

THE RISE AND FALL OF JOHNNYCAKE HOLLOW

From its humble beginning in 1810 until 1840, Randolph grew to become the largest populated settlement in Portage County; Ravenna being the second largest followed by Kent.

Although the Randolph area was devoted mostly to farming, a sizable number of skilled tradesmen and their families established small shops and industries to serve the needs and wants of this agricultural community. Among the first of these businesses which flourished were: a grist mill, blacksmith shop, cider mill, tannery, saw mill, barrel maker, and distillery. A concentration of several cross roads to the northwest of Randolph Center attracted many of these fledgling operations. A major factor to this location was the abundance of fresh water flowing northward in the Little Cuyahoga Creek. It was also known as Congress Lake Outlet, but later to be called Breakneck Creek. This area became known as Johnnycake Hollow. The name probably originating from the corn meal biscuits or pan bread that the growing number of workers and residents of the vicinity ate as a lunchtime staple.

The Merrill Company became the largest employer. It was a foundry and machine shop which specialized in making molds and metal patterns. Mead & Brainerd Flouring Mill was another major factory. John Strong had a shop devoted to the manufacture of wheels and fabrication of wagons and buggies. O. C. Dickinson built a steam powered grist mill. Jonah Hines also had a flouring mill in the area. Other firms included Belding & Collins cloth dressing, Hiram Outcalt's tannery, Asa Rawson & Nathan Sabin dye works, Ward's saw mill, Levi Rawson's wool carding, Albert Kreinberg's jewelry and clock repair, Elmore's chair and cabinet shop, Eliakim Merriman's cooper shop (barrel making), a brick kiln, an ashery, a tavern, linen and leather shop, grocery store, cobbler and a gunsmith.

Perhaps as many as 200 people were gainfully employed, some earning as much 25 to 50 cents a day.

In 1854, there had been no rain since June; the entire area was in the midst of a considerable drought. Then early in the forenoon of a dry and dusty day in early August, a major fire erupted in the engine room of the Mead & Brainerd flour mill. The flames quickly spread throughout the wooden structure despite the futile efforts of several workmen. There was no fire department and a lack of workers and effective equipment prevented the containment of the fire. Sparks and burning embers were quickly whipped and picked up by the wind and rising currents of air to be spread to nearby businesses including the Merrill factory which was similarly destroyed.

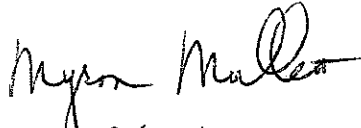
Ground fires also raged in the underbrush and weeds along the creek destroying other structures as well. Much was given to save items of worth and tools. Horses, mules and oxen were led to a safe distant and secured. Several people were singed and burned, but unbelievably there was no loss of human life.

Some of the businesses were not completely destroyed; but could not continue because of the fragile dependence upon each other's products to operate. For example, the wagon maker, chair and cabinet shops needed the wood from the destroyed saw mill. The tannery had provided skins and hides to the leather, harness and shoe shops. Carding, weaving and the dye works had relied upon the woolen and textile firms for materials. Consequently, the absence of workers and customers caused the few remaining retail, service and repair operations to either close up or move. Some business men decided to rebuild in more populated locations, bringing to an end the heyday of the bustling boom town. Johnnycake Hollow became an almost a deserted village.

A local legend had it that a public hanging in Ravenna had drawn many of the workers and local towns people. This, however; is untrue, since there is no record of such a newsworthy event occurring on that hot and windy destructive day in August 9th of 1854.

The entire area eventually returned to a quieter and slower pace of life. Orchards were enlarged, forests and woods were thinned and cleared to provide more tillable farmland. Churches and schools were built, roads and bridges were improved and additional families moved into vicinity to establish a stronger community and improved way of life.

Breakneck Creek continues to flow, meandering and curling its way through the hollow with only its steady current to remind us of that tragic day which changed the history of Randolph Township, Portage County in the state of Ohio. vicinity


2/28/2003

A LISTING OF FACTORIES, INDUSTRIES, BUSINESSES, SHOPS AND STORES
OF JOHNNYCAKE HOLLOW AND SURROUNDING AREA 1840 – 1860

Flour mill
Blacksmith shop
Distillery
Tannery
Gunsmith
Wagon maker
General grocery store
Wool carding, weaving and dyeing
Foundary – iron, copper and lead
Millwright
Chair factory
Pattern and mold maker
Jewelry and clock repair
Ashery
Cooper
Grist mill
Cider mill
Tavern
Brick and tile kiln
Stone and marble cutter
Linen and hat shop
Shirt factory
Tinner shop
Leather shop – harness, shoes and boots
Cabinet and carpentry
Iron working – farm implements and nails
Rope maker – clothesline, bed cords, rope halters
Woodworking – gun stocks, plow handles, sleigh runners and wagon gears, etc.
Basket factory – straw and bark