

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

## ESTHER ANN SMITH

Esther Ann Smith, of English/Canadian descent, was a Wayne Township, Cass County, Michigan settler, who migrated from Canada with her parents in 1855. She married William Watson in 1860 in Dowagiac. She left family stories, which her daughter Alice Martha Watson saved, detailing a number of interesting events and facts about the early history of Wayne Township; some tragic, and others enlightening. As the wife of a well-to-do and successful farmer, she was a social leader. As an educated and well-read matron, she had the forethought to protect her family's history, and believed that it was the duty of the women in her family to maintain genealogy. She enjoyed "Whip-Poor-Wills," was famous for her huckleberry pie, and helplessly watched, in horror, as corn liquor moonshine killed two of her husband's farm laborers.

The Smith family of Southwest Michigan is large, spread throughout the region, and has an extensive number of different branches. Esther Ann's division of the Smith lineage migrated to Massachusetts Bay Colony, but returned to England during colonial times. While living in Ludgate Hill, London, England, they decided to return to the North American English Colonies, and migrated to colonial Sussex County, New Jersey. When the Revolutionary War ended, in flight as British Loyalists, they escaped to Ancaster Township, Wentworth, Ontario, Canada. The family has traced its origins back to Dorset and Suffolk, England, but it was the events in Ludgate Hill in the early 1800s, which drove her ancestors to North America a second time.

Ludgate Hill is an ancient section of London. It is the site of the famous St. Paul's Cathedral, which by tradition was said to be "the original site of the Roman Temple of the Goddess Diana." The Roman Empire occupied the British Isles long before the Normans or Anglo-Saxons invaded. The Blackfriar Dominicans came to the region in 1221 and built a friary (monastery). By 1260, King Edward VI (and then later Queen Mary) imprisoned political opponents there in a gaol (prison), used Ludgate Hill Gate for beheadings, and had the severed heads set on pikes for the black flies to devour. In 1596, Shakespeare, the famous English playwright built "Blackfriars Theatre" on the site. It is where London's first newspaper, "The Daily Courant," was published in 1702. When Benjamin Franklin served as an ambassador from the United States to England, he frequented a coffee house on Ludgate Hill. However, despite all of that history, by the 1800s, Ludgate Hill consisted of a series of small alleys, cramped living quarters, poor sanitation, and urban filth (which has been eliminated in modern times). Esther Ann's great-grandparents John Smith and Anna Roy were both born in Ludgate, London, England, and then moved to Pre-Revolutionary, New Jersey as English Loyalists. When the Americans won the Revolutionary War, they fled to Ancaster, Canada to escape the wrath of the Sons Of Liberty (U.S. Militia).

Cass, Berrien and Van Buren County of the early 1800s had its share of Canadian immigrants, and historically a number of Wayne Township pioneer families trace their roots back to those origins. West Canada, later known as Upper Canada or Ontario had been settled by English speaking pioneers. East Canada, later known as Lower Canada or Quebec, was settled by French speaking Europeans (mostly from France). The Wayne Township Smith's migrated from West Canada (Ancaster, Wentworth, Ontario, Canada).

Ancaster, Canada was founded in 1793, and is part of the Niagara Escarpment, which is a "cuesta" or series of bedrock cliffs between New York and Ontario, along which the Niagara River flows to Lake Ontario. It was unique because it was settled by French speaking fur traders, British immigrants from England, " and British Loyalist citizens of the Thirteen Original U.S. Colonies, who fled there after Great Britain lost the Revolutionary

War. Settlers first started arriving in 1787. Smith British Loyalists, Esther Ann's ancestors, who came there as refugees, when Britain no longer controlled the colonies, soon lost their loyalties to England. Two generations later, no one in either the U.S. or Canada, who were then on friendly terms, cared whether grandparents were English Loyalists during the Revolutionary War. The land rush began, and Michigan became a great "melting pot of diverse settlers" seeking property and prosperity. By June and July of 1850, when the U.S. Federal Census was taken, 38 Smith families had settled in Cass County. That number included Esther Ann's grandfather, Stephen Smith in La Grange Township, and her parents in Wayne Township.

