

The Polish in Otsego County

Laura Walker

1971

The Polish were one of the prominent ethnic groups among the pioneer settlers in Otsego County. The results of their industry and enterprise are much in evidence in the County today. Unhappily they left few records and mementos to ease the lot of historians who would write of their presence and accomplishments.

Due to the language barrier and the limited means of transportation and communication of the early days, social activities were almost completely restricted to others of their own group. Another factor which made them reluctant to mix readily or to fraternize was the heritage of their former life in Poland. Whether they had lived under German or Russian domination, they had experienced both rejection and exploitation by those who controlled their lands and production. Because they wished to determine their own destinies and not live merely as puppets, many left their homeland. These adventurers showed the courage, determination and desire for freedom of the early inhabitants of Otsego County.

Settlers did not arrive in Otsego County until about 1868. The delay was due in part to the reports of government surveyors who were in the area in 1840. They surveyed a 25 or 30 county region, but their reports gave the impression that this part of Michigan was mostly marshland and unfit for cultivation.

Otsego Lake Village was established in 1872, with the first railroad line reaching that point in May of 1873. This line, the Jackson, Lansing and Southern, was extended to the present site of Gaylord by July of that year. The first known Polish immigrant, Michael Swantek, was employed in the construction of this line along Otsego Lake in 1873. (2) The following year, 1874, saw the first Polish homestead established by Michael Merkel two miles east of Gaylord. (3)

From that date until the early 1900s, Polish immigrants continued to come to Otsego County. The earlier arrivals were primarily families coming directly from Poland. Around the turn of the century there were also Polish families who remigrated from the eastern United States. As the Polish families established themselves in their new homes, they wrote to relatives and friends back in Poland, encouraging them to come also. Of those who moved here from the east, many were attracted by newspaper advertisements telling of cheap lands and opportunities to prosper in northern Michigan.

Though Michigan was noted for its vast stands of white pine, there were extensive hardwood forests in the Otsego County region as well. It was in these hardwood groves that the homesteads of many Polish settlers were located. After timber was cut for the homes and outbuildings, that remaining was cut and burned to make way for crop lands. This was a slow, laborious process and only a few acres could be cleared each year. It is ironic that large quantities of hardwood, which were burned as a valueless nuisance to these settlers, would have found a ready market in the charcoal and last block industries that came a few years later.

Crops were raised primarily to provide sustenance for the family. Cows, chickens and pigs also provided food for the family. Any surplus produced was used to barter for staple items and sometimes sold for cash. Potatoes, vegetables and other perishables for winter eating were stored in root cellars. Wild fruits and berries were harvested in season and preserved. Lack of any type of cold storage restricted the butchering of pigs or cows to the winter months. Eggs and butter were generally used as a medium of exchange, but on special occasions, such as Christmas and Easter, they were utilized in the home to give the family a treat.

The log cabin was the home for the early Polish families. It was small, usually with a room for cooking and eating and a bedroom for the parents and small children on the ground floor. There was also sometimes a living-room. Any upstairs space served as sleeping quarters for the older children.

The size of the house had little relationship to the size of the family, most of which were large. The family was a close knit unit, with all members sharing in the responsibilities. The younger children had household tasks to do and the older ones helped with the farming.

Families not only worked together, but they shared times of recreation. Neighbors would meet at a home, have dinner, exchange experiences, and enjoy dancing. There was usually a fiddler in the group to provide the music for dancing or entertainment.

Conveniences taken for granted today were unknown. If the mother did not make her own soap, she could obtain it from an itinerant peddler in exchange for wood ashes. Often the especially soiled clothes were soaked in lye-water obtained by bleaching wood ashes. Boiling, scrubbing on a washboard and rinsing completed the laundry process. The water supply often depended on a rain barrel or was hauled from a nearby lake. The earliest wells were dug and water raised with a bucket and rope.

