Early History of Meyersdale

The pages that follow are a Meyersdale Republican newspaper article that was found among the papers of the late Irvin H. Dietle, my grandfather, who was born in 1899. The article was written by the 76 year old grandson of a pioneer who settled in the area in 1776. The date of the article is unknown. The Meyersdale Republican was founded in 1900.

Lannie Dietle, March 29, 2015
A CHAPTER OF EARLY HISTORY OF MEYERSDALE

One of Oldest Living Residents Jots Down His Recollections of Pioneer Families and Occurrences in the Olden Times.

How many residents of Meyersdale are familiar with the early history of the town? How many are aware that the place has had no less than half a dozen different names during its existence—from the time that the first settlers came, about the beginning of the Revolutionary War, to the present day?

Only a few of the oldest inhabitants can remember the time that it was known otherwise than as Meyersdale, and before that, as Meyers Mill. Yet it has been variously known since the beginning, as Sparta, Moyers Stadt, Moyers’ Mili, Meyers Mill, Fairfield, Coal Dale, Dale City and Meyersdale.

Mr. John M. Olinger, who is now 76 years of age, is perhaps the best posted man on the early history of the town now living. Mr. Olinger is frequently asked by his friends for information about the early history of the town. While his own recollection of a century, he remembers many of the traditions handed down to him by his parents and grandparents.

Mr. Olinger’s grandfather located here in 1776 and originally owned the land on which the greater portion of the town of Meyersdale is now situated. At the urgent request of the editor of The Republican and others of his friends, Mr. Olinger has kindly written for publication some of his recollections of the early history of the town and its pioneers, which we present herewith.

Mr. Olinger has made only slight mention in his article of one of the prominent pioneer families, the Buechleys, or Beachleys, as the name is now spelled, for the reason that he is not so familiar with the history of that family as of others of whom he has written. He will let some one better qualified give the genealogy of that pioneer family and tell about the important part they took in founding the town.

to keep the harder well supplied with meat at all times of the year, there was no legal protection for any other kind of game, and back in the 18th century the deer would travel back and forth between the Allegheny and Laurel mountains, and at a point on the Pennsylvania side of the Allegheny, the deer would be shot on their journey.

Hogs cost very little, 20 to 25 cents for a four-weeks-old pig. They would be kept on the farm and given corn and otherSupplies, and at the end of the year, they would be ready for the market.

Traveled Miles for Salt.

Salt, which was almost indispensable, could not be had in the early days in this section of country. Some people had certain woods planted to preserve their meat, and in a few instances a few neighbors would take each two horses with pack saddles and go through the woods along trails so far east before the farmer could make a fox chase, that it took a week or six days before they returned. They often went as far as Winchester, Va., for salt, for they found no shelter for the night, or the way, they would tether their horses and let them eat grass and leaves, while the men would eat what they had brought with them and roll themselves in blankets and sleep on the ground. A few bushels of salt supplied a family for several years.

Original Land Owners.

The adjoining owners were Andrew Berninger, on the South, now the Meyers land; Henry Ambrose on the east, now the E. M. Berkleen farm; John Yother on the north, now the Meyers farm, and John Burnen on the west.

It may not be out of place to explain here that "tomahawk right" was so called because in those early days when the greater part of this country was still under survey, and the colony of Pennsylvania was a dependency of the British Crown, it was customary for any man who wanted land that was still part of the public domain, to select a site for a homestead, erect a cabin upon it, and then with an ax, or tomahawk, cut the boundaries of his claim by blazing the bark off one side of the trees facing the body of the land he wished to appropriate. By "squating" on a certain length of time he could have it surveyed and secured to his ownership.

Coffee Measured by the Grain.

In the early years of my grandfather coffee was a scarce article. Everybody used parched rye as a substitute. But a few of the wealthiest families would get a pound or two of "store" coffee, as they called it, which would last for a year or more. Only on special occasions would a few grains of store coffee be used with the rye. It was said that a good housewife on one occasion had a prominent visitor, so she ordered her daughter to prepare dinner and mix seven grains of store coffee with the rye. The daughter discovered that they had only five grains and more. The mother said to use what they had.

Some Early Buildings.

In 1790, Grandfather Olinger built a six-roomed house of honest logs just about a rod to the south of the old mill. The family moved to what is now the town of Meyersdale and vicinity. I remember going on different occasions deer hunting through here on their way from one mountain to the other and many were shot on their journey.

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In seeking the reminiscences of my boyhood days and the early history of the town of Meyersdale, allow me to give a brief history of my ancestors as far back as known by my father and mother, and from other sources dating back to 1748.

Johann Olinger came to the country in 1748 and settled in Berks County, Pennsylvania. He emigrated from Germany and was of Polish descent. My grandfather, John Olinger, was born in Berks County in 1750, but his father moved with his family a few years later to York County, Pa., near the Susquehanna river.

