IN THE LIVING ROOM of our Crocus Hill home in St. Paul rests a small, black sewing rocker with a new cane seat. Visitors to our home seldom sit on the little rocker, preferring instead the overstuffed couch or a heavy chair with arms. In our bedroom upstairs is another rocker, identical with the one in the living room, and in our basement workroom is a third — its cane seat in tatters, the joints of the chair loose, rungs broken. Someday I will take a weekend off and take the rocker apart, clean and mend its rungs, and glue and peg it all back together.

In the meantime I continue to search for a fourth chair. My reason is simple. We have four children, and I want to bequeath each of them a Whiting chair, a chair made by their great-great uncle Almon Whiting. He turned the rungs on an ox-driven lathe in a field by a lake in Otter Tail County.

I bought the third chair a couple of summers ago in an antique shop at Old Clitherall, Minnesota. I made the mistake of letting the owner of the shop know I recognized the chair. We were in the shop's barn, and I was looking up at the haymow where, forty years before, I, a city child, had spent a joyful afternoon leaping into piles of hay. Then I saw the chair. "That's a Whiting rocker," I said. The antique dealer's look became calculating, and the price jumped by $20.00. No matter. When we walked back to our cottage by Clitherall Lake, my husband was carrying the broken-down rocker. In our family, our roots are entwined in rocking chairs.

It was such a rocking chair (could it be the very one?) that my great-aunt Lu Whiting, then a girl of twelve, raised above her head to charge a drunken Indian, usually friendly, who now was threatening her grandmother, sitting helpless and old in another Whiting rocker.¹

My grandmother Lois Murdock's childhood home was the stagecoach stop on a bluff overlooking Clitherall Lake, and travelers, neighbors, and Indians all made themselves at home. My grandmother's parents, Hyrum and Rachel Murdock, had been married in 1846 at Winter Quarters, near Council Bluffs, Iowa, by famed Mormon leader Brigham Young himself, and their Mormon hospitality included everyone, nonbelievers and Indians as well.²

²The author's family records differ on where Hyrum and Rachel Murdock were married. The Gould Papers in her possession say Nauvoo, Illinois, and her family genealogy indicates Winter Quarters.

Mrs. Young is co-owner of the Old Mexico Shop on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. She is a descendant of Francis Lewis Whiting, leader of the first group of Cutlerites to settle in Otter Tail County.

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Actually, they did not count themselves among the Mormons, despite an early admiration for Brigham Young, but “Cutlerites,” followers of Alpheus Cutler. Cutler had been the master stone mason on the ill-fated temple in Nauvoo, the Mormon settlement on the Mississippi River in western Illinois, and a member of Mormon founder Joseph Smith’s inner circle. A contender for the mantle of the prophet following Smith’s murder at nearby Carthage, Illinois, in June, 1844, Cutler lost out in the struggle for followers. While Young was leading thousands to the valley of the Great Salt Lake, in Utah, starting in 1847, Cutler was pointing a small band of religious visionaries, among them two sets of my great-grandparents, elsewhere — eventually toward the frigid wilds of western Minnesota. They traveled in late winter by ox team from northern Iowa to west central Minnesota, eventually coming to rest on the shore of Clitherall Lake in what is now Otter Tail County.

Being the people they were, they did not crumble handfuls of soil between their palms or examine the timber to determine whether this would be a likely place to settle. Instead, the elders among them knelt in prayer on the lakeshore, confident they would receive a sign from the Almighty. It was great-grandfather Francis Lewis Whiting who received what they interpreted to be a revelation from the Lord that this narrow stretch of land between Battle Lake and Clitherall Lake was henceforth to be their dwelling place. Alone among Minnesota’s pioneers, they had come not in search of land (farms and factories had been twice left behind in their search for a promised land) but in response to what they believed was a commandment from God to build a new Jerusalem in Minnesota’s green and pleasant land. On May 6, 1865, they unpacked their wagons, sank axes into virgin timber, and plotted the first settlement in Otter Tail County.

Their descendants were to look back critically on those early decisions. As my father used to grumble, “They walked over the most fertile land in Minnesota to settle on a sandbank.” Though twenty-eight families were in the party, they filed claims on only four homesteads — convinced, as had been so many Utopians before them, that their dream of a perfect society was about to be realized, if not within the decade, certainly within their lifetimes.

The twentieth century dealt harshly with that dream. A visitor to Old Clitherall today is hard-pressed to find signs of that first pioneer settlement. A lakeside resort occupies the site of the early homes. The logs from the old church, the first one in the county, were traded long ago to Abner Tucker for a parcel of land, and today they constitute the west wall of Julius Stabnow’s barn. And if you know where to look, you can find the remains of Hyrum Murdock’s old log barn. It still stands, housing a power boat in stalls where a team of oxen once wintered.

