

CASS & BERRIEN COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES
By Jeannie Watson

JESSE ADAMS, SR.

Jesse Adams, Sr. pioneered the wilderness of Milton Township, Cass County, Michigan, settling there in 1831. That first year, he and his family withstood the perils of menacing winter storms, an unproductive growing season, and near starvation. If it had not been for wild game, foraged plants, strong sons, and Wayne Township friends, his family would not have survived. He arrived in the same year that the Carey Mission in Niles, Michigan, just a few miles northwest of his homestead, was being abandoned. Jesse was in the vicinity when Niles, Michigan was named Pogwatigue," and the waters of the St. Joseph River ran crystal clear. He was one of the settlers who rushed to Niles to help fortify defenses when word came from Chicago, warning that Indian Chief Blackhawk and his warriors were on their way to Southwest Michigan heading for "Canady" (Canada).

Based on what little is known of Jesse Adams' Scottish origins, his ancient ancestors came from the Cheviot Hills in what was once called the Borderlands of the British Isles. That region today is called Northumberland, and the Cheviot Hills are a natural barrier between Scotland and England. Lawless raiding tribes once inhabited these peaks, and their villages have always been remote and isolated. The Cheviots are now the northern most part of England, dotted with ancient ruins, old castles, and fortifications. Many Adams are part of Revolutionary Era American, but this branch of the family was thought to have migrated to North America, from the Cheviots, during the Great Migration of the late 1700s and early 1800s. The Adams surname, at one time, was spelled "Adamus" and means "earth."

Born in 1775, Jesse Adam, Sr.'s parents were Lazarus and Mary Ann Adams. He married Lydia Farrow, raised his young family, and then migrated to Michigan with his adult children, their spouses and grandchildren. Somewhere along the way, he made the acquaintance of Walter Samuel Watson, and they became best friends in their old age. The families were related. Jesse's and Lydia's union produced the following children: (1) Jesse, Jr. (1801-1872) who wed Catherine, (2) Mary Polly-Ann (born 1/26/1790) who married George Wallace Smith, (3) Isaac who wed Rebecca M. Lowry on 4/6/1838, (4) James (1806-9/29/1897) buried in Boyer Cemetery, (5) George (1808-1880) who is interred at Pearl Grange Cemetery, (6) Moses (8/17/1812-6/4/1886) who wed Hannah (both are in the Adamsville Cemetery), (7) Enos (born 1837) who married Cornelia (both in Millberg Cemetery), (8) Prescott J. (10/6/1817-4/19/1899) who is buried in Factoryville Cemetery, (9) Artimesia who is in Factoryville Cemetery, and (10) Luminia (12/1790-1861) who married Nancy Hangly (both in Tobey Cemetery).

With his extended family, Jesse Adams, Sr. arrived in an oxen pulled wagon train, during the spring of 1832, at age 57. He settled on Section 7 of Milton Township, and with the help of his grandson, Jacob born in 1822) built a log cabin and lean-to-shelter for oxen. His son, Jesse Adams, Jr., bought land in Section 3 of Milton Township. He had followed relative Sterling Adams to Milton Township. Sterling was one of the first pioneers in the area, settling on Sections 12. Brother, Harrison Adams settled in Jefferson Township. Adamsville (once called Adamsport) in Ontwa Township of Cass County, Michigan was named after the Adams family. Sterling and Harrison Adams are buried in the Adamsville Cemetery. All of the before named Adams are on the 1840 U.S. Federal Census.

Jesse's log cabin was built in the midst of two hundred year old trees that towered overhead and shut out all light to the ground. "The tree trunks were so wide a man could not wrap his arms around the base, and even come close to touching fingers. He knew the age of the trees, because he counted the rings in the crosscut

stumps that were left after timber was felled, quartered, and re-split, for the cabin. Cutting those trees down, with an ax and hand saw, was a grueling, long, exhausting process.

The Adam's family's first Michigan winter was brutal, and their supply of wood firewood was the only thing standing between them, and freezing death. That winter's snow storms were so blinding, a rope was tied between the cabin door, wood pile and log lean-to-barn , so no one would get lost in a storm. Southwest Michigan's famed "lake effect" snowdrifts reached the top of the windows, and doors had to be forced open against the weight of the newly fallen snow.

Their first crude corn fields, which had been cleared, plowed, and planted using the oxen, suffered a killing spring frost that destroyed the young plants, and left them desperate for a winter food supply. The supplies they brought ran out. They could not afford to even buy salt from a neighbor, so it was given to them. Knowing the larder would be empty come fall unless they took action, they fished and dried filets throughout the summer. Then in winter, they ice fished for more protein, until "they could not stand to see another fish." The family foraged for wild berries, roots and greens just to have enough to eat during the warm months. That winter, his sons and grandson, who were hunters, brought them fresh kill wild turkeys, squirrels, bear, white tailed deer, opossums, and muskrats.

To take a "lake bath" Jesse and Lydia, had to go to Goose Lake in Section 3 of Milton Township, where his son resided. They only "lake bathed" in that first year's late spring, summer and early fall, because at any other time the lake was frozen or too cold. Before and after the "big freeze season," they hauled water from the well and filled their small copper tub. During the winter months, they melted snow, and "sponge bathed."

The second year, and during those seasons to follow in Michigan, Jesse Adams, Sr. overcame his initial problems and went on to create a self-sufficient homestead. He expanded his fields, and planted potatoes, corn, wheat grasses, and sorghum fodder for the oxen. His wife kept a garden, and a root cellar was built.

