The Pioneers—1834-1846

Extremes of habits, manners, time and space.
Brought close together, here stood face.
And gave at once a contrast to the view.
That other lands and ages never knew.

—Paulding.
IN JULY, 1833, Morgan L. Martin returning from Milwaukee to Green Bay, stopped at the site of the present city of Sheboygan and did not find a single white man there.

The first permanent settlement was made in the fall of 1834 when William Payne and Col. Oliver C. Crocker came up from Chicago to build a saw mill near the junction of the Mullet and Sheboygan Rivers, midway between the present city of Sheboygan and the village of Sheboygan Falls. Crocker was born at Union, Broome County, N. Y., in May, 1811, and moved to Chicago in 1834. William Payne was an Englishman, born in or near London in 1806 and came to this country in 1827, first settling at Buffalo and then at Chicago. The partnership between Crocker and Payne was drawn up by Judge Goodrich of Chicago in 1834.

When the two men arrived here Col. Crocker gave a letter of introduction to the Chippewa chiefs of this locality. The letter was written by F. J. V. Owen, the Government Indian Agent at Chicago. Following are its contents:

"To Wa-mix-i-co, Te-Shing-go Bay (Che-che-bin-guay who signed the treaty of Chicago, September 26, 1833) and others of the Chippewa tribe of Indians:

"Your Great Father, the President of the United States, purchased the Menomonees all the country in the neighborhood of Sheb-y-a-gun River. This purchase was made at Washington city five or six years since.

"My children— I know you claimed this land, and told me that the Menomonees had no right to sell it, and you told us the same thing at the trade held last Fall at Chicago, and although your Great Father had bought it of the Menomonees, yet your fathers, the commissioners of the Chicago treaty, purchased your rights to it again last Fall.

"My children— The bargain you made with the commissioners of your Great Father is not yet agreed to by the wise men of the East, but I am sure it soon will be.

"My children— The white men who take this letter to you are good men, they do not want to meddle with your fields or your hunting grounds; all they want is to build a mill on the Sheb-y-a-gun River.

"My children— I hope you will not interrupt these men, as they will be good friends to you; they will do none of you any harm. If any of you are dissatisfied, come and see me and I will make all clear to you.

"My children— You had better come to see me, if you are not satisfied with the talk I send you.

"June 5th, 1834. Your Father at Chicago, F. J. V. Owen."

The Indians received the two pioneers peacefully and permitted them to erect their mill. There were valuable pineries at that time in this vicinity and a great deal of timber was cut and shipped to Chicago during the next few years. A short time after their arrival Payne and Crocker built a log cabin about half a mile below the site of the mill, at the mouth of the creek since known as Follet Creek. The Indians viewed this encroachment of the white
men without any signs of displeasure. But when they became aware of their preparation to build a dam, some four or five hundred of them, notwithstanding the conciliatory letter of the Agent, assembled to protest against any such obstruction, as they regarded it, to the fish ascending the river and thus cutting off one of their important sources of livelihood. After long and tedious negotiations, however, their consent was finally obtained and the dam was built. In the summer of 1835 Silas Steadman and David Giddings, who later settled in this county, visited the place. Mr. Giddings described it in the following words: "There was a row of bark wigwams extending from the mouth up to the high ground or present level of the streets. In and around these houses was a multitude of squaws, children and dogs. The trail ran along in front of their wigwams, and as we passed we were surrounded by their yelping curs who were determined to prevent our passing. We had no difficulty in following the trail up to the mill, two miles or more up the river, where we had a good night's rest. The mill had just been finished and they were sawing and rafting timber."

But Payne and Crocker had squatted upon this land. In September of the following year (1835) a party consisting of William Farnsworth, the trapper and fur trader, who had visited this locality in 1818, Morgan L. Martin and others bought the claim and the mill and put it in operation. At the first land sale held in 1835, they could not secure a preemption, not having been there and improved the property in June 1834, as the law provided. The next fall, however, the land was purchased by Martin at a public sale, no one bidding against him. Col. Crocker removed to Binghamton, N. Y., where he became a prominent figure in state politics. William Payne went to Milwaukee, founded the present city of Saukville and then moved to Chicago to engage in the coal and wood business, where he died in 1868.

