A FARM FAMILY'S WORLD, 1880

Phil R. Jack

By way of introducing the short diary which follows, a few remarks are in order. Every once in a while one comes across an item of evidence which makes an impression greater than surface indications would warrant. Such was the case with a short account of a family's activities which appeared toward the end of a farmer's account book of the 1830's and 1840's. The material, which covered almost six months of the spring, summer, and autumn of 1880, had been entered in what had apparently been blank pages of a family document which had been handed down from an earlier generation. At the time of first reading, I was more interested in the accounts which depicted the activities of a farmer who was also a distiller and a producer of linseed oil.

As a few years went by, I found myself referring to the diary as a source of illustrations of rural family life in western Pennsylvania toward the end of the nineteenth century. The document is certainly not notable as a source of new knowledge, but I believe that it reinforces well the idea that rural people of the past were quite human, and very busy ones at that.

The activities of these people are unusual to present-day readers — for instance, the incessant traveling which took place within, for the most part, a five-mile radius — and it all adds up to a word picture of another way of life. Of interest is the laconic manner in which various items were entered in the diary; emotion was not an overt part of the life of these people, at least not in their writing. About the only instance of an outburst was on the 26th of May when the writer exclaimed about the miserable weather, "Dry, dry, dry." More feeling was displayed here than in the notation concerning a son's being far away and ill in Colorado Springs.

These farm folk, the Henry K. Dilts family of North Mahoning Township, Indiana County, were engaged in all sorts of economic, social, and political activities. The writer, who, from internal evidence,
was the mother of the brood, does not distinguish between the various aspects of the family's life. When we of the present time study the past, we often tend to forget that the people involved did not make the same abstractions that we do; every line of this diary leads to the conclusion that Nancy Allison Dilts felt that life was being lived in a perfectly normal, unitary fashion. She does little romanticizing, which may (or should) be a hint to some groups of the present day. Simply, these people were engaged in a traditional manner of living which they found to be satisfactory.

“On the move” is the fittest description which can be applied to the individuals of the family; in fact, they seem to gallop off in as many directions as there are members. The constant moving about the countryside was not considered by them to be abnormal. It was expected that considerable mobility would take place; visitors' names were noted, and the trips by family members to other places were duly recorded.

There were some thirteen individuals in this busy family. “Papa” was Henry K. Dilts, while the writer of the diary was his wife, Nancy Allison Dilts. According to the manuscript census schedule of 1870 (that of 1880 not being available), the parents would have been 48 and 46 respectively in 1880. The “Mother” mentioned may have been Nancy's mother, for Henry's mother had died in 1877. The Dilts children ran the gamut of ages in 1880: Wilson, 23; Linus, 22; William (Willie), 20; Adda, 18; John, 16; Bell, 14; Harry, 11; Annie, 9; Tommy, 7; and Ella, 4. The last three children named were probably the “three little ones” who, along with Adda, were left behind while all the others went to the “big convention” at Indiana. The last survivor of the family was Thomas, who died in 1963, aged 91. Henry and John died in the same year, 1893, while Annie died in 1894. The family remained intact for only thirteen years after the diary was written.

On any given day, at least one of this numerous group was away from home for one reason or another, while the rest stayed at home, engaged in the farm chores. There are implications that Wilson, Linus, and Willie operated to some extent on their own. (Willie was the only one of the family to be called consistently by a nickname.) The whole diary is a fine illustration of the truism that large families

2 That information about the family not contained in the diary was secured for me by the Misses June and Nan Dilts, daughters of Wilson Dilts.
were advantageous on farms because of the many tasks which could be carried out by people of all ages.

The many comings and goings of the Dilts family indicate that they tended to operate within an habitual area; from what is known of rural life, this must be presumed to be their community. More than eighty-six per cent of the trips occurred within a five-mile radius of their home. With the exceptions of the excursions to Colorado and Kansas, the longest journey made was to Kittanning, about twenty-three miles as the crow flies. Indiana, approximately sixteen airline miles distant, was the most distant point ordinarily visited. An interesting point arises in connection with the family trips. Since the construction of paved roads, patterns of road-use in the region have been modified. At least one of the roads used by the Dilts family is no longer in existence. For that reason, it is now a greater (relative) distance from the home site to such places as Smicksburg than it was in 1880. The question arises as to what extent the changes in road-use have affected the various economic and other patterns of the people living in the area.

A tentative survey of the days recorded in the diary indicates that all of the Diltses were at home or at school only about twenty per cent of the time. On four days out of five, one could reasonably expect to run across a Dilts somewhere within a four-or-five-mile radius of his home.

