

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

CYNTHIA SAMMONS

Cynthia Sammons was a pioneer woman of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan, and the wife of "Uncle Tommy" William Bagwell Gilbert. She had a number of unusual skills, and was Uncle Tommy's equal when it came to independence, tenacity and strength of conviction. Several charming stories about her were almost forgotten, until they were dredged out of old family archives. Cynthia was a social leader, champion of the downtrodden, artist and bell ringer.

Once considered to be of German and Prussian descent, current European research, indicates that Cynthia Sammons was of Dutch ancestry, which clarified certain notes left about her. The family was found to have migrated from Holland, Reusel de Mierden Noord-Brabant Netherlands to Germany, to Ulster, Ulster County, New York, and then to Shawangunk, New York. Cynthia's father was "Casey" Cornelius Sammons (1757-11835), a farmer, and her mother was "Peggy" Margaret Potter (1766-1835). Her grandparents were Johannes Sammons (b. 1712) and Janneljen TerWillege (1721-1762). Cynthia's husband, William Bagwell Gilbert was French. To correct past impressions, Cornelius' and "Casey" (a nickname) were the same person, and a double migration from Netherlands (Dutch/Holland) to Germany, and from Germany to America occurred.

Cynthia was born on April 5, 1795 in Mohawk, Montgomery County, New York, or Montgomery, Orange County, New York (opinions are split). Her parents moved to Sharon Springs, Schoharie County, New York when she was a child, and built a log cabin on the banks of the artesian springs. Sharon Springs sits at the base of the Catskill Mountains. Mineral waters pool there and are heavily laden with sulfur, magnesia and chalybeate, which at that time was thought to have curative properties. These eastern post-colonial town's people took advantage of the areas abundant mineral water, erecting simple baths and crude spas to lure New Yorkers from more populated areas. A successful, but simple, health resort developed that provided employment for local young people who were second and third generation descendents of founding pioneers. Medical knowledge was minimal at this time in history, and those suffering from health problems sought relief anywhere they could find it. From the seriously ill to those seeking to retain health and beauty, easterners in their horse drawn buggies and wagons, came to the spas.

The Sammons were a typical close knit family. Cynthia's siblings were Miranda Sammons (1795-1816), Francis Sammons (1800-), John Sammons (1804-) and Margaret Sammons (1808-). They followed the ridged cleanliness traditions of the Dutch and Germans. Everything in the home was cleaned thoroughly and cleaned again. "The door knocker had been scrubbed so many times by the children, that the lion's face on its handle was worn away by the constant polishing." The wood plank floors were mopped and scoured so often, the once rough wood was smooth and splinter free. As was the family's custom, the children were raised to be industrious hard workers, and organized, efficient task masters. Miranda passed away when she was 21 years of age. Francis and John were farmers like their father, having spent many youthful years working in the fields of the family's farm. Cynthia and Margaret were educated in the domestic skills necessary to run a household, and were taught math skills so that they could manage household account. As young maidens, the girls were encouraged to work in the fledgling mineral springs baths that were established to draw those seeking a cure for illnesses at Sharon Springs. Cynthia kept a local spa's ledger books.

Cynthia was taught by her mother to be a weaver, and a maker of tapestries, because cloth had to be woven at home. The Netherlands (Holland) and Germany for centuries had been the center of a textile industry, where wool, fine linen threads and cottons were woven into artful fabrics and intricate weaves. The Dutch word "weven" was similar to the English word "weave." Cynthia had mastered the "Dutch weven," a coarse mesh weave that was made on a loom to create cloth suitable for blankets, and furniture covers. She, also, weaved cloths that were used to make clothing. Her tapestries were of finer weaves, using dyed threads, and one of a kind work of art that brought "a pretty penny," when sold to early era spa patrons and clients.

About 1815, when Cynthia was around 20 years of age, she met William Bagwell Gilbert and they were married in New York. The family settled in Springfield, Otsego County, New York. The marriage produced six children, who were all born in New York and when adults married their spouses in Silver Creek Township, Cass County Michigan. The children were: Belinda Gilbert (1816-1868, who married Abram Conklin), Julia Ann Gilbert (1821-1886, who wed Daniel Blish), William Gilbert, Jr. (1822-2903, married Mary O.), Isaac Anderson Gilbert (1832-1884), and Jane Gilbert (1835-1907, who wed Dexter Cushing).

