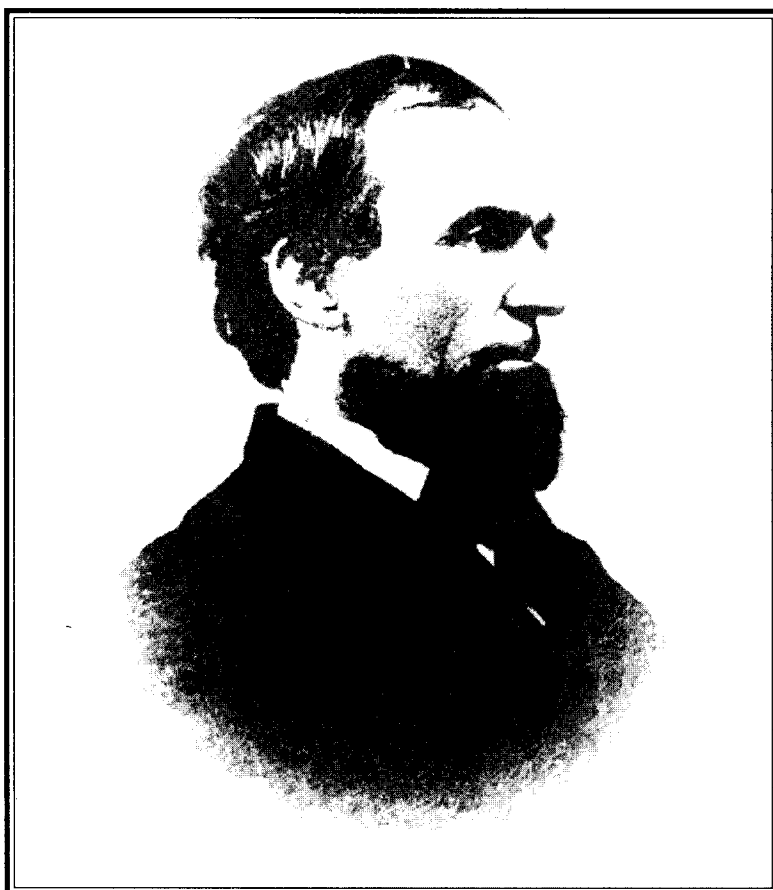


Fragments of the Past

*Historical Sketches of
Oley and Vicinity*



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Chapter 6

Sketches of the Yoder Family



But say you, to the Yoders. We will drive on to Pleasantville, and then we are in the very midst of the settlement of these families.

Pleasantville is a village of some half a dozen dwelling houses all of which are neatly built of brick, a public school house belonging to the independent sub-district of the place, and a tavern. A post office affording the advantages of two mail routes, one bi-weekly to Reading, the other tri-weekly from Kutztown to Pleasantville and Norristown. These are carried by good coaches accommodating passengers at the same time. Besides there is an Odd Fellows Hall, probably the finest building of the kind in the county, outside of Reading. It was built in 1856, was superintended by Daniel B. Yoder, and cost about \$6,000. The inhabitants are principally mechanics, supplying the wants of the surrounding community.

We hardly know on whom to call first of the many, but we will first pay our respect to Mrs. Charlotte Yoder, now over eighty years of age. But what is here recorded was mainly transmitted by her Aunt Reppert, with whom we had the pleasure of meeting at this place on a former occasion.

Yost Yoder (or Judder as the name was originally written in German) came from Switzerland, we are told, accompanied by his brother Hance or John. They were the first settlers of whites in that section of the valley, and the first of this name in this county, though others distantly re-

lated subsequently found their way hither.

They left Switzerland and went to England and from thence came to this country. They were religious fugitives, as appears from the fact that everything was left behind when they fled their country except a copy of the Bible which they brought along and is still preserved among the family.

We have on a former occasion adverted to Yost Yoder. He had settled the farm now the property of Mrs. Charlotte Yoder, and displayed quite a conspicuous part among the early pioneers. He was very fond of hunting and trapping, a passion freely transmitted to his son John, who in the course of time became his successor on this homestead.

