

They Were the First



(The following is an excerpt from ***A Lively Town***, 152 Years in Rochester, by the Rochester Centennial Commission, 1969, an account of Rochester's first family and the pioneers who followed; the Native Americans who shared the land.)

The war of 1812 was over. The British had controlled the Great Lakes briefly, but Commodore Oliver Perry settled that at the battle of Lake Erie.

Detroit had recovered from a year's occupation by British troops in 1813; Chicago had taken four full years to recover from the British-inspired Indian massacre of 1812.

The National Road people had been clamoring to build a gateway to the west and the road was finally on its way to Indiana.

The United States was on the move again. Restless people who had moved inland from the seaboard states could continue the westward march now that the British - American dispute over the Northwest Territory was settled.

One of the restless people was James Graham, born in Ireland according to his Revolutionary War records; born in Scotland according to a statement his grandson made in 1928. Graham had already migrated from New York to Philadelphia to Ontario. In 1813 the Graham family-James, his wife Mary, their daughter, and their sons, Alexander and Benjamin and their wives-crossed the Detroit River on a raft, with five cows and three pigs swimming alongside.

James made a living in Detroit as a woodcutter at 25¢ a cord. But Detroit, a village of 1,700 people, was not to his liking. When Native Americans told him of hilly country covered with oaks north of Detroit, he yearned to move on. For several years James and his sons looked for a passable route through the swamps of southern Oakland

Country, country that an early surveyor called a "low, wet land with a very thick growth of underbrush, intermixed with very bad marshes, the intermediate space between these swamps and lakes is with very few exceptions, a poor, barren, sandy land on which scarcely any vegetation grows, except very small scrubby oaks."

But James Graham was a determined man on the move, and in the winter of 1817 the Graham family, including son-in-law Christopher Hartsough, took the old French Road along the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair to the settlement of Mt. Clemens. It was a three-week trip, but Native Americans had told James of a passable trail along the Riviere aux Hurons (changed to Clinton River in 1824) inland to the land of hills and oaks.

William Graham, son of Benjamin and grandson of James, described the rest of the trip to the *Pontiac Press* in 1928 when William was 90 years old: "Indians, directed them to the site of Romeo, from which they were to go between the east branch of the Clinton and St. Clair Rivers until they struck high banks at a fording place.

"Follow the ridge to a little stream running south and go to a mountain (Tromley Mountain) directed the Indians. This they did, finally striking the juncture of Stoney and Paint Creeks, which landed them on the present site of Rochester."

The restless James Graham knew what he wanted when he saw it. A land of virgin oaks, pine, elm, maple and beech. Three fast-flowing streams with plenty of power for a mill. On March 17, 1817, the Graham party pulled up near what is now the Rochester Municipal Building.

"There they remained for a short time in a temporary abode," reported William Graham, "finally squatting on the southwest quarter of section 15 (near the corner of Avon and Livernois) on the Clinton River, where they built a home of poplar logs." To Alexander Graham and his wife goes credit for building the first home in Oakland County. It was a log cabin on the plot just south of today's East Alley on Third St., built in that spring of 1817. There was born James, first white child born in Avon Twp., and there Mrs. Alexander Graham decided to call the settlement Rochester, after her home town in New York.

Benjamin Graham bought 180 acres just north of the intersection of Auburn and Crooks Rds. in 1826. James moved in with him. He finally settled down, and his great - great grandson, Edward Johnson lives in Avon today.

NATIVE AMERICANS

The Native Americans helped the Grahams in their harvest for 10 or 12 years after other white settlers arrived. Alexander and Benjamin learned the language. In turn, Benjamin helped the local chief obtain nails and other materials to build a house. The Native Americans packed the supplies off to their winter home in Clare and Chippewa counties.

Pioneer C. Z. Horton remembered the Native Americans in letters to the Rochester Era written in 1875. Writing about the years 1825 to 1830, Horton recalled burial grounds on today's northeast corner of Main and Third, one north of today's paper mill, and one "North of Green and Sons's Saw Mill" probably in the northwest portion of today's Michigan Christian College.

