

**EARLY HISTORY OF OVID**  
**<sup>1</sup>DR. BION L. BATES**  
**October 1963**

**Tape #021**

**Transcribed by Myrna A. Van Epps, April 2007**

Notes:

- Original tape and slides mentioned are in the possession of <sup>2</sup>Dr. Jackson W. Bates.
- The dashes indicate short points where tape could not be understood.

Side 1

This presentation was made by Dr. B. L. Bates on October 1963. He was 76 years old at the time.

--- in this little talk, largely from *Ovid Onward*, a play that was put on up in the park in 1936, and it was written by our Vera [Hudson] Self and put on up there by a hundred people --- and some of my experiences when I first came to Ovid in 1906, Oct. 30 to be exact. We start out with the question of what did we know of this area and the sites and stories about Indians who frequented this central Michigan was what we now call Clinton Co. plus other lands were a part of Oakland Co. Now it doesn't seem possible that Clinton Co. could have been a part of Oakland Co., but it was. By an act of the legislature in 1830, it became annexed to Kalamazoo. We moved. Our courthouse was moved down to Kalamazoo evidently. But the next year the legislature described the boundaries of a tract later called Clinton Co. Our township was a part of DeWitt for a short time before it was divided into sixteen townships.

In Feb. 1836, a group of people in the vicinity of Rochester, NY, organized themselves into the Rochester Colony for the purpose of establishing a settlement in Michigan. Two men were selected to examine the land lying somewhere between the headwaters of the Maple and the Shiawassee Rivers, believing that eventually a canal would be built joining these two waters thus making a shortcut across the state from Lake Huron to Lake Michigan. Of course that dream never materialized. They chose --- by what is known as "The Colony" or "Duplain" and soon the settlers started on their long journey.

In July of that same year one of the three groups of a party of sixteen led by Samuel Barker left New York State for a new home in the wilderness. They came from Buffalo to Detroit by boat using their oxen to complete the journey over one of the two Grand River roads. Perhaps some of you didn't know that the road that goes through Laingsburg was also called a Grand River Road. It was used quite extensively for traffic from Detroit to Grand Rapids, the one which passes through Laingsburg. Thus far the

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road had been chopped out, but from there on they had to clear their own path. It took them nine days to go from Laingsburg to Colony.

I suppose you're wondering what this had to do with the early history of Ovid. Well, these pioneers when they settled had a --- of the 640-acre section and lots to the village of Mapleton or Colony. In other words they had the sections all laid out and each member was to draw by lot the number of the section that he was to get in Clinton Co. He could also have a lot in the village of Mapleton, as they called it at that time, or the Colony. By the way those lots are still on the tax rolls for the supervisor's copy year after year.

This man, Barker, drew section six of what is now Ovid Twp. Credit has been falsely given to Mr. Barker for having built the first house in Ovid. He did build the first house in Ovid Twp., a log cabin with a bark floor. This was on the Maple River, six miles west of the present Ovid and on his own section six which he drew. Later he built a home directly south of the brick schoolhouse on the Colony Road. You see we are now getting a little closer to Ovid.

We just cannot visualize the hardships these people endured the first few years. --- and stalwart and left to their own resources with no cleared land, it took careful planning when they left their homes in New York to sort out only the most necessary items needed to exist in the woods. I have had several very pleasant visits with a Mrs. Belle Hinkler? of Lansing, formerly of Ovid and Elsie, who is 98 years old and very keen of mind. She remembers well hearing her grandfather, this same Samuel Barker, a member of the Rochester, NY, group, relate stories of the trip to central Michigan and of the early days of colonization.

I might say now that I just saw Mr. B... come in. His grandfather was William Henry Faxon, a man who had much to do with the early days of Ovid. His sister married a Dr. Watson. He lived where the Watson house is, some of you know on the river right where that is. He was the only doctor in this big area here. Of course his services were very much in demand.

So the Ovid class of 1936 celebrated for their graduate exercises the hundredth anniversary of the building of the Barker cabin by very successfully putting on in our memorial park the pageant, *Ovid Onward*. It was a tremendous undertaking by over 100 people, a salute to the class of 1933 (sic), and to the author, Mrs. Vera Hudson Self. The pageant was so well received that it was repeated one evening of the 1941 Gladiolus Festival, Mrs. Self taking charge as before. She was a teacher here.

Finally, in 1837, a Mr. William Swarthout, coming from Ovid, New York, did build a cabin on the river as it passes through our present village. Two years later he secured a land grant from the government for 320 acres or a half-section out of this section 12 on which Ovid is now situated. The township was named Ovid in his honor and later the village. At that time land was selling for \$1.25 an acre.

