

CHAMPION

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 brief history of Champion Township and its schools.

As far as the eye could see were dense forested trees of beech, hickory, oak, maple, elm, whitewood, walnut and ash --- timberland as fine as any that could be seen in Trumbull County. This was the first view of Champion Township as seen by the early pioneers and settlers. A land that was low and level, except for the northwestern portion, which was slightly rolling. The soil was mostly clay except for the eastern and southeastern part of the township where it was more sandy. Northward the township contained numerous swamps, drained by a number of small streams or swales called Young's Run and Chocolate Run --- natural water ways that remain even today.

This land, in the early 1800's, was a desolate region with its dense unbroken woodlands and deep swamps. It remained almost uninhabited except for wild animals, birds, and the "redmen" as they were called by early settlers. The redmen had been attracted to the area because of the abundance of game --- turkey, deer, wolves, and bear. They lived in the southern part of the township in a little village of eight or ten huts and remained even after the settlers arrived. They were on friendly terms with their white neighbors, and frequently visited their homes to "grind the tomahawks" and to beg for food, tobacco, and "fire water."

A great deal was learned by the early settlers as to "the hunting ways" of the Indians. Many of fine buck fell victim to the unerring aim of the cunning redman who concealed his body in a deep hole made near a spring or deer-lick.

This was Champion --- one of the last townships to be settled in Trumbull County --- known as Township 5, Range 4, --- located north of Warren, east of Southington, west of Bazetta, and south of Bristol. Champion Township was purchased by Henry Champion, an original member of the Connecticut Land Company in 1798. He was sole owner except for a few families who settled in the southern half of the township on land purchased for \$2.50 an acre. Henry Champion, being a money-minded businessman, held the land for nearly twenty years, hoping for higher prices --- \$10.00 an acre --- a price that most settlers could not afford. Thus Champion was slow in developing. Rapid development did not begin until Henry's death nearly twenty-five years later.

The first settler was a man named Nichols, of which little is known. The first permanent settler was William Rutan in the year 1806. He and his wife, Hannah, came from Bellvernon, Pennsylvania. They had two children, Catharine and Henry. Mr. Rutan's log cabin was the first residence built in the township --- built on the architectural plan of what was called "cut and try."

In 1806 or 1807, William Woodrow of Westmoreland County in Pennsylvania bought land, made a clearing, and built a cabin where the Champion Presbyterian Church now stands. In 1808 he moved his family to Champion. Mrs. Woodrow rode a horse and carried her son, John, then about two and one half years old, in her arms. The horse was loaded with saddle bags in which a few household articles were packed. Mr. Woodrow went on foot and drove two cows. Upon his back he carried a knapsack and in it, his son Smith, who was then about six months old.

The Woodrow cabin was similar to the early dwellings in most of this area. It was a log house, about 15 x 25 feet on the ground, and 12 feet from the ground to the eaves. A floor above the one below was made of split oak timber. The chimney was built of straw, split sticks and mortar. Even though much care was taken to have as much mortar on the inside as possible, the chimney often caught fire.

The early settlers often cooked by the fireplace. Most had no lamps by which to light their dark rooms. For some only a saucer of lard and a rag for a wick provided some dim light.

Early life in Champion was both difficult and rewarding, and many tales of those times have been handed down by the early settlers. Indians lived close to the settlers and were camped between the Rutan cabin and the city of Warren. Although they were held in awe by the settlers, they were friendly. Sometimes, though, they stole chickens and teased for supplies.

Because of the presence of Indians, the Rutan family and the Woodrow family were watchful of each other. If one man left the vicinity, his wife took the children and stayed with the other family. On one such night, Mr. Woodrow's family was staying at Rutan's home. Since Mr. Woodrow enjoyed some lively fun, he returned home soon and crept up to the Rutan house like an Indian. He burst open the door and grabbed Mr. Rutan. Of course the women and children were horrified. Such was the wild humor of the frontier.

Wildlife was abundant and often came in sight of the houses in the daytime. A family could get a supply of fresh meat in just a few hours. Wolves and bear were destructive and had to be closely guarded against. Sheep were never safe when a wolf was near and the bears seemed to be especially fond of pork. Many tales have been told of bears coming close up to the cabins and attacking hogs in the styes.

