

A HOMESTEAD WITH A SPRING

By Tom Turnham

For the first settlers of Minnesota it would be hard to overemphasize the convenience of having a spring on your own land that could provide a steady supply of pure, cold water. It could be used not only for drinking water for the family and their livestock, but also used for keeping their meat and milk from spoiling during the hot summer months. There were a number of springs around the Lake Minnetonka area but the one that directly affected my pioneer ancestors was the one located along the creek that flows from Clasen Lake to Stubbs Bay and is about 200 yards southeast of the intersection of Watertown Road and Leaf Street. Originally this was part of the homestead of my great-grandparents, Edwin and Emily Maxwell Turnham who had claimed the land in 1855, the year this part of Minnesota had been opened for settlement.

It wasn't by accident that they claimed this particular 160 acre parcel with a flowing spring. The previous year Emily's two brothers, Francis and James Maxwell, had come up the Mississippi River from Illinois where the Turnham and Maxwell families were living and had scouted the area for desirable parcels to claim the next year when the state would be opened for settlement. They wrote down various sites they felt would be good to claim but the one they felt was the best was the one with the spring. They went back home to Illinois and told the clan to sell all their holdings so they would be ready to take the first river boat leaving for St. Paul the next spring after the ice went out. Minnesota looked like the land of opportunity.

That first summer must have been a harrowing one for Edwin and Emily and their four little children between the ages of 2 and 10. Their only shelter, until they could build a log cabin, was a very primitive one consisting of rough poles leaned against a large fallen tree, thatched with marsh grass and sided with slabs of elm bark. How happy they must have been that fall when they finally completed their new, two-story, 16' x 18' log cabin, just before the onset of winter.

There were a number of requirements for the settlers before they would receive title to the land they were claiming. First, they had to complete a cabin, then clear enough land for a garden and pasture, and finally build a shelter for their animals. There was a time limit to complete these improvements, I believe it was four years, so there probably was plenty of chopping and sawing going on in the "Big Woods" at that time.

Many of the other settlers who had claims near my great-grandparents used the Turnham Spring as their source of drinking water. It was a wonderful resource to have and they willingly shared it with all. The spring made the Turnham place somewhat of a center of activity in those early years. When neighbors came to replenish their drinking water, they would stop to visit and possibly meet up with friends who were also coming with their empty pails.

A few years later the Turnham place and its spring became a regular stop for the stagecoach that ran from Minneapolis to Watertown. One historical source even says that the stagecoach passengers occasionally stayed overnight, with the ladies sleeping upstairs in the house and the gents sleeping in the hayloft of the barn.

The ever-flowing spring even provided the Turnhams with a monetary advantage as there was a law at that time that said any farmer who provided a watering trough for passersby was excused from road poll tax. While this was probably a very small saving, every little bit helped, as the family, like many of their neighbors, was desperately short of money. When the federal government passed a law in 1858 that required larger

payments than were originally required, the Turnhams could not make those payments and they were forced to sell 100 acres of their land in order not to lose everything, but they managed to keep the land with the spring.

Edwin and Emily ultimately had a family of six girls and four boys. Because of this large family and their natural hospitality, their place was often the site of neighborhood picnics and holiday celebrations. When the children grew up, they married and left home but fortunately for the parents they didn't move very far away. Family get-togethers at the old homestead remained a regular occurrence with names like Fleming, Stubbs, McCormick, Snoke and May (daughters married names) as well as Turnham represented.

Edwin died in 1879 but Emily lived until 1908 when she passed away at the age of 83. She lived on the original property until her death, the last few years sharing the home with her only unmarried child, Segal, who was known to all as "Teed". Teed eventually inherited the property and owned it until his death in 1951.

An article in the **Minnetonka Record** of August 13, 1915 illustrates the importance of the spring and creek to the family members: *"61 descendents of Mrs. Emily Turnham returned to the old Turnham homestead for a family reunion on July 29, a revival of the old Thanksgiving tradition. - - - There was a plentiful lunch on the bank of the creek and the old residence resounded again with the shouts and laughter of children as they waded in the stream and romped in the meadow. It was interesting to note how many went down again to the spring to kneel and drink as in childhood days."*

After Teed's death, his grand-nephew Bill Mills purchased the old homestead from the estate and platted the property as Swan Lake Addition with a winding street named Cygnet Place running through it. The lot where the spring is located was purchased by Greg and Rosemarie Ehalt in 1960. They built their family residence on the bank of the creek and this is where they still live. When the Ehalts drilled the well for their house they hit the same vein of water that feeds the spring, at a depth of about 80 feet. Their house is just slightly south of where the Turnhams had built their first log cabin.

The flow of water from the spring nowadays varies quite a bit with the season. It has a small but steady flow in the springtime that reduces to a mere seepage in the dry summer months. We have to use our imagination to visualize the cold, clear flowing rivulet that served our pioneer ancestors so well 150 years ago.