

## JAMES ELDER, PIONEER<sup>1</sup>

JAMES R. E. CRAIGHEAD

**R**ETURNING to my native hills at Elders Ridge, Pennsylvania, in 1931, after an absence of forty years, I was impressed by the need of definitely preserving certain of the traditions of the place. It was clear that unless this were done within the next decade or so, much of the historic material now available in this region could be gathered only with great difficulty, as those of the generation which I represent would, in the course of nature, have passed from the scene, and with them, traditions which some of us heard from the lips of our pioneer ancestors.

With this object in view, arrangements were made to establish headquarters for a local historical center by removing from its original location the little log spring house in which Dr. Alexander Donaldson, founder of Elders Ridge Academy, heard his first classes, and by restoring it as completely as possible on the academy grounds. However, the little building that had stood unobtrusively on the hill slope for almost one hundred years could not stand the "glare of the limelight" in which it found itself. Although the work of reconstruction had been well done, the room suitably furnished with relics and antiques, and a nucleus of old books and manuscripts gathered from the libraries and attics of farmhouses in the community, and although it had just been dedicated with appropriate ceremonies on October 21, 1932, still, only ten days after the dedicatory date, the academy gymnasium burned, and in the heat of the conflagration the newly restored building was completely consumed. The one redeeming feature of the fire was that the contents of the latter were saved.

Effort was again made to establish another historical center, this time in one of the literary "society halls" in the brick academy building

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erected by Dr. Donaldson in 1850. The room was thoroughly reconditioned; hardwood floors were laid; about twelve hundred volumes were collected for a memorial library; gift books from many of the academy alumni were secured; and as many volumes as possible of the libraries of the two literary societies were collected, together with the records of these societies covering the years of their existence. In the cabinets and cases of the room was one of the finest private collections of geological specimens ever gathered in the state of Illinois, and, with it, an array of Indian relics and objects taken from the mounds of that state. Programs of academy events, pictures, paintings, souvenirs, and other objects of historic value of a varied nature were here being collected and marshalled into shape for the use of those, who, in future time, might be interested in matters relating to the pioneer period and to the history of an outstanding school of a previous generation. But, alas, on the night of February 19, 1936, the building was burned to the ground, and with it perished the contents in their entirety.

A third effort is now being made to collect such books and objects as will help preserve the local traditions and meet the needs of the community, and a commendable start has already been made. The aim each time has been to gather from the descendants of as many as possible of the original families such material as might be gleaned directly from their ancestors and to leave it in such shape as to make it available for future use. The effort would naturally chronicle the family incidents of those bearing the names of Barnard, Bell, Boden, Coleman, Craighead, Donaldson, Elder, Ewing, Finley, Fritz, Guthrie, Harbison, Henderson, Henry, Hine, Hood, McComb, McKillip, McLaughlin, McMeans, McNeil, Reeves, Rosensteel, Shearer, Smith, Spalding, Townsend, Watson, Wilson, Wray, and many others whose histories antedate or dovetail into those here mentioned. Were the list to include the names of those students whose lives were largely molded at Elders Ridge Academy, it would be well-nigh interminable.

From all these names, I am selecting one of the pioneer class, James Elder, about whose life certain of the traditions of the locality gather, and these are presented as nearly as possible in the original form in which

they were given to me. This naturally calls to mind the old home in which I was born and reared and which, after more than one hundred years, is still standing strong and durable. In that old house are to be found two rooms of more than ordinary interest to the few remaining members of the original group that once occupied them. The one is the living room where the family assembled for their "state dinners"; where they gathered on Sabbath evening and recited the Westminster Shorter Catechism and sang to the accompaniment of our little melodeon; where on week-day evenings, during the winter time, neighbors often came and sat in the friendly circle about the blazing fire while Baldwin apples were passed; and where at other hours much of the study and reading of the family was done, by the light of the shaded kerosene lamp. The other room of happy memory is the large and cheerful one occupied by my grandparents of sainted memory during their sunset years. Here before the open fireplace, it was my frequent privilege to sit in a little brown chair at the feet of my charming grandmother and hear her musical voice tell what a boy of seven or eight delights to hear—the tales of Indian life and the actual experiences of pioneer days.

