

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to interview Levi Livingston, then 89 years old. At the time I talked to Levi, he had the distinction of being the oldest living resident of Lake County, Michigan, who was also born in that county. Levi was still busy, cutting pulpwood and driving his Model A Ford to his work. He lived with his wife, Anna, and their black cat in a little stone house near the edge of the Manistee National Forest. He worked in the aspen woods with a chain saw, the power tool he adopted after he was eighty years old. Before that time, he did all his work with a bow saw, traditionally called a "Swede Saw" in our area.

Levi died many years ago, in his nineties, but reading some of his observations on the early days of this part of Michigan still brings life into those long gone days. Here is a sampling, in Levi's own words as I recorded them in 1964. My father posed the questions in this interview.

*Where did you go to school, Levi?*

Bristol school, Starr school.

*Did you go in the summer?*

Oh, yes, I used to go to school summers.

*Were the teachers pretty strict?*

Not bad; they was pretty good. I was about as bad as anybody. Sadie Garringer, when she used to teach in there, she'd tell me to go out and get a good--what I'd like to be licked with. A good stout beech. I'd cut off three or four beeches and fetch 'em in. She didn't hit very hard. She kinda failed. She didn't never wear one out.

*What did you study, Levi?*

Readin', writin', 'rithmetic; that's about as high as we'd get. Spellin'---we used to have spellin' schools and I'd get spelled down every time. I remember they wanted me to spell "bureau." I can spell it now---b-u-r-e-a-u.

*Did you ever have any socials at your school?*

Oh, yes. Mabel Robinson used to have an exhibition there. We'd learn to speak pieces, you know, and plays. Then we went down to the town hall and had an exhibition there. She'd rent the hall or they'd let her have it.

*Did you have candles that were lit on the school Christmas tree?*

Yes. One night we was practicing on the pieces there and I was to have a gun and shoot the gun off accidentally. I loaded it up with powder, and it blowed the lights all out; left us all there in the dark.

*What year were you married, Levi?*

I was about----let's see----I can't remember. I was 27 when I was married.

*How far did you have to go to get your license?*

I went to that place east of Reed City--Hersey. Yes, I rode down there on a bicycle and got my license.

*Must have been about 35 miles, wasn't it?*

Yes, just about.

*Wasn't a very good road, was it?*

Oh, sand roads. We used to follow cow trails along the side--most all footpaths, you know. Used to go down them footpaths with a bicycle.

*Did the cows run in the roads?*

Oh, yes, the cows was in the roads, most all over. Then people walked back and forth. Always had a path along the road. Had a lot of footpaths then. Was the only way they had to go; that was before they knowed anything about the automobile.

*Did you have a belling when you got married? (Note: a "belling" was the local name for a charivari, or "shivaree", the nighttime serenade of a newly wed couple, usually accompanied by loud noise and demands for candy, cigars, and drinks.)*

They didn't get me! Nobody knowed I was married. Ol' Nels Norman said, "If we'd knowed it, we'd have had some beer out of it." But I never told nobody I was going to get married; I didn't think anything about it. Houghton, he come along; he was Justice of the Peace. I said, "Come on in. I've got a job for you." He drove a span of horses at that time. So he put them horses up there and come in and done the job and drove on. Nobody knowed anything about it. Never thought nothing about it.

*Did you ever go to a belling, Levi?*

Oh, yes, we went to bellings. Walter down there, he got married and we followed him up and went there two nights. There were about 200 of us belling him. He wouldn't come out; the second night, we shot some of the windows out of the house, but he wouldn't treat. We just shot powder, but it would knock the windows out.

The interview went on to other topics, and Levi gave his account of the early days of logging in the area, and described many of the settlers of eastern Lake County and northwestern Osceola County.

Reminiscences are always subject to interpretation, and every person's memory has its vulnerability, but oral histories of an area add a flavor and life to the past that can seldom be attained in other ways. As I read these words, I see Levi, a small, wiry man with a gray mustache. Into his nineties, he wielded his axe and saw, and I don't think of him without them.