

TALES MY MOTHER TOLD

By Alma W. Swinton

Vermontville, in Eaton County, Southern Michigan, was just a little settlement, hewn out of the wilderness, when my grandfather first came there from the East in a prairie wagon, to preach and later to teach.

He founded the first institution of higher learning in that region, the Vermontville Academy, which continued until the establishment of Olivet College. Sessions were held in a small building called the "chapel". It still stands and is used now by the Congregational church for group meetings and the Ladies' activities.

The new settlers hastened to plant vegetable gardens. They might have starved had there not been good crops, for the nearest stores were thirty miles away. Mud, snow, and storms quite frequently made the trip impossible.

There were many Indian families in the vicinity, friendly, who came frequently to exchange tanned deer skins, bead work, bows and arrows, maple sugar, wild honey for the community's flour, matches, cooking utensils and other products of civilization. The squaws, especially, were interested in clothes, and carried off happily many bundles of what now we would designate as "rummage".

One day an ancient squaw, her face seamed with a hundred wrinkles, who had been a frequent visitor, appeared at the back door of my grandmother's cabin with her offering of hand work. My grandmother accepted the beautiful beaded bag and belt, then tried to find out what the squaw would like in return --

Flour? A shake of the head -- Ugh! Coffee? Beans? Molasses? Salt? Bread? Pan? Pot?

O Yes! It must be clothes. My grandmother ran her hands questioningly over her apron and blouse and a little gleam appeared in the opaque eyes of the visitor.

Apron? Skirt? Blouse? Scarf? Hat? (ridiculous, but it might be) Cotton? Lindsay woolsey?

All suggestions received only a shake of the head and an Ugh! of denial and disappointment.

My grandmother was completely baffled. The squaw sat down on the steps, apparently resolved to sit it out until her desires were satisfied.

She sat on, hour after hour. From time to time Will, my uncle, and Sara, my mother, looked out the window to report progress. "Look! Mother, She's still there!"

Dusk came; my grandmother prepared the family supper and offered a heaping plate to the stoical guest on the steps. She wasn't interested.

Finally when supper had been cleared away, lamps lighted, and the primitive little cabin made snug for the night, my grandmother felt she must make one more effort to discover her visitor's heart's desire.