THE BACKWOODSMAN ERA IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA
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The term "backwoodsman" has been given a broad connotation throughout this paper. Perhaps in no other place have the lives of men and women been so closely connected as upon the American frontier. Mutual dependence between the sexes was the keynote, for the vigorous life demanded that they pool their energies and their resources if they hoped to survive.

The scope of this paper is of necessity wide because of the nature of the material dealt with. The aim has been to present a panorama of the life that the backwoodsmen lived from day to day, crossing the formidable Alleghenies by pack horse or Conestoga wagon; clearing a tiny patch of land; planting the first crops; building a roughhewn log cabin; sleeping after their labors in a makeshift bed or before the fire with insect-infested hides for blankets; making their clothes of deerskin or homespun; eating the proverbial "hog and hominy" from wooden trenchers and hollow gourds; spending long hours of back-breaking toil in the fields under a sweltering summer sun; childishly delighted with their infrequent weddings and house raisings; fighting with their own hardy strength and ineffective remedies the ravages of disease; and continually exposed to the scalping knives of the Indians.

These first home-seekers who followed the old military roads hewn out by Braddock and Forbes into the Ohio country were for the most part single young men traveling alone or in groups. These adventurous youths usually worked as trappers and hunters, and then, after choosing a desirable piece of land, returned to the eastern settlements, oftentimes married a childhood sweetheart, and started westward again, this time to establish a home. Married men were also found in this vanguard, but

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 28, 1940. At the time of writing, Mr. Bryce, a teacher of history in the North Fayette Township High School at Imperial, was doing graduate work at the University of Pittsburgh. — Ed.
they too traveled alone and did not return eastward for the women and children until the Indian disturbances that attended the French and Indian wars had subsided.²

The real backwoods homes began with the migration of families to the West, however. Such a journey was full of perils for all, but especially for the women and children. The paths they followed were frequently barely passable, sometimes lying along the brink of precipices and elsewhere frequently flooded by swollen spring streams, all of which had to be forded. At first wagon travel was an impossibility, so pack horses were used as a means of transportation for many years. The families usually considered the long journey westward as one that would be made only once in a lifetime, and so, “burning their bridges behind them,” they either sold or gave away most of their household possessions, retaining only the barest necessities.

Over these perilous highways wound caravans of families bound for the trans-Appalachian country. They usually had at least a vague idea of where they planned to settle. Perhaps they planned to locate close to brothers or friends who had gone before and sent back glowing accounts of the abundance and richness of the cheap land; others journeled toward a “garden spot” already selected upon preliminary tours by fathers or elder sons. These eager pioneers traveled in a variety of ways. Some used wagons and carts; others continued to travel by pack horse; the poorest undertook the long journey on foot. An amusing incident is related concerning a German family which, arriving in Philadelphia practically penniless and with a flock of children, commenced the long trip west on foot. They put the two youngest babies in a tub and each parent seized a handle, while the other children marched in front of them, heaped to their utmost capacity with household goods.³

³ Charles McKnight, Our Western Border, 650 (Cincinnati and Chicago, 1876); Riegal, America Moves West, 701; Morris Birkbeck, Notes on a Journey in America, 32 (London, 1818); F. Cuming, Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country through the States of Ohio and Kentucky, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., Early Western Travels, 4:227 (Cleveland, 1904).
Many of the travelers slept in their wagons along the side of the road, and from numerous heaps of ashes noted by contemporary travelers, it is evident that the practice was quite common. Highwaymen of the worst caliber were not infrequent. In addition, the women and children, especially, needed shelter indoors after a toilsome day in the open. Often times the party stayed at cabins, where they were treated kindly as a general rule. Beds were spread out on the floor for the mothers and the younger children, while the men usually slept in the wagons to protect them from sneak thieves.4

