# YESTERDAY'S WOMEN

***The true icons of pioneer heroism . . .***

While much has been written about pioneer life, there is scant account of the harsh plight of our pioneer women. I speak of women of late 1800's —Victorian times—for it is they who were luminary as Canada took root and settlers began to spread their imprint across the country. The sojourn of those women was not so many years ago that many of us do not still have a connection with it through our grannies and great grannies. I chose the characterization of their lives being hqrsh because for working class women, life held few rewards. Yes, there were occasional lighthearted moments, perhaps at a social event having something to do with the church; but life was largely one unbroken narrative of misery—-misery that could only be met by stoic acceptance and dogged spirit. To be sure, Canada has its storied heroes; from early on we learn of our founders and explorers and military men—Champlain, McDonald, Brock and the like—it is a long list—yet it is almost wholly comprised of men. Hidden way down and smothered by the men on the list are scant few women. Yes, we have Laura Secord and Agnes McPhail and Nellie McClung and they were instrumental indeed in Canada's formative years. But—I contend that the real heroes are those about whom we seldom sing——the great phalanx of women of humble birth who inhabited the unsettled reaches of our country, hammering civilisation out of harshness, all the while creating and nurturing the families that have become we gentle folk of today. These comprise the epitome of valor. In particular, I write here of one Nettie Knott, an exemplar of what heroism truly is. Know that Nettie is but one foot soldier in a great regiment, all gone to their reward now—but whose influence will remain forever imprinted on our land.

*In Victorian times, the unbroken trial of a woman's life had to be met dressed in 'decent' clothing that covered the whole body . . .*

Nettie was born in 1866 in Hastings County, the third of eight children and a farmer's daughter. Farms, and the markets to consume what a farm could produce, were not well developed at the time; a diligent farmer could feed his family but generate very little money. A large family was a bittersweet thing; the many hands lightened the work——but every mouth to feed and every body to clothe was a distinct burden. Consider that Canada, in most of Victorian times i.e., the latter years of the 1800's, was in an overall depression; outside jobs for a farmer's daughter did not exist. Nettie Knott's option would have been to make herself generally useful to her mother, helping with such chores as a child could accomplish, contributing to the domestic workaday as she approached adulthood. Only if the family was sufficiently affluent, which it was not, she might be kept in school to become at best, a teacher. At home, work was the ethic and carefree childhood days were few for Nettie. In truth, female children were largely a detriment; hence, the objective of every parent was to get every daughter married off to any man who presented himself at the first opportunity. I admit to speculation here but a suitable match may not have been on the horizon for Nettie. We have one picture of her, dressed handsomely in a shirtwaist, perhaps one of only a few times in her life that she was ever 'primped up'. From the photo, we discern that she had an eye condition properly called 'strabismus'. I don't even like to write about it but alas, in her time, such a condition was regarded only pejoratively; She would have suffered the pain of being shamefully called 'cockeyed' or 'wall-eyed' or had 'a cast in her eye.' It was a cruel world for one with a physical aberration in early days. The point is, and still very ashamedly, a physical abnormality greatly prejudiced one's chances of 'getting married off'. Robert Lavender, a neighbor, was eleven years Nettie's senior. At 31, it was abnormal that he should not be married; from this, we can surmise that he was not the cream of the crop; he had some negative attribute unknown to us which limited his options and which had impeded his prior partnering up. Neither he nor Nettie would have thought of the other as a first choice but were accepting that slim pickings were better than no pickings. Finding each other was a thing of Providence for all concerned. Yet, whatev-

er Robert's attributes or lack of them, he was not really a bad catch for it seems he was no stranger to work which was the prime measure of a man's worth. From what we can discern, he owned a team of horses and any man with a team could be a wage earner even in bad times. He was described as a 'wagoner' on his marriage certificate, a connotation of respectability that 'laborer' did not have. Reciprocally, ensuing events show Nettie, no matter her physical affliction, to be indomitable in her undertakings. As a potential pioneer wife, she had substance. Whatever their impedances, Nettie and Robert married well.

