WELCOME BACK FROM THE ATTIC

YESTERYEAR AROUND CALEDONIA STATION

No. 6 1976

THE LABARGE GRIST MILL — 1890's

The community of Labarge was first called Caledonia Center from its location in the center of Caledonia Township. Labarge began when in 1868 William H. Brown of Alaska erected a flouring mill on the east banks of the Thornapple River near the present site of the power dam. He spent $14,000 on the structure. The grist-mill contained three run of burs, and the most approved machinery. The flour manufactured was of the best quality. Brown also built a saw-mill at Labarge. The mills were operated by Jamison and Bray after the death of Brown in 1877, they were the administrators of his estate. On February 1, 1881 the mills were purchased by John W. Sanbrook and Charles W. Dutcher. Mr. Dutcher soon sold his interest in the business to John McQueen in June of 1881.

By 1885 the saw mill had been sold to E.H. Peet. It was also owned by J. Poland and George Baker before the business was abandoned around 1890.

John W. Sanbrook continued to operate the flour mill until about 1892 when he sold it to Rice R. Record. Mr. Record manufactured flour until 1901 when the site was sold the the Thornapple Electric Company.

The Thornapple Electric Company built the first water-power generating station in 1901, and reconstructed the dam. The big dam and power-house at Labarge was the north terminal of a 45 mile transmission line that

went to Nashville on the south. It supplied power to the villages of Middleville, Nashville, Lake Odessa and the city of Hastings. The company had a steam-power plant at Hastings that could supply 350 horse-power in case of accident at the Labarge plant. The company supplied power to consumers and small factories along the Thornapple who had abandoned their steam plants and installed motors, which proved much cheaper and more convenient. The dam broke and was washed out several times during the early years.

Labarge was given a post office as Labarge on December 11, 1876 with Alexander Kilgore as its first postmaster. Mr. Kilgore owned the general store. About 1882 the general store was sold to George C. Baker who also became postmaster. About 1895 Robert Davis became postmaster and operated a Notions store. The last postmaster was F.P. Beaumont who took over the general store about 1899. The postoffice was closed November 30, 1901 when the area was included in the Caledonia rural route.

Between 1870 and 1901 the community of Labarge included the following businesses: a general store, blacksmiths, wagon shops, a hotel, a flour mill, a saw mill, a shoemaker, a cooper, a live stock dealer, a book agent, a notions store, a furs and hides dealer.

RICE RECORD

Descendants of the pioneers who originated at Labarge remember when the Labarge Dam was raised and repaired and how the resulting high water flooded the property above the dam. They remember when the east and the west end of the bridge had to be repaired and each time it was out of commission they had to go all the way around to the Stauffer Bridge (Alaska Ct.) by horse and wagon. It was at this time (1919) that Henry Linsley stocked his home which was on the east side of the river with a few staples and was so encouraged with the trade that developed, that it soon became a grocery store and was the last store to remain until about 1936.

Some of the long-time residents remember sliding down the hill in wooden butterbowls produced by the butterbowl factory (saw mill) that had previously shut down. Even though these people lived so close to this dam which produced electricity for areas like Middleville and Hastings only three houses that were very close to the bank of the river had electricity. Having electricity in your home back then really only meant electric lighting as there weren't any electric appliances yet. When there was an electric storm and the power was off the man from Consumers, Will Knight, would start off with his trouble man, Roy Cain, in his horse and buggy and look for the source of trouble down the power line. Eventually they hoped to meet the repairman from Hastings who had started coming north searching for the problem.

SUBSCRIPTIONS –
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The committee staff for the sixth issue has been Editor, Kenneth R. Gackler; Photo Reproduction, Jay L. Shook; Layout and Printing, Edward and Don Passenger; Research, Mary Crumback, Eve Geerligs, and Lorrine Crumback.

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THE ONLY CENTENNIAL FARM NOW LISTED IN CALEDONIA TOWNSHIP

John Harper, native of Ohio was born December 3, 1827 to Henry and Elizabeth Harper who were natives of Virginia and Pennsylvania. John Harper and two other families came to this county in 1866 from Ohio. The land which he settled on is located at 8117 Alaska Avenue SE and was then like a primeval forest. After marrying his wife Phinette North in 1831, five children were born: Chloe V. Harper (Mrs. Jeremiah Arndt) born 1851; Eva L. Harper (Mrs. Joseph Sherk) born 1853; Frances E. Harper (Mrs. J.H. Schiedel) born 1856; Henry Z. Harper born 1861; and Silas Ellsworth Harper born 1862. All five of these children, ranging in age of five to fifteen years accompanied their parents on the journey from Ohio by horse and wagon.

