

BYRON THROUGH THE YEARS

By Ruth Bird and June Case
(written in 1948)

With the able assistance of our teacher, Mrs. Mattie Shafer

PREFACE

After several weeks of study and research we present this brief history of the town of Byron. We have included only those facts that we were able to identify as having actually taken place.

Special acknowledgement is due our parents and friends who have so patiently helped us in obtaining this information. We are grateful to those friends who loaned us their very old volumes of interesting information.

The foundation of appreciation is knowledge, and the knowledge we have gained through our research has made us appreciate our heritage from these pioneers. It has been an experience to visit and observe the places of historical interest.

Ruth Bird
June Case

The territory of the town of Byron, one of the identical townships of the Fond du Lac County, consists of Township North and Range 17 East by the government survey. The town lines were run during the winter of 1834-1835, - Hiram Burnham running the section and quarter lines.

The first settlement in the town of Byron was in the year 1839; John Case, Oscar Pier, Patrick Kelly and William Stewart came from New York State and made their settlement "A little east of the north line of the town". This location in Section 3 was chosen because of the "rich prairie soil, the oak timber lands and the brook which flowed through it". John Parsons, arriving direct from England a short time later, located upon a lot about a mile farther west of the first settlers.

These pioneers were followed by James Balson, who was born in England, and who emigrated to America in 1842. He settled on a farm of eighty acres of government land. At first he built a crude shack as a home, but later he built a comfortable log cabin which had the distinction of being the finest house in the township of Byron.

Samuel Butler, also a native of England, early took up a homestead in the same neighborhood. His daughter, Mary, taught the first classes to be held in the town, in her father's corn barn in the summer of 1841.

John Potts with his wife and four children came in the summer of 1844 and settled on Mound Prairie. The first shelter for his family was made of crotched poles stuck in the ground and covered with grass and blankets.

In 1845 another settlement was started in the southeastern part of the town. This group included Hiram Merriman, Jabez C. Clemens, Sumner Sweet, Joseph Nightingale and others.

In the same year Reverend Isaac Vaughn, a Methodist minister, and some friends from the county of Genesee, New York state, formed what is now called the Genesee neighborhood. This settlement was located at the crossroads of Sections 19 and 30 of the town of Byron and Sections 24 and 25 of the town of Oakfield. Matthew and Elizabeth Divers Batchelder, who came with this group, took up a homestead claim of eighty acres and built a log cabin upon their holdings. William Shuttleworth, a native of Nottinghamshire, England came to Byron in 1849. He settled near his friends at Genesee and worked at his trade of stonecutting. Andrew Gibson, also a pioneer at Genesee was a blacksmith by trade. A link in the chain of the history of these early settlers may be found in a little cemetery located in Section 19, town of Byron, on County Trunk F. The tombstones, which are called "the stiff white pages of history", reveal names of members of the Genesee settlement. Among the graves are those of Elizabeth Batchelder, the mother, 1819-1892, and the following children: Irving 1841-1858, Helen 1844-1846, Thomas 1847-1849, and James 1849-1850. Other pioneers whose graves are marked are Isaac Vaughn, 1765-1853; Andrew Gibson, 1798-1883; and William Shuttleworth, Jr., 1844-1850.

A pioneer family to add to what Fred L. Holmes calls the "Irish community" in "Old World Wisconsin" is that of John and Nora Dyer. They were married in Ireland and came to America in

1836. Twelve years later, the same year in which Wisconsin was to become a state, they bought the seventy acres of land in Section 24, town of Byron, which is still known as the Dyer homestead.

Daniel and Ann Claughton Costello, both of whom were natives of Ireland, came to America in 1839, and after living sixteen years in Massachusetts, they purchased eighty acres in Byron township.

The first German to settle in Byron was Phillip Bodemar. He was born in Germany in 1805, and after serving in the army of his country from 1826 to 1832, he came to the United States. He settled in Byron in 1846.

The town of Byron was organized in 1846 and the first man chosen to serve the town of Byron as chairman was William Stewart. The election was held at the home of Orrin Merris in Section 22. A town hall was later built on the same farm.

Schools and religious meetings go together in pioneer settlements, and they were quickly provided by the town of Byron. By 1843 there was a schoolhouse built on land donated by Patrick Kelly. By 1845 the second school was provided by the Genesee community. Religious meetings were held in each of these schools previous to the building of churches. St. John's Catholic Church in Section 22 was built in 1847 from stone cut from the limestone ledge.