When injuries or illnesses occurred, mother had to be both doctor and nurse. The lucky one might have a family medical book as a guide. Home remedies were widely accepted. Seeds and roots were gathered for medicinal use. Catnip tea was used for stomach disorders and pumpkin seeds for kidney diseases. Infection was treated with a linseed poultice. Colds were dosed with onion syrup or a few drops of kerosene on sugar. A midwife was the only help available at the deliveries of babies.

Life on the farm was less demanding in the winter months so most of the men sought employment in the lumber camps. These seasons in the woods were long and the work was arduous. Depending on how far he lived from the lumber camp, the man might be away from his family for many weeks at a time, possibly getting home only once or twice during the entire winter. His pay would vary from \$10.00 to \$18.00 a month plus room and board. Some came from as far away as Saginaw to work in the Gaylord camps and some men worked just for room and board. Nearly everyone walked from their homes to the camp.

Very little luggage was needed; usually a few extra clothes and possibly a pillow would suffice. A straw-filled wooden bunk and horse blankets provided sleeping quarters. The bunk rooms were equipped with wooden benches and kerosene lamps. Lights were out at 9:00, as all hands were up at 4:00 AM for a hearty breakfast before going into the woods. Food served in the camps was better and in greater quantity than the family had at home. One item not usually available was eggs. A cookie called the "square timber" was a popular item in most camps, as were molasses cookies. The men's infrequent visits home were looked forward to by his children because the camp cook would send along a supply of these as a treat.

To help ease the burden of providing for the family, it was not unusual for boys as young as fifteen to work in the lumber camps. Young girls were sometimes hired as cooks. At a camp on the Black River a thirteen year old girl did the cooking for a crew of 18 men. (4)

The pine lumbering had reached its peak and was nearly depleted by 1890. At about this time the Detroit Iron and Furnace Company established a charcoal operation. Located about two miles north of Gaylord, its twelve kilns utilized thousands of cords of maple each year. Its product was shipped to Detroit weekly by railroad. The charcoal kilns were in operation less than ten years, but the Dayton Lumber Block Works, which was established also around~1890, continued in operation until about 1930.(5) Both of these hardwood based industries provided extra income employment for the farmers. Those who had teams could hire out for hauling.

Many of the Polish housewives were able to help augment the family income by custom sewing. Wedding dresses were an item the local seamstresses were often called on to produce.

The farmland in Otsego County was found to be well suited for raising potatoes. They had become the principle cash crop of the Polish farmers. The potato harvest gave the young boys an opportunity to earn extra money by picking up potatoes. The potato is still the leading farm product of Otsego County today, but the harvesting process has been completely mechanized.

The families who lived off the mainly traveled roads were often isolated for long periods of time in the winter. The main roads were kept passable by using a snow-roller. The township operated either a wooden or steel roller, which was about six feet in diameter and ten feet wide. Three teams of horses would be needed to pull these. The snow-packed roads would be the last to break up during the spring thaw.

Rural mail service in Otsego County was inaugurated April 15, 1904 (6). Before that date, mail was picked up at the Gaylord Post Office. The areas of greatest population density were served by Del Shelter and Clarence Murner. (7) The routes were about 27 miles each. A horse-drawn light sleigh was used in the winter and a wagon the rest of the year. While the mail carrier parked in a drive to eat his lunch, a feed bag of oats would replenish the horses' energy supply. Often in cold weather the carrier would be invited inside to have a hot cup of coffee with his lunch.

The Polish families who settled in the village of Gaylord experienced a different type of living than those on farms. The public water distribution system was available in the early 1880s. The court house was built in 1891 and the first electricity arrived in 1897. The only bank in Otsego County was founded in Gaylord in 1893. (8) The mail had to be picked up at the Gaylord Post Office until about 1954, when house delivery began. (9) Gaylord began paving its streets in 1921 and the sewer system was started in 1933. (10)

Gaylord was first a trading center for farmers and later supplied lumber camps. Several Polish men established businesses upon arrival in Gaylord. Later on others took over businesses already established. When possible, the Polish consumers would patronize a Polish businessman. Available were grocers, dry good stores and a meat market. The service of a livery stable was available and the men could find relaxation in a Polish-owned saloon.

