

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

HUGH S. GARRETT

Hugh Stuart Garrett was an 1859 settler of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan, and a member of its early Irish Community. He escaped Ireland with his family, where the potato famine threatened their very survival. When reaching New York with only "the shirt on his back," he faced the ethnic bias, reaped upon each new wave of immigrants, in that century, (regardless of their point of origin). He overcame staggering challenges in Europe, and America's "rites of passage" in the "the land of opportunity." His courageous "rags to riches" life story is an inspiration, and his profile gives a glimpse into one of Southwestern Michigan's early unified sub-cultures. However, above all else, he will be remembered for his most unusual "Shanghai."

Hugh Garrett, and the Garrett Clan, came from County Down, Ireland, and Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Irish name (before Americanization) was "Mac Gerailt" and "McGarraty." They were members of a larger Clan called the "Fitzgeralds," and in fact, Garrett and Fitzgerald are often used as synonyms in Ireland.

Born in 1825 in County Down, Ireland, Hugh Garrett's parents were James Garrett (who died in 1828) and wife Sarah Stewart (1795-1845). Father James "was reared to manhood by an uncle, and was early taught the duties of farm life . . . (and) milling." Hugh's siblings were Mary and Jane. His grandparents were Joseph Garrett (1799-1862) and Eleanor Orr (1807-). Joseph and Eleanor's children were: "James (father of our subject)," John, Hugh (an uncle), William, Mary, Daniel and Jane. All the living above migrated to America, with their families, except father James (who had already died), sisters Mary and Jane. These hearty souls share a disturbing past, as did all Irish immigrants of that era. To understand Hugh Garrett, one must first comprehend his ethnic legacies, which influenced every decision he, or his local Irish Community, made in Michigan.

Ireland, in the 1600s, was invaded by the British Army during England's quest to create the Commonwealth of Great Britain. Prior to that time, that country's monarchy, and proud Irish Clans, ruled. The Clans owned vast parcels of rich farm land that were passed from father to son for generations. When England conquered Ireland, that way of life was destroyed with devastating consequences. Ireland's property was taken by military force, and ownership was given to English landlords, agriculturalists, and land barons. The British Army occupied Ireland for two centuries, and the Irish people, during that time, were forced into a form of medieval feudal serfdom and poverty, as the English drained its riches. Ireland became a food source to fuel British Commonwealth expansion, and the people were tied to the land by British law. These proud souls had to pay high rents to their baronage landlords and sell their crops to Englishmen merchants who fixed unfair prices. It was forbidden to educate the children of the poor, which would have given them the chance to reason out their predicament and rebel. By English law, they were denied the mobility to leave Ireland, and dominance was held with brutal certainty. This subsistence existence was maintained, "so that hungry English cities could be fed," Commonwealth Military food supplies lines would continue, and colonial expansion maintained. By force, the British turned Ireland into its bread basket cornucopia, and the Irish people into vassals which kept them in a continuous state of poverty. This oppression went on for over 200 years, turning proud strong intelligent literate

clansmen into peasants on their own land, stripping them of national pride.

To make matters worse, the English landlords understood little about traditional Irish farming or agricultural practices. Customs and historic ways of farming were based on generations of trial and error learning. Like all farmers of this unscientific time, agriculturalists did not understand why ancestral procedures were followed, and science everywhere had not advanced far enough yet to explain anomalies. The Irish simply knew that if they failed to respect traditional practices, famines followed. Three Irish farming traditions were practiced; "crop rotation" (varying the type of crop grown on a field), "fallow fields" (land unseeded or cultivated for several seasons), and "lazy bed planting" (rows of raised beds cleared of grass for potato planting with grass strips in between).

"Irish Lumpers Potatoes" were the main variety and food source of Ireland. They are propagated by planting sections of the potato ("seed potato") which holds a sprout, called the "eye of the potato." The English monarchy, and its people, enjoyed Irish potatoes so much, Ireland was ordered to grow them every year, and increase production, instead of following the traditional rotation of crops and fallow fields method that limited output. Protests by the Irish, who favored traditional methods, were over ruled. These changes produced more crops for a while, but finally nature rebelled and disaster struck.

