

EARLY PIONEER LETTERS 1837 & 1838

Joseph and Sanford Case, two ambitious brothers from New York, were some of the very first settlers in Thornton, arriving in 1835, several months before the village was platted. The Historical Society was fortunate enough to acquire letters written by the Cases to their brother Victor in Pennsylvania, telling what life was like in their new place of residence. Joseph Case became the second Thornton postmaster in 1836. One of the letters bears his postmaster "free frank mark."

I found the Case letters to be very intriguing; an actual first-hand account of what life in our Village was like in 1837 and '38. I wanted to know more about these two early pioneers and so began my research.

When the Case brothers first came to Thornton in the spring of 1835 it was a true wilderness with no roads, only Indian trails. It's hard to comprehend the courage it took to leave their family and go West in search of a way to make a decent living, never knowing if they would ever return or see their family again. At that time there was a small store in the Village, built and kept by William Woodbridge, to buy goods. Although Chicago was only 25 miles away, it too was still quite primitive, and to reach it would require a trip by horse or by stage coach.

Joseph Case was born in 1806, and his brother Sanford in 1811. This makes them 29 and 26 when they moved from their native New York to the Village of Thornton. Sanford worked mainly as a carpenter while Joseph was more interested in farming. Both apparently had some education and enough money to start acquiring land. They looked for business opportunities and bought and rented out a blacksmith shop.

A book entitled the History of Cook County by Andreas, published in 1884, is a wonderful reference source. It mentions the Case brothers several times:

"Joseph and Sanford Case settled here in the spring of 1835..."

"Joseph Case was the second postmaster, succeeding Mr. Berry in 1837..."

"Joseph Case, who has already been mentioned as among the early settlers of Thornton, died in 1868 (another source says 1872)..."

"When the first settlers arrived at Thornton, they found the ruins of what had evidently been Indian fortifications, occupying the site of the present

town. The ruins consisted of outer ditches or trenches, and inside of these were the works or fortifications proper. On the banks of these, trees, apparently not less than one hundred years old, were growing, which only furnished abundant proofs of the indisputable antiquity of the ruins. When Joseph Case arrived here he used frequently to talk with the Indians about the origin of the remains, but could only learn that with them it was supposed they were built by the French explorers many, many years before..."

"The oldest house now standing in the village was built in 1837, for a man named Barrett, by the Case brothers and John B. Toban (possibly Taber). It stands on William Street, near the residence of Peter Upston, and as it is now in an advanced state of decay, the chances are that this land-mark of early days will soon have gone the way of all the earth..."

The Andreas book also indicates that Sanford Case was very active with Thornton Township, formed in 1850. He was the Township Clerk 1855-56, Township Assessor 1857-58, 1862-64 & 1865-66, and held the position of Township Supervisor from 1864-65.

Township minutes from 1857 show that Sanford was on a Committee to purchase land from Gurdon Hubbard to be used as a "Burying Ground." This land is now known as Thornton Township Cemetery, located just west of the village on Ridge Road.

An 1861 plat maps indicates that Sanford Case owned 80 acres on both sides of Ridge Road, directly across the creek.

Sanford Case married Rebecca Taber (perhaps the sister of John Taber, a business partner). They had no children. Rebecca died in 1865 at age 40 and is buried in Thornton Township Cemetery.

Joseph and his wife Mary had four children. Their daughter Helen, who died at age 15, is also buried in the Township Cemetery. Son Henry married a local woman, Maria Gardner, daughter of Ira Gardner. The Gardner farm was located where Wampum Lake is today. Frank was married in Crown Point, IN, as was daughter Josephine.

After a search of records from surrounding cemeteries, I could not find

where Sanford and Joseph are buried. Perhaps they too are in the old Township Cemetery, with their headstones long since destroyed by time or vandals.

It is almost overwhelming to think that their letters have survived for 167 years, and that after so much time and so many miles they have returned to the place where they left by stage coach so long ago.

1837 LETTER FROM THORNTON, ILL. Folded letter with "Thornton Ill" manuscript postmark & manuscript "25" rate, addressed to Victor Case in Knoxville, Tioga Co., Pennsylvania, with lengthy, (2-1/2 folio pgs) & interesting letter contents, datelined "Illinois, Thornton, March 15, 1837," from his brother, Sanford Case.

