FOR A LONG TIME HOSTILE

Indians discouraged settlement in the valley. For many prospective settlers, the heavy forest growth, water on and in the ground, mosquitoes, and ague were probably no less powerful deterrents than the Indians. Immigration began in a small way about 1820, the Indians having relinquished their claim to the greater part of the region under terms of a treaty signed a few years before. For several decades after it began the influx of settlers was slow.

The earliest whites who established themselves in this wet wilderness depended for a living mainly on hunting and trapping. After the hunters and trappers came men with their families in covered wagons, driving their livestock before them. They aimed to buy land and condition it for farming. Like those who preceded them, they had to depend largely upon food materials obtained in the woods. Some of these people came from settlements outside Ohio; others moved in from older Ohio counties, to the east and southeast. There was also a trickle of immigration from Germany and other European countries. No doubt the principal attraction for all was the low cost of the land. A
good many Indians were still in the area, but they were not
dispersed to disinter the hatchet that their chiefs had buried;
in numerous cases very friendly relations prevailed between
them and white settlers.

Travel in Ohio at that time involved many difficulties,
hardships, and dangers. Wolves and other predatory ani­
mals still lurked in the woods. Even worse were lawless
men who preyed upon travelers, stealing horses and, on
occasion, murdering men for their possessions. Families
coming in from the east were harassed in some instances by
laborers on the National Road, then being extended west­
ward in sections through Ohio. A favorite trick of these
rough fellows was to fell a tree across the thoroughfare
ahead of an approaching wagon, then demand a fee for
the removal of the obstruction.

If unbridged streams could not be forded, it was neces­
sary to build rafts and pole families, wagons, and livestock
across. During much of the year, especially in the Black
Swamp region, such roads as had been opened were appal­
lingly bad, with deep ruts and formidable mudholes whose
negotiation would tax the patience, courage, and skill of the
most stouthearted and seasoned traveler. It was not uncom­
mon for two or more families to pool resources and travel
in a wagon caravan. This was a decided advantage in
meeting many of the difficulties, but of course it gave no
protection against the ubiquitous mosquitoes or prostrating
attacks of malaria.

The first task of a newcomer, after building a rude log
cabin and doing some rough work to aid drainage, was to
clear some of the land of trees. This verily, on the whole,
was an undertaking that bordered on the insuperable, one
at which only stouthearted, robust men could have succeeded. Few today can appreciate the awesome immensity of that virgin forest or imagine the fears and forebodings its dark depths tended to engender. Historians tell us that even after some of the Indian trails had given place to crude wagon roads and fairly extensive clearings had been made, it was not uncommon for women and children—even grown men—to get lost in the big stands of timber.

We were told that Robert Gamble, a pioneer who settled on a tract adjacent to the one that later became our farm, went into the dark woods one evening, guided by the sound of a bell worn by one of his cows. He rounded up the little herd, intending to return the animals to his clearing. They stubbornly resisted all of his efforts, breaking away time after time and running back to the starting point. A neighbor, hearing the commotion, found that Gamble was actually trying to drive the cows directly away from their home quarters. The animals knew that, but the man, completely “turned around,” found it hard to believe.

One spring day a child of six, daughter of a pioneer family, wandered along the path leading from her father’s cabin on the Ridge into the forest. When the sun dropped below the treetops at the edge of the clearing, her parents, noting that she had not returned as expected, became greatly alarmed, for the woods still harbored bears, wolves, and wildcats. The father fired several shots from his musket as a distress signal. Soon, in response, his nearest neighbor appeared. All night and into the following day, their hearts filled with apprehension and dread, the two men searched among the trees over a wide radius but they found no trace of the child. Toward noon of the second day an Indian
chief, accompanied by two braves, strode to the neighbor's cabin, the little girl, unharmed but with tear-stained and bramble-scratched face, asleep upon his shoulder. She told how she had wandered along, lured by ever brighter and more attractive flowers, until at last the path seemed to have disappeared. She ran wildly, now in this direction, now in that, becoming more and more confused. Finally, as the dark curtain of night closed over the forest, exhausted and paralyzed by fear, she raked leaves together beside a log, lay down, and cried herself to sleep. There, hours later, the Indians found her. This was an oft-told tale in our family, for its central figure, in maturity, became my father's mother.

The settlers felled the big trees that grew about their cabins and cut them into logs, reserving the best for splitting into fence rails. They piled brush and unneeded logs in enormous heaps, sturdy men and sturdy oxen toiling through many long days. Finally, they applied the torch and the great heaps, which included some of the finest timber that ever grew, went up in smoke.

Three or four weeks of the most strenuous labor were required for a good woodsman, felling a tree at a time, to clear an acre of hardwood. In some instances clearing was expedited by an ingenious method known as "slashing." Starting at the side of a timbered tract opposite that from which the wind most commonly blew, the slasher would chop notches in all of the trees in a swath about thirty feet wide across the tract, cutting trunks one-third to one-half through. Notches were so placed as finally to direct the fall of each tree to the leeward and toward the center of the "windrow." Near the windward end of the slashed strip,
the notches were all made considerably deeper. Then, with a brisk wind blowing in a direction parallel to the swath, a big tree was chopped off at the windward side as a "starter," to fall against one or more of its deeply-notched neighbors. The latter were knocked over and in tumbling threw down others to the leeward. And so it went, until, within a few minutes, all in the swath had fallen prone in a terrific, prolonged, awe-inspiring crash. A competent slasher could cut off about an acre per day; two experts working together commonly counted on slashing twenty acres of heavy timber in about nine days.