The hitching post was a familiar sight on Main Street prior to the automobile. Milk in cans was delivered by a horse drawn wagon, the housewife providing her own kettle, pan or other container.

Typhoid fever was a common disease in the early 1900's. Many young adults lost their lives to this dread malady. It was believed the method of milk delivery may have contributed to the typhoid, as the epidemic appeared to subside when this method of milk delivery was discontinued.

Polish was the language spoken in the homes. Because the husband's work took him into associations where English was spoken, it was necessary that he learn this second language. He would work at improving his ability to communicate in English by acquiring a dictionary and studying it in the evenings by the light of kerosene lamps. When he had achieved sufficient mastery of the English, he would assist others seeking help.

The Polish children were impressed with their need of the English language when they entered school. The teacher spoke only English, making it imperative that the child waste no time in mastering this second language. Because their contacts were more limited, many Polish housewives did not learn to speak English.

The Polish custom was to make a gala occasion of their weddings. Festivities began with a breakfast in the home of the bride following the Nuptial Mass, and the joyous celebration continued throughout the day. In the evening there was dancing, often held in the barn, using the floor that normally served as storage space for wagons and sleighs. The music was supplied by fiddles. The wedding might be held any weekday, but it was the custom to hold another celebration the Saturday following so that relatives and friends whose work kept them from the wedding day could also join in the celebration. (11)

The lot of the early Polish settlers was hard. They enjoyed none of the luxuries and conveniences which are commonplace today, but they did not consider themselves deprived. Many have happy memories of those times. Conditions and experiences, which today would be considered hardships, were made joyful and memorable by close family ties, willing industry, and perseverance.

Saint Mary's Church in Gaylord was a unifying influence for the Polish settler of Otsego County. It had its beginning when the Reverend Francis X. Shulak, a Jesuit missionary, donated two lots from the Michigan Central Railroad Company, which later became the site of the first St. Mary's Church in Gaylord. Polish settlers cleared the lots and cut the timber to build the church in 1881. From that date, until 1888, St. Mary's was a mission church with Shulak visiting here about four times a year. The priest would perform baptisms and weddings and supply the spiritual needs of the Polish families. (12)

The church began keeping records during this period. The first resident pastor, the Reverend I. Opyrehalski, arrived at Gaylord and remained one year. Each of the next three years the parish was served by a different priest. These priests were the Reverend V. Zaleski, the Reverend M. Crochowski, and the Reverend Alex Lipinski. In 1892, the Reverend Casimer Skory arrived and served until 1904. The present church was erected across the street to make room for the new one on the original site. (13)

The discontinuation of worship services in the old church buildings did not end its service to the parish. It provided space for a variety of activities including chicken dinners prepared by the ladies of the church for fund raising, hot lunches to the children of St. Mary's School and the floor became a court for basketball practice sessions.

The present church was erected in 1900. Its cost was \$22,000.00 but it now (1970) has an insurance value of \$223,000,000. (14) The dedication of the church was on September 15, 1901. The congregation was about two hundred families, mostly of Polish national origin. Services in the Polish language and English were held each Sunday. (15) To the parishioners, who were predominantly farmers, coming to church was a regular observance and a highlight of the week.

In winter going to church required an early start and bundling up in warm clothes. The team was harnessed, hay put in the sleigh, and narrow, snow-covered trails taken to town. When snow was deep, the sleighs sometimes cut across fields. To make the ride more comfortable, bricks heated on the stove were wrapped in cloth and either placed at the feet or held in the lap to keep warm. At times, older children would jump off the sleigh and run behind to warm up. Some of the more fortunate couples might come to town in a horse-drawn cutter with a buffalo robe over the lap and legs for warmth.

