

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

BELINDA ANN GILBERT

Belinda Ann Gilbert was a local pioneer woman who migrated to this area in 1850 with her husband Abram Conklin. Her parents were, also, local settlers. Belinda was a social leader, strong matriarch of her family, and devoutly religious. Her musical abilities were admired greatly. She was educated, well read, and keenly committed to the cultural mores of those times. Her devotion to this era's standards and values lend a glimpse into the unique way the Victorian Era viewed the world, and how those modes of behavior effected life in Southwestern Michigan, despite its pioneer conditions.

The Gilberts were of French descent, historically associated with a number of significant Pre-Revolutionary War events, and have a connection to old Canada. Gilbert ancestors were sea captains, French patriots in New France (term referring to parts of North America when France claimed ownership), were involved with the early French Fur Trade, and became post-colonial U.S. citizens.

Belinda was born on September 4, 1816 in Sharon Springs, Schoharie County, New York to William Bagwell Gilbert (1791-1864) and Cynthia Sammons (1795-1886). She was the eldest sibling of six children. When she was age 4 (1820), her family moved to Cherry Valley, Otsego County, New York, then later went to Springfield, in Otsego County by 1830. Her father was involved in "teaming" (driving fast horse teams) between Albany and Buffalo, and worked in the "lime burning" industry (lime was used in the making of cement). She was educated in local Otsego County Schools, and was read to often by her parents from their extensive library. During her young adult life, she enjoyed, often read, and was greatly influenced by English and Victorian Literature. According to family notes, she especially liked the English classics, Alfred Lord Tennyson's (1809-1892) "Tears, Idle Tears," and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (1806-1861) religious theme works. She was said to be conservative, even as a young woman, and lived by strict moral convictions.

She was courted by Abram Conklin (1806-1876) in New York and they married in 1838, when she was age 23. The couple settled in the town of Stark, Herkimer County, New York until the autumn of 1850, when they migrated to Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. Then she moved with her family to La Grange Township in that same area. The family later sold the La Grange land, and bought property at Indian Lake in Silver Creek Township next to her parents, where Belinda set about creating the home she always wanted.

The children of Belinda Ann Gilbert and Abram Conklin were: Gilbert Conklin (1839-1920) who married ("Maria") Mariah Bedford, Simeon Conklin (1841-1912) who wed Malinda Gilbert and Charlotte Swisher, Abram Conklin Jr. (born 1845) who was joined in matrimony to Nellie Flickinger, Jane Conklin (1849-1933) who never married, George Conklin (1852-1865) who died at age 13, Charles Eugene Conklin (1854-1917) who married Alice Irene Bedford, Lydia Conklin (1857-1905) who was the second wife of John N. Hawks, and Belinda Conklin (1859-1859) who died in infancy.

Belinda Ann Gilbert was a skilled "harpsichord" player. She took lessons as a child in New York, and perfected her skills over the years. The harpsichord was the precursor to the piano. It is a cembalo (a clavier instrument with a key board and strings that are plucked by plectra arms that are mounted on pivots). It sounds much more like a stringed instrument than a piano. Her husband ordered her a "spinnet" (a harpsichord that is compact, with one string per note, that sits upright and allows the player to rest comfortably at the keyboard when playing the musical instrument. She was said to favor Baroque, Renaissance and other classical music.

During quiet evenings, on holidays, after dinner, and during special church services she would play the harpsichord for family, friends, and neighbors.

The Indian Lake Church (which no longer exists) was located on School Street, not too far from the Conklin/Gilbert Indian Lake homestead in Section 32 of Silver Creek Township in Cass County, Michigan. It was "across the road and down a ways from the Indian Lake Cemetery " (which still does exist). This was Belinda's congregation of choice, and she insisted that her husband and children attended church faithfully with her every week. Through this religious affiliation, she did charity work, contributed to the well-being of the community, and sought to help those less fortunate. The ladies of the church would gather together at Belinda's home and have tea. They would make "patch work quilts from rags" (nothing was wasted back then), knitted mittens and socks for local children in need, or gathered food stuffs to deliver to the poor on holidays.

The Victorian Era (1837-1901), and Belinda's devout leanings had a strong influence on how she viewed the world, dressed and the type of behavior she expected of her family. She was said to be "a loving mother," but quite strict with her children. She had a strong personality, expected conformity to a precise set of rules, and insisted on pious living. "Her mother was less demanding of the children's decision making than Belinda, and more indulgent." Belinda's beliefs were not atypical of the Victorian Era for the growing middle class, and more successful families, regardless of Southwestern Michigan's pioneer circumstances. It was especially common among those families that had the resources to provide the accouterments needed to maintain a more genteel lifestyle.