Taverns were also popular resting places for the wayfarers. The first of these public houses or “ordinaries” on the frontier were located along the Braddock and Forbes roads. The families slept upon the floors of the barrooms, wrapped in their own blankets. A typical tavern scene is recorded in the journal of Arthur Lee: “The 1st December [1784] brought us across Turtle Creek, through its rich bottoms, and the Bullpen Swamp [now part of Wilkinsburg], to Mr. Elliot’s, when ourselves, our servants, several wagoners, his wife, and eight children, and a young daughter, all undressed and went to bed on the floor together, in a miserable log-house.”5

Although the hardships of travel weighed heavily upon these families, they nevertheless found pleasure in the beauty of the country along their way. Winding around an abrupt promontory, they saw the morning mist, like gossamer, lying in the valley far below them. If they traveled in the spring, the scenery was extraordinarily beautiful. The banks of the swiftly racing mountain streams were carpeted with thick green grass and spring beauties, while the milky white, pale rose, and soft purples of the rhododendrons mingled in prodigal profusion with the creamy pink of the mountain laurel among the crevices of the rocks.

If they came in the fall, they did not enjoy the journey nearly as much. As they crossed the crests of the mountains sudden sleet storms chilled them to the bone. After they began to descend, heavy snows, which had already fallen, partly obliterated the roads, and the bushes

flanking the paths were bent over with snow, obstructing travel greatly. The little caravans often plodded along in the face of an icy mountain wind with their shoes soaking and their clothing wet to the knees.\(^6\)

And so the emigrants traveled on through the early spring and summer and into the late fall, often miserable, but always looking toward the land beyond the mountains, the Utopia of their dreams.

The typical backwoods home was a small cabin built of roughhewn logs on fertile soil close to a spring or brook.\(^7\) In locating their homes the backwoodsmen were guided by the tops of the ridges and the watercourses. Hence, a great number of farms in the western parts of Pennsylvania and Virginia bore a striking resemblance to an amphitheater. The buildings occupied a low position, and the tops of the surrounding hills were the boundaries of the tract to which the family cabin belonged.

The cabin itself was a simple affair, the whole of which could be constructed with an axe and an auger. Sometimes a hammer taken from the doubletree of the wagon was pressed into service. With these crude mechanical tools the amateur architects reared a house that lasted them from fifteen to twenty years. Many of the cabins were built square with the sun as a means of telling time, for when the rays of the sun fell directly over the doorway the settlers knew that it was high noon. The cabin was a small dwelling seldom larger than twenty by thirty feet, and was one and one-half stories high. The interspaces of ten logs were stuffed with rails, calked with common clay, and daubed with mud. Frequently the work was done quite haphazardly and as a consequence the cabin was considerably cold. In the winter the roof was usually covered with clapboards, which resembled unshaven barrel staves. These were held securely by placing heavy poles across them. The open space between the roof and the half-story was known as the "cockloft" and was used as a sleeping room for the older children and chance travelers.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) John S. Van Voorhis, *The Old and New Monongahela*, 8 (Pittsburgh, 1893).

The cabin was lighted by one window, which was made by sawing into a log, placing sticks across the opening, and then pasting a piece of paper greased with lard in the aperture. This, to quote one pioneer, "shed a beautiful and mellow light across the cabin when the sun shone through it." Light also entered by the door, the crevices, and the chimney. The latter occupied one end of the room, opposite the windows. It was built of mud, sticks, and "niggerhead" stones to the point of the roof and from there was carried upward by mud and faggots. The fireplace was ample and was lined with both stones and clay in order to make it relatively noncombustible. The floors consisted of heavy puncheon planks made by splitting logs to a thickness of two or three inches and then hewing them on both sides with a broad axe. The only entrance to the house was by the huge door hewn of rough puncheon slabs, which hung on wooden hinges and was opened from the outside by lifting the wooden bolt with a buckskin latchstring. Thus the latchstring being "hung out" was a token of welcome in the backwoods. Steps were occasionally made of the "loop" that had been cut out for the window openings.9

In the early stages of backwoods life, the building of chimneys and the laying of floors were often postponed to a future day, because all the backwoodsman's energies were needed for clearing the land and planting the first crops. Frequently, many of these luxuries were never completed and many a cabin had only a hard-beaten earthen floor and a hole in the roof through which the smoke could escape.10

In these crude dwellings, set in the midst of the great primeval forests of the West, the hardy backwoodsmen began a new life that was destined to change not only their own lives, but also the whole future course of American history.