Originally, there was a small two bedroom house with a white picket fence and a one-story barn built of logs, which was later used as a hog house. The family recall of being told about the old-fashioned latch on the door in the first homestead. It was used with a string and when the string was pulled to the inside the door was automatically locked to anyone from the outside.

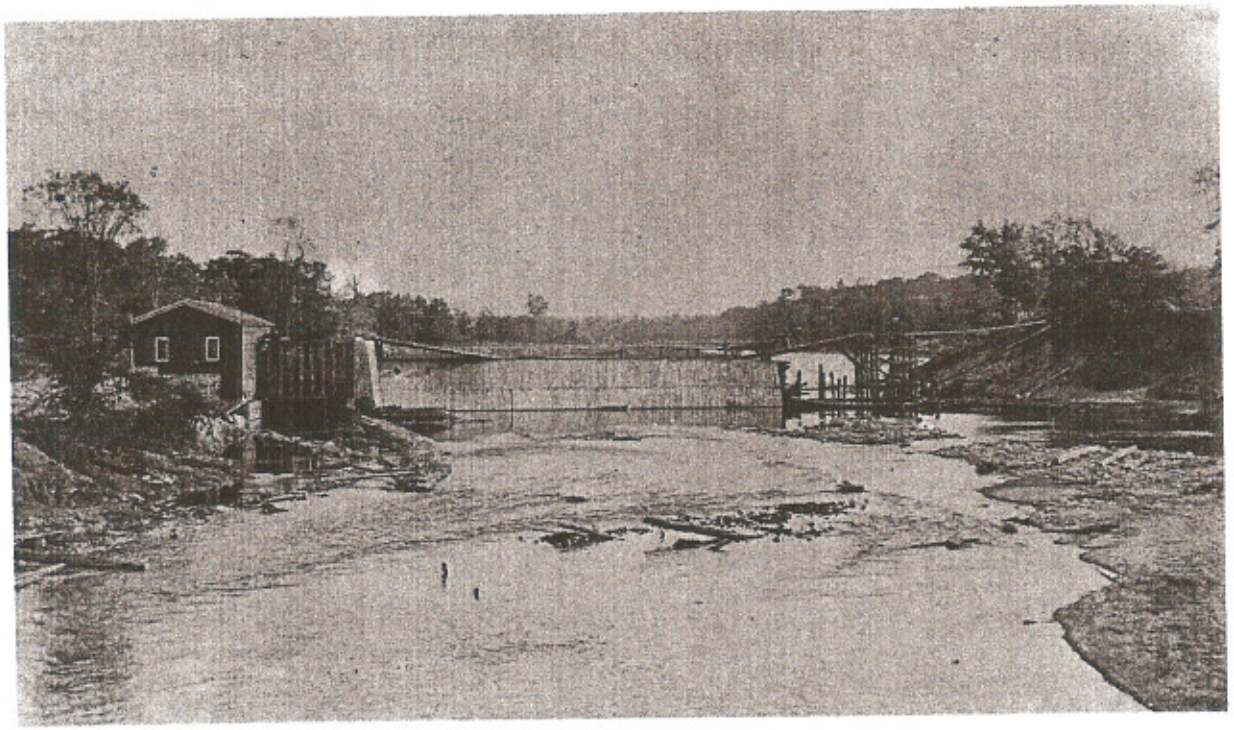
It was in the year 1891 that Henry Harper, John Harper's son married Nellie Linsley who lived just down the road to the north. Nellie (Linsley) Harper was believed to be the oldest living person at the age of 97 years in Caledonia Township at the time of her death in 1970.

It was in 1905 that Henry Harper erected the present farmhouse. It is a spacious home with many large rooms. The living room has a large door that slides into the wall. Most of the wood used in the home was from the trees on the farm. The oak woodwork has been refinished of late with lots of hard work and loving care. The dining room had a large oak cupboard that had access from either the kitchen or dining room.

