Black Swamp Farm
ONE

The Swamp and How It Was Made

The Historical Records, though somewhat fragmentary and indirect, indicate that the French explorer Robert Cavelier de La Salle and a group of his compatriots were the first of the white race to behold the Maumee Valley, in the northwestern quarter of what is now the state of Ohio. That was about the year 1669. In ensuing years other Frenchmen—explorers, missionaries, and traders—visited the region. At the urging of the colonial governor, most of them kept ever in sight the objective of strengthening and confirming the claim of the French crown to a vast interior area of the continent, of which this valley was a part. The British, who considered this territory rightfully theirs, viewed these incursions with an extremely jealous eye; it was not long until they had men on the scene, maneuvering to checkmate the French.

No doubt all these Europeans, viewing the valley in its pristine state, marked certain features that set it apart as different from anything they had seen elsewhere. For one thing, they found the native population relatively large. The Indians had a particular liking for the region and tended to concentrate in it because its rich natural re-
sources supplied them abundantly with the necessities of life with only a minimum of effort on their part.

Moreover, it had for them no mean strategic value, being traversed by one of the most convenient and useful routes of travel in their far-flung domain. Via the Maumee, the Wabash, the Ohio, and the Mississippi rivers, the red men could move easily by canoe in either direction between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico with only simple, minor portages to impede them. These rivers, the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence, and streams tributary to them gave them ready access to nearly all of the continent east of the Rockies.

The whites could hardly have failed to note that the land was extraordinarily flat, much of it lying at almost dead level. Nowhere was there an elevation that could qualify even as a hill. Over thousands of acres countless trees that towered to unusual heights grew in dense, unbroken stands. The big trees stood like straight, giant poles, branches and leaves joining and intertwining at the tops to form far above the ground a vast canopy that almost completely shut out the sun's rays.

In the woods they found innumerable deer. There were also many bears, wolves, wildcats, foxes, and the like, as well as a wide variety of game, songbirds, and birds of prey. Snakes, including deadly rattlers, moccasins, and copperheads, were likewise in evidence. Fish abounded in the streams. Armadas of bloodthirsty mosquitoes lurked everywhere, and on every hand frogs and turtles were present in great numbers.

The palefaces encountered great reaches of water lying, dark and motionless, over much of the flat terrain. This
stagnant accumulation, in combination with the waxy
gumbo beneath it, made travel other than by boat or
canoe in the streams extremely difficult and unpleasant,
not to say hazardous at times. Eventually, as the region
became familiar to more and more white men, the boggiest
and wettest portion, a belt lying along the Maumee River,
principally to the south and east, thirty to forty miles wide
and about 120 miles long, came to be generally known as
the "Black Swamp."

Bearing in mind the great expanses of murky water, the
sticky mire, and the fearful darkness of the deep, dense
woods—to say nothing of the Indians, the snakes, and the
predaceous animals—it must be admitted that this was a
very appropriate name. For several recent generations,
however, "Black Swamp" has been very decidedly a mis-
nomer. As a matter of fact, the general character of the
region has been so greatly altered that a considerable num-
ber of the many people now living in it are only vaguely
aware—if aware at all—that their homes are in what a long
time ago was a great waterlogged swamp, so dark, so for-
bidding, that it could be fittingly described as "black."

How did this region become the Black Swamp? How was
it eventually transformed so that today the casual observer
can scarcely believe that only a relatively short time ago it
was a heavily forested wilderness, much of it under water,
replete with wildlife and a favorite retreat of the red man?

It is a long story. To start the account somewhere near
the real beginning—that is, with that period in our planet's
history that ultimately saw the valley assume the character
it had when white men first viewed it—it will be necessary
to "flash back," as they say in movie studios. We shall have
to go back a long way, through thousands of centuries. Some of the geologists who have studied available data are of the opinion that the period we are considering began half a million years ago. There are those who argue that this estimate is too low, others, that it is too high. For our purposes here, however, quibbling over some thousands of years, more or less, would be pointless and, in large measure, bootless.

It is an established fact that at some time in the distant past masses of snow began to collect in unprecedented quantities in areas below the Arctic Circle, lower layers of snow becoming solid ice as weight increased. How or why all this happened not even learned men of science can say with certainty. Whenever it may have occurred, whatever condition or combination of conditions may have brought it about, the accumulation of that snow and ice was the opening phase of a most amazing natural phenomenon.

