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Credit River Township

Today, like 1855: Fertile fields, friendly folk

By Jan Saarela

Early settlers in Credit River Township, had they heard the adage "luck o' the Irish," may at first have thought it true. These Irish immigrants, having left their homeland to escape the ravages of the potato famine, were grateful to have happened upon fertile farmland at the eastern end of Scott County. Better yet, the land was free, offered by the government to anyone who would clear and farm it.

But lucky? Yes and no. The homesteader discovered quickly that the task ahead - grubbing out a home and living from the bare land - was anything but easy. Still, life was rich and full, largely because they lived in a community with other Irish farmers.

At one time, the northern two-thirds of Credit River Township was inhabited exclusively by the Irish. For a time, over 95% of the population was Catholic.

But in the 125 years that have passed since those first families arrived, most of the original farms have been divided and sold, with farming no longer the occupation of Irish descendants.

Other changes have been minimal. No industry has come to Credit River, and virtually no commerce. In 1981, although the population has increased considerably (with housing developments such as Creekwood, Caseys and Bangs Addition), the township remains the same rural community it always was.

Nevertheless, there are some who say that the resident today is missing out. The most fortunate - the luckiest of the Irish, perhaps - may have been the grandchildren and great - grandchildren who grew up in Credit River Township before modernization, before the growth of Twin Cities suburbs. Life was simpler then and outside contacts few. People depended upon their neighbor for help and for entertainment.

"I'm Glad I lived when I did, and where I did" says Clare Muelken, who grew up on a large Credit River Township farm, about one-half mile from the business section at the intersection of County Roads 27 and 68.

Today at the same site, is a tavern, formerly the town hall, and across the street a vacant general store, once the thriving business of Muelken's uncle, Pat White. Just to the west of the store was a creamery.

That was it! The Credit River Township business section was never any larger than these three buildings, plus a small blacksmith shop. Yet the center was a tremendous convenience to nearby farmers.

Before the store opened farmers walked, or took a team of horses to Savage to pick up staple items such as salt, sugar and flour. Other items, such as fabric and tools, were purchased during infrequent trips to Minneapolis or St. Paul.

"The (Credit River) store was wonderful," remembers Pat Muelken. "Uncle Pat had a grocery counter in the front, sold dry goods in the back - well, he sold just about everything. And usually he'd ask his customers, 'Wanna have a little toxie (beer)?"

"And the store had a telephone booth. And that was quite a novelty! We all had phones at home, so we could call each other. But only at the store could you make a long distance phone call."

The settlers had only a horse and buggy on which to depend for transportation and often roads were muddy or full of ruts. Later the train passed through the community, but it ran only from Shakopee to

Farmington and passengers found it necessary to transfer for most of the places they wanted to go. The Irish homesteaders, because they traveled so little outside the township, made the town hall a place of social gathering.

At the town hall (the new hall on County Rd. 68 was built about 20 years ago) neighbors met for games of cards, for masquerades and for basket socials. Young people often married within the community, with a gala wedding dance held in celebration.

“All of this has such great memories for me” says Muelken. “I just loved the farm. There are so many things the farm child gets to do that the city youngster cannot do.”

“sure, it was a lot of hard work and we had no convenience. But eventually we go the. I remember, in the hot summer, sleeping in the big screen porch – and all of the fun times with brothers and sisters. Back then, everyone spent a lot of time with their family, and families became really close – much closer than they are now”

“The farm life – I loved every minute of it.”

Pat Cleary is the only living male descendant (fourth generation) of Cornelius Cleary, who in 1850 brought his wife Bridget and their four sons from Ireland to a better future in America. For five years, the Irish immigrant worked in New York, hoping to save enough money for land in the Midwest. In 1855 he discovered homestead land in Credit River Township, part of which is now Cleary Lake Regional Park.

In 1857, Cleary built for his family a large log cabin, the building still intact today.

Pat Cleary’s grandparents were married in that log house, and the first Credit River election was held there. Furthermore, passing missionaries used the structure to say Masses for residents who did not have yet have a church building. But soon they did.

In 1862 the Irish Catholics built a log church on a high hill overlooking what is now Cleary Lake. The building burned and a white frame building – with a hand carver altar, stain glass windows, a choir loft, a 65-foot tower and 1,200 pound bell – was built in its place. St Peter’s Catholic Church was completed in 1871, one year before Cornelius and Bridget Cleary passed away.

Pat Cleary remembers stories of the traveling priest who, because of inclement weather, sometimes arrived at the church quite late. People who arrived for Mass at 9 a.m. on a Sunday morning often waited until late afternoon for the service to begin.