It is evident that the family members were engaged in many different activities. To modern eyes, the frolics mentioned are of interest. Not all of the family attended each one, but it is certain that older ways of pleasure and labor had not as yet disappeared. This diary is from another day, and it points out a vastly different way of life. Clearly, the writer was not at all interested in a world which lay outside the confines of the rural community, the farm, and the family. Read then the diary which follows and note this world of a rural family in Indiana County in 1880.  

THE DIARY

May 1st 1880
1st Preaching at Gilgal. Wnt to Mothers and stayed all night.

3 The addition of some periods constitutes about the only changes I have made in the material. Spellings and capitals have not been altered.
3d M  Adda and John started to school at Covode. Ann St. Clair buried to day. Finished sowing oats.
4th T  Nice warm day. Bell washing. Linus and Papa working at wash house. Willie plowing for corn in little meadow.
5th W  Willie plowing. Linus and Papa making board fence. Sam sick to day. Prayer meeting to night at [?]. Very warm. Had a letter from Wilson last night. He is at Colorado Springs and Sick.
7th Fr  Still warm and dry. Willie still plowing for corn. I am very weak yet and dont feel well at all. Ada and John came home this evening. Aunt Polly here.
8th Sat  Linus went to Georgeville in forenoon. Papa at Sam Auls. Papa building fence. Willie plowing. Ada, Bell and Willie gone to Davidsville this evening. Coming home about 9 o clock they saw a bright Light in the heavens and heard several reports like thunder or blasting in a well. Supposed to be the bursting of a meteor or gas collected in the air.
9th Sab  Young folks at church. Very warm and dry.
10 Monday  Willie gone for a load of boards. Papa gone to canoe to see a horse. Linus bumming. Dry and warm. [?] planting corn.
11th T  Rained last night. Grass and woods green. Sold six head of fat cattle. Linus and Sam Aul gone to George Auls to weigh them. Papa and Frank Brown started to Kansas this morning. Willie plowing. Bell, Ada, [?], Lizzie [?] gone to Granny Fetterhoffs.
13th Th  Boys planting corn down by the run. Nutt Dilts here. Very cool to day. High wind. Doe Morrow called for a few minites this afternoon.
14th Fri  Fine day. Willie harrowing for corn. Linus finished run

4 Present-day Trade City.
5 Possibly present Cherrytree.
6 Linus was loafing.
field. Planted some potatoes afternoon. Linus gone for Ada and John. Bell and Annie gone to Store. Had some frost for three nights.


16th Sab  Beautiful day. Ad here. Bell and Annie at Sabbath School. Soph and Ede Vanhorn here in the evening. Come to see Mother.

17th Mo  Boys planting corn. Bill Fetterhoff helping. Still dry and warm. No rain since the 11th.

18th Tu  Willie plowing. Dry and warm. Linus took the roof off the old School house. Going to put on a new one. Mother better today. So dry that nothing can grow.


20th Th  A beautiful morning. Still dry and warm. Linus gone to Mart Whittakers raising. Harry harrowing. Ede Vanhorn here last evening on her way to Davidsville. Willie came home at noon and went to Lecture to night at Davidsville.


23rd Sab  All church but mother and the little one. A very fine day. Not too warm.

24th Mon  Another beautiful day. Willie harrowing. Linus gone to George Auls with the cattle to see them weighed. Harry took Ada and John to Covode.

25th Tu  Another beautiful day but too dry for any thing to grow. Linus and the children planting corn. Cut worm bad

7 Present-day Hamilton, Jefferson County.
this year again. Willie gone for boards to Johnston Sawmill. Stone hauling to day at Pete Frechs. None of ours going. Papa still away yet at Kansas. Lecture last night at Davidsville.

26th We


27th Th

Quilting at Swans. 22 there. Had a big day. Rained a couple of Showers. Looks for rain to night. Linus clipped 9 Sheep to day.

28th F

Rained a little this morning. Cleared off in afternoon. Linus clipped 6 sheep. Went to Davidsville after supper.

29th S

A beautiful day. Linus and Mrs. Swan clipping sheep. John roofing the kitchen. Sale at Stears this afternoon.

30th Sab

Linus not at home. Ada and John went to Covode in the evening. Bells birthday. 14 years old.

31st M

Linus and Mother went up to Grandmothers to see if we could get some shingles. Looks for rain to night.

June

1st

Linus went for the shingles in forenoon. Afternoon he and I went to Davidsville. Took 35 lbs wool to Ramey. Got 45 cts per lb. Ebert got 300 ft of flooring and paid me 5.00 for it. It is raining now and quite cool.

2 D We

Cleaning house. Linus shingling kitchen. Moved the Stove in the kitchen.

3d Thur

Bell and I papered the room. Linus away. Alice Sprankles here. Rained some. Planted some beans today.

4th Fr


5th S

Primary Election to day. Willie came home. Went to mill in forenoon. Ada and Bell cleaning house.

6th Sab


7th Mo

Willie gone to haul boards. Adda and John to school. Linus cultivating corn.

