

General Notes: Rev. John Rix Robinson [54829]

1

Rev. John Rix Robinson

Birth: Mar. 5, 1826

Muskegon County

Michigan, USA Death: Apr. 23, 1897

Shepherd

Isabella County

Michigan, USA

Portrait and Biographical Album, Isabella County, Mich. containing Portraits and Biographical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens of the County... Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1884. 590 pages. Clarke Historical Library Central Michigan University on-line library.

pp. 454-457:

Rev. John R. Robinson, preacher and missionary on the Petosky Indian circuit and resident in the township of Isabella, Isabella County, is the only child of Rix Robinson, the first white settler in Kent Co., Mich.

Rix Robinson came to the Grand River Valley in 1821, in the interests of the American Fur Company. He was a man of remarkable character, who commanded the respect of the savages among who he spent his life and from whose history he is inseparable, by the nature of his relations with them. In September following his arrival in Kent County, he married Mis-so quot-o-quay, a woman of the Mackinaw Indians. She became the mother of one child, -- John R.,-- who was born March 5, 1826. She died of consumption about the year 1848, in Ottawa Co., Mich. Rix Robinson died at Ada, Kent Co., Mich. in 1874.

John R. Robinson received the best educational advantages of the sections where his father had business interests. He was sent to an infant school on the Island of Mackinaw, taught by Mrs. Sarah C. Owens, and later to the school at Flat River, now Lowell, in Kent County, taught by Caroline Beard, who was married to Caleb Page. Later on he was sent to Grand Rapids to complete his period of study. On reaching manhood he became manager of his father's large estate, and during the winter seasons engaged in buying furs for Nelson Robertson, for the Fort Wayne Company, Louis Campau and A. Roberts & Son, of Grand Rapids. He was afterwards interested in the construction of the Detroit & Milwaukee Railroad, and superintended the building of six miles of the track near Spring Lake and in the vicinity of Ionia, this enterprise occupying two years. On its termination he engaged as an Indian trader in Oceana County at Pentwater and Elbridge, in which he continued three years. During the past 20 years he has been engaged to some extent in the same variety of traffic at various points in Michigan. He has acted all his life as Indian interpreter, having learned from childhood both the English language and the Indian dialects.

In the years 1862 and '3 he assisted in raising a company of military recruits, and intended entering the service of the United States under a Lieutenant's commission, but his father interfered, as he was an only son. Still he continued to do valuable service as a recruiting officer, and received the enlistment of a considerable number of whites and Indians.

While at Pentwater he was converted to the Christian religion, through the efforts of the Revs. Lee and Boynton, revival preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and from the period of his conversion was a changed man. The license of the life he lived, and the opportunities authorized him by unlimited resources of money, etc., derived from his father's immense property, had subjected him to deleterious influences and he ran a career of dissipation, of whose character he was scarcely conscious until its enormity was brought to his comprehension by the efforts of the Methodist missionaries. Within a year after his conversion he was licensed a local preacher, and has since done valiant service among the people with whom he is connected by blood. He was married March 15, 1846, to Lucy A., daughter of Solomon and Clementina (Granger) Withey. She was born in 1829, in St. Alban's, Vt., and by her marriage became the mother of five children, born as follows:

Harriet E., Feb. 13, 1849;

Andrew J., Aug. 17, 1851, died Aug. 27, 1852;

Charity C., June 13, 1853, died Aug. 27, 1866;

Dennis W., Feb. 8, 1856, died Aug. 25, 1856;

James B., Sept. 29, 1857, died Feb. 1, 1879.

Mrs. Robinson passed many years of her life as a teacher among the people to whom she became allied through her marriage. At the time of her death she was teaching at the Sheldon school-house near Nipissing. She died in the religious harness, and is succeeded in her labors by her sole surviving child, Harriet E. Robinson who is following worthily in the work of her sainted mother.

The location of John's solitary grave in the old part of the Salt River Cemetery is indicated by a modest red sandstone marker inscribed simply "Husband." Next to the stone stands a rusty Masonic emblem.

