the Cedar Park Seminary, and also various concerts. Lectures were also well attended. We find mention of lectures on "temperance," "phrenology," and one on "God and His attributes." As political tension increased during the 1850's such timely subjects as "Kansas" and "abolition" were discussed. There were quite a few abolitionist lectures. Ladies anti-slavery meetings were also quite frequent during this period.

One of the most pleasing aspects of the social life of Schoolcraft was the way in which people helped each other in time of need. Harvest season and barn raisings were events where the people would get together, pool their resources and help each other. These events were also a chance to get together with friends and have a good time. Such gaiety and intimate social relationships have long since passed from the scene.¹

¹. Ibid., p. 137.
CHAPTER X

ABOLITION AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Dr. Nathan Thomas had said many years before William H. Seward, that, "Slavery cannot continue to exist under our government. If it is not put down by the ballot, it will go down in blood." Thomas, whose parents were Quakers, was actively opposed to slavery. He was dedicated to the abolitionist cause, and his house later became one of the stations on the underground railroad.

Dr. Thomas also took an active part in politics. In 1837, he and four hundred and twenty-two other voters from Brady and Prairie Ronde townships sent a petition to congress asking its opposition to the admission of Texas into the Union as a slave state. Later this group sent numerous other petitions asking for abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and opposing the admission of more slave states. In 1840 Thomas took an active part in the formation of the Liberty Party. Five

2. Ibid., p. 110.
years later he was the candidate for lieutenant-
governor on the Party's ticket, with James C. Bir-
ney the presidential candidate.¹

In 1843 a man named Cross stopped at School-
craft for the purpose of setting up a station on
the "Underground Railroad," which he was organiz-
ing at the time. The Thomas home was made a sta-
tion on this line.² This "railroad" brought the
slaves from the south to Schoolcraft, from there
they were transported to Canada by way of Battle
Creek, Marshall, Jackson, and Detroit.³ Zachariah
Shugart, a Quaker on Young's Prairie in Cass
County, delivered the slaves to Dr. Thomas at Schoolcraft.
Thomas, in turn, would deliver them by wagon to
another Quaker named Erastus Hussey at Battle
Creek. The slaves soon began to arrive in lots of
six to twelve. They caused the Thomas family much
work and expense, for they had to put them up,
many times over night, feed them, and transport them
to Battle Creek.⁴

¹ David Fisher, Compendium of History and Biography
   of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, Chicago, 1906,
   pp. 68 f.
² N. M. Thomas, op. cit., p. 110.
³ Fisher & Little, op. cit., pp. 68 f.
⁴ N. M. Thomas, op. cit., p. 110.

(37)
In 1847 the slave hunters came to Cass County, causing much anxiety there and also at Schoolcraft. These "hunters" claimed many negroes as their property but these former slaves were quickly rescued by the people there. The rescuers, however, were the heavy losers, many being obliged to sell their farms and move west.

After the passage of the fugitive slave law in 1850 greater precautions were taken and fewer slaves passed on the regular route. During the next ten years, however, many did stop at the Thomas home on their flight to Canada.¹

During its nearly twenty years of operation, it is estimated that the Underground Railroad through Schoolcraft carried between one thousand and fifteen-hundred slaves to freedom. Many of these Negroes stayed in Michigan which probably accounts for the heavy Negro population in Cass County. But most of these former slaves passed on to Canada, although many enlisted in the Union Army and went back south to fight.²

¹. Ibid., p. 111.
². Fisher & Little, op. cit., pp. 68 f.
CHAPTER XI
REFLECTIONS

Although Schoolcraft was the first village established in Kalamazoo County, it never grew and developed as was expected and is still a small village today. There were several reasons for this stunted growth, but the two most important were lack of water power and no sufficient outlet for its great volume of agricultural produce, mainly wheat. If Schoolcraft had received the Michigan Central Railroad, which was surveyed through the village in 1834 but later was routed through Kalamazoo, it might have grown as Kalamazoo later did. But because of the railroad Kalamazoo became the market and shipping terminal of Prairie Ronde's rich produce, thus receiving the benefit and the resulting prosperity which the village of Schoolcraft might otherwise have had. Kalamazoo grew larger at Schoolcraft's expense.

Another reason for Schoolcraft's failure to grow was the lack of water power, essential for grinding grist and flour. Because of the fine mills at Brady (Vicksburg), Kalamazoo, and Flowerfield, the needs of the surrounding settlers were diverted to these towns, taking another important element of
trade away from the village.

Although Schoolcraft never grew into a large, bustling city, its history is varied and interesting. Its connection with such personages as James Fenimore Cooper, Hiram Moore, Lucius Lyon, Nathan Thomas, and E. Lakin Brown make it important in area and state history. These are just a few of the outstanding names, there are many others; men, women, and children - the hearty pioneers who labored and died carving a home out of this wilderness. These hearty pioneers, characteristic of thousands of others' during the early 1800's, helped shape the destiny of our country by their westward expansion and in this respect the history of Schoolcraft, the history of Kalamazoo, and the history of a thousand other little settlements is important in the story of this nation's westward expansion. The pioneer at Schoolcraft, like the pioneer everywhere, is best described in the words of Schoolcraft's own poet, E. Lakin Brown.

"Oh bright were the hopes of the young pioneer,
And sweet was the joy that came o'er him,
For his heart it was brave, and strong was his arm,
And a broad, fertile land lay before him"

And in tribute to these pioneers we must say again with Mr. Brown.

1. Durant, op. cit., p. 151
"All honor and praise to the old pioneers; You never may know all their story; What they found but a desert, a garden became, And their toil and success is their glory." 1
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