The Methodist and Baptist churches sent ministers into the pioneer country at an early day. In 1842 Mr. Halsted and Mr. Smith were resident pastors in the county, and itinerant pastors were supplied at the request of the people. These traveling ministers felt the need of a community meeting place, and it was through their efforts that the Methodist Camp Grounds was established in Section 20 of the town of Byron. In the vicinity of this camp grounds are many interesting natural curiosities in the line of mighty masses of rent limestone and winding passage-ways into the "Ledge". The Byron Camp Grounds has grown from a well chosen natural meeting place into an organized center with cottages, a tabernacle, and dormitories for the convenience of the hundreds of people who meet each summer to worship God in the great out-of-doors. Many modern conveniences have been added over this long period of time, but it is still the original setting which was chosen one hundred years ago by the pioneer Methodists of the town of Byron and the state of Wisconsin.

Transportation in early Byron as in other pioneer communities was difficult. Roads were laid out which were little more than trails. Many of the pioneers came to town on foot, having followed the water route by way of Green Bay, via the Fox River and Lake Winnebago. Other settlers came by way of Milwaukee or Sheboygan, sometimes driving by wagon to the town of Byron.

It was not until December 1874 that the Fond du Lac, Amboy, and Peoria railway was organized under the laws of Wisconsin. The company purchased the right of way of the old Mayville and Iron Ridge Railroad. The project was primarily promoted to connect the iron and copper regions of Wisconsin with the coal and corn regions of Illinois. The road was absorbed by the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad in 1885 and was changed from a narrow gauge to a standard gauge railroad.

Entering the town of Byron in Section 4, the road crossed the township in an almost straight north and south line, leaving through Section 34. It served well the community through which it passed, there being a station at South Byron with a full time agent and telegraph facilities. There were two flag stations, one at Jones' Crossing and one at Camp Grounds. The passenger service on the railroad is now handled by bus, but there is still daily freight service.

With the Byron Camp Grounds already established and a railroad flag station at the crossroads of Sections 20, 21, 28 and 29 it was natural for the pioneers to choose a nearby site for the building of the first school house in that area. In 1874 a one-room building was erected to serve the school district, Number 7, until April 1916 when it was destroyed by fire.

The history of District Number 7 is closely woven around another pioneer of the township- John B. McDonald. As a youth of nineteen years he came on foot from West Bend and was employed on the farm of Charlie Woolridge in Section 28 for a number of years. While living here he met and married Eugenia Canniff of the neighborhood. They then went to live for several years on a farm in Section 33. In 1890 Dr. and Mrs. McDonald purchased a farm in Section 29. Their children - Jay, Minnie, Iva and Archie attended school in Byron Number 7. Jay McDonald, the older son, still lives on the farm purchased by his parents. His memory of some of the early teachers include Anna Nugent, Effie Joslyn, Emma Searles, Allie Sheridan McCoy and Mae Pygall.

Mr. Jay McDonald served the district as clerk for eight years. He was clerk of the school board at the time the first building burned in 1916. It was due to his efforts and those of Austin Case and John Graff, other members of the board, that the new building was ready for use in September of the same year.

The McDonald children, Melvin, Helen, Jay and Lorraine received their elementary education in the same district where their father attended school.

The only pupils enrolled in the Camp Ground School at the present time who can trace their ancestry back to pioneers of the town of Byron are June and Nancy Case. Their great-grandparents, Gilbert and Josephine Myers Case came to Wisconsin in 1866 and settled on a farm in Section 36, town of Byron. Austin Case - the children's grandfather, a son of these pioneers spent his entire life in this town until he moved to Fond du Lac in 1947. After his marriage to Carrie Hornung he purchased a farm in Sections 21 and 28. Their children - Roy, Earl, Josephine, Leon and Irene received their early education in District Number 7.

In 1939 Roy and Doris Binning Case- the parents of June and Nancy, as well as Ruth and Dean- purchased a farm in Section 21. Roy Case is serving as clerk of the Camp Ground School Board, with Clinton Ehrhardt as director and Bennett S. Bird as treasurer. Mr. Case adds the names of Alice Hayden, Leola Waller, Olga Martin, Gladys McCullough, Josephine Case White and Irene Matthews Hurteau to some of the past teachers.

The early settlers in Byron shared in all the privations so common to new countries. They depended upon each other for help and companionship. The fact that so many families in the township can trace their ancestry to the original pioneers, speaks well of the satisfaction these people

always felt for their community. They had their trials, hardships, misfortunes and adventures, and they have left a heritage of which the present residents of the town may well be proud.

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(We missed the Jacob Lerch homestead on Highway 41 just south of Byron. It has been in the Lerch family since 1856.)