

# John Harper sank roots by creek that

## Settler of 1834 traveled far to claim soldier's bonus

By VIRGINIA GUST

A chilly spring wind was blowing across the still untouched countryside that day in March as the tired team of horses brought the heavily laden wagon to a stop in a clearing.

The driver, wearied from his long journey from Batavia, N. Y., got down from the wagon seat to stretch and look around at the section of land that would become his home for the rest of his life.

The land bordered what now is B Drive N. in Emmett Township.

The year was 1834 and the man was John Harper. He had come to settle his 134 acres of land, a bonus from the government. He couldn't have chosen a lovelier spot. There were meadows, a fine stand of hardwood timber and a creek running through his property.

Harper had an eye for beauty and business. The timber would provide logs for his house and the creek would furnish power for a sawmill where lumber could be cut to sell to other settlers.

Harper died 130 years ago, but his name has remained to become an integral part of the community. The creek where the sawmill was located became Harper Creek and, 121 years after Harper's arrival, a school district was named Harper Creek Community Schools.

The creek is the loveliest of streams, spilling and sparkling along through farmland, woods and residential areas, making homes pleasanter because it is there.

Harper Creek, a busy rivulet, flows from Graham Lake through Leroy, Newton and Emmett townships and then empties into Minges Creek, which flows into the Kalamazoo River.

On its way from the lake to its confluence with Minges Creek, Harper Creek slows to wind enchantingly through Binder Park to the delight of park visitors.

*Story by Virginia Gust  
Photos by Don Nelson*

Years ago, before the arrival of many settlers, there was an Indian trail along the banks of the creek. Mrs. Bernice White, descendant of area pioneers, remembers Mary Cameron, an early resident who died at the age of 101, telling about the Indians packing fur pelts along the trail through Binder farm on their way to sell them in Marshall.

More than 3,000 students attend Harper Creek Community Schools. The number of students today far exceeds the population of Calhoun County when Harper arrived in 1834.

When the district was organized in 1949, it was called the Calhoun Rural Agricultural School District.

The name proved confusing and in 1955 word went out that the district was looking for another name. Mr. and Mrs. Guy Morgan and their daughter, Judith, who lived in the school district, suggest-

ed the name Harper Creek. "The creek ran right through the school district and we thought it would be a fitting name," recalled Mrs. Morgan.

Morgan, who died a number of years ago, was a member of the school board for nine years and was president of the board when the high school was built.

According to Michigan Pioneer Records, Harper was a "man of means."

He had been a captain in the War of 1812, in which the United States and the British fought for three years.

At the end of the war, the government had little or no money to pay the officers who had served in the forces, so bonus land in the "west" was offered in payment.

Why Harper waited so long to claim his land bonus isn't known but in 1834 he arrived with his land patent, signed by President Andrew Jackson.

Harper, with the help of his eight children, cleared the land and a year later he built the sawmill.

The mill is gone now, but the stone wall at the dam that Harper built 142 years ago remains. Submerged on the bottom of the millrace, west of the dam, are wide planks believed to be remnants of the sawmill.

Harper and his family first lived in a log house. Later, he built a frame home for his family.

The house, located at 6994 B Drive N., still is standing and has been made more charming through the years by succeeding owners.

Dr. and Mrs. Emory W. Morris ago. During their 30 years there, they made some additions to the home and added plantings to the yard. Dr. Morris, who retired in 1970 after directing the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for 37 years, died in 1974.

The property now is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Conway, who also have added improvements to take fuller advantage of the property's great beauty.

Harper constructed his house on a slight knoll overlooking the sawmill. At the rear of the house, in a park-like setting, is the original barn with its board and batten siding, now serving as a stable for the Conway horses.

Some of the magnificent old oaks on the grounds must have been standing there when Harper arrived to take up his homestead.

The eight-inch square timbers used in constructing the barn must have come from trees on Harper's property that apparently also provided the wide planks for the flooring. The large square nails securing the planking still are much in evidence.

A sketch of the old sawmill, a gift from Dr. Morris, hangs in Harper Creek Community Schools' administrative offices.

Harper died in 1847, and according to the pioneer records, his daughter, Mrs. Sophia Henderson, inherited the property. He is buried in the Sanstone Cemetery on 11-Mile Road in the shadow of I-94.