Esther Ann Smith was born April 11, 1844 in Ancaster, Wentworth County, Providence of Ontario, Canada to Allen Smith and Phoebe Glanford. Her parents migrated to Dowagiac, Cass County, Michigan in 1855. She was educated in the local schools, was an avid reader, and had been raised to fill the role of a wife and mother. When she was age 15, she met William Watson, who was the son of a prosperous Wayne Township farmer. The couple courted, and her father gave permission for the marriage.

On the June 1860 Federal U.S. Census for Wayne Township, Esther Ann Smith is listed as age 16, father Allen as age 39, mother Phebe as age 37, brother Lewis as age 15, sister Mary as age 12, brother Stephen as age 10, brother William as age 8, sister Margaret as age 6, and brother Herbert as age 4.

On November 1, 1860 in Dowagiac, Michigan, Esther Ann Smith (age 16) married William Watson (age 25). They moved to his Berrien County farm, but spent much time in Wayne Township at his family's original Section 14 homestead. When her husband was asked to take over the family business, the couple moved to Wayne Township, where he had been born. The marriage produced five children: (1) Alice Martha Watson (8/18/1861-7/17/1932) who wed Joseph Page, (2) George Watson (6/2/1864-4/11/1952) who married Edith Reader, (3) Emily I. Watson (5/22/1866-12/2/1890) who died at age 24, (4) Phebe J. Watson (11/17/1862-5/15/1863) who died at age 1, and (5) Walter E. Watson (3/24/1872-9/30/1872) who passed away at age 6 months.

Esther Ann and her family appear on the 1870, 1880, and 1900 Wayne Township U.S. Federal Census. Her mother, Phebe, came to live with Esther and William around 1885, and is recorded on the 1900 U.S. Census as being age 75. Phebe, Esther Ann's mother, shared a unique fascination with her daughter, the Whippoorwills.

Wayne Township of the 1800s was the habitat of the WHIPPOORWILL, *Caprimulgus Vociferus*, a nocturnal bird, of medium size, with bark brown and gray plumage. Esther Ann and Phebe enjoyed the song that these birds would sing on warm summer nights when the stars were shining, and the background sound of crickets filled the air. They would quietly coax William and the children outside to listen to the natural symphony. The bird's "whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will" song, and cooing melody, would fill the air and "delight the souls of nature lovers." The local pioneers believed that the whippoorwill were "goatsuckers," that they would lap the milk of lactating female goats in the dead of night, but this was mere fantasy. These birds feed only on moths and flying insects. Having them in the vicinity reduced the mosquito population dramatically. They were active during the late evening and early morning hours, sleeping during the day. These creatures nested on the ground, hiding in ferns, gray bracken, brown shredded bark, and dead leaves. Their eggs were laid on a bed of twigs, and were so well camouflaged with ground cover that one could walk right over the nests, and never know it was there. If the chicks were discovered, the parent Whippoorwills would move them to a new location by carrying the babies in their mouths one at a time to a new nesting site, "just like a cat moves her kittens." Pre-adolescent boys in the neighborhood enjoyed using them for early morning target practice with "their slingshots and small rifles," until Esther Ann learned of their antics, and put a stop to the "wasteful slaughter." Weasels and snakes were the most danger to young chicks. Late April and early September were the seasons in which they visited Wayne Township.

Esther Ann was quite well known in Wayne for HUCKLEBERRY pies, jams, cobblers and preserves.

