

Sentinel-Tribune

Black Swamp Once Ruled the Land and People

By Ken Kinney

A new business sprang up: teams of horses or oxen standing by along the route to help wagons escape from the muck. In fact, some of the more imaginative people were accused of adding water to already oozing roadbed to virtually guarantee an unsuspecting driver would get stuck, thus requiring payment for emergency road service.

Living in the swamp was normally detrimental to the health of the settlers who tried it, especially in the summer.

"They (first settlers in Wood County) were subject to all kinds of deprivations. The most distressing of all the rest was their being subject to epidemics that swept through the country every summer and fall in the shape of malarial fevers...from the real old-fashioned four-hours every day, down to the third-day chills, and all this to be borne without medicine or medical assistance," Leeson wrote.

"Summer was a time of fear in the swamp...not from worry over highwaymen...but from the increased threat of disease," wrote James Roberts of Waterville.

"The warm months gave way to unrelenting swarms of gnats and mosquitoes and then the inevitable outbreaks of 'ague' or malaria. The cause of malaria was unknown at this time. The malaria parasite, transmitted by the mosquito (the dual spelling is the writer's), was yet to be discovered.

"The most effective tool available (to fight the mosquito) was the smudge pot. These pots and their accompanying clouds of dark smoke discouraged the insects and were useful throughout most of the day; they were next to the cow while milking, under the table while eating, and even beside the bed while sleeping."

Leeson also gave credit for some alleviation to the "Good Spirit who, thinking he had punished His people enough, sent Dr. Eli Manville who distributed a few pounds of calomel and a few hundred bottles of quinine..."

Leeson wrote that "they (first settlers around Bradner) saw a great deal of sickness. Mrs. Edmunds had the ague (malaria) for seven years in succession, and the mosquitoes were terrible bad... screens ere unheard of then, and they (mosquitoes) just swarmed in the houses."

Carolyn Platt wrote that the ague was also called the "shakes," because shaking spells uncontrollably seized victims. When crews were digging the new canals, "reports were received of typhoid, pneumonia, cholera and especially malaria, usually called ague or 'the shakes'."

"Whenever a new family made their appearance and settled down, we would all say 'there is another family with whom we can divide the shakes.' The day the chill was to come on, you could look out from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and you could see the boys come into take their shake, as much as to take their dinners.

"We had no need of a doctor to bleed the patient, for the pesky mosquitoes did all the bleeding that was necessary."

A poem published in 1837 in the Maumee City Express commented: "There's a funeral every day, without a hearse or pall; they tuck them in the ground, with breeches, coat and all."

As settlers came in ever-increasing numbers, likewise did the pressures increase to, somehow, tame the Black Swamp. It became obvious that the only solution was to kill the swamp. It was equally clear that the best way to bring about the swamp's demise was to drain the water that lay there most of the year.

One cynic reported that it was not until the famous Toledo War of 1835 that officials in Columbus were spurred to take some action. "Armies" of Michiganders and Ohioans were prepared to fight for a six-mile-wide strip of land that one surveyor showed was in southern Michigan, while another had it in northern Ohio.

(The Toledo war was never fought. Cooler heads decided, before a shot could be fired in anger, that the disputed land was to be part of Toledo, and that Michigan, in return, would receive the Upper Peninsula.)

Before ditch digging became an official state program, private landowners in Wood County made attempts to drain excess water from their lands.

Around 1840, an E. Rowan, who had moved from Maumee to Jackson Township in southwestern Wood county, dug what Professor Leeson described as the first (drainage) ditch in the southwestern part of the county."

The intention was to drain what is now known as the Jackson Prairie, but the ditch was only sixteen feet in width and, on the average, three feet in depth.

It proved to be of no benefit for two reasons: it had no outlet, and its extent was so short that it overflowed its banks and did no perceptible good.

“Rowan (the contractor) built about three miles of said ditch at great cost to his employers, and no profit to himself,” Leeson wrote, continuing with: “He did all the excavation with men and spades. The price he got for digging was 16 cents a yard, and the price of good ditchers a day was fifty cents.”

Finally, the Ohio General Assembly passed the 1859 Ditch law, which “authorized the construction of these open surface ditches by County Commissioners upon petition by one or more landowners to be affected...”

Peter Wilhelm, whose great-great-great grandfather Jacob Wilhelm settled in southern Henry County in 1839, wrote of what had to take place to get a functioning ditch.