Cleary’s father, ill as an infant, was carried to Marystown for baptism, because a priest was not expected in Credit River Township for several months. By 1885, St. Peter’s became a principal parish, and parishioners gained the services of a full-time priest.

The church was the spiritual center, a second home to the Irish immigrant, his children and grand children. It was here they conversed with each other, often for hours after Mass had ended.

Said one former church member, “It wouldn’t do to go inside too early, because we did a lot of talking beforehand too.”

It was at St. Peters the Irish farmers were baptized, married and eventually buried in the adjacent cemetery. Names on tall tombstones include Hanrehan, McQuestion, O’Connell, McCarthy, McMahan, Sheehan, O’Grady, Casey, White, Faricy, Cleary, Haugh.

Three miles to the west was Prior Lake’s St. Michael’s Catholic Church, a mission church. As the lakeside community grew, St. Michael’s became the centrally-located congregation, and eventually the rectory at St. Peter’s was moved to Prior Lake. The last priest to live in the home, while it remained in Credit River, was the well-known Father John Deere.

Pat Cleary remembers, "He was a tall, large man with reddish hair – just the typical Irishman. He had a lot of friends, and could be counted upon to drop in and visit just about anytime. Often he'd come over late in the afternoon and say to my parents (John and Liz Cleary), 'Hello, I'm staying for dinner!' But no one minded. There were nine kids at the table already, plus a few hired hands, and one more didn't make a bit of difference."

Father John Deere passed away in 1936, still serving St. Peters – then the mission church – and St. Michaels – the principal parish. Born in 1877 and ordained in Ireland in 1903, he had come to the United States and entered the arch diocese of St. Paul under Archbishop John Ireland.

In February 1960, St. Peter's was closed altogether. Shortly thereafter, the building, belonging to the archdiocese was torn down.

Destruction of the church building came as a crushing blow to people who continued to attend church, and had continued to regard it with great reverence and sentimentality. To them the decision was without reason, painful and unfair.

"the church wasn't hurting anyone" said Clare Muelken, "and it was so beautiful." She kept a plaque that hung beneath one of the stained windows inscribed "Given by John White in memory of his wife, Mary." The couple, Muelken's parents had been married in the church.

Pat Cleary and his wife Aurelia, who have just celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary, remember the life-size statues that once stood in the interior of the church. Because of the high cost of shipping them to another church sanctuary, most of them were destroyed.

St. Peter's it could be said, was a symbol of the Irish who settled in the area.

Now it is gone, and the people too, have scattered. Only a few of those original names, such as the Kanes (Aurelia's maiden name) and the Haughs remain as township landowners. Another is Casey, a name still prevalent in the township.

John and Mary Howe Casey, immigrants from Dublin, Ireland homesteaded in nearby Cedar Lake Township in 1857. Their son, William James Casey, Sr., married Johanna Faricy, daughter of Robert Faricy and Margaret Dordan Faricy, immigrants from County Cork, Ireland, Credit River homesteaders in 1855. The couple purchased the original Faricy homestead in 1912, the land passed to their son in 1937. William and Johanna Casey bore 12 children, and a count in 1977 revealed that they had 45 living grandchildren, many of them still in the township.

Robert Faricy – one of the original settlers in Credit River Township – came to the United States with two of his brothers, James and Patrick. The three settled on individual 160-acre homesteads, located just to the east of the Cleary farm. The very first Faricy encampment was established beneath an unusually large basswood tree alongside the Credit River.

One of the farms, that of James Faricy, remained in the family for exactly 100 years. In 1955, it was sold by James' grandson, Pat Faricy and his wife Gertrude. The couple currently lives in Prior Lake.

The Haughs, by number a small family in Ireland, were apparently of sound financial condition, at least in comparison to others who had lived through the Irish potato famine. The Haughs came to America twice!

At first the Haughs didn't like America, so they sailed back to Ireland and tried to buy back their farms. But they couldn't, so they sailed to the United States for the second time, and settled eventually in Credit River Township.

A majority of the Irish immigrants were in the 20-30 age bracket, but the Haughs were different. Edward, born in 1832, probably arrived in the East Coast in 1849 or 1850. And he brought with him his parents (John and Hanora Haugh) and a younger brother, Michael, born in 1846.

The older John Haugh, born in 1806, died in Credit River Township in 1846. Of the tombstones in Credit River Cemetery, his birthdate is the earliest. Michael Haugh, who lived until 1923, was for many, many years the man who rang the bell at St. Peter's Church.

Living in the area today are several seventh generation Haughs. Twin brothers Rollie, a realtor, and Robert, owner-manager of the Prior Lake Union 76, are great-great grandsons of John Haugh.