They are considered "old fashioned plants," rarely heard of today, because they only grow wild in certain types of acidic wetlands, but are difficult to cultivate in fields. Huckleberries grew wild in the marshes of Wayne Township, and less than a mile farther north in Howard Township, Van Buren County, Michigan at the base of Fifeild Hill. The early settlers called them "nature's candy." They have a sweet, tart taste, similar in appearance to wild blueberries, and grow on shrubs. They were difficult to eat, when picked right off the bush, because of their larger seeds. When an expert like Esther Ann, and her kitchen girls, cooked, strained and processed a harvest of these delicacies, the resulting deserts and spreads required no additional sugar and provided a most delightful taste. In Wayne and Howard Townships, they ripened in "mid to late summer, peaking in August. Esther Ann would take an August expedition of her husband's farm hands, and her serving girls, to collect Huckleberries. It was a long slow picking process, and they had to visit several known swamp sites to collect enough berries to provide for the needs of the family, and her husband's farm workers. Picking days were long, and the hot sun, for which Esther Ann always brought parasols (umbrellas), gloves, and wide rimmed hats, to shield the ladies from the sun. When her female contingent returned home, they spent the next three days cooking, straining the cooked berries to remove the seeds, and preserving the fruit; a hot, wearying experience. The bears of Wayne and Howard Township loved huckleberries, a threat Esther Ann did not take lightly, because of a dangerous encounter.

BLACK BEARS used to inhabit lower Michigan. Wayne Township had a population of the pesky creatures in the 1800s. Females ranged in size from 100 to 250 pounds, and males from 150 to 400 pounds. They were usually shy, and would run away if they picked up human scent, unless it involved food or their young. During the winter months they hibernated, but in the summer they roamed the area eating, and storing fat for their winter's sleep. Breeding was accomplished in June and July, and then the small cubs were born in January in winter dens. These animals "had a sweet tooth;" they loved huckleberries. During one Howard Township muck land harvesting expedition, at the base of Fifeild Hill, Esther Ann and her "pickers" stumbled upon 2 adult bears and a cubs. Approaching "downwind," the silent pickers had no idea the bears were quietly eating only yards from them, and the hungry bears had no warning that a confrontation was imminent. A farm hand, suddenly, found himself between the adults and the cub. The hungry, surprised and startled adults, had no intention of running and leaving their youngster, or their food source, and attacked. Gun shots fired into the air ended the battle, and the bears escaped with their cub in tow. The farmhands badly mauled arms, bite marks, scratches, and bruises convinced Esther Ann that from that day on they had to follow certain rules. The fellow involved was lucky to have escaped with his life. From then on, all thickets were scouted before picking began. Silent berry picking was forbidden. All of Esther Ann's workers were instructed to make noise, constantly talk, and a metal wash tub was beaten with a stick before entering the undergrowth ("making a terrible racket").

Esther Ann's daughter, Alice, was an asthmatic, and this mother became very adept at treating the symptoms of this respiratory ailment. As a result, she developed the reputation of being able to handle minor medical emergencies. Local settlers would come to her for help, and despite her family's affluent status enabling her to defer the responsibility to others, she rarely turned them away.

CORN LIQUOR AND GRAIN FERMINTED MOONSHINE were unfortunately a part of the history of Southwest Michigan. Many pioneers made it, drank it and even sold it to the Native American Indians. Its crude commercial production in Cass and Berrien County was one of the first financial ventures to follow farming, logging, the fur trade, and trading posts. If it was made incorrectly, it was toxic. If it were produced correctly, moonshine had a high alcoholic content and was addictive with continuous use. It was illegal, and so it was made by the light of the moon (by moon shine) to hide its production. Many a pioneer log cabin had a "liquor still" set up in the woods behind it, hidden from the sheriff. Alcoholism was as much of a problem in the 1800s, as it is today, and used far to much.

During Southwest Michigan's early history, Moonshine was often made by those ignorant of the fact that there were two different kinds of alcohol; one would intoxicate, and the other would kill. (a) Ethanol, or grain

and/or fruit fermented alcohol, resulted from the action of yeast on the sugars of plants. It is not toxic if not taken in excess, but it does have a negative effect on muscle coordination and judgment. (b) Methanol, or wood alcohol ("wood spirits") is a toxic poison, and is made by distilling wood in iron retorts. Ignorance of these two distinctions, caused a serious incident to occur in Wayne Township. Bottling, jugging, and labeling of alcohol in the 1800s was crude, unregulated, lax, careless, or none existent, making for dangerous consequences on a farm. William Watson, Esther Ann's husband, would fire any farmhand caught drunk, and it was the rare worker that crossed that line. Esther Ann had to deal with only one serious incident, as she was the one turned to when ailments first afflicted her husband's farmhands.

