

The Rivers of the Saginaw Valley 1839

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[Kawkawlin River]²

The Kawkawlin I first will name,
A noted stream for fish and game:
And to your notice I will bring
Its Indian name Ogohcawning [Gawaak Ning],
Which in English means the home
Where wall-eyed pike are wont to come;
For at its mouth there then was found
A very famous fishing ground.
The Williams Brothers traded then,
And, with the help of a dozen men,
A cargo there each spring they'd take
And ship them all across the lake
To sell at Cleveland or Detroit,
And though it then no great exploit.
No white man's dwelling then was seen
Along the banks of the Kawkawlin;
The nearest settlement that day
Was fully twenty miles away.
In sailing southward on the bay
On any pleasant summer day,
When off the mouth of Kawkawlin,
The Saginaw was plainly seen.

¹ Michigan Historical Collections, Pg. 496.

² The name Kawkawlin River means Walleye River. The Kawkawlin River does not enter the Saginaw River but enters the Saginaw Bay northwest of the mouth of the Saginaw River.

The perils of its navigation
Were then unheeded by the nation.
No friendly light was there to show
The troubled sailors where to go,
But, unobstructed by a bar,
Its free commerce then to mar,
Six feet of water scarce was found
Between the surface and the ground.
But, when the vessel sailed inside,
In deeper water she would ride,
And on each hand there might be seen
A broad expanse of living green.
The prairie coming to each shore
With groves of trees was dotted o'er.
Thus it appeared on left and right,
Until was reached Bay City's site,
Where there was seen on either hand,
Timber growing on higher land.
On the right, tall pines were seen,
Distinguished by their darker green;
And on the left the banks were high,
And, could all freshets then defy.
Here, in two channels the river is cleft,
The broader one is on the left;
There lies a middle ground between,
Where many hay stacks have been seen.

[Squaconing Creek]³

Upon the right and at the south,
Lies the broad Squaconing's mouth;
To the north of which you'll see
The first old Indian apple tree.
The fine location soon did draw
A settlement at Saginaw.
It is not now quite fifty years
Since Harry Campbell there appears;
A joker of the ready sort,
Always looking out for sport.
One day at Saginaw, he found
A dentist there on business bound,
Whom of him inquired to know

³ Perhaps Squaconing means "Last" signifying the last battle with the Sauks.

The chance for business down below.
Harry bent upon a joke,
Thus of business prospects spoke:
"Yes, there's Squire Conning, now, forsooth,
With a big mouth and not a tooth:
His mouth, it is so very large,
To fit with teeth you well can charge
So that great profits will inure,
For teeth Squire Conning must procure."
The dentist then on business bent,
Straight to Lower Saginaw went.
There his errand he made known,
And when his reference he had shown,
And said he came down from the south
To fit with teeth Squire Conning's mouth,
Those present, into laughter broke,
And said 'twas Harry Campbell's joke.
Now to our vessel we must go,
Our progress has been quite too slow.

[Sonwesconing Creek]⁴

But if the wind blows from the north
Upon our journey we'll set forth,
We'll pass the creek Sonwesconing,
Which Skull Island near will bring,
Where, by tradition we are taught,
A famous battle once was fought,
Which drove the Saugies from the land
And gave it to the Ojibway band.
Forward and to the left we'll see
The landmark called the old lone tree;
Perched on its top a big white owl,
Which is a spirit in a fowl,
For an Indian prophet long ago
Told his people it was so;
That the guardian spirit of their race
In the owl there sitting at that place,
Their course would watch, their actions guide,
So that prosperity would abide.
But when the spirit left the field,

⁴ I am not familiar with this creek. Skull Island is near the mouth of Squaconning Creek. The Saugies were the Sauk.

Their nation's doom would sure be sealed;
Some great misfortune then would come;
In places strange they 'ere would roam.
I cannot tell how much he knew,
But the Indian's prophecy came true;
For more than fifty years ago
The tree received a fatal blow.
It yielded to the treacherous flood;
The waters long around it stood.
Its leaves fell off, its brandies bare,
E'en like a skeleton it stood there;
While around and above the fierce storm swept,
The spirit owl his vigils kept;
But when it tottered to the ground,
The owl no longer could be found.
Smallpox among them then appeared,
Which by all, is greatly feared;
They, unaccustomed to the sight,
Were panic stricken with affright;
When an Indian was attacked,
Their utensils soon were packed
And to some other place they'd fly
And leave the victim there to die.
It followed them from place to place,
'Till by it fell one half their race;
The remnant then in lonely bands,
Went forth to unaccustomed lands.
Sixty years have scarce rolled round
Since few but Indians here were found;
When fourteen hundred in a day
Were gathered to receive the pay
Which was due them from this nation
According to treaty stipulation.
Now scarce an Indian is found
Upon their once best hunting ground;
Near the site of the old lone tree
A mile race course we now may see.
No Indian passing by the place,
No spirit owl to watch their race.
Our onward course we will pursue
And see what else is brought to view.
The Devil's Elbow comes the next,
Which the sailors always vexed;
For the river here takes such a bend