Thirteen years slipped by with very little happening on section 12 except clearing the land and burning the beautiful timber in preparation for farming. Then all of a sudden about 1850, when the good news came that a railroad was to be built from Detroit to Grand Rapids that would come close to this vicinity, things began to happen.

One mile east of our present city was a little settlement called Clark's Corners. Perhaps the only excuse for its existence was that the stagecoach road passed through it. Just north of the present farmer's market, on the west side of the road, was the inn. These stagecoaches, of course, were drawn by horses, and the horses tired and they had to have inns where they could stop, --- their baggage and stay all night, and to change horses.

My father remembered that this area as he drove through it with his parents in the fall of 1855, enroute---what consisted then of only four long houses. I'm taking the liberty here to bringing in some personal news. I hope you don't object to it. They were moving from Ohio, by boat from Cleveland to Detroit and by the Detroit, Grand Haven, & Milwaukee RR, as it was then known, DGH & M, to ---- which was as far as the track was completed. Here they stored their goods and hired a team to bring them on the way. Grandfather Bates had his belongings shipped to Ovid in the spring of '57 when the railroad was --- this far. Then ---

To get back to Clark's Corners, our Ovid might have been located one mile east if the land --- hadn't been just south of where Jake --- farm is.

Jerry: [brief conversation, unclear]... the corner, the intersection of the railroad...

Bates: Did you ever find any relics?

Jerry: Yes, when I was a kid back in 1900, there was a still, where an old blacksmith shop used to be right near the railroad. There was also a school which my father attended. My father went to school there. You see, he started school in Ovid, but he got into so many fights here in Ovid that his dad sent him down there to that school down there. Well that's in the day of the Civil War. He said his first day in school he remembered himself when they won the war, they got interested in the fights. They was right in the middle of the tracks having fights; one boy rolled one way and the other one the other [way] probably, and the train went over them. Neither one of them seemed very worried about it. --- He got into so many fights in the school in Ovid his dad sent him all through the woods there from our old farm down there to this over school at Clark's Corners.

I don't know whether --- to get to, but the way I understood my dad to say, that Ovid originally was started at Clark's Corners, but this old man Clark that owned this land in there, he wanted so much for it, Dad said, "Well, I guess you can keep it ---. We'll

move our town down this way." So, they started down this way. By gosh, your father came here in '55. Is that right?

Bates: Yes.

Jerry: Well now, I'm of pioneer stock on both sides. My grandfather Faxon was a boy of 15 years old in 1836 when they came to Rochester Colony. My other grandfather came here in '59. This railroad was put through in '57. I think you have that down in '57. I was a little interested. One thing I wanted to find out whether they knew that Ovid really started at Clark's Corners.

Bates: No, they don't. I think I have the answer to that.

Jerry: My dad said it was because this man, Clark, was asking too much for this land, so they came down here. Personally, I don't remember just which year Ovid started itself.

Bates: Thank you very much, Jerry, and I'm awfully glad you came over.

Jerry: There is a few things, naturally. I got that stuff from the breakfast table and the dinner table and the supper table because the family was involved, and the pioneers on both sides, you know. I remember back maybe 40 years ago, I happened to find an old ledger in my basement where my grandfather ran a store during the day of the Civil War. All those old pioneers at that time, there as just the one shop. --- was their main shop. I saw my grandfather ---'s name in there. I found out at that time that he owed --- Pearl \$700. I told that to my dad and he said, "I remember that very plain." He said of his father coming home and telling his mother. "You know, I owe --- Pearl \$700. How do you suppose I'm going to pay that?" But that was the way they lived in those days, was from one harvest to the next. Of course, wheat was their main thing in the days of the Civil War.

Bates: I might say, Jerry, your grandfather, William Henry Faxon, thought his grandson, your brother, Fred, he was one of his first patients in Ovid.

Jerry: I remember that.

To get back to Clark's Corners, Ovid might have been located a mile east if the landowners had not asked such an exorbitant price for their property. That was Mr. Clark, you see. Mr. [A.H.] Frisbee, who operated a cooper shop east of the present water works, hearing all this, offered to give to the company the land where the depot

and freight sheds now stand. Soon Clark's Corners faded from sight, as the people, buildings and all, were moved to the present Ovid.

There was great excitement on Christmas Day in 1856 when the first train whistled into Ovid. As soon as people were sure the railroad was coming, Ovid jumped ahead with visions of a great city in the making.

