

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

## ABRAM CONKLIN

Abram (Abraham) Conklin was a pioneer of Cass and Berrien County, Michigan. Arriving in 1850, he established an agribusiness that had few rivals. He owned almost a thousands acres of the finest farm land that existed in the region. He was a land speculator, master farmer, and entrepreneur. As a founding father of Southwest Michigan's original tourist industry, his life story provides insight into how that business first developed. Using the latest eastern and state advances, he redefined how cows were utilized in Michigan.

Based on DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) records, the Conklins were originally of Dutch descent (Netherlands/Holland), who migrated to Italy and then went to England. Their ancestors were glass makers, and credited with the development of some of this country's first window glass. Prior to the 1500s (and the original Dutch innovations), buildings did not have glass panes. All buildings were windowless, or had small walls openings, covered with wooden storm shutters. The only way to admit light to the interior of a room was to open the crude hinged panels, which exposed the room to the outside elements.

When the Italian ruling class, heard about the glass experiments occurring in the Netherlands, they offered to fund the work of Dutch glass makers (including the Dutch Conklins) if the workers would come to Venice. Hoping to make huge profits, Italy's nobles underwrote further research, kept the process developed a secret (passed only from father to son) and forbid glass craftsmen to leave the country. Glass was not widely produced, was in high demand, and expensive. Initially, the only buildings having glass window glazing were churches. Small, lumpy cut colored glass pieces were held in place by lead to form religious scenes. By 1530, "float glass" was invented, which was flatter, thinner and more easily cut. In 1595, Queen Elizabeth I of England, offered handsome rewards to Dutch /Italian glass craftsmen (which included Conklin ancestors), if they would come to England. An innovative glass industry developed in Bagot Park, London.

In 1838, three sons of Dutch/Italian/English glass maker William F. Conckelyn (1583-1610) were offered a contract by the Massachusetts Bay Colony to make glass in American. Sons John, Ananias and Jacob Conckelyn were the first Conklins in American from that branch of the family. Those bearing the Conklin surname in Cass and Berrien County were descendents of Ananias Conckelyn.

The original Conklin moniker has gone through an series of spellings changes. It was first spelled "Conculyns," then "Conckelyn," next "Conkling," and finally Americanized to "Conklin."

Abram Conklin, the subject of our focus, was born on April 9, 1806 to Simeon Conklin (1769-1850) and Lydia Rose Howe (1776-1825) in Stark Township, Herkimer County, New York. In 1820, his family moved to Danube Township, Herkimer County, New York when he was age 14. Then they returned, by 1830, to the town of Stark. He was educated in Herkimer County, as the son of a successful farmer; where he was trained in that era's cow breeding practices, and the knowledge of how to coax rich yields from well tended fields.

In 1838, at age 33, in New York, he married Belinda Ann Gilbert (1816-1868), daughter of William Bagwell Gilbert and Cynthia Sammons. The marriage of Abram and Belinda produced 8 children: Gilbert Conklin (1842-1937) who married "Maria" Mariah Bedfrod (1842-1937), Simeon Conklin (1840-1912) who wed first Matilda Gilbert and second Charlotte Swisher (1849-1928), Abram Conklin, Jr. (1845- ) who in 1878 married Nellie Flickinger, "Jennie" Jane Conklin (1849-1933) who never wed, George Conklin (1852-1865)

who died at 13, Charles Eugene Conklin (1854-1917) who married Alice Irene Bedford (1855-1919), Lydia Cynthia Conklin (1858-1905) who was the second wife of John N. Hawks (1849-1925), and Belinda Conklin (1859-1859) who died as an infant.

