

Settlers Moving to the Midwest – The Blodgetts

Introduction

What qualities were required of the early settlers in order to leave the comfort and familiarity of their homes (mainly in the northeast) and make the trek west to frontier Illinois?

Curiosity?

Courage?

Confidence?

All of these traits which amounts to character – it took an incredible amount of gutsiness to make this move into uncharted territory.

“It has been said that whatever else he might lack, the Yankee immigrant never arrived without what he considered the indispensable articles: a plough, a bed, a barrel of salt, meat, a supply of tea and molasses, a Bible and A WIFE.”

Israel Porter Blodgett in Northeast

Born in 1797 in Amherst, MA. (the day that John Quincy Adams was inaugurated second president of the U.S.). He married Avis Dodge in 1820 when he was 23.

Career as a blacksmith. Sent by the government to Harper's Ferry - foreman of the welding room.

Worked with a very intelligent young man who was described as a young mulatto (mixed race). After getting to know one another, the man revealed to Israel he was a slave. His master hired him to the Superintendent of the Armory and the master took his wages except a small amount for clothing.

He asked Israel how he could escape to Canada where he heard there were no slaves and escaped slaves couldn't be returned.

Israel explained that if he would follow the North Star, he would sooner or later reach Canada, but he must travel at night along unfrequently roads.

Soon after the man went missing-someone divulged that it was Israel who made his escape possible. He was discharged.

Israel returned to MA and had businesses making plows but building burned. In NY made wagon wheels, gun barrels, & anchor chains for 4 years.

Travel to West

1830 – Israel was smitten with “Western Fever” and decided with others to organize the Hampshire Colony with plans to settle someplace in Illinois.

Started the trek with Mr. Spear and Mr. Jones. In Terre Haute, Indiana, Mr. Spear became discouraged and turned back. Mr. Jones decided to settle west of LaSalle in Bureau Creek. The Hampshire Colony settled there. The winter of 1830 was brutal.

Israel couldn't convince Mr Spear to keep heading north; he believed it better to settle nearer to Chicago where they could find good land. He made a claim on land about 5 miles south of Naperville and erected a house – log cabin.

Avis Moves West

Avis had a rough trek out west. She traveled with her 4 children (one under 6 months old) with about 40 people. Met group in Albany, N.Y. and took a canal boat to Buffalo which took 2 weeks.

Took steamboat from Buffalo to Detroit. Planned to board a schooner to Chicago, which was to also carry supplies to Ft. Dearborn. But found no schooner available because the garrison left Ft Dearborn.

Colonists had to find teams of horses to travel to Chicago by land. Long and tedious journey- "The roads were in the crudest shape, hardly any work done upon them."

They had to cross streams in wagons and take ferry boats to cross large streams. The trip took three weeks.

Israel eventually met up with them in Chicago and together they went to their home in DuPage. Family was the 4th. Henry said, "And when all the fatigues and trials of the journey were at an

end, she moved into a log house, which she made more comfortable & homelike than any such home I have ever seen.”

Avis’s Views on Slavery

Like Israel, Avis had strong convictions about the injustices of slavery. Both were outspoken abolitionists as were their children.

According to their son, Henry: A few weeks after moving to their house, a slave bounty hunter on horseback rode up to the door, leading two negro freedom seekers, whose hands were tied, and who were held by a rope passed from their hands to the pommel of the saddle. He asked mother if she would give him a drink of water. She took a tin pail and cup and went to the spring, filled the pail with fresh, clear water, and began giving the negroes a drink. The fellow cursed her and asked why in the devil she was giving water to the ‘n’ word, said that he asked for water for himself, not them. She answered that the spring was there, he could help himself; that these men couldn’t do that, and therefore she was giving them the water and not him.

Henry said that this was the first opportunity had as a young boy to “see a sample of our southern slavery, and it was a lesson which has stayed with me through life, as it has with all other members of our family.”

The Blodgetts eventually moved to DG and they operated their house as a station on the Underground Railroad 1840s-1861. They provided aid & shelter to freedom seekers.

Underground Railroad

- Large movement of people, white, black and some native tribes who opposed slavery and worked together at great risk to help people to escape to freedom.**
- A person escaping slavery could be hidden until taken to the next stop. This organized system is called “underground” because it seemed as if people would suddenly disappear as if going underground.**
- DuPage County was a critical passageway because it was due west of Chicago, the destination for catching boats sailing to Canada where slavery had been outlawed.**
- The Blodgett house became a stop on the UGRR as they helped slaves escape to freedom. Often the lantern in their window signaled their house was a safe place for runaway slaves to find food, clothes and transportation to Chicago on their way to Canada. Israel would secretly transport the freedom seekers at night to the home of Philo Carpenter in Chicago.**

- **The risks for helping on the UGRR were substantial. It's believed that the Graue Mill area in Fullersburg was a secret stopover in the UGRR.**

Chief Aptakisic & the Blodgetts

Aptakisic (aka Half Day), the Potawatami chief, formed a true friendship with the Blodgetts. They desired to live in peace with one another. Aptokestic met at their home several times during 1831-32.

There were 5 tribes of Indians that occupied the region: the Potawatami, the Foxes, Sacs, Miami & Blackhawk. Israel smoked the pipe of peace many times with some of the chiefs – Waubonsie, Shabbona & Aptakisic.