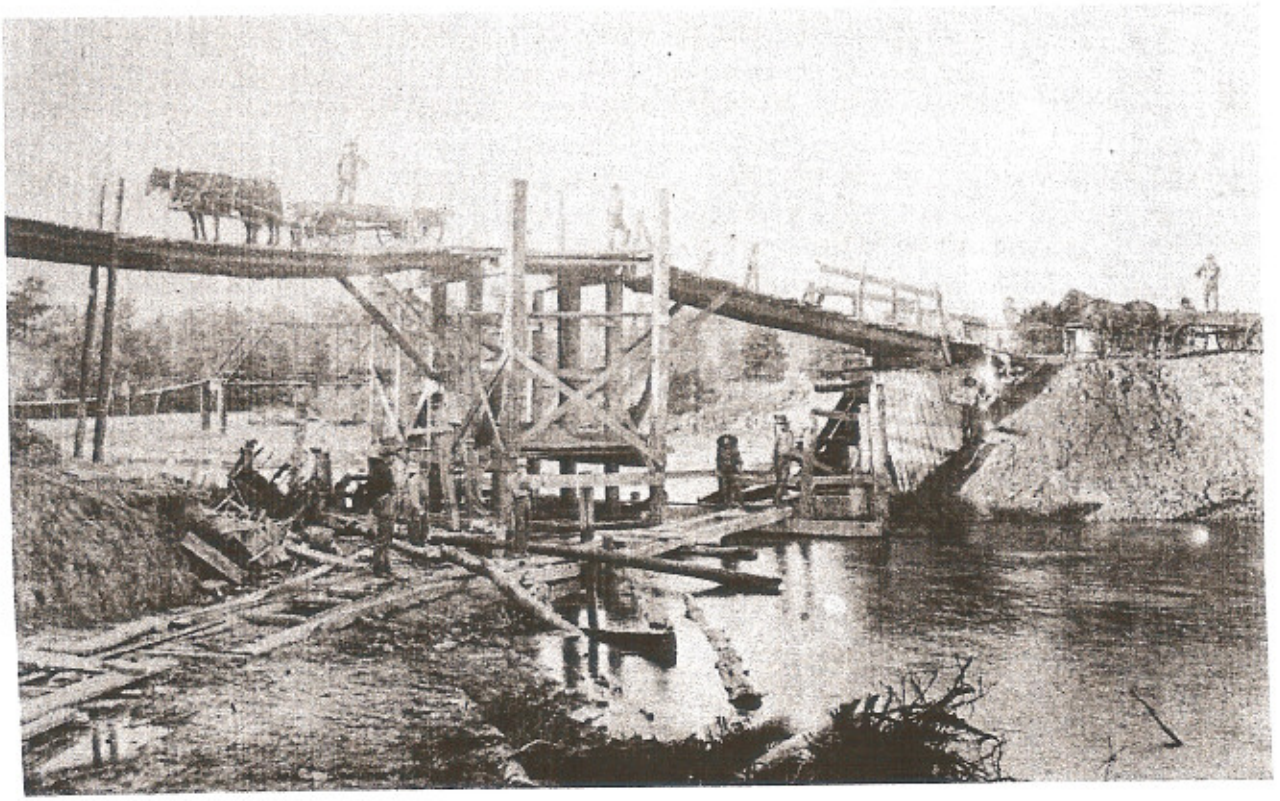
The kitchen has been remodeled but at one time had a large wood burning range that both cooked the family meals and heated that portion of the house. Two porches have been enclosed adding extra room to the downstairs. The upstairs has enough room to have a spare room that has always been used just for storage.

