

When the Everett House was erected

Recollections of Theodore E. Potter

Lansing Journal 10/04/1902

The old Everett house now begins to present a dismantled appearance, the windows have been removed and the roof torn off. In a few weeks the building will have been entirely carried away, and another year, it is expected, new and imposing building will be erected on the site.

Theodore E. Potter recalls the time when this old building was being erected.

“In 1847 or 53 years ago this month, “ he said yesterday, “as a boy of 16 years, I made my first trip to Lansing, going with the surveyors from my home 12 miles southwest of the city, where Potterville is now located. My father had died in July, 1846, leaving my mother with seven children — the oldest 18 years of age and the youngest five years — living in a double log shanty, with split logs for the roof. We had seven acres of cleared land, which made an acre for each child.

“The surveyors started from Battle Creek to lay out an air line wagon road to the Capital City, going via Bellevue and Charlotte. After leaving Charlotte, my mother's seven acres was the only cleared land the surveyors struck until they reached this city. When they reached our place they asked for supper, lodging and breakfast for ten and when morning came my mother had hired me out to the party to make the trip to Lansing. As I was the youngest, I had to do all the odd jobs, and they kept me quite busy for five days.



“The first improvement we came to in Lansing was the Benton House (now called the Everett House) which was being built of brick and up one story high. This was the first brick that I had ever seen masons laying. and I watched the masons with a great deal of interest. There was then no hotel accommodations in the city, and our party spread blankets for the night under a large elm tree on Washington avenue near the Briggs store.

The timber was yet standing on Washington avenue in its nature state. We bought our supplies from the Briggs store for our morning breakfast, and started out early to look for the state capitol, which was to be raised on that day. Everybody had been invited to take part in the raising of this state building, and many came from the two county seats — Mason and DeWitt. In fact the day was made a holiday for everybody within reach of the Capitol City. As I look back upon it today, it was one of the great events of my boyhood life. Many a gallon of good Kentucky whiskey was used on that state occasion.

“In October, the next month, I was selected from my family to go with four of my uncles — Henry Taylor, G.P. Carman, John Strang and Samuel Preston (who are all now dead) — to build a log schoolhouse in Lansing for C.P. Spragee, another uncle to teach in. This school was located on Spring street, near the mineral wells. Chief Okemos and his tribe of Indians were camped along the banks of Cedar river, just west of us. Bush & Thomas’ general store that handled more goods than all the other stores in the city, was on Cedar street near the Main street bridge. The logs for the new schoolhouse were taken from land near where the vinegar works is located without the consent of the owners. We had four yokes of oxen with us, and I handled my mother’s team. Chief Okemos took quite a lively interest in me. I suppose on account of my youth and my poor clothes, and he would point to my feet as much as to say that I should have moccasins. He would go with me after logs and often place his hand on me and say, ‘Pickeninie Chemockeman’ (which meant small white man). He would invite me down to his tepee and his squaws would make fun of my bare feet. He presented me with a nice pair of moccasins, which I was very proud of, as it was the only instance I ever knew of that an Indian had ever given a white person anything.

“Two of the ox teams were sent to Flushing, 40 miles away for fine lumber for the floor of the school building, as it was the nearest fine mill. The building was finished in about two weeks. It was two stories high, with school rooms above and below and there is no doubt but that Mr. Spragee started the first graded school that was ever taught in this city, he and his wife being the teachers. Mr. Spragee’s wife dying in the spring of 1849, he left Lansing for California, going by way of Cape Horn, and making the trip in a little less than six months. . He became a noted lawyer on the Pacific coast and is now located in Shasta county, Cal., on a fruit ranch and is enjoying life at the ripe old age of about 80 years.”

Note, Theodore E Potter died on October 25, 1910. Mr. Potter traveled across the plains to California, fought in the Sioux Wars, served with the Union Army through the Civil War and also took part in the hunt for the Younger brothers after the Northfield raid. His life story, **The Autobiography of Theodore Edgar Potter**, is a fascinating read.