

## CCHS Meeting on October 18, 1979

## Erma (Randolph) Waggoner Robinson (1925-2000) &amp; Elizabeth Cowles [1917-1983]

[Names in italics are identified speakers.] Others offering information after formal presentation are:

Janet M. (Sturgis) Snyder (1929-1993) re Banner Road

Ford Stevens Ceasar (1911-1994)

Elsie (Ward) Bottum (1898-1982) re Wilbur Hart (1898-1982)

Helen Post (1908-2009) & Katherine (Post) Ward (1902-1987) re Greenbush & Eureka

Hazel Bebee

Thomas J. Teare (1898-1986). re Eureka.

Coyne Cowles

... Lean to the left. Lean to the right, gentlemen, and lean to the left. They would even be out the window to keep it balanced; very bad roads in spring and fall; muddy in parts. Sometimes they would find people walking into the next tavern before the coach got there because it was stuck in the mud.

As the road system grew, heavy wagons and coaches were built to carry freight and passengers. Conestoga freight wagons were built to carry loads of freight that weighed as much as 6,000 pounds. The Concord coaches and the [J.] Murphy wagons carried passengers and stopped along the route to get fresh horses. Because of this, the term, "stage" or "stagecoach" came into use. The roads over which the stagecoaches first traveled were called "post roads" because posts, exchange of horses, were maintained at intervals along them. When mail began to be carried over the post roads, places where the mail was handled were called "post offices." They moved along in stages. We feel that is why they were called that.

We found in this history we discovered down at the State Library and Elizabeth [Cowles] ...has a complete story: Daniel Hibbert had stock in lines running from Jackson to Grand Rapids, Detroit, Adrian, Hillsdale, Lansing, Chicago. In Grand Rapids in 1856 he had a capital of \$59,000. That was quite a lot of money, I would think, for that time. He employed 62 men using 199 horses. He had 45 coaches and carried an average of 150 passengers daily.

I would like to say a little bit about why we drive on the right side of the road in America. The men who drove the Conestoga wagons along the early roads started the American custom of driving to the right. The Conestoga wagon took the name from the Conestoga Valley in Pennsylvania where it was first used to carry freight. Americans had first followed the English custom of driving on the left. The Conestoga wagon driver either walked on the left, sat astride the near left field horse, or he rode the "lazy board." The lazy board was a projecting oak board between the left wheels on which the driver could drive the horse and operate the brakes, where the driver would have a clear view of the road. It was necessary for the wagon to keep to the right. Soon other vehicles adopted the practice. The first turnpike in America was in 1794 in Philadelphia to .. and it had a special surface that was invented by John L[ouden] McAdam. It was called "macadam," I believe....

The first stagecoach went out from Detroit in 1822 to Mt. Clemens. After the Erie Canal

was built, with Michigan fever, they had to have some way to bring the people quickly and all their freight into this area. Travel wasn't cheap even then and despite all the hardships that the passengers endured too in those days. If a passenger weighed 100 pounds, that was like one fare, but if he weighed 200, it was two fares, double it. So it was to an advantage to be skinny. It cost about 4¢ to 7¢ a mile. For instance; from New Buffalo to Kalamazoo, fare would be \$3.75. You have to remember that sounds cheap now but in those days when they were working for maybe \$2 a week or something, that was an expensive fare. Some of them, between the first class and the sort of a second class, the difference was the springs. Some of them didn't have any springs. You know what that would be like.

Now, I think we're going to get into the Clinton County. We have this map. We'll start at Maple Rapids. We really don't know too much about the accommodations there. Other people know more about it than we do. We know the stage went there and that was the first river crossing, as I understand, on the way to St. Louis. How they got there, I'm not sure. I remember as a child my parents would say, "Shall we go the [US] 27? [route] or shall we go to Chase's corner? [Forest Hill & Colony Rds.] Of course, I preferred the Chases's corner. I was always afraid of that area out there by Livingston's area [US 27 in Greenbush Twp.] They had big ditches with water and I suppose I had heard of someone falling in there.

The other tavern or inn was at McMasters [near Maple Rapids Rd. & DeWitt Rd. intersection] In 1860, I believe it was, Chauncey Morton bought the house, evidently, and started an inn. Steven McPherson had built the house and Morton went into it; and then [S.L.] McMasters. I found a little note in the paper at Bement Library. It said, "100 years ago he was having a dancing party on August 15 to dedicate his new hotel." That was just a mile west of the Union Home Cemetery.

Can you tell about Eureka?

