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Caldwell's prairie. 1975

Smith, Catheryn Fisher

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CALDWELL'S PRAIRIE

As Written By Catheryn Fisher Smith

Re-written by Bernice Brown

Illustrated by _____

April 30, 1975

A True Story of Caldwell's Prairie

This is an old and true story about the community of Caldwell's Prairie as told to us in writing by long-time resident, Mrs. Catheryn Fisher Smith. She learned about the early pioneering days that were rich in patriotism,

Draw some of the things that helped Mrs. Smith learn about Caldwell.

hard work and happiness in numerous ways. She dashed about the country side gathering dates and talking to people. She looked into musty books, opened yellowed letters and traced faint names on old tombstones.

One letter written in 1895 tells about the very beginning of this story.

(Written by Addison Ressigue)

"In 1835 Joseph Caldwell and his brother, Tyler, with their families and their sister... travelled all the way from Vermont to Wisconsin by wagon. They first settled about three miles from Kenosha, known then as Pike River."

The writer continued his letter to tell that in 1836 his family also decided to "emigrate" to Wisconsin as their friends and neighbors the Caldwell's had done. But they did not travel by wagon, oh, no, — read on...

"We left Vermont about the middle of May and boarded a canal boat... traveling by the Erie Canal to Buffalo. It took three weeks to make the trip. We crossed Lake Erie in a crazy old steamboat... At Detroit we had to take a schooner, for at that time there were no regular steamers making trips up the lakes. We were three weeks making the trip because of the winds, but then the winds became so strong we were carried past Pike River on to Chicago. There the boat was laid up in the river ten days waiting for a wind to go back north."

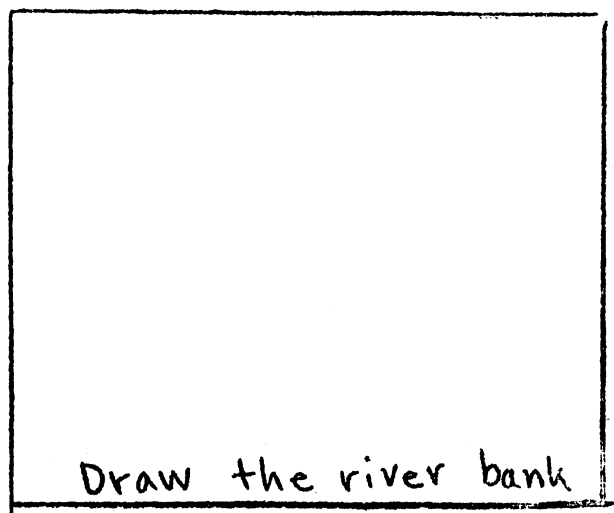
They
started
out
mid-
May.

They
arrived
July 1st.

Illustrate one of the writer's boat travels.

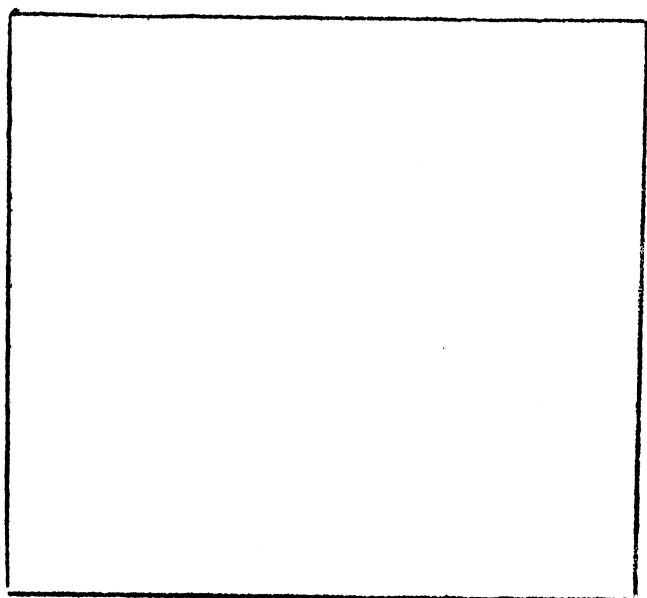
The letter continues: "We were taken to Joseph Caldwell's house, a log one about twenty feet square which sheltered 26 people." Meanwhile Mr. Caldwell had found a spot he liked better. This was to be known as Caldwell's prairie. Mr. Caldwell and some of the men went at once and built a log cabin there....