Upon arrival at church the team was put in the stable and given some hay. This stable, owned by the church, stretched the entire block between Mitchell and Sheldon Streets next to the railroad tracks and opened on North Otsego Street. After church services, many families would go to the Stanley Mackowiak store for supplies. This store was opened especially for the convenience of the farmers, as they made few trips to town.

NOTES

1. Sisters of County History, Otsego County Herald Times, February 1969. p. 14, Col 3 and 4. Gaylord Library.
2. Obituary, Otsego County Herald Times, n.d., Walter Swantek.
3. William Granlund, History of Otsego County, (typescript) Gaylord Library.
4. Joann Swantek, Interview, October 1970. Joann was the camp cook at Black River. She now lives in Gaylord, Michigan.
5. Harland Bartholomew and Associates, "Comprehensive Plan", Gaylord, Michigan, May 1966, p.3.
6. Mrs. Glen Smith, Interview, November 1970. Mrs. Smith is the historian for the organization Pioneers of Otsego County.
7. Ibid.
8. Harland Bartholomew and Associates, op. cit., p. 3.
9. Rose Kondratowicz, Interview, November 1970. Rose was employed at the Gaylord Post Office from 1921 to 1960.
10. Harland Bartholomew and Associates, op. cit., p. 3.
11. Lucy Amborski, Interview. October 1970. Lucy taught at Big Lake School and she would attend the celebration held on Saturday.
12. History of St. Mary's Parish, "Twenty-fifth Anniversary", May 3, 1953, p. 5. A booklet made up for the celebration of Monsignor Kaminski's twenty-fifth year at Gaylord St. Mary's Church.
13. Ibid.
14. Monsignor Kaminski, Interview, October 1970. Monsignor has served forty years at the St. Mary's Church.
15. Ibid.
16. History of St. Mary's Parish, op. cit.
17. Lucy Amborski, Interview, November 1970. Lucy remembers attending these parties.

18. History of St. Mary's Parish, op. cit.
19. Victoria Rolinski, Interview, October 1970. Victoria walked a long distance to class and upon arriving late was admonished by Ponganis of the responsibility for arriving on time.
20. History of St. Mary's Parish, op. cit.
21. Monsignor Kaminski, Interview, November 1970. Monsignor has been with the church forty years and has seen this growth.
22. Ibid. This took place during Kaminski's time in Gaylord.
23. Story of St. Mary's School, Otsego County Herald Times, October 25, 1962, p. 9.
24. Ibid. p. 5, column 1.
25. History of St. Mary's Parish, "Twenty-fifth Anniversary", May 3, 1953, p. 5.
26. Ibid.
27. Sister DeLisslis, Interview, November 1970. Sister was teaching at St. Mary's when the high school began.
28. Ibid. Sister was on the St. Mary's High School staff when the school was accredited.
29. Alex Kowaleski, Interview, November 1970. Kowaleski had a part in organizing and directing the St. Mary's basketball team.
30. Tory on St. Mary's Basketball Team, Otsego County Herald Times, March 22, 1956. p. 1. Stanley Solokis was St. Mary's first hire coach. Solokis was coach for ten years.
31. St. Mary's Elementary School Burns, Otsego County Herald Times, December 1, 1960 p. 1.
32. The Dedication of St. Mary's Elementary School, Otsego County Herald Times, October 25, 1962, p.1.
33. Donald Crandall, Interview, November 1970. St. Mary's students began shared-time vocational classes at Gaylord Public Schools in 1956-57. Crandall became Vocational Agriculture instructor at Gaylord Public Schools in 1959.