When the Gilbert family moved to Michigan, Cynthia demonstrated the fortitude and strength of her ancestors, meeting the challenges of a pioneer woman without complaint. She was said to have been an extremely hard working, well organized, and energetic female. "She could do the work of a large family" all by herself in record time. Besides being her husband's soul mate, and helping him become a financial success, she was a strong, responsible, loving mother. Despite the many burdens she bore, Cynthia continued to do the family's weaving and enjoyed her tapestry work. Cynthia would set at her loom, in Gilbert's Castle, long after everyone else went to bed.

Cynthia was a woman of strong convictions and high moral standards. She considered the government's treatment of the Native American Indians, and especially the Potawatomi "to be a sin against god." She influenced her husband to tolerate the Indian's use of their maple trees, and permit the continued use of sugar camps on their property. She would give the Indian women woven blankets, knitted gloves, bags of dried peaches, and loaves of bread for the children in the winter. She is, also, credited with helping the small local French community.

According to one family account, Cynthia Sammons Gilbert was an avid reader, following a series of reports, and the progress of Geronimo in the news (even though the information was months old by the time it reached local newspapers). Geronimo was an Apache Chief (forced onto a reservation) whose first wife and children were killed in an ambush by the Mexicans. From a secret camp in the Sierra Madre Mountains, he and his braves would raid white settlements for food and supplies. The U. S. Army finally tracked him down on 9/4/1886, captured him, and forced him and his Apache people to march to Fort Marion and Pickens in Florida. Cynthia made a comment about "Geronimo Last Stand" (9/4/1886), in her family and local history notes. Referring to the Indian chief, she said "I hope Geronimo survives this injustice." (Geronimo did survive, despite many hardships, and lived to enjoy an old age.)

Showing her practicality and intelligence, Cynthia came up with a clever idea during the planning stages for construction of Gilbert's Castle. She wanted a cupola on the top of the house, to serve as a third floor captain's look-out. The cupola was built to provide a spectacular view of Indian Lake, and the setting sun. It, also, was a high draft exit for summer's rising hot air to escape the top floors. The draft and pressure change pulled in cooler air through open windows on the first floor (that era's version of air conditioning). The cupola was, also, used as a look-out for travelers on the one lane, old dirt road that is now Indian Lane Road. At that time, site lines had been cleared of trees for the purpose, where today a woods flourishes.

For a short time, the local community of settlers in the area would drop off their mail at the Gilbert's house. It was said she would stand in the cupola and watch for the stage coach that would pass by below, on the dirt road (which became Indian Lake Road). The stage went between Dowagiac and St. Joseph, Michigan, though Sister Lakes. When Cynthia spotted the coach coming, she would hurry downstairs, exit the house, rush down the steep path on the front of the bluff, and give the driver the leather mail bag.

Cynthia loved children and showed her understanding of their playful nature in many ways. Grandchildren of the extended affiliate Gilbert family (which included Bedfords, Hawks, Conklins Garretts, Blishs, Cushings and Owens) used to love to play in the captain's look-out. Cynthia, in her old age, would give the children hand mirrors and binoculars. She told them how much her own children used to enjoy focusing the sun's rays on the lake, signaling boaters with flashes of light from the cupola, and using coded flickers of reflected light to send messages (one flash to children in a boat on the lake meant "hold up one arm, and two flashes meant hold up both arms"). Once she got them started in this game, she encouraged them to make up more complex codes, which they did with great joy. Another family story, involves Cynthia teaching the family's grandchildren how to use her loom. She had commissioned a smaller version of the same loom, sized down to a child's proportion, which the youngsters had to master before progressing to the larger one. It seems weaving one's initials, or clever sayings (like "Home Sweet Home") in a small tapestry became the children's passion.

Family historian, Guy Wesley Hawks, recorded a story about Cynthia's Bronze Church Bell, which she had for many years. The very steep path, that lead down the west face of the bluff on which Gilbert's Castle's sets, was used to reach the lake. A narrow crude stairway made of cement and whatever else was available, was built over the path to make the descent and climb easier. (It is currently covered with vegetation). The family's children used to love to boat, swim and play on the lake all day long in the summers. In her younger days, Cynthia used to go down those steps to the lake, and call the family's children in for the evening and their supper, while trying to be heard from the beach frontage. She wanted a better way to let the children know it was time to leave the lake and come up the hill. She asked her husband to get her a bell that could be heard all the way across the lake. Uncle Tommy never did anything in a small way. If the pealing tones of the bell was to be heard anywhere on the lake, the bell had to be of good quality and properly cast. Through letters to friends back east, he located a beautifully toned church bell, bought it, had it shipped to Silver Creek Township, and suspended it from a beam supported by two posts, at the top edge of his home's front bluff.