The first store was built by B. J. --- where now stands the motor garage. In 1855 the Park Hotel, later called the Clinton House, was built on the south side of the tracks and the Retan House on other side. In 1857 several stores were opened. A post office was established in the Park Hotel with J. D. Park as the first postmaster. The village was platted by B. O. Williams in 1858 and incorporated in 1869. I just can't understand why they didn't incorporate sooner than eleven years, but that's the record that I have.

In 1869, when Mr. Harry Marvin was president, Anthony Swarhout built the first brick store in 1869 and leased it to C. Beebe & Sons. This still stands and is now the Jenks Drug Store having housed the same line for nearly one hundred years. Homes sprang up on every side and soon Ovid contained a population of 1500 people (That doesn't seem possible today 'cause it's short considerably.) when the carriage factory joined.

An opera house was built on the site now occupied by the Legion Hall. Shows by stock companies as well as single-night stands were popular. Lecture courses with famous speakers flourished every winter adding to the culture and entertainment of the people who attended from miles around.

I well remember the fairgrounds, and some of you do, I know, and the ball park, grandstand, race tracks, and exhibition building just east of the ---. The first newspaper was printed in 1866. While the name has been altered, it has been a continuous service since. The water works was started in 1888 at a cost of \$1500 but did not supply the whole town. The records are not clear for the periods of the electric light plant at the same date. I've understood that one was built after the other and the former lost money. So they built the other to see if they couldn't make it up when they'd take another debt. That's what I've heard.

There are important reasons for Ovid's boom, the chief of which was the high fertility of the surrounding land; and its two cooper shops and the Ovid Carriage Factory at its peak employment for 250 men, he latter turning out 50 buggies a day, one every twelve minutes, in Feb. 1888.

Another important factor contributing to the city's rapid growth was the fact that the Ann Arbor Railroad did not reach Elsie 'til 28 years after Ovid had a rail service. Regular horse-drawn bus and freight service between the two villages was in operation all these years. ---VanSickle(?) drove a bus back and forth to Ovid day after day to meet the train. Elsie depended on Ovid for banking and much of its merchandise. Logs from virgin forests as far north as Sickles [in Gratiot Co.] were hauled into our village by sleighs faster than the railroad could handle them. I understand the railroad

didn't have too much equipment. I suppose they had to have the flat cars on which to load the logs and they probably didn't have too many, but they had big gang of teams bringing logs in here. Both sides of the streets nearest the tracks were piled with them leaving only one-way traffic. The day the Ann Arbor reached --- signaled a short era of slower business for our village.

As stated above, the Ovid Carriage Company did a flourishing business under the management of Frank Schofield who took over probably in late '70. He didn't build the company, but he took over probably in late '70. For some reason the plant went bankrupt. I think some of us knew why it went bankrupt. That was before my day, but I heard the story. Mr. Sam Pearl took over.

Since it appeared that the company was handicapped by lack of space, the village bonded for sufficient funds in the '90's to build the brick building, now the Vaughn Seed Company which still stands. Of course, it wasn't too long before the advent of the auto began to take its toll and the factory was closed. The next plan to make use of the building was a furniture company. I think it was the --- Furniture Company, but I'm not sure. This too failed. Then in 1910 Mr. Scofield convinced the Ovid people (He came back here.) that there was still a demand for the famous Ovid carriages and if they would loan him \$5,000, he could make the factory wheels go once more. The money was raised by subscription and Mr. Scofield did manufacture buggies getting his supplies on credit from different companies who induced to --- manufacture buggies --- and passed into hands of the receivers who closed it up.

The greatest chance Ovid ever had of becoming a great city was when the big building was fully occupied and auto companies were on the lookout for a small factory to supply parts. A representative of the Hayes Manufacturing Company of Detroit intended to look over the building. When on the train here, he fell in with a gentleman who once lived in Ovid and who on learning of this agent's mission intended to help our village land the plum, only to oversell the proposition. The result was that the agent stayed on the train until it reached Ionia and the Hayes Mfg. Co. built a branch there. Our factory still remained vacant.

In 1913 Scott --- a --- had an idea. He thought that he might have the building put to use. Fortunately, he had a friend in Henderson who managed the products of Vaughn Seed Company there. At Mr. ---'s invitation, Mr. [Harry] Owen inspected the Ovid building and then made a favorable report to his company with the result that it moved the branch here. The company specialized at first in raising the --- flowers and for seven years had plantings of 200 acres or more. --- it's the distribution people for many of the company's products which are trucked in from Chicago. It employs at the peak season of the year about 70 persons. At present a large addition to the plant is under construction.

It might be mentioned that Ovid had an organ factory operated by Nelson Jenks. Perhaps many of you people never heard of it. There's one of those organs up at the restaurant north of St. Johns.

