

More Union Countians who moved to Illinois, Wisconsin and Beyond

by

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Timothy J. Ryan's article about Union Countians who emigrated to Stephenson County, Illinois, which appeared in ACCOUNTS Vol 2, No. 1, was the inspiration for this article. Lois DeGarmo, long time volunteer at the Stephenson County Genealogical Library once remarked to me that she believed that more than half of the current residents of the county were descended from people who came there from Union, Snyder and Centre Counties in Pennsylvania. Relatives on my mother's side of the family from both Union and Snyder and on my father's side from Union went to Stephenson County, to adjacent Green County, Wisconsin, and beyond.

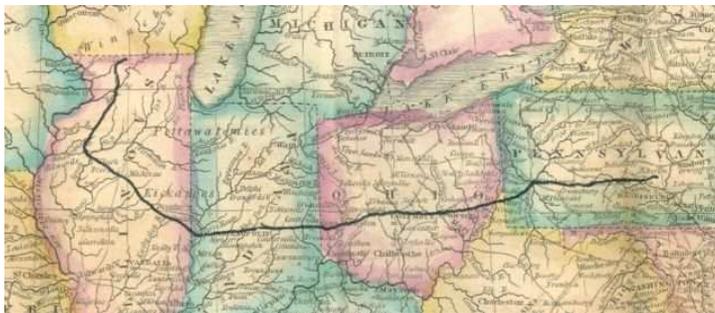
America in the mid-19th century was a mostly agricultural society and most of the migrants from central Pennsylvania who went west were tenant farmers in search of cheap land. Since tenancies ran from April 1 to March 31 of the following year those who decided to migrate usually began their journeys early in April. This was not a good time to travel. The weather was often cold and spring rains played havoc with the primitive system of dirt roads and wagon tracks that were the norm at the time. Rivers and even small streams were flooded at times, causing delays under miserable conditions. In addition, folks from the central part of Pennsylvania faced the hurdle of having to get over the Allegheny Mountains.

Nevertheless it was necessary to make this early start in order to arrive in time to clear some land and build shelter before cold weather set in. Thus, not only was the journey long and arduous but it was followed by a period of intense labor in order to be prepared for winter.

The Bolender Party - 1840

We can get a good idea of what the trip was like from an article that appeared in The Orangeville Courier (Illinois) on July 6, 1901. At the Bolender family reunion Levi Bolender had given an account of the journey he made in 1840. Levi was 17 years old at the time and had come with his parents, John and Catherine (Steese) Bolender and their other eight children. John Bolender had been born in 1796 about a mile east of Middleburg but had lived as a tenant farmer in Hartley Township since 1832. Also in the group were John's younger brother, Michael's, family of seven, and three unmarried men, George Maurer and Michael and Isaac Gift. The group was led by John Kleckner who had traveled west from Buffalo Valley in 1838 to find suitable land and found what he was looking for in Stephenson County. The Kleckner family consisted of nine members.

According to Levi Bolender's account the group assembled on the north side of Middle Creek at Royer's Bridge, about 3 miles west of Middleburg on April 6, 1840. The trip to Lewistown took two days. The next day Reuben Bolender and Charles Kleckner took the farm implements and household goods on a boat while the rest of the party continued on by horse and wagon. The boat would be transported via the Pennsylvania Canal to Hollidaysburg where the goods would be unloaded and transferred to the Allegheny Portage Railroad and taken to Johnstown. There the goods would be transferred again to boat that would use the western portion of the canal for transport to Pittsburgh.



Route take by the Bolender party , 1840.

In the meantime the rest of the party continued overland with their horses and wagons. It rained the first two days after leaving Lewistown and the party

had difficulty finding lodging. Often the women and children stayed in a farmhouse while the men slept in the wagons.

When they arrived at Pittsburgh they were supposed to regroup with the two young men who were traveling by boat but the boat had not arrived. They spent two days purchasing stoves and various other articles, intending to ship the heavier items down the Ohio River to its confluence with the Mississippi, then up the latter to Galena in northwestern Illinois and finally overland to Stephenson County.