Around 1842, when Hugh Garrett was age 17, a North America potato fungus was accidentally brought to Irish soil by British landlords who wanted to experiment with more productive varieties of potato. This fungus was called "the potato blight." The fungus turns the potato into an uneatable blackened gelatinous mass, and spreads by air borne spores. The blight flourishes in continuously used fields, and worsens with each "same crop" repeated planting. The only way to stop it, in this era, was crop rotation and fallow fields that interrupted its life cycle, which were forbidden by the British because those methods reduced production.

In 1843, the fungus "stalked the land," infecting potatoes in the fields and storage facilities. The plant disease was worsened by heavy rainfall at harvest time, because the potato blight flourishes in moist conditions. No one knew why it was happening. Thirty to forty percent of the potato crop was destroyed. The Irish people were forced to eat that part of the crop they would have sold to pay the high British rents. Even worse, to stay alive, they had to eat far too much of the "seed potatoes" needed for the next season's planting. Crop production was reduced because fewer potatoes were planted, but the English insisted their potato quotas be kept constant. The "potato blight" continued to ravage those healthy crops that were grown, and spread. With each following season, the situation became more desperate, and famine swept the land. Ireland, a country that was once considered a plentiful self-sustaining food source, and shipped food to the hungry British Commonwealth, was reduced to brutal starvation.

To put food on empty tables, starving people hunted wild game, stole their neighbor's cows, and foraged for naturally growing foods, which were soon exhausted. Famine swept the land of Ireland with such thoroughness, starvation began to reduce the population. Millions died, malnutrition caused still births, the weak were lost first, and children suffered the most. Starvation is a terrible way to die, because the body starts consuming its muscles, and weakness reduces one's ability to find the food that it so desperately needs. As those around you start to expire, the situation becomes one of panic and a desire to escape the nightmare. Only the very strong, and most intelligent, survive starvation when famine sweeps through a country.

In 1845, Hugh's widowed mother, Sarah Stewart Garrett died of starvation, during the worst of the Irish Potato Famine, at age 51. Sarah's passing marked the end of the family's tolerance for life in Ireland, under British rule. British land barons, and landlords, in Ireland had the resources, and wealth, to buy food, from other countries, to feed their serfdom people. The costs of feeding the hungry masses, was weighed against the costs of ship tickets to other countries. It was cheaper for a land baron to ship his peasants to America, bundle them off to Scotland, or indenture them as servants to wealthy Europeans, than it was to buy food for the masses. This is how the Great Irish Exodus began; British landlords shipped their serfs to other countries to reduce their financial losses, and the Irish went willingly to escape the famine.

With his extended family, Hugh Garrett, age 23, boarded the ship "Arethusa" bound for North America. Based on New York Port Arrival Records, the Arethusa carried 250 passengers, and the Garretts were housed in the steerage compartment (forward lower decks). New York Passenger Lists, and the ship's manifest, recorded the fact that he arrived in New York on 4/6/1848 from "Port of Departure Belfast, Northern Ireland." According to family historian, Guy Wesley Hawks, "Hugh Garrett commented that the Atlantic Ocean voyage was a nightmare of unsanitary conditions and overcrowding." In total, over 1.5 million Irish men and women had fled to the United States in this migration.

When the Irish arrived in the United States, eastern coastal Americans witnessed ships loads of starving, poverty stricken, traumatized Irish immigrants disembark. The Irish were relegated to city slums, because they could afford nothing else. Human nature took over, and like all other waves of new poor immigrants arriving in America, the Irish were "shunned due to prejudice, and socially profiled, despite surviving one of the greatest travesties in history. With this legacy, Hugh S. Garrett, and the Garrett Clan (his large extended family), became U.S. citizens.

The Garretts, and their Irish companions, stayed in New York for two years. In 1850, after gaining their bearings, the group moved to Montgomery County, Ohio, where Hugh, rented farm land and worked hard for others to earn a "nest egg" on which to build his future.

The group migrated to Franklin County, Indiana in 1852. There Hugh continued to work long hours, accumulating the money he needed to establish a secure future. "The farther west the Irish moved, the more tolerant of diversity, the population became." The change in attitude "was like a breath of fresh air to their tender Irish hearts." It was a matter of demographics. Populations close to coastal areas, saw the slums and poverty, while Ohio, Indiana and Michigan saw the human beings, their strong work ethics, and their honorable Irish characters.