The first family to settle in the northeastern part of Champion about 1829 was the James Walker family. Mr. Walker was often away from home and Mrs. Walker stayed at the cabin, taking care of the children and the animals. The cabin had no doors, only curtains, and wolves and other animals could easily enter the first floor. It was therefore necessary for Mrs. Walker to take the children up into the second floor loft and drag the ladder up after them. There they would spend the night. One night there was a great disturbance about the enclosure where a cow and a calf were kept. The next morning Mrs. Walker found a bear had been trying to "breakfast" upon one or both of her animals.

She could see the prints of his feet. She started on the bear's tracks and saw that it had entered a hollow tree. She returned to the house, secured fire and kindling, made a fire at the foot of the hollow tree, and burned both tree and bear.

From just four families in the early 1800's, Champion started to grow rapidly during the 1820's to 30's. Early family names to appear during this time included the following:

Lane, Donaldson, Croninger, Chambers, Pierce, Foulk, Ross, Durst, Thompson, Cook, Mikesell, Hull, Packard, Weiss, Smith, Walker, Harper, McCombs, Osborn, Burstler, Anderson, McMurray, Fowler, and Hartman.

William Rutan built the first frame house and William Woodrow built the first brick house. It was in this first brick house, which still stands today on Champion Street East, that the Township was organized in 1831 into an election district and named Champion in honor of Henry Champion, its former owner. The men elected each other to offices such as trustee, clerk, and justice of the peace. Almost every eligible voter in the township got an office and some even held two offices. Roads, churches, and schools were among the first concerns of the early officers.

The first road built through Champion was the old State Road, used as a military road during the War of 1812. It followed the general direction of the present State Road.

Early community life in Champion centered around its churches. The oldest church in Champion was the Presbyterian --- organized about 1838 and built in 1842. It is still in use today and stands on Mahoning Avenue. The Methodist Church was organized about 1848 and services were originally held on State Line Road. Later services were moved to Champion Center. About 1857, the United Brethren held services in a house located on the Champion and Bazetta line. The Champion Disciples, or Christian Church, was organized in the early 1890's.

The first schoolhouse in Champion was a log one which stood south of the William Woodrow home. The first term was taught by Catharine Church in May, 1815. The school soon had to be closed because there were too few families to support it and classes were then held in a shop building on the William Woodrow property. In 1829 or 1830 a brick schoolhouse was built opposite the Presbyterian Church. For some years all the "scholars" of Champion attended this school. A frame school later stood on this site.

Other district schools sprang up throughout the township. Mrs. Rutan, Mrs. Sheldon, and Sally Wilson Harper were teachers in the early days of Champion. Lena Kyle taught in District School No. 4 in 1836. She received \$18.00 and her room and board for five months teaching. She had seventeen scholars.

By 1874 Champion had seven one-room schools. August 26, 1889 was the first recorded Board of Education meeting. It showed that Champion was educating 217 students, 14 to 47 per school and employed 14 teachers. Salaries ranged from \$31.00 for men to \$20.00 for women.

The curriculum included the following subjects: orthography, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English grammar, language, history, map drawing, and physiology. Texts included McGuffey's Revised Eclectic Readers and Ray's New Series Arithmetic.

The first mention of a superintendent was Sam Wallers --- in the Board minutes of February 18, 1894. In 1894 the Champion Board of Education voted to "grade the schools."

By 1899, nine district schools were used in the township's educational system. Old District School No. 3, built in 1891, was known as the Shafer Road School. It was located on the west side of Shafer Road, south of Airport Road and housed Grades 1-8. Land for the school was purchased from Charles Chinnock, one of the prominent families in the area. Myrtle Stroup was the last teacher. One of her pupils was Lowell Shafer who vividly recalls his early school years.

The one room school had "central" heating. Warmth came from a potbellied stove in the center of the room. On bitter cold days the teacher and the pupils, about thirty in number, would crowd as closely to the woodburning stove as possible. Shafer can remember going on foot to school with other boys who would walk part way on the top of a fence to get to the school because of flooding. No one worried about illness in those days and young people often were healthier than today. He and his school chums would take turns, as the teacher dictated, to carry water in a pail from a farm about a half mile distant from the school. Mostly it was the boys who went after water, but sometimes, they'd take a girl along for company. When the pupils got the water back everyone would have a drink out of the same tin cup. Sometimes a thick coat of dust was floating on the water but no one worried about such things because they didn't know or care about "bugs" the way people do today. He recalls that they "had fun at school and sure learned." He admits that his memories are probably more treasured than those of others --- he married the teacher.

This script by Mary Olds, 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 the townships of Trumbull County with a focus on early education and the role of the woman educator.