"When they had put a shake roof on the house they went back to move the families. Father brought three or four yoke of oxen and a wagon and with a load of household goods he took Mr. and Mrs. Cheney and child, my sister Mary and me for the first load... Between our starting point and Rochester there were no houses except at Ive's Grove where we stayed all night at an inn... We arrived at Rochester about noon the next day. About a half dozen families were there."



"The river had to be forded. A passage just wide enough for a wagon had been put through the bank, sloping down to the water."

"When the team got into the water, the leaders stopped to drink, the others swerved to one side and OVER WENT THE WAGON, Mrs. Cheney and her child who were sitting on a chair in the front end were thrown into the water. Mr. Cheney pulled her out quickly and people who saw the accident ran to our aid and took her to a house where her clothing was changed. That night we arrived at our house. It had neither floors nor windows so the wagon was taken apart and laid down for our beds. The next day father and Cheney went to the woods and cut some logs and split them for a floor. They were six inches thick."



After they had laid some of the floor — for the stove area and sleeping area — the father went back for the rest of the family. They returned in a week.

Illustrate the log cabin.

At that time there was only one house between Rochester and Caldwell. There was no one in Waterford but soon after a sawmill was built there.

Between 1836 and 1846 many families took up government land. Between 1840 and 1845 a migration came from Vermont and settled at Caldwell's Prairie. We are told that sixteen families came from Vermont.

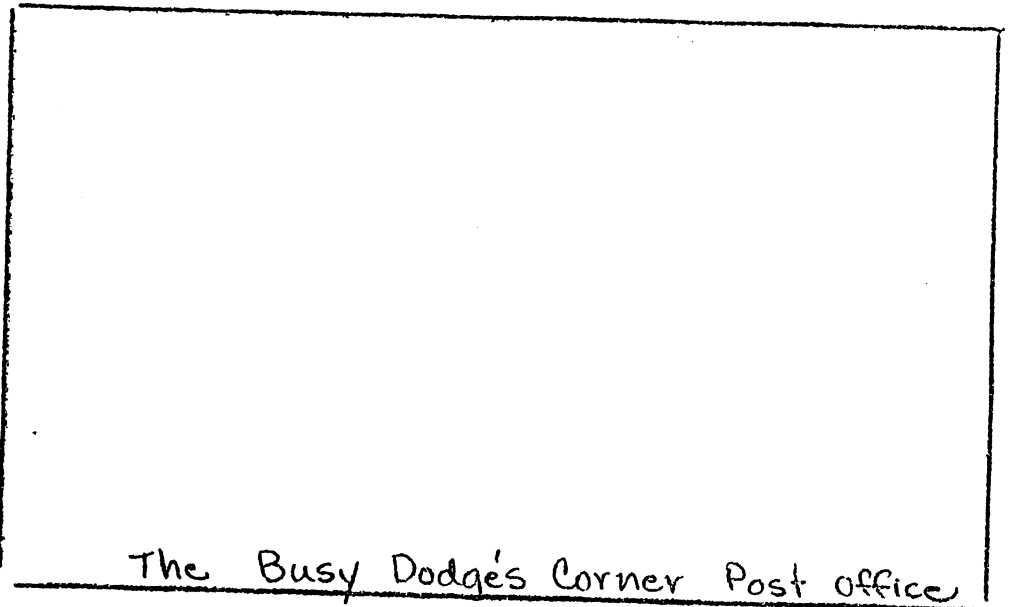
"For the next decade it was one of true pioneering", writes Catheryn Smith, "homes were made, roads surveyed and bridges built. Caldwell was on the main route between Milwaukee, Janesville and Beloit and passing teams became numerous because produce was hauled between these points. Each fall Missourians came through with caravans of four or five yokes of oxen and great prairie schooners with lead from Mineral Point. For these men a string of hostelrys (inns) was soon erected, ... a mile and a half to the east of Caldwell was the fine three story stone hotel built by Uncle Jessie Smith. Most resplendent was this building with its great open fire places and the spring floored dance hall on the third story. Here for twenty-five cents a man might have a night's lodging for himself and team, supper, breakfast and a glass of whiskey."

25¢
5-
FINISH THIS SIGN

Education in those early years was the responsibility of the pioneer women, many who had been well educated in the east, taught their own and their neighbors' young.