Slowly and irregularly, during a very long period, the ice piled up higher and higher. At length the accumulation attained such volume and such weight that enormous masses, like vast rivers, began to flow out from the centers of glaciation in both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. The formation and initial flow of those ice masses, or glaciers, marked the onset of the earth’s ice age, one of the most striking and momentous periods in its relatively recent history.

From studies of existing glaciers it is known that that ice flow was never fast, never regular; the rate of movement was directly proportional to the snow accumulation, which varied widely from year to year. The flow was on a gigantic scale, and its force was irresistible. The ice picked up and
carried with it rock fragments that ranged in size from boulders almost as large as a house down to small pebbles. Measureless masses of sand and clay were accumulated and moved along in the ice streams. This burden of materials, all abrasive, vastly increased the power of the glaciers to cut and grind and crush. Mountains and hills were gashed and furrowed as if by some colossal engine of limitless power. Hard rocks of the earth’s outer crust were deeply grooved and abraded. (Examples of such rock carving have been found in many places. Among the most striking are those appearing in the hard limestone of Kelley’s Island in Lake Erie, lying to the north of Sandusky, Ohio. Excavations there have revealed acres of bedrock plowed in smooth, parallel furrows and flutes. Numerous geologists and multitudes of tourists have visited this island and viewed the famed glacial grooves in a huge exposed rock. The straight, parallel furrows in this monolith, deep and regular in contour, are practically the same as might have resulted if it had been passed through some mechanical shaper of fabulous size and power.)

In the glacial period ice sheets ranging up to a mile and more in depth spread over the northern part of our continent at one time or another. They covered a large part of present Canada, all of what is now New England and New York, and much of the area now occupied by the states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. In Montana the Rocky Mountains blocked the flow of ice from fountainheads to the northeast, but mountain glaciers streamed down to supplement and extend the continental sheet.
The glaciers flowed in numerous streams and lobes. Time after time they advanced, then receded, each advance, each recession, continuing many thousands of years. Scientists have established that four separate ice ages occurred. On our continent the four glaciations are known as the Nebraskan, the Kansan, the Illinoian, and the Wisconsin, the names indicating the regions in which each left its trace most indelibly.

At length, many millenia after the first accumulation of ice in far northern regions began, annual snowfalls diminished by degrees, and the southward movement of the last vast ice masses subsided very gradually. Solar heat slowly melted the ice so that the enveloping sheet retreated northward. The rate of this withdrawal was slow and irregular, apparently never exceeding a few hundred feet per year.

The topography of areas traversed by the glaciers was changed beyond recognition. Gone were many of the old hills. On our continent a new chain of low, gently sloping hills and ridges made up of debris released from the leading face of the ice mass, now extended in a line, curving irregularly, from the Atlantic coast to the Rocky Mountains. This was the terminal moraine, which marked the extreme southern spread of the ice sheet. Northward and roughly parallel to this moraine a number of other ridges traversed the drift plain in sagging, irregular lines, often broken and disconnected. These, composed of the same material, are generally less massive than the terminal moraine. They were formed when the melting process slowed from time to time, causing a temporary halt in the retreat of the ice sheet.

Mountains, roughly sculptured, presented strange new profiles. Old lakes that had not been completely obliterated
showed marked transformations. New lake beds and new rivers appeared. Many old streams had been filled up and buried under drift; others had been greatly altered, being displaced and forced into new channels or compelled to find new outlets. Oceans of fresh water from the melting ice escaped, directly or through newly carved channels, to preglacial streams. In the flood plains of old streams terraces were built up from silt that the torrents, pouring swiftly toward the sea, washed down from the moraines. In some instances the rushing waters, laden with abrasive materials, cut long, deep chasms and gorges through hard, solid rock.

Some of the preglacial valleys became mere shallow elongated depressions. Others disappeared completely, giving place to comparatively level plains. Drift, composed of boulders, gravel, sand, and clay, covered the primordial terrain to depths ranging from a few feet to several hundred feet. All of the present state of Ohio, with the exception of about one-third of its area, in the southeast, has a deposit averaging about one hundred feet in depth.

After the ice sheet, retreating northward, reached the southern divide of the Laurentian Basin, a vast tract now occupied in part by the Great Lakes, water from melting ice accumulated along the face of the ice wall, forming several lakes. The overflow from these lakes, of course, could not escape northward; it could get away only through old watercourses that carried much of it finally to the Mississippi River. There was also a mighty flow eastward across the present state of New York to the Hudson River. Outlet streams, including the Minnesota, the St. Croix, the Illinois, the Wabash, and the Ohio rivers—even the Father of Waters itself—to this day present features that were carved
and constructed by that gigantic, prolonged flow, heavily charged with sand and rock fragments.

