

Harvey Eller (1819-1906)

Harvey⁵ – Simeon⁴ – John³ – Peter² – George Michael¹

Harvey's remarkable life span of 87 years in the 19th century was just that, remarkable. Harvey's father, Simeon, lived to age 56, his grandfather, John, to age 56, and his great, great grandfather, Peter, to age 53.



Harvey was born 24 March 1819 in Wilkes County, North Carolina on a farm on Cole's Creek, a branch of the North Fork of Lewis Creek. He was one of 11 children, the second born and the oldest son. His father, Simeon, was a self-educated man. His eleven children received the best schooling that the community provided but they all claimed that their father taught them more than the schools. Simeon was a prime mover in establishing the Wilkesboro Academy, one of the earliest schools of importance and influence in western North Carolina.

Young Harvey grew to manhood working on the family farm. At age 22 he married Mary Caroline Vannoy, a descendent of French Huguenot emigrants. Their marriage took place 25 November 1841 and was to span 64 years! They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in late November 1891.

Upon taking a wife, he established himself on a farm in the valley below the south slope of Rendezvous Mountain which is situated some 6 miles west of North Wilkesboro, N.C. Here they built a life together, farming, and raising seven children during the years 1841 - 1852. Their family would eventually number 15! All of these children would attain adulthood, which for the time was astounding.

Harvey was a large man standing well over 61. Mary Caroline on the other hand was of slight stature and fragile. They were members of the New Hope Baptist Church located near their farm. Harvey's father, Simeon, and his mother, Susannah Kerns Eller, were founding members of this little church which was constituted and established on 26 June 1830. Though the original church structure no longer exists, the current structure houses an active congregation today. The adjacent cemetery is the resting place for many Ellers, Vannoys and McNiels.

Slavery was a most distasteful practice to Harvey and Caroline, and they opposed it vigorously. The liquor traffic there also offended their Christian precepts. They

longed to get away from it to save their children from its influences. For these specific reasons they decided to remove themselves from Wilkes County and move to Jefferson County, Iowa where Harvey's uncle, David Eller, was then living. This decision could not have come easily. It was momentous but their convictions were strong and they resolutely proceeded to make the move. Late in the summer of 1852 they began their preparations.



A strong wagon was fitted with a schooner body over which was bent six bows of green hickory. Strong tenting cloth was sewed to the bows, means for folding the cloth over the ends of the enclosure were provided, and well planned provisions of all kinds were stored inside. All surplus belongings were disposed of at a public sale. Late in September preparations for the journey were concluded.

Friends and relatives alike tried to dissuade the family from starting out on such a long and hazardous journey. And well they might. The oldest child of the family was William Hamilton, barely ten years of age. Jesse, the youngest, was a baby of only seven months. Between these were Cleveland, aged eight, Virginia, aged seven, (the future mother of *J. W. Hook*, author of *GEORGE MICHAEL ELLER, and Descendents of his in America*), Nancy, aged five, Mary, aged four, and Anderson, aged two. The family was going alone, something rather unusual of long journeys in those days. Their forefathers had lived there amid peace and plenty for almost 100 years. All of these reasons were advanced by troubled friends and relatives, but to no avail.

On the eve of their departure, neighbors and relatives stayed up all night, singing hymns and offering prayers. None of them ever expected to see the family again. The next morning as the family piled into the wagon, goodbyes were said and farewell songs sung. Several young male relatives on horseback escorted the travelers until they passed safely over the range of mountains beyond the "jumping off place". This was from the fertile valley floor up and over the highest point of the Blue Ridge mountains. Thence the lonely wagon with its sacred charge passed on and out of sight below the western horizon.

The wagon was drawn by four horses, the father riding one of the wheelers and driving the lead team. Water was carried in kegs and the supply was replenished at each opportunity. All cooking was done over camp-fire. The first cook stove that any of the family had ever seen was at Danville, Kentucky. They were accustomed to cooking at the open hearth. At night the father and older children slept in a tent, while

the mother and younger children slept in the wagon. During the entire trip there was not a night that religious services were not held. What a blessed sight that little group must have made as it assembled at night-fall along the lonely trail to invoke God's blessings upon their journey.

The wagon rumbled slowly and safely over the mountainous region of Tennessee, through Cumberland Gap, into Kentucky, thence to Danville and Louisville, Kentucky. Vincennes, Indiana, Springfield, Illinois, Keokuk, Iowa, and over the old Fort Des Moines Road to Brookville where David Eller, Harvey's uncle, lived.

