

MECCA

A HISTORY OF MECCA TOWNSHIP AND ITS SCHOOLS

The Alpha Omega Chapter ... Alpha Delta State of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International an honorary women educators' group in cooperation with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation presents a History of Mecca Township and its people.

All roads lead to Mecca, so goes the saying, but after a long torturous walk from Connecticut to the tangled wilderness that was Mecca in Trumbull County of the great Western Reserve one woman was known to murmur, "This is Mecca?"

How Mecca got its unusual name lies hidden somewhere in antiquity. One map of 1806 indicated the area as "Belle-eau" a French word for "beautiful water," but another map of the same year had the name Mecca and Mecca it remained. This was a bit extraordinary because it was more natural for the settlers to name the new lands either by their own or their owners' names or by names from their former home, Connecticut, already familiar to them.

The original draft of Mecca contained four tracts. Ely, Kingsbury, Cowle, and Kirtland, the largest being the Kirtland Tract, which comprised the entire northern half of the square township. William Ely, Andrew Kingsbury and Solomen Cowles held the southern half. The tracts were divided into lots. Judge Turhand Kirtland, of Poland, Ohio, acting for his brothers and other stockholders, was very anxious to have the Kirtland Tract settled and therefore made easy terms with the purchasers. It was these terms - that the only interest had to be paid - that induced any pioneers to come to this uninviting region remote from the rest of the world and very difficult to reach.

Mecca Township was among the late settlements of Trumbull County. The land was largely swamp and covered with a heavy growth of forest timber along with thick underbrush and swarms of mosquitoes. Wild animals were in abundance. One pioneer said, "I have stood in the door of my log cabin when a dozen deer were in sight." Game was plentiful, especially wild turkeys. However, wolves howled at night and bears also lurked about.

Mosquito Creek divided the township into two unequal parts with the greater part being to the west of the creek. Beavers had built dams across the streams leading into the creek, which formed ponds and small lakes later of great use to the early settlers for water power for sawmills. Lumbering became an important industry for them.

Although the Indians had lived in this region prior to the invasion of the white man, there was only one small Indian hut standing on the bank of the Mosquito Creek when the first settlers came. It stood where the middle of Route 88 causeway crosses the lake today. The few Indians that came through told the settlers that they wouldn't like the water. It was oily to taste. They had often found it floating on the surface of the

springs. They reclaimed it by dipping blankets into the springs and squeezing out the oil that had been absorbed. The oil was used for medicine. That oil proved to be very important to the people who lived in Mecca just prior to the Civil War.

The first settler came to Mecca in 1811. He was Joseph Dawson of Poland, Ohio, and purchased land from Judge Kirtland. He constructed a crude cabin, the only one in the township for nearly two years. His daughter, Nancy, was the first girl born in Mecca.

For several years, the only routes of travel were roads bushed out sufficiently to allow the passing of a horse or a yoke of an oxen and paths marked by blazed trees. The roots of trees grew quite near the top of the ground in this wet land, so after the timber was felled the ground was burned over as thoroughly as possible. Good crops of oats and wheat could be raised by harrowing in the seed. Corn was often raised by planting the seed in a hole made in the earth by a hoe or even an axe. While burning off the timber, the settlers saved the ashes and from them made potash for which there was a ready market and brought cash.

As more settlers arrived in the township of Mecca, house raising and logging bees became frequent. The good wives and mothers showed their talents in providing delicious food for the men.

Spinning and weaving were very important work for the women, too. Some families kept silkworms. Others grew flax for linen. Wool was plentiful when the wolves didn't get too many sheep.

Many people are under the impression that the early settlers were an ignorant lot, uncultured and undesirable, and while this may be true of some, in general, many came from homes of wealth and refinement. Here they carefully raised their children teaching them in morality and religion. Before the first school was built, these hardy women taught their children in their homes. Lucretia Meacham held classes in her cellar and Betsy Wilbur taught school in her home.