***Nettie***
***unknown infant.***

Their first child came along within a year. Details of their exact movements of the next few years are a bit murky; what is important is that the narrative moves away from Hastings County. Ten years into their marriage, in 1898, we find them ensconced on their own plot of land i.e., lot 6, concession 6 in Livingstone Township. This location was about twelve miles out in heavily forested wilderness from the then hamlet of Dorset, to the extreme north of Haliburton County. There was no depression here. It was the heart of the burgeoning logging industry, there being at least a dozen log producing operations (camps) right around where they settled, all frenziedly levelling the great pine forests that covered Ontario's north country. The camps were populated by men of every age and stripe who followed the camps like they were chasing a gold strike. All were referred to as 'shanty boys' after the rude hovels in which they were accommodated. It would appear that several of Nettie's brothers had preceded the Lavenders on their northern peregrination. Having readily found work in the camps and grabbing at the free land being offered by the government, they had attracted Robert and Nettie to follow suit.

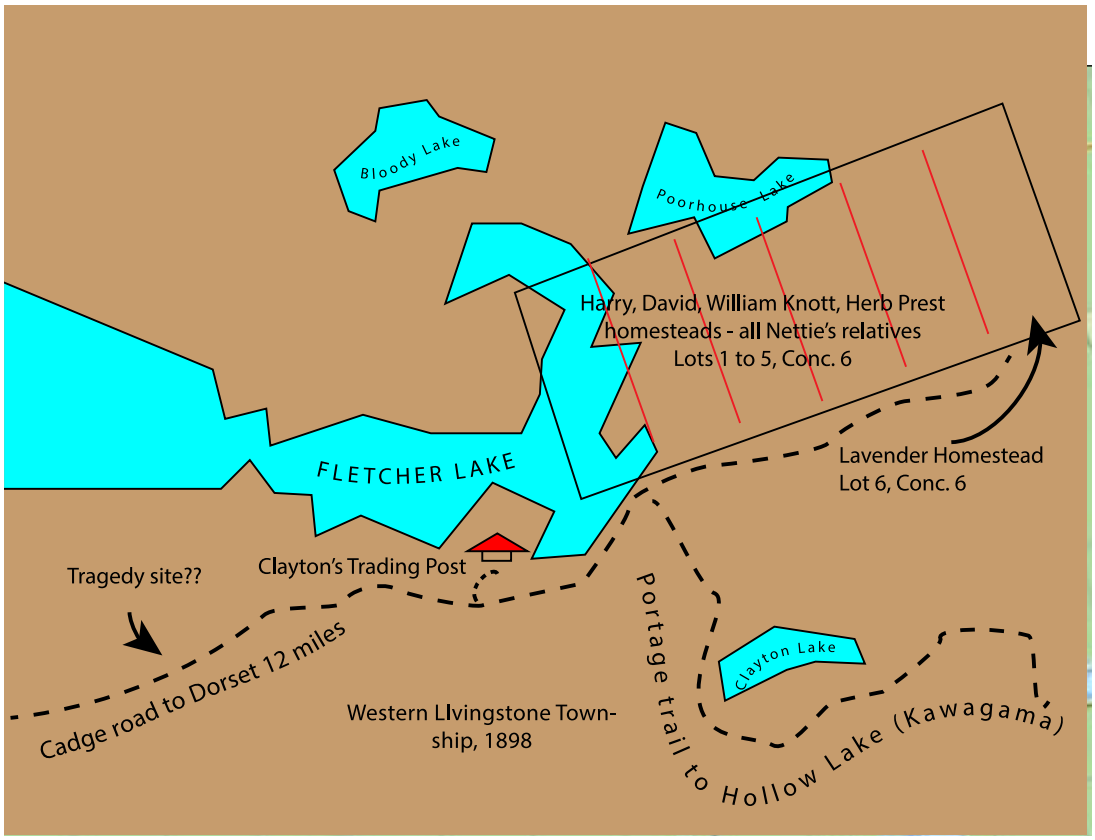
If Nettie's sojourn on the farm through childhood and adolescent years was one long episode of privation and hard work, it was little compared to her odyssey to the north country. From Madoc to Dorset is a distance of about 80 miles. There was no railway at the time and it required a wagon trek westward to Bobcaygeon and thence straight northward to Dorset. All roads were rough and primitive. The Lavenders' only option to migrate the distance was with Robert's team pulling a wagon carrying whatever chattels and implements they may have by then accumulated. It was certain to have taken a couple of bone-jarring weeks whence Nettie would have crouched for hours on the wagon bed, nursing a child, tending to the needs of the others, no facilities of any kind of which to avail herself. Inns or other accomodations were sparse if indeed they could afford them; it is more likely they simply camped under the wagon at night like is described of old western wagon trains of history books and films, eating only what could be prepared on a campfire.