Family links:

Parents:

Rix Robinson (1789 - 1875)

General Notes: Rev. John Rix Robinson [54829]

2

Miss-a-quot-o-quay Robinson (_____ - 1844)

Spouse:

Jennie Gibson Robinson (1837 - 1906) *

Children:

Dennis W Robinson (1856 - 1856) *

Burial:

Salt River Cemetery

Shepherd

Isabella County

Michigan, USA

Maintained by: Ron's Resort

Originally Created by: Alan barber

Record added: Jan 28, 2009

Find A Grave Memorial# 33334229

<http://boards.ancestry.co.uk/thread.aspx?mv=flat&m=1076&p=localities.northam.usa.states.michigan.counties.leelanau>
1 of 1

John Rix Robinson 1826-1897 ADembinski (View posts.) Posted: 26 Jan 2011 6:00PM GMT Classification:

Biography Edited: 27 Jan 2011 3:18PM GMT Surnames: Robinson, Lasley, Withey, Wood, Lee, Rev. Robinson is on the records of the Northport Indian Mission, founded in 1882. The last years of his life were spent as a Methodist missionary working among Michigan Indians. What follows is a biography for him, which sheds light on the early history of Michigan and Leelanau County. In 1858 a group of the early pioneers of the Grand River Valley formed the Old Residents' Association. At about the same time several local groups also began holding annual outings for members, all of whom had become residents of the area before Michigan became a state. The story is told of an incident -- a familiar Robinson family legend -- that occurred at one of these early Old Settlers' picnics. This particular incident, however, was never recorded in any of the minutes. During the meal an Indian appeared, demanding to know why he had not been asked to join the Association since he had been a resident of the area since long before 1837. To punctuate his remarks, the young John R. Robinson then proceeded to dance on the tables, spilling food and breaking dishes. The performance was humiliating to his long-suffering father, Rix Robinson. But John's disgraceful behavior was hardly anything new. And as today's newspapers would say, alcohol was involved. Rix, formerly the chief agent for Astor's American Fur Company in Western Michigan, had upon his arrival in the area in 1821 married an Ottawa princess, Pee-miss-a-quot-o-quay (Flying Cloud Woman). The union had been at first a business necessity. Her father, Nam-nom-ma-daw-ba (Old Rock), was the head chief of the Grand River tribe at Battle Point near what is now Grand Haven. Her brother-in-law, Hazy Cloud, was the chief of a small band at Ada, Rix's principal post. Thus the alliance virtually assured his success as a trader. He was one of the family. On March 5, 1826 John Rix was born while the whole family was encamped around Rix's post at Duck Lake in Muskegon County. The next summer when they all traveled to Mackinac Island as usual to deliver the furs, Rix's immediate family included not only his wife and their own baby, John, but at least two young girls and a boy. The Ottawas were not particular about keeping track of exact relationships. Cousins, aunts, grandparents - they were all family. Oddly enough this notion was not entirely foreign to Robinson. Certainly the Robinsons back in New York had kept more formal account of relationships, but they still considered that family was family. In the early 1800's priests, among them the venerable Frederick Baraga, began to visit the Grand River area with some degree of regularity. Through the urging of the Catholic Arbre Croche area Indians, many of the Grand River bands were being baptized. Among them was Hazy Cloud and his whole household. At about this same time Rix's elder brother, Edward, and his large family joined them at the Ada post. The white man's civilization was creeping in on them. Social and religious pressures were building. About ten years after Rix had taken his squaw to live with him in the Indian fashion, the couple were re-married in the white man's way by a Catholic priest. Other cultural problems were also arising. Like so many of the half-Ottawa children known as half-breeds, John was becoming unmanageable. Back in Auburn, New York a boy's anti-social tendencies were effectively curbed by direct physical intervention. Within the close-knit structure of the Ottawa tribe such force was unnecessary. In fact it was unthinkable. An older family member might speak sharply to a child, but a mother never did so. Her relationship with him was totally and continually one of affection and joy. Obviously conflicts must have arisen between the trader and his wife, and John made the most of it. Finally it was decided that John would stay on Mackinac Island with the family of Rix's old friend, the tavern-keeper Lasley and his wife, Rachel. There the boy attended the Mission School as had some of the older children in his mother's family. During John's separation from his parents every winter, his mother's health began to fail. At first she had only a bothersome cough each morning. As the years went on she became pale enough to be mistaken for a half-breed herself. Finally it happened. She began coughing up blood. They could ignore the obvious no longer. She had consumption, and everyone knew in those days that the only hope for a cure lay in getting plenty of fresh air and sunshine. She had contracted this dread