"Two young bucks (young men feeling their "wild oats") who worked for William Watson, set up a secret "still" in the woods behind his bunk house. Thinking the idea was a great lark, they used anything they could find to add to the mash that they were creating to ferment: fruits, peels, corn, grains, husks, leaves, saw dust, wood shavings, and more. The distillation process required heat, and the retort was tended to at night to hide the smoke. They thought themselves most clever for devising the scheme and completing the process. They even poured a liniment of alcohol rub into the batch. Their confidence and glee at fooling the boss was high, until they drank liberally of their brew. The symptoms were severe and painful, so they sought help at the big house. They had poisoned themselves with wood alcohol (which was in the liniment), and no doubt leached from the saw dust and shavings. She encouraged them to vomit. By the time the nearest doctor was brought from Dowagiac, a long ride, they had already passed away, suffering an agonizing death. William Watson smashed the liquor still, and informed his crew that "spirits" were forbidden. If they did not like that declaration, he offered them their pay and "good riddance." The story spread throughout the Cass County at the time.

Years later, news reached Esther Ann that two other foolish fellows in Decatur had stolen a bottle of Bay Rum (a wood alcohol based hair tonic) from the local barber, and drank it, thinking it was spirit liquor. These foolish old men experienced the same fatal fate, as the farm workers. When Esther Ann was asked why she chose to record this story for future generations in her family history papers, she replied "so history is not repeated."

Esther Ann shopped at the "Anse Knights Grocery Store" on Phelps Street in Decatur, Van Buren County, Michigan, which was north of Glenwood in Cass County. Anse's store existed in circa 1877-1890. She would take a one horse wagon, and was usually driven there by her husband. Decatur's main street, at the time was a dirt thoroughfare, lined on either side with a wooden walk away in front of the stores. Her driver would back the wagon up to the wood planking, and load supplies that were carried from the store's front double entry doors. She would sit with her parasol, and wait on the stairway, along side the store, that lead to the second floor and third floor, which were rented to tenants. Despite her husband's prosperous conditions, as mistresses of the homestead farm and ranch, Esther Ann bore the responsibility of seeing to it that the household was managed properly, larders were stocked with supplies, and everyone was fed. These shopping trips, always included the purchase of books, which were added to her family's library.

Esther Ann Smith, at age 60, passed away on November 8, 1904 in Wayne Township, Cass County, Michigan. In 1903 and 1904, Cass County experienced a frightening epidemic of tuberculosis. Lack of local medical knowledge and antibiotics, were basically what led to her death. In 1882, Robert Koch, a German bacteriologist, discovered that "tubercle bacillus" was the germ that caused the affliction. Diseased lungs collapse, and if not treated correctly, the patient suffocates. It was spread by droplets in the air expelled when coughing, but such knowledge was slow in reaching Wayne township. Quarantine and patient isolation could have stopped the spread of the infection. Today, it is a rare disease, due to medical advances. She is buried at the South Wayne Chapel Cemetery with her husband, who survived her by 8 years.

In conclusion, Esther Ann Smith was a Canadian of English descent who settled in Wayne Township in circa 1855. She was the wife of prosperous farmer and horse rancher, William Watson. Esther was well-read,

and educated to manage a household, as a wife and mother. She favored Wayne Township's Whippoorwills, was an expert at reaping the bountiful fruit of the region's wetlands, and known for her Huckleberry deserts. She contributed to the health of the local community with the limited knowledge she had, when she could have deferred to her status position and left the chore to others. She was a devoted wife, loving mother, and respected matron of the community. Esther Ann Smith Watson earned her place in local history.

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## RESEARCH

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