

LIFE IN NORTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA EIGHTY YEARS AGO

NELLIE SUYDAM COWLEY¹

IN 1851 Robert Cooper Gordon began a "Book of Reference." At that time he was living on a farm of a hundred and seventy acres near Utica, Venango County, Pennsylvania, which his father, John Gordon, had bought from a Revolutionary soldier, Major Reynolds. Later Robert Gordon bought a partnership in a store at New Lebanon, Mercer County.

At first the book was used chiefly to put down business transactions and to keep a list of bank notes received, the names of the men from whom he got the notes, and the dates. So we read:

"C. Lafayette Bank of Cincinnati, 7456, Nov. 27, 1848, 5.00."

"D. 6439, Bank of Upper Canada, Toronto, 2 Oct. 1850, 10.00."

"A. No. 3663, Chautauqua County Bank, Jamestown, New York, Oct. 25, 1849, 10.00."

Bills often had some private mark, usually on one of the upper corners. The reason for making such careful memoranda on the notes can be seen in a later entry:

"Apr. 4, '53. W. Russell gave me 5 dol. for a counterfeit bill which I returned."

Some of the business transactions were so complicated that it is no wonder they had to be put down in writing. One can picture the long, leisurely conversations necessary to arrange the intricate details, the two men standing on the plank porch of some country store, or in barns piled high with fragrant hay, or sitting on their horses where they chanced to meet under the maples on some country road. Here is one:

¹ Mrs. Cowley, now a resident of Glendora, California, is a member of the National Writers Club and a contributor of articles and poetry to various well-known periodicals and newspapers. She would welcome information as to her great-great-grandfather's name and the part of Scotland he came from. She writes: "My mother thought, but did not have positive proof, that he was Samuel Gordon, who took up land in Franklin Township, Westmoreland County, February 16, 1785. His son was John Gordon, whose second wife was Isabel McMasters, daughter of John Riddle."—*Ed.*

"Apr. 1, '53. I bought John Duff Land 25 acres & Allowance for 350.00 dollars. Paid him 75 dollars in cash and agreed to pay J. Muse & Co. 143.92 cents to pay Duff, 15 dollars in grain, one Saddle, Bridle, Martingales & robe for 11.00\$ and give P. K. Muse a credit for 7.75\$ and the balance 97.50 to be paid in goods in Eight months or as soon as demanded. Duff & Bruce are to build a good fence on the south end of New rails and a deed to be made within 2½ years."

The "allowance," whatever that was, must have brought up the price on this piece of land, for other pieces sold at a much lower rate: "Feb. 18, '51. Sold my land that I bought of Murphy's to Robert Dilley at four dollars per acre, 5 in hand & seventy he to pay by the middle of May and the balance, 25, in one year from this date, all in Cash." Other farm land sold at from eight to ten dollars per acre.

Horses and oxen were relatively high, one horse being sold at seventy dollars and one at eighty-five, while Grandfather Gordon purchased "one yoke oxen at 90 dollars, one yoke \$68, one for 50, one for \$100." Sheep were bought at "160 cents per head" in 1851, and "244 cents per head" and "275 cents per head" in 1853. Cows were bought for eleven and twelve dollars a head and sold for fifteen and sixteen.

Regular farm help got fifty cents a day and harvest hands seventy-five cents. Girls doing general housework received a dollar to a dollar and a quarter a week.

Considerable business was still carried on by barter: "Apr. 23, '51. Went to Franklin. Took 15 bushels wheat. Traded 2¾ bushels to J. Adams for goods. Gave 12 bushels to Mr. Lindsay for one Lapane [or Lapave] watch which he insures to keep good time for 1 year. 1 peck for fixing Rebecca's watch. Bought one pair shoes at auction at 87 cents. Bought 2 tin buckets at 63 cents, Cash."

"Feb'y. 1, '51. Bought of Mr. Grove 6½ yds . . . Calico at 18¾ per yard. Gave sheepskin, 50 cents & agree to pay the balance in flour at 2½ per pound."

Butter sold at twelve and a half cents a pound and a cowhide for a dollar and a half. Dry goods were rather high, comparatively, for satinet was "75 C per yard," and a "Black silk kerchief," one dollar, but meals were low. "Aug. 30, '53. Went to Mercer as delegate to a Whig convention. Paid 37 cents for horse feed and Dinner . . . June

1, '54. Paid 62½ cents for supper, Bed and horses in Barn" at Franklin, Pennsylvania.