It was called Swizzletown for a while. It was also called Greenbush and then they discovered that there was another post office [named Greenbush] and this presented a conflict. Then it was named Eureka but I think they called it "Swizzletown" because there was so many taverns around, and praise the Lord, we don't have a one today.

At French's Corners was the great tavern [A.M. Drake's] on the north side. On the other side of the road was the road was the Keystone or [Flويد] Coleman's Hotel which was called Park House. 100 years ago [David S.] French (1844-1927) bought 220 acres, elegant farm, [corner of US-127 and French Road] and he improved it. He called it the Park House. I think there's a picture of that in the old history books. It's been reproduced. That's where Betty [Minsky] lives.

We're sure the stage went through Duplain and Rochester Colony. One of the very earliest ones [stage stop owners], I believe, is Samuel Gardner. That is in section 6 of Bingham, very north corner. I believe he's [Gardner] a relative of mine because my great grandfather lived there and worked there for him and both their names were Samuel. We have a little ditty in our family. *Uncle Sam keeps thrifty shop, and Billy is the fiddler, Hooker? is the fighting top, so pop goes the weasel.* There was Samuel Gardner who kept the thrifty shop; William, who lived

across the road and probably was a fiddler; Hooker Gardner was the fighting top. I didn't know what that meant when I was a child. I thought Uncle Sam, United States. As I got older and studied genealogy, I found out it was something. Then Samuel Gardner went into St. Johns and started a little tavern at the corner of the courthouse lawn, wouldn't it be? It didn't amount to too much I don't believe. Then there was the Gibbs House down the street farther.

In Fowler, 3/4 of a mile east of Fowler, was a little village called Dallas. It was there about ten years, 1857 to 1867. The roads were terrible and it was hard to get there. It was so swampy. Mr. Fowler owned some property farther west 3/4 of a mile so they decided to move the village. The hotel would be the main thing and they called that Isabella. For some reason they didn't like that name too well so they named it Fowler in honor of this Mr. Fowler. I think he was instrumental in getting the railroad in there too.

Then down here on the DeWitt Road we have Halfway House. It was halfway between Dewitt and St. Johns.

Two miles south of that, at one time, J. P. Russell had a tavern. He called it the Travelers Home. Beside of it was a brewery of some sort but operated by John H. Hewitt.

Then at Merle Beach or Muskrat Lake, as it was called then, there was a tavern there.  
[Merle Beach Hotel]

[There was one] at Dewitt and it was called Scott's Tavern in DeWitt. As near as we could figure, it was about in this area, east side.

As we are thinking of these, we know where there was a post office, there was usually a stage, because that's where they got their mail. There was a post office called Oral too...

*J. D. Robinson* speaks: ... Oral [Philander] Pruden who was the postmaster there had a son, Oral, so they called the post office Oral. Irma [Robinson] run into some old bank receipts and like that. Their address was Oral, Michigan. We wondered, where in the world is Oral, Michigan? That's where it was, over in Riley Twp., a little post office called Oral.

I was working on the stage coach routes. Most of you know that I have been interested in the post office for a long, long time. [He is a former St. Johns postmaster.] This is what we found about the [Rochester] Colony: A post office was established at Mapleton about 1840 and given the name of the town but this Mapleton being found to conflict with another office with the same name [and so] changed its name. Mail was at first sent to Duplain over a route from Owosso to Lyons once a week. You think our mail is slow! They got it once a week if the stage didn't break down.

Elsie post office was established in 1857. Mail was received by the way of the Colony until the creation of... In my memory, I can remember when Elsie got their mail through Ovid. One route was established to Elsie. Then they got another mail on the Ann Arbor railroad which was later in the day.

In Greenbush Twp. the post office was established in Steven Richmond's home in 1843. Before that time it was received at Laingsburg. Now stop and think how far you had to go to get your mail from Greenbush Twp. to Laingsburg. I'm wondering how in the world they ever notified anybody they had mail unless the fellow who left yesterday came back and told the guy there was a letter.

*Ford Ceasar:* I can answer that for you. Many times in the county paper or local paper, it would advertise that there was mail in the boxes to be picked up...Postage was collected from the patron. It did cost 25¢. The patron had to pay for the mail when he got it.

*J.D. Robinson:* This Mr. David Sevey received word that he had a letter awaiting him at the Laingsburg post office and he dug around until he found the 25¢ before he went over. To his dismay he found there were three letters and he only had 25¢. So he scoured Laingsburg and he finally dug up the extra 50¢ out of somebody and brought his letters home.