"Early settlers frequently saw Indians. A tribe of one hundred Pottawatomies lived in near-by Mukwonago and often at night their pow-wows could be heard. Among the stories which have been handed down to us by word of mouth are two, which I believe are typical of Indian nature.

When the Dodge's Corner post office was erected near-by it happened to be built directly in the path which the

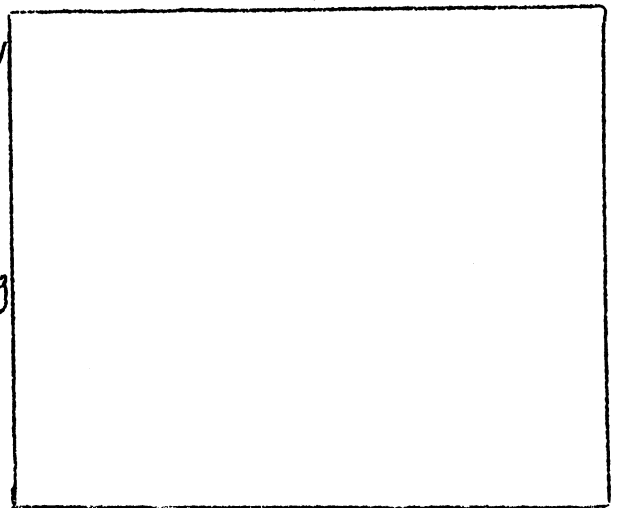


The Busy Dodge's Corner Post office

Indians had walked for years from Mukwonago to another encampment on the shores of Big Muskego Lake. Fortunately for the Indians there was a door at either end of the post office — so when enroute from one camp to the other — the Indians always walked through it, never around it.

The second story deals with Uncle Jessie Smith. On a cold November day an Indian

came to him and begged for cider. The cider was fast becoming hard and Uncle Jessie feared dire results. Not wishing to offend the Indian, he told him with great cleverness, so he thought, that he could have all the cider that the willow basket he carried could hold. The Indian departed and Mr. Smith probably chuckled at the way he had outwitted him. Before very long the Indian returned, his little willow basket thoroughly protected with a coating of ice, which he had secured by dipping and re-dipping in the spring and letting the water freeze each time. He got his cider.



Illustrate the willow basket tale

My grandfather has told me of Indians rapping on the windows of their log cabin begging his mother for food.

More families were arriving. In Mukwonago a store was established. One had to cross the river in an old canoe to reach it and to get the store-keeper up from his fields one pounded with a club on a big cauldron kettle... ”

Land was being cleared and a few frame houses were taking place of the log cabins, since the saw mill was established in Waterford. The

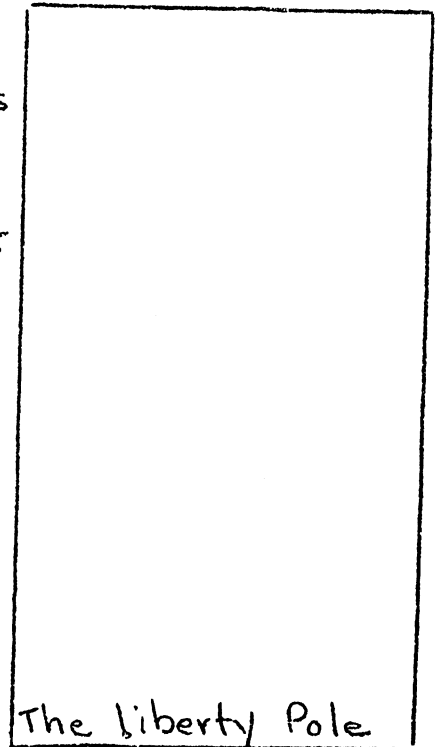
Indians were beginning to move away and then rumor came of GOLD in California!

Nothing to do but go and away went some of these Wisconsin settlers but hardships unknown before met these men, "Miners feared starvation and prices became enormous. Flour was \$4.00 a pound. Meals were a dollar and a half a piece and lodging with a bed on the floor, supper and breakfast was considered moderate at \$4.50." Many of the miners died out there.

"Once more the prairie became "Peaceful Valley"... Land was being cleared, many sheep were raised with Milwaukee supplying the market for the wool. Hay was cut from the big marsh and horse's hoofs were protected from the soft squashy surface with wooden shoes.

