

## **THE PIONEERS..... A NEW LIFE, A NEW LAND**

Rochester is not only the heart of the hills but it's the heart of Oakland County.

The area gains that distinction not because of its geographic location, but because the county grew up around the first settlement there.

The first family in Rochester – and in Oakland County – came in 1817. Then, James Graham, an Irishman who had settled in Detroit, grew tired of cutting wood at 25 cents a cord. With his wife, sons Alexander and Benjamin, and daughter and son-in-law, Christopher Hartsough, he set out to find new land.

In Mount Clemens, Indians told Graham of a passable trail along the Riviere aux Hurons (changed to Clinton River in 1824) inland to an area abounding with hills and Oaks.

On the Indians' advice, the Graham family followed the river to a ridge, over that and along a stream until they finally reached the juncture of Stoney and Paint Creeks – the present site of Rochester.

On March 17, 1817 the family cleared a path to the creek behind what is now the Rochester Municipal Building. They later set up housekeeping on the southwest quarter of section 15, near today's intersection of Avon and Livernois roads.

To Alexander Graham and his wife goes the credit of building the first permanent home in Oakland County. And Alexander's wife named the immediate area Rochester after her home town in New York. History books say Benjamin, a surveyor, mapped out much of the area that now includes Avon Township.

Others followed the Grahams, and in the fall of 1818 John Hersey built a log cabin north of Paint Creek. The land he bought for \$2 an acre was the first public land sold in Michigan.

By 1820, there were 129 people in Avon. That same year Michigan Territorial Governor Lewis Cass proclaimed Oakland a county. Fifteen years later, the Township of Avon was established.

Those were the beginnings. In the years that followed more persons carved out firsts in the new land.

Roger Sprague drove the first team of horses into the county in 1821. Until then, history books say, pioneers like the Grahams had loaded themselves and their

goods on horseback and wound their way through the woods and along the stream banks.

Not surprisingly, one of the first things the pioneers started was education of the youngsters. A school was started in Alexander Graham's old log house under the direction of a man named Farrington. As early as 1821, a small school with six or eight pupils was started in a log shanty in the same area. By 1824, Rochester and Avon residents turned their attention to entertainment. Jacob Miller, better known as 'Dutch', built a distillery along Paint Creek in 1824. Residents started churches, literary societies and a cornet band.

In 1824, the first highway was authorized. The Pontiac and Paint Creek Turnpike Company constructed a road from Detroit to Pontiac – a town growing to the west – with a spur to connect Rochester and Royal Oak.

Today, these two roads are called Woodward Avenue and Rochester Road.

The early roadway was quite different from the highways of today. They were constructed of logs laid side-by-side across the path. This style of construction was appropriately called a corduroy road. It did not permit high speed but it did make easier the passage of wagons laden with farm produce or supplies.

The trip from Rochester to Detroit took two days over the corduroy road. In 1873, the road was improved and became a gravel roadway from Rochester to Auburn.

Those roads were important to the first residents. It wasn't until 10 years after the Grahams first arrived that there was a local store at which they could purchase supplies. The first store was started in 1827 by Seneca Newberry, a merchant-politician from Connecticut.

The first post office was three miles south of town and was replaced by a Rochester office in 1828 or 1829. At that time, letter mail was brought to the Rochester office three times each week.

Prior to April 12, 1869 Rochester was a part of Avon Township. At that time, residents voted to incorporate as a village. Later the village shifted to City status and in 1969, the incorporated City of Rochester celebrated the centennial of its attainment of corporate status.

The city has turned much of the land where James Graham and his family spent their first night into a park. Later the Kiwanis built a new pavilion on the north side of Paint Creek. Today the city sponsors its Arts n' Apples festival there. It is also making plans to build a community house on that spot.