A few words ought to be said regarding the life and character of William Farnsworth, trapper, fur-trader, lumberer and pioneer settler of this county. He was a Scotch American, little being known of his early life. He
went to Mackinaw and Green Bay about 1822 as a clerk of the American Fur Company. "Of a bold, enterprising and independent character," to use the words of his business partner, "he chafed under the restraints which were held with an iron grasp by the agents of the Fur Company over all persons in their employ."

Farnsworth decided to do his trading independent of and in opposition to the great Fur Company with John J. Astor and his immense wealth at its head. The influence of this company was so powerful with the Indian tribes, that the man who undertook the hazardous task of thwarting their plans for profit, did so at the peril of his property and even of his life. But nothing daunted, Farnsworth secured his outfit of goods and provisions for a winter supply and planted himself alone in the heart of the Menomonee country. He had scarcely located and sheltered himself in a rude log cabin, when a large delegation of the head men of the tribe called to pay him a visit and to warn him that he must quit their country without delay, or that his stores would be sacrificed as their lawful prize and resistance would cost him his life. There were fifteen or twenty of these stalwart sons of the forest seated around his cabin, when these threats were uttered. In this dilemma Farnsworth seized a keg of powder, placed it in the center of the room and fixed a stump of burning candle in the orifice at the top. He then addressed them in a calm, but determined tone of voice, that he knew they were "braves"—that he also was a "brave" of the white men; and if his property and life must be sacrificed, they must all suffer the same fate; no truly brave man should ever fear death. Nothing further was said, but as the candle had nearly burned out, one after another of the Indians left the house in great haste, and the trader having got rid of his visitors, extinguished the candle.

After that he continued his trade for many winters unmolested. Farnsworth lived at Sheboygan from 1835 until his death with the exception of four or five years. After purchasing the mill Farnsworth put it in charge of Jonathan Follet, who had come there with his family in the meantime for that purpose. They occupied the log house at the mill. Mrs. Ezra Follet was the first white woman to become a permanent resident of the county and did not see another white woman until the following year. The first frame house in the county was erected near Farnsworth's mill, and was kept as a boarding house for mill hands and as a tavern for travelers passing between Green Bay and Milwaukee. This was the only house then in existence between those two places.

During the winter and spring of 1836 the village plat of Sheboygan, the site of the present city, was surveyed and platted for the proprietors, Messrs. George Smith, Daniel Whitney, William Bruce and Seth Rees, by William S. Trowbridge. The first sale of lots was by auction, at Chicago in June, 1836. That summer Farnsworth induced Charles D. Cole to come to Sheboygan to engage in the mercantile and forwarding business. Cole was born in Schenectady, N. Y., in 1806, had moved to Cleveland, O., in 1830 and had taken charge of a line of canal boats ply-
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ing between that place and Portsmouth, on the Ohio River. He landed in Sheboygan in July, but after remaining two or three days, set out on horseback with Farnsworth for Chicago to attend the land sale. The proprietors of Sheboygan offered their lots and Cole purchased three, on the river, in company with Farnsworth, Brush and Reese & Co., under the firm name of C. D. Cole & Co. Cole then returned to Green Bay to get his family and buy a stock of merchandise. The following August he reached Sheboygan with his family, just a few days after A. G. Dye, who had been engaged by Farnsworth to build a warehouse, and Morris Firmin his helper, had arrived with their families. Levi Conroe and several workmen had arrived a short time earlier and were building a hotel for the proprietors of the town. This hotel after completion was called the “Sheboygan House” and was destroyed only a few years ago. Cole opened a small store and became the first postmaster of the settlement, the mail being carried twice each week from Milwaukee to Green Bay.

By the fall of 1836 Dye had completed the warehouse and the dock which was 160 feet long, built out into the water ten feet deep. Meanwhile he also had erected a frame building for his own family. During the fall of 1836 John D. Gibbs and family, B. L. Gibbs and James H. Gibbs arrived in Sheboygan and during the following winter and spring cleared the land around the present Gibbsville for farming. William and Peter Palmer took up farms at about the same time in the same neighborhood. In the winter of 1836-37 the first school in the county was assembled in Sheboygan and taught by F. M. Rublee. Provisions were very scarce during the winter and had to be brought from Milwaukee and Green Bay.