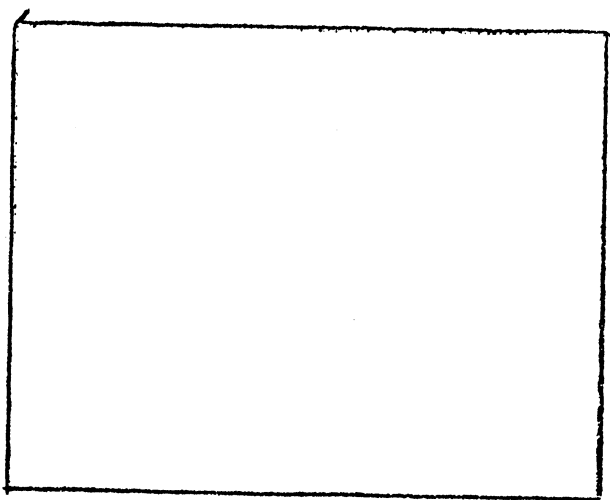
Singing schools, apple parings, skating and spelling bees furnished recreation." Dancing lasted all night and church all day."

Then came the beat of drums and the call to arms for the north was against the south. Quicker than it can be told a company of men was raised. A liberty pole was erected on the village green - back of where the church and hall now stand. One night the rope broke on the liberty pole and because of its height and slimness no one dared climb it.



Finally a reward of five dollars was offered to anyone who could repair the damage. One night a stranger came, climbed the pole, mended the rope, collected the money and no one ever knew who he was, from where he came or where he went.

In 1869 the Caldwell school was built and in 1871 a town hall was erected. "Many are the events which have taken place in that hall but none shine out more brightly than the early



Draw the Caldwell school or the town hall

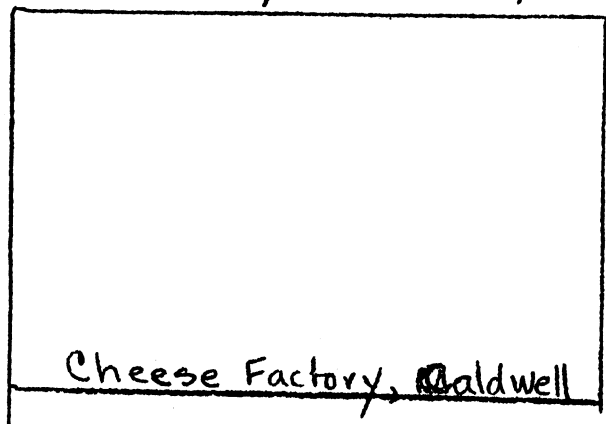
sheep shearing festivals. These festivals were gala two day affairs. Sheep were donated for shearing purposes and farmers tested their skill and speed. Women out-did themselves in culinary skill, a dance was held at night and so widespread

became the fame of this event that reporters from Chicago newspapers came to cover the event."

Along with sheep raising gardening began to become more widespread. Potatoes, melons and sweet corn were the main crops. The

farmers had to have help and more than one young German boy came out from Milwaukee on a lumber wagon and worked by the month for five or ten dollars. Most of them saved the money to eventually buy farms of their own.

The farmer's schedule in those days was something like this. On Monday morning a load of produce was prepared and that afternoon it was taken to the city. The farmer lodged there all week at a farmer's hotel on the outskirts of the city. On Tuesday the load was marketed, while at home the help prepared another load. Tuesday afternoon the farmer drove his empty wagon to Hales Corners, there to meet one of his men with a new load of produce. Loads were exchanged, the farmer returned to town and the help to the farm. Day after day through the garden season this routine was followed with the farmer being home only Saturday night and Sunday.



In the early 1900's a cheese factory was built. The women met to make ice cream for the socials. Chicken pie suppers and oyster stews became popular,

as did the Autumn Harvest Social, which is still a tradition.

"People in Caldwell were content with their double surrys and rubber tired buggies... until one day the merchant appeared in a new contraption called a Reo. Horses went wild, climbed fences and

ran away. Then other people began to buy autos and motor coats and veils... some drove as fast as forty miles per hour."

The auto appears in Caldwell

Today Caldwell is still just a wide spot on the road with the peaceful prairie surrounding. Many residents are the descendents of those early New Englanders and reflect the spirit of their tradition while they give way to the ever changing ways.