The postmaster at Victor was Hugh Haggerty. He'd been postmaster over an established route at Owosso and Ionia. That was 1847. The mail service gave Victor a weekly mail. It was never great enough to bring them a postmaster but small enough to put the route in the... [Mr.] Post went to the post office for a letter that Haggerty had warned him he had received. He found only Mrs. Haggerty at home. Responding to his request, she began to look for the letter...in the cupboard...She impatiently remarked, "You would think that Haggerty would keep the mail somewhere it could be found." Mr. Post agreed with her and joined in the search. Finally, they unearthed the letter. When you're thinking about the postal service we have now, just remember these things. Their letters were very valuable to them. They didn't get very many so they went to all kinds of lengths to get a letter. ...

Here's another little thing I put down. Lester Jennison came to Eagle in 1841 as... postmaster. Mail route was established from Ann Arbor to Ionia. Mail was first carried on horseback by a man named... At that time there probably wasn't any railroad. He went by horseback. [*J.D. Robinson* concludes]

Dexter Trail was used. In the history book it says that often there was wagons of money brought from the Ionia Land Office en route to Detroit over the Dexter Trail. There aren't any records of hold-ups or at least any place that we could find. Then it was quite safe to ride on. It says they were middle-age, confident, drivers and very little drinking. They wouldn't turn down a drink or two but there really weren't drunk drivers. There weren't runaways... You could get a dipper full of whiskey for a nickel and the food was very good even if the accommodations weren't so great. Sometimes it was a loft, I guess. The men and women would sleep in an attic room. Dexter [Trail], in that area there were no licensed inns. There was a tree, 28' in circumference with a spring by it. That they would have encampments there at night. There really weren't any inns in Dallas.

Do you know if the cost that they had to pay to travel included their lodging or did they have to pay for their lodging? (*audience*)

They had to pay for their lodging too. So you had to be very well-to-do to travel. As one

young lady wrote to someone and she said, “No matter how short or how long your journey, you always started before daylight.” That was the disagreeable part of it.

My grandfather drove stage coach from Grand Rapids to Ionia. I’ve heard my dad talk about it but I could find no record...(audience)

We have asked some people to come tonight who could tell us some things about--. Even if you weren’t contacted before, we would just like to have you tell us anything you know about stage routes, where they went. Helen [Post] and Katherine [E. (Post) Ward] would you want to tell us anything that you recall? Do you remember hearing your folks tell it?

I remember most of the people that lived in Eureka 25 years ago. Virgil Wright ...for at least 20 yrs. [Mail Carrier on 1910 census] ...*Clarence*

Thank you, Clarence. Katherine do you have anything you’d like to add?

I don’t have anything like that. About 75 years ago, the stage went by our house. We lived right west of the Sherwood School, across the road from where Helen [Post] lives now [French Rd.] It was just a great thrill. My brother and I watched the stage go by when it left St. Johns. That was [pulled by] horses. It was a long black outfit. It had three seats in it. On the sides there was a curtain rolled up like this. They had that up when the sun was shining but when it rained it was put down. My father...went to Detroit. When he came home, he came on the stagecoach. My brother and I, we sat down in the yard watching and watching for him to home...He had a great big sack of peanuts for us. We were so thrilled. It was something we looked forward to to watch that stagecoach go by. It traveled on ... road. It was more of a main road than Maple Rapids Road. It used to go by our house. It was coming out of Eureka. *Katherine E. Post Ward.*

Hazel Bebee would you like to tell us something? She has been a resident of Greenbush Twp. all of her life.

... I can verify all of it. ..put his horses in the big barn down on Railroad St...He always ate his dinner at the Farmer’s Hotel...Virgil Wright [1881-1929] was a driver. [Mail carrier on 1910 census]. As I remember him, he lived up there on the hill where Paul Brubaker now lives... If I had a quarter to spend at the fair on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, I was a rich kid. *Hazel Bebee*

Tom Teare also was a resident of Eureka at one time. Maybe you might give us a little reminiscing.

Years ago we were talking about the old prairie schooners, the wagons that were out on the plains. It was sort of a romantic story, I think. It was 20 years ago when this happened. I said, “I remember the old prairie schooners.” Whoever I was talking to laughed heartily and said, “Were you around at that time?” I said, “I remember the prairie schooners,” matter of fact twice. That night it came to me what I was talking about.