The year 1837 is one celebrated for wild speculation in western lands and wilderness cities. A number of adventurers with speculation in their eyes had arrived at Sheboygan late in the fall of 1836. The nearest settlement to the south was Milwaukee of which the “Detroit Advertiser” in its issue of August 29, 1836, says, “Twelve months ago and this place had no existence, the land being owned by the government. Now there are in the place from 50 to 60 frame buildings finished, besides 60 to 70 under contract and a population of from 500 to 600 inhabitants.” The nearest settlement to the north was Green Bay. An unbroken forest extended westward to the prairies of Fond du Lac. But none of these circumstances prevented the most extravagant expectations of the immediate growth of a populous and flourishing city at Sheboygan. “The settlers,” says Horace Rublee, “believed that, situated as they were, about midway between Green Bay and the southern boundary of the territory, their town would soon outgrow Milwaukee and that it was destined to become the metropolis of Wisconsin.” Speculation was at its height. Real estate was booming. A lot which two years afterward could not have sold for as many shillings, was considered a bargain at five or six hundred dollars. Everybody was expecting sudden wealth
from the rise in the price of wild lands. There was a temporary show of prosperity. A map of the county made at this time represents the river as navigable to its source; vessels sailing its entire length, and a city laid out with streets and avenues where Sheboygan now stands. At the close of 1837 the settlement at this place contained seventeen or twenty buildings, including a school house, two large warehouses, two stores and a blacksmith shop. All of a sudden the bubble burst. All business stopped at this settlement. The inhabitants packed up their belongings and moved away, some of them taking up farms in the neighborhood. The stores and shops were all closed. The dwelling houses were abandoned. Some of them were torn down and taken to Milwaukee. At one time the "city" contained only one man—Captain Thorpe. It was literally a "deserted village."

In 1837 Silas Steadman and David Giddings came to this county and built a mill at Sheboygan Falls, which gave employment to several men and formed the nucleus of a permanent settlement. Both of these men had visited this county in the summer of 1835.

Alvan Rublee came to Sheboygan in the fall of 1839 and engaged in lumbering during the ensuing winter. The following summer his family arrived. That year there were only three families living in the settlement at Sheboygan. Only small coasting vessels engaged in carrying lumber south touched here, the voyage to Milwaukee taking sixteen hours.

On December 7, 1836, Sheboygan county, which had originally formed part of Brown county, was created by an act of territorial legislature. It was not, however, organized for legislative and executive purposes until December 17, 1838. For judicial purposes, however, it remained a part of Brown county until 1846. In pursuance to the legislative act of 1835, the first election for county and town officers was held on the first Monday in March, 1839. At that time the town of Sheboygan was coextensive with the county of Sheboygan which had the same boundaries that it has today. Whenever another township was organized it was cut out of the area comprising the township of Sheboygan. For ten years the county contained only this one township with the settlement at the village of Sheboygan, as the town and county seat.

It was at this time that the demand for internal improvements became so great that it was adopted by the hero of Tippecanoe in his presidential campaign of 1840. The enthusiasm reached even this remote frontier settlement in the wilds of Wisconsin. After repeated efforts, the inhabitants of the county induced the territorial legislature of 1838—1839 to adopt an act for the establishment of two public highways in this county. One of these roads was made to run from Sheboygan by way of Hustis Rapids on Rock River, near Horicon, to Madison. The other was laid out from Sheboygan to Rochester, now Sheboygan Falls, and thence to Fond du Lac. B. L. Gibbs
of Sheboygan, James L. Thayer of Manitowoc and John Hustis of Milwaukee were appointed commissioners of the first road, while Charles D. Cole and David Giddings of Sheboygan and John Bannister of Fond du Lac became the commissioners of the second. A government appropriation of $3000 was expended on the Fond du Lac road in 1845.

A wagon road as early as 1837 had been cut through the woods along the lake shore from Milwaukee to Green Bay and passing through Sheboygan. It is evident, therefore, that the inhabitants of this vicinity early recognized the benefits to be derived from good roads. But the next few years there developed a tendency to over-emphasize the importance of roads and as in 1836 speculators thought they had discovered a means of acquiring great wealth by investments in real estate, so in the early fourties they saw a gold mine in the construction of roads. Private capital flowed freely into that channel of investment and scores of corporations were formed for building plank or gravel roads. But the number of roads projected far excelled the number built, and more fortunes were lost than made.