The journey was full of new and thrilling experiences. The roads in some places were hardly more than trails and three great mountain chains had to be crossed. Rivers and streams had to be forded. Food for the younger children was scarce and at times the only water obtainable was from streams that were muddy and questionable. While crossing Tennessee the travelers had their first glimpse of a railroad train. They came to a crossing and the father and older sons got out to examine the tracks, leaving the mother and smaller children in the wagon. Almost without warning a train came along and so frightened the horses that they all but upset the wagon. The incident struck terror in the heart of Mrs. Eller. She often told about it in later life.

As the wagon neared Danville, Kentucky, the faithful mother, worn by the long and arduous journey, fell ill. Permanent camp was made in the thought that an indefinite delay might result. Did Providence have a hand in locating that camp? It would seem so, because next day it was found to be near the home of a former friend and neighbor in North Carolina named Cones. He placed one of his cabins at the family's disposal. Here the brave mother obtained a much needed rest. The expense of the delay, however, added to other expensive misfortunes to the wagon, and the need for extra food, forced them to sell one of the four horses and to resume and complete the journey with only three.

The Ohio, Wabash and Mississippi Rivers were provided with steam ferries which enabled the travelers to cross without mishap. Not so, however, with the White River in Indiana. This river was crossed by an old row ferry which all but capsized with its load in midstream. The listing of the ferry caused the horses to become frightened and for a moment it seemed inevitable that the wagon, team, and all would be thrown into the water. By carefully unhitching and shifting the horses so as better to distribute the load, the ferry was balanced and a crisis overcome.

The old Fort Des Moines Road westward from Keokuk guided the family to the David Eller homestead, which was located on what was later known as the old Marion Tracey Farm, 2½ miles southeast of Brookville in Jefferson County, Iowa. The family

arrived there the latter part of November in 1852. And, well that it did not arrive later because winter began early that year and heaped untold hardships upon later arrivals who had no warm homes to move into. David welcomed his nephew and family and shared his house with them for three months until they could arrange for a lease on some property nearby. It was in this vicinity that two more children were born, Israel Curtis Eller and Martha Clementine Eller.

In 1856 the family moved to the Agnes David Farm north of Ottumwa, near Dalonega, where they lived until the latter part of December of that same year. They then moved to an 80 acre farm, which they had recently purchased, located in the extreme northern end of Wapello County just south of Martinsburg, Iowa. Four more children, John, Thomas, Jacob, and Edson C. were born at this home. Food was scarce, warm clothing almost unobtainable, and the family subsisted for the most part on pumpkin molasses and corn bread.

Late in 1864 Harvey sold this farm and on November 24 of that year purchased the unimproved quarter section of land (240 acres) from James Grant Hook, the grandfather of author J.W. HOOK. Upon this property 40 acres were "broken out" or plowed for the first time. They built a log house, a log barn, a frame smoke house, and they dug a well. This became the permanent Eller home in Wapello County. And it was here that the last two children of 15 were born, Maggie in 1866 and Otis in 1870. Upon this land today is located the town of Farson, Iowa which was incorporated in 1898. What a pity the founding fathers did not consider naming the town Eller or Ellerton.

Just prior to this time and at the outbreak of the Civil War, the Iowa Ellers included Harvey and his family, his Uncle David who established his home in Jefferson County, Iowa about 1838, and two of Harvey's younger brothers, John Cleveland Eller and William Eller, who had emigrated to Iowa in 1853.

Back in North Carolina, Harvey's three younger brothers, David, Jesse Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, enlisted in the North Carolina regiments of the Confederate Army. So it was that William Hamilton and Barnett Cleveland, the two oldest sons of Harvey, served in the Union Army, participating in Western campaigns, while Harvey's three brothers served in the Confederate Army seeing action in the Eastern campaigns. Two of these brothers died in the war, David at Drewry's Bluff, Virginia, and Thomas Jefferson in the Battle of Chancellorsville. If not actually "brother against brother" fighting in the Civil War, it was here that uncle against nephew and nephew against uncle.

The hardships of that pioneer family were uncountable but they persevered and

endured them all with a strong faith and conviction. Though all 15 children attained adulthood, tragedy would strike the family three times.

