

Sketch of Jerry Church

Posted by nzipfel on August 10 2008 15:34:45

SKETCH OF JERRY CHURCH

THE name of Jerry Church is inseparable from the history of Clinton county and Lock Haven. It was through his efforts the county was formed and named, and to him we owe the existence of Lock Haven as the county seat. No book of this kind would be complete without a sketch of himself, which we now proceed to give, as we find it in a book entitled, "Travels of Jerry Church," which was written by himself, and published by a firm in Harrisburg in 1845.

In the said book he informs the public that he was born in the town of Jericho, now called Bainbridge, in the state of New York, in 1796. His parents were formerly from the state of Vermont. His early education was received in the school of his native town, which was taught in the winter by a man, and in the summer by what they called a schoolmarm. He informs us that he liked the summer school the best, and was somewhat sorry when he was expelled from the school for trying to kiss his teacher. This ended his education so far as the schools were concerned. And at the age of fourteen he went to work at making shingles, which was an important industry in his section at that time.

He says he worked about two years at this business, and then stopped, giving as his excuse that hard work did not agree with him, and that it hurt his feelings.

However, at the time he gave up the shingle business, he had managed to save between three and four hundred dollars. This he invested in cattle, and turned drover. The investment proved a failure, as he drove his cattle to Orange county, N. Y., and could not sell them at cost, hence he lost his time and labor, and he returned home with scarcely enough money to purchase a suit of clothes, which he states he was very much in need of at that particular time. He says his father advised him, at this period of his existence, to turn his attention to some other business, as he was not cut out for a drover. He therefore decided to become a musician, and purchased a violin, which his folks would not allow him to bring into the house, hence he was compelled to practice in the barn, which, he assures us, was a difficult task on cold days. However, he became sufficiently accomplished in the art so as to be able to play a few tunes in a fair and respectable manner, and was finally hired to travel with a wax figure exhibition as musician, a position which he greatly enjoyed, but which was not very profitable.

He gave this up, and turned his attention to cutting and rafting lumber. He was assisted in the enterprise by an older brother. They cut their timber in the winter and in the spring, while rafting it down the Susquehanna, they lost control of their raft and it ran on an island, causing them serious loss, and when the lumber was marketed they had very little left for their season's work. Once more he abandoned the lumber business, and decided to try his fortune in a Western country. In company with a carpenter friend named Solomon Dickey, he traveled through Canada, but as they did not like the Canadians very well they concluded to go to Olean Point, New York state. There they hired out to build boats and skiffs for the sum of \$16 per month. He informs us that it was at this place he had the first streak of good luck in his life." He says: "I was invited to play the fiddle for a country ball, and received \$25 for my services, which was quite a sum for the pocket of a poor boy." After working there for about four months, they made a boat for themselves and went down the Allegheny river to a place called Portsmouth, in Ohio, where they parted company and never saw each other again.

Jerry Church, being left to himself, wandered around until he struck a place called Middleburn, in Ohio. Here he met a man named Parker, who had been a merchant in the vicinity of Church's former home, at Jericho.

He says: "Parker informed me that he was about to build a still-house for the manufacturing of whisky, which would pay him big, and if they could not make much money they could at least make enough whisky to cheer their drooping spirits and make them feel rich." He assisted his friend Parker

to erect the house, and to manufacture whisky for nearly a year, when they purchased a boat and loaded it with cider and apples, and took their load down the Ohio to the Kenhawa river, and up that to Charleston, Virginia, where they traded it for salt, which they carried back and traded for bacon, flour, potatoes or anything in the shape of produce. He followed this business for about a year, when he gave it up and hired with the captain of a produce boat at fifty cents per day. The work being hard, and the pay not enough, he soon gave up the business, and in company with a Frenchman started a store boat. They loaded their boat at a small town below Cincinnati with store goods of all descriptions, and sailed down the river, stopping at every town until they had sold their stock, when they also sold the boat and gave up business. His next venture was the wax figure business, which he followed for a season, until he was taken sick with the ague, which compelled him to remain idle for nearly a year. He next became a clerk in a little country store, and afterwards turned peddler; which business seemed to flourish to such an extent, that he finally saved enough money to start a store of his own, which he did in the house of a farmer who resided on the bank of the Licking river. He remained for a year, when a desire to return home seized him and he gave up business, and after purchasing a horse and wagon started for the home of his youth. He traveled through the state of Ohio, and finally arrived at Harrisburg, the capital of Pennsylvania, where he met a brother and sister of his, the former being a resident of the town, and the latter being there on a visit. His sister accompanied him to Jericho, where they found their mother, brothers and sisters, their father having died previous to this time. He next went into the store business with an older brother, at a place called Colesville, in Brown county, N. Y. The people of that section were poor, and nearly everything purchased at the store was paid for in lumber, shingles, etc.

