

BY DAVID RUTTER



Few photographs, if any, are available of northern Illinois' prairie settlers during Barrington's earliest settlement (in the 1830s and 1840s). This image shows a covered wagon with its sides rolled up. It is parked at a military facility in the East, most likely near Richmond, Va. This albumen photographic print was taken on July 5, 1865, the year Barrington was incorporated. Albumen (silver) photography was invented in 1850 and offered the first commercially viable way to take and print photos.

The Prairie Pilgrims

BEFORE THEY WERE SETTLERS, founders, and ancestors, the early settlers to Barrington shared an epic commonality. They were people hoping for a better life. But more fundamentally, they were wayfarers, just as Pilgrims had been 200 years earlier. Just as the Irish, Poles, and Germans would be at Ellis Island six decades later.

Beginning a new life with new joys and new human richness required immense work in the early 1830s.

To reach the new life in the fertile hills that abounded in Barrington and Cuba Townships, they were rattled, shaken, and bruised aboard heavy wagons that carried them from the east. The trips often lasted months.

The journey was hard in ways we barely comprehend now. Rudimentary roads were a luxury. Paved highways were nonexistent. Every danger

might not only be an inconvenience, but also deadly.

But the uncompromising nature of the trip was just as well, because it trained them to survive. Living in the 1830s was hard. We have forgotten that, because their life is not ours.

A comfortable life changes attitudes and context. But to clearly understand who we are now, it's useful to see the prairie pilgrims and their lives in 1833. It's where and when Barrington was born.

THE URGE TO GO WEST

Even before they called themselves Americans, the West seduced Americans. It was in their bones. The compass arrow pointing in that direction sang of freedom, plenty, and rebirth. And escape.

The earliest colonists felt that urge when they sailed from Europe. Settlers in New England felt the same call when they loaded their families

and every pot and piece of furniture they owned aboard heavy wagons and slapped the reins to drive West.

In this quest for rebirth, Barrington's beginnings arrived late to the frontier stage.

By the time Barrington was populated in the 1840s, Illinois had been the nation's 21st state for more than 20 years. The lower two-thirds of the state had long been settled by people from the South.

But Indians owned the prairie-grassed northern tier of Illinois and organized settlements there were risky. The trails were protected from violence only because soldiers traveled there as frequently as friendly Indians.

When the Chicago Treaty settled the Black Hawk War with the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi tribes in 1833, the land rush was poised to begin. Would-be immigrants bottled up in Massachusetts and New York craved what Barrington and Cuba Townships most offered—cheap, open land. Just as Indians dispatched their ownership of New York City for trading trinkets and beads, the prairie plains tribes sold most of northern Illinois for \$100,000. The price was negotiated at the end of a musket barrel.

Eastern farmers watched all this with interest—and hope. For \$1.25 an acre, the standard federal Land Office price, a farmer with a large family could live on his own land for far less in Barrington than he could rent in the East.

One of the young Illinois citizen-soldier militiamen who forged that land deal was Abe Lincoln. He helped create Barrington long before he saved the Union.

In 1833, Barrington was the American West. It called out, and settlers came, eventually by the thousands.

THE TRIPS OF A LIFETIME

Pack your bags. Load up the SUV.

If you live in Great Barrington, Mass. or Troy, N.Y., or any of a dozen other eastern towns, the trip to any of the various Barrington, Ill., communities takes about 14 hours to travel the 850-plus miles on Interstate-90.

In 1833, that trip took seven to nine weeks if

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you came by heavy-yoked wagon and oxen team through the muddy trails of Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan, or down to the Ohio River, and half that time if the family hopped aboard a Great Lakes steamboat in Buffalo and headed to Chicago.

On a good day, wagons could cover about 15 miles. It was a trip only late spring and summer could accommodate.

Many of Barrington's original 200 families poured through Chicago, a miserable, contagion-infested hovel of 200 people, and widely regarded as a den of thieves and scoundrels. Even state tax collectors disliked visiting the place because it never generated enough tax revenue to pay for their trip. By 1840, the population had grown to 4,000 people.

Nothing changed the trip west for future Barringtonians more than the invention of the steamship, which allowed for travel on the Great Lakes.