The interior of the cabin was truly the domain of the backwoods wife and mother. Here she toiled endlessly, amidst the crudest equipment, to

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10 Harris, in Early Western Travels, 3:15.
make a home for the family and to give them the barest necessities of life. No ideal of conduct is more beautiful than that embodied in the life of the frontier woman who, leaving the security and the conventional life of the older settlements far behind, set her steps to those of her husband. She came to the western border "young and raw, and found her neighbors to be other girls as inexperienced." The woman was little more than a girl, having married at fifteen or sixteen. But she accepted her lot uncomplainingly and was a real helpmate to her husband. She cooked his meals, bore and nursed his numerous children, shared his hardships, and encouraged him to remain in his new home after the corn crop had failed or when he shook with the dreaded ague. Today she was a seamstress; tomorrow, a doctor and a nurse; the next day, a teacher; or again, a worker in the harvest field by her husband's side.

The furnishings of the cabin home were chiefly the product of the father's skill with the axe and the auger, with the possible exception of some grand old chests or a bureau carried laboriously over the mountains from the East. Wild cherry, oak, and black walnut woods were chiefly used as they were the most durable. The first article of furniture to be made was the lone bedstead, which stood against one wall of the cabin. This was sometimes fastened to the wall, but usually it was constructed by driving forks into the ground, laying poles across them, and covering the entire structure with a mattress of oak leaves or of cat-tails stripped and dried in the sun. The tables, which occupied the opposite side of the room, were oftentimes no more than a couple of clapboards resting on wooden pins driven into the wall. Occasionally, these were a little more elaborate, however. An amusing anecdote, illustrative both of the meager utilities and the resourcefulness of the backwoodsman, is related by a traveler who journeyed through the Western Reserve during the latter years of the eighteenth century. An ingenious host at one of the stopping places, upon finding that there was not sufficient room for all the party at the family tables, unhinged the door of the cabin and used it for the same purpose to the great satisfaction of all. Benches and three-legged stools were made of puncheon with the legs set neatly in

the auger holes. Four-legged stools were practically unknown as "four legs of anything could not all reach the floor at the same time."¹²

The glow of the leaping flames of the pine logs in the fireplace stretched the length of the room. They threw both the chimney and the shovel and tongs on the hearth into bold relief, played fitfully on the wooden bowls and "noggins" on the rustic table, and lit up the strings of dried apples, cubes of pumpkin, and small, greasy bags of seeds hanging from the rafters. They cast a half-glow on the clapboard shelves about the fireplace, piled high with pots, grubbing hoes, harness, and pieces of broken log chains; showed redly on the hunting shirts and bedgowns that hung on wooden pegs about the wall or swayed from a string of buffalo hide; and touched the household rifle and shot-pouch that were "suspended to a joist by two small forks, or buck's horns." Perhaps it threw fantastic reflections on a battered looking-glass hanging beside the door, which, being a highly prized curiosity in a backwoods community, was decorated by the children of the fortunate household with wreathes of colored birds' eggs and strings of bright green peppers.¹³

The cabin held relatively little comfort. The size of the families made it necessary for the younger children to sleep on the floor before the open fire with bear, buffalo, and deer skins for coverings. Their older brothers and sisters climbed by wooden pegs to the cockloft "into which the moon and stars peeped and all the winds and storms of heaven blew." There, among the suspended slabs of bacon, kegs of rancid fat, piles of dried corn, and bunches of herbs, they lay down on beds of straw. If the mother was an unusually industrious woman, "cadders" were used for the coverings because the frontier housewife soon found "that to make rag-carpetings ... and to sew two breadths of the proper


length together was a good substitute for blankets, especially if there could be here and there a rag of red flannel, even if the rest were but tow-linen rags.” None of the beds was totally free from fleas and bed-bugs, and rats scurried about unhampered in the loft. There was warmth only close to the roaring open fire, but much of the heat from this was carried up the chimney on blustery nights and oftentimes the winds, changing suddenly, sent the smoke billowing down the chimney in thick clouds. In summer the dingy rooms grew stuffy, the odor of frying grease hung in the stagnant air, and swarms of gnats and other insects buzzed unhampered through the cabin.  

