

Sarah Dibley Fowle's Letter Home to Her Sister in Wadhurst, England

15 March, 1837

Oak Creek, Wisconsin Territory

Dearest Sister:

I take pen in hand to tell you wonderful news. A son, Horace, was born to John and me on the 26th day of February. He is a bonny, blue-eyed little soul and he is feeding so hungrily that we feel sure he will grow to a fine, strong man. We thank God for him. His nine brothers and sisters marvel at his strength and manly looks. He is said to be the first white boy to be born in the entire settlement.

I pray that you are well, dear sister. How we missed you during your long stay in India! It was so hard for us and our children to leave England and the easy living of the mansion at Wadhurst. It was piercingly sad to leave our dear ones, but John felt strongly that we would have a better life in this new land.

Our trip on the steam ship Daniel Webster was stormy and long. Most of the children, and John, were ill on the voyage. I thank God for my strong stomach and a strong body to care for them on their bad days.

On coming to America we stayed a few days with the Elsoms in Rochester, N.Y., then took another steamer for the lands farther West. We had hoped to disembark in the Milwaukee harbor, where the Menominee River joins the lake. The seas were so stormy that we decided to continue south to Chicago. John found little there to encourage his plan for a grist mill and a farm, so after a few days of rest and preparation we again headed north.

Maude, you never saw anything like the wagon we rode in coming up from Chicago! It has a long, wooden cart on four wooden wheels, with a huge canvas top stretched over a light wood frame. We bought two oxen in Chicago to pull it. The younger children and I sat on the front seat and John or one of our sons walked alongside to keep the oxen moving. Once our wagon got mired in the mud. The animals pulled and groaned to no avail. Finally John ordered everyone out. We had to carry our steamer trunks, our reticules—everything we owned—to a dry place. Then the men cut branches and piled them under the wheels. By that time it was getting dark so we decided to spend the night there along the Root River.

Next morning we had only a foot trail to follow. Finally we came to a creek that came down from the west. John followed the creek to its mouth in Lake Michigan. He thinks this will be a good place for his saw mill because the water falls 12 feet at one place. He has named it "Oak Creek" for the many oak on the high land.

We traveled on several miles to the North. We were befriended by Horace Chase, who found us a cabin near the lake at the mouth of the Menominee River. We stayed there while John and the older boys built us this house in Oak Creek.

We have also made friends with the Juneaus, who live nearby. Solomon is a fur trader and Josette, his wife, is Indian and French. She helped us with provisions.

Now we are in our own large house on the lake bluff. John has added on a tavern and stage station. It is the only resting place between Racine and Milwaukee. The military road coming up from Chicago bends to the west right near our house. We charge 25 cents a night for meals and lodging and 10 cents for each horse. The men spread buffalo robes on the floor to sleep on and we have beds for the women.

But John and I are worried. The lake bank has washed away quite badly in the winter's storms so we may have to give up this location.

Brother Joseph Dibley has been working as a carpenter in Milwaukee, but he still wants to farm, so we are expecting him soon to settle on land north of us. The four older boys are already talking about taking over their own land. We paid \$1.25 an acre for the land we bought from the Government Land Office in Green Bay.

We have no school as yet, but I am teaching the younger children as well as I can from the books we brought on the ship. The children are a great help to me especially with our two cows, which they milk morning and night. John, Henry and Joseph slaughtered some of our cattle last fall. We dried some of the meat over the fire. We made candles from the fat and tallow. Then we made soap. We started with the fat that separated from the meat scraps we had boiled down. Then we made lye by running rain water over the ashes of our cooking fires. The fat and the lye heated together made quite good soap. But it is a far cry from the scented bars we had back home!

We make do with as much as we can, because it is a long, rutted road to travel to the Milwaukee settlement for supplies.

When their chores are done for the day, the young children clamber up and down the creek bank. They made themselves snow shoes and love to explore along the lake shore and climb onto the great ice floes.

As you can see, sister, it has taken several weeks to finish off this letter. There is so much to do, we all love this land and enjoy making a new life in it. Seeing the lake reminds me of the ocean and looking at the high banks makes me homesick for England and for all of you.

If only you could see little Horace, and how strong and healthy the children are growing in this clear air.

Your loving sister,

Sarah Dibley Fowle

The Rest Of The Story

John and Sarah Dibley Fowle eventually owned 800 acres in the village that began as Oak Creek and was later named South Milwaukee. The Fowle family tilled a fine farm on what is now Grant Park and John became a prosperous miller. There were many descendants. Horace himself had 10 children and built the house now used as the Grant Park Clubhouse. John's son Henry became a dentist. He and his wife, Appolonia Wood, built the house at 300 Hawthorne Ave. that the Girl Scouts of Milwaukee Area occupied from 1926 until 1960.