Otsego County's First Polish Families
1875 – 1885

Mr. and Mrs. Peter Basinski
Mr. and Mrs. Valentine Borowiak
Frank Dipzinski
Andrew Dreffs
Jacob and Frances Holewinski
Mr. and Mrs. Valentine Koronka
Joseph Kowaleski
Frank Lewandowski
Andrew and Catherine Mackowiak
Stanislaus Mackowiak
John Marcinkowski
Dan Merkiel
Michael Merkiel
Frank Nowaczyk
Mr. and Mrs. Michael Swantek
Mr. and Mrs. John Switalski

1885 – 1900

Martin Amborski
Martin Gapinski
Mr. and Mrs. Francis Jaruzel
John Kondratowicz
Jacob and Mary Kujawa
Mr. and Mrs. Peter Latusek

After 1900

Tony Burzynski
Joseph Gruszczynski
Frank Latusek
Jacob and Mary Mankowski
Valentine Mankowski
Stanley Piasecki

Places of Business Operated by Polish Merchants

<u>Merchant</u>	<u>Business</u>
Kuras	Grocery
John Kondratowicz	Grocery
Joseph Kowaleski	Grocery and Saloon
Alex Kowaleski	Drug Store
Stanley Kwapis	Grocery
Peter Latuzek	Saloon
Stanley Mackowiak	Grocery and Saloon
Dan Merkiel	Grocery
Frank Noa	Meat Market and Grocery
Boleslaus Rolinski	Livery Stable
Walczak and Czapran	Dry Goods

Name Changes (Nicknames)

Czarkowski – Woods
Ducakowski – Summers
Dunanski – Dreffs
Frankowiak – Francis
Kondratowis – Conroy
Lenartowicz – Fisher
Mackowiak – McCoy
Marcipkowski – Cook

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Interviews (Oct. and Nov. 1970)

1. Amborski, Lucy:

Lucy's grand parents (Andrew Mackowiak) came directly from Poland and purchased land south and east of Gaylord. The purchase was made in 1879 from the railroad company. The road continues to use the name of "McCoy".

2. Borowiak, Katherine and Vincient:

Katherine was born in 1892 and Vincient 1888. Each being born in Otsego County of Polish born parents. Their wedding gift from Stanley Mackowiak was a ride to church in a "Gaylord 30" car. Mackowiak was among the first in Gaylord to have a car.

3. DeLillis, Sister:

Sister first came to Gaylord Saint Mary School in 1924. She has taught eleven years at Saint Mary, over two different periods. Sister DeLillis came back in 1970.

4. Dipzinski, Louis:

His father, Frank Dipzinski, Jr., came to Gaylord from Poland at the age of 16. Grandfather, Frank Dipzinski, Sr., had come to Gaylord at an earlier date.

5. Gapinski, Martha:

Martha's father, Martin Gapinski, came from Poland to America al a stowaway. He was twenty-one years old when his parents sailed to America. His country would not issue a passport for him because of his age. A younger brother traveled with Martin. They worked in Chicago stock yards before coming to Otsego County in 1892. Martin lived near Elmira and in 1900 married Marianne Switalski. The couple is still living in Gaylord as of Dec. 1970.

6. Hutchins, Herb:

He was born in 1888 and has been a resident of Otsego County since a baby. Mr. Hutchins supplied many of the early pictures of Otsego County.

7. Jaruzal, Martha:

Martha's parents, Peter and Josephine Basinski, came to Otsego County in the late 1870's from Poland. They never learned to read or write English. Martha attended a public school one day, but received Catechism training. She enjoys reading and spends as much time with books as her eyes will permit.

8. Kaminski, Francis, Monsignor:

Francis Kaminski was born in Poland on January 4, 1900. He came with his family to Ludington, Michigan in May of 1906. He attended Stanislaus School in Ludington for his elementary education. In 1916 Kaminski entered Saint Joseph preparatory seminary at Grand Rapids, Michigan. He studied theology and philosophy for six years at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Montreal, Canada. Kaminski

was ordained by the Most Reverend Joseph Pinten, then Bishop of Grand Rapids, on February 5, 1928, in the Cathedral of Saint Andrews. His first assignment was to Gaylord Saint Mary Parish. Of his forty-two years in priesthood, all but three of them have been in Gaylord, Michigan.