That eastward now our course must tend.

[Cheboygoning Creek]⁵

But when we've passed Cheboygan's mouth,
It then lies nearly to the south.
At this place, 'sixty years ago,
The banks were high, the river low;
Miles of the blue joint grass were seen
On the prairie, so bright and green.
On these green banks did wild flowers bloom,
Sending forth a sweet perfume.
As Willow Island we shall pass,
We'll see a tree and blue joint grass;
But when we reach Zilwaukie's site
There's timber land upon the right;
Upon the left the Island Crow,
Where the Indians' corn did grow.
Passing Crow Island soon after that,
We come to the shoal—the Carrollton flat;
The river Bo spreads o'er the ground,
Four feet of water is all that's found.
There on the right the traveler sees
Another clump of apple trees.
Who planted them? Tell, if you can,
Whether an Indian or white man;
For they were old, as we do know,
As they stood there sixty years ago.
And as the flats we now pass o'er,
We closely hug the right hand shore,
And pass along 'till the pilot sees
A little clump of willow trees;
Then put the helm down hard a lee
And in deeper water soon we'll be.
In all this route o'er which we've been
No white man has as yet been seen;
No improvement has e'er been made
In all this land with ax or spade.

[Pay-saw-wink or Saginaw]⁶

⁵ This creek today is also called Cheboygan and arises in Tuscola County. Its name means the great rice gathering place.

⁶ Pay-saw-wink was Saginaw the great camping ground where many bands of Native People met each spring.

But here upon the left we'll see
(Near the street that's now called Genesee,
In the city of East Saginaw,)
A Mock house built with ax and saw.
By whom 'twas built we do not know,
But it stood there sixty years ago,
Unfinished and without a roof,
Which state of facts comes near a proof
That the Indian's savage nature then
Proved hostile to all good white men;
For the "Mission" that was undertaken
Forever after was forsaken.
Further on and to the right,
If evening's come we'll see a light,
For there's a house two stories high,
First on the route that we'll espy;
Built by the trader Jo Compeau,
Seven and sixty years ago,
When the soldiers of the nation
Near that place then had a station.
A little farther on our route
We'll cast our anchor and look about.
If in the Indian tongue I'd sing,
I'd call the place now Pa-su-ning;
But when the English term is found,
Its meaning is "Near camping ground."⁷
Your attention to it I draw,
For'tis the fort at Saginaw.
Here stands some of the old stockade,
Which by the soldiers had been made;
The gate which had been iron bound,
Was broken and had fallen down.
Six block houses there did stand,
On a very beautiful rise of land.
No new improvements had been made;
No business here but Indian trade.
Here, now, we'll leave our larger boat,
And in a canoe we'll onward float.

[Shawesskoskong or Green Point]⁸

⁷ This was Pay-saw-ning or the great camping ground now the central part of the City and County of Saginaw.

⁸This is Green Point where there was often a Native Camp. I was the point of junction where the Tittabawassee, Shiawassee, and Cass River form the Saginaw River.

As up the river we pass along,
The place on the right is Shaw-es-sko-skong;
Green Point, the Indian word doth mean,
Appropriate when the prairie's seen.
The only ferry was crossing here,
That was on the river for many a year.
Here two large rivers unite their flow;
To view them is pleasant, as on we go
For where together they mingled run,
The river Saginaw is begun.