disease while living in the white man's log cabin. Her only hope lay in returning as frequently as possible to live with her own people where she could again sleep in a hut and spend her days out in the open air. It would be difficult enough for a white man to do his own housework and cook his own meals. But the Ottawas knew that a man who did such things was not a man at all but a woman. For convenience and to maintain Rix's trading position, Miss-a-quot-o-quay's young and beautiful niece, Sippi-quay-daw-da (River Woman), the daughter of Hazy Cloud stayed on with them. Meanwhile the wife came and went as her health permitted. Since the land acquisition treaty of 1836 had made specific mention of Rix's "half-breed family," young John was brought back to Ada after the first payments were made at Grand Rapids. By this time all but one of Rix's remaining six brothers had joined him in the newly ceded lands. Lewis, Rodney, and Lucas were all now settled a few miles east of Ada at the mouth of the Flat River. Among them they had easily populated a school, so John joined his cousins and a few of their Indian neighbors at the Lowell school. Later he was sent to Grand Rapids where he studied under Henry Raymond and later Henry Seymour. John was a bright boy; and by the time he had finished all of this schooling, he was well educated indeed considering the times and circumstances. In fact he was far better educated than the majority of white farmers with whom he would have to deal. John soon learned that there was not much call for well-educated Indians in the white man's world. Nor did he have a place among the Ottawas. There he was really quite hopelessly uneducated. While he spoke the language fluently, he was no kind of hunter. He had learned a bit about farming from his father and his Robinson uncles, but the Ottawas considered growing things to be women's work. Among the white settlers John was just another half-breed Indian while the Ottawas regarded him as a friend, but hardly their equal. Rix's fur trade had been successful, and he had closed out his accounts when the trade began to dwindle around the time of the 1836 treaty. Now a large landholder and prosperous farmer, Rix made sure his son never wanted for money. Once in the early 1800's wildcat banking had threatened to ruin the father financially. Now John seemed determined to finish the job. For several years he tried his hand at various jobs, alternating between speculating in furs and managing his father's Landholdings. His only steady occupation seems to have been drinking. In 1848 the community was surprised to learn that John had eloped with Lucy Withey, the white daughter of General Solomon Withey. They had been married near the Baptist college Lucy was attending in Granville, Ohio. The Withey's were old friends of the Robinson's, and at one time the General had run Rix's tavern at Ada. Another Withey daughter had married a nephew who worked on his Uncle Rix's farm. Still many must have wondered what Lucy saw in this dissipated young man. Surely any good qualities he might have possessed had escaped general notice. In time the babies began arriving at roughly two-year intervals. Only two, Harriet E. (Eva), the eldest and James, the youngest lived to adulthood. The three middle children died within a few days of one another during a nightmarish epidemic in late August, 1856. They were buried together at Ada. A family needs a modicum of financial stability, so John and Lucy moved onto the homestead property at Ada. John continued to take a few jobs that his father was able to obtain for him through his political connections. Among these was a short stint as foreman for a section of the Detroit and Milwaukee (Grand Trunk) Railroad being built near Ionia. At one point in the early 1850s John tried to convert his sometimes inconvenient heritage