

City Folk Helped Pioneers During Awful Winter
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By Harriet Kilborn

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By

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Little Regional Historical Society

Historians Told

City Folk Helped Pioneers During Awful Winter of '77

Sub-zero temperatures Wednesday evening set the perfect stage for the story of the Mossback winter of 1877 at the Little Regional Historical Society's February program.

Historian Harriet Kilborn, president emeritus of the society, said in her opening remarks:

"On this 16th day of February, 1977, it is surely appropriate that we look backward to that winter of exactly 100 years ago when Petoskey citizens got the word that the Mossbacks were starving in the woods."

That was the year listed in local history books as the "arctic winter". "Mossback" was a name given to those hardy pioneers who took advantage of homestead lands first offered in northern Michigan from 1875 to around 1880.

Miss Kilborn noted that several events occurred at that point in history to cause the influx of so many settlers looking for a new start in life after the panic of 1873 had stripped away their homes and savings. Indian lands in the north had just been offered under the federal Homestead Act after the required 20 year waiting period.

following the Treaty of 1855. It was also fairly easy to get to northern Michigan since the new G.R. & I Railroad had been extended to Petoskey in 1874.

Under the Homestead Act Civil War veterans were offered 160 acres, while others could homestead 80 acres.

Several took advantage of this offer and tried to cut a farm from the hardwoods surrounding Petoskey. They had hardly cleared enough land to build a shelter for their families before strong northwest winds brought weeks of frigid weather and buried the countryside under drifts of heavy snow.

It wasn't long before word reached town that the poor, unprepared Mossbacks were starving, so the citizens of Petoskey joined together to do something to ease the hardship and suffering. This had to be done by volunteer offerings as state and federal welfare programs were unheard of at that time. Help came from all over Michigan. The people of Grand Rapids sent a carload of food and clothing. The Home Benevolent Association was organized by Mrs. Anna Kirkland and

other Ladies of Petoskey to help the poor.

Then, as if in answer to their prayers, the passenger pigeon chose northern Michigan as its annual nesting place. Millions of birds blackened the skies for days at a time. They also brought commercial pigeon hunters who hired the local Indians and homesteaders to help them kill the young pigeons for restaurants in Detroit, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia.

Besides providing food for the starving Mossbacks the pigeon harvest brought in much needed cash. E. T. Martin a professional pigeoneer said in defense of the slaughter that he paid over \$35,000 into the pockets of local residents to harvest pigeons in Emmet County in the spring of 1878.

"We who enjoy northern Michigan as it is today should stop now and then to pay tribute to those early homesteaders whose efforts and endurance during that crucial winter 100 years ago carved this community out of a wilderness", Miss Kilborn said in closing.