

LOST IN THE WOODS

A Thrilling Incident in the Early History of Ingham County

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These long winter evenings have a tendency to bring to mind days and circumstances of the past; and the many scenes of thrilling interest that transpired in the early settlement of this county, are to me interesting themes of thought.

I will relate one that has some very strange and unaccountable features. And I will here say that there are still living witnesses in this county to the truth of my story. It was in the month of October, 1837, in the township since named White Oak, in Ingham county. It had been a dark, cloudy, gloomy, dismal day with a continual mist of rain. Just one of those days that would be the most likely of all things to make the stout-hearted pioneer think longingly of his eastern home; think of the bright spots in childhood's happy days, and wish their return. And what added to still more to the despondency of the time as night approached, long before the thick blackness finally settled upon the earth, the wolves set up such a tremendous howling as has never been heard by a white man in that vicinity, nor has been since. The woods were perfectly alive in every direction with the ferocious animals. I shall now begin to mention manes, for I have said that there are now living witnesses in the county to the truth of my story. Wm. A. and David P. Dryer, with their families, occupied the same house. It was such a night and such a time as I have above described that Emily Dryer, the wife of Mr. D.P. Dryer, was lost in the woods. Her husband was absent from home, W.A. Dryer was sick abed and delirious with fever, the after part of a severe fit of the old fashioned ague. Mrs. D.P. Dryer went out some 30 to 40 rods from the house after a cow, the bell being very plain hearing, and it was not a very near night. The wolves had not commenced their hideous music, and no danger was apprehended. But she made a very great mistake and one that is often made. She had become what is usually termed "turned around" and made an unsuccessful effort to drive the cow further away from home. Finally she gave up all hope of getting the cow home,

and night approaching , the wolves beginning to make known their presences, she left the cow and wandered off into the dense forest. Mrs. W.A. Dryer, becoming alarmed at her absence , and the fact that being lost in the woods being demonstrated by the cow coming home alone, language must utterly fail to convey any adequate idea of the feelings of the horror-stricken woman, with a sister lost in the woods either wild despair or already a prey to ravenous wolves; a sick husband on the bed; three unconscious , helpless children on the floor, one her own, the other two, perhaps motherless. The awful howling of the wolves had now become constant. The nearest neighbor was Mr. John Clements, who lived more than half a mile distant, with thick woods all the way. It had become almost totally dark. The case is a desperate one. Something must be done. In a Christian land like ours, the life of a human being must not be given up to be torn, mangled and devoured by the wild beasts of the forest without an effort to snatch it from the jaws of the destroyers, if not now already too late. The heroic Christian woman, for she was that in the broadest sense of the term, after invoking the Divine blessing and asking for aid and protection in this time of great danger and severe trial, amid the terrible howling of the wolves in every direction. She courageously went forth to carry the sad news to Mr. John Clements, who soon made it known to his brother Henry , living another half mile away, also to Mr. Wm. Turner, then living in the place since owned for many years by Hiel Phelps. These families comprised the entire settlement within reach, the next nearest neighbor being A. Winchell, more than two and a half miles distant, and across the then impassible "Big Marsh." The three men soon made their appearance, led by the heroic woman, at the home of the lost one. John H. Clements, then a lad accompanied them. They carried with them cow bells, tin horns, and guns, with the vain hope of calling the lost one from the wilderness. The bells were rung, the horns blown , and the guns fired, but alas, all to no purpose. Hopeless despair now pervaded every mind. The thick darkness of the night, the cold rain, which now increasing, and the noise of the tin horns, the bells and the guns, which only aroused the anger and increased the fierceness of the wolves, all conspired to make them feel their utter helplessness. All further effort to rescue the lost woman was finally give up as hopeless. The heart-stricken little company, overwhelmed with sorrow, concluded to wait until morning, and than raise all the

inhabitants for several miles around, and ascertain if possible , the fate of the lost woman. With this determination they went into the house.

I have said that there were some very strange and unaccountable features in this occurrence, and I anticipate that the reader perhaps has by this time begun to inquire “What is there particularly strange or miraculous about that?” “It is nothing very strange that a person should think that a cow would not know the way home better than himself, and leave the animal to go directly home, while he took the opposite direction, and become entirely bewildered. It is nothing unusual for the pioneer to hear the wolves howl and make the woods ring with their hideous music.” But do not decide until I tell you how the lost woman was rescued from certain death.

Mr. W.A. Dryer’s fever had now partially subsided and consciousness was returning . He was very much surprised at the presence of his neighbors, and learning upon inquiry , the terrifying news , was wild and excited and demanded to know they did not go and find her. Being informed of the efforts that had been made, all to no purpose, he declared that ringing bells, blowing horns and firing guns, could not be expected to be successful, for the woman, beyond question, had become nearly insensible, that he could go and find her. By this time he was on his feet and called upon his wife for his boots. Being asked by his neighbors what he wanted for his boots, he said he was going after Emily, for he knew he could go right where she was. The boots were soon in readiness. The neighbors now began to remonstrate saying that he was delirious and knew not what he was about; the woman was beyond a doubt already torn to shreds, and that was calamity enough, all that the little settlement could endure; and they must not allow Mr. Dryer in his present condition and state of mind, to suffer the same fate, which they believed was certain. They seemed to believe it a duty they owed Mr. Dryer, his family, themselves, and their God, if possible, even though it should require physical force, to prevent him from sacrificing his life in a perfectly vain attempt, as they believed, to rescue the woman. He told then very affectingly and decidedly that the trials and deprivations they had suffered together, incident to pioneer life, had caused him to regard them as brother regardeth brother; that he knew very well what he was about, yet no man must lay hand on him, if

