

LOOKING BACKWARD
Recollections of Benton and Vicinity
More Than Sixty Years Ago

By "Old Timer"

INTRODUCTION: The *Argus*, Benton's weekly newspaper, from mid-August to the first week in October, 1929, ran a series of eight articles entitled, "Looking Backward." The author's name is unknown, except by a pseudonym, Old Timer, undoubtedly, written by an elderly person who had lived in the Benton or the immediate area for a long time. These personal accounts were the writer's remembrances of specific events over a period of sixty years, reaching as far back as the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Basically, they are primary documents that provide the reader with a series of historical snapshots, descriptive narratives, of what life was like in our area more than a hundred years ago from today.

In the sixth essay on "Looking Backward" published on September 19, 1929, we can learn about the mail routes in the northern part of the county, the roles of Rev. Edward E. Orvis and William H. Smith in publishing the first newspaper, *Independent Weekly*, in the Fishing Creek Valley, baseball coming to Benton, and early swimming customs in the Fishing Creek. Three endnotes provide some additional information about the newspaper.

Other essays from "Looking Backward" will appear from time to time in subsequent issues of the *Newsletter*.



In these days of air mail one can send a letter from New York City to San Francisco in 36 hours. Sixty years ago [1860s] a letter mailed at Benton on Monday would reach Bloomsburg Wednesday morning. The mail was carried by the Cambra stage every other day to Bloomsburg and return. A Star route from Laporte to Forks served Benton. The carrier started from Central Monday P.M., stopping at Coles Creek, Benton, Stillwater and at Forks waited for the Cambra stage up from Bloomsburg. In the spring of the year when roads were very bad, sometimes he would not reach Benton until near midnight and then had to go on to Central and make the trip to Laporte and back to Central next day. The down mail from Benton Monday P.M. would lie at Forks until picked up by down stage Wednesday morning.

Postage was 3 cents and I was once by an old farmer that in years before the time I am writing of postage could be collected from the one receiving the letter. He added: "I didn't mind paying 3 cents for a letter but it made me mad when I paid 3 cents and only got a comic valentine."

Those were the good old days.

Conditions changed about the early 1870s. The Christian Church secured Edward E. Orvis as its pastor. He brought with him a small printing press and type and published a religious magazine the *Messenger and Laborer*. It was also about this time that William H. Smith erected a building and started a tinware business here, and he and Pastor Orvis decided to publish a weekly newspaper which they called the *Independent Weekly*,¹ printed on a Washington hand press which an exuberant individual in Ikeler's barroom

declared was the same press that Ben Franklin had used. A daily stage also started from Benton to Bloomsburg and soon got the contract for carrying the mail. The Star route was abolished, and a daily mail service resulted.

Editor Smith in order to get up a subscription, offered to take farm produce in payment therefore. The *Mountain Echo* of Shickshinny poked fun at Smith by saying that "Editor Smith of the *Independent Weekly* got peeved because one farmer brought him small potatoes for his subscription."

Handicapped as he was, with defective eyesight, poor hearing and also lame, Mr. Smith did much to put Benton on the map. After a few years he moved with his paper to Milton and was burned out in the disastrous Milton fire in the 1880s.² He was one of the committee sent by Milton to Philadelphia to secure relief for Milton's homeless and was clad in a long linen duster when he arrived there. Philadelphia responded quickly and liberally to the Milton sufferers and William H. Singerly of *The Record* and other publishers procured for Mr. Smith a printing press and type, and in a few days he had Phoenix-like risen from the ashes and was once more publishing his paper at Milton in a freight car on a railroad siding.

I do not remember whether the name of the paper was changed to the *Argus* then or before, but later on Mr. Smith returned to Benton with his paper and his subsequent history is remembered by most of you.³ I have written this rather long account of Mr. Smith with the main idea of connecting him with the advent of baseball in Benton and vicinity.

When Howard and Ellis Masters were in their teens, they attended a boarding school near Philadelphia and then learned the game of baseball. At vacation time, about 1869, several of their schoolmates came up from Philadelphia and vicinity on a hiking and camping trip to Long Pond (Ganoga Lake). They pitched their tents at Benton and next day got up a nine and played a game of baseball in the field above the red barn. This new game drew quite a gathering and Benton soon disguardad [sic] town ball and took up baseball. The game was similar but in some ways different from the present game, as then the ball was pitched (not thrown) and the catcher caught it on the first bounce. No gloves or masks were worn or even known of then.

When the weekly paper got started, the game of base ball received considerable notice by Smith and teams from nearby places sprang up. Laporte had a nine, and there was a challenge to a contest between Laporte and Benton. The latter team went to Laporte in the Benton stage and "Bill" Smith was chosen as umpire. If I remember right, the Laporte boys put it all over the visitors but "a good time was had by all" and Smith wrote up a first class baseball story about it for his paper. I wonder how many of the players in that contest are now living.

In the early 1870s' there was a game played at Benton, about where the school building now stands, between the Benton team and a team of young farmer boys from Jackson Township. In those days high boots were worn, and in order to run the bases faster the Jackson boys discarded their boots and played barefoot. I was asked to umpire the game, but after I had made a couple or more decisions the Jackson boys did not like, I decided to quit umpiring while the quitting was good – and I not reconsider, either.

It may interest my readers to know that Thomas K. Brown, who was one of the little party of campers that brought baseball to Benton, is still enjoying camping-out life each year up in the Adirondacks, although upwards of 84 years of age. And Benton and Columbia County has produced several players of note in fast company.

There is not much connection between baseball and swimming, but the old swimmin' hole at the rocks will never be forgotten. The "new road" was not built at the time I write of. There was no such thing and no need of a bathing suit. We disrobed right there at the creek or in the bushes on the bank above the rocks and in "a natural" state enjoyed ourselves. No one lived nearby and no one objected. The swimming hole of today is much the same, but the bathing costumes of the girls make it more attractive and colorful.

¹ The *Independent Weekly*, a Democrat newspaper, began publishing on April 1, 1874, in Benton. A year and half later in the fall of 1875 the partnership between Orvis and Smith ended with Smith retaining ownership of the newspaper. At the same time he moved the newspaper to Orangeville but only remained there for six months before returning to Benton in April 1876. Smith in September 1877 would move the *Independent Weekly* again. This time he went to Milton and renamed his paper the *Argus*. *History and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties Pennsylvania*. Vol. I (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1915), 101.

² The fire that nearly destroyed all of Milton occurred on May 14, 1880. It began in the Milton Car Works around noon, and because of strong winds it spread quickly through the town. Herbert C. Bell. *History of Northumberland County*. (Chicago: Brown, Runk & Co., 1891), 566.

³ Editor Smith left Milton in 1892 and returned to Benton with his newspaper, the *Argus*. In the same year he died, and his wife continued the newspaper until she sold it to Percy Brewington on August 30, 1891. *History and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties Pennsylvania*, 101.