Arriving at Dorset, they would have stocked up on necessities at the trading post and set off on the final twelve miles over a cadge road to their plot in the enclave now established by Nettie's brothers at the eastern edge of Fletcher Lake. On arrival there, they would have had to continue their camping existence as they had on the trail while getting a home erected in which to live permanently. We can speculate that they went about this simply with axe and adze and saw and they were surely helped by the Knott boys already on the scene. There was no shortage of logs from which to hew out a home. Such dwellings were usually one large room to begin with, all that could be accomplished in a single building season. It therefore meant that all family members lived in a single room. Sleeping surfaces, whence balsam boughs served as mattresses, where shared by all children, the adults being the only ones to have their own bed. We don't know if the Lavenders had been able to acquire an iron stove or whether they had had to build a stone fireplace with internal shelves for cooking. Either way, though wood was plentiful all about, due to the drafty nature of the dwelling, they could heat the enclosure only marginally in the winter months. The unmentionable part of it is that there was no plumbing

***Boiling out the bedding . . .***

of any kind and the daily production of body waste of the entire family had to be jettisoned into a cesspool of some order dug to below the frost line outside. The daily ritual of teetering out with brimming, malodorous pails and pots was a trial to all, particularly if it were met with the disaster of a spill. Distasteful though it be to write about, it was but one of the travails that Nettie had to accept stoically. A particular ordeal for her was the need to deal with the inexorable soiling of whatever she had contrived to serve as the baby's diaper. And what of the children who wet the bed, for surely some did? A chronic smell of stale urine suffused the smoke-grimed interior. Laundering was another ordeal. It could only be done by hand in a tub, water having to be carried in by hand and heated in a boiler on the stove. It was possible to dry things outdoors on a clothesline when weather was clement but during winter months there was an eternal stringing up of clothing and bedding et al on hooks and pegs and lines strung out everywhere in the dwelling.