Not wanting to waste valuable time John Kleckner sent the rest of the party on its way while he waited for the boat. His intention was to load the purchased goods onto a boat and meet up again in Dayton, Ohio. Kleckner became anxious and started out on horseback to see what had happened to the boys. Somehow he missed them and went all the way back to Lewistown and then returned to Pittsburgh. There he learned that the boys had arrived and had continued on with their cargo down the Ohio. He then had no choice but to load the purchased goods and start down river.

Meanwhile the horses and wagons had crossed the Monongahela River and gone on to Wheeling where they crossed the Ohio River. Here they entered the National Road (now US Route 40) that was in much better condition but on which they had to pay toll. After leaving Zanesville, Ohio, they had a narrow escape when one wagon almost tipped over on a high hill. After leaving Columbus they had nothing but rain and mud until they reached Dayton.

Here they expected to reconnect with John Kleckner who was coming down the Ohio River to Cincinnati and then up the Miami Canal to Dayton, but Kleckner was not there so the party continued on. It must have been worrisome for Mrs. Kleckner. First her son had not met up with them in Pittsburgh and now her husband was also missing. However, Kleckner arrived in Dayton only a few hours after the horses and wagons had left. He made arrangements for the goods purchased in Pittsburgh to be shipped to Galena, mounted his horse and caught up with the others later the same day.

The next day they crossed into Indiana where they found the roads muddy and almost impassable in places. Finding lodging continued to be a problem and

most nights they had to ask local farmers to provide a place for the women and children to sleep. Finally, after reaching Indianapolis the weather turned warmer. Now the women and children slept in the wagons and the men slept wherever they could find a reasonably comfortable spot on the ground.

The party continued on to Terre Haute where they were joined by another family who had been traveling alone. They were ferried across the Wabash River but soon realized they had left the other family behind. Mike Bolender returned to help them but was unable to catch up with the rest. The area had been deluged with rain for a week and the roads were full of mud and water. The main party moved on but Mike had a hard time finding the track. Fortunately he met up with two men who were able to guide him to Paris, Illinois, where the others were waiting. Levi related that Mike “was as mad as a wet hen” because they had not waited for him.

Shortly after leaving Paris they stopped for a few days to rest and buy cattle. Turning to the northwest they soon encountered sloughs and marshes, making progress extremely difficult. Wagons sank so deep that it took two teams of horses to pull them out. Nevertheless, they finally reached Peoria where they were ferried over the Illinois River. They continued on to Knoxville and then turned northeast, crossing the Rock River near Dixon. Two more days going north took them to Freeport, the seat of Stephenson County. They arrived on June 6 while Charles Kleckner and Reuben Bolender who had taken the river route arrived one day later.

From Freeport the party moved on to Rock Grove Township in the extreme northeast part of the county. Both of the Bolender families moved into existing log cabins. Neither family was able to build and move into suitable accommodations until the following spring. John Bolender died in 1868, by which time he and his sons and his son-in-law George Maurer owned over 1000 acres of land just to the east of the village of Rock Grove. At this time John Kleckner’s sons owned ca. 320 acres bordering George Maurer’s land on the east plus ca. 600 acres farther east along the Wisconsin state line. Also by this time there were at least six families from central Pennsylvania living in Rock Grove village and four families living on farms nearby.

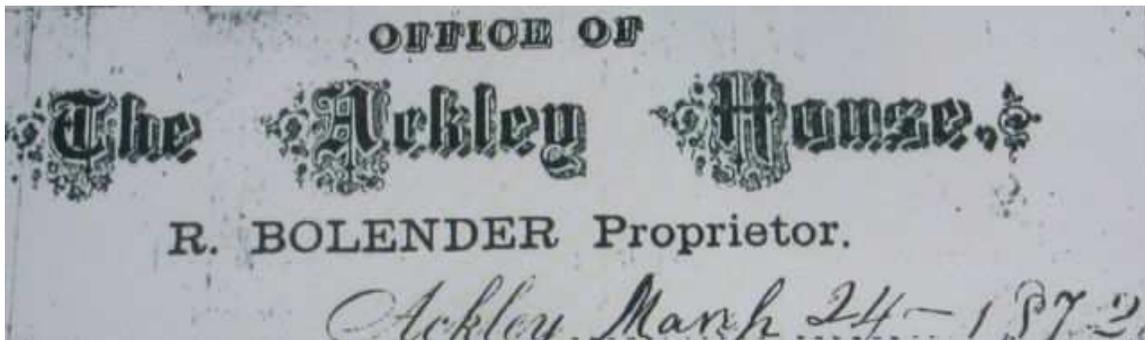
Mike Bolender purchased a claim in Oneco Township. By the end of the Civil War he and his sons owned ca. 375 acres to the north and east of Orangeville. At the same time Michael Gift, another member of the Kleckner party, owned ca. 300 acres adjoining the Bolender properties. At least six central Pennsylvania families were living in Orangeville and five on farms close to the Bolender properties. Mike Bolender's largest tract is bordered on the north by the Wisconsin state line and on the west by a road now known as Bolender Road.