In May of 1832 a War Council was called among the Native American Indian chiefs. Black Hawk and his band of Sacs and Foxes wanted to wage war with the white people. They had been moved west of the Mississippi River and came back to make war upon the settlements. Aptakisic didn't vote for the war, and after the council ended, he quickly left the area.

On May 10, about midnight, Aptakisic came to the Blodgett's house and gave a whoop. Israel sprang out and opened the door and Aptakisic told him that he needed to get away from here because they were going to be attacked.

Flight to Fort Dearborn

After Aptakisic arrived to warn the Blodgetts, there were slightly different versions of what happened next. In a memoir by Julia Blodgett, their granddaughter, Avis first prepared food for Aptakisic and insisted that he rest. He rolled himself in his blanket and slept on the floor. In another version, the family quickly prepared necessary items and left asap. But in both versions, neighbors were warned about Black Hawk and a procession was gathered on the road to Chicago.

When the procession got under way, mostly with oxen teams, Aptakisic (Half-Day) dropped into the rear, and not saying a word moved on with them following in their trail to assure their safe journey to Chicago where they would go to Fort Dearborn.

They camped for the night at Laughton's place, where Riverside now is, and in the morning continued to Chicago, the old chief following them as he did the day before until they were in sight of Fort Dearborn, where he waved them good-bye turned his

horse and disappeared. They spent 4 months at Ft Dearborn. The Blodgetts and other white settlers were in grave danger, and Aptakisic saved many lives. Potawatomi braves were held together near present day Riverside.

Move to Downers Grove

Imagine the terror and stress Avis experienced during the Black Hawk war! The family fled their home when she was about 6 months pregnant. Two weeks after returning home from Fort Dearborn, Avis gave birth to a healthy baby boy who eventually became a captain in the Civil War. As Henry said, it was a crucial test of her courage.

Israel bought 300 acres of land in DuPage for \$1.25 per acre. In the fall of 1835, he sold the farm moved to Downers Grove where he built a log cabin and raised 7 sons and one daughter. At times, the Indians would come in groups and ask for food. Avis never denied them, knowing it was greater security for her family to give them food.

Aptakisic, Waubonsie, and Shabbona were frequent visitors at the Blodgett home for years. One Sunday after church, Avis was surprised to find a pow wow outside their home. They chose Avis to secure their weapons away while they danced &

whooped it up under the influence of fire water. 30 hours later when they sobered up they thanked her & called her “the brave little white squaw.”

Life in Downers Grove

Following the Black Hawk War, the local Native Americans were forced to move west of the Mississippi. In their forced exile, they had to endure many diseases (including malaria) besides crude conditions and rough weather, which affected their crops.

In 1846, after 10 years living in a log cabin, Israel built a 1 ½ story house. It became a stop on the Underground Railroad. The home was on Randall St. Years later when the land was sold to a builder, it was relocated to Maple Ave where it still stands today. It is the oldest house in Downers Grove. The house remained in the family until the death of grandson Will in 1933.

Avis believed in the importance of education. She taught her daughter Mary so that she could teach. Mary became a teacher for her siblings and other children at 12 years of age. The Blodgett children became valued citizens. Three fought in the Civil War, one became a federal judge, another a lawyer and one was the mayor of Waukegan.

Conclusion re: Israel

Israel was one of the first entrepreneurs in DuPage County and was instrumental in the growth of this area. He was an experienced blacksmith, an inventor of a self-scouring plow to cut through prairie grass, and a farmer. He was a friend to the pioneers, to the local Native Americans and an abolitionist.

Henry says of Israel: “My father was a plain, unassuming man--a mechanic, and from a long line of mechanics, *and he was a good mechanic*. He had only a common school education as was given the sons of mechanics in the latter part of the 18th century. But he was a reader of good books and far better informed than the average men of his occupation...he had the courage of his convictions on all questions of public interest. He was one of the early anti-slavery men, and courageous in the assertion of his views upon the sin of slavery long before there was any Abolition or Anti-Slavery Party.”

Conclusion re: Avis

Henry says: “My mother was a remarkable woman...a great reader, one who appropriated what she read to aid in the duties as a wife and mother. She was one of the most affectionate and care-taking mothers, and took pride in shaping the minds of her children to fit them for the duties of life.

“She was also a woman of splendid courage. Few women could or would have done what she did in starting from central Massachusetts in 1831, with four children, the oldest not ten years old and the youngest a little over six months old, to make such a journey to the then wild West....she bore all the fatigue, danger and discomfort of the journey without a murmur, and was the most cheerful and even spirited person of the party. And at the end of her journey, she moved into a log home. In the midst of these new surroundings and inconveniences, she found time to teach her young children and carry on their education as well, if not better than it had been done in the schools we left behind. No sick neighbor was neglected or went without care, and no stranger was ever denied food or lodging at our house. But the crucial test of her courage came, when in the Black Hawk war, we fled from our home – she within three months of the birth of her child. It was in all respects, evidence of a heroic self-control and equanimity of spirit which shows her to have been no common woman.”

Yes, no doubt that Avis Blodgett was one remarkable woman.

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