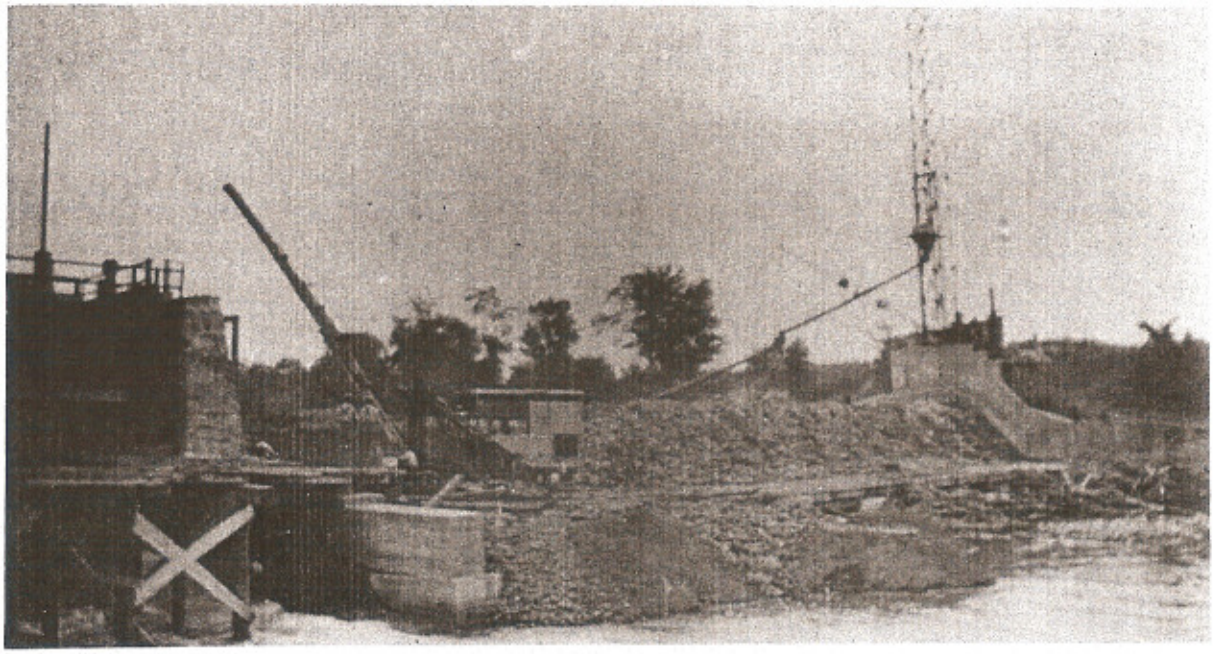
Descendants of the Henry Harper family include: Mrs. Ora Peel, dec; Mrs. Florence Tolhurst, dec; Clarence Harper, Alaska, Michigan; Richard Harper, Chippewa Lake and Mrs. Clara (Harper) Denise now present owner of the farm.

We are thankful for all the families of the early pioneers who share with us their heritage and memories of the past.