9. Kondratowicz, Rose:

Rose and her sister, Emma, are living in the original home of their parents. The house, 214 S. Indiana, Gaylord, Michigan, has had additions and been remodeled. Rose worked at the Gaylord Post Office from 1921 to 1960.

10. Koronka, Roman:

Roman is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Valentine Koronka. The Valentine Koronka's came to Gaylord around 1885 and Mr. Koronka left his wife and baby at the Gaylord depot while he walked to the country in search of a place for the three of them to stay. The John Marcinkowski's family made room for the Koronka family.

11. Kosiara, Josephine:

Her grandfather, Frank Lewandowski, came to Gaylord about 1888, leaving his wife and child in Poland. Lewandowski traveled as far as Bay City and ran out of money. He walked on to Gaylord, having to exchange his coat for food along the way. Lewandowski worked in the Charcoal Kilns, lumber camps and saved money for his wife and child's passport to America.

12. Kowaleski, Alex:

His father, Joseph Kowaleski, came from Poland with his parents about 1892. They cleared and farmed where Gay-EI-Rancho now is located. The family moved into Gaylord later on and Kowaleski went into the grocery business.

13. Kwapis, Rose:

Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Holewinski, arrived from Poland between the years 1874 and 1880. The Holewinski's settled east of Gaylord near other Polish families. The citizenship paper of Holewinski is included in the illustrations. Rose began clerking in the Kwapis store at the age of 13. When Rose was dating and the couple wanted to visit in the country, they would hire a horse and buggy or cutter from the Rolinski livery stable.

14. Latuszek, Regina:

Regina's mother, Josephine Burnyaski, came to Otsego County as a young girl. The Burnyaski's came from Pennsylvania and they did not care about the isolation in Otsego County.

15. Lyke, Betty:

Betty is the daughter of Stanely Piasecki who came to Gaylord about 1902 from Pennsylvania.

16. Mackowiak, Andrew:

Andrew's father, Stanislaus, had the grocery store and saloon in Gaylord.

17. Pomarzynski, Celia:

Celia's parents, Jacob and Mary Kujawa, came from Poland in the 1880s and settled northeast of Gaylord. Celia was one of 12 children; she was born in 1805. It was a six and a half mile walk to St. Mary's Church for instruction classes.

18. Rolinski, Sophie:

Sophie's parents, Peter and Veronica Latuszek, settled east of Gaylord upon arrival from Pennsylvania. Latuszek was active in community affairs and often served as chairman in groups.

19. Rolinski, Victoria:

Jacob and Mary Mankowski, Victoria's parents, came to Gaylord from Pennsylvania. They had heard of the prosperity in Northern Michigan from relatives here in Otsego County.

20. Smith, Glen (Mrs.):

Mrs. Smith is the Historian for Otsego County Pioneer Club. She also taught and enjoyed the 60 Polish children attending the Big Lake School.

21. Shipp, Hazel:

Her husband, Frank Shipp, was manager and vice-president of the Dayton Last Block Works in Gaylord. Many Polish farmers hauled their logs to this industry. Those who worked for the company in the beginning received a dollar for a ten-hour day.

22. Swantek, Joann and Walter:

Walter's father, Michael Swantek, arrived when the railroad was being put in to Gaylord. Michael Swantek met other Polish families as they came to Gaylord. Joann's father, Andrew Dreffs, came from Poland. Dreffs served in the German Army before coming to America. Before service, his name was Dumanski. 80th Swantek and Dreffs were of great assistance to other Polish settlers in understanding the written and spoken English language.

23. Wojtkowiak, Mary:

Mary's parents, Stanley Piasecki, came to Gaylord in the early 1900's. Teachers of the Big Lake School often roomed and boarded at the Piasecki home. Mary is one of the cooks for the Saint Mary School and has been doing this for twenty years.