By 1856, Hugh Garrett was 31 years old, and had accumulated a sizable financial foundation upon which to build his life. Eight long years of hard work, integration into the American culture, and lessons learned the hard way (through experience) gave him confidence, and the resolve to act on his desires. According to family notes, the first step he took during this era of his life was a courtship. Sweet Irish Miss Jane Ellison was the object of his desire.

On 10/29/1857, Hugh Stuart Garrett (age 32) wed Jane Ellison (age 37) in Franklin County, Indiana. Indiana's Index to Marriage Records records the event. The marriage produced two sons: Michael Stuart Garrett (8/15/1856-11/23/1916), who later married Edith E. Bedford (1859-1942) and William James Garrett (1858-1928) who wed Ada Moore.

In 1859, Hugh decided he was ready to begin the next phase of his life, which was to migrate

to Michigan, and buy his own land. As the extended family's leader, he, himself led his group to Cass County, Michigan. "With some assistance from his father-in-law, he purchased his own farm." As time passed, he added to the acreage, until he owned 200 acres, and reaped the lucrative benefits of that agricultural advantage. Hugh held the deeds to property in Sections 8, 16, 17 and 21 of Silver Creek Township.

When Hugh was 36 years old, the Civil War (1861-1865) began. He was required to register for the draft, and did so on 7/1/1863, but was never drafted.

Most of Hugh's Irish constituency settled in three areas. The first was Jefferson Township in the Daily Road, Dunning Road, and Route M62 area. In fact, the Union/Daily/Brookside Cemetery was originally an Irish cemetery, and to this day holds Garrett family members (including Hugh). The second Irish settlement region was Silver Creek Township. The Leech Road, Daily School, and Dewey Lake areas were favored by the Irish (especially Hugh). In fact, the congregation of Sacred Heart of Mary Catholic Church (the church Chief Leopold Pokagon founded), eventually, was attended by these Irish. The third region settled was LaGrange Township around Section 31.

Guy Hawks (family historian) commented that Hugh Stuart Garrett knew, he and his Irish family, had found the perfect place to call home when three things happened. First, he was eagerly invited to participate in what was called a "Michigan community bee" (exchange of work) with his neighbors. The men of Silver Creek Township would get together, if a field had to be cleared of forest, or a big job needed to be done. Hiring loggers to do the job was expensive, so the community often logged themselves. "For several miles around," neighbors were invited to help fell trees, clear away brush, remove stumps, and share their hard labor to complete a project. It was a time of "frolic," male bonding, sweat, and laughter.

The women, at the same time would share a "quilting bee" (make quilts for each other together, as a community project), and cook large succulent meals. This is where one of the traditions of "bring-a-dish-to-pass-and-share" started in Southwestern Michigan. By the time the ravenous men, hungry children and happy chatty women came together in the late afternoons, the work of many hands had reduced long back breaking jobs into efficiently completed projects, that took days instead of weeks to complete. Participating in a "bee" obligated the rest of the community to share their labors for other member participants' undertakings.

The second way Hugh perceived his full acceptance into this diverse Cass County Community, involved a courtship. Hugh's son, Michael Stuart Garrett, had his eye on the daughter of one of the most respected and prominent men in the neighborhood, George Bedford. Young Edith E. Bedford returned the interest of Michael Garrett, and "no one gave a hoot if Michael were Irish or not." "The Garretts were admired for their work ethic, intelligence, and courageous nature. The measure of a man was based on his character, brawn, and honesty," not point of origin. (Southwestern Michigan was a remarkably open minded and diverse population, when one considers what was happening in other parts of the country.)

The third way, Hugh Garrett felt accepted was the interest in his Shanghai. The Shanghai were a very special breed of chicken. Prior to 1843, all chickens in North America were "fanciers," a mixture of Plymouth Rock, Rhode Island Red, Buckeye and Wyandotte breeds, who had been bred from European and American stock. They were small, slow layers (of eggs), and hard to pluck (remove their feathers for cooking). Every farm in Southwestern Michigan kept poultry for eggs and meat. At the time, only the Shanghai had an advantage over those poultry, and the birds drew the attention of the farmers. The area's men wanted to know how Hugh came to possess the Shanghai.