Yost Yoder had the following children, viz.: three sons and one daughter. His oldest son was named John, generally nicknamed Yost-Hannes—a name, by the way, he did not like. His second son was Jacob, who moved on the other side of the Schuylkill. The daughter was married to Lazareth Weidner, and the third son was Samuel and lived near Lobachsville.*

The wolves used to annoy his flocks very much. These wily marauders had their scenting places in the adjacent hill from which they would sally forth in the night, giving the pigstys and sheepfolds of the settlers regular inspections and when their bloody thirst was satiated, retired to their dens. Yoder, though an excellent hunter, found all his ordinary modes frustrated in capturing

these thieves, who cautiously evaded all his traps. He bethought himself of a plan for their destruction. Close by one of their trails, he dug a hole in the ground about eight feet deep. The sides were made smooth and even. At the bottom he placed some mutton, and covered the opening of the hole lightly with brush. The wolves, attracted by their olfactories of this favorite morsel, followed the scent of the bait and, before becoming aware of the stratagem, were precipitated into the pit from which they could not escape. It was thus that he captured five in one night and finally succeeded in ridding the neighborhood of these depredators. (However, no immortal honors have been attached to his name, like that of General Putnam, for killing but a single she-wolf.)

He was a man full of courage, but in his demeanor rough and coarse. Indeed, he became in consequence a byword which is not yet quite absolute in the neighborhood, "like Yost-Hannes," meaning to imply as rough and uncouth as he. He was fond of making fun at the expense of the Indians. At a time when these tawny neighbors were celebrating a wedding, he resolved to have his bit of jest. There was quite a company of them and Mr. Y. approached them secretly, having first provided himself with a good hickory switch. He watched them closely for a while and, just when they were in the height of their glee and jubilee, he pounced in their midst. While they were far from dreaming any harm, he commenced switching most awfully and cruelly the whole company until it was entirely dispersed. This was done with-

out any provocation; as he said, "Just for the simple sport of the thing."

This shows in part the character of his disposition. He loved sport, but his tastes in matters of this kind were evidently rough and no doubt adapted to his time. He was also fond of athletic exercises. He was of a wiry frame and remarkably healthy constitution, and all his children who died a natural death were distinguished for longevity.

Every fall he made hunting excursions over the Blue Mountains, when he would be absent from home for weeks, threading his way through the trackless forest, solitary and alone, save for his favorite dog and rifle. He had several depots along his line in hollow trees, wherein he often left stores from year to year.

One day John Yoder and his wife went on some errand, a distance that took them nearly all day, and left home in charge of their children until they should return. The good parents were detained on their way and did not return as soon as they had expected. During their absence two Indians paid them a visit, as they often did, and inquired for whiskey from the children. They told them that their parents were not at home, and so could not give them any. This refusal was quite a disappointment, especially to one of the Indians, who at once commenced menacing and abusing the little girls, even insinuating that he would have "him" before he left the house. This threat much alarmed the children. The passive Indian took offense at the other's conduct and protected them. Words soon ran high between them and they withdrew from the house. The children, though fright-

**The following note is an awful recital of true facts; but, of course, for the pity of highly respectable living connections, unpublishable:* Many of these children proved worthless. John Yoder hung himself at Reading, but used to live with his sister, Mrs. Cunius, at the old homestead.

Samuel was intemperate, and died in the woods. His body laid out about three weeks before it was found, and animals had defaced it considerably. He lived and owned the place now the property of George Kerr, which he got from his father.

Jacob was a little lame and short-witted, became a drunkard and at last died. (They had no poor-house then and each township had to maintain its own poor.) He left a son who was known by the name of "Irish Pete," who also committed suicide by hanging himself.

Samuel Yoder, a son of George Yoder, the Revolutionary War soldier, also hung himself.

ened, followed them stealthily in their wake, to observe their movements, not knowing what might follow. About ten rods north of the house stands a sassafras tree. Under this the Indians halted. With uplifted tomahawks they faced each other. It was an awful moment, for a desperate conflict ensued between the two, in which one was killed and scalped.

This is a true story recorded verbatim from an eyewitness, one of those children who beheld the bloody tragedy with her own eyes. They had concealed themselves in a thicket, almost terrified to death. However no further harm accrued to them. This happened in 1756. The narrator was Mrs. Y. Reppert.