Horton joined 25 or 30 Native Americans in a dance: "They had one drummer, his drum being made of a hollow log about a foot in diameter, nearly two feet in length, dressed quite thin, and a raw skin of some kind drawn over it, the drummer using but one drum stick. Their music, if such it could be called, was but one continued stroke like the ticking of a watch. They had also a flute or Flagolette which was blown upon, and on which they could raise and fall some three or four notes by finger-holes . . . then would commence the dance. Each male and female would have the skin of some small animal - a weasel, black or gray or red squirrel . . . and as those that danced would ... come up to some who are sitting, for fun or for a present, or a treat, would present the head of the animals to their faces; and should two or more of the dancers come forward in this way, you must arise and either join in the dance or treat, or sometimes both. Their steps taken in dancing was by stepping on one foot, then slipping it forward once, then the other foot down and slipping forward again, and so on alternately. On these occasions, before many of them get drunk, these dances go off quite pleasantly and with considerable hilarity."

Horton described another dance, which older settlers told him took place in 1824: "South of (the present paper mill), near the hill, . . . the Indians cleared off all the flat and built a large log-heap, set it on fire; in building the heap, they left an opening in the center. They then brought forth two white dogs which they had fantastically decorated with red flannel around their necks, tied in their ears, and around their legs and tails; and when the pile had fairly become ignited all through, they threw their canine victims into the aperture left in the middle of the blazing pile. They then commenced their songs and dances, which they kept up all night - as the old saying is, 'they made the welken ring.'" Horton told the story of We-se-gah, probably the most turbulent of the Native Americans in this section . . . most of the settlers were afraid of him. Of his quarrelsome and pugilist propensity none perhaps were better acquainted than were Alexander and Benjamin Graham. They both had, several times, quarreled with him. We-se-gah at one time drew a tomahawk on Benjamin while he was at work on his shoe-bench, for which Benjamin gave him a very sound thrashing, and at another time he attacked Alexander. After a long tussle of nearly an hour's duration, Alexander finally overpowered him. We-se-gah, drawing his blanket over his face, then sat down and waited for Graham to dispatch him according to Indian law - by burying a tomahawk in his head. Graham

raised the blanket and said to him, 'Go! Never come back. If you do, I will kill you!' We-se-gah went, and was never seen in this section since."

THE FIRST

James Graham was the first. He was the one who proved it was possible to get past the swamps to the land of hills and oaks and water power. But he wasn't alone for long. The wilderness was pushed back almost as fast as a subdivision grows today.

John Hersey built a log cabin north of Paint Creek in the fall of 1818. The land he bought for \$2.00 an acre on October 29, 1818 was the first public land sold in Michigan. It was bounded by today's Woodward Avenue on the North, Main Street on the east, University Drive on the South and near Ludlow Avenue on the west.

There were 129 people in Avon by 1820. In 1819 it was Austin E. Wing, a land speculator, along with Daniel LeRoy, George Postal, Dr. William Thompson and a dozen others who bought land in Avon. In 1823 Lemuel Taylor bought 160 acres on Stoney Creek and his great great granddaughter, Sarah Van Hoosen Jones, lives there today. Rochester's biggest expansion period was 1823 and 1824, when 72 parcels of land were sold. By 1837, just 20 years after James Graham followed the Clinton into the hills, 164 people had bought 22 parcels - all of the land in Avon Township except Section 16, which Federal law reserved for school purposes in every Township in the Northwest Territory.

Most of Avon's early settlers came from New York and from newly settled lands in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. Ninety-seven of the first buyers of parcels in Avon came from Michigan counties; 56 came from counties in New York; five came from Vermont, New Jersey and Ohio. The heavy influx of New Yorkers to this new frontier is not unusual. Michigan's Albion, Lansing, New Haven, Utica, Franklin, Genesee, Monroe, Wayne, Clinton, Livingston, Oswego, Otsego, Troy and Bloomfield, as well as Avon and Rochester, are duplicates of town and county names in New York.

Territorial Governor Lewis Cass would proclaim Oakland a county three years after James Graham stopped traveling; the Township of Avon would be established 18 years after; the State of Michigan would be admitted to the union (Avon electors voting 104 to 52 in favor) 20 years after. Fifty-two years after the Grahams left the trail and settled down, the village of Rochester would be incorporated complete with churches and hotels, mills and farms, literary societies and a Comet Band.

But the James Graham family did it alone in 1817. They were the first.