Other prices were: "Jan. 31, '51. Paid 5 cents postage on letter. . . . Feb. 7, '51. Went to Heister's Coal Bank. Got 17 bushels Coal. Paid 68 cents Cash. . . . Mar. 20, '51. Gave the postboy 25 cents which pays up to June next. . . . Mar. 25, '51. Stopt at Middletown. Got 1 shoe set on Mike and paid A. Dunn 6 cents for it. . . . July 25, '51. Bought 2 Tablecloths from an Irishman. Paid him 3 dollars in silver." But in these days of high hospital bills perhaps one of the most interesting entries to young parents would be that of "Nov. 4, '51. Wife had a daughter about 2 o'clock. . . . I paid the Dr. 3 dollars in silver."

I almost hesitate to record the following two entries in these days when millions and billions are tossed around so lavishly that any sum with only six figures looks small, but here they are, although I fear they will brand my grandfather forever:

"Jan. 24, '51. Went to J. Nesbit, Esq. at night. Horse got loose, ran home, broke halter & lost 1 shoe. . . . Jan. 25, '51. Went back to look for lost shoe. Found it and one other Shoe."

This is a shameful confession and yet may not such thrift and attention to detail on the part of men of those days have been the foundation for the following entries:

"Apr. 23, '51. Paid the Treasurer 753 Cents County and State tax in full for 1851 [on about a hundred and seventy acres of farm land] and 76 for J. Cooper, 56 for Wm. Gordon. . . . Dec. 30, '51. Paid J. Nesbit 232 Cents, my school tax in full."

And still an almost 1941 note creeps in on October 20, 1853: "Went to Mercer to attend a meeting to protest county Bonds." Alas! His descendants have been protesting ever since.

Gradually mention of daily doings creeps into the book until it becomes a diary as well as a record of business and gives us a picture of farm and small-town life in western Pennsylvania in the middle of the last century. Seventy years before, in 1782-85, it had been the frontier. As soon as the Revolutionary War was over, settlers had come from eastern Pennsylvania and taken up land. There were Indians in those days and big game. But by 1851, the Indians had been driven out of the country, and there was only small game.

"Mar. 1, '51. Shot two red squirrels. . . . July 2, '51. Killed a rattlesnake of the yellow kind. . . . Sept. 25, '51. We got 31 fish in the run this afternoon. All trout but 3."

Robert Gordon attended church nearly every Sunday and for years the texts of both morning and afternoon sermons are set down and the length of time it took to preach them. "Jan. 12, '51. Mr. Glenn preached from Isah. 46 C, 1 v—55 m and Psalm 49, 8 v, 40 m. and is to be at the school house at Jas. Byeres in Evening. . . . Jan. 26, '51. Mr. Glenn preached at the church from Daniel 12 C, 4 v—80 m. & Rom. 15 C, 13 v—55 m. and is to preach at Utica at Night."

Robert Gordon took a Whig paper and the *Genesee Farmer*, which was thirty-seven and a half cents a year. "Library No. 3" was bought for the Sabbath School at ten dollars, by the officers of the school. He bought little books for his own children. Two of these have survived the years: *Woodbine Arbor, or the Little Gardeners*, dated 1849, and *The Fairy and the Children*. The pictures in this last book are crudely colored, much as a child would color a picture with crayons, but the publishers, Huestis & Cozans of Nassau Street, New York, assure us that "they are highly colored, printed on superfine paper and have been got up without regard to expense."

Other books Robert Gordon procured either through the minister or from agents. Most of them were religious—a Bible, *Scripture Questions*, a fat little hymn book, two inches wide, three and an eighth inches long, and one and one-fourth inches thick, set in infinitesimal type, Nelson's *Cause and Cure of Infidelity* and Dowling's *History of Romanism*, which had gone through sixteen editions, but we also find *The Successful Merchant*, and *The Book of Mormon* published in 1830. The last was sent to him as a curiosity by his sister Nancy, who with her husband and family went to Oregon by ox team in 1854.