Audience: ---

Yes, if you go there, you look and you'll see the name printed on there. ---

They also had a business college managed by Professor Baker; also an apple dryer located where the Clinton Cider Mill now stands and owned by Gleason Brothers. This later burned, but it was because of that apple dryer that I got my present wife because her father was the nineteenth counsel in the British Island, Antigua, and because mother Jackson couldn't stand the health down there, he had to give it up and he came back to Holley, NY, where his wife's people lived. While he was there he got word from Ovid through Horace Keys that there was a vacancy here in the apple-drying business and would he come here and take over. They moved to Ovid and wasn't that a lucky day for me?

M-21 was paved in 1929. Up to that time the major east-west highway came down Front Street and there were eight corners to be made getting from the road that comes into Ovid from the west and getting back onto it again out by the restaurant out there. Eight corners! You count them up sometime, to get to our village! So the highway department decided to cut a new ridge straight through. Businessmen were furious. A committee waited on the authorities in Lansing asking that the old route be paved. The only benefit resulting from the trip was the promise that our Main Street would be paved. Labor for the pavement was done by Jackson Prison inmates who lived in a large barracks south of town. Cement and gravel were unloaded in --- from freight cars and conveyed by a narrow-gauge railroad to the pavement machine. That was both ways from ---

And now a word about our glorious park. At the close of the first world war, it was quite the custom for cities to erect some sort of a memorial. It was Tom Hyslop's (Bob Hyslop's father) idea that Ovid build a park. Meetings were held with the result that seventeen acres north of the school were purchased. The necessary --- was raised through popular subscription. A landscape architect was employed and later the tract was enlarged by eight acres on the north with pumps donated with modern working water. They disbanded and they had \$800 and they turned it over to Roy [Gumear]. He bought that eight acres north of the park. But this park would still be a little more than an athletic field had not the late Roy Gumear donated countless hours of labor and much expense planting the beautiful trees. It can be safely said that he personally set out about 90% of all the trees. The last day of work that Roy ever did was on the park.

The first cheese factory was located on east side of Main Street on the bank of river. About 1911---who had a factory in Birmingham, built a factory west of the Ovid Rollerdom which launched an operation of two years. Then in 1921 a Mr. McDowell of Flint convinced the famous author, James Oliver Curwood of Owosso, that Ovid was the center of one of the best dairy areas in the state. It is now evident that he was right. Curwood willingly put up most of the money, the value of the stock being purchased by local businessmen. In 1926 the plant was sold to the --- Co. and later to the Detroit

Creamery Co. Now that the Michigan Milk Producers Associations own it, Ovid can boast of having the largest milk plant in the state. I'm told by one of the employees that at this time of the year, when the milk business isn't quite so plentiful as it is in the spring, that there are between a million and a million and a half pounds of milk being taken in every day. That would be 500 to 750 tons, and the employment grows from 160 and 170. I believe that this does not include the truck drivers.

I know there are many more interesting items that might be written about the history of Ovid. In fact in just the last few days, friends have called telling me where more facts might be found and I aim to run them down.

If we thought last winter was a "blinger" or otherwise, and I'm speaking as though I was here, please listen to this 1912 one: Feb. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 20 below; Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>, 30 below; Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>, 15 below; Feb. 13<sup>th</sup>, 20 below; and the 21<sup>st</sup>, a blizzard and there were no trains for two days. The first canteen came in on the third day on sleigh with four men on and they all had shovels. They got in here and the businessmen were so glad to see them they all got out on the street because they hadn't had any business for two or three days. The bank did \$68 worth of business in one day because I remember it. Someone may correct me on that, but I think that was right. There was a knee-deep fall of snow in March but there was no wind.

I make no apology for the pictures I'm about to show. They were gotten up because of Betty ----, whom many of you knew, was president of the Crescent Club. She thought it would be nice to have a program, or three programs possibly I think it was, of the past, present, and future of Ovid. She assigned to --- the past. We got the idea that if we could dig up some old pictures, that would be just lovely. I looked up Jay ---, who had the printing office then. He said, "Let's go down to the place where Marian Temple lives now." So we went down there because it was just a --- with a roof over it that they used for a chicken coop. Jay said that he had heard that some of Bill Merrill's films and pictures might be found there. We went down there and found a gold mine. We found all we could carry of films. Many of the pictures that we show were found in that old shed. Through the kindness of Dr. Bruce Elliot, we had slides made up. He made the slides for us.

I make no apology for the pictures I'm about to show. Most of them were found and I told you where. Mr. Merrill's studio was where Dale --- now has his garage. Some of these pictures are badly faded.

The program continues to end of tape on side 2 with description and discussion of pictures being shown.