Includes (spelling corrected):
Illinois Thornton March 15, 1837
Brother Victor

I with pleasure received a letter from you Saturday evening and was glad to hear you was well and doing the same. It appears by yours that you never received an answer to the one of yours dated the 6 of October which came safe to here and I sent one in answer in a few days. I now employ a moment in writing you another, hoping it may reach you without fail. I am at work at my trade in company with John Taber in a small place by the name of Thornton about 25 miles south from Chicago, on a stream of water called Thorn Creek, which affords a good mill privilege. There is a saw mill in operation at present and we have a job of putting up a flouring mill another summer which will make an addition to the place and gives us a job of about \$1200, which is to be completed by the first of December next. We furnish the heavy timber frame, raise, enclose and do the joiner work inside, which with the rest of the work we have in view of putting up a house and barn for another man that lives in this place, will keep us busy through the summer and gave us a plenty of work, and we hope if nothing else happens and we enjoy ourselves to do a good summer's work which is all cash as soon as it is done. We have done work to the amount of about \$600 since we have been in this part of the world. We charge \$2 per day and board \$2.50 cents, board ourselves, which amounts to quite a sum in the course of a year. We have a lot in this place with a Blacksmith's Shop on the same and tools which cost us

\$300 tools (illegible) shop. We intend to carry on that branch of business as there is a first rate place here for it this summer especially on account of the mill. Then we will be \$1000 worth of work to be done on that in the Black Smithing line which we have the promise of if we get a good Smith. Joseph is now gone to Chicago in search of one. We intend to do something or nothing here before we leave the place although I do not think this country is the best in the world myself. There is a number of objecting to it, one is there is a scarcity of timber. Another it is in general rather too level, which makes it rather wet in some places, but it settles fast and bids fair to make a good farming country. Around about here produce is high, flour is from 10 to \$12 per barrel, corn and oats 75 cents per bushel, potatoes 50 cents, pork \$30 per barrel. Board in Chicago is from 4 to \$6 per week. We pay in this place \$3 and not the first rate at that, but tolerable, good aplenty of pork and potatoes, not many extras to be had. We have had cold weather here this winter. The snow has been about 12 inches deep, which made most beautiful sleighing for about 2 months, and some as cold weather as I ever felt in York State in my day. The snow now is gone and the weather begins to moderate. You wrote you thought of coming out here this summer. I should like to see you here. There is a good chance to make money for those that understand it by speculation, but it requires some money to start with and close calculation to manage it right or the speculator's money goes faster than he is aware. There has been fortunes made here in a short space of time, but in general more by luck than wit in my way of thinking. I want you to come and see the country if nothing more than to satisfy yourself. It is uncertain when I should return if ever. I want to see you as well as the rest of my friends. I had a letter from Loring the other day. He wrote they were all well. He thought of coming out this way in the summer as he had done with Walker and was out of business then in that place. Joseph had one from George at the same time. He also thinks of leaving home but in my opinion he had better stay on the old place a spell longer yet, for if he leaves home Father and Mother will be left alone pretty much and without help. Joseph's (illegible) is good at present. He calculates to work with us this summer and intends to do something in the farming line as he has a good claim 2 miles from here of first rate land and good timber with some improvements on the same. He thinks of sowing some grain, just enough to keep a team and other stock. Thus you know what we are all about and a doing in this part of the moral vineyard. How we shall make out time alone will determine. I think however we are doing better here than we ever was at any other place. Since I have been writing this there has been a man in

to sell us a lot in this place with a house frame on it. We bantered him a while and finally made a bargain with him for the same for \$250. We pay 100 down and the rest in 6 months. So we now have two lots now in this place which are worth perhaps \$700 as they hold property of the kind here. Nothing more at present. Write as soon as convenient.

Give my respects to Caleb and Family, together with the rest of my friends. We have seen nothing of the Lyon S. Case, V. Case folks since I have been here. They have not taken the trouble to call on us. Emilus Bales is in Chicago I am informed, but have not seen him. Wm. Bates died at Bloomington last fall. (illegible) for the present