In "the autumn of 1850, Abraham Conklin, with his family (and a herd of breeding cows). . . emigrated from Stark, New York to Silver Creek Township," Cass County, Michigan. The first land he purchased, however, was in La Grange Township ("a farm known as the Hess property"), "to which he moved in August of 1851." In 1852, a major Typhoid Epidemic broke out in the town of Dowagiac, Michigan which rests on the epicenter of where the corners of Silver Creek, La Grange, Wayne and Pokagon Townships meet. Travel in the area came to a standstill, because of fear. Despite that precaution, the sickness spread, killing 1/13th of the local population. While waiting in La Grange Township for the disease to run its course, Abram had time to think. He decided the best opportunities for him were in Silver Creek Township. Besides his farming plans, he wanted to buy lake frontage and exploit its potential. In 1853, he returned to Silver Creek Township, buying 270 acres of land in Section 31 and 32, which had substantial Indian Lake beach frontage. It bordered his father-in-law's property.

The first thing Abram Conklin did was to create a self-sufficient homestead. With grain fields, pastures, meadows, vegetable gardens, corn glebes, and hay lots he grew feed for his farm animals, and nourishment for his family. Animal husbandry supplied meat and eggs. Cattle, horse, pig, goat, rabbit and chicken dung was used to fertilize the fields and gardens. Bee hives produced honey. Root cellars stored a year's supply of root crops each season. His orchards produced fruit, and his brambles provided sweet ripe berries. Surplus was sold to buyers in Dowagiac, Cassopolis, Niles, and St. Joseph, Benton Harbor and the area surrounding his farm.

Abram's second activity was land speculation and agribusiness development. He started buying farms in the area, and turned them into revenue sources. He rented this property to tenant farmers, brought in many sharecroppers to work parcels, and seasonally contracted fields for use by local plowmen. His fruit orchards were run by farm laborers he paid to live on the premises, and provided produce that was sold to local town markets. Profits were used to buy more land. He finally owned 936 acres of rich farm land, and shipped food to wholesalers in Chicago by train.

In the mid 1860s, Abram started to implement his third venture. Upon occasion, he would take the railroad train in Dowagiac or Benton Harbor, Michigan, to Chicago, Illinois (about 96 miles from Michigan's border) and visit the stockyards. There he might sell a prize heifer (young cow), or buy a large bull for stud (breeding purposes). However, he had another purpose for those visits. He began discussing with acquaintances there, during hot summer days, the cool pleasures of camping and swimming in Indian Lake. The more propaganda he generated, the more interest grew in vacationing on his Indian Lake beach frontage. He had the gift of subtly convincing others to his way of thinking.

Abram Conklin was called a "Founding Father of the Dowagiac/Sister Lakes Summer Tourism Industry," because he was one of the first entrepreneurs to "get the gem of the idea and actively promote inland lake camping as a desired summer pass-time." The shores of the mighty Lake Michigan along Berrien County's western border had always attracted water lovers since the French first settled in the area. However, the many small in-land fresh water lakes of Cass and Berrien County were never seriously considered tourist attractions, until men like Abram decided to make it so. Before there was ever a cottage, hotel and resort industry dotting the local small lake shore landscapes of Southwestern Michigan, there was a flourishing primitive camping business, which Abram Conklin founded.

Abram had started out simply, by clearing his own Indian Lake beach frontage of underbrush on Section 32 of Silver Creek Township in Cass County, Michigan. Those first facilities consisted of campsites that he rented for a few days at a time. Vacationers had to bring their own tents, or sleep under the stars. Bookings

were made by telegraph messages, or during his Chicago visits. Finally, ads were placed in Chicago newspapers. Travelers were picked up at the Dowagiac or Benton Harbor train station with his horses and buggies. Firewood was available for campfires. Lavatory facilities consisted of an outhouse in the woods, or required those in need to "squat behind a tree." Abram always advised tent netting because of mosquitoes. A covered well with a bucket on a rope was the drinking water source, and the only light at night consisted of candles or campfires. His idea for using lake frontage to attract Chicago tourists was adapted by others.

Abram Conklin's heirs retained ownership of his original Indian Lake frontage acreage, plus other parcels, and leased the land to vacationers, who paid rent. Conklin Shores (resort area), where those original tents were once staked, finally included a much larger portion of Abram's original homestead than the first camping area. He advised his descendants not to sell the land when he was gone, to continue contracting for the property's use, and thus keep their property rights.