he did it would be at his peril. He declared again that he could find Emily, and by the help of God he would. By this time his boots were on, and encouraged by his brave wife with a torch in his hand composed of a handful of dried hickory bark, which was always on hand in every pioneer's house, he fearlessly started out, taking a westerly direction. The woman had gone east when she first left the house. After every argument to dissuade him had proved futile, he being entirely insensible to fear, they felt that a great responsibility was upon them. They began even to fear that should they by any means detain him, they might be held accountable for the death of the woman. This thought entered their minds, they concluded to let him go, and one of the friends volunteered to go with him. But they had proceeded but a short distance when the awful screams of the wolves which were still kept up without abatement, proved too much for his courage, and he requested Mr. Dryer to return with him to the house. The request was readily complied with. Immediately starting again, his wife, whose courage was never known to fail, said she should accompany her husband. But friends protested so strenuously she finally gave it up, and Mr. John Clements volunteered to take his life in his hands and go with the wild and delirious man on his dangerous errand of mercy. They proceeded about a half mile, often hearing the brush break by the tread of wolves, when they halted, Mr. Dryer saying "we shall find her," and calling "Emily," at the top of his voice. She heard him, but remembering he was sick as she supposed, dare not answer, for there had been a panther prowling about the vicinity that fall, and it must be him, and if she answered it would bring him to her. Not receiving any answer to their call, they hastened on some 60 or 80 rods (*80 rods = .25 mile*) farther and calling again. O, who can tell the joys that thrilled the soul of the lost and bewildered woman, when she fully recognized the voice of her deliverer? or who can describe the happy satisfaction of the half delirious brother when he heard the well-known voice of Emily saying, "here I am." She had found an oak tree that had blown up by the roots and had lodged in another tree, the body standing at an angle of about forty-five degrees. Close to the side of this stood a white maple and passed the body of the oak, about twenty feet from the ground branching out about five feet above the oak. She had followed up the oak from the roots, to the maple, and found a resting place, and one of safety from the wolves, in its branches. She had lost her shoes, of which she could give no account. Her stockings were worn and torn to

pieces. Her feet were sore and bleeding, and benumbed, and chilled by the cold rain. She could not possibly keep her position much longer. The little remaining strength must have soon given away, and she fallen to the earth a prey to the ravenous wolves. She had heard them gnashing their teeth, and seen their eyes flash as balls of fire under the trees. It was now about 10 o'clock at night. She had taken her position before dark. Being assisted to place her feet on the log, and sustaining herself mostly with her hands by holding to a branch of the maple, for she could not stand until after a vigorous rubbing of her limbs — and standing on a log eighteen to twenty inches in diameter, twenty feet from the ground was not the most convenient place imaginable for such work. As soon as she was able to walk by the help of her assistant, he set astride of the log and hitched backward down to the ground, the woman supporting herself by placing her hands on his shoulders. As soon as they reached the bottom a start was made homeward. At this time Mr. Dryer met with one of the greatest trials of his life. His friend and companion in danger had become bewildered and was determined to take the opposite direction. He said that while standing and holding the torches he had been careful to keep the direction, and was positive that he was right. Mr. Dryer could but acknowledge that he had given no thought, but believed that the same unerring hand that had raised him from the sick bed and had led them so directly to the **(unknown)** through the darkness, and danger, would not now forsake them, but would lead them all safely home. — But his friend was inexorable and would not yield. Mr. Dryer feeling that he had been commissioned by Divine Providence to rescue the woman from a horrible death, said he would still follow the same guiding spirit. But his friend was still persistent, and Mr. Dryer being unwilling to leave him wander all night in the woods, and perhaps suffer an awful fate, finally proposed to go with him, on condition that if they should come to a marsh, as he was sure they would, he should give it up and follow him, which was readily agreed to. They had proceeded but a few rods when they came to the “Big Marsh.” But as **(unknown)** it may seem even on being reminded that they had crossed no marsh in getting there he would not consent to a change of course. Every entreaty having failed, with the most heartfelt sorrow and grief, and an affectionate shake of the hand, he was to bid good-bye. But he very soon came to a wise conclusion that they might perish, and changed his course and followed. In accordance with Mr. Dryer's faith, the same supernatural spirit or influence,

for it can be called nothing less, enabled them to go directly home. On arriving at her own house about midnight, Emily was bewildered that she did not know her own children. When shown her oldest child and told who it was, she looked at him with a wild gaze or (**unknown**) and asked. "Can it be that this is Isaac?" It was feared by her friends that her mind would never recover from the terrible shock. She looked wild, acted strangely and unnatural for some months, but finally recovered.

PIONEER

Editors note.

William Allen Dryer died in 1896 at the age of 83. Emily Dryer and her husband David Dryer later moved to Bath Township. The story "A Woman Lost in the Woods" later appeared in, **Family Trails Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 1967**, with some variations to the story. Nothing has been changed in the transcription of this article. The only added information is in italics.