into a little cash. Legally an Ottawa, yet very much his canny father's son, Ne-she-kay-pe-nay-se applied for and secured a U.S Patent for 4,500 acres of fine timberland in Holton Township, Muskegon County. This land had been put aside in the Treaty of 1836, but few Ottawas wanted it because it offered no good hunting and fishing. In the meanwhile squatters had moved in. As soon as John obtained the land, he sold it for several thousand dollars to Ransom E. Wood of Grand Rapids. The irate squatters gave Mr. Wood so much trouble that he soon returned the land to John. After the Detroit Supplemental Treaty of 1855, the few remaining tribes on the Grand River were pushed on up into Oceana and Newaygo Counties. Soon John and his cousin Seth Robinson followed them to Pentwater and Elbridge. John, financed by his father, went as a trader while Seth was hired as an official U.S. Interpreter. Business should have been good. Game was still relatively plentiful. Mink, muskrat, bear, and buckskins were sent to Detroit by the ton. In the spring huge quantities of maple sugar were brought to the traders, and during the summer bushels of huckleberries were shipped to Buffalo. But like any good trader John was careful to stock plenty of illegal whiskey, and somehow the business failed to prosper. The opening guns of the Civil War prompted John to join many of his Robinson cousins in enlisting in the U.S. Army. Rix had other ideas. When Rix's father had objected to the War of 1812, Rix had cheerfully avoided the draft and come west as sutler to the troops. Now he could see no reason for John to risk his life over a quarrel many regarded as none of Michigan's business anyway. Again using his political influence, Rix had John deferred as an only son. John knew when he had been outmaneuvered. For the rest of the war he had to content himself with encouraging others including the Ottawas to enlist. During the 1860's the Ottawas of both Pentwater and Elbridge were the objects of some particularly intense missionary effort on the part of traveling Methodist preachers. The early Catholic missionaries generally had been content to help the Native American adjust materially with the expectation that the Gospel message would likewise be assimilated in time. By contrast the Methodists came in offering instant and future glory for the repentant sinner while painting soul-searing images of eternal damnation for the rest. During one camp-meeting which lasted a full week, white passersby mistook the cause of all of the commotion. Word quickly spread to Grand Rapids that the Indians were on the warpath, coming back for their lands. Guards were hastily posted at the river crossings and all approaches to the city. After the dust had settled and the chiefs heard of the rumors, they quickly sent apologies to the Indian Agent in charge. It was while he was attending one such camp-meeting in 1869 that John suddenly felt that he had been seized by the Spirit. He firmly renounced his former ways and took the pledge to abstain from spirituous liquors. Soon he even took out a local preacher's license. "I give this thing three years, and he'll be worse than ever," predicted his weary father. The years passed. John still didn't prosper as a businessman, but he remained sober. When his father's health began to fail, he returned to Ada. Two new business ventures - a grocery in Nunica and Lowell and a shingle works in Sand Lake - lost money at a predictable rate. Meanwhile John was assuming more and more responsibility for the homestead. He paid the taxes and arranged financial transactions. Finally Rix was convinced. Always highly regarded for his personal integrity, Rix nonetheless eschewed any organized religion. Two years after the death of Miss-a-quot-o-quay in 1848, he had married his long-time companion Sippi-quay in a Baptist ceremony

