CHAPTER VII

"SQUIRE BAKER"

Already tall and slender, John Baker accentuated his height by wearing a tall, white beaver hat "stove-pipe" hat, the humorists called them. It was the style worn by the well-dressed man in cities, both English and American, but not common on the frontier. A certain aptness, therefore, inhered in the term by which he was often referred to as "the Tower of London". He was not annoyed by this appellation. In fact, I believe, he considered it rather a distinction. He never ceased to be proud of being an Englishman and so some years later, when he had acquired more lands and someone asked him how he would be regarded in England if he possessed there as many acres as he did in America, he replied without hesitation "I'd be called 'Squire Baker'". Somewhat in envy and somewhat in bitterness, neighbors occasionally referred to him thereafter as "Squire Baker*.

It was probably before this appellation became common that he was elected treasurer of the school district. The Diary shows under the date of 1853 a double page headed "SCHOOL DISTRICT ACCOUNT". But there are no entries until

"1854

April 4th received of School Superintendent..... 23.57
(Probably this means $23.57....J.E.B)
(No date) Received on Warrant..... 96.57
(" ") Received on Warrant……... 120.35
(I suspect that the third item is the sum of the first two, with a typographical error in the cents column .. J.E.B)

The next double page is headed "School Disbursements"

"Summer School to Clary Bove (Probably Clara Bovee..J.E.B) 18".00
"J.Y. Wolfenden for Winter School..... 