Jesse's pride and joy were his oxen. He resisted all attempts to sacrifice them for the sake of the dinner table during the "starving time." He had no horses, and without the oxen there was no hope of long term survival. Oxen at this time in history were divided into two categories - "stud oxen," and draught oxen. Stud oxen were particularly large males bovines (cattle) used for breeding purposes, and were used to pull small wagons. Draught oxen were adult castrated male bovine. They grew huge, muscular when worked, and docile when castrated, because the hormone shift forced them into pre-puberty growth spurts. His Durhams and Ayrshires were "gentle giants," who would respond to commands even if quietly stated. These draught animals were favored for their endurance, strength, and ability to pull heavy loads. They moved "unmovable objects" (difficult to move). They were slow, but steady; used for plowing, dragging scoops for moving dirt, stump removal, and hauling. He considered them superior to horses. The oxen would be harnessed together with "head yokes" attached to their horns, or "bow yoke collars" that fit over and under their necks. A large number of early pioneers preferred draught oxen to horses.

When Cass and Berrien County pioneers used oxen to pull wagons in groups, they were called "bull trains," "parlances," or "rough trains." Oxen were often used to haul freight wagons (carrying heavy loads of merchandise to trading posts), lumber, logs, farm produce, straw bales, and hay. They were the number one choice for doing heavy farm work. Although slow, they were incredibly strong, intelligent, steady and followed commands easily. Jesse's oxen were some of the first to work the local topography in Milton, and bring heavy wagon loads into Southwest Michigan.

In early May of 1832, Jesse made his way from his homestead in Milton Township, northwest a few miles, to the nearest trading post, settlement, and Indian Village of "Pogwatigue." Pogwatigue meant "running water" in Potawatomi, and was later renamed Niles, Michigan when it was officially "laid out." At this early

time in local history, there was a ford (shallow area that could be waded or driven across) at the St. Joseph River in Pogwatigue (Niles) called the "Crossing" or "Pawating" by the pioneers (area where the bridge is now just southwest of downtown, that leads to Niles-Buchanan Road). It was there, at the ford, that he heard about what was happening at Carey Mission, just 1 mile across the river. Being a man of curiosity, he made his way to where the activity was occurring.

Carey Mission was in the process of being dismantled when Jesse arrived. It had been established to educate the Indian children, teach the local Potawatomi how to live like the white man, farm, and survive. Today the Carey Mission Site is marked with a plaque, placed there by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Family notes about Jesse state that "he stood with several other old timers watching the log cabins being torn down." From the spectators viewpoint, "the scene had a deep tinge of sadness." Everyone watching knew that the Indian Removal Act, which prompted the demise of Carey Mission, meant the Patawatomi would be forced to leave their homeland and go west. Jesse was "feeling powerfully sorry for these particular Indians."

On May 19, 1832, Jesse was removing a stump with his team of oxen, in a field, at his homestead in Milton Township. A rider, "pushing his lathered horse hard," spotted Jesse, and rushed to the work site. The neighbor was spreading the alarm that word had come from "She-gong-ong" (Chicago) claiming that Chief Blackhawk, the Fox Indians and their Sac Indian allies had been victorious in a battle with the Army west of the Mississippi River. Several families on the Fox River had been murdered after the struggle, then scalped by Chief Blackhawk's warriors. The Indians were expected to try to reach "Canaday" (Canada), through Cass and Berrien, murdering as many white folk as possible along the way. All local able bodied frontiersmen were ordered to meet in Pogwatigue, and prepare to stop the marauders. Unlike most of the local Patawatomi Indians, Blackhawks' and his tribal alliance had not formed an amicable relationship with the white man. They hated the European settlers, killed as many as they could, and were notorious for scalping, taking women and children as slaves, and burning homesteads. Fear spread like wild fire, as news passed from homestead to homestead in Cass and Berrien County.

Jesse joined his sons, after taking wife Lydia to Jesse Jr.'s farm, and the men set out for Pogwatigue. Before long, "almost every able bodied man in southwestern Cass and southeastern Berrien County, capable of bearing arms, had joined the (military) troops" who had already converged along the St. Joseph River. When a courier arrived saying that Blackhawk had crossed the Mississippi, and messengers continued arriving in the days that followed, the excitement and fear mounted.

Blackhawk and his warriors never reached Michigan. They were stopped by the army and settlers in Illinois, 200 miles from the Michigan border. They retreated back across the Mississippi River, and headed farther out west. In the years that followed "the last of the Indian Tribes were removed" from the lands east of the Mississippi, and "the peace was never broken again."

Jesse Adams spent the rest of his life on his homestead in Milton Township, making occasional trips to Pogwatigue, or visiting his friends in Wayne Township. He welcomed many visits from his family. In total, he only lived 14 years in Cass County, Michigan, but he was the patriarch of a family that blossomed into many descendents; most who still live in Southwest Michigan today.

Jesse Adams died on May 5, 1845. He is buried in Row 14 with his wife at the Smith Chapel Cemetery, Milton Township, Cass County, Michigan. Jesse was age 70 at his passing. Many of his descendents are interned at the same burial ground.

In conclusion, Jesse Adams was an original pioneer of Cass County, who survived great hardship. He overcame blinding snow storms, crop failures and near starvation. Favoring oxen over horses, he bred these gentle giants. When the Carey Mission was closed, he watched the dismantlement. Jesse joined able bodied

pioneers and militia of Cass and Berrien in Niles, who were fortifying to stop Blackhawk's advancement to Canada. He was an old man when he came to Southwest Michigan, and only lived for 14 years after his arrival. Jesse was the original pioneer patriarch of a family that still exists in the area today. He earned his place in local history.

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RESEARCH

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