The business becoming monotonous to him, he took what lumber he could collect and rafted it down the Susquehanna and sold it at Marietta. After this he traveled through several of the Southern states, visiting the gold fields of North Carolina; going from there to Tennessee and Missouri, and finally through quite a number of the Western states. He was accompanied on this expedition by one of his brothers, and they took up a homestead near the town of Ottawa, Ill. They remained on their land about a year, when the brother became tired of the West, and decided to return to his home in the East. So they laid out their land into lots and started in a wagon, drawn by oxen, for the town of Chicago, a distance of eighty miles.

Chicago at that time contained about six houses, and was occupied by the French and Indians. Jerry Church says: "We then took passage in a wagon that was going to Michigan through the Indian country without any road. On our trip we came to the home of an old Frenchman who had married an Indian squaw, and who had three pretty daughters. My brother fell in love with one of the girls and wanted to stay and be an Ingun, but I persuaded him to travel on. Although he said he would just as soon be an Ingun as not, if he could live with one of those pretty girls."

They traveled for some time through the state of Michigan, visited Detroit, then went to Buffalo, N. Y., and took a steamboat for Cleveland, Ohio. Here his brother left him and went to Tennessee to buy some land, and Jerry himself went back to Illinois to look after the town they had laid out on their homestead. On the way he met a man who had been to their new town, and who offered a wagon load of goods, wagon and horse included, for the Churchs' interest in the land. The trade was made, and once more Jerry Church was a full-fledged peddler. He traveled from place to place until he landed at St. Louis, where he sold his outfit and took passage on a steamer for New Orleans. Here his fever and ague came on him again, and he decided to return home if he could get there. He found a vessel about ready to sail for Philadelphia. He says: "I went aboard and asked to see the captain. They told me to walk down stairs into the cabin. I told them I could not do that, as I was too weak to walk anywhere. The captain then came up and I asked him if he could take a passenger to Philadelphia. He said he could not take me as I was too much of a skeleton to stand the voyage. I told him I wanted to go, and had the money to pay my fare, and it made no difference to him whether I could stand the trip or not so as he got the money. If I died he should wrap me in a blanket and toss me into the ocean. He said all right, I could go, which was very good news to me indeed."

The vessel stopped for the winter at the mouth of Morris river, about sixty miles from Philadelphia,

and our hero was compelled to travel by land, which he did, and finally arrived at New Cumberland, at the home of his brother Robert. He next drifted to Middletown, where he made his home with a sister for a time. His next move was to invest in government lands in several of the Southern states; these he sold, and was thus placed once more on the road to prosperity. He then came to the town of Williamsport and laid out what is called "Church's Addition" on a farm of 103 acres, which cost him and his brother Francis, who was at that time a resident of Wellsboro, Tioga county, \$10,000. This investment was a profitable one, and the two brothers proceeded from Williamsport to Derrstown (now Lewisburg), where they purchased a tract of 125 acres for the sum of \$5,625. Jerry Church says in connection with this purchase: "Having been in the habit of making towns, we got the idea into our heads that we could make one most any where, so we concluded to try a small one on the opposite side of the river from Lewisburg. While we did not do them much harm as a rival, they were glad to buy of us at a big price. Two days after we had purchased it for \$45 per acre, we laid out the land into streets and alleys, and called it Churchville. We sold the whole tract inside of two weeks, making considerable money but not much of a town." The brothers then went to Harrisburg, where they purchased a small mill patent, a mill and threshing machine, horse power, and all the apparatus for setting them in motion at any place. They shipped their purchase by canal to Pittsburg, and started with a carriage and team of horses for that Western city. Upon their arrival there they found their machinery all right. They determined to ship the whole concern to Louisville. They accosted the captain of a ship and asked him if he carried freight. He said he could carry all they had. Jerry Church then informed him that they wanted him to take two "Churches," a grist mill, a saw mill, and a carriage and two horses. The captain waxed angry and told them he could not carry such freight, but when informed as to the weight of the articles he changed his mind, and they landed at Louisville, where they tried their machinery, which failed to work. They finally sold out the concern and drifted from place to place until they found themselves in Chicago, where the two brothers parted company, the one going to the far West and Jerry Church returning to found the present city of Lock Haven. His story concerning the founding of Lock Haven we will give under another head.