The woman’s cooking equipment was extremely primitive. When she wished meal for johnnycake or corn pone, she was forced to grind it on the hominy block or in a handmill. The actual cooking was, of course, done over the open fire. Only the greatest necessities were brought over the mountains. These together with a few clumsily homemade utensils comprised the frontier woman’s sole culinary equipment. Meats were of necessity either boiled or fried, although occasionally a joint of beef or a brace of wild turkeys was suspended in front of the fire on a strong cord and roasted slowly. Vegetables and stews were boiled in an iron pot held by a crane or a hook fastened in the chimney. The daily baking was done in a “Dutch oven” with coals heaped upon the lid. Biscuits made with soda extracted from burning corncobs were baked in a three-legged “spider,” in which the cornmeal was molded into johnnycakes and baked on a slanting board before the fire. Sometimes an article to be baked was packed in cabbage and pushed directly into the coals; when johnnycakes were baked this way they were referred to as “ashcakes.”

Breakfast usually consisted of hog and hominy accompanied by johnny-

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14 Finley, Autobiography, 73; W. Faux, Journal of a Tour of the United States, in Thwaites, Early Western Travels, 2:286 (Cleveland, 1904); Albert, History of the County of Westmoreland, 157; McKnight, Pioneer History of Jefferson County, 225; “Our Cabin,” in The American Pioneer, 2:446; George Henry Loskiel, Extempore on a Wagon; a Metrical Narrative of a Journey from Bethlehem, Pa., to the Indian Town of Goshen, Ohio, in the Autumn of 1803, 12 (Lancaster, Pa., 1887); F. C. Johnson, The Pioneer Women of Wyoming, 23 (Wilkesbarre, Pa., 1901).

cakes, corn pone, and, occasionally, buckwheat cakes. The food was served in wooden bowls and eaten from "trenchers" or "noggins." When the latter were scarce, gourds and hard-shelled squashes were resorted to. Some cutlery had been brought from the East, and wooden knives, forks, and spoons were made. But many a scalping knife or clasp knife was pressed into use at the table. In fact for some years the backwoodsmen objected strenuously to the introduction of earthenware complaining that it dulled and often broke their hunting knives. Milk and water were the universal drinks. Coffee and tea were rarely used, partly because they were hard to get and partly because these same husky backwoodsmen declared that they "didn’t stick to the ribs" and they considered themselves disgraced by showing a fondness for such "slops."

Supper (the backwoodsman often had no lunch) was almost invariably of mush and milk with johnnycakes, when meal was plentiful. When it was not, "pumpkin bread" was eaten with almost as much avidity. There were various methods of eating this backwoods dish. Sometimes a pot of mush and milk was placed on the table and all the family served themselves from this common dish. At other times a large dish of plain mush was placed in the center of the table and each member of the family dipped into it from time to time, placing each spoonful in his individual noggin filled to the brim with creamy milk. When milk was scarce, the mush was frequently eaten with sweetened water, molasses, bear oil, or fried-meat gravy.

The mother not only toiled daily to feed her hungry family but she also spent long hours over the roaring fire, preparing foods for the dreaded winter season. There were venison and beef to be dried; fat from bear and possum to be rendered into oil and stored away in deerskin bags; corncob molasses to boil; sassafras, sage, and mint to brew into teas; corn, pumpkins, and squashes to store away; and fruits to be dried.

