"What Went on Around Here at Kenton Farm"

The following is a series of happenings from an article written by Virginia L. Hunt and published during 1958

Indians and the early white settlers placed their dead in our gravel beds. We wonder whether we also have the glaciers to thank for the boon of many springs here. Their presence set the stage for much that happened later. Multitudes of animals came to drink from our streams or made paths from spring to spring. Buffaloe, with their sure instinct for traveling up the easiest slopes, roamed up and down leaving the "traces" that later became our roads. We had hides for carriage robes, till lately. Then there were red deer, elk, and turkeys, pigeons, ducks, and the small game we know today – and there were bears and wolves and panthers to prey upon the others. Indians followed the animals into this rich hunting ground.

The first people of whom we have remains were the nameless Indians who made pottery, baskets, and mounds, burying their dead with ritual and ceremony. One of their burials was found by the great uncles of the present owner about 100 years ago, when a gravel bank in which they were digging slid down to disclose a tall warrior (skeleton?) standing with his possessions about his feet and beads about his neck. The uncles had strong religious scruples against desecrating a grave so hastily covered up the warrior, though someone did take the beads. They are now in the attic. Since then, generations of children have been digging the gravel hunting for the warrior – but so far, no luck, because the uncles never gave a hint at where to look.

Another Indian burial is even more mysterious. It may have been the result of a great battle fought nearby, or of some strange burial custom. Anyway, when we were digging gravel, just east of the barn to make a new cement foundation, we cut into a mass grave. It was the south end we got involved with and there were quantities of human foot bones all together – of Indians – a visiting anthropologist told us. (Seems part of the

anthropologist's regular job is identifying Indian bones for the police to distinguish them from those of modern murder victims.)

The workmen on the barn job wouldn't come back for a week after we'd reburied them and what is at the north end of that grave is still unknown.

When the white men reached this part of the country it was nearly covered with mighty forests, interlaced with the paths of game and Indians. Those Indians were warlike, savage and led by able chieftains. For which reason, our early settlers had as hard an existence as any in the New World.

Johnny Appleseed, however, seems to have been able to travel freely up and down the valley. Some say he was safe because the Indians believed he was "possessed" and a holy man. Carrying religious tracts, the lore of gardens and healing herbs, especially dill, and planting apple seeds and seedlings – he went his way to the frontiers. Three of the apple trees he planted in what was later the southwest corner of our orchard were still alive 50 years ago, and their apple seedlings through our woods, perhaps descended from his plantings.

For other white men, the story was very different. They had to face massacres, ambushes, kidnappings, raids and battle. Those who know Indian ways and combined hardihood, enterprise and leadership were the great men of that time.

Such a man was Simon Kenton. He ranks with the frontier heroes Boone and Clark. Coming from Virginia into Kentucky and thence up to Ohio, he was several times captured. In fact he was "probably in more expeditions against the Indians, encountered greater peril and had more narrow escapes from death than any man of his time. He was the first white man to settle on this farm.

How he came to choose it as the site of his first settlement here in Ohio and to build his cabin near where our spring house stands is a story with several variations. One account has it that years before in 1778 or '79, as a captive of the Indians he was made to run the gauntlet up the trail (now Route 68) where he passed such a beautiful spring gushing out of a hillside that he vowed if he came through the ordeal alive, he would return and make it his home. Another version says that as he was being led up the valley, the war party of which he was a captive, stopped to drink at our spring. The water was so refreshing that Kenton vowed to return and settle there. The spring later became the focus of a "well known and general camping ground for wagons coming to Ohio." Our old horse trough marks this spot.

Anyway, he did return in April of 1799 leading a large party of friends and relatives and twelve Negro slaves. He had cleared a way called Kenton's Trace at an earlier date and the women and children and household goods traveled along this rough track on horseback

with packs and saddle bags. There's one of a pair of such saddlebags here still. The first wagon to travel on the "trace" came several years later.

Throughout that summer, they built fourteen log cabins; Kenton's about where the Historical Society's marker is erected. The legend reads "Site of Simon Kenton's first log cabin home in Ohio." The position had been pointed out in later years by his daughter, Sally Kenton McCord. The built a second house too, where their children, together with the little Indians from the nearby camp, learned to read and write. Kenton himself could not read and must have felt keenly his handicap. It may have been a reason for defective titles to his lands. It was certainly the reason for building a school at a time when there was danger in every thicket, hardship and privation for daily companions.

Once while Kenton was away, a drunken naked Indian staggered into the cabin and demanded whiskey. When Mrs. Kenton refused, he snatched the baby Matilda from her cradle and made for the Indian camp. Fortunately, it was a friendly camp and, as Mrs. Kenton ran towards it, she was met by the chief bringing back her baby. Another story with several variations, concerns Kenton's shooting an Indian at our spring. Some say the savage was a dangerous menace to the settlement, which seems likely, some blame Kenton for the shooting. In any case, this was supposed to have been the last Indian killed around here and surely the last killed on this farm.