Ringling of the bell had an interesting effect on local fishermen. In this era fishing served only one purpose. Fishing was done for food, and not sport. It provided an additional protein source, and sometimes the only food in lean times. Local fisherman would launch their boats in front of the Gilbert's Castle bluff, and then slowly row around the perimeter of the lake casting their fishing lines and wormed hooks into the shallows, where fish like to hide in the summer afternoons. Cynthia, with her precise nature would ring the bell about an hour before sunset, everyday, to call the children and grandchildren home. The local Indian Lake community became so used to that melodious sound, that they also responded to that summons. In this era of no electricity, no lights, no refrigeration and no automobiles, Cynthia and her bronze bell became a time keeper for anyone close enough to hear it. When she rang her bell, the entire lake emptied of boaters, fishermen, swimmers, vacationers, and people. Everybody went home for the night, and listening for Cynthia's bell in the evening became a summer tradition. Uncle Tommy would laugh about the fact that she could empty the lake with two rope pulls. When Cynthia grew old, the bell was infrequently rung, and its significance waned. It was stored in a shed, and left to collect dust, which is not atypical of old relics.

Cynthia's Bronze Church Bell, the one that made such beautiful pealing tones, was sold before extended family members (who knew the story) realized what happened. (It may have ended up in an local church tower, or in attic collecting dust; though that is speculation.)

For the sake of local history, and to aid future interested historic researchers, the following information should be noted: Guy Hawks (who saw the bell with his own eyes at age 12 years in 1885) investigated the matter when he was an old man, and thought the bell was either a Paccard or a Meneely Bell. Recent research eliminated the possibility that it was a Paccard Bell. The Meneely Foundry in West Troy (now called Watervliet), Albany County, New York, manufacturer of Meneely Bells, was a metal bell foundry company between 1826-1950. It was located close to the Erie Canal in Albany, New York, and the old factory area still exists as a historic site. Over the company's 144 years of existence it made 70,000 bells. However, bronze bells made in the 1880s were special. They were created by "lost wax casting," which meant the shape of the bell was carved into large blocks of wax by hand, fitted together to form a cavity, and filled with bronze. Bronze bells were "tuned" by shaving layers of bronze off of the inside, until the desired tone pealed when struck with a clapper. This required a highly skilled craftsman sculpture, with an educated ear, and resulted in each bell being a "one-of-a-kind artistic creation."

Bronze bells were, not only special because of their historic existence and bronze content, but also because of their unique sound (no two such bells pealed exactly the same tones). Cynthia's Bell was described as having two loops at the top, through which rope was placed to hang it from a wooden beam with some type of pivoting mechanism. The exact shape of the top portion of the bell was not described in clear detail (either slightly curving outward or tapered), but there were decorative rings around the base and further up. The clapper hung just below the bottom rim of the bell, and the surface had no cracks or imperfections. It is unclear how the rope was attached to the bell, as no mention was made of that fact. The Meneely Foundry made mostly cast iron bells, so bronze ones were probably done by special order in limited numbers. Based on today's antique market, and internet searches, bronze bells of that vintage and type today can be worth, an estimated, ten thousand dollars, and priceless to local historians.

Cynthia Sammons passed away in 1886, at age 91 years. She is buried in the Gilbert Private Cemetery, with her husband, and other family members, behind Gilbert's Castle, in Section 29 of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. (Some people believe she died 20 years earlier and opinions are split. However, events associated with her life, arranged in a time line, support 1886.)

In conclusion, Cynthia Sammons was a unique and special lady, who should be recognized as such. She was a loyal wife, a loving mother, and a delightful grandmother. She was a woman who was always cleaning, polishing, dusting, cooking and active. Her work ethic and stamina were legendary. She championed the Native American Indians, and gave generously to their children. Cynthia was a weaver of cloth, who used her skills to make clothing, and useful items for those she cared about. Her tapestries were supposed to be beautiful works of art, and as an artist in this particular medium, she had no rival in all of Cass or Berrien Counties. Cynthia demonstrated a special understanding of children, and knew how to hold their interest, entertain them, and make learning fun. Her bronze bell was used to summon the family's children off of Indian Lake, and became a cherished summer tradition. She was adored by immediate, extended and affiliate family members. Cynthia Sammons was a pioneer woman, who was as much a part of Silver Creek Township and Cass County, Michigan history as was her husband.

RESEARCH

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