The population of the whole county in 1840 was 133. Along the lake shore during the summer there were a number of fishermen, mostly from Ohio, "a rough, hard-drinking set of fellows, who left the county as soon as cold, stormy weather came on in the fall." A considerable number of white fish were caught, which with lumber formed the only exports from this port. There was not a physician, lawyer or clergyman nearer than Milwaukee. All provisions or clothing had to be obtained from Milwaukee or Green Bay. During the next two years the tide of emigration into this county was high, so that by 1842 Sheboygan county had 227 inhabitants.

In that year George C. Cole came to Sheboygan. He enumerates the following list of persons as then residing in the county: In Sheboygan and along the lake, Capt. and Mrs. N. W. Brooks and girl, Mr. and Mrs. Stephan Wolverton and two girls, Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Brown, Mr. and Mrs. John Glass, Don Fairchild, David Wilson and family, Alvah Rublee and family, Mr. and Mrs. David Evans, Hiram G. D. Squires, Mr. and Mrs. William Ashby, Aaron Ritter and family, A. Farrow and Wentworth Barber. At the Dye Settlement, Asahel G. Dye and family, the widow Farmin and son Benjamin, Newall Upham and wife, Chauncey Hall and family, Wendell Hoffmann and wife, Elizabeth Cady, spinster, and brother Edward. At Gibbsville, John D. Gibbs and family, Mr. and Mrs. James H. Gibbs, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin L. Gibbs, Mr. and Mrs. John Johnson and seven children, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Palmer, William Palmer, Leroy Palmer, Allen W. Knight and wife. At Sheboygan Falls, Albert Rounseville, wife and two children, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin C. Trowbridge and family, Alvira O'Cain, Maria Dieckmann, Seth Morse, Samuel Rounseville, Harmon Pierce, Nelson Bradford, George O. Trowbridge, Mr. and Mrs. Silas Steadman, Mr. and Mrs. David Giddings, Mr. and Mrs. Charles D. Cole and family and George, William and R. Cole. On the
A PIONEER'S LOG CABIN
Trowbridge farm were William Trowbridge, his wife and four sons. William Farnsworth spent part of each year in this county.

In the spring of 1843, Henry Conklin brought a small stock of dry goods and groceries and opened a store at Sheboygan. The next year the road to Fond du Lac was opened and the tide of emigration flowed in that direction, the western part of the county filling up with settlers. In 1846 a settlement of Fourierites was begun in the town of Mitchell by a colony from the state of New York, but failing to secure a charter from the legislature the colony disbanded, one group joining the communistic settlement at Ceresco, near Ripon, and the other group of three families remaining in this county. The number of settlers gradually increased so that when Dr. J. J. Brown arrived in 1846, he found the following people residing here in addition to those mentioned above: Dr. S. M. Abbott, Henry S. Anable, Daniel Brown, E. Fox Cook, H. H. Conklin, Rev. L. W. Davis, Evan Evans, A. H. Edwards, Judge William R. Gorsline, Gen. H. C. Hobart, Thomas C. Horner, J. F. Kirkland, A. P. Lyman, Rev. H. Lyman, John Maynard, Dr. Jairus Rankin, H. N. Ross, William Seaman, H. N. Smith, J. R. Sharpstein, Judge David Taylor, D. C. Vosburg, George M. Gillett, Frank Stone and John H. Roberts.

A charter was granted incorporating the village of Sheboygan by the legislature of 1846. On February 9th of the same year an election was held to choose the village officers. The victorious candidates were: President, H. H. Conklin; Trustees, Warren Smith, J. L. Moore, William Farnsworth, R. P. Harriman; Clerk, D. V. Harrington; Treasurer, Van Epps Young; Assessor, Stephan Wolverton; Constable: Robert Watterson.

The county government at this time apparently was not a very expensive institution, judging from the report of the county commissioners, Sylvanus Wade, B. R. Farmin and A. W. Knight and clerk W. W. Kellog for the year 1844. The report consists of the following items: Expenses — for county officers, printing etc., $395.40; support of poor, $14.75; support of schools, $220.92; roads and bridges, $311.20; contingent expenses, $70.96; county tax $1,018.69; amount in treasury January 1, 1844, $892.20; Total expenditures for the year $2000.90.

With the incorporation of the village of Sheboygan, the pioneer period of Sheboygan may be said to have come to an end. A prosperous enterprising village stood where the Indians had held their councils, where the fur traders had plied their trade, where the pioneer lumberer had cut the pine trees, where the hardy farmer had cultivated his field.

“But times are altered; trades' unfeeling train usurp the land, and dispossess the swain.”