

A Farm In Wolves' Clothing



Margaret Oberlin enjoys some autumn sunshine on the front porch of her century-old Indiana County homestead.

BY RANDY WELLS

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ROCHESTER MILLS (Indiana Co.)—One of the country lanes in northern Indiana County that leads to the Margaret Oberlin farm passes through a stand of dark, dense virgin timber.

Many of the trees are 150 feet tall and measure 15 to 20 feet in circumference. Even on a hot July afternoon, the woods are cool and shady, probably just the way they were nearly 200 years ago when her late husband's buckskin-clad great-great-grandfather came to claim the land -- as his payment for helping eliminate timber wolves from the region.

The property, just on the outskirts of the village of Rochester Mills, is one of 26 farms honored by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in the third quarter of 1989 as official Pennsylvania Century Farms.

The picturesque farm has been in Oberlin's family nearly double the number of years needed to qualify for the honor. She moved to the farm three years after she married, and has now lived there 65 years. Her husband, D. William

Oberlin, died in 1985.

According to a family history compiled by Dr. Allen Ryen of DuBois, Oberlin's grandson, the land is the homestead and original land grant of John "The Trapper" Leasure who was born in what is now Westmoreland County in 1762.

The property was deeded from the heirs of William Penn to Lohn Leasure in 1796, in exchange for his help in exterminating timber wolves from the newly opened frontier land. Ryen notes in his history that the region was crisscrossed with wolf trails, and travelers feared for their lives after dark. The original deed was for 396 acres of prime forest and farm land -- one acre for each wolf scalp John Leasure collected that year.

The original deed even was written on a wolf pelt, according to Ryen's research, and Oberlin said her husband told her once he saw it when he was a small boy. But the pelt-deed was destroyed in a fire at the Indiana County courthouse in the early 1990s. Through five generations, the farm has been passed down to Oberlin through her mother-in-law's side of the family.

The property is believed to also have been the site of an early Indian hunting village.

"Years ago we used to rummage around and we found arrow heads," Oberlin, now 86, said recently.

Ryen, who has been collecting his family's history as a hobby for the past 20 years, also recalls evidence of early settlers on his grandmother's land.

"As a kid I remember there were a couple of graves marked with stones around them," Ryen said, adding the exact site has been lost from his memory over the years. But he, too, recalls finding arrowheads and pieces of flint in the plowed fields after heavy spring rains.

In 1977 the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh registered the farm as a primitive archeological site,



A picturesque illy pond, lined with white birch trees, is fed by seven springs from the hillside behind the barn.

noting that possible Indian grave sites remain undisturbed on the property.

Now about 147 acres in size, the Oberlin property is no longer a "working farm," although a neighbor leases part of the land to raise hay and corn, which grows up to the edge of Oberlin's lawn. The homestead, located on a gently sloping hillside, is easily one of the most scenic in the area.

According to Ryen, the white, four-bedroom Victorian house was built in 1874 at a cost of \$3,000. It is a double-plank frame dwelling, built of some of the fine timber settlers found there.

The house features hemlock and white pine planks up to two feet wide. Its 1/4-inch-thick copper roof was replaced in 1978 as a precautionary measure, Ryen said.

Oberlin's daughter Marjorie was married in the living room of the big house only two generations after Marjorie's grandmother had been married on the front porch with guests watching

from the shady front yard in 1895.

In 1903 the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railroad had laid tracks nearby between the house and Rochester Mills, and Oberlin was able to take excursions on the "Hoodlebug," the gas-driven coach that shuttled between Indiana and Punxsutawney.

When the house was partially remodeled several years ago, a small triangular piece of wood was discovered under the stairs. Penciled in intricate longhand on the piece of wood were notes from the builders, providing a little

more valuable written history to the lore of the two-century-old homestead. Much more the farm's past has been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.

"I'm the last of my family," Oberlin said, "and I wonder, why didn't I ask questions of those people when they were living?"

The only other original building, a large barn three years older than the house and now covered in red aluminum siding, stands nearby. Beyond the barn is a large

(Turn to Page B20)

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