After lying where they fell for a year or more, the dry trees were quickly disposed of by burning on a wholesale scale. Neighbors came from settlements near and far to help with the logging and burning. These "logging bees" were frontier social affairs in which an enormous amount of hard work, hearty repasts, and unlimited lusty fun were combined, to the delight of all participants.

The woodsmen collected quantities of the ashes that remained after big clearing fires. They leached the ashes, then boiled the lye to evaporate the water. The resulting potassium salt had an important market value at stores and trading posts. Some settlements had "asheries" that bought ashes and processed them, selling the potash to eastern establishments manufacturing soap and glass.

To us today, with lumber so scarce and expensive, this large-scale destruction of fine timber seems a rank, outrageous waste. It did not appear so at the time. To these men the forest was an encumbrance that they had to get rid of so that they could make the land yield a living. Timber for a long time had no market value—there was no
market. In time, after much good timber had been destroyed, canals and railroads, made markets available, and a few sawmills and plants for the manufacture of barrel staves and hoops were set up. Factories that turned out handles and household woodenware were also established. Thousands of top-quality trees were taken out for use as ship timbers. Enormous quantities of wood were consumed in tile, brick, and lime kilns. Railroads bought and used much native timber as ties and bridge timbers. The opening of oil fields created an enormous demand for wooden "sucker rods" to be used in pumping oil. A vast amount of good timber went into rails and posts for fences.

In Paulding County, adjoining our county at the north, big charcoal ovens were built adjacent to a furnace for reducing iron ore, which was brought down from the Lake Superior region. This establishment yearly consumed the timber from about one thousand acres, converting some one hundred twenty cords of wood per day into charcoal sufficient for making forty-five tons of iron.

A tract of twenty-five acres or more of timber was commonly left when a farm was cleared. This was intended to provide fuel and lumber as needed in later years. The woods of course provided shelter for game birds and animals, so that for years there was excellent hunting. In many cases tracts from which virgin timber had been removed and sold were left undisturbed until small trees and saplings developed, producing a new generation that was known as second-growth timber.

Whites learned early from the Indians the art of making maple syrup and sugar. For a long time these maple products were the only sweets other than honey available in
pioneer settlements. When they cleared their land, many spared large groves of maples. Sugar or hard maples were preferred, but much sap came from soft maples. On those farms sugar-making was long a regular spring occupation.

Living in our community was an old man understood to be part Indian. Each year he cultivated a patch of tobacco. After curing, he reserved some of the leaves for smoking. He prepared others for chewing by boring large holes in maple trees and packing the tobacco into them. The sap gave the plug qualities and flavor that he considered highly desirable.

Among native forest trees were beeches, hickories, oaks, sycamores, walnuts, elms, maples, wild cherries, mulberries, ashes, and box elders. There were also honey locusts, coffee nuts, and ironwoods. Native poplars were known as “cottonwoods,” basswoods were commonly called “linns.” Shrubs included sumac, dogwood, elderberry, pawpaw, spice-bark, haws, buttonwood, prickly ash, and several varieties of wild berries. Wild grape vines with thick, heavy stalks grew to the tops of some of the tallest trees. No evergreens of any kind grew native anywhere within many miles. A neighbor once found in the woods a small red cedar. Transplanted near his home, it developed into an attractive tree. No doubt that cedar grew from a seed carried by a bird from a tree growing many miles to the northeast where red cedars are common. Although the buckeye, or American horse-chestnut, flourishes over much of Ohio, giving it the nickname “Buckeye State,” none grew on our farm or anywhere near. The redbud, or Judas tree, common in woodlands and beside streams in nearby areas, was also conspicuous by its absence.
In early spring the ground in woodlands was carpeted with wild flowers. Predominant among them were violets, sweet Williams, buttercups, Dutchman's breeches, Jack-in-the-pulpits, deer-tongue lilies, and May apples. Few ferns were found. The Virginia creeper was also rare. We children often gathered large bouquets, being partial to sweet Williams, wild roses, and blossoms of the wild grape, because of their agreeable perfume.

For many years all fields in the region were enclosed by rail fences, laid up in the familiar zigzag or "worm" form. Weathering and decay made steady inroads upon the rails, many of which on our farm had seen half a century or more of use. Gradually, fences of this type disappeared from the scene, nearly all being eventually replaced by factory-made wire fences. Broken and discarded rails were bucked up and used as fuel. All odds and ends of other wood no longer useful met the same fate.

Some farmers bought Osage orange seedlings and planted them in hedges to replace rail fences. The wood of this tree, named for the Osage Mountain region and the worthless orange-shaped fruit it bears, was used by Osage Indians and others for making bows; hence it is sometimes called bowwood. The hedges added a picturesque touch to landscapes, but they were not satisfactory substitutes for good fences. Most of them have now been torn out because, after years of growth, they occupied too much space, and they robbed field crops of nutriment and moisture.