“Eight Generations”

Ironically, the oldest farm in Ohio is one of the most difficult to find. I followed my car’s GPS, which led me down rural Adams County roads, past a drive signposted to an old farm open to the public for “Pioneer Days.” But that wasn’t the one I wanted. So, I kept going and heard the message from my GPS lady that I had arrived at my destination. An unmarked road, leading up a hill, was my only option; so I turned up the hill and pulled around a farmhouse where I met two of the Smileys. One was the farm’s owner, John Smiley, and the other was his son James, the eighth generation of Smileys. James has two sons, who represent generation number nine. Wow! On the map, this road is named “Smiley Road.” In reality it is unmarked.

I sat on the porch and chatted with John, the seventh generation of his family. He had just returned from a tractor pull, a competition to see who has the strongest tractor. He won third place, good for ninety bucks, more than covering his $20 entry. “It beats farming,” he joked.

John told me that his ancestor, Alexander Smiley, an Englishman, was granted 500 acres of this land by King George III in 1772, four years before the Declaration of Independence. Why here? Why then? This was wild, uncharted territory, the uncharted Northwest Territory, and most definitely Indian country. Land of the Shawnees, Miamis, Mingos, and Delawares. It was a time of frontiersmen.

One of them, Simon Kenton, a peer of Daniel Boone, who turned 17 in 1772, had fled his Virginia home a year earlier after he thought he had killed a boy flirting with his girl friend. The lad survived but Kenton didn’t return home, instead choosing the life of a scout and Indian fighter in what is now Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia. He was a natural in the woods and, in 1774, two years after Smiley established his farm, Kenton served as a scout for settlers – British colonists – in Lord Dunsmore’s War, pitting them against the Shawnee and Mingo tribes. Even though the war ended in 1774, fighting between the settlers and Indians continued for over 20 years in Ohio. Kenton was captured twice by the Shawnees, who respected him as a great warrior but forced him to run the gauntlet. He survived. Twice. All this while Alexander Smiley was farming in the hills of Adams County. It must have been a time of great adventures.

The original farmhouse Alexander Smiley built burned down. Another was built in 1813 and lasted almost 200 years before it, too, burned. John told me he was born in this house in 1952, as was his father – in 1915.

John and his son James still use this old barn, built in the 1800s, raising Charolais cattle as well as corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay. Their 600 acres provides a good living for them and allows the Smiley heritage to continue, which is also the hope of this painting and essay.