A very remarkable story-teller was this dear grandmother, Julia Ann Sherer, wife of David Elder, a woman well versed in Shakespeare, Milton, and other poets, and a lover of flowers and children. She told with relish of the days of her young womanhood and of the scenes and experiences that most entranced the young boy who sat by her knee in open-mouthed attention. Even yet one can almost hear her say:

"Tonight, I am going to tell you about your great grandfather, James Elder, and how he came to this neighborhood and settled here. He belonged to a family who came from the eastern part of the state back in 1786. The Revolutionary War had ended and the people were turning their faces more and more to the West and taking up land among these hills. The good farm land along the main highways had been claimed for the most part, and now the settlers were pushing further back into the country. All this southern section of Indiana County was then a part of Westmoreland County and from the wind-fall on the hill here above the house, as far as one could look in any direction across the country, there

was scarcely a clearing to be seen. It was all one great stretch of forest land. Your great-grandfather's people formerly lived in the Paxtang Valley near Harrisburg. His father, Robert Elder, was a cousin of the Reverend John Elder, the "Fighting Parson" of Revolutionary fame, who made up a company of soldiers out of the men in his congregation and led them against the British under the name of the Paxtang Rangers. They were a pretty wild lot but he generally kept them well in hand.

"The Robert Elder family, of which your great-grandfather was the eldest son, fitted up their panniers and saddlebags, for the horses they were to ride or lead across the mountains, with what they were likely to need in the new country. Then the father, Robert, and his wife and their grown children, James, David, Robert, and Ann, climbed into their saddles, rode out of the valley, crossed the Susquehanna River, and were soon in Carlisle, ready for their western trip.

"Father Elder used to tell his children in after years of the things that impressed him as a young man when he made the trip. Everywhere along the way, the travel was to the West. Hundreds of pack horses were to be found in Carlisle being stocked with merchandise for the Monongahela country, mainly iron and salt, although goods of every description were being transported. Families of all sorts and conditions were pressing toward the West, seeking new homes. The men were guiding their pack-horse or wagon trains up long, steep slopes, through deep ruts on either side. The women and children, carrying bundles, labored up the soggy steeps on foot, and often some mother or daughter might be seen carrying a precious spinning wheel to save it from ruin in the jolting wagon.

"At night the travelers slept around their fires in the open or lay on skins or straw mattresses on the floors of the wilderness hotels. Only the barest necessities and most precious possessions could be brought along, as the loads of the pack horses would naturally have to be limited to about two hundred pounds, while the belongings in the larger Conestoga wagons were generally of only two or three tons weight.

"It required twenty days or more to make the trip from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, as the rate of travel by pack-horse train in the mountainous

regions was about fifteen miles a day, and, with the wagons, a much shorter distance. The cost of carrying a ton of merchandise from the eastern city to Fort Pitt varied from \$70 to \$125, and in muddy seasons the price was two or three times greater. Salt, which had to be transported with the greatest of care, as sweating horses and drenching rains might dissolve the cargo, cost \$2.50 a bushel for moving it a hundred miles westward.

"Grandfather Robert Elder brought his family by the southern route, passing through Bedford and Ligonier into the wilds of Westmoreland County. I imagine they crossed the Kiskiminnetas River at the mouth of Black Legs Creek, where there was a bare half dozen buildings at that time. They then came out to these hills by way of Robinson's blockhouse, north of Saltsburg, where possibly your great-grandfather saw for the first time his future wife, Margaret Robinson.

"The traveling was very slow, for the road lay, for the most part, through virgin forest, with only an occasional clearing here and there through the six miles that lay between the blockhouse and this place.

"Finally they arrived here only a few rods from the place where we are now sitting. A big hickory tree, which had been splintered by lightning, stood close by the spot where they stopped. Here they unloaded their horses and tethered them where they had some chance for forage, built their fires in preparation for the evening meal, tied together the tops of some near-by bushes, and over them spread their blankets. Then, raking together a mass of leaves under their improvised canopy and spreading more blankets on the leaves, they were ready for supper and rest. However, as the evening deepened the horses began to show signs of unrest and they were brought in closer to the camp and finally tied by strong ropes to the trees. The cause for this unrest was soon apparent, for as night settled down the camping family could see by the light of their fire the glaring eyes of timber wolves here and there in the surrounding darkness.