Many different stories have been told concerning the peculiarities of Jerry Church, but what he says of himself in the little book of which we have spoken gives a better idea of his real character than what anyone else can say about him. It is the opinion of all who were originally acquainted with the man that he at one time intended making his home in Lock Haven. He built himself a peculiar dwelling a few rods below the old Court House, of which he speaks as follows: "In order to carry out my originality I built an office in the town standing eight feet above the ground, on thirteen large posts or pillars, to represent our thirteen Continental states. In the first place it is made by placing thirteen large pine trees five feet in the ground, and thirty feet long, in their natural state, with the exception of taking the bark off, and painting them in imitation of marble, with a fourteen feet room formed inside of the posts, so as to form a balustrade all around it; and the roof projecting over so as to protect the building. I concluded, when I was making it, that it was an odd looking office, and different from anyone I had seen in this country. And as I was no lawyer, and could not expect any notice or business in that way, I concluded that I would build my office so that clients might look at it without expense. If I am not very much mistaken, they would make as much at that as they would if I had been a lawyer myself. I had a number of scientific gentlemen to view the little building, and they always asked what order I intended it to be. I told them I never did anything according to order - it was all a matter of taste; that I never learned anything by note, and therefore could not inform them any more than that it was my own order, and that appeared to satisfy their inquiries always. I had always concluded that there was no chance for me to have any kind of a monument erected in remembrance of me, unless I should place some of my odd matters and things before the public myself, so that they could not all pass by without observing that some person had been there before." He also says: "I had a summer seat built in the first place at Lock Haven, so that if I got tired I could go -up and take a rest. It was formed in a cluster of black walnut trees. It was twenty-five feet from the ground, forty feet long, and seven feet wide, placed so as to be supported by the trees, banistered, and a seat running all around, and winding stairs up one of the trees. And I must say that when I went up on to the upper seat I felt like a bird. I had it painted by a German painter, and I told him that I would like to have it made like marble; but as he did not understand English very well he made it what I call 'Dutch marble,' all full of white and black spots. The natives of that country thought it was a wonderful thing, that I should throw away my money so, to make a nice

seat to sit on, and asked me why I did so. I told them that I sat far more comfortable on the seat than I could on a bag of dollars. So they gave it up. It has ever since gone by the name of 'Church's Folly.' However all were willing to take a seat with me now and then." It is very natural to suppose that after a man had founded a town, and lived to see it become as prosperous as Lock Haven, he would be desirous of remaining in it in order to secure some of the honors if not the financial benefits of its prosperity. But such was not the case with Jerry Church. He seemed to have had a mania for laying out towns, and, after he saw them fairly started, to leave them to their fate. He watched the growth and fought the battles for his new town of Lock Haven until 1845, when he once more turned his face westward, where he remained until his death, which took place in Carlisle, Iowa, November 1, 1894. He made several visits to Lock Haven, the last one being made in 1865. At this time he was honored by the citizens with a complimentary supper.

In alluding to his death The Indianola Tribune, of Carlisle, Iowa, gives the following sketch of the closing years of his life:

"One of the earliest pioneers, and one of the most remarkable men of Central Iowa, has ended a life of adventure such as it has been the fortune of few to live. In the year 1845 he came West to Des Moines while the Indians were yet in possession of the country, and in 1846 laid out the town of Dudley, about two miles east of Carlisle, on the Des Moines river, which place he abandoned in 1851, after the great freshet of that year had made sad havoc with his embryo city. He then moved to Carlisle, which he had in the meantime laid out. Soon after he went to Kansas, and in furtherance of his mania for laying out towns, he laid out the town of Franklin, near Lawrence, which, however, was another failure, and he spent most of the time for some years at Carlisle, until a few years since he went to Nebraska, and, carrying out his desire for pioneer life, took a homestead. He remained in Nebraska until brought back by Dr. Hull to the home of his pioneer days, where on Sunday, November 1st, Uncle Jerry breathed his last, and was buried by the loving hands of those who had known him so long and so well. We have sketched thus fully the details of his adventures to show the natural vent of his life, and his nature as a pioneer. While Uncle Jerry was never a prominent man in society, or in state or nation, yet he was one of those men whom it was a pleasure to know; one of those strong, sensible, sturdy pioneers to whom our country owes so much; one of those who were the forerunners of a more advanced civilization, who prepared the way for the inhabitants of the West, and moulded to a great extent the course and destiny of a great and prosperous country. Dangers had no terror for him, and his whole life was spent in their very midst. He was plain and blunt in the expression of his opinions, which were always strong and well taken. He was very charitable, almost so to a fault and no poor man or woman ever appealed for assistance in vain to his kindly heart. To the children Uncle Jerry was almost a divinity; so kindly in all his actions, so was narratives of adventures of frontier life, in which they delight, that he was a welcome visitor at every hearthstone, and the friend and intimate of all who knew him. Enemies he had none, nor could have had, for everything in his nature was such as to make only friends. In his religious belief he was a consistent Universalist. His religious faith was firm to the end, and his sad burial rites were performed by a minister of that denomination, the fortunes of which he had followed, and the success of he had desired so long."

SOURCE: Page(s) 6-15 Historical and Biographical Work, of Past and Present of Clinton County by J. Milton Furey, Pennsylvania Grit Publishing House, Williamsport PA, 1892