“The Diary”

This barn isn’t particularly old, built probably in the 1890s – from trees on the farm, fashioned into beams connected by mortise and tenon joints and wooden nails. And, with a colorful family history, it probably wasn’t the first barn built on this farm. But, although the bank barn may not rank in Ohio’s top ten of distinctive old barns, its story certainly is one of Ohio’s best.

Thanks to an article about my Ohio Barn Project in the Logan (Hocking County) newspaper, Robert Sharp asked his daughter Nancy Sharp-Ward to contact me. And, since the barn was located in Sugar Grove, just across the Hocking County line, I included it on my barn tour. Fortunately I met Nancy who showed me a diary written by one of her ancestors, one that could easily be made into a movie. But let’s begin even earlier. Click here for this great story!

Joseph Sharp served as a captain in the Revolutionary War as well as in the War of 1812. His wife Anna Lee gave birth to the diary’s author Robert Lee Sharp, the oldest of six, in Belmont County in 1824. Blessed with an engineering mind, Joseph received a contract from the state of Ohio to build a dam on the Muskingum River, which he completed in 1838. Robert, then 16, was sent to run a commissary store for his father in Sugar Grove, where his entire family moved the next year. Soon after their arrival, the state of Ohio commissioned Joseph to build Buckeye Dam on the Hocking River, which he did. After that, the state, having trouble selling bonds to complete the Hocking Canal, which Joseph, again hired by the state, was working on – with a young man, Archibald McCann, whom he took on as a partner. To help finance the project, Joseph mortgaged his farm and, thanks to a Columbus financier – who secured the bonds – was supposed to receive a huge cash payment for his work. But, rather than taking time to travel (via horseback in those days) to Columbus for the cash, Joseph sent his trusted partner. However, McCann never returned, leaving Sharp in serious debt. For years the family tried to pay it off, using stone from quarries on their farm, but it appeared hopeless.

Realizing that his father might lose the farm, Robert, now 27, decided to seek fortune in the California gold fields, hoping to earn enough money to save the family farm. This gold rush began in January, 1848, when a New Jersey carpenter, James W. Marshall, found flakes of gold in the American River at the base of the Sierra Nevada range. Over the years, the prospect of instant wealth attracted over 300,000, including Robert Lee Sharp and James Garden, both of Fairfield County, who left on this perilous journey in 1852. Robert kept a daily diary, which documented their travel on the Oregon Trail, a route laid by fur traders around 1811 and initially was passable only on foot or by horseback. By 1836 a wagon trail had been cleared to Fort Hall, (Idaho) and in 1839 the Mormons began their migration, culminating when Brigham Young founded Salt Lake City in 1847. Over 400,000 pioneers, farmers, and settlers used this trail throughout the West, whose states would be formed much later (Kansas – 1861, Nebraska and Nevada – 1867, Wyoming and Idaho – 1890, and Utah – 1896). Robert’s son, Willam Hale Sharp, transcribed his father’s notes into printed form, *The Life and Diary of Robert Lee Sharp*, publishing it in 1938. It shows what a young Ohio pioneer was willing to risk, traveling thousands of miles in untamed frontier.

On April 19, 1852, they began with a trip to Cincinnati, where they boarded a riverboat to ride down the Ohio, bound for St. Louis. While passing along the shoreline of Indiana, Robert commented on Mason’s Cave, a rock formation where a band of outlaws lived, whose leader was named Mason. So notorious was he that the governor of Mississippi offered a large reward for his head, which one of his thugs, tempted by the cash, delivered – literally.

From the Mississippi they continued by boat up the Missouri where they disembarked and signed a contract in St. Joseph, Missouri, with a wagon trail master for passage to California. Both Robert and James paid $100 to James Coulter and Company, a firm from Columbus, Ohio, which would provide food and tents though Robert and James would have to secure their own “arms, ammunition, and blankets.” On May 8 they began – apparently with many others – in covered wagons pulled by two oxen. They saw slaves, an Indian mission, and were approached by an Indian boy trying to sell them a pony. Another Indian came by, riding horseback and sitting on a buffalo hide with paintings depicting the Pawnees killing his wife and two children, apparently done while he was hunting buffalo on Pawnee land. And then came the graves. The cholera and dysentery.

The diarrhea came first, caused by the thousands of buffalo carcasses strewn along the trail in Nebraska from 1844 to 1848, though this infection continued for years later in parts west of here. The cholera epidemic lasted from 1849 to 1852, though this, too, continued, marked by graves that Robert described nearly daily. Sick travelers in their wagon train often could not be moved, delaying the trip. Others died a day or two later.

By 1852 this trail, leading across the plains of Nebraska and into Wyoming, Idaho, and Utah became known as the Oregon Trail – since it ultimately reached Oregon. Diverging before that, Robert’s expedition would head south – on the California Trail – ending in Eurkea, a town north of San Francisco and near the northern gold fields. And, despite danger, the lure of freedom, fertile farm land, and, of course, gold, drew settlers along this trail. In the diary, Robert commented on the other wagon trains. When they began their journey in St. Joseph, they saw 1,500 Mormon covered wagons crossing the Missouri. On June 20 they met a mail carrier who had left Kanesville, Iowa, 16 days earlier and had counted 3,000 wagons on the route. He noted much sickness, “as many as 13 dying out of one train.”

Indian skirmishes, gunslingers, and card sharks were common, though the most famous western outlaws – Billy the Kid, Jesse James, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid – flourished decades later. Indeed, in the 1850s this was the Wild West. On May 17, Sharp recorded that an Indian was shot for stealing a mule. Ten days later he wrote that, at Fort Kearney (Nebraska) guards had to protect some Pawnees since a band of Cheyennes entered, while on a horse stealing foray, which netted them many horses and one Pawnee scalp.