The coming of summer was welcomed by these border cooks, for then the wild fruits could be utilized in any number of ways. From the time the first wild strawberries appeared on the bald knobs of the hillsides, and until the last chestnut fell, gay little excursions sallied out into the woods on summer days to gather the whortleberries, gooseberries,
blackberries, and May apples that abounded along the small streams and in the deep hollows. In the early fall wild grapes, cherries, plums, pungent little crabapples, black haws, paw paws, and thick carpets of nuts lured the frontiersmen again into the forests. These expeditions were always undertaken under the watchful eyes of the younger backwoodsmen. The deadly copperheads and rattlesnakes lurked constantly under the thick brush of the berry bushes; wolves and panthers slunk from tree to tree; and at any moment the bloodcurdling Indian warwhoop might sweep across the hills.  

But cooking was only one phase of the backwoods woman’s life. Her family must be clothed as well as fed and practically every thread of these garments was of the woman’s own making. Every family had a flax patch that the woman had helped to plant and to harvest. This flax she carded, spun into thread, and then wove into cloth. Every cabin sounded with the softly whirring wheel and the rhythmic thud of the loom. The backwoods woman did not have time to make the delicate and intricate waxwork samplers and painted silk petticoats that her eastern sisters delighted in. During the summer months the industrious mother wove her flax and wool into linsey-woolsey, the warmest and most substantial cloth she could make to withstand the cold winters. But when the flax crop failed or the sheep were destroyed by wolves, she was forced to resort to “nettle bark” or “buffalo wool” for her supply of “linsey” or else the family were clothed in buckskin garments. Sometimes pure yarn was spun but this was very difficult to soften. The method generally employed was to place the cloth on the floor and throw a quantity of homemade soapsuds and warm water over it. The men of the household and any male visitors then sat down upon stools, caught hold of a rope that had been tied in a circle, and began to kick the wool or flannel with their bare feet. When the good wife thought it to be sufficiently “fulled” or softened, the men were released from this task, which, though tiresome, was nevertheless a mirthful one, for oftentimes one of the party slipped from his seat into the soapy heap, amidst

16 Doddridge, Notes, 72, 73, 88, 89; “Our Cabin,” in The American Pioneer, 2:452; McKnight, Pioneer History of Jefferson County, 228; Riegal, America Moves West, 73; Harris, Journal, in Early Western Travels, 3:358.
the loud guffaws of his companions. The cloth was usually allowed to retain its natural color, the most common being "sheeps' grey" made from the wool of both black and white sheep. Occasionally, however, the housewife gave her artistic sense free rein and she colored the yarn with dyes made from the roots, leaves, barks, and flowers of the woods and meadows. During the long confining winter months the housewife prepared the lightweight cloths for the summer clothing. Tow and linen cloths were the most popular, and they took the place of the muslin and calico of a later day.  

But the woman's work was only beginning after the yarn was dyed and spun. There yet remained the task of sewing it into the finished garment. From the linsey-woolsey the frontier woman fashioned for herself and her daughters the usual bedgowns, heavy baize dresses for winter, and petticoats.

For her husband and sons she made the indispensable fringed hunting shirts, which were loose frocks with bell-like sleeves and which reached to the thighs. They were made of linsey, coarse linen, and deerskin. Leggings, breeches, and jeans were fashioned of the same materials, while sweaters were cut from flannel. Buckskin overalls and caps made of wool and the pelts of rabbits, beavers, and woodchucks, with flaps to protect the ears, completed the backwoodsman's wardrobe. Buckskin was most commonly used for garments because of its resistance to nettles, brier scratches, snake bites, and chilling cold. The clothing made of buckskin usually fitted loosely and many a hearty laugh resounded around the hunting campfire when some mischievous companion suddenly pressed his neighbor's pants close to his legs, causing the victim of the joke to leap about thinking himself on fire. The babies in pioneer settlements also had to share in wearing homespun. Mrs. Alice Morse Earle relates the following story, which is typical of backwoods conditions: "When the grandmother rode out some eighty miles to see her


18 Doddridge, Notes, 91; McKnight, Pioneer History of Jefferson County, 119; Johnson, The Pioneer Women of Wyoming, 30; Duncan, "Old Settlers' Papers," 391.
grandchild, she shed bitter tears at beholding the child, but a few months old, clad in a grey woolen homespun slip with an apron of blue-and-white checked linen. The mother, a backwood’s lass, had dressed the infant according to the fashions to which she was naturally accustomed.”