8th Tu

Fine day. Linus at the corn. Census man here to day.

9th Wed

Linus at the corn. Bell gone to post office. Wheeler got 4 head of cattle to day from us. Papa still away. Looking for him in a couple of weeks.

Linus working on the road. Rained at night. Thunder and lightning. Uncommon warm weather.

John cultivated corn in forenoon. Linus plowed the potatoes after dinner. Had some more rain. Linus gone to Uncle James for wool. John and Harry hoeing potatoes.

Linus gone to Covode to church. Willie to Georgeville. Bell went to Marchand at night. Had a thunder shower. Frank Brown came home.

Willie gone to haul boards. Linus to Marion. Very cool this morning.

Rained all day. Still no flood.

Linus went to Covode. Willie came home with a load of boards.

Willie went down the country with his boards to trade for grain. Linus at the corn. Bell and Mother papered the room. Nice day.


Willie and Linus working corn. Wilson came home from Colorado about dark. Milt Dilts here all night.

Linus 22 years old to day. All gone to church. Ada gone to Covode.


Linus working corn. Bell gone to Dilts.

Willie gone back to town. Linus went to Bushes to a Chopping. Afternoon Bell and Rhoda Sprankle went to Marchand to a convention.

Very warm this morning. Linus working corn. Bell sick. Mother not well. Folks calling corn, grain small. Willie home.

Willie gone for John and Adda. Nice rain today. Papa came home today with the ponies.

Stormy day. So many people here to see ponies. One run off. Caught it at Elderton.
27 Sab Lots of people here to day. Sile Baird here. His horse died and Wilson took him to Dixonville and then to Kittanning.

28th M Took the ponies up to Will Browns. Linus and Papa went along.

29th Tu Papa and Mother at Will Browns. Rained. Sold the spotted ponies to Rev Davis.

30th Wed Ada and Mother at Clem Auls for cherries. Sold the sorrel ponies to Rev Jennings.

July 1 Boys cutting wheat at Sam Auls. Mary Work here.


3d Sat All gone to celebrate at Covode but Papa and I. Papa sick. Fine day.

4th Sab A Beautiful day. Mother gone to Mahoning to church. Uncle Jo and Aunt Jemima here.

5th Mo A very wet day. Men all bumming. Ad here this afternoon.

6th Tu Men and boys cutting wheat. Bell and Adda gone for cherries to Susan Sprankles. Rained in the evening.

7 Wed Boys cutting wheat in the hill field. Very fine day. Bell and Tommy gone to Georgeville.

8th Th Finished cutting grain. Hauled in some grain.

9th F Wilson at Frechs. Boys hauling in grain.

10th Linus gone to Indiana. Boys hauling grain.

11th Sab Fine day. Wilson at Oakland at church.

12th Mo Willie going to plow for buckwheat. Linus working corn. Other boys doing something.

13th Tu Willie plowing. Other boys hunting lime Stone. Linus finished corn.

14th W John Rider helping Willie to plow. Rained in afternoon.

15th Th Very warm. Rained some. John Rider here this afternoon. Papa paling the fence.

16th F Willie and John Rider Sowing Buckwheat. Wilson and Papa thrashing rye. Linus at Sam Auls helping at the hay.