conducted by Rev. Leonard Slater. The choice of Mr. Slater was due to their long-time association in Grand Rapids and the high esteem in which Slater had been held by old Chief Noonday, the paternal great-grandfather of Sippi-quay. An occasional funeral or Robinson wedding accounted for the balance of Uncle Rix's church attendance. Pious Christian friends of Rix sincerely loved the old man and worried a great deal about his ultimate destiny. To their immense relief he finally reconsidered the matter; and shortly before his death, he was baptized. Apparently he had reasoned that if Christianity could actually bring about the transformation he had seen in John, there must be something to it after all. Other people began to see John in a different light too. He was no longer a half-breed who must be tolerated out of respect for his father. He was a local preacher. Years later the Rev. John R. Robinson joined the Old Residents' Association. Following the deaths of Rix on January 12, 1875 and Sippi-quay a few months later, John went about settling the estate. He buried Sippi-quay at the Ada cemetery near his mother, being sure to have her Indian name of which she was so proud rather than the English "Nancy," engraved on the headstone. Then he sold what land he could, including the homestead property, in an effort to pay off as many claimants as possible. In the fall of 1875 John, Lucy, Eva, and James struck out for Isabella County and a new life. John was ordained and accepted a call to be the first pastor of the Methodist Indian mission at Isabella. In order to eat he had arranged with the U.S. Indian Agent at Ypsilanti to act as teacher at the Mission School and U.S. Farmer. Eventually he also became General Superintendent. Upon arriving at Isabella, just north of Mt. Pleasant, he was appalled to find that the former care-takers of the Native Americans had swindled whole families out of their lands. Many were quite literally starving to death. Immediately John went about notifying agencies of the plight of the people. At first he referred to them as "these poor people." As the correspondence continued, they soon became "my people." John learned his way around; he hired the best lawyers he could find. Each month he personally spent several days in Probate Court trying to get the lands returned. Slowly his mission achieved relative prosperity. Churches and schools were built. The camp-meeting grounds were improved. While still performing his governmental duties, John was now in charge of a circuit of three churches - Neppising at Isabella, Nebatung on the reservation, and Calkinsville. In August 1881 the annual camp-meeting had drawn enthusiastic and favorable attention from the white community. The meeting had opened on a Wednesday with mostly Native Americans in attendance. On Thursday a few white families traveled the two miles from the village with their tents and pitched them on level ground amid the tall hemlocks. On Friday an excursion party came from East Saginaw and heard sermons by various guest preachers. John translated all of these for the Native Americans. By Sunday three trains arrived carrying people from Coleman, Clare, Loomis, Salt River (Shepherd) and St. Louis. In all 4,000 people were present for John's afternoon service. It is recorded that a good collection was received. John could at least make money for the Church. The once irresponsible half-breed who routinely failed at every business he had ever tried was now an accomplished administrator and spiritual leader. Little niceties still escaped his notice at times. After several years it came to the attention of the Indian Agent, George W. Lee, that it was Lucy and not John who was actually teaching at the Mission School. John replied that he hadn't thought that it mattered since the money all went to the same family anyway. In the spring of 1882 Mr. Lee died. Along with granting permission to close the Indian School for the summer vacation, the agent's widow asked John to continue his position until a new agent could be appointed. In 1883 John left the federal service and took over the entire Methodist Indian circuit. For a time Isabella remained their home, and Lucy continued to teach. When she was 55, Lucy suffered an acute attack of "inflammation of the bowels" or peritonitis and died on April 8, 1884. She had been teaching at Sheldon Indian School near the farm at the time. After Lucy's death, Eva continued to teach in the Indian schools in her mother's place. Having already lost James in 1879, John moved from the Isabella farm. By June 1884 a boarding house in Petoskey had become the center of his activities on the Mission circuit in the Traverse area. A curious white resident gave the following account of an Indian wedding performed by John during a camp-meeting near there: They sat [in front of the stand], she with downcast eyes, while he gazed directly in front at the group on the stand; both wearing that expressionless face peculiar to the Indian; until we began to wonder as to what it all meant, when the missionary (Robinson) stepped down from the platform, accompanied by a young Indian; and bade them rise, and proceeded to perform the marriage ceremony in the Indian tongue. At the close all knelt in prayer after which the newly married pair arose and returned to their respective seats in the different divisions of the congregation. Years later John, now the only surviving member of the family, returned to Isabella County. In March, 1897 he had his membership transferred from the Masonic Lodge in Mt. Pleasant to the Salt River Chapter. One month later on April 23, he died. The location of his solitary grave in the old part of the Salt River Cemetery is indicated by a modest red sandstone marker inscribed simply "Husband." Next to the stone stands a rusty Masonic emblem. It was probably no accident that John R. Robinson's conversion to Christianity marked a true turning point in his life. As a preacher of the Gospel John soon came to enjoy the same degree of prominence and esteem among both Native American and white residents that his father had commanded before him. John had finally found the one area in which there was no need to compete with the accomplished and dynamic Rix. Paradoxically, the more openly and directly John began to identify himself with the Native Americans of his Mission, the more acceptable he seems to have become to the white community. This is true to such an extent that finally we find him today buried as a white man indistinguishable from all of the others in the white man's cemetery.

_Re: John Rix Robinson 1826-1897 [ADembinski](#) (View posts.) Posted: 30 Apr 2011 3:30PM GMT
Classification: Query Author of above article is Jean Robinson Martin, posted by permission