

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

## ANN BARTON SMITH

Ann Barton Smith was a pioneer of Cass County, Michigan, first arriving with her family in New York during the summer of 1837, and then migrating to Michigan in the fall of 1841 with her husband, George Bedford. This was a dangerous and violent era in local history, and survival drove her to take extraordinary measures to insure her family's safety. She could fire a rifle with deadly accuracy, "ride a horse like the wind" and still rock her children in their cradles with loving tenderness. What set her apart, and made her memorable, was her clever understanding and use of "behind the scene political alliances."

Ann was the wife of George Bedford, who settled on Section 28 of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. She was born on 4/19/1814 in Curtain Dome, England to William Smith, Sr. and Elizabeth Barton. Her older brother, William Smith, Jr. was the best friend of school chum George Bedford. She was educated in a "ladies' finishing school," as was befitting her gentry class upbringing. Her equestrian skills and understanding of horses were well earned, because her father was a horse breeder, and part time book printer. The family's library was filled with manuals on horse husbandry, thoroughbred pedigrees, and literary novels about stallions and mares. She was trained to be the lady of a country manor home, manage accounts, raise children, and run a household, not eke out a meager living in Michigan's unforgiving and uncivilized wilderness.

Ann's father was William Smith, Sr. (born 1770), and her mother was Elizabeth Barton (born 4/9/1784), who was a school teacher and governess before she married. Both are interned in England. Ann had three brothers, who all migrated to Michigan. First, William Smith, Jr. (1812-1883) married Elizabeth (1822-1891), lived in Silver Creek Township and moved to Mason Township. They are interned in the Kessington/Sailor Cemetery. Second, John Smith (1803-1892) married Sarah Bachall (1808-1887). They are buried in the Sumnerville Cemetery. Third, Ezekiel Smith (1811-1894) married Laura (1811-1894). This couple was laid to rest in the Sumnerville Cemetery.

William Smith, Jr. (1812-1883), her brother, migrated to Southwestern Michigan in 1840. He wrote letters to Ann, and George, who were, at the time living in Syracuse, New York. His letters raved about the land ownership opportunities, abundant natural resources, and rich "sandy loam" soils of various undeveloped areas of Cass and Berrien County. So, with hope in their hearts and a year's supply of provisions in their oxen drawn canvas covered wagons, they went to Michigan.

Unfortunately, for Ann, the reality of their situation, that first winter, was disillusioning and threatening. She and her family lived, with her brother and his family, in the Smith's log cabin. Survival required a non-stop series of wearying activities, and Ann faced, for the first time, the hardships of a pioneer woman's existence. George, and his mother, bought acreage next to William's land that November, the men cleared the forest for fields, and logs were stock piled for cabins. Dangerous hunting trips by the men, to keep meat on the table, lasted for days at a time, while the women worried at home. Besides their crowded conditions, the children contacted a series of illnesses, and her beloved horse, Firefly, was stolen by the Indians. Supplies started disappearing from their covered wagons, that sat idle waiting for the spring thaw. Chilling temperatures, ice storms, and deep snow drifts from the area's "lake effect" squalls could mean a frozen death. The cold kept energetic children inside, and their mothers in a constant state of frazzle. Black bears were a worrisome threat, and errors in judgment could be fatal. To make things worse, there were rumors of an Indian uprising and a murders. While the men of the region were not adversely opposed to violence to protect their families, Ann

hated blood shed, feelings of helplessness, unrelenting dangers, and the hostilities that surrounded her.

Ann's "final straw" came, one twilight in early March after a snow storm, before the men had returned from a hard day's work in the forest. She had walked outside to feed the tethered animals, with her rifle in hand, when she spotted foot prints in the snow heading toward the covered wagons. Rounding the side of the farthest wagon, she spotted two squaws with their heads inside the canvas, and their hands in her candle crate. Hand dipped, homemade candles, and the fireplace, were their only source of nighttime illumination. She pulled her rifle to her shoulder and ordered them to halt their thievery. The startled Indian women withdrew from the wagon, and prepared to run. That was when Ann fired a shot into the air.

Apparently, the missionaries had been successful in teaching these native American Indians to speak English, because (according to family stories) in fragmented speech, they begged her to allow them to leave, and explained that they only came to get the candles, so they could sell them at the local trading post. It had been a hard winter, their own supplies were low, and they needed the money to buy food to feed their young children. They claimed the children were starving.

Ann was at first "taken aback" by this plea, after all they were stealing from her family. However, the thought then struck her that these women were far more like her than not. After all, they were all females trying to survive in this "god forsaken land," endure in a man's world, and care for their children. Ann told them to take the candles, and asked them to return the next day with their children. She promised to feed everyone, and suggested together they might form an alliance that would be mutually beneficial.