Mrs. Reppert was quite familiar with the Indian dialect and could speak it well in her old days. A Delaware Indian happened to call at her house once, a few years before her death and she was able to converse with him. It shows her excellent memory.

We must next call on our especial friends, Messrs. John and David Yoder. They have a fine house and an excellent farm. We will have the pleasure of finding these gentlemen quite intelligent, who understand to do the polite, as well as the right, in every respect. There is also a grist and clover mill on the property, doing a good business in this way.

The farm of the brothers, David and John Yoder, was first settled by their ancestor Hance or John Yoder, a brother to Yost, and has ever since remained in the family.

They showed us a number of old papers from which we learned that the first survey of this estate was returned in the Secretary's Office at Philadelphia for Hance Yoder, dated March 25th, 1714. This survey included many of the beautiful farms along the road toward the Oley Churches.

From another paper we learned that Anthony Lee returned into the Secretary's Office, June the 21st, 1717, the survey of a large tract comprising over 300 acres, adjacent to the north of Yoder's.

We were shown other interesting family relics among which was a German Bible, unquestionably the oldest copy to be found far and near. It bears the date 1530, showing that it was printed while

Martin Luther was living, and was perhaps one of the first specimens issued by the German press. It is nicely printed and somewhat illustrated. The text is not divided into verses.

In referring to church history, it appears that but very few, if any, Bibles were printed before 1540, and this date may be nearer the age of it than the former. It had been in the Yoder family for a long time in the old country yet, and was the only thing regarded of special value brought by them in their flight to this country.

John or Hance Yoder was a brother to Yost Yoder and it is said that they came over together. Mr. D. Yoder thinks they did. Hance Yoder had four sons: Hans, Samuel, Daniel and Peter. (Daniel died 1747, August 21, age 31 years, 8 months.) Second Hans had three sons: Daniel, Martin and Jacob. His wife, Sarah Shenkle died in 1798 and was buried on a Whitsuntide holiday at Philip DeTurk's graveyard. The gravestones at the cemetery are of very fine sandstone and extra workmanship, and Y. thinks, as they differ in texture from our own, were in all probability brought from the old country.

On or near the spot where now stands the stately mansion and other excellent buildings, was first erected a small house, the home of Hance Yoder and his family. The precise date of this I was not informed; but this is certain, that at the time all around was yet a mere wilderness inhabited by Indians and beasts. His only neighbor was Yost Yoder.

One day Mr. Yoder, accompanied by his wife (a helpmate of those days), was engaged in extending their farmland by clearing away more of the forest in the field lying opposite the Pleasantville Hotel. The industrious parents had closed up their cabin with all their children in order to protect them from harm from the beasts which occasionally straggled along, and engaged themselves the more earnestly to their arduous toil, being assured that all was safe and secure at home.

Yoder and his wife were however not long at work in the field that day before they were alarmed by the report of a gun in the direction of their house. They hastened to the house and found a gang of neighboring Indians, who were intoxicated.



They had come to the house to see Mr. Yoder who, by the way, was an intimate friend of theirs. But when they came to the house and found the door locked and yet somebody within, they thought they were intentionally refused admittance. They became enraged and indignant and, being drunk, without forethought fired through the door with a rifle. Mr. Y. was one of those that lacked not courage and was speedily amongst them and found them very boisterous and threatening, but without giving them time he gave them a thorough switching. With this the whole party left with threats of revenge. Neither was he kept long in suspense for soon the whole company, with quite an accession, returned demanding satisfaction. The latter portion fortunately were sober. Yoder coolly told them all that transpired and showed them the bullet hole in the door of the house and the helpless children within, and how easily they might have killed some of his very dear children. This had the desired effect. The Indians became enraged at the perpetrator, so that they would have murdered him outright had it not been for the kind intervention of Mr. Yoder, who with difficulty persuaded them to desist inasmuch as no harm had occurred. He advised them to go home in peace and do no more, which they agreed to do. The rifle ball fortunately had done no harm within.

They had also carried off a bundle of Yoder's deerskins which were returned by the latter company; but Y. refused them, on the ground that he was in full satisfaction. They, however, in-

sisted on returning them to Yoder.