Four vessels came to Chicago harbor in 1833. That went to 450 in 1836. Said a Chicago newspaper at the time: "Almost all vessels from the lower lakes are full of passengers and our streets are thronged with wagons loaded with household furniture and the implements necessary for farming."

Some of the boats carried 900 passengers and their baggage. During the summer season of 1835, about 1,200 people daily left the port of Buffalo bound for Chicago.

By 1847, traffic on the lakes required 60 steamboats and 340 vessels of other descriptions to handle the traffic. From Buffalo to Chicago by steamboat in 1850 cost \$10.

THE FIRST FAMILIES

The first families of Barrington and Cuba Townships came through a well-worn cultural pipeline.

The first permanent European-American settler in Cuba Township was lifelong bachelor Amos Flint, in 1834. His name still dots geographical points in the area. Then Jesse F. Miller and William Van Orsdal arrived from Steuben County, N.Y.

Most of New England's pipeline to Barrington (the Great Barrington, Massachusetts families) were English, originally from the Northampton region north of London. Those from Troy, N.Y., added a sprinkling of Dutch and Irish.

Tower Lakes was an Irish enclave populated first by Rose and Hugh Davlin of Troy. They were

born and wed in Ireland and then settled in Troy, as had a few of their Illinois neighbors. They claimed 80 acres of government land, and built a log cabin.

But because Illinois was populated from all directions, the township retains a multi-hued cultural quilt of Scots, Germans, and transplanted Canadians.

LIVING THE PRAIRIE SETTLER LIFE

In the beginning, settler families shared communal similarities. Whatever they brought overland from Chicago was housed as quickly as possible inside a broad, low, insulated log cabin. Building that cabin was always the family's first course of activity.

Most came as farmers but quickly diversified into mercantile commerce. Soon they kept homesteads and livestock, as well as a "modern" home in town.

Prairie life was always confined to the basics and divided along old, rigid gender boundaries. Men worked outside and built the homestead's inventory of improvements and assets. Women worked inside and tended to domestic responsibilities, which were as massive as they were complex.

Women tended to the medical preparations required for general health. The discovery that microbes cause contagion was not determined for another 50 years after Barrington was settled. The cause of illness was usually laid to a dissolute life or the wrath of an angry God.

While medical discoveries were on the way, citizens of frontier Illinois faced a life filled with episodic epidemics of malaria, cholera, and "mange", poorly trained or quack doctors, potentially fatal cures, and generally unhealthy conditions. Public sanitation was disconnected from the illness it caused. In 1833, civilization often reeked.

The Barrington area's early settlers arrived in the midst of a devastating cholera epidemic, which killed 10 percent of the population in most western cities. Imported from Europe, it spread via frontier soldiers and became embedded in the prairie. Life expectancy was 40 to 50 years and brutally low for children. Bad teeth and childbirth took lives.

Against this scourge, families had sulfur, curative roots, blood-letting, and several addictive narcotics. There were no antibiotics or surgery

beyond emergency amputation. No one washed their hands to prevent illness.

One third of Illinoisans lived past age 60 in 1830. But that is solely a function of declining infant mortality.

They grew corn, which they ground into meal. Prairie cuisine was often mushy and bland. Cast iron was the metallic custom of the culture—both for farming and cooking. Music and entertainment were home-generated. Parents raised crops and children, and an occasional barn.

Women wore heavily layered petticoats even during summer. Men wore shirts with long shirt-tails because they did not wear underwear.

Settlers ate everything they grew, shot, or pulled from rivers.

Life ebbed, but did not change perceptibly for 60 years after Flint arrived. Then the railroads came. Electricity eventually arrived as did incandescent lights and the telephone. Then electrically-powered refrigeration ended one great frontier killer—bacteria-saturated food. One by one, the necessities of primitive survival were replaced by modern conveniences.

The prairie pilgrims of Illinois could at last breathe easier. They could thrive.

It had been a long, hard trip to the promised land. U

Editor's note: If you enjoyed this story, order your copy of Quintessential Barrington's special edition due out March 1, 2015. This special edition is the official publication for Barrington's 2015 Sesqui-centennial. Order forms are available at Village Hall at 200 S. Hough St., or online at www.qbarrington.com, or call us to mail you an order form: 847-381-3860.



David Rutter is a frequent contributor to Quintessential Barrington.

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