Relatives Follow the Pathfinders

It was common practice for migrants who settled in the west to write home and invite other relatives to join them. Thus, later in the 1840s and 1850s the Bolender brothers were joined by several Gearhart and Wittenmeyer families from Snyder County to whom they were related by marriage. Finally, in 1865 their youngest living brother Frederick moved to Stephenson County. Frederick had moved from Snyder County to New Berlin in the 1830s. After the death of his first wife he married Sarah, a daughter of John Steese. After her father's death Frederick and Sarah moved to the Steese farm which was the site of the 1755 Leroy Massacre. Their youngest son John Henry is buried in the Steese family graveyard on the farm.

Due to the expansion of the road system and road improvements Frederick's journey west was not as difficult as that of his brothers' but he did experience one serious problem they had not. On June 1, 1865, The Mifflinburg Telegraph reported, "We are informed that F. Bolender, Esq., late Commissioner of Union County, while at Pittsburgh on his way west, was robbed of about \$90, by pick-pockets."

After the Civil War four of John Bolender's children moved on to find opportunities elsewhere. Reuben went to Ackley, Iowa, where he owned and operated The Ackley House, a large hotel. Matilda married Jackson Kleckner



Ackley House stationary

author's collection

and moved to Dallas County, Iowa, where they engaged in farming. John moved to Monroe, Wisconsin, where he and his children operated a highly successful business and were active in civic affairs. Isaac moved to Perry, Iowa, and worked as a carpenter.

Mike Bolender's children all remained in Stephenson County but he and John both had grandchildren who moved on to Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado, California and the province of Alberta in Canada.

Early Bolender and Catherman Migrations

John and Mike Bolender were not the first members of the family to go west but unfortunately the earlier migrants did not leave extensive records of their journeys. Their uncle John had served in local militia units during the Revolutionary War. John later served for many years as a justice of the peace and shortly after Union County was erected he was appointed to the position of Associate Judge in 1815. (This might have been an example of political patronage since his father Adam was well acquainted with Gov. Simon Snyder.) After his father's death John migrated to Hamilton County, Ohio, in 1822. His son John had settled there a year earlier and two other sons joined them in 1823. They all settled in or near Elizabethtown, a little village almost on the Indiana border. In 1825 John (the son) wrote to the Harmony Society, a Christian pietistic group that practiced celibacy and had recently relocated to Beaver County, Pennsylvania, expressing interest in bringing his family to their settlement but nothing came of it. Other members of the extended family moved on to settle in

Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi and California.

John and Mike's uncle Adam had also served during the Revolutionary War. After the death of his first wife he moved to Centre County in 1804. Prior to 1820 four of his sons migrated to Ohio, one to the vicinity of Dayton and the other three to the Canton area where they were joined about fifteen years later by another brother. A daughter and her husband moved to Pickaway County, Ohio just south of Columbus, also prior to 1820. We can assume that the three sons who first moved to the Canton area went on horseback since they were all under 20 years of age and would have had little to take with them.

The first person on the paternal side of my family to head west was my ggg-grandfather Jacob Catherman's younger brother Conrad. Perhaps out of a sense of adventure Conrad, another former Revolutionary War soldier, left his home near Swengel in 1795. Records are incomplete but it is clear that he died somewhere in the Northwest Territory in 1799 shortly before his 34th birthday and that estate papers were filed in Cincinnati. This was before Ohio was admitted to the Union. Whether his wife and two children were with him is unclear but if so they returned to Pennsylvania.