Thirty-five years after Abram passed away, the "Dowagiac-Sister Lakes Resort Area" consisted of Indian Lake, Magician Lake, Round Lake, Dewey Lake, Pipestone Lake, Crooked Lake, Little Crooked Lake, Cable Lake, Brush Lake, Priest Lake and Keeler Lake. Cottages lined the lake shores where simple tents once rested, and a thriving tourist business brought revenue into the area. Inns, marinas, small grocery stores, dance halls, pavilion summerhouses, and organized activities accommodated a lush tourist trade. (The vacation traffic was so heavy at Indian Lake in the early 1900s that an "electric train tram, with its overhead wire, ran between the Benton Harbor-Chicago train tracks to that lake.")

The fourth business venture Abram embarked upon was the raising of milk cows and beef herds. Within this enterprise, he had one stinging failure, that his children never forgot.

Abram Conklin's contributions to local bovine breeding of the 1860s and 1870s were partly responsible for his great financial success.. During these early years most Michigan farmers only slaughtered cattle for meat when the cows passed their milk producing, draft (work), or stud years. Early Michigan farmers did not distinguish between dairy and beef cattle. However, Abram had been a New York farmer, had been used to more advancement methods, and saw the potential to make big profits.

After the Civil War (1861-1865), "Americans acquired a taste for more meat in their diets." Abram quickly recognized the potential market for high quality protein. While most Southwestern Michigan farmers were still only butchering the milk cows for protein, when the animals passed their prime, he raised a herd of Hereford cows just for their meat. Then sold beef to local settlement stores, towns or neighbors.

In the fall and winter, Michigan's icy cold weather would preserve the butchered flesh of these cattle, which Abram hung on ropes from his barns' rafters in burlap bags to keep it away from rodents (no refrigeration back then). During the summer, he used a "smoke house," salt brine, and drying to cure and preserve the meat to make jerky. He raised Jersey and Guernsey cows for their milk. He bred and fattened bullocks (castrated bulls) for their meat, because such animals grew large and more muscular when lacking mating organs (because of the hormone shift); a fact he learned through trial and error. He subtly popularized the eating of veal (calves meat) as a high quality dinner food through "word of mouth." While most of the cattle of his day had horns, he read that polled cattle (cows bred without horns) were "less likely to injure each other," and began searching for new breeds of polled livestock.

Abram shipped prized bovines of exceptional weight by rail to distant cattle markets to get top dollar (mostly to Chicago). He started raising Devon Cattle, acquiring a breeding pair from Ohio. His Hereford breed had been introduced to the U.S. in 1817, Guernsey in 1830, Jersey in 1833, and Devon in 1843, so Abram applied the knowledge accumulated by eastern state farmers to improve his Michigan cow breeding and care. In 1866, Abram became interested in a breed call the Galloway. Galloway were purchased from Scotland by the Agricultural Department of Michigan State College (now called Michigan State University) in Lansing, Michigan. They were allowed to roam freely, and grazed on campus grasses. When the cows were made available for sale to selected

Michigan farmers throughout the state, Abram bought a pair, and successfully launched his own Galloway beef herd. He was, also, clever enough to realize that he could collect "stud fees" for his more unusual bulls.

Abram Conklin lived a charmed financial life and rarely changed business venture plans once implemented, be it farming, land speculation or tourism, with one exception. His daughters, with his help, had raised several prized, specially bred, heifers. He wanted to investigate the idea of shipping live cows by steamer ship from Benton Harbor, Michigan to Chicago, Illinois, over Lake Michigan. This was an alternative to using railroad cattle cars that passed through Dowagiac, where cows lost weight when shipped as railroad freight, reducing his profit margin.

Abram convinced daughters, Jane and Lydia, that their most prized breed heifer, Clemintine, to which they were so attached, and had personally raised, was ready for market. The magnificent creature had been cared by his daughters since its infancy, fattened, pampered and favored. It was a fine specimen, still horned, but large, gentle, ready to breed, and produce more of its spectacular kind. His daughters thought it had beautiful brown eyes, and often stroked its soft curly black hair. Despite its size, it had a gentle disposition, and they claimed a "lovable character." It would place its nose under their elbows to be caressed, enjoyed being petted, and seek their attention. Abram had promised the girls the cow would not be slaughtered, but instead would live a long life and mother many calves, because of its unique hybrid and size status. It would bring a fine sum of money in the Chicago stockyards. The girls did not want it sent by ship on Lake Michigan, but Abram overrode their objections.

