

ROCHESTER HISTORY

'BILLY YANK'

By Merritt Romine

'Billy Yank' is the starting place for our tour of Mt. Avon Cemetery. In 1826, this burial site was the first cemetery platted in Oakland county. Because of its' historical significance, the Michigan Historical Commission, in 1979, placed Mt. Avon Cemetery on the Register of Historic Sites. As we walk through this important influence on history, we learn about the early pioneers who came to Rochester to harness the forest and rivers, clear the land, and build mills on the streams to saw trees, grind grain and weave wool.

We learn of the great families who settled our villages, farmed our land, fought in our wars, invented our machines and built our schools. The statue of 'Billy Yank' stands quietly at arms rest in the middle of the cemetery a short distance from the Second Street entrance. Nearby is the grave of John L. Snook, who, as a young man, served in the Civil War. He and his brother, Rufus, joined the famous 22nd Michigan Volunteers.

Tragedy struck when several men in the regiment died in Kentucky of typhoid, including Rufus Snook and Col. Moses Wisner, who led the regiment. John L. Snook went on to fight at the Battle at Chicamauga where many Oakland County men were killed, captured and imprisoned. When he returned to Michigan, John built the Overlook Fruit Farm, where Winchester Mall is now located. John was known as the Poet Laureate of Oakland County and recited his composition, 'The Soldier Monument' at the unveiling of the Billy Yank statue in 1911. On Snook's tombstone is the inscription: "Thinker, Teacher, Soldier, Farmer, Poet, Author". His book of poems can be found at the Rochester library.

We move on to visit the graves of Captain William Price, his wife, Sally Axford, and some of their children. In 1835, William Price, who was an officer in Michigan's Militia, became the first Avon Township Supervisor just before Michigan became a state. At the time he became Township Supervisor, he had purchased the John Hersey Grist Mill at Stoney Creek, which he owned until his death years later and Joseph Winkler then bought the mill. At the next grave is buried the Almon Mack family. He was also a mill owner and became the second Township Supervisor and later a State Legislator. Almon Mack's home was at Fourth and Walnut Street and was torn down to build the Post Office. We come to the Nathaniel Baldwin and Dr. Cyrus Chipman monuments. Both of these Rochester pioneers served in the Revolutionary War. The first township Post

Office was in Dr. Chipman's home at the N.E. corner of Auburn and Rochester Roads.

The oldest part of the cemetery now, where the names of the families read like Who's Who in Rochester history. Col. John Frank, who served in the Territorial Militia, married his neighbor, Dr. Chipman's daughter, Arabella. Area Seniors Betty Arscott and Ray Frank are descendants of these early settlers. We learn at the next marker that Alexander and Sarah Graham were the parents of the first child born to a settler coming into Oakland County. Sarah named Rochester after her native town in upper New York State. They were also the occupants of the first cabin built by pioneer settlers and there is a plaque at its location on East Third Street.

The present day Rochester Pixleys are descendants of Jonathan Pixley, who migrated from upper New York State in 1831 by way of the Erie Canal. He and his wife raised 13 children. Hardship in the first year found most of their children ill with typhoid fever, but they all survived.

Kids and adults alike are fascinated with the next stop at the 100-year Time Capsule. On Flag Day, 1987, to honor Michigan's 150th Anniversary, the capsule was buried in a formal ceremony by the Rochester Historical Commission, with the stipulation that it was to be opened June 14, 2087. Some are interested to know that 48 clubs and organizations contributed many books, photographs, videotapes, newspapers, and artifacts that should be of interest and value to future historians.

On the way back to our starting place, we pass the Lt. Sam Harris Fountain. He was a Civil War cavalry officer under General George Custer and fought at Gettysburg. He spent almost a year in Libby Prison. Nearby is the Arthur E. Collins grave site. Collins became a Sergeant Major in the famed 22nd Michigan and also fought at Chicamauga, where he was wounded, captured and sent to Andersonville Confederate Prison. When Collins finally returned home, he opened a grocery business where the Janet Varner dress shop is today. At the Lysander Woodward Monument, we reflect that he is the only citizen for whom two streets are named. Woodward was President of the Detroit-Bay City Railroad and was instrumental in getting the railroad and depot built in Rochester in 1872. The railroad ran through the back of his farm, now known as Dinosaur Hill Nature Preserve and North Hill subdivision. The old railroad bed has become Paint Creek Trail, an 11 mile long park for walking. It extends from Yates Cider Mill to Orion.

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