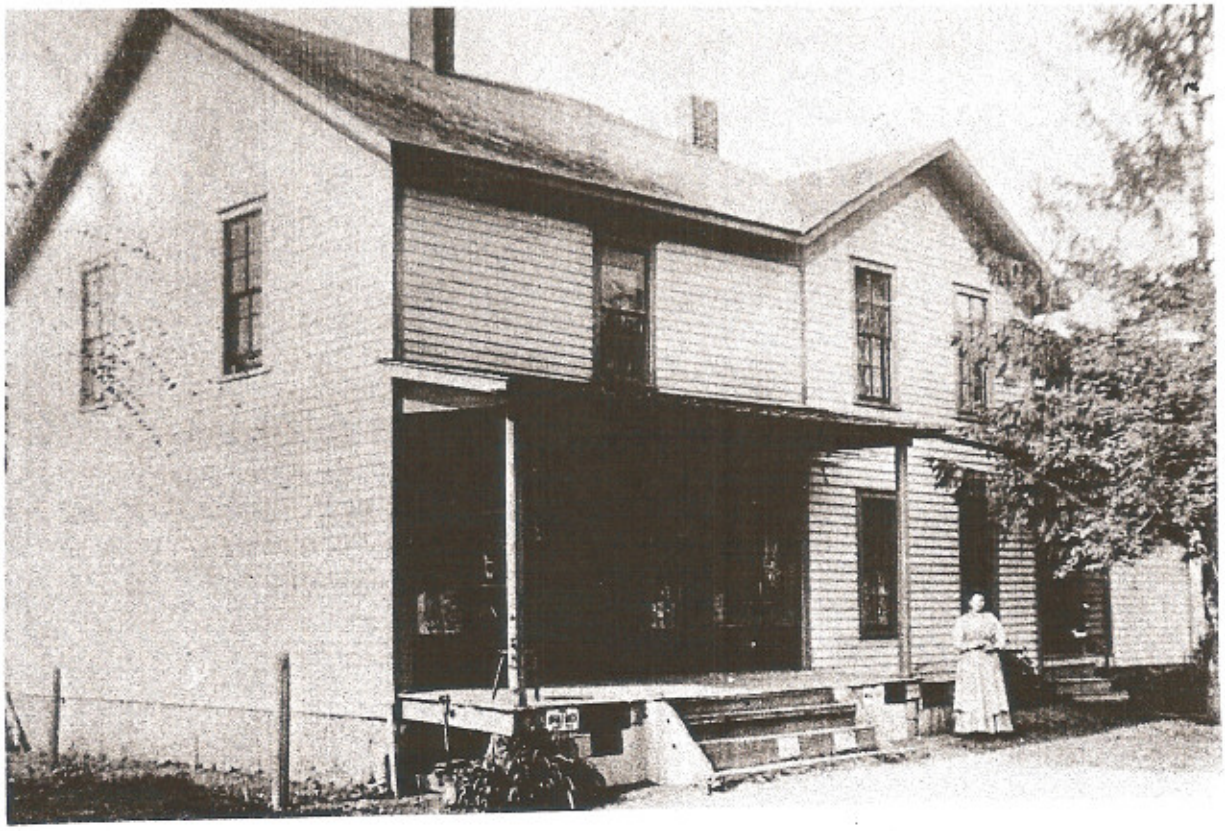


REBUILDING LABARGE DAM EARLY 1900's





REBUILDING LABARGE DAM 1920



H. L. LINSLEY, GENERAL STORE, 1920's

THORNAPPLE VALLEY PIONEER ASSOCIATION

The Thornapple Valley Pioneer Association will hold their annual reunion in the grove south of the mills at Caledonia Center, on Saturday afternoon, August 7th, 1886. A basket picnic and old fashioned social visit will be the program. Bring your baskets of refreshments and abundance of good cheer, and we will make it the happiest day of all the year. All old settlers whether members or not, come and join with us in our festivities.

Dated July 29, 1886. Warren S. Hale, Secretary

On Saturday August 7th, 1886, the Thornapple Valley Pioneer Association held their second basket picnic, in the grove, on the banks of Thornapple River at LaBarge.

Although there was some misunderstanding as to the time of meeting, and the day being unintentionally appointed on the same date of the U.B. quarterly meeting, and also the day that some of the members observe as their Sabbath, there was a good attendance, being upwards of two hundred people present. There were comparatively few on the grounds up to two o'clock. Social chit-chat relating to past experiences were uppermost in the minds, under the many gray hairs. Exercises began at 3 p.m., called to order by the president of the society, Edward Campau Esq., who with the able assistance of the secretary, W.S. Hale, and other officers and members of the association filled his part well.

The meeting was opened with prayer by Elder Garrett of Alaska, followed by an impromptu address by Benj. Woodward of Dutton, who took for his subject, "Those days, when we looked each other square in the face," was delivered in a happy and earnest manner, treating upon the early history of pioneer life, its trials and privations, and the good fruits of the early settlers. His remarks were entertaining in all their parts and well received by all. Next in order was the following interesting essay by Mrs. Edward Campau:

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here today on the occasion of the reunion of the Pioneer Society of Thornapple Valley, and the subject for contemplation would be the experience of the pioneer upon entering the then western wilds, 40 or 50 years ago. And I am here today to congratulate you who helped to compose the advance guard of the pioneer army; you who have seen the gradual development of the country until the present day, and have assisted to drive back the frowning forests into fruitful fields.

So, now it behooves you to inaugurate an honorable gathering to commemorate those events, an act that will make hearts respond one toward another.

I wish I might photograph to you as it is on my mind, the great, wilderness 50 years ago, filled with wild flowers of every hue, game plenty and wild fruit in great abundance; nature had done its utmost, it seemed almost a pity to disturb it.

On the 8th of August, 1836, my father with his family, landed at Yankee Springs, where we found a portion of a log house erected, minus windows, with part of a floor, to supply them, quilts and Indian mattings were used. Now after a time this house extended on and out, until it was known as the seven story house, all on the ground, and in it were three great fire-places, jams open to the ceiling, chimneys carried up of sticks and plastered with clay. In them were kept, not the puny fires of today, but such roaring fires, it would make one laugh of a cold night, to see the fire crackle through the immense pile of logs, nearly as high as the jams. Those veterans, how they rejoiced when they saw those roaring fires, and smelt the sweet savor of wild fowl and fish, and had the blessed

privileges of seeing beings of their own race, and sleeping inside the walls of logs, why my worthy pioneers, it was just too good to be lost, after one had traveled all day and a part of the night in those great forests. No wonder there were hearty old time greetings, and you need not think they called for a numbered room they were glad for a corner blanket bed on the floor. Why the first Governor of Michigan has slept there, also the On. Lewis Cass of Detroit, and many a Divine of other cities, and the best of the land, as well as their lesser lights, have all made their stopping at Yankee Springs.