By the early 1870's, all of the land in Credit River had been claimed. Original settlers, besides the Clearys, the Faricys and the Haughs include John White, Michael Flemming, George Wild, Michael Regan, Daniel Lawler, Henry Reardon, Among other families were the Sherins, the Kanes, the Lannons and the Garveys.

Some say the township was named after a storekeeper who, in lean times of the early settlement, allowed his customers to buy supplies on much appreciated credit. Others insist that the name was given when a priest from Lakeville came to call in the settlement. But the creek was so swollen he could not get across, and he had to turn back. In Lakeville, he found his mother near death, and gave "credit" to the stream. Had he been able to make the trip as planned, he would not have seen his mother before she passed away.

According to yet another story, financial "credit" was given by the French at Mendota to Irish settlers who had come up the Mississippi River, on their way up the Minnesota River, west to land that is now in Scott County. In June 1855, they were said to have come back to Mendota, reporting to the French that they'd found "near heaven" – lots of wood for heat and building, plenty of lakes and ponds and grass over a foot tall.

Indians were very numerous when first the township was settled, but none ever troubled the whites. Pat Cleary remembers that his grandmother was sometimes visited by an Indian who would walk unannounced into the kitchen and sit wordlessly on the floor. His grandmother would give him freshly-baked bread and then he would leave – but not before giving her an exchange piece of venison.

Many of the Irish left Credit River in the early 1920's when the price of farm produce dropped, and so did the price of farmland. Many of the young had already left the farm for jobs in the Twin Cities. Of those who stayed, most do not regret the decision. One is Jim Casey, the man who eventually developed Casey's Addition. "There is just an exceptional quality of life here," he says.

Like Muelken, Casey can remember the basket socials, the dance afterwards, the annual Easter play, the live bank music sometimes at the hall. If a calamity befell a farmer, all the others would come to help, he said.

Casey, who has spent long hours putting together the Casey family tree and Credit River history, has one loose end – one happening he cannot understand. Credit River Township, he points out, is 24 sections in area – not the 36 sections of a typical township. He knows that a two mile strip, or the eastern one-third end of the township, was at one time taken away by the state Legislature, and given to Lakeville.

The situation, as told to Pat Faricy, happened as the result of Dakota County politicians working through the legislature to gain Savage (a former commercial center) – to get it into Dakota County boundaries. Legislatures began the "chopping pattern" to the south, slicing two miles off Credit River Township, then two-and-one-half miles of Glendale Township to the north. But for some reason, the plan failed, with annexation stopping just short of Savage.

Faricy: "Back then no one really cared what county they lived in. But if that happened today, it would cause quite a squabble!"

Although the Cleary homestead was sold in 1961, the name remains in the township. Cleary Lake Regional Park was named after Pat Cleary's Irish great-grandfather who first settled the rolling, scenic property.

Cleary's father, John Cleary, was one of the five original founders of the Prior Lake State Bank.

"We saw no poverty when we were growing up," comments Aurelia. "everyone made their own living." The pair attended school in separate one-room buildings, with Pat remembering that one class had a total of 52 students.

Cleary continues: "Farming was a lot of hard work, but there were a lot of good times, too. I remember my dad cutting wood and hauling a cord at a time, with a horse and wagon. He'd make \$1.50 a load, even though it took him all day to make the delivery."

Later, remembers Cleary, piles of wood were stacked along the railroad with the train stopping to measure and buy it.

At Keatings corner, about one-and-one-half miles from the general store, was an elevator and train station where passengers were picked up and let off, and where farm produce could be loaded and transported to market.

An exciting time for the Credit River family was the arrival of the telephone. Typically, 16 phones were installed on a single line, and there was very little privacy as calls were placed.

The Irish farmers devised a signal – a certain series of rings – that would warn others of trouble, Maybe a fire, or a son or daughter who had been kicked by a horse. In this case, all would come for help.

Eventually Pat and his brother James took over the Cleary farm, 500 acres of land between the park and County Rd. 12. Like his father, Cleary raised corn and wheat, beef and hogs. "But never any dairying," he mused. "I was always glad of that."

During WWII, 100 acres of the farm, near County Rd. 12, were used as a military training field, with flight instructors coming out with novice flyers from Fort Snelling. All day long planes would fly in and out of Credit River, touching down, then rolling over nearby housetops. (During WWII, Credit River housewives got together to knit blankets and roll bandages for American soldiers).

"It was a good life," says a thoughtful Pat Cleary.

"Everybody was happy then," adds Pat Faricy. "Maybe even more so than people are today."