"One of the Elder boys took his rifle, which he had placed conveniently near, and shot toward the place where the prowling animals were thickest, and the whole pack scurried off a little distance, but soon they

came back bolder and more aggressive than before. The horses again began to paw and snort in fear. A second shot from the rifle seemed less effective than the first in driving off the prowlers. Then father Elder, who was a good woodsman, planned that rather than build up the camp fire into a roaring blaze, he would try an experiment with the lightning-shattered tree trunk. He quickly crept from the blanket tent, pulled down one of the larger white splints, and let it fly back among its fellows with a great rattling noise that sent the wolves speeding off in several directions to return no more for the rest of the night.

"The next morning, grandfather Robert made a trip through the woods growing on the three nearest round tops and came back to tell that he had found limestone at several places, that there were two good springs within a stone's throw of where they were camping, one on either side of the watershed; that some of the chestnut trees he had seen on his walk were six or seven feet in diameter; and that all these signs made the place where they were camping just as good for a homestead as any they might hope to find.

"So the axes were taken from the packs; before noon they had erected a temporary shack with forked corner posts on which they laid the poles for the framework; and with a roof made of bark, brush, and leaves they made ready their primitive home. With other young forest trees they made a strong stockade for their horses before nightfall and so prepared for the felling of the larger trees and the squaring of the timber for their new home on the following day. This building was put up on the ground which is now our garden and loopholes were cut in the logs of the second story, in case of attack by the Indians. Before the summer was at an end the blockhouse had been completed and a clearing made along the watershed.

"Grandfather Robert Elder died in 1790 and grandmother survived him by some twenty years. Meantime, other settlers had come into the country and located among the hills, about the time that grandfather passed away. The Ebenezer Church had been organized and his body was buried at this place, eight miles distant from his home at the Ridge. Father Elder was elected one of the original members of the session. He

was a large muscular man, full of courage and capable of wonderful endurance. It is said that with considerable ease he could pick up his wife and set her upon a horse; and yet, notwithstanding his great physical strength, he was preëminently a man of peace. He permitted no quarrelling on his premises and never hesitated to interfere when men sought to fight and abuse one another, according to the brutal custom of the times.

"He was a firm advocate of temperance, as was his father before him, and after his father's death his Uncle John Robinson and he were the first in their community to banish the whiskey jug from the logrolling, the barn raising, and the harvest field. This was at a time when it required immeasurable courage to take such a stand, for those living up to such convictions were regarded as mean and stingy. The distilling of whiskey was a main source of revenue at that time, but even so, the Elders took a decided stand for temperance and their families were total abstainers.

"This young giant of the forest land made an excellent pioneer. He seemed to be wholly without fear and only on one occasion admitted that he was frightened. This was when he had gone one day in early winter to a neighbor's home to assist in butchering. Delayed until late in the afternoon, he started through the forest to his home as evening came on. Wolves trailed him and were soon about him, snarling and howling. No doubt he thought of his experience at the base of the hickory tree shattered by lightning when he drove away the prowlers. But the case was different now. The smell of blood was on his clothing and once a wolf scents this his lust for prey seems to cast out fear. Your great grandfather carried a long handspike and with this he threshed the young trees by his path, beat upon the trunks of the trees, and again put terror into the hearts of his prowling enemies and escaped.

"In 1792, he married Martha Robinson. Six sons and two daughters were born to them. The sons were Robert, David, Joshua, John, James, and Thomas. The daughters were Mary and Rachel. The struggle for existence at that time was hard but the line of the clearing was extended and the stumpy fields brought forth abundantly. On May 26, 1812, the mother died, and before another year was ended, the father, who since

the death of his wife had managed to keep the home together, 'fell on sleep,' and the care of the family passed to the boys who were still in their teens."

Thus ended my grandmother's narrative. Last week I visited the well-kept country cemetery at Ebenezer, Pennsylvania. There, near to the shaft that marks the resting place of John Montgomery, who served as a member of the life guard of Washington from 1776 until the end of the Revolutionary War, is the simple stone of this other Revolutionary hero, which carries this inscription:

"In memory of James Elder who died April 23rd., 1813, in the 50th. year of his age. "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the children of God."