I visit that barn every summer, stirring clouds of mosquitoes from the tall weeds as I force my way up to a window to peer inside at the massive timbers, the marks of the adz still visible. I am always relieved to find the old barn has survived another Minnesota winter.

Down the hill from the barn is the secluded summer home of a Minneapolis physician, complete with a guest house, boathouse, dock, and boat-lift big enough to handle anything on the lake. The lawns are always neatly mowed. I know, because I trespass every summer to visit the land on which this summer home is built. For this is the Point on Clitherall Lake, once the home of a band of Ojibway (Chippewa) who were camping on that spot the day the Cutlerites rounded the end of West Battle Lake and came upon Clitherall Lake. These were the Indians whose dogs raided Hyrum’s tiny flock of sheep, the sheep whose wool kept his children warm and whose flesh literally kept them from starving those first winters.

After the Ojibway dogs made a particularly bloody raid on the sheep, one of Hyrum’s sons could restrain himself no longer. Grabbing a gun he ran off in the direction of the Point and the Indian village, vowing that he would kill a dog for every lost sheep. Fortunately Hyrum could run faster than his son, and he got the boy back into the house before a shot was fired. A few hours later the family looked out from its cabin to see a file of Indian women carrying what looked to be feather pillows as they walked up the bluff along the lakeshore. At the highest point they stopped and, pulling out knives, slashed open the pillows, letting the winter wind carry a blizzard of feathers out over the frozen lake. “They did it to show they were sorry,” explained my great aunt who, as a little girl, witnessed the poignant example of two peoples striving to communicate their joint suffering, their shared remorse across a cultural gulf so vast it would not be bridged for generations.

When I climb the fence to wander over the grounds of the house on the Point, I do not feel I am trespassing on that land. In some mystical way the Point is also ours, though we have no deed or title to it. It is ours through our connection with what once happened there — much...
A Minnesota winter is a test of endurance, or so we like to tell ourselves. For the Clitherall pioneers it brought out both their sexism and their stamina — their sexism (or was it merely practicality?) because in the early years many of the girls did not have shoes in the winter. Only the boys, who went outside to do chores, had shoes. In the spring, when the girls could endure the confinement of a cabin no longer, they would run out on the frozen lake in their bare feet, sitting down on the ice to wrap their feet in their long skirts when the ache became too much to bear.8

I have told this story at candlelit dinner parties and have been met with disbelief. Would any children run barefoot across a frozen lake? Could their feet stand it?

My great-grandfather Francis Lewis Whiting, faced with the problem of finding winter boots, killed one of his oxen, skinned the hind legs, sewed up the bottom end, and fixing straps at the top, had himself a pair of boots. He left the hair on the skins so he looked like a centaur walking around in the snow, and the tracks he made were neither man nor beast. But the boots were warm, he claimed, and in Minnesota in the winters of the 1860s, that was all that mattered.9

I make my pilgrimages to Old Clitherall in the summer, looking for tracks left by the Cutlerites. As we have in other years, our family will spend time visiting the old barn and Julius Stabnow’s logs and wandering through the cemetery on the hill where the pioneers lie buried, their headstones, in the main, still legible. We will visit Almon Whiting’s house, now a tumbledown ruin, and walk through a field of oats trying to find traces of the chair factory. We will visit the museum of the Otter Tail County Historical Society in Fergus Falls to see Whiting rockers like the three we own.

Our search for roots goes no further back than to these gentlefolk. It is as if in Old Clitherall our roots hit an underground stratum of rock and stop there. These stubborn members of an obscure and doomed sect hold captive the imaginations of their descendants. In real life their uncompromising belief in the rightness of their cause would have been impossible to bear. But as pioneers who suffered all things, risked all things for an improbable vision, they spring full-blown from the head of Zeus. They need no progenitors.

My quest for the past always ends at Old Clitherall where in my dreams these builders of a new society stride in their homemade boots and sunbonnets over the peaceful landscape of Otter Tail County, sharing their gardens with the Indians, singing the Lord’s song in a strange land, holding fast to a belief as old as the Pilgrims, as Moses, as Abraham himself, that the Lord leads His people through the wilderness to a new land.

We will be back at the Old Clitherall antique shop next summer, looking for another Whiting rocker for the fourth child. One of these summers we will find it.

8 Gladys Gould Papers.
9 Gladys Gould Papers.