Your Brother

Sanford Case

V Case

Direct yours to Thornton, Cook County, Illinois

Thornton January 21, 1838

Brother Victor

After having written to all our friends in York State I take my pen this evening for the purpose of writing you a letter. Before I left home I had got my mind made up to come to your place, but I read a letter from Joseph wishing me to come out here with Mary and the children. He sent in the letter money to bear our expenses. I thought probably it was as good an opportunity as I should have for seeing the western countries. We went to work and got all things in order for the journey and in 3 days from the time we read the letter we was on our journey to the far off west. I was rather afraid that it had got too late to start such a journey but as it happened we had a very good time of it and found the distance to be short to what I expected. We were but 2 weeks and 3 days from the time we left home on the road and we went to Levoiston and to Mayvill in the time. I believe we stopped 4 days on the road in all. We found some pretty hard roads but not so bad as I expected at that time of the year. We had a first rate time up the lake, a very still, warm day. It was as pleasant a day as you ever see and we had good luck to get a good boat to come up on. And in just 2 weeks and 3 days from the time we left home we arrived in Thornton. Found the boys well and a doing as well as the times will allow. Joseph was very much pleased to have his family with him. Sanford and Joseph own a good deal of property here. They have 2 Village lots in this place, one with a black smith shop on it which business they carry on, the other lot has a building on it which they occupy as a Joiners Shop. They have

also a lot in Joliet, a flourishing village 25 miles west of this, 2 yoke of oxen, besides a good many tools for farming, and they have each of them a claim of 160 acres of land each about 2 miles from this. It is given up by all that have seen it that it is the best and most valuable land anywhere about in this section of country. It lies on the Calumet River at the mouth of Thorn Creek. There has been a canal laid out to come into the river about 3 miles below this land. It is expected they will get to work on it this summer, and as soon as they get that completed they will make a canal of Thorn Creek up to Thornton which can be done with very, very little expense as all they will have to do will be to build a tow path on one side and the Calumet is a navigable river up to Chicago. The worst part I find with the country is there is not timber enough, other ways I like the country very much. I am engaged for the winter in teaching school in this place. I have \$15 per month for three months. I have no business for the next summer as yet, but am in hopes to get some good business. I wish that you was here. I think that we could make things go with a rush. They sell goods here at a very great profit. There's but one store in this place and that is a very small one. We are all well here at present and hope to remain so. Mary has been some homesick but has got pretty much over it. She has not heard anything from her friend at Bloomington until today. She took up a paper from there and found in it an Administrator's notice of Merit Lyon Disest which in all probability is her brother. Give my respects to Kelibs family. L.R. Case

Joseph Case PM Free
Mr. Victor Case
Knoxville
Tiogue Co.
PA
Thornton May 28

Thornton May 25, 1838

Dear Brother,

Your letter was duly read and we were much pleased to hear that you and friends were all in usual health. It is a consolation to ones self to hear from friends and connections but it is a much greater one to learn that they are all well. We are all in good health at present. Times are very hard, made so by the scarcity of money or, by the large quantity of bad money that is in circulation. Almost all of the money that is a going now is of the Saftifund Bank of Michigan which is worse than no money

or of very little worth, but we are in hopes that there will soon be an alteration in the money business as the Banks are a beginning to resume specie payment. I had a letter from Laura last week. She wrote that our friends were all well there. Sanford and Joseph are all the while at work at something. They do not get many cash jobs now. Sanford is all the time at work in the shop at something or other. He is now at work a covering a barn for old Widow Barra [Berry] to pay for board. They were owing her at the time of the last settlement last fall \$430.00. When they get the barn covered they will have over paid her. Joseph is now at work on his chance at putting in crops. He has sowed about 7 acres of wheat and is a going to plant 2 or 3 acres of corn and about one of potatoes. He has 3 hogs which he has calculated to fat this fall for his pork. Another summer they rented their blacksmith shop for \$150 for one year. This is a beautiful country and will make one of the finest farming countries in the world when people begin to take hold of it, but they hate to go to work on their claims and lay out expenses on that they would if the land was their own. The greatest there is with this country is the scarcity of timber and for building and fence. The stage is coming and I must close. Give my respects to Rhoda. In haste, L.R. Case
Victor

(Partial Letter)

"Thornton Ills" manuscript postmark & manuscript" Joseph Case, P.M., Free" postmaster's free frank on 1838 folded letter addressed to Victor Case in Deerfield, Pa. 1 folio pg letter contents, dated Sept. 2, 1838 from S & J. Case with a postscript from Joseph Case, writing to their brother in the East, w/interesting contents reflecting the money difficulties in the wake of the Financial Panic of 1837. Includes, (spelling corrected): "...Sanford and the children are sick with the Ague. It is quite sickly here this season as well as every where else....If you have or can get \$2000 and send to us before the 19th of November send it without fail so that we can be prepared to get the lands we want, as we are not likely to get the money due us soon enough for the sale. We have sued for money enough and shall get it, but at the length of the law, which will make it too late....If possible, send money of New York State Banks. Send it in letter closely folded...at our risk..."