In making inquiry in regard to Captain Jacob Yoder, noticed in I. Rupp's work, page 181, the Messrs. Yoder told us "He was our uncle." They say he was born here on this spot, and not at Reading. They also recollect him well when he paid them a visit, now over fifty years ago. They say he was of a lively disposition and had imbibed considerably of the liquor. He was anxious to take Daniel along, who was then a small boy, and told how he raised hemp and tobacco in Kentucky. Mr. Y. says he recollected this very distinctly. He also told them many of the Revolutionary incidents, as well as those of the Indian wars in which he had engaged. He had traveled all the way from Kentucky and back again on horseback. He stayed here for some time.

In Rupp's *Berks and Lebanon* occurs the following, page 181:

Capt. Jacob Yoder was born in Reading 1758. He is a highly respectable and wealthy farmer of Spencer County, Kentucky. To him belongs the honor of having descended the Mississippi River in the first flatboat, and if no other powers than those of time and wind and storm shall assail the tablet, of which an account is given below, it will preserve the fact, recorded in deep indentations upon it, through a series of ages to come.

The iron tablet was cast by Hanks and Niles of Cincinnati in 1834, and now marks the spot where remain the bones of Capt. Yoder. It is one of the first of the kind ever executed west of the Alleghenies. It has this inscription:

Jacob Yoder
Was born in Reading, Pennsylvania
August 11th, 1758
And was a soldier in the Revolutionary Army
in 1777 and 1778;
He emigrated to the West in 1780, and in May
1782, from Fort Redstone, on the
Monongahela River
in the
First Flat Boat
That ever descended the Mississippi.
He died April 7, 1832, at his farm in Spencer
County, Kentucky and lies here
Interred beneath this tablet.

No one who has any pretensions to the possession of a soul can contemplate this tablet without a variety of emotions. A brilliant series of associations enchain the mind of the gazer; as with a spell to it. That the man who navigated the first flatboat that ever descended the Mississipp-

pi should have lived to see a magnificent steamboat ploughing the same watery track, is a truth which affords a subject of admiration. When he launched his little ark on the Monogahela, what were his anticipations? Luck, as time has proved! No, he thought of the wily savage, whose cover was a wide and untrodden wilderness. He proceeded on his precarious voyage. Instead of cheering aspects of busy cities, flourishing villages, and cultivated farms, which now claim the voyager's attention, he saw a range of hills unshorn of their primeval wilderness, whence the lugubrious howl of the wolf proceeded, the vast wilderness which the foot of the civilized man had not trodden. Instinct, 'tis true, with life; but it was the life of the forest denizen, the trembling fawn and the myriad songsters of the wild. He reached his destination, but his safety was a manual to himself; and his dangers hereafter recited, awakened up a fear-stricken excitement in the minds of those who listened to his tale of perils "by field and flood." He lived to see the country change masters, the wilderness blossom as the rose, and human energy achieve a conquest over a thousand obstacles.

"This is the greatest triumph that man has yet achieved. History records no parallel. To the future generations of America, it will be what the fabulous age of the Titans was to the ancient Greeks."

Capt. Jacob Yoder is a direct descendant of this family of Oley and, in many traits of his daring adventures and general character, bears a striking resemblance to the elder Yoders.

Hance Yoder was the builder and owner of Griesemer's Mill property as well as the homestead of the Yoders, and had trouble with his neighbor Leshner. Neither did his domestic affairs glide along very smoothly. He was intemperate and, as might be expected, had a good many domestic squabbles. One day after he was absent from home, he returned in the evening to find his house deserted by his wife, with everything that could be carried off except his three children, leaving them in a most deplorable condition, not even leaving the means with which to feed them. Her brother, Mr. Martin Shenkle, took advantage of Mr. Yoder's absence and carried off all that he could with his sister. She subsequently removed to Reading where she had an illegitimate son, who later lived at Susquehanna, a respectable man. When she died she left some property. She was unfaithful. She lies buried at the family burial place at DeTurks in Oley. The burial took place at Easter. (*Note: Hance Yoder lived at what is now Griesemer's Mill, and it was here that Capt. Jacob Yoder was born in 1758.*)