On the way to Chicago, a terrible storm came up. The ship was buffeted on all sides, as huge waves flooded the decks and fierce winds threatened to capsize the vessel. The steam powered cargo ship carried a heavy load, was riding low in the water, and the experienced captain had only one option, unless he wanted to go down with his very expensive ship. His cargo was insured, so he ordered the heaviest articles tossed over board. According the family story, the most appalling thing happened. In a desperate attempt to save the ship from sinking, the determined captain showed no mercy.

Clemintine weighed over 2000 thousands. She was so big, a steam crane, with a pulley system, had been required to get her on board. At the captain's command, she was the first to be led to the open railing. Mooing, protesting, fearful, and sensing her fate, she resisted. Her big brown eyes and gentle nature had little effect on a captain facing disaster. She was loosely tied to the railing, the crewmen withdrew, and the next huge wave sealed her fate. Clemintine drowned in Lake Michigan, as expendable cargo.

When Abram's daughters, Jane and Lydia, learned of what happened, "the female crying, screaming, and yelling were more than a man could bear." Young Lydia accused him of "drowning Clemintine." Jane locked herself in her bedroom. The girls were so upset over losing Clemintine, "they would not talk to their father for a solid week." Needless to say, after the emotional turmoil his daughters put him through, Abram's attempt to ship prized cattle to Chicago on Lake Michigan failed, and was never attempted again. This father did care deeply for his daughter's and convinced them to raise another calf to adulthood; it was named "Clemintine II."

Abram Conklin continued his farming activity, being one of the most prominent of the local areas citizens. He spent his summers with the family, living in his big summer cottage on the Indian Lake beach frontage, and the winter's in the original homestead's farm house. He educated his children in the local elementary Indian Lake School on School Street, sent them on to high school in Dowagiac, and then funded their individual choices for college educations. He was careful to treat his children equally. When his sons Gilbert, Simeon and Abram Jr. were married, Abram Sr. gave them each their own large farms. The original homestead and house was left to youngest son Charles. Daughter Jane never married and was given a sizable farm of her own. Young Lydia was given a farm, which was rented because she lived at home until she married. (Daughter Belinda had died as an infant, and son George passed away at age 13.)

In 1868, Abram's wife, Belinda Ann, passed away. On the 1870 Census, at age 64, he was shown to be living with sons Abram (24) and Charles (age 15), daughters Jane (age 21) and Lydia (age 12), plus 3 hired helpers. A townhouse was kept in Kalamazoo, Michigan for the use of children and grandchildren who attended school there. He served as the 1876 Silver Creek Township Representative for the Cass County Pioneer Society. Abram's remaining

years were spent living quietly amongst his family. As he aged his children took over the running of his business ventures, and these enterprises were eventually split into smaller operations.

Abram Conklin passed away on December 22, 1876 at age 70. He is buried in the family's Indian Lake Cemetery Lot #70, Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan, with Belinda, his wife.. His descendants still occupy the original farm house, which is now considered a Centennial Farm. The house was remodeled and several additions increased its size.

In conclusion, one of Cass County's most successful pioneer farmers, Abram Conklin, migrated from New York to Silver Creek Township. Accumulating 936 acres, he ran an agribusiness that had few equals. He started a camping enterprise on his Indian Lake beach frontage, that eventually led to a local tourist industry. He successfully raised beef cattle and dairy cows, when most local farms did not distinguish between the two. His homestead farm was a model of self-sufficiency. He was a good father, supportive husband, and caring grandfather. His Centennial Farm House still exists today. Descended from Dutch glass makers, Abram Conklin, demonstrated the same intelligence and willingness to be innovative as did his ancestors. He was a respected member of the community, and earned his place in local history.

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