18th Sab Ada at Mahoning at church. The rest at Davidsville.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 Mon</td>
<td>Boys mowing. Papa at Davidsville.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 Tue</td>
<td>Boys mowing. Papa and Dick Repine at Davidsville.</td>
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<td>Girls hunting berries.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 Wed</td>
<td>Cutting hay. Digging for lime.</td>
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<td>22 Th</td>
<td>[?] at hay. S. A. Shields here.</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Ada and Zill Shields gone to Jefferson.</td>
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<td>24th Sat</td>
<td>A beautiful clear day. Wilson not at home. Linus at Sam Auls. Willie going to mow.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bell going to Georgeville. Ada at Jefferson.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25th Sab</td>
<td>Boys at church. Bell and Annie at Georgeville at church in afternoon. Ada came</td>
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<td>home this evening.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26th Mo</td>
<td>Ella and Mother at Sprankles. Boys mowing and cutting oats.</td>
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<td>27th Tu</td>
<td>Ada at Frechs. Boys working at hay.</td>
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<td>28 We</td>
<td>Papa gone to Indiana.</td>
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<td>29th Th</td>
<td>Mother at Wortmans and Huffmans.</td>
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<td>30th F</td>
<td>Priscilla Sprankle here and Mead Work came.</td>
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<td>31st</td>
<td>Linus gone to Frostburgh to a picnic. Wilson and Willie working at oats trying</td>
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<td>to finish harvest. Papa gone to Marion. Last day of August 1880 [?].</td>
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<td>August</td>
<td>Boys gone to Bush meeting. Harry Luis and Frank Bell here last night.</td>
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<td>1st Sab</td>
<td>Papa and Linus cutting oats. Wilson gone to Mr. Earharts to work. John and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mother at Georgeville. Rained this evening.</td>
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<td>2d Mon</td>
<td>Wet day. Boys not doing anything particular. Papa and Sam Aul at Smicksburg.</td>
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<td>3d Tu</td>
<td>Still wet. Papa and Sam gone back to Smicksburg. Linus cutting oats for Sam Aul.</td>
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<td>Clearing up this afternoon.</td>
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<td>4th We</td>
<td>Papa, Adda at Smicksburg. Boys digging.</td>
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<td>5th Th</td>
<td>All gone to picnic at Marchand.</td>
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<td>6th Fri</td>
<td>Finished putting in oats. Digging lime.</td>
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<td>7th Sat</td>
<td>All at home. Dident go to church.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Sabb</td>
<td>All at home. Diden go to church.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9th Mo</td>
<td>Digging lime. Linus at home. Dave Allison and Mose Gingrich here for dinner.</td>
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<td>Digging lime. Willie away for coal for Sharrett Sprankle.</td>
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10th Willie going for coal. Papa gone to Smicksburg.
11th W Uncle Fair and Sarah Coulter here. Thunderstorm and rain.
12th Th Papa gone to Smicksburg. Boys at lime.
13th Fr Bought a yoke of oxen from Lewis Brillheart. Thrashing this afternoon with two horses and yoke of oxen.
14th Willie hauling coal for to burn lime.
15th Sab [Blank]
16th Mon Papa got hurt with a bull.
17th Tu Started the cattle this morning. Linus gone along with them.
18th W Papa no better. Lots of people here to see him.
19th Heavy rain. Harman here putting in window and hanging door.
20 Fri Eb Kinter here all day.
21 Sat Grandmother here and lots of other folk.
22 Sab People here all day.
23 Mon Willie went for coal. Linus came home.
24th Papa better. Able to walk a little.
25th We Willie for coal. Other boys at lime.
26th Th Willie for coal. Linus and John at lime.
27th Fi Willie for coal. Linus and John at lime.
28 Sat Linus and Willie gone to camp meeting.
29th Sab Wilson and girls at church.
30th Mon Linus and Willie came home at noon.
31st Tu Boys at lime. John plowing.

Sept 1 Boys still at the lime.
2d Thu Boys and Jack Whittaker at the lime. Doc Laney and family called to see us. Ada at Indiana. Thrashing to day.
3 John and Willie thrashing at Riders. Mary and Ally Nicol here all night.
5th Sab Linus Lewis here all day. Billy Bush here.
6th Mo Boys at the lime. Ebert [?] helping. Wilson went at noon to plow for Ebert.
7th Tu Wilson plowing at Blooses. Boys at lime.
8th We Boys at lime. Ebert helping. Ada at Marchand.
1964

**A FARM FAMILY'S WORLD, 1880**

9th Th
Raining all day. All bumming.

10th Fr
Boys on clearing. Ada came home.

11th Sat
[Blank]

12 Sab
All at church at Davidsville.

13 Mon
Willie on clearing.

14th
John cutting corn.

15th
Papa and Mother at Davidsville. Took 14 chickens up. Weighed 40 lbs.

16th
John at Blooses. Linus and Willie on clearing.

17 Fr

18th Sat
Boys and Papa all on clearing. Bell and Annie gone to Uncle Peter.

20 Sabbath
Adda and Willie at Covode at church. Went to Flemings for dinner. Wilson came home to day.

Mon 21st
Wilson gone back to Docks. George Diven here all night. Rained some today. Boys on the clearing.

Tu 22d
Bell gone up to her Grandmothers with Wilson. Boys on the clearing.

Wed 23
Sowed wheat on clearing.

Th 24

Fr 25th

Sat 26th
Bell went to Davidsville. Stayed all night.

Sabbath
All at church at Davidsville.

Oct [10?] Poleraising at Davidsville.

Oct 11th
School commenced today. Susie Neal teacher.

Oct 14
School went to Punxsutawney fair.

16th
Papa and Annie and I went to Lewises.

17th
Papa and mother at church.

18th
Willie and Linus thrashing rye.

19th
Boys at rye. Wilson taking off apples.

20th
Thrashing wheat with the machine.
21st  Finished the wheat at noon. Wilson, John and Ada went to Brillharts to a husking and quilting. Other Boys cleaning wheat.

26th  Big Convention at Indiana. All went but Adda and three little ones. Rained all day. 22 hundred torch lights at night.

27    We all come home but Linus.

28    Democrat convention.

29    Linus come home.

30    Rained. Boys and Papa started down the creek.

31st  Nice flood. All rafting.