The ceaseless wash and surge of waves built up beaches about those lakes. As the glacial field slowly receded, the lakes also pulled back by degrees, abandoning old beaches and forming new ones. At last the original lakes all disappeared, but they left behind them the beaches that clearly tell the story, in each case showing outlets as well as changing areas and shore lines.

One of those ancient bodies of water, named Lake Maumee, extended in the long ago across northwestern Ohio and a corner of Michigan, from what are now Lakes Erie and Huron, to the site of the present city of Fort Wayne, Indiana. It had an outlet to the Wabash River through which its water flowed to the Ohio and thence to the Mississippi. There was also some discharge to the Ohio through the Scioto and Miami rivers.

In the course of its long life this lake built up a series of beaches that are still plainly to be seen. The outermost and highest of these ancient beaches extends into Ohio from Michigan at a point near the town of Fayette, Ohio, toward the northwestern corner of the state. From there it runs southwesterly to Fort Wayne, Indiana. From Fort Wayne the line is traced southeasterly through the towns of Van Wert and Delphos, in Ohio. At Delphos it shifts to a northeasterly course and extends to Findlay. After making there an odd double fold, it continues generally northeastward. Intermediate beaches run inside this one, nearer the existing shore of Lake Erie. These beaches are known locally as "ridges" and bear such names as "Sand Ridge," "Sugar Ridge," etc. Lying relatively high, with good natural drain-
age, most of them, from the days of the aborigines until now, have been used as trails or roadways.

The drift plain of northwestern Ohio was left so flat that creeks and rivers, all "young" by geological standards, with only slight fall, flowed sluggishly. For that reason they were unable to dispose of water as fast as it came down in rains and snows. This in large measure was responsible for the excessive wetness that originally prevailed during much of the year. The heavy forest growth also played an important role in retarding drainage.

The ancient beaches and the glacial moraines in most instances constituted impassable barriers to natural drainage. Generally, surface water was able to get away only by making detours around them. For instance, but for the beaches and moraines, water carried by the Blanchard River, which has its beginning near Kenton, could have continued its northerly flow directly to Lake Erie, over a route of about fifty miles, with a fall of about four feet per mile. Instead, it had to cut a channel from a point near Findlay to the westward, roughly parallel to the obstructing ridges, meandering about fifty miles to the Auglaize River. Thence the water is carried northward fifteen miles to the Maumee River and on to Lake Erie, some fifty miles distant, the fall averaging about eighteen inches per mile.

Another river, the St. Joseph, originating in Michigan, carries water over a roundabout route totaling over 160 miles to Lake Erie via the Maumee, with a fall averaging about twelve inches per mile. But for the barriers established in the ice age, it could have flowed over a direct route about sixty miles long to the lake, with a fall of five feet per mile.
My father was born on a farm that his father had chopped out of the virgin forest in the valley. In young manhood, he became the owner of a farm, some four miles distant, on which he spent more than sixty years of his life and on which my brother, Carey, my sister, Bessie, and I were born and grew to maturity. Both farms were in the Black Swamp, but in our time these and all other farms thereabouts were neither black or swampy. None of us, for years, heard the name Black Swamp applied to any part of the region—we didn't hear it mentioned at all, for that matter. Only the flatness of the country and the dark, somewhat waxy soil remained as clues to its original condition.

Our farm (now owned by others) lies four miles southeast of the town of Van Wert. It is in Van Wert County (named for Isaac Van Wert, one of the three American militiamen who captured Major André, the British spy, in 1789). A few miles to the north runs the outermost of the old Lake Maumee beaches. This east-west ridge has long been known locally as “the Ridge,” and our township, which it crosses, was named Ridge Township.

The Ridge follows a fairly regular course, with an elevation several feet higher than that of adjacent land. It became for white men, as it had long been for the Indians, a major artery of travel. Today, the Lincoln Highway, Ohio–U.S. Route 30, runs over it throughout the county and beyond in both directions. The first homes in the area were established on or near this old beach because it afforded a convenient means for ingress and egress, and because the relatively dry soil was better adapted to tillage than the perennially wet lands on either side. The width of the Ridge in the county averages about a quarter mile. It is
generally higher along its southern side, sloping off gently toward the north. It is composed of sand and gravel with an admixture of shells, just as one would expect in any beach. Pioneers who built their cabins on the elevation found good water when they sank wells to a depth of fifteen or sixteen feet.