How many years the Kenton family lived here is uncertain. It might possibly have been until 1810. Simon himself was away for long stretches. From one such trip he brought back pear snips, which he planted around the cabin. We have several pieces of these trees, beautifully polished and carefully preserved. Pear trees have been planted in that spot from that day to this. But he did move about a lot. Once he moved up on the Prosser's hill next door, because a good many arrows had been coming over from those woods. He had a mill over at Lagonda too, and some historians believe he moved there in 1806. However, others think he stayed right here and rode back and forth to the mill.

One of the children of the settlement, little Abraham, died and was buried on this farm. Others of the party may have died too, as mortality was high in those dangerous times. Perhaps when we get around to digging down to the level of the early settler's cemetery, we may find much more.

Financial misfortune hounded Kenton so that he lost these lands when he went up to Urbana to debtors' prison and the ownership passed to Samuel McCord. Kenton's daughter, Sally, married into this family. From McCord, title passed to Joseph Cartmel, in 1823, who sold it to the ancestors of the present owner for $1,400.00 in 1828. They were Ishi and Manuel Hunt from New Jersey. A brother, William, married Mary McCord at a later date so we hope these transactions were friendly affairs.

You will see, on the Memorial herb terrace, little Edwin McCord's gravestone dated 1822 and another small one for Samuel McCord Hunt, 1837. When getting gravel out for road mending, about 30 years ago, these stones were found lying flat side by side a foot below cultivated ground northeast of the mass Indian burial. There were indications that the graveyard was quite extensive. Again, the contractor stopped the digging, covered up the spot but kept out the stones of the two little boys. We, who were not here at the time, have only lately heard the story and been told the location of the graves.

In the late 1700s, there was already great excitement throughout the East about our Ohio lands. In New England, New Jersey, and Virginia enterprising people were getting restless. Questions were being asked, and letters traveling back and forth by stagecoach and post rider.

The Hunt family, of Hunt's Mills (now Clinton), near Princeton, New Jersey, had been thinking about them for 40 years and writing about them to Johnm Cleve Symmes. We have several of these letters carefully preserved. Finally, one of them, Franklin Hunt, a doctor, made the move about 1823. He bought land up in the valley and built a brick house. Then the rest of the family started, in 1828. There were the elderly parents, Ralph and Lydia Eyre Hunt, and their other grown children. Manuel, Ishi, William, Benjamin, Ralph, Mary and Eleanor. They came in covered wagons – Lydia carrying across her knees her delicate old English mirror that was so precious a part of her dowry. It hangs now in the green bedroom. Most of their other furniture, however, was left in New Jersey until they should have a house to put it in.

All of the family seemed to realize that they were living in stirring history making times and carefully kept their records, newspapers, magazines, and books. These are a rich source of information. In Urbana, they stopped to shop around for land, and finally chose Kenton Farm for the same reason that Kenton had picked it – abundant springs – perfect they thought for raising fine saddle horses. For this purpose, they brought from New Jersey a famous stallion, descended from Old Slamerkin.

While title to the land was being taken by Manuel and Ishi, William stayed in Urbana, married Mary McCord and became postmaster there. The first thing they built, just as it looks today, was their springhouse in 1828. On the hill above it they put up a double log cabin. Its picture is hanging in the upstairs hall, painted 30 years ago, as it was described by one of the children who had lived there. From the cabin they could overlook the building of their permanent home.

This took four years. The contract called for about 153,000 bricks to be made, fired and laid for $6.00 per thousand. Clay came out of the excavation for the cellar. Carpentry was a separate project and contract, costing $470.00 and plastering still another costing $162.00. The house was patterned on those they knew and loved in New Jersey. Every time we

restore some part that has been destroyed or changed, we have to go to the New Jersey records. The Library of Congress has them.

When the house was finished, they sent back to New Jersey for their furniture. It came via canal and wagon in the boxes and crates which are still in the attic. The cost of shipping was not very different from the freight rates now, meanwhile fields were being cleared and shake rail fences put up. Everybody lent a hand; Kenton had worked the land with the help of his slaves. The Hunts were strong abolitionists and had freed their last slave (named Caesar) in 1828. So, they hired several free Negro families who built cabins toward the back of the place.

Soon the rich land of our valley was producing such big crops that everyone knew the produce would have to be shipped to more distant markets. But how to do it!! Some believed that canals were the answer, then news spread of the wonderful iron horse in the East which could haul a whole wagon train.

William Hunt, (now a Major) in Urbana, thought a combination of waterways and rails was the solution and began to work for it with John James, Joseph Vance, and Tom Corwin. He brought his growing family out to Kenton Farm while he himself traveled back and forth to Boston and Washington to raise money and arrange a franchise for a railroad. The charter was signed in 1832, which makes our little Made River and Lake Erie R.R. the father of all western railroads. (Though an earlier charter had been granted to another company, which was never developed.) But the building took a long time. It seemed a wild dream to most people. In a way it was a wild dream which will only now be completely realized with the opening of the St. Lawarence Seaway. But when part of the dream finally came true, after huge obstacles had been overcome, cholera, bottomless swamps, right of way tangles, delayed supplies, political wrangles, our little railroad in the valley was the first to reach Clark County from the North.