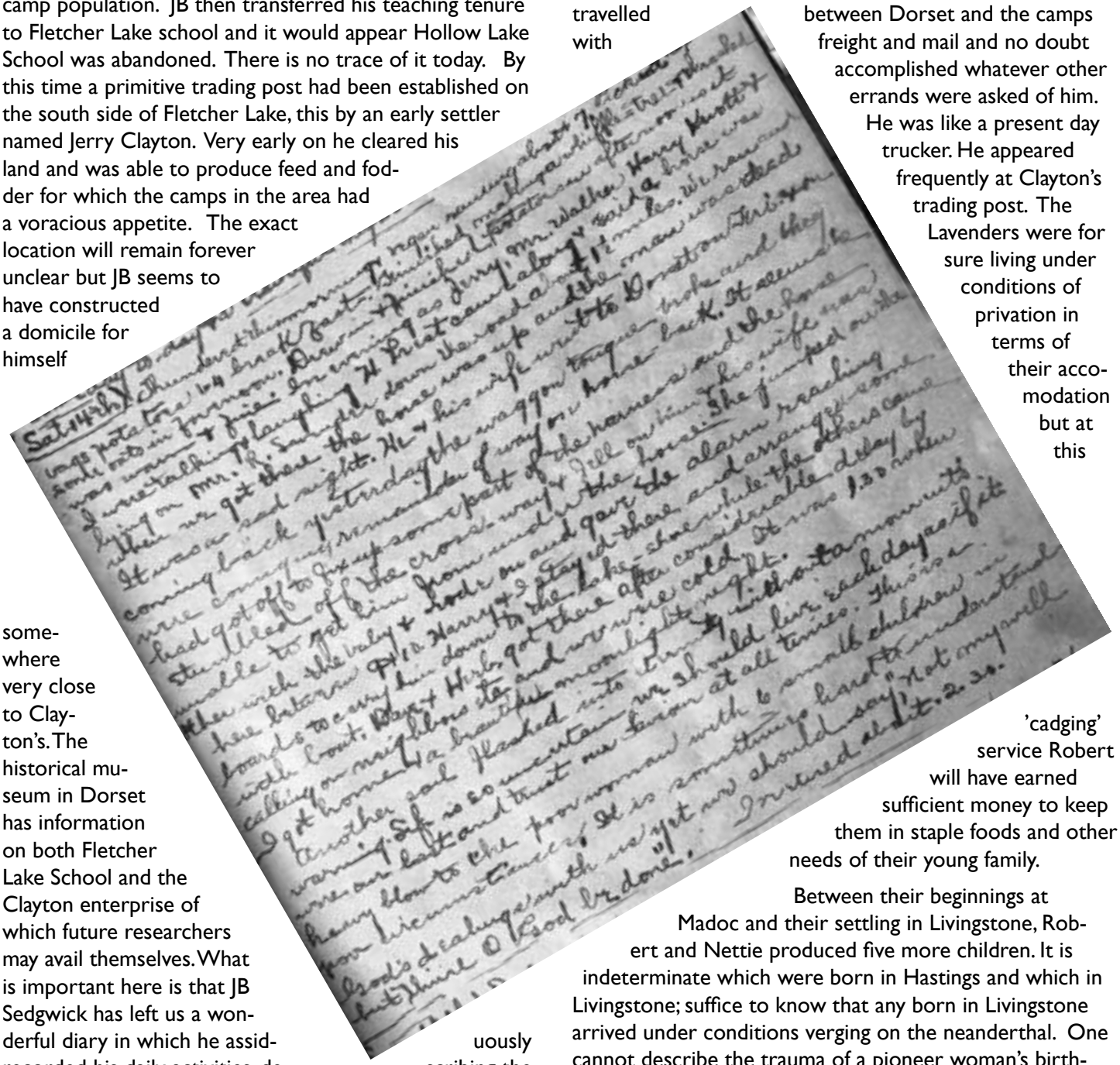
There is another aspect to this that I've not seen written about: It was a rare, if non-existent logging camp that was not beset by vermin—body lice and their cousins the bedbugs. They were ubiquitous and added to the torment of summer blackflies and mosqitoes, their colonization in every bed and everybody occasioning an almost unbearable torment. Remediating methodology was not well understood in those pioneer times; nothing short of complete boiling of anything that touched the body and a dousing with carbolic soap, a rare possibility, availed complete results. Due to the highly contagious nature of vermin, it is certain that Robert would have become afflicted as he moved about the camps and in turn would have gifted his family. Whatever other tribulations they lived under, the ordeal of body lice was always present. For Nettie, as for all pioneer women across the land, it was stoically accepted that life was afforded them by divine Providence——but it was not sweet. Nettie's daily life was a trial beyond words; we can only wonder how she coped.




*Western Livingstone township 1898*

At this point we leave the Lavender narrative to describe another pioneer. John Barr Sedgwick, commonly known as 'JB' began his life in the little hamlet of Gelert, forty miles away in Snowdon Township: He was a pioneer farmer's son who had done what Nettie was never able to do, that being to gain an education and become a school teacher. 1895 found him taking up a position in a wilderness log school that had been cobbled together at the east

end of Kawagama Lake to serve the children of the camp laborer population of the area. It was called Hollow Lake School, that being the original name of Kawagama Lake. He taught there only about two years whence in 1896 a slightly larger school was built at Fletcher Lake, a few miles to the north and more closely centralized among the camp population. JB then transferred his teaching tenure to Fletcher Lake school and it would appear Hollow Lake School was abandoned. There is no trace of it today. By this time a primitive trading post had been established on the south side of Fletcher Lake, this by an early settler named Jerry Clayton. Very early on he cleared his land and was able to produce feed and fodder for which the camps in the area had a voracious appetite. The exact location will remain forever unclear but JB seems to have constructed a domicile for himself somewhere very close to Clayton's. The historical museum in Dorset has information on both Fletcher Lake School and the Clayton enterprise of which future researchers may avail themselves. What is important here is that JB Sedgwick has left us a wonderful diary in which he assiduously recorded his daily activities, describing the world around him and the comings and goings of the population which inhabited it. The diary takes us from his early days in Gelert through a kaleidoscope of turn-of-the-century travels and back again. His sojourn at Fletcher Lake covers from 1896 to 1900 and we may think of it as a treasure indeed. At the time of this writing, transcripts of the diary have not yet been provided to the Dorset Museum but they will soon be so rendered.