Every one slept on the floor in the attic, no partitions but sheets and people were so thankful for that, a roof over you to keep out the storm and the hungry wolf and wild Indians. Now to get to this place in the woods, we followed a trail marked by blazed trees, 19 miles from Gull prairie, not a house between, nor a fence or a bridge enen, what a contrast between that and today. What nerve it took to be a pioneer. Then when we were there, it was for a time, no going back, it was to stay, we came to stay, and we did.

West of us it was 18 miles to Otsego, where there was a saw mill, what little sawing could be done in those times; everyone was sick with ague. It was ague, ague, ague. Fourteen miles east was Hastings, our friend Elijah, not the Elijah who was translated, but Elijah Alden can tell more of it, but as I remembered it, there were three houses. It was the county seat of Barry county after it became a county. At Middleville one house, Esq. Hill, was the only man with his family, then away on to Ada 18 miles, was another house and a ferry and a tin horn.

In 1837 I went to Grand Rapids, they were building their first church, a frame building, and of Catholic denomination. At that time it did not compare favorable with Alaska. The stumps were in the crooked and hilly streets. Nothing but wooden buildings, two hotels, National and Eagle. Way up in Kent it was called the Bridge Street House. It stood all alone, and but two or three other buildings. All this was when Michigan was a territory. One day I saw the boys throwing up their hats and heard the men hurrah, and I said to my mother, "what is that?" she replied, "Michigan has become a State." In my childlike simplicity I said, "I don't see any difference, when did it come, "Oh!, about a week or two ago," she replied, what a contrast to think of it now. There was no telegraphing then, nor a mail but once a week, and that was carried by immense gray horses. The through mail, was in a great canvass sack, and it looked like a well filled straw bed, on the other horse was the side mail and carrier, whose name was Wm. Vanderwalker.

Soon after this, as the weather became cold, there was a heavy lumber wagon provided, and the Government appropriated $1,000 to Gen. Solomen Withey to get that mail through. There the first log structure was built across the Coldwater. My father known, as Yankee Lewis, built it and hired every one he could get to use an ax. The next spring when the high water came, away went the bridge. My mother cooked the provision and sent it by the wagon load, to supply them, as they couldn't get anything short of 14 miles.

Ladies sometimes accompanied their husbands, I remember one, a Mrs. Judge Bell, her husband was the land agent of Ionia, they always went every year horseback, every one went by horse, and all wore a mosquito net on their hats, both Gents and Ladies. Conveyances were of the strongest kind, and they took ax, saw, hammer etc., prepared for any accident which might overtake them; there was no house to go to each one had to rely on his or herself, for all tools and conveyances.

Today on looking over these grounds, I see so few of the old veteran pioneers. I could name the Hills, Leonards, Stewarts, Smiths, Barlows, Peter McNaughton, Witheys, Wm. Brown, Henry

Jackson, Elijah Buck, John Fairchilds and many more whose faces were just as well known to me as our worthy Secretary, "where are they," they have just glided down the river of time to await our coming, but they did not go until they had hewn out their own monuments. They built them high and broad and strong. Peace to their ashes.

A recitation, "Pioneering" by Miss Anna Pratt was delivered in a pleasing manner, after which the business meeting was held.

W.S. Hale moved that a pamphlet be printed, containing a history of the Association, by laws, and a list of the members, giving so far as possible their birth place and date when they moved into Thornapple Valley. After a discussion, by a number of the members it was unanimously carried.

No other business coming before the meeting, the secretary announced that he was ready to receive names of any who wished to become members of the Association, of which there were twenty-five added to the list. With the affairs of the society in the hands of these efficient officers, it is sure to succeed. All possessing the confidence of their neighbors and have the necessary ability and push.

A bountiful picnic supper was indulged in by a few, the greater part returning home immediately after the business meeting. The families of Messrs. E. and C. Dunham soon discovered that an editor was within reaching distance, and took pity on his lankness thereof.

All in all, it was a pleasant gathering and one that the pioneers of Thornapple Valley will long remember.

LABARGE SCHOOL ABOUT 1900

Back Row (Top): Hazel Rowland, unknown, unknown, Hazel Hembling, unknown, Helen Sherk, unknown, Bernice Dunham

Third Row: unknown, Harold Dunham, Charlie Carter, Ora Harper, Hattie White, unknown, unknown

Second Row: Henry Tape, unknown, Roy White, Bertha White, Lloyd Leonard

Front Row: Ralph Rathbun, Ralph Sherk, William White, Blain McWhinney, Norman Luneke (teacher), Edna Amon, Mary Record, White