The big day arrived in September 1848 when the road was finished and the "iron bands" (rails) met here, "near Major Hunt's country home." The people of the valley put on a grand celebration and barbecue, with speeches by the Governor of Ohio and Illinois and a gathering of notables from up and down the line. William Hunt was trustee for 13 years and President from 1843 to 1847. He had his own station below the house in the valley and Kenton's Spring was piped down to water the iron horse. Later when the station was no longer used, it was hitched to a team of oxen and hauled up the hill to its present position behind the house to be our wood house and garage.

Then crops, especially wheat, began to roll east, west, north, and south; and so did everyone living in the valley. They had a grand time "taking the cars." Hunt diaries are full of accounts of their trips.

For a few years, all went well. But other railroads had come in. There was a depression and the little M.R. & L.E. road, founded with such high hopes, became part of the New York Central System. Meanwhile war clouds had been gathering. Our crops could no longer be shipped to the south and southwest. This hit all the railroads as hard as it hit us, though later our little road got some business hauling southern prisoners of war to Sandusky.

Then more and more of our men went off to war. The two from this farm were Ralph Hunt who joined the Made River Tigers of Moorefield (later in First Kentucky Infantry) aned William Jr., who enlisted in the 17h Ohio Battery in Springfield. Their swords hang in the hall, their uniforms in the attic. With half the able-bodied men away, we wonder how the farms were run, especially as people could not always count on the kind of help hey had received from each other before this time. For now, the community, and even families, were divided; their relationships marred with bitterness, some favoring the North, some the South, to the point of violence and destruction.

On the place Southern sympathizers burned the cabins of the free Negros. You can find the foundations in the woods, for they were never rebuilt. Great Grandmother Mary McCord, though a passionate abolitionist had a brother-in-law who favored the South, and once she hid him from Northern soldiers in the small loft above the spring house.

Of course, the women had been organizing to help their fighting men. When the troops were near enough they sent down delicious food: jellies, pickles, chickens, broth, etc. This house was headquarters and Great Grandmother Mary McCord Hunt, president of the Sanitary Corps, forerunner of the American Red Cross. When you study the Charter and functions of the Red Cross today it is surprising how many of the services had been tried out by the Sanitary Corps in the Civil War. They would assemble here. Can't you picture all the buggies and horses tied in the yard and the women at work in the house rolling bandages, picking lint to make absorbent dressings, packing food, medications, and things to read, writing letters to lonely soldiers, and planning how the shipments were to be sent? And when the men came back, they were often broken in health and many died young, leaving the women to carry on.

Whereas in early days this place provided a living for about 20 people in the big house and several families of farm laborers, today it supports one very small family. Of course, in the early days many hands were needed to accomplish the simplest thing. For instance, one-fifth of a farmer's acreage was required to feed the horsepower, an estimate made by a wise old neighbor and wonderful farmer, George Prosser. Corn was planted with a hoe, wheat broadcast by hand, harvested with a scythe or sickle, threshed with flails, or by men on horseback riding round and round on the barn floor over the sheaves. It was then tossed in a sheet to clear it of chaff. Girls brought cool water from Kenton's spring for the thirsty men in the fields, who drank it from the gourd dipper now in the attic. A blast from the conch shell, now the half door stop, brought everyone in from their

work for the midday meal. And what meals! The women had vast amounts of food to prepare. For baking the Dutch oven was filled with embers from the fireplace which were afterward raked out. First 20 to 40 loaves of bread went in when they were done, a bushel of potatoes, and last of all, before the oven was cooled, a bushel of apples. This is just a sample of what that oven could do.

Soap had to be made from grease and lye, leached from a barrel of wood ashes. It was good too. We found a wooden box of it in the eaves closet and used it with enthusiasm. The smoke house, since tumbled down, was quite a large affair, and must have processed quantities of ham, bacon, and sausage. One of its great iron kettles stands beside the kitchen fireplace to hold kindling.

And just to occupy any spare time that was lying around, the women made pretty things: netted teasers for the four posted beds, quilted and patchwork coverlets, and samplers. But most important of all they taught their children the virtues they valued most – independence, thrift, industry, helpfulness, respect for parents, tenderness towards children – kindness to all.

Nowadays, when we are working on some community project, and the yard is full of cars, we think of all the past roof-raisings, quilting bees, and threshing's with the yard full of wagons and horses, and we rejoice that in spite of the outward changes many of the ideals and customs of the early settlers are still going strong.

NOTE: While much has changed surrounding the old Kenton-Hunt Homestead since Virginia Hunt penned these pages, very few changes have been made to the original structure or detail of the house. We shared a vision and felt love at first sight for this historical property and its beautiful land when we purchased it in 2005.

Although no additions were made to the outside or structure of the house, the entire infrastructure was rebuilt including new plumbing (five bathrooms), new electric, new windows, plaster and paint, and all the original ash wood floors refinished. We, along with various craftsmen, worked 7 days a week for 5 months to restore this grand home.

In September of 2005 we opened the famous property as the Simon Kenton Inn. We believe that Simon and Virginia would be pleased. We sincerely hope that we've preserved a piece of American History to be enjoyed and admired for many generations to come.

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