Southwest Michigan, like the rest of the country, was awash with the trends of the Victorian Age in the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s. Those who were better off financially in America (new money) "mimicked the high society of their former mother country, England (old money), in dress, morality and mannerisms." The fact that Britain's Queen Victoria's influence, and preferred behavioral standards, reached all the way across the Atlantic to America, was seen as a "social back-lash against the problems of the early Industrial Revolution, which had many social problems." Crude dirty factory production floors lacking laws for safety in the east, harsh living conditions, poverty in the lower working classes, child labor, public intoxication, dysfunctional families, and increased mobility were challenging the fabric of a nation built on solid values. Gender bias, and double standards for men's and women's acceptable behavior were rampant. The high moral standards of the Victorian Era, good manners, strict rules of etiquette protocol, and charity work, paralleling this time, "was thought to be an attempt to counter those problems, and set an example for the masses."

In any case, when Belinda arrived in Michigan from New York, she brought with her a set of high expectations that influenced the women of the local area. Her status as Abram Conklin's wife, gave her the opportunity to make her views known locally. She felt her family had to provide a model of decorum for those around them. Daughters Jane and Lydia had to wear tight lacing corsets that cinched the waist, chemises, petticoats, bloomers, solid bodices, long sleeves and longer skirts. In this era, ladies never exposed skin, cleavage, ankles or bare upper arms. As respectable ladies, they were not allowed to go outside without bonnets, feathered hats, or at least, hair nets and gloves. Their long hair had to be bound, braided, and pinned on their heads, because a gently bred young woman could not be seen in public with hair hanging to their waist; it was considered provocative. Women never wore britches, because that would expose the shape of one's derriere (buttocks), which had to be hidden behind yards of flowing skirts. Umbrellas had to be carried outside to protect the epidermis from sun tanning, as a lady's white skin was considered a sign of her station, and a mark of beauty. Family records state that Belinda "wanted her daughters to appear meek, modest, virginal, and above reproach, which was the case in public." Lydia and Jane were taught ballroom dancing by their father, while Belinda played the harpsichord..

Belinda's sons were expected to behave as gentlemen with "dignity, restraint, self-control, responsibility, maturity, and respect of elders at all times." She demanded the boys follow the proper rules of etiquette and chivalrous behavior. Rising to one's feet when a lady or older person entered a room, and opening doors for women regardless of their age was demanded. She made them practice polite conversation, and forbid them to monopolize conversation, speak out of turn, or interrupt someone else talking. "She even went to the point of

making the boys tip their hats in greeting, bow when introduced to guests, and kiss their mother's hand or the gloved fingers of older women." The boys were instructed in the fine art of leading a lady on the dance floor. She expected them to maintain well groomed facial hair, hats, vests, coats, polished boots, and creased trousers, unless they were working outside.

"Victorian Bourgeois inclinations conflicted with some of Belinda's siblings's desires and decisions." Marriage in this era was considered sacred and a life long commitment. Divorce was viewed as scandalous, and hidden from the public, if at all possible. When younger brother Eugene Gilbert divorced Nina Root, and married Susan Tice, Belinda told him, he had disgraced the family, shunned him, and never talked to him again as long as she lived., even though they were next door neighbors. Her highly conservative nature and modesty, was intolerant of suggestive or vulgar language. She disapproved of brother Issac's use of the words "leg," "chicken breast," or "puberty." When vacationers rented camp sites on her husband's lake frontage, she insisted that "bathing costumes fully cover the flesh," and that the rare "young lady camper not linger outside of her tent wearing wet clinging cloth after a swim."

There was one more story that was preserved about Belinda in the family archives. She had a deep abiding love for song birds. Her parlor (living room) was home to elaborate ornamental metal Victorian bird cages. Her colorful song birds were a fascination that drew the grandchildren of the family, neighbors and friends. She loved finches, and kept three kinds; goldfinches, greenfinches and parakeets. They were small brightly colored seed eating birds of the aviary family "Fringillidae." They made distinct "tweeting sounds" that "filled the house with sounds of merriment." Belinda, also, favored nightingales, small "sing-song cagelings" related to thrushes. The males would "chirp out a sweet melodious song." These song birds were of the genus "Luscinia." Lastly, she adored mockingbirds, which would imitate the sounds of the finches and nightingales. They, also, sang their own songs. They were of the aviary family "Mimus polyglottos." Belinda's little songbirds were so trusting of her, that she could place an outstretched finger in a cage, and the little nestlings would hop on her digit with no fear of human hands.

Belinda Ann Gilbert died on October 20, 1868. She was buried at the Indian Lake Cemetery, across the road from the church that she attended so faithfully. She was 52 years of age at her passing. She only spent 18 years living in Southwestern Michigan, but her impact was felt in the social atmosphere of the time. She brought a level of eastern state culture and sophistication to the community.

In conclusion, Belinda Ann Gilbert was a local pioneer and resident of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. She was the wife of Abram Conklin, a highly successful farmer of Cass and Berrien County. She was an adorning mother, who sought to provide her children with a high standard of behavior, elegant manners, and social etiquette. Her Victorian Era beliefs and religious convictions influenced, not only her family, but the local community as well. Her fashionable eastern style of dress, and the way she raised her children reflected the culture of the times. She was a skilled harpsichord player, and her hobby was the keeping of parlor song birds. Belinda was educated and well read. She was a colorful role model for women of her era, and earned her place in local history.

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