



Lucretia Miller Lee

By Elizabeth Schmidt

The gravestone is tilted and part of the epitaph is obscured by the ground, but it has survived the various expansions and contractions of the earth and weathered well. It marks the grave of Lucretia Miller Lee, who endured the hardships of a frontier life and like her stone weathered well.

Lucretia Miller was born in West Springfield, Massachusetts, on July 15, 1785, the daughter of Jacob and Lucretia Ely Miller. Her father moved westward in stages and his family either moved with him or followed later. The first stop was Warren, New York, where Lucretia Miller married John B. Lee on January 16, 1807. Her father moved to Scipio, Cayuga County, and then to West Brighton about 1810. Part of his farm is now included in Mt. Hope Cemetery. In 1812 the Lees arrived and settled on a farm to the south of the Monroe County Poor House farm on what is now South Avenue.

What is known about Lucretia's life, other than the vital statistics, comes from three pioneer letters by Edwin Scrantom about a "tea party" given in honor of her 88th birthday. The table was set with the family's best china, linen, and silver; the food was excellent, as were the stories told at the party. Perhaps the stories were embellished a bit, but they give an idea of what life was like here in the early nineteenth century and a good description of the land in the area near the Lees' home.

A thickly wooded forest surrounded their home and those of the other settlers. Wildcats, wolves, and bears were very much present, so much so that venturing into the forest at any time was hazardous and at night particularly dangerous. To the east of the farm was the East Swamp, and in the area in front of what is now the old chapel in Mt. Hope Cemetery was the Bear Swamp. When this general area was first becoming populated, neighbors helped each other to clear the land and raise their first homes. Since it was a rural, sparsely settled area, the settlers must have led an isolated life until it became more populated.

From 1812 to 1814, John Lee worked for the government as a teamster, using his own team of oxen to haul lumber and provisions to Hanford Landing. Lucretia Lee was left in charge of their home and children while he was gone, sometimes for 2 or 3 days. When Lee journeyed to Rochesterville through the forest, he rode one of his oxen, sang loudly, and cracked his ox whip to frighten any nearby animals. Lucretia and their children would accompany him on foot as far as they dared. When he rode on alone, she and the children would wait and listen for any noise or change in his voice that would indicate he had been attacked by animals. When





Lee returned at night, he always carried a lighted torch and Mrs. Lee surrounded their home with fires as precautionary measures. "...although wild beasts are around more or less during the day, it is only at night when 'all the beasts of the forest creep forth.' "

The wildcats that inhabited the East Swamp were a particular problem. They were uninhibited predators and "scratched on the settlers' windows and doors, and disturbed the hens and geese," terrifying the inhabitants. While the dogs warned them when a wildcat was nearby, they, too, were frightened and hid. When seen in the darkness, the wildcats "showed their great flashing, fiery eyes as they gyrated, growled, and spit, and refused to go off, returning as they often did several times in the night."

One morning in 1814, a tall, young man who had been hunting wildcats all night looking especially for a particularly, bold, troublesome one, came to Lucretia's door. When he entered her home, the first words he said were, "See, I've got the critter." He was highly elated over his success and swaggered around the room telling about the hunt. It was then that Lucretia noticed the head of the head wildcat resting on his shoulders, the body hanging down his back, and the tail dragging the floor. It was a large one.

Equally troublesome, but much smaller, were the mosquitoes from the Bear Swamp. Its fens, according to the settlers, turned out larger mosquitoes than any of the surrounding countryside. Some said they were the size of grasshoppers. The mosquitoes were a scourge of the inhabitants. "They had waited so long for civilization that they had become very hungry, and when a cloud of them lit on a sleeping child, the effect was that of a plaster of Spanish flies." At night Lucretia protected her children from them by filling the house with smoke from a smoldering fire.

Lucretia Lee lived long enough to see the forests changed to cultivated land, the wild animals disappear, the mosquitoes eliminated by draining the swamps, more homes built, and her neighborhood become an established community. She was a hardy, pioneer woman who outlived her husband and all except one of her children. At the time of her "tea party," she was becoming frail in body, but her faculties were still intact. She died five years after her birthday party at the age of 93 and is buried in Mt. Hope a few miles from the site of her former farm home on South Avenue.

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