Apparently, when the area up around Gaylord and Grayling was first settled, there was an influx of immigrants from Indiana. They would come up our road which was Krepps Road. My birthplace was ½ mile south of Eureka and ½ mile east, across from the Eagle School where I was born. The whole thing came to me. People making their way to the north to settle the land to the north in Clinton Co.—I suppose, Gaylord, Grayling or somewhere--came up our road because there was a bridge across the river at the that time, north of us. That was the main road that came through. It wasn't a very good road. It was just a dusty road but it served a purpose. Diagonally across the road from our place and down just a bit, there was a nice wood lot. I think we called it Barrington's Woods for Mrs. [Frances] Barrington. I'm not sure who she was in connection with Barrington Mills. On the first occasion I remember this family--for all intents and purposes, the outfit was like a prairie schooner. I remember it was large, the same style exactly, great canvas over the bed of the wagon. They had pulled in at Barrington's Woods. Father sent one of my brothers—I hitched along. I was just a little kid--to see if there was anything he could do for them. He found where the spring was down there where they could get good spring water. Would they like some milk? Did they need anything?-- which was very typical of my father. He was always doing a good turn for a neighbor or somebody who came through the countryside. I think on one or two occasions they were out of something and we supplied it. That was how the memory of the prairie schooner came to me. To me it was a very interesting thing. I had forgotten completely all about it.

Was that a family or was it different people? They were camping out.

That was a family. There was a husband, wife and, I believe, two children. I'm not entirely sure. I wasn't much of a youngster, it was more of an impression.

There was one other thing that occurred to me.. You were talking about carrying the mail from the Rochester Colony or Mapleton which at the time it was called. My father bought the farm on which I was born, I think, in 1867. He got the contract to carry mail from Rochester Colony, I believe, to Ashley. There was no Ashley at the time. That was before Ashley was heard of. Approximately a mile west of Ashley, maybe ½ mile north—It's [state route] 57 at the present time--is the farm where they had a post office. Father carried the mail the first time from Rochester Colony, I think three times a week. I'm not sure of that. He forded the Maple River. At one time when fording the Maple River, there was a tree across the river. It pinned him down somehow or other in the water and he couldn't get up. He thought there was a possibility that he might die there in the river. He had a little English coach dog he was fond of and he always followed along back of the horse. Evidently he was wading the river, maybe leading the horse, I don't know. He finally explained to the dog that he should go home and get the lady who

was my father's wife at that time, Vesta Richmond, who was my father's first wife—I think she was born in the Saltbox House [restaurant]. Anyway, the dog finally went home, excited and [alerted] Vesta by barking and finally got the idea across to her that she should come with him. She saddled a horse and rode down to the Maple River and helped to save my father. (*Tom Teare*)

There are some others we would like to hear from briefly. She remembers riding on the stage.  
Lena--

...I remember coming on [US]27 which of course it wasn't then... place in by Livingston's there south of Hila's [Bross's] ... *Lena*

The stage used to run from Maple Rapids to St. Johns back and forth...They didn't get the railroad. Then they used to have another route, the old State Road. That went to Bridgeville and cut out Maple Rapids again which used to have a nice big hotel and things like that and the stage used to run from Maple Rapids to St. Johns and back. Then the stage ran from McMasters. People who lived in Maple Rapids had to go over...Then they had to go over to McMasters to get to St Johns. This I heard from my husband's aunt who remembered going over to McMasters to get the stage to St. Johns and points South. (unknown speaker)

The stage used to come down...W. Colony Road where my folks lived. [The driver's] name was Wilbur Hart...maybe every day...going to and from Maple Rapids... *Elsie (Ward) Bottum*

Going that way they wouldn't have to cross the marsh...

I've heard my husband say they hauled grain to St. Johns by Banner Road. He doesn't remember all the routes they made he does remember that was the high sandy road... Isn't that right Janet [Snyder]. She lives on that road.

Yes, it was a stage road... *Janet Snyder.*

They would stop or go off their route to stop at certain people's homes if they got word they wanted to ride the stage. (*Ford Ceasar*)

I was disappointed that ...couldn't come tonight but she did tell me that father had consumption. He went out west somewhere for treatment to a sanitarium. She remembers that the stage came down from Eureka and picked him up. They lived down here just past the half-mile corners.

Her father died her out there. I guess he didn't return but it quite impressed her because she knew he was very ill. ...

...I'd just like to say that all these places that you've talked about are mentioned in my book [*Great Northern Ghost*]...There was one stage stop that was known as Yankee Bill Wyman's which was about half way between McMasters and what is [US] 27 now. It wasn't a very satisfactory place to stay. It was rather unkempt. The food was not good but it was the only place for a little while. It was between Eureka and Maple Rapids. It served its purpose but it soon died out after McMasters established itself. The old State Road..... (*Ford Ceasar*)

Tape concludes with group input on route of old State Road. It is followed by reading of an excerpt from *Conquering the Wilderness* regarding stage coaches.