[Tittabawassee River]⁹

Here on the right there swift doth run,
The prettiest river under the sun;
Its deep, fresh current is crystal clear,
Till mingled with darker waters here;
Its Indian name is pronounced, I think,
As if it were written Ta-ta-ba-wa-sink,
Which is the same as if you say,
Running parallel with the bay;
That you will see is the river's course,
Which gives the Indian name its force.
We pass the prairie, and then there come
Extensive orchards of purple plums.
When we have gone a mile or more,
Standing upon the left hand shore,
A trading house we there shall see,
Built by Riggs, named Lauren P.,
But abandoned as we do know
Nearly sixty years ago.
We pass the Riggs house; the scene is changed;
Deep forests on either hand are ranged,
Huge black walnut trees are seen,
With red elm and butternut between;
Five lengths of twelve foot rails I've cut
From the trunk of one tall butternut.
In springtime, flooded by melted snow,
The river here does its banks overflow;
And for their fertility of soil
Of the lands I've seen they surpass them all.

⁹ This is the Tittabawassee River whose name means curved or twisted shining river.

Next thing to notice, as on we pass,
Is, on the left bank, a patch of grass;
Standing there the traveler sees
The most famous of all the apple trees.
Four large trunks from one small seed grow,
Planted there in the long ago.
Other trees close around it stand,
But that's the most famous in the land.
The fruit it bears is the very best,
As eating of it will surely attest.
Since sixty years if not before,
One hundred bushels a year it bore.
As we pass along to view the ground,
A high bank on the left is found;
When further on and to the right,
A little clearing comes in sight;
Upon it there a log house stands
Which has been built with white men's hands.
The place that does the eye so charm
Long ago was called the Stanard farm.
Further on six miles from town,
We'll reach the farm of Yankee Brown.
Around the town the story ran
That he was an easy-going man;
On the river's bank he cut his trees,
And to get rid of them with ease
Into the stream he let them fall,
Trunks and branches, leaves and all;
Thus obstructing navigation,
Against a law of this great nation.
Then everything there was to "tote"
Had to be carried in a boat.
Jewett up the river bound,
Paddling along o'er familiar ground,
Near shore his boat did glide with ease
Until he reached those fallen trees,
When with all his might and main,
Around them he went to the shore again.
When he stood up and with a frown,
He thus addressed his neighbor Brown:
'If I catch yon at that again
I surely will of you complain."
"That makes no odds," said Brown, "you see
Most everyone complains of me."

Upwards of sixty years ago
Of a famous mill site some did know.
Considered of great value then;
None nearer in the white man's ken
To Saginaw could then be found,
Where mills could run or grist be grounded.
Milling soon after was done by steam,
No mill dam now obstructs the stream;
The place here noted in my ditty
Is now the site of Midland City.¹⁰
The right hand fork we'll now ascend,
But far more force we now must lend,
For as further up the stream we go,
Much stronger doth the current flow.
We'll pass along twelve miles or more,
And look upon the left hand shore.
And now Salt river doth appear,
Where democrats were bound last year;
At the river's mouth or just below,
Not far from fifty years ago,
The State did there then undertake
A well to bore and salt to make;
The project failed, and that sad fate
Was caused by being a bankrupt State.

[Chippewa Creek]

To explore these smaller inland streams
By far a heavier task would seem;
For nothing near them could there be found,
But pine and Indians' hunting ground.
Pine grew on every valley stream;
On Tittabawassee the most was seen.
We'll now again to the forks return,
And see what further there is to learn.
The left hand fork I now will say
Is called the river Chippeway.
As up the Chippeway stream we go,
Into it we'll find Pine river flow.
Both rivers in these days known quite well,
In Gratiot county and Isabel;
But then in the times so long ago

¹⁰ The City of Midland was also called the "Forks".

No white man's work was there to show;
Nothing at all could there be found,
But Indian camp and hunting ground.

[Shiawasse River]¹¹

To the Saginaw fork we'll now return,
And see what more we there can learn.

To where the Saginaw's begun
The Shiawasse there doth run;¹²

Its Indian name doth indicate,
The river that is running straight.

As we ascend a mile or less
Upon the left we'll see the Cass.

Above the Cass it now doth take
A breadth that's sometimes called a lake;

In it Dead Island now is seen,
But then 'twas clothed in living green.

With wild ducks oft, the water there
Was covered o'er for acres square.

A broad expanse of wild rice grows
Where this lake river together flows.

Then prairie comes upon either hand,
Before we reach the thick timbered land.

On the left hand there is a big bayou
Where the Flint river once did flow.

From the Saginaw six miles or more
Southwest we'll see Flint river's shore;

And as from it onward again we pass,
We'll find large tracts of prairie grass.

And as we proceed landmarks to seek,
Three miles up we'll find Swan creek;¹³

Three miles still further on we'll see
The river that's called Mich-a-see-be;

Bad river it is by English name,
And it once was quite possessed of fame.

Few there are who now can tell
The history of Bad river canal.

'Twas planned and might sometime have been made
To accommodate the western trade,

¹¹ The meaning of the name Shiawasse is the straight ahead shining river.

¹² He is again at Green Point.

¹³ He is at the forks of the Swan, Bad, Shiawasse, and Flint River just above Green Point.

By opening up a water way
Across the Lower Peninsula.
On the towpath now large trees do grow,
Where it was made so long ago.
After we leave Bad River's mouth,
We'll then pass onward to the south,
Until we reach the Driftwood station,
Which hinders all further navigation.
From there we'll have to drag our boat
To a point above where it can float.
From Bad River's mouth twelve miles will bring
Us to the place Che-as-sin-ing;¹⁴
In the language of the Chippeway race,
Its meaning is the Big Rock's place.
From this point we will onward go,
Till we reach the site of Owosso.
Eight and fifty years ago,
As the writer very well doth know,
This place was reached by two young men,
They were A. L. Williams, and Brother Ben,
Where they found the Indian chief, Wasso,
And gave it his name with the prefix O.
We will now hasten from the south,
Until we reach Flint river's mouth.¹⁵
That stream and its branches to explore,
Will take us four or five days more.
As we ascend upon each hand,
A belt of timber there doth stand.
Beyond we'll see as we do pass,
A large extent of prairie grass;
To the right is the stream Mich-te-gay-ock,¹⁶
But to find it we shall have good luck;
To do so there'll be miles to tramp,
For its mouth is hidden in a swamp.
Ten miles on up the Flint we'll go,
But then our progress must be slow,
For here another driftwood lies,
Which further progress now defies.
A mile or more we must drag our boat,
Before in water again we'll float.

¹⁴ He is now a Chesaning on the Shiawassee River.

¹⁵ He is again near Green Point.

¹⁶ The Mistequay River flows into the Flint River near the mouth of the Flint River.

Instead of small streams running in,
Their outward course can here be seen;
They across the flats their course pursue,
Till in a swamp they are lost to view.
Here may be seen upon each hand,
Some very fertile bottom land.
In spring the river its banks o'er flows,
And here much black walnut timber grows.
As we pass up stream on either hand
We'll see some rolling timbered land.
As further still up the stream we go,
Much pine timber is found to grow.
Here on the left Pine Run comes in,
Which on the Saginaw trail is seen.
And on its banks there once was found,
Quite a convenient camping ground.
There is nothing more to note I think,
Until we reach Pe-wan-a-go-wink.¹⁷
And here resides an Indian band,
The largest one that is in the land.
In describing them I'll be very brief;
Old To-na-dog-a-ny was their chief;¹⁸
Wild game in the forest did abound,
And in the river fish were found;
The squaws now cultivate the fields,
Which to them a bountiful harvest yields.
They live here on their reservation,
The happiest people in the nation.
Pe-wan-a-go-see-ba is the river's name;
By the English name it means the same.
The stream is crooked the current strong,
So over the land we'll skip along
Until the site of Flint is found,
And there we'll stop and look around.
Where the Saginaw Trail Flint River crossed,
Had a long time been a trading post.
The river in half a circle came,
Grand Traverse then was the new French name;
Called Squo-ta-wi-ing by Indian race,

¹⁷ This is today near the City of Flint, Michigan. Pe-wan-a-go-wink was a Native Village. Pe-wan-ago-see-ba means the Flint River.

¹⁸ His name meant rampant dog.

Which means the fire land or burning place.¹⁹

[Thread River and Grand Blanc]²⁰

Here enters in the river Thread,
In Oakland County it has its head.
As on its northern course it's bound,
A settlement on its banks is found.
Captain Stevens was the first man
Who there a settlement began.
Tis seven and sixty years or more
Since he that region did explore.
When first he settled there 'twas then
Near twenty miles from more white men.
The name of the place was then "Graw Blaw,"
For as Frenchmen passed the place they saw
A "Big White" man who there resided,
And that circumstance a name provided.
The Frenchmen wrote the name "Grand Blanc"
It was so pronounced by every "Yank."
The Perry settlement was the next,
Where in eighteen hundred and twenty-six,
Edmund Perry his home did fix.
Others there were besides this man,
Who was the patriarch of the clan.
Fifty thousand they there have made
By farming industry not by trade.
The Smiths and Thompsons and Daytons then
Were among the hearty and stalwart men
Who were farming near the Thread River's shore
All told, there were more than half a score.
Each saw the fruit of his early labor,
For if one got rich so did his neighbor.
A saw mill on the Thread then stood,
But it proved to be of but little good.
Four miles' travel it still will take,
To reach the Copiniconie lake;
Near which resided the Fisher band,
Descendants of the "Big White" man.
Their hair is light, their eyes are blue,

¹⁹ This was a burnt over field used for planting corn and potatoes.

²⁰ Grand Blanc was named for the big white man Mr. Fisher who came to the area just after the American Revolutionary War and married a Native lady.

And their complexion's fair to view.
Some lived there till they were very old,
While others on to life still hold.
The lake is of a stream the head
Which finds its way into the Thread.
Now to the Flint we will return,
For something more is there to learn.
By the old treaty of the nation,
There was there made a reservation
Of eleven sections of good land,
For half breeds of Flint River's band;
To the section lying east and south,
Just above Thread River's mouth,
The title to Edward Compeau went,
A half breed of Indian descent.
He built a house for the Indian trade;
No other improvements there were made.
The trading house they occupied,
And with them here I did reside.
Two families near that place did stay;
The third was seven miles away. ,
Since then there's been a great accession
To that very scanty population;
For the place that was then esteemed so light
Has since become Flint city's site.

[Kearsley Creek]

Up the river now we'll go,
But there's nothing very strange to show.
If water courses still we seek,
We'll find the mouth of Kearsley Creek.
Few flats upon the banks are found,
The country being of higher ground;
All the way there is timbered land,
And pine is seen upon either hand.

[Lapeer]²¹

We'll travel onward as far as Lapeer;
But no white man shall we yet find here,

²¹ French "la Pierre" meaning place of the small stones.

For 'tis not now eight and fifty years
Since the first white settler there appears.
In the fall of eighteen thirty-one,
The first real settlement was begun;
The Harts and Whites there settled down,
And each commenced a rival town.

[Cass River]²²

Over the trail we now must pass,²³
Until we reach the mouth of the Cass.²⁴
Having already left our boat behind,
Another one now we here must find.
Near the mouth the traveler sees
A growth of monstrous hickory trees;
They bore large nuts, with strange, soft shell,
That by hogs and squirrels were liked full well.
But the treacherous river's overflow,
Destroyed those trees long, long ago.
As we pass on up upon either hand,
We'll find rich river bottom land;
But when we've gone six miles or more,
The river's blocked from shore to shore.
Another drift wood here is found,
Again we must haul our boat around.
A little further along we pass,
Until we come to the bend of the Cass.²⁵
By Bridgeport the place is occupied;
A village now known far and wide.
When sawing puts pine wood to test,
That on Cass River is found the best;
The large pine trees that here are found,
With hardwood timber set all around,
When manufactured into boards,
The best of lumber always affords,
And the very ground on which they stand,
When it is cultivated land,

²² The Cass River empties into the Saginaw River at Green Point. The river was also known as the Upper Huron, Onottoway Sebewaing, and Mattawan River. The "wain and wan" endings in the latter two names may mean skin or fur. The Mattwan River likely meant the good fur river.

²³ This is the Saginaw Trail.

²⁴ He is again at Green Point.

²⁵ This might be called the Great Bend in the river at Bridgeport, Michigan, as opposed to the Short Bend at Frankenmuth, Michigan.

The largest crops doth still produce,
And is the best for the farmer's use.
As further still up the stream we go,
Old Indian fields are there to show
Where large tracts once were cultivated,
As by the old Indians has been stated.²⁶
And as we pass on to the river's head,
We find where the elk and moose are fed.²⁷
We have now passed over all the ground,
That near the valley streams is found.
On Tittabawassee and Saginaw
And Thread were the white men that we saw.
But in passing over the self same ground,
Ten fine cities may now be found.
Of villages there are full two score,
And if small ones count, there are many more.
Then if we number the population,
By the most accurate estimation,
Three hundred and twenty thousand souls
Must be counted upon the census rolls.

²⁶ This is likely at today's Caro, Michigan, which is in Indianfields Township, Tuscola County, Michigan.

²⁷ This is in or near Elkland Township, Tuscola County, Michigan.



The Saginaw River System—1836 Farmer Map of Michigan Cutting. (Courtesy of Michigan State University Library)
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