

Feb. 19, 2014

**TOURING SULLIVAN COUNTY'S  
MUSEUM . . . while dusting**



Continuing on with Deb Wilson's rendition of Thomas Jackson Keeler (TJ):

"Meylert, Keeler and the boy crossed the dirt road and walked to the barn behind the hotel. There in large wooden crates lined with straw, lay dozens of sugar maple saplings. The saplings came from cuttings which had been grafted onto the rootstock of maple trees in Montrose, where Michael Meylert once lived. The young trees had traveled by train to Muncy and then by wagon to Laporte where Meylert

himself helped to unload the crated saplings into the barn. He knew springtime was the best time of year to plant the saplings, when the ground was not too cold and still moist from melting snow.

"Soon John Keeler and his son, armed with picks and shovels, were driving their horses and wagon up Muncy Street. The wagon was loaded with two dozen maple saplings and a number of sturdy hemlock stakes. Meylert had instructed them how deep to dig the holes before firmly pressing down the soil over the roots and finally staking the young trees. They began above Courthouse Square and by noon had planted 12 trees along the west side of Muncy Street.

"TJ hadn't eaten since dawn and his stomach told him it was time to stop for lunch. He and his father sat on the back of the wagon and unwrapped a burlap sack of buckwheat cakes and dried venison. TJ hardly noticed what he was eating, he was so caught up in watching the hustle and bustle around him. In Nordmont he attended Elk Lick School, a one room schoolhouse and worked on his family's farm. His routine never changed and he only had contact with family and folks from neighboring farms. This was a place TJ had only imagined. He made up his mind that instant that he would live here someday.

"After lunch the farmer and his son continued their planting along Muncy Street. By 4 o'clock in the afternoon they had covered the roots of 18 young sugar maple trees with soil. The saplings looked vulnerable, tied to their hemlock stakes with raw dirt surrounding them. But when Michael Meylert came to survey the day's work he smiled broadly and shook the hands of John and TJ Keeler. He proclaimed it was a fine day's work and paid them a fair wage.

"While Meylert was talking to John about the possibility of having TJ do some further planting on his own, the boy wandered down toward the courthouse square. There was only one house on that side of the street, just above the courthouse building site. It belonged to William Fancher and his wife Susan. Mr. Fancher was a carpenter who built the house for his family to live in while he worked for Michael Meylert. TJ stood by the sapling he had planted in front of the Fanchers and watched the carpenter unload his tools into the shed behind the house. Young TJ didn't have much free time between school and his farm chores but any spare moment he did have was spent in the barn, honing his own carpentry skills. It was more than a hobby for him, he had dreams of building his own house and barn someday. Mr. Fancher and his wife Susan walked over to thank TJ and told him they had always hoped for a shady spot to put up a hitching post for their horse. Mr. Fancher smiled as TJ looked over his tools and even let him hold his new handsaw. At that moment John Keeler put his hand on his son's shoulder. It was well past time they were on their way. John Keeler shook Mr. Fancher's hand saying; "I hope the lad wasn't bothering you, he is drawn to shiny saws like a bee to honey."

"The Keelers partook of a quick supper in the loghouse along with a dozen of Meylert's workers. Then they hitched their horses to the wagon and rode out of town, intent on making their way home before darkness fell.

“As dusk fell on the mountain the farm wagon made its way toward Nordmont. A catamount screaming in the woods caused John Keeler to snap the reins to hurry the horses on a bit. He turned to his son and said; “Mr. Meylert told me he is going to build a grand mansion for himself in Laporte, on the ridge overlooking town. He said keep practicing at your carpentry and one day you might lend a hand in the building.” Up the road TJ saw smoke rising from the chimney of their farmhouse. He jumped off the wagon and ran the rest of the way up the mountain to his home . . . he had a lot to tell his mother. His dreams that night were of tall trees towering high above a road dappled with sunlight. The End.”

Now, a footnote to Deb’s story. A maple tree can live well past one hundred years of age and such is the case with some of those very trees planted by the Keelers so long ago. What Deb has also shared with this story is simply put ‘the kindness of others’. One of the present day owners of a property shaded by one of those old trees watched as a mighty one that had experienced so much of the life of others, was brought to the end of its own. The individual then took parts of that very tree to another friend, who then turned it into bowls. One of these bowls was placed in Deb Wilson’s hands last summer. She and her great and great great grandfathers were now bridging time – with just that touch.