Conrad's daughter Catherine married Ezra Hayes and they joined a group of Mormons who settled in Nauvoo, Illinois. Ezra died at Nauvoo and Catherine and her daughters followed the Brigham Young party to Utah in 1848. Daughter Lucinda was married to Janvrin Hayes Dame (his second marriage) that same year and in 1851 daughter Lovina became Dame's third wife.

My great-grandfather Daniel's aunt Catherine (1797-1850) and her husband Benjamin Keister (1799-1872) and their eight children left Union County in 1844 and went to Stephenson County, Illinois, settling in Kent Township. Their oldest son David later moved to Oregon and two daughters went with their husbands to Iowa and Minnesota, respectively.

Catherman Siblings Go West

Four of Daniel's siblings went to the same region. Samuel Cotherman (the seventeen children in the family were taught by different teachers, producing

three different spellings of the surname) went to Rock Grove Township in Stephenson County in 1848. At the time he was 22 years old and unmarried. He stayed only a year before moving to Monroe in Green County, Wisconsin. He operated a nursery for a few years, then worked as a joiner until buying a large farm in Sylvester Township in 1856. He retired in 1895 and moved to town. In 1901 he sold all of his real estate and he and his wife moved to Faribault County, Minnesota where all six of their children were living. He died there in 1909. Many of his descendants still live there but his youngest son Edgar moved to the Adirondack Mountains in New York where he operated a vacation resort.

The next to go was Thomas, at age 21 and unmarried in 1855. He went directly to Monroe where brother Samuel was already living. Initially he worked as a carpenter and is credited with having helped to build many of the better houses in Monroe and vicinity. (Pennsylvania Germans often pretended that they did not understand English when they had some motive, usually ulterior. Tax records for Monroe in the 1850s are replete with entries of "Dutchman." Apparently Thomas was one of these because he does not appear by name until 1860.) In 1863 he purchased a farm of 80 acres in Section 1 of Monroe Township, living there until his death. The farm remained in the family until his grandson John's widow sold it in 1970. The location is on the east side of Wisconsin Route 69 ca. five miles north of Wisconsin Route 11.

"Uncle Tom" was my grandfather's favorite uncle because he would come back to Union County fairly frequently and regale the relatives with tales of what he had seen on his travels all over the country. In fact it was on just such a visit in 1903 that he died here and was buried in Hartleton Cemetery. I often wondered how someone with the responsibility of operating a farm could have traveled so widely until I met his great-grandson John in Monroe in 1995. John told me that Tom was able to travel by rail for free because his oldest son Frank worked for the railroad in Newark, New Jersey. Whenever he felt like it Tom got on a train and left his wife and unmarried daughter Susan to operate the farm until he returned. With a daughter married to a rancher in Kalispell, Montana, and the son in New Jersey Tom had an excuse to travel almost the entire length of the continent and he did just that.

When Thomas Cotherman migrated to Monroe he was accompanied by his brother Reuben, age 20. When Reuben left Union County he had already spent a substantial part of his life as a miller's apprentice with his brother-in-law Samuel Weidensaul. He worked as a miller from the time he arrived in Monroe until retiring in 1907.

Reuben had saved enough money that he was able to buy a building lot within a month of his arrival. In fewer than five years he had purchased another property, sold both and bought a small farm in Jefferson Township near the Illinois border.

In 1866 Reuben, in partnership with Aaron Stahl, purchased a property of 62 acres that included a saw and gristmill in Rock Run Township in Stephenson County. In 1871 he moved on to the mill property and bought out his partner's interest two years later. In 1877 he built a new mill and a new dam. His millpond became an important source of ice in the winter and the ice harvest brought in additional revenue. At the same time he began landscaping around the mill and pond. Eventually he opened up the property for picnics. It quickly became a popular recreation spot and another source of income from ticket sales, boat rentals and the sale of ice cream. He was almost fanatically meticulous about the appearance of his property and he once ejected a young couple for breaking twigs from a weeping willow tree and throwing them into the pond, after which he took a boat and retrieved the debris.