My grandfather's farm was in York County in 1778, to Mary Zech, a Swiss girl, who came to this land west of the Allegheny mountains, known as the Clearfield, settled early in the year 1768 on horseback, and arrived in what is now Stony Creek Township. Finding nothing to suit him, he came to what is now Meyersdale and settled on the land for many years afterward known as the Olinger farm. There was then a small log house built by C.W. Trexler's dwelling house now stands. He occupied that for some time. It had about an acre of ground cleared around it. He bought a "Tomahawk" from a Frenchman who had named the place Sparta. My grandfather paid 300 pounds for it ($500, a Pennsylvania pound being $2.50 25/32).

Pioneering in Wilderness.

After he bought this land he returned to his family in York County, purchased his few goods and started in a two-horse wagon for his new home. He came by the way of Hagerstown and Cumberland, Md., following Gen. Braddock's trail, the trunk road over which the National Road was later built. A few miles east of the present site of Frostburg, Md., he left that trail and struck out for Pohocamps, or a part of that ancient village, where stood an inhabited hill on which he put up for the night. He tethered his horses out in the open to help them eat grass and leaves. Next morning he fed his two horses a loaf of bread, his horse feed having given out. As the country between Pohocamps and Sparta (now Meyersdale) was at that time an almost impenetrable forest, he secured the services of two men of the family whose hospitality he had enjoyed, to help him from there to his new home. It took from early morning until late in the night.

The Peter Meyer Olinger, farmer, senior, lived on the farm his father purchased, Lebanon County, Pa., 44 years later. His mother was born in 1745, and moved to Tuscarawas County, Ohio. His father was married in 1718. He paid 300 pounds for it ($500, a Pennsylvania pound being $2.50 25/32).

Grandfather Olinger lived here 44 years, then sold the Olinger farm to my father in 1817, and moved to Tuscarawas County, Ohio.

My father was married in 1818. He paid 300 pounds for it ($500, a Pennsylvania pound being $2.50 25/32).

The war with England from 1812 to 1815 raised the price of all products which naturally increased the value of land. During that war, a two-year-old steer would bring $10.00, a five-year-old steer would sell for $50.00, and a ten-year-old steer would sell for $100.00. A cow could sell for $50.00, and a horse could sell for $50.00. A farmer could buy a farm for $100.00, and a farmer could buy a house for $50.00.

Success of Pioneers.

My father often related the hardships his parents had in those pioneer days. There was no money. People then needed very little money except for taxes. Clothing was all homemade. Flax was raised and prepared for the loom to make the linen and summer wear, and wool raised and prepared for the loom for the winter clothes. The women would spin the flax in the winter on their little spinning wheels and the wool in the summer on the large wool wheels. There were then a number of looms in the country. To color the yarn, copas and anise made into dye were the color that came next. Then the yarn was dyed, some in white and yellow barbed. All woolen goods were colored with butter yellow, making a brown color and cost, nothing but the labor. A little later about all woolen goods were colored with madder, a cheap red color.

Plenty of Wild Meat.

The meat eaten in those days consisted principally of venison and pork. Venison cost nothing but the price of the powder and shot used in bagging the deer, and as the animals were tame and plentiful and the pioneers expert marksmen, with the flintlock musket, or more modern percussion cap rifle, it did not take many shots.
Various Names of Village.

The town was now named Fairfield. This was the name of the old Fair trade Mill. Later the town name was Vermont, now as Fair trade City. On account of the many names it finally decided in a judicial contest, when the part decided in favor of naming it Fair trade.

History of Meyers Family.

Robert Meyers Sr. lived in Lebanon Pa. He married Mary H., and they had six children: John, Charles, John, and Christian. John married to Barbara Yocto, from the county. The daughters were Mary, Catharine, and Maria. Maria married to John Olinger.

Civil War Times.

The next date of any importance was the Civil War from about 1861 to 1865 when a number of citizens were drafted. One was my father, who was drafted after long service in the Union Army. He was a faithful soldier and served with distinction.

On April 1, 1864, my wife and myself returned home from the war. We were happy to return to our new home in the hills of Pennsylvania. The war had been long and hard, but we were grateful to be reunited.

An amusing incident that occurred in my life was...
PUBLIC SALE

of

BUGGIES AND HARNESS!

At H. L. Griffith's Warerooms,

SATURDAY, APRIL 15,

Commencing at Ten O'clock P. M.

Fine assortment of Buggies, Surreys and Runabouts, Two and Three-seat Mifflinburg Spring Wagons, Delivery and Farm Wagons. Seventy-five sets of light and heavy Harness of every style. Here is your chance to buy what you want at the right price.

HORSES!

L. J. Esken will sell a carload of draught and general purpose Horses the same day. Mr. Esken is an expert horseman and has selected for this sale the very best. They will be stabled at the Sikes Hotel barn, where they can be looked over before the sale.

DON'T MISS THIS GRAND OPPORTUNITY

To buy a Good Horse and a Fine Rig.

TERMS WILL BE MADE KNOW ON THE DAY OF SALE.

W. H. POWELL, H. L. GRIFFITH,
AUCTioneer., MEYERSDALE, PENN'A.