When Ira Knapp came to Mecca from Vermont in 1825, he recalled, "The Buttles families were the only inhabitants on the west side of the creek. There were no roads, only blazed paths. Some of the streams had pole bridges. But a log school house was partly built at Mecca Corners. I helped to finish it and Mr. Bartlett came from Greene to teach. He was paid ten dollars per month, but not in money. The settlers helped him to clear his farm in Greene."

However, having one school at Mecca Corners on the east side of the creek didn't help those who lived on the west side of the creek at Power's Corners, later to be known as West Mecca. Abner Mason and his wife were the second family to locate in West Mecca. At last the Buttles were to have neighbors. Their son, Nobel, taught the first school west of the creek when he was eighteen years old in 1828. Two years later, he built a sawmill at a beaver dam and cut lumber, too.

Meanwhile, churches began to flourish. Buildings used during the week for school became churches on Sunday. The meeting to organize the first Congregational Church was held in the winter of 1822. The Freewill Baptists were to follow, and then the Methodists. Although the Methodists started out in East Mecca, then ended up across the creek and held services in Noble Mason's school building.

Life took on a cultured flavor in this backwoods farming community. Children were dutifully taught to read their Bibles and to walk in holiness and righteousness. There was no academy or high school in Mecca, but those who wished to go went to Bristol, Cortland or Greene. There seemed to be no end to the acquired serenity of life here until one day in 1859 when William Jeffrey, a blacksmith, began drilling a water well on his land south of Powers Corners and struck oil.

Within weeks, other well drillers struck veins and the boom was on. Speculators came from all parts of the country, property values soared. Hotels, boarding houses, shanties, and even tents sprang up out of nowhere. Liquor was sold in violation of the law. Gambling was carried on, and the jail began to house many arrested for rowdiness and drunkenness. There was a strip of land one mile wide and three miles long dotted with as many as seventy-five oil rigs. The new boom town was called "Dixie" and suddenly there were three post offices: Mecca, Powers Corners and Dixie. The quiet folk of Mecca were chagrined at the turn of events.

Money was won and lost in the land speculation and at the gambling tables. But, then as quickly as the boom began, the bubble burst. The war came and the oil gave out. Dixie became a deserted village. Most of the buildings were sold to people in Warren or Cortland and moved off on sled runners during the winter. Others were left to rot and the township of Mecca finally returned to normal.

However, at the turn of the century, trouble rose again, this time with an attempt to consolidate the eight district schools in the township. There was to be one school. So a vote was taken. The issue barely carried and more people in West Mecca were against it. Quite a bit of resentment developed over the site for the new school and as a result nothing was accomplished. The next year when the issue was presented again, it failed miserably on both sides of the creek. Finally, the following year it was decided to build two schools, one at East Mecca and one at West Mecca. It was done. That first year each principal received fifty dollars a month and the teachers thirty dollars.

Now the 1920's and 30's brought new names to Mecca Township, names heard in Ireland, Poland, Hungary, Finland and other European countries. These new neighbors added color to the otherwise transplanted New England community. They were a hardy lot also, as were the first settlers of this wilderness.

Then in the 1940's a most significant change came when the government began work on a reservoir for the purpose of water for drinking and for flood control. This reservoir was to be built on Mosquito Creek and was to split Mecca finally and forever into two separate settlements: Mecca and West Mecca. This meant that many people would have to move for their lands would be completely under water. It meant a new and bigger school, this time to be built on the east side of the lake with a causeway joining Mecca and West Mecca. It was a time of great change and there were many protests from those who had to be uprooted. For gone was the creek where many Mecca-ite fished or swam. Gone were the swamps and with them the mosquitoes. Were they bad? Well, ask any old-timer.

Now there is a beautiful lake, one mile wide and sixteen miles long. On any day, you can see quiet boats bobbing in the sunlight, or if you look closely along the shore, you just might see a willow pole with a mischievous boy at the other end, who just happened to miss the schoolbus.

Script by Frances Ganard. Narration by Gene Roberts. These programs were prepared by the Delta Kappa Gamma Society in cooperation with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation to promote a better understanding of the history of townships of Trumbull County, with a focus on early education and the role of the woman educator.