

**Pleasant Valley's "Ye Correspondent" - 1888-1908**

By Larry Kidder

What would be your reaction if you opened the latest edition of your local paper and found that one of your neighbors had sent in a three line story printed under the heading of *Neighborhood News* that described how you broke an arm falling off a ladder, or, that you were suffering that week from stomach cramps, or, that you were away visiting relatives in a nearby town? At the very least you might have words with your neighbor and perhaps also your lawyer. However, people reacted differently back in the 1890s and early 1900s. People looked forward to reading this type of news item the way people today might eagerly read about the lives of celebrities. The newspapers were full of tidbits about ordinary people, and people might even object if such news from their neighborhood was missing.

Newspapers like the *Hopewell Herald* served a wide audience and encouraged contributions from rural neighborhoods, such as Pleasant Valley, and small towns, such as Titusville. Usually one person from a neighborhood would submit weekly news items for a period of time and then there would be a gap until someone else picked up the job. The news items submitted were very personal in nature and provide us with a fascinating picture of the lives of countless ordinary people in rural America. Thus, for example, we find statements such as this one from the January 3, 1889 issue of the *Hopewell Herald* under the heading Pleasant Valley. "Charles Miller is building a very fine poultry house, which he is much in need of, with the poultry he keeps." In 1889 Charles Miller owned what is now Howell Farm. Pleasant Valley is fortunate that one of its inhabitants, Rachel Williamson, who wrote the lines about Charles Miller, took on the task of reporting the doings in the Valley to the *Herald* on a regular basis for 20 years. These 20 years correspond closely with the 20 year period that Howell Living History Farm has been designed to interpret. Because she chronicled the story of Pleasant Valley for so many years, Rachel Williamson is the subject of this first story.

"I understand there are some threats of having a paper stopped if Pleasant Valley is not represented. Well here we are, now don't stop your paper; perhaps there will be more news hereafter." – *Hopewell Herald*, Dec 22, 1888, page 6.

The earliest known column by Rachel Williamson was written a month and a half before the column that included the statement above. Perhaps that November 8 column was sort of a trial run and Rachel was prevailed upon by friends and neighbors to write regularly. Her statement on December 22, indicating that the people of Pleasant Valley wanted their news included in the paper and that she was taking up the cause, signaled the beginning of her 20 year commitment to recording the lives and experiences of the people of Pleasant Valley as "ye correspondent". The news she wrote consisted largely of those juicy tidbits of information that would make us hopping mad today, but that were eagerly anticipated a hundred years ago. In writing her local news columns Rachel Williams produced a veritable diary of 20 years of life in Pleasant Valley.

She was born Rachel Gulick on May 25, 1843, the daughter of Henry and Ann (Dean) Gulick who had moved to Sycamore, Ohio shortly after 1840 from Amwell Township, New Jersey. In 1860 the family was living in Isabella, Michigan. Rachel was 17 years old and on August 21 she married 22 year old Franklin B. Stilwell, the son of Pettewell and Cyntha Stillwell of Isabella. In 1862 Rachel gave birth to daughter Sylvia Josephine.

With the Civil War in full force, Franklin enlisted as a private in Company H of the Michigan 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment about 1863 when he was 25. His regiment saw action in many of the major battles of the war, including Vicksburg, Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania, and the Wilderness, suffering the loss of 11 officers and 212 enlisted men killed or mortally wounded in combat and 3 officers and 223 enlisted men who succumbed to disease. Whether Franklin died of wounds or disease, Rachel applied for a widow's pension on May 18, 1865. She and Josephine continued to live in Michigan until about 1877 and then moved back to New Jersey, where Rachel probably had relatives, taking up residence in Hopewell borough.

In 1880 Rachel was living alone in Hopewell supporting herself as a milliner and dressmaker. Josephine was now 17 and living with a family in Jersey City as live-in help. Rachel married brush maker Amos Williamson of Titusville, New Jersey on December 28, 1881 in

Hopewell and by 1888 Amos and Rachel were living on Pleasant Valley Road about half way between the Delaware River and the Pleasant Valley schoolhouse. At this location Amos established their home and the shop where he sold the brushes he made and Rachel wrote her columns for the *Herald*.

While many of her notices record who visited whom recently, births, marriages, deaths, social events, weather conditions, and other commonplace happenings in the lives of the people of Pleasant Valley, some of the major events were also described. When the Mercer County freeholders came out from Trenton to decide whether or not to build an iron bridge on Hunter Road, Rachel reported it. When the local people met in the old schoolhouse to decide whether or not to build a new one, Rachel told the story in some detail, including that Amos Williamson chaired the meeting. After the school was built she recorded information about the teachers, students, school events, fundraisers, meetings, social events, etc. She was a religious woman and chronicled the preaching done by pastors who came out to the Valley from the Presbyterian and Methodist churches in Titusville, as well as the summer Union Sunday School held at the schoolhouse in which both adults and children participated. But most of her columns describe the commonplace activities of the local farm families. We learn of the various illnesses and accidents that often plagued the people of the Valley, as well as jokes they played on each other. There are lighthearted moments and a number of tragic ones. But, Rachel seems to have been a happy person who enjoyed life and her associations with family and friends immensely, and this joy of life comes through in her columns.

Many of the items Rachel reported were about her own family, although it wasn't obvious because they were inevitably written in third person. Her daughter Josephine and son-in-law M. Thatcher Heath lived in Lambertville and she recorded their frequent visits to Pleasant Valley. Even tragic family events were recorded in third person, as on February 7, 1889 when she reported the burial of her granddaughter by writing, "Mr. and Mrs. M.T. Heath, of Lambertville, buried their infant daughter last Saturday; it was sick only five days, the disease being catarrh of the breast." More often she reported on happy occasions, such as the visits of her granddaughter Mabel Heath. But then, she also had to chronicle Mabel's declining health and death in 1898. Her grandmother's eulogy for 15 year old Mabel was the longest single item she wrote and is perhaps her most emotional piece. The majority of items were about other families, with her personal family happenings sandwiched in without fanfare. On August 5, 1908 when she noted, "Amos Williamson is very low at this writing with no hope of his recovery," this brief personal note was sandwiched between the notice of a former Valley resident visiting old friends and the visit of a neighboring family to see friends in Trenton. Amos died on August 7 and Rachel's column was understandably absent until September 2 when, after six notices about other families, she gave a short paragraph announcement of Amos' death, again in third person. In what I believe was her final column, published on October 28, 1908, again after six notices of other families, she stated, "The sale of personal property of ye correspondent on the 17<sup>th</sup> inst. was well attended and things sold at fair prices. All articles were pretty well removed by evening." Soon after the sale, she moved to Lambertville to live with her daughter's family. The next Pleasant Valley column did not appear until December 2 and was signed "Spider". Thereafter, through 1910, the Pleasant Valley column appeared only sporadically and with an unknown author.

Rachel lived in Lambertville the rest of her life. On January 5, 1928 she died of the "infirmities of old age" at the age of 85. Her daughter, Josephine, preceded her in death the previous year, but she was survived by grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It is doubtful that Rachel thought that her newspaper jottings would ever have much meaning beyond the fleeting pleasure given her friends and neighbors, but for us today the columns are a unique diary of twenty years of life in Pleasant Valley. They give us a feel for the human experience there that stark, impersonal documents such as census enumerations, land deeds, and inventories can't convey. The stories of Pleasant Valley that follow in this series, although not all are drawn from her writings, are dedicated to "ye correspondent" of Pleasant Valley, Rachel Williams, in the hope that they will help modern residents and visitors to the Valley appreciate its people and their lives around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.