When Hugh Garrett settled in New York, after leaving Ireland, he was eager to learn the "ways and means" of surviving in his new homeland. He happened to rent land from a poultry farmer, who was carefully experimenting with a new breed of chicken from the Orient. Hugh spent time with the old man in New York, who became his mentor, teaching Hugh everything known about this new breed of chicken.

The Shanghai came to American, because of the Asian trade of American and English ships. "In those early days of sailing vessels, fowls for food were carried alive on ships, and if possible, a particular fine bird (or small flock) was kept alive for sale at the end of the voyage." One port of commerce was Shanghai, China, where ship's captains would buy chickens for the return voyage across the ocean. One of these merchant ships' port of entry back into the United States happen to be New York Harbor.

Hugh's mentor had bought a small flock of Shanghai off of a ship's captain, and began breeding it. Hugh recognized how special the Shanghai were, and volunteered to help the old man with his labor, learning everything the old farmer was willing to share with him. By the time, Hugh migrated to Silver Creek Township in Cass County, Michigan, he had a breeder flock of his own.

Once settled on his Michigan farm, Hugh discovered that another local farmer had Shanghai chickens, but was unable to fill all the orders of neighbors who wanted to start their own Shanghai Flocks. That neighbor, a Dr. Enos in the Village of Pipestone, Berrien County, Michigan contacted Hugh and suggested a trade. The two men exchanged roosters to increase the viability of each man's Shanghai flocks. (The Village of Pipestone, around 1853, 6 years before Hugh migrated to Michigan, was dubbed "Shanghai Corners, because of these chickens, and Shanghai Cemetery is named as such, because of the dubbing.)

Shanghai chickens are much bigger than "fanciers," with some of the cocks weighing 12 to 15 pounds. The hens were aggressive egg layers, sometimes dropping 2 or 3 eggs per day. The breed had "copious plumage," that made the birds look even bigger. A rooster gathered his flock of hens around him, defended the ladies with vigor, and fathered chicks with prowess. They free ranged (ate off the land and did not require special feed), and "were easy pluckers." These poultry were so large they could not fly over a three foot high fence, and escape. Far different from the old native American stock, the Shanghai chicken "took the (eastern part of the) country by storm from 1849-1854." In 1859, local farmers desire for the Shanghai chicken took Cass and Berrien County, Michigan with the same energy. Hugh, like Dr. Enos, had a "waiting list" of buyers. Today that breed of chicken (and their descendents) are called "Cohin" in Michigan, and the reality is that our settler's not only effected the genealogy of human being in the area, they also influenced the genetics of local farm animals.

Hugh raised his family, and spent his remaining years as a respected member of the local community. The Garretts were part of the five Silver Creek Township politically powerful extended families that intermarried; the Bedfords, Conklins, Gilberts, Hawks, and Garretts. He is listed as "head of house" on the 1870, 1880, and 1900 U.S. Federal Census for Silver Creek Township. His wife Jane Ellison died in 1902 and was buried in the family's plot in the Union/Daily/Brookside Cemetery in Jefferson Township. The 1910 U.S. Federal Census, shows that, at that time, he was living with his son William J. Garrett and wife Ada in Silver Creek Township. He spent his final years enjoying his grandchildren.

Hugh Stuart Garrett passed away in 1921 at the age of 87. He had lived a full and productive life. His contributions to the local economic community and Irish heritage were greatly admired.

He was interned with his wife, at the Garrett family's original burial ground, in Jefferson Township, the Union/Daily/Brookside Cemetery, Cass County.

In conclusion, Hugh Stuart Garrett was a local settler, who survived the Irish Potato Famine, overcame many road blocks, and became a leader in the community. He was hardworking, astute, honorable, and highly intelligent. Hugh came to be admired for his strength, character and fortitude. The contribution he is most remembered for, locally, is his Shanghai Chicken Breed, and the impact it had on local poultry farming.

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RESEARCH

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