And the diseases didn’t bypass Sharp. Towards the end of May he became sick, which worsened, requiring him to lay flat in the wagon, a condition not improved by passing graves daily. Other wagon trains had travelers that got sick and died, burying the dead in shallow graves, which wolves often found. The cause? Dead buffalo, rotting in the hot sun. On June 2 Robert wrote, “We can see one hundred buffalo heads a day. Some of them have the hair on. Two men at camps nearby are about to die with diarrhea.” Earlier he wrote, “We met a train of traders today, with fourteen wagons loaded principally with buffalo robes. Drivers were very hard, greasy looking men.” Two weeks later the caravan came upon Indian traders, about 100 Sioux, who were selling moccasins and buffalo robes. Like old barns, the buffalo herds were vanishing.

Finally in August they crossed into Nevada and California, where Indians were rudely referred to as "diggers", for their practice of digging up roots to eat. Robert comments on July 17 reflect this, “A digger (Indian) shot at a man in another train and wounded him.” On August 1, he wrote, “We saw a digger today with a horse, some gold and an old coat, which he had no doubt killed an emigrant for.”

Both before and after the gold rush, the California Indian tribes, not as fearsome as the Sioux or Iroquois or Apache, were no match for the encroaching settlers. Researchers have documented that, funded by both state (California enter the Union in 1850) and national money, "well armed death squads, combined with the widespread random killing of Indians by individual miners, resulted in the death of 100,000 Indians in the first two years of the gold rush.” Finally, in June, 2019, California acknowledged these massacres when governor Gavin Newsom apologized for the genocide.”

They ate whatever they could: antelope – “a delicious dish,” mountain goats, deer, elk, buffalo, cattle, and prairie squirrels – “a fine dish for dinner.” Some unscrupulous traders charged “exorbitant” prices, taking advantage of travelers, and some could get their price – as when they crossed Nevada’s Carson’s Sink, a desert – 48 miles wide – and came to a trading post, where “all of these posts keep whiskey and water to sell. At this post I paid 25 cents for a quart of water.” He later told his son that, nearly dying of thirst, he often paid a dollar for a single glass of water. During that stretch, Robert’s will and fitness were tested: they arrived at sunrise at the Carson River, “nearly given out, having walked 52 miles without stopping longer than to eat or drink.” Along this trail they saw hundreds of abandoned wagon frames, as well as hundreds of dead animals from previous years. The desert took its toll.

Robert’s trip, though rife with danger, had its rewards. They traveled alongside, forded, and boated on some of America’s iconic rivers – the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Platte, the Sweetwater, and the Snake. They saw the spectacular scenery of the West. In Nebraska they first encountered towering rock formations – Church Tower, Chimney Rock, Scotts Bluff. In Wyoming, in addition to seeing Independence Rock and the Devil’s Gate, they passed by part of the Black Hills and saw “Indian lodges,” a term Robert used to describe the teepees of the nomadic Plains Indians – “in the shape of a cone, and end of poles stick out of top from two to four feet.” He later observed Indian bands moving, “They pack their tents and everything.” Later they saw snow covered peaks of the Rocky Mountains in the Wind River Range and the hot springs of Idaho, not far from “a crater of a volcano. It is 100 feet above the plain, and the mouth of the crater is 200 feet wide and 50 feet deep … Sides of rock are melted and burnt to a cinder … Fire appears to have issued from hundreds of places, and there is volcanic rock lying over ground.” These Ohioans had many tales to tell their grandchildren.

Finally, on September 1 they reached Placerville, California, where the diary ends, mostly because Robert ran out of writing materials and, now on foot, had less energy to document each day. And though the Coulter contract specified transport to Eureka City, the company couldn’t take them any further – they had lost all their horses and cattle in the trek across the desert. So Robert and James traveled on their own to San Francisco, where they began to seek their fortune in the gold fields of the Sierra Madres.

Now, there are many published journals of pioneer men and women who crossed the Plains in the mid-1800s, all describing the hardships encountered along the trails. But, this one, whether or not Robert found gold, was one of the most noble: a son who risked his life in an effort to pay off his father’s debts and save the family farm. The happy ending is that he did discover gold – prospectors found over 750,000 pounds of gold in California – and, when he determined he had enough – after being gone for nearly two years – he returned home to Sugar Grove. However, this time he didn’t cross back over the perilous trails, he chose instead to ride a ship through the Isthmus of Panama and then to New York where he boarded trains to Ohio.

Upon return, he paid off his father’s debts, saved the farm, and was rewarded with the north half of the farm, which he settled. After building a fine home, he married and raised five children, one of whom, William Hale Sharp, recorded his father’s diary in 1938 and donated the original manuscript to Ohio State University, which, in turn, gave it to the Ohio History Connection, where it’s held in safekeeping. In the late 19th century Robert re-opened the stone quarries on the farm, which his father had used to build the locks on the Hocking Canal, and expanded the business, employing up to 150 men. The family continued the business into the early 1900s.

Robert E. Sharp, the current farm owner, continues the family heritage, now approaching the rare bicentennial farm level. His daughter, Nancy Sharp Kindle, represents the sixth generation of the family and features her great-great-grandfather’s historic diary on the Sharp Farm Market website, reminding readers of the courage of this early Ohio pioneer. In hindsight, it was remarkable that this Ohio legend had enough foresight to record his observations for future posterity such as Aaron Ward, Nancy’s son, the seventh generation, who’s had the chance to visit the Ohio History Connection to read the original manuscript. It is, after all, quite a diary.