There was plenty of hard work, which was carried on regardless of weather. "Jan. 13, '52. Took what hides we had to Goodard. Came back past the rails. Hauled 2 loads, 108. Some snow with high wind. This is the hardest day to be out yet. . . . Jan. 19, '52. Some more snow this morning and very cold. Hard day to be out. Froze one of my ears today. Hauled 2 loads rails, 123."

The entry of August 27, 1851, notes some unusual weather: "There

was Frost here this morning. Light"; and "Sept. 15, '51. Frost. Corn killed in places."

But with all this work there was plenty of social intercourse. He belonged to the Mill Creek Blues, as an age-yellowed slip of paper attests: "This is to certify that R. C. Gordon has been a regular member of the Mill Creek Blues (Volunteers) for Seven successive years and has trained at least three-fourths of the days of training in the above mentioned time, properly uniformed and equipped, as witness my hand this 25 day of Dec. 1843. Jas. S. Austin, Capt."

Besides church and camp meetings, there were also spelling and singing schools, huskings, choppings, and barn and church raisings. He attended a concert at Fairview and went to Mercer to railroad and temperance conventions and to Franklin where Governor William F. Johnston "addressed a meeting in the Courthouse for 1½ hours." Judging from the length of sermons and addresses, one must conclude that our ancestors were a patient people and "clergyman's sore throat" was not yet invented.

"Dec. 4, '51. Thresh'd oats and cleaned up 209 Bushels. Came home and went to geography singing. . . . July 8, '54. I went to French Creek fishing. Waded in the water all afternoon. Got some fine fish."

Church people will probably be astounded to learn that in the early part of the nineteenth century whiskey was freely served at church "raisings." My great-grandfather John Gordon became a temperance man as a result of an incident in his family. He never used whiskey himself, but the men in the harvest field thought that they had to have it or they could not work. Robert Gordon, then a small boy, was sent to the house for the jug of whiskey. His little half-brother Samuel wanted to go back to the harvest field with him. On the way the child became thirsty and Robert, not knowing that whiskey was any different from any other drink, gave him what he wanted, with the result that the baby became dead drunk, and was in danger of dying.

When the child had recovered, William, an elder son who was strongly temperance, said to his father, "Now is the time to decide for or against whiskey." "I am against it," said John Gordon, "and the man who won't work for me without whiskey, can get work some place else."

When the Mill Creek church was to be "raised," John Gordon, who had given part of the land on which it was to stand, sent the word around with the invitations that there would be no whiskey. Everyone came to see if there would be anyone else there. When all had assembled, John Gordon told them that the women were preparing a good dinner, but that there would be no liquor. Instead of leaving, everybody pitched in and helped, and the Mill Creek church was probably the first church "raised" in western Pennsylvania without whiskey.

Evidently betting was not frowned upon: "Mar. 5, 1853. Dr. J. W. Orwig bet that he could suck 48 hen eggs. I stood him 5 dollars and J. Muse agrees to pay half. The Dr. sucked the eggs and won the money."

But dancing drew this stern comment: "July 4, '54. Our town was disgraced with a ball tonight."

A sermon was preached on Thanksgiving Day, but there seem to have been no festivities. Christmas was noted, but evidently not celebrated: "Dec. 25, '51. Christmas day. Cloudy. A little snow in evening. Hauled 4 loads rails, 225."

It would seem that more was made of the Fourth of July. Robert Gordon writes of that day in 1851: "Cool, but clear. Went to Utica to a Sabbath School celebration and was pleased with the performances: viz., the schools were formed and marched in procession to the grove and seated. Opened with prayer by Rev. R. Glenn. Declaration read by C. Hidrick, followed by an address by R. S. McCormick, Esq. Then musick while the provision was put on the tables. Blessing asked by Mr. I. Martin. The provision was then handed round by the committees. Benediction by R. R. Glenn. Order was very good. At 2 o'clock, the Utica temperance society held its Annual meeting at the schoolhouse. Opened with prayer by Rev. R. Glenn. Then addressed by R. S. McCormick, Esq. Adjourned to meet sine die. Pete McGinnis was there and fully showed the use of Liquor to make a man a *Fool*."

There are constant references to trips on horseback or by buggy. The distance traveled on one of these journeys will not seem great to a generation which goes seventy and eighty miles an hour, but it took a good horse to travel so far in one day and a good driver to bring him through without injury: "July 12, '54. Started ½ past 6. Fed at Andover and

again at Adamsville. Was home soon after dark, making a drive of 57 miles. Pete a little tired. Roads dusty."