The seamstresses’ tools were very crude. They cut out the jackets and leggings with a butcher knife, used an awl for a needle, and deer sinews for thread.

A glance into the interior of a backwoods cabin at night would show what is, perhaps, after all, the ideal house. Every member of the family was busy at some homely task. The father proudly exhibited a pair of newly completed moccasins, stuffed with deer’s hair and oak leaves, a primitive makeshift for socks. The eldest son bent low over a pair of half-finished “shoepacks” made of leather tanned in the family vat. Small wonder that he worked with such swiftness, for after they had been blackened with soot and greased with lard, he could “cut a fine caper,” indeed, at the next “corn-huskin’.” If it were near Christmas, however, he was busy carving the hickory and slippery elm bark boxes, which were cut in oval shapes and, after being ornamented with pen-knife carvings and wild flowers, were presented with much “toe-scrapings” to some backwoods maiden. The mother’s gnarled fingers were busy at knitting woolen mittens, or starting stockings on crude wooden frames, while the little girls sat at her feet weaving baby cradles out of hickory twigs. The young boys were always especially active during the long winter evenings. There were corn to shell, tobacco to twist and stem, rye straw to be woven into hats, and turnips to scrape. If it were spring, the woman and her daughters were busy making brooms of corn straw, with handles of birch or ash, or weaving willow baskets. The boys fashioned “sifters” for their mothers, which were made of deerskin stretched parchment-like over a wooden loop and perforated with a hot wire. Outside the open cabin door, in the gathering dusk, the father and the older sons put the finishing touches to the season’s supply of “gims,” the backwoods substitute for barrels. These were made of hollow trees,

cut to the desired size, with a round piece of puncheon pinned on, or fitted into one end. Later in the evening, behind the securely barred cabin door, there would surely be the sound of whetting steel, for scalping knives and tomahawks had to be kept keen-tempered for the marauding Indians who would come with the first winds of spring.\textsuperscript{20}

Within the general course of this paper it has been necessary to eliminate much significant material. Little or nothing has been said of such backwoods superstitions as sinister sounds, weather signs, omens, and dreams. Likewise, the religious and ethical phase of backwoods life with its circuit-rider preachers, early camp-meetings and revivals, and the slow but gradual establishment of law and order have not been considered. In regard to the prevalent diseases, their rather primitive remedies, and the earliest backwoods doctors and their many-varied treatments much material may be obtained by means of a somewhat lengthier treatment than that afforded by this paper. Then too, such interesting and descriptive episodes of backwoods social life as logrollings, corn huskings, "schnitzens," kissing parties and weddings, and the more prosaic, but withal fundamental, tasks of primitive farming and hunting have been given but scant treatment in the course of this paper. Suffice it to say that every one of these factors played a most conspicuous and important role in the ever-unfolding drama of a backwoods environment.

Today the rude cabins have given way to fine homes, church bells have taken the place of the Indian scalp-yell, and the narrow wilderness trails have become great highways leading to all parts of the American nation. We who look back upon the American backwoodsman, however, see something that is both finer and greater than a rude log cabin raised in the wilderness. Though the walls he built for his family and for himself have long since crumbled, the symbol that this same backwoodsman has erected lives on eternally in the hearts and in the minds of the entire American people.

\textsuperscript{20} Finley, \textit{Autobiography}, 70; Doddridge, \textit{Notes}, 114, 115; Richardson Wright, \textit{Hawkers \& Walkers in Early America}, 50, 63, 64 (Philadelphia, 1927); "Our Cabin," in \textit{The American Pioneer}, 2:750.