“After a surveyor and engineer marked the course of a ditch (usually along section lines), a timber crew moved in and cleared the area of forest and underbrush,” Wilhelm wrote.

“Some timber was saved for building bridges, buy the rest was stacked to the side and burned. Once crews had removed the stumps, workhorses and farm plows were used to clear the ground along the course of the ditch. After one pass with a plow, a second crew removed the loosened ground with horses and slip scrapers.

More than 15,000 miles of open ditches were dug throughout northwestern Ohio in this backbreaking manner, opening up 5 million acres of new land to settlement, he said. Most Wood County drainage ditches are wider and deeper than ditches elsewhere, and their size and numbers are impressive sights to newcomers.

Wilhelm wrote that the construction of open drainage ditches is “best exemplified by...the Jackson Cut-Off” which was dug in 1878-79.

First of all, Wood county engineers decided to divert two streams, Brush Creek and Yellow Creek, in Jackson Township, which formerly ran into the North Branch of the Portage River and, eventually into Lake Erie near Port Clinton.

So they dug the Jackson Cut-Off and sent the two creeks into the southern end of the ditch.

The Cut-Off runs straight north for seven miles and is the western boundary of Milton Center. The bridge on Mermill Road as it crosses the ditch is nearly 100 feet long, and at that point the Cut-Off is about 75 feet wide and between 20 and 25 feet deep.

North of Portage Road the Cut-Off takes a left turn, meandering about two more miles before it runs into Beaver Creek, just east of Grand Rapids, and ultimately into the Maumee River. It has been called "the largest waterway for purely drainage purposes in the state." It drains about 30,000 acres (47 square miles) of Wood County, and it cost \$110,000; a \$60,000 upgrading was done in 1948.

Beginning in 1860, drainage ditches were painstakingly dug by man wielding a shovel. Writer Wilhelm wrote, "By the 1860s, literature in farmers' journals was pleading for machines drawn by animal power to replace hand labor."

By 1890, the increasing expense of labor spurred the invention of a mechanical ditching wheel, and in 1892 (after most of the still-existing ditches had already been dug by hand) James B. Hill, a machine shop worker in Bowling Green, built and patented a steam-driven mechanical ditching wheel, Wilhelm said.

"Hill borrowed the idea from a Professor Sites of Tiffin who abandoned the idea in 1888 after several failures. Hill perfected Sites' idea and began manufacturing what he labeled the 'Buckeye Ditcher.' His first model was completed 1893."

After moving his business several times because of financial problems, Hill sold out his business in 1902, and it settled in Findlay as the Buckeye Traction Ditcher Company.

According to Wood County engineer Tony Allion, virtually no ditches have been dug since 1920. Until 1960, ditch maintenance was done primarily as a result of a landowner petition, Allion said. Now, however, the county maintains some 500 to 600 miles of ditches, while the remainder about 2,400 miles, is handled by property owners whose lands drain into them.

A direct consequence, and benefit, of the ditch-digging program, Wilhelm wrote, was the construction of roads. The dirt from the ditches made a bed several inches above the surrounding fields and made for well-drained roads when properly graded.

Another consequence was that the land made tillable by the drainage of surface water was revealed to be some of the richest and most productive farmland in the world.

An even more lasting consequence was the Black Swamp was gradually being eliminated.

With the soil, with every drainage ditch dug, the resulting acres added to tillable farmlands were subtracted from the swamp, killing it acre by acre, farm by farm.

Is there anything left of the Black Swamp?

Almost nothing. One 50-acre tract of wooded land near Rudolph is said by some to remain swamp-like. However, Greg Genzman of Perrysburg, chief ranger for the Wood County Park District, which owns the property, said the acreage is "a degraded remnant of the swamp, but there's very little left."

Others have said that the Goll Woods State Nature Preserve in Fulton County is the largest and most mature fragment of the Black Swamp remaining in Ohio," but geologist Jane Forsyth doubts that the swamp existed that far north of the Maumee River.

In any case, the Black Swamp was defeated soundly, taking about 14,000 years to mature and not more than 60 years to eliminate, such was the determination of the settlers who defied it and who prospered from the rich land that came from it.

Wood County which was 90 percent covered by forest lands in 1830 saw that number reduced to hardly more than 5 percent today. The trees, felled one by one, gave way to a county in which nearly 80 percent of the land now is devoted to crop growing.

And some would be saddened by the realization that most visible reminder of the Black Swamp is the vast network of drainage ditches which are still doing their job of keeping the swamp at bay.

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