Most country merchants bought their goods from traveling salesmen, but after Robert Gordon became a partner in the store of James Muse at New Lebanon, he made trips to Philadelphia for that purpose. He carried his money in a canvas sack much like the sacks banks use now. It was in gold. My mother has told me of her and her little brother lifting the sack to see how heavy it was. The journey was somewhat long and complicated.

"Sept. 21, '53. Started to Philadelphia. Took dinner at Mercer, supper at Newcastle. Took the boat packet. Sept. 22, Clear. Breakfast at Rochester. Went to Pittsburg on the cars, then took the train at 9 for the city. Had a pleasant trip. Sept. 23. Arrived at Philadelphia at 8 this morning. Found goods higher than formerly. Put up at the Eagle Hotel. Bought our notions. Sept. 24. Bought our dry goods today. Fine weather for purchasing. Sept. 25, Sabt. Went to the chapel in the morning. Then to 8th and Cherry Church. At night went to Arch Street Church to hear Mr. Wadsworth. Sept. 26. Finished buying our goods. Weather fine. Sept. 27. Paid all our bills of goods, but one, our grocery bill with Steen, Garrett & Co, \$202.54 unpaid. Paid our hotel bill, 125 cents per day. Started at 1/2 past ten at night for Pittsburg. Sept. 28. This day on the cars. Saw a man that had been killed by the cars running over him. Arrived at Pittsburg at Nine P. M. Stopt at Brown's Hotel. Sept. 29. Bought our hardware, books and groceries, then I went to the State fair. Evening took the cars to Rochester, then the packet to Newcastle. Sept. 30. Breakfast at Newcastle, dinner at Mercer. Rode home with Judge Kerr in his buggy. Arrived at New Lebanon before sunset well and hearty."

Another long trip for the times was to Ohio to say good-by to his sister, Nancy Condit, who, with her husband, Philip Condit and family, crossed the plains by ox team to Oregon in 1854. Philip Condit's journal of the six months' journey would have been more exciting reading if they had been attacked by Indians, but they were thankful that they escaped, even if the account was not as thrilling for later readers. There was plenty of hardship, though. Every day, toward the end of the long

drive, an ox would lie down and die, and their minds were often filled with forebodings and homesickness. One of Philip Condit's entries says that "during this day Mrs. Condit and myself became so tired and impatient of the journey that we both had the horrors pretty bad, but when evening came, the young folks seemed to be so happy that we partly forgot our troubles and recovered the balance of mind we had so nearly lost."

There was talk of a railroad across northwestern Pennsylvania: "Jan. 4, '53. Railroad meeting at night. Jan. 5. I went with J. A. Leech and others to view a track for a railroad from Brown's Mill to Mill creek. Started at Sandy Creek where the outlet of the lake puts in, and run straight to Butler's field 2 miles. The rise to the highest point is 276 feet above the bottom of creek. . . . Jan. 7. Went to the railroad surveying. Commenced where we had left off and continued a straight course to Mill creek about 3 or 4 rods below E. Price's sawmill. Distance, 4½ miles and 5 perch." There was a railroad meeting to appoint delegates to Mercer, but there is nothing said later on about the road's being built. The farmers had to go a long way to have their grain ground, so Robert Gordon, Mr. Muse, and others decided in 1855 to put up a steam mill. Most mills then were run by water power and steam was an innovation. My grandfather was very enthusiastic about it, but it was the cause of his death.

"The mill," writes my mother, "was a very narrow building, three stories high. On the ground was a sawmill. The second and third stories were devoted to flour, corn and buckwheat. It was raised in November. When the frame was high in the air, and timbers needed putting in place, no carpenter or other man would risk going to the top. Father went. He had a heavy wooden mallet, called a commander, to use. While on the top the men pushed the timbers and he almost lost his balance. He would have regained it, but someone pushed the timber the other way and he could not hold on. When he found he must go, he thought of the men below and jumped, carrying the heavy tool till he was over and past them and then dropped it. He struck the ground heavily, but strange to say, no limbs broken." Before he got over the effects of the fall, however, he was seized by typhoid fever from which he never recovered.