The first occurred June 15, 1875 during the time the family was building yet another home, a frame house on the Farson property. Young John Eller, age 17 and number 10 child, did all of the hauling of building materials from the markets for this construction. On the night of June 14 there was a major rain storm and it continued to rain most of the night. The next morning John took his team of horses and wagon and took the younger children to school. He then went to Marysville to have his breaking plows sharpened. While waiting his turn at the smithy, he and several others were called by the road-overseer to help him remove debris from the top of the bridge over Compentine Creek. The rain of the previous night had caused a great overflow of the creek and the water, when it began to recede, left many logs, trees and brush on the bridge. There was imminent danger of the weight crushing the bridge. As the men rolled and pushed the heavy logs off of the bridge, the work being near completion, a chum of John's jumped on one of the large logs and went floating down stream. As the next large log was being shoved into the water, John jumped astride it and floated down the rushing stream. He was dressed in overalls and was barefooted. He rode perhaps a fourth of a mile when it struck an eddy. The log lunged and John fell into the water. He did not know how to swim and no one was near enough to save him. His body was found four hours later 1 mile down stream. The body was placed on a wagon and taken back to the farm home. The weather was very warm and there was no trace of any ice in the county. Nor was there an undertaker or funeral home. The boss carpenter, who was building the new house, made a strong, rough wooden box and the body was placed in it. Cold water from the well was poured over the body night and day until the funeral and burial. (note burial site in photograph)

Six years later in 1881, the second tragedy occurred. Mary Octavo Eller Phelps, number 5 child, died in child birth. Mary and her husband Josiah Phelps had seven children including one set of twins. These Children were from 2 to 12 years of age. The second set of twins, Martha and Mary, were born 27 March 1881. Mary died of complications on 3 April 1881 at the age of 33, leaving her husband with nine children under the age of 12. Most of the children were raised by relatives with several of them being taken into the home of Harvey and Caroline until they reached adulthood. (Note: Josiah Phelps had served in the Union Army. He was captured with most of his regiment near Tifton, Georgia after fighting the Battle of Atlanta. He was imprisoned at Andersonville where he spent the winter of 1864, and where is nearly starved to death).

Tragedy number three struck in the form of an explosion and fire in January of 1892. This was just six weeks after Nancy Eller Troxel attended Harvey and Caroline's 50th

wedding anniversary. Nancy lived in Clay Center, Nebraska. She had followed her brothers Jacob, Thomas and Edson from Iowa to this eastern Nebraska pioneer town in 1874. There she had purchased a 40 acre homestead. She married Frazier Troxel on 3 November 1878. Four children were born to this union, Susie Caroline, Leetha Grace, Daniel Curtis, and Bessie Eller Troxel. In 1892 the girls were aged 13, 9 and 4, Nancy was cleaning their dresses with gasoline. This was the only method of "dry cleaning" in those years and for some years to come. The gasoline exploded and set fire to Nancy and the youngest daughter, Bessie. They were both engulfed in flames and Bessie ran to the nearby school house where her father was working. She died that day. Nancy lived through the night but died of burns the next morning. She was coherent to the extent of conversing with her son, Dan, that evening. This nine year old was urged to persevere and to accomplish good in his life. Dan Troxel proved a worthy heir to this courageous mother. He graduated from Yale University School of Divinity in 1922 and subsequently ordained as a Minister of the Christian Church. He served several, churches in eastern Nebraska and in Ohio and taught religion at the University of Chicago and at the College of Bible at Lexington, Kentucky.

After celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary in November 1891, Harvey and Caroline would find the following decade to be in declining health. They sold the Farson farm shortly after the anniversary and moved to Blair, Nebraska to be with their son Israel Curtis Eller, Judge of the County Court and representative to the Nebraska legislature. They remained in Blair until 1895 when they returned to Iowa to live in the village of Hedrick. Their last years were spent with their daughters Maggie Eller Davis and Martha Clementine Eller Dickens. Caroline died 18 January 1904 (see obituary) and Harvey left this mortal life 3 November 1906. Both are buried in the old section of Competine Cemetery located one half mile east of Farson, Iowa. Their young son John is buried beside them.

Harvey Eller, during his years in Iowa, was chosen to serve on school and township committees including several years tenure as township assessor. He was a pillar of the local Baptist Church and filled all of the offices that the church had the power to extend. It was Harvey's practice to start and to end the day with prayer. His grace at the dinner table is remembered by descendants as a very special gift.

Prepared by Lynn Eller, September 1990