The next day, after the men had gone to chop down their tress, Ann, her sister-in-law, and mother-in-law set about preparing for their guests' arrival. They stoked the fire in the fireplace, and then filled the cast iron kettle with venison, onions, potatoes and carrots. They placed pans of fresh dough in the stone fireplace's "bread-hollows," and peeled the last of her sister-in-law's supply of root cellar apples for pies.

By the time the poverty ridden, cold, hungry squaws and their young children arrived, the aroma of yeast raised bread filled the air, fresh churned butter waited in the cool shed, a hearty stew bubbled in the pot, and sweet cinnamon apple pies cooled on the table. Ann Smith always felt that a hearty warm meal could soothe the worst disagreements, and mellow any temper. In this case, she felt that the way to successful female negotiation was through the bellies of hungry youngsters, and grateful mothers, whose cooperation she needed.

After a very satisfying, pleasant and filling lunch, while the children played outside, Ann and these mothers came to an agreement. The plan was to form an alliance for the sake of the children. Trade would commence for tallow (animal fat), which would be used to make candles, soap and lubricants for each family. An iron kettle and one bag of salt were bartered for spring, summer and fall lessons on how to identify and forage for wild berries, edible roots, mushrooms, and paws paws. When summer came, wild bee honey would be traded for yeast made breads and sweet tarts. All stealing from Bedford and Smith homesteads would cease, and no retaliations would be visited upon the Indians (which was a standard pioneer response). Bolts of cloth and thread would be traded for animal pelts. If hostilities in the area arose, these women would put pressure on their men to protect families of females in this personal entente. To maintain the agreement she insisted upon "once a moon" (month) "sweet bread" teas. That day Ann's feelings about Michigan changed, and her favor of "behind the scenes political alliance" grew. (The reason we know this incident occurred is because, Ann held her grandson Guy Wesley Hawks on her knee and told him the tale. He, in turn, passed the lore forward to his heirs.) Several interesting things happened after this luncheon. Two weeks later, "Firefly," Ann's beloved horse suddenly appeared tied to the hitching post in front of the cabin one morning. The Bedford home became a stopping off place for eager Indian youngsters who loved Ann's sweet fruit pastries. Quietly, behind the scene and bluster of macho men, women forged a lasting peace, and compromised over petty disputes.

By 1851, Anne had given birth to eight offspring. The children of George Bedford and Ann Smith, plus

their spouses were as follows: George E. Bedford (1837-1901) never married, Harriot (Hattie) Bedford (1838-1894) wed John B. Williams (b. 1833) and moved to Missouri, Mariah (Maria) Bedford (1842-1937) married Gilbert Conklin (1839-1920), John Wesley Bedford (1846-1925) married Rozilla Walker (1847-1911), "Matt" Martha Bedford (1848-1934) married George Weston Hawks (1846-1910), "Jennie" Jane Elizabeth Bedford (1851-1881) married John N. Hawks (b. 1848), Alice Irene Bedford (1855-1920) wed Charles Eugene Conklin (1854-1927), and Edith Bedford (1859-1942) married Michael S. Garrett (1860-1916).

Ann went on with her life, was a helpmate to her husband, a strong mother to her children, and a loving grandmother. As the family prospered, her forceful personality was felt within the larger community. She was referred to as "no shrinking violet" (not a shy person), "a force of nature," and "the power behind George's throne." It was said that she "ruled the roost," and "had no tolerance for youthful foolishness" from her children or grandchildren. Her personal style of "working behind the scenes to effect outcomes," earned her a lot of political influence in the local pioneer community as time progressed. She became a social leader, worked for humanitarian causes, and was quite famous for the large summer picnics and "family-get-togethers," she loved to hostess.

Ann and George were so devoted to one another, that when he died in January 28,, 1889, her life's journey soon ended as well. She died 10 days after he passed away, on February 7, 1889. Ann is buried at the Indian Lake Cemetery, Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan.

In conclusion, Ann Barton Smith was the wife of George Bedford, and a successful pioneer in her own right. She was the matriarch of the Bedfords and their extended affiliate families. Though she had many admirable characteristics, two were most remembered. First, her ability to form, mutually beneficial, personal social and political alliances behind the scenes was legendary. Rarely did she ever try to solve a problem or establish a relationship in public, preferring quiet conversation and negotiation behind closed doors. Her way of dealing with potential enemies or rivals, was to gently make them friends. Second, she championed those in need. Ann was a sincere humanitarian, especially when it involved women and children.

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## RESEARCH

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