JB mentions Robert Lavender's name several times in his journal and from this, we get the picture that Robert was probably not permanently on the payroll of a particular camp. Rather, as a 'wagoner' he hired out his team wherever there was work for it but in particular, travelled between Dorset and the camps with freight and mail and no doubt accomplished whatever other errands were asked of him. He was like a present day trucker. He appeared frequently at Clayton's trading post. The Lavenders were for sure living under conditions of privation in terms of their accomodation but at this 'cadging' service Robert will have earned sufficient money to keep them in staple foods and other needs of their young family.

Between their beginnings at Madoc and their settling in Livingstone, Robert and Nettie produced five more children. It is indeterminate which were born in Hastings and which in Livingstone; suffice to know that any born in Livingstone arrived under conditions verging on the neanderthal. One cannot describe the trauma of a pioneer woman's birthing in genteel terms nor sugar-coat it in euphemisms; the episodes were invariably grisly and to appreciate the travails of Nettie Knott, we should remember them as such; Nettie was on her own with a husband whose expertise in such matters was limited to birthing among livestock. We can picture her in that dim, drafty log enclosure with no plumbing of any kind, her contractions coming ever faster, her water breaking, only a coarse, unwashed and impotent teamster attempting to stanch her bleeding with handfuls

of dried moss . . . Six times Nettie underwent this, at the very best, a neighbor or a local indigenous woman serving as a midwife——but it is certain there were no other comforts to aid in any of her deliveries. Of all Nettie's travails, pioneer birthing was the epitome of the heroism of which I set out to write.

Robert would not have been party to the daily routine of managing their home. In keeping with the custom of the time, proper deportment for him was tending to any and all aspects of maintaining life away from the actual domicile; whatever was to be done within the purview of the home was Nettie's responsibility, though she could enlist whatever help the kids could provide. We come to October, 1898 whence the belabored life of Nettie Knott continues to unfold with its customary weight: An event is about to occur that will transpose her very existence from merely burdensome to incomprehensibly untenable. We piece together the narrative from JB Sedgwick's continuing diary: The month unfurls with ever shortening days and spotty weather. Downright cold begins to replace seasonal coolness. Robert, having picked up outgoing camp mail, sets off for Dorset to make his delivery and pick up needed supplies, as well accomplishing whatever errands may have been asked of him. He travels in his wagon, taking Nettie along with him, a thing not done on perhaps every trip but there are certain needs in the town best acquired by the woman of the house. More to the point is the fact that she is breast-feeding baby Thelma. The remaining children will be left in the care of the oldest, perhaps with one of the neighboring Knott women looking in. Robert's trusty team of horses pulls the wagon along the ragged skid road, mostly corderoyed with cross fallen poles and much intersticed with tree stubs and stumps. For the whole distance it is a jarring, body-wracking trip. For those interested in superstitious portent, it was Friday thirteenth. JB not say where they put up for the night but on the following day, loaded with supplies and camp mail, they start the twelve miles back to Fletcher Lake. By dusk, they are within about three miles of Clayton's trading post when due to the unceasing juddering of the wagon over the rutted road, the tongue of the wagon breaks off it's fastenings and the wagon is left with no ability to steer. There is nothing for it but to abandon the wagon until tools and help can be brought out to effect a repair. Robert unhooks the horses and after much finagling in the increasing gloom, for it is a moonless night, separates their harnesses so that he and Nettie may each mount one and be carried the remaining distance. Getting Nettie with the infant up onto the horse's back requires much boosting and probably not a little swearing. After moving toward home only a short distance, Robert's horse requires an adjustment to its harness, possibly a dropped trace chain, whence he gets off to secure it again. As the horse stamps to maintain its footing on the uneven road, it's hoof plunges through a void in the corduroy, causing it's entire leg to plunge below the road surface and dumping the horse, legs flailing, over the road verge. Robert has no chance to jump away; alas, he plunges down the grade, falling heavily and the horse crashes instantly on top of him. Nettie, horrified, somehow scrambles down off her horse and groping in the near darkness, illuminated only be the loom of her toppled lantern, attempts to coax the downed horse to its feet by seizing and pulling on its bridle. It is to no avail. The harder the horse struggles to Nettie's tugging, the more it slides down the embankment, Robert underneath. It is but a few moments until Nettie realizes that her attempts are futile. The horse is down positively, Robert is pinned under it not moving and help must be gotten fast. How Nettie clambered back aboard her horse with the infant on her hip and how she navigated the remaining miles to the trading post in the dark, we can only guess. Perhaps her horse remembered where it was fed. Whatever, that intrepid pioneer woman did it.