The families of all four of the siblings who had gone to Green County got together for a reunion at Reuben's picnic grove in 1903. In the photograph that was taken on this occasion (see below) Reuben, Thomas and their sister Sarah are the first three standing on the right. Samuel and his wife Elizabeth stand immediately to the left of the large bunch of bananas behind Sarah. In 1907 Reuben bought several lots in the village of Dakota and had a house built. Later that year he sold the mill property. He died in 1915.



Cotherman family reunion, Stephenson County IL. 1903.

Author's photo

Although Reuben and Thomas were quite different in personality for brothers separated in age by only two years they were obviously close. When Reuben's first wife died two days after the birth of their fourth child Thomas and his wife took the newborn daughter into their home and raised her as their own. Both of the brothers referred to her as "my daughter" in their wills.

One of the enduring questions pondered by Stephenson Country historians is what became of the millstones used in Reuben's mill. The millstones are of significance because they were the same stones that Dr. Thomas Van Valzah [see Timothy Ryan's article, ACCOUNTS, Vol. 1, No. 2] had brought from Union County in 1837. They were sold to Michael Shane about ten years later and used in his mill, the same mill later owned by Reuben Cotherman. When Reuben sold the land the next owner neglected the mill and the millpond. Supposedly he dropped the millstones into a large spring on the property but they have never been found.

In the 1960s the property was purchased by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia and eventually developed as a subdivision known as Lost Lake-Vladimirovo. All of the residents are members of the church. When I visited the

property in 1995 I spoke to one of them who told me that he had conducted an exhaustive but unsuccessful search for the millstones.

Sarah, younger sister of Samuel, Thomas and Reuben, was married to Samuel Emerick in Centre County in April 1856. Samuel, then 26 years old, had already established himself as a mason in Monroe and owned a house and lot there. Samuel and Sarah had their only three children before he enlisted in Co. B, 31st Regiment, Wisconsin Volunteers in 1862. He served three years and was engaged in Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas.

After the war Samuel continued to work as a mason and dabbled in real estate. He was quite successful and in 1868 he built a larger house that still stands today. He died in the summer of 1879, a few months before his 49th birthday. In 1881 Sarah and her children sold the vacant lot next to their home and finally sold their house and lot in 1893. Apparently the house had been rented because by that time Sarah had been living for several years with her younger daughter and son-in-law, Elizabeth and Frank Hanna, on a farm of 233 acres in Plymouth County, Iowa. Her other two children had moved to Omaha, Nebraska. Sarah continued to live with the Hannas until her death.

Frank Hanna and his brother James had purchased the farm in Plymouth County in 1882. The deflationary period that began in the late 1880s and led to the serious economic depression in the 1890s hit them hard. They were unable to pay their taxes and to ward off foreclosure they sold the farm in 1892 and used the remaining proceeds to buy cheaper land in Charles Mix County, South Dakota. In 1909 Frank Hanna sold his land in South Dakota and purchased a much smaller farm in Benton County, Arkansas. He retired in 1920 and Sarah and the Hannas moved into the town of Rogers where she died four years later.

Staying in Touch with the Home Folks

Although five of the children in this family left Pennsylvania (brother William moved to Bellevue, Ohio in 1855) they kept in touch with the siblings they left behind by way of letters and with the exception of Sarah, occasional visits. In 1894 they began to plan a reunion that took place on September 7, 1895 at Albright's Grove (later Mohn's Grove), a picnic area south of Laurelton. All

seventeen of the children were still living and all but William and Sarah attended. It was a large gathering of over three hundred people. A photograph was taken of the fifteen who were there.



Fifteen of seventeen siblings. 1895.

Author's photo

The Bolenders on my mother's side of the family and the Cathermans on my father's side were typical of the pioneers who left central Pennsylvania for greener pastures in the west. After enduring the hardships of the trip and getting settled in a new land they built for themselves comfortable lives, albeit lives that were filled with hard work. Some of them were more successful financially than others but no doubt all of them did better than they would have if they had remained in the east. They were all part of the westward expansion that made the United States of America into a great and powerful nation.

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Numerous personal interviews with descendants of the Bolenders and Cathermans who went west.

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