At the very moment of this catastrophe, half a dozen

men were sitting around the stove in the lamplight of Clayton's trading post, doing what men like to do with their leisure evenings after a day's toil. Supper over with, they had lit up pipes and were sitting around the stove in the lamplight, yarning endlessly of days past. Among them was JB; of the others, two were related to Robert and Nettie and lived in their conclave—Harry Knott and Herb Prest. Their camaraderie was summarily interrupted when there was a fuss outside—a jingling of horse harness and the panicky cries of a woman in distress. Nettie breathl essly told them of events and carrying lanterns, all quickly headed out the trail to do what could be done. To everyone's grave consternation, the horse had managed to struggle to its feet——but Robert was motionless where he had lain under it, a grievous wound over his ear, possibly from impalement on the stubble. Sadly his body was lifeless, whether from that wound or the crushing of the horse not being immediately evident.

We do not know exactly what was done with Robert's body; JB diarizes that they 'carried it to the lake' which of course would imply that it needed to be transported across the water. The best guess is that they intended to take it to the Knott/Lavender/Prest conclave of property to the north and east of the trading post for burial, a trip often accomplished by boat. In a later entry, JB describes going to the Lavender property for the funeral. We can find no other record of a burial in any known cemetery; it was not uncommon for the time to have a 'folk burial' on the deceased's property and that is probably what happened. JB describes going to the funeral proceedings by walking, not a long distance alternative to boating from the trading post. He further describes that the travelling preacher who would normally attend a funeral did not show, whence he (JB) was co-opted to perform the niceties. This was no great challenge for JB who was born and raised a devout Methodist and practiced his faith all his life. Before retiring that night about 2:30, JB rues in his diary: 'Another soul flashed into eternity without a moment's warning. Life is so uncertain we should live each day as if it were our last and trust our Saviour at all times. This is a heavy blow to the poor woman with 6 small children and poor circumstances. It is sometimes hard to understand God's dealings with us yet we should say 'Not my will but Thine O God be done". '

So far we have found no census or birth records for corroboration but we can take JB's word for it that Robert left behind a widow with six children and 'poor circumstances.' Poor indeed. There were absolutely none of the social relief that would be in place today. Nettie was left with only their log house and what few possessions it contained. Reason tells us that whatever income Robert had been able to glean was just enough to replenish their unceasing consumption of staples and fodder; it was now summarily stopped and a savings account would have been non existent. JB, true to his charitable upbringing, took it upon himself to make the rounds of the camps with a 'subscription' for Nettie—his word for what we now call a collection. He records only the contribution of the Robertson camp as being $19.50 but there were certainly others. No doubt Nettie's brothers and in-laws in their conclave stepped into the breach to fill the dire void of Robert's workaday functions. Indeed, in similar circumstances, it was not unheard of for another unattached man in the community to step into the breach as a de facto husband. No such option apparently presented itself for within a short time, Nettie and family left to join her estranged family which had emigrated to Michigan shortly after she left Madoc. We have not yet been able to learn of how her life unfolded from that point but there is a Knott family tree on Ancestry and I continue to try to connect with whatever descendants may yet exist. While her Michigan family no doubt afforded her their benefaction, they cannot have exactly welcomed a 40-ish woman with six children as anything beyond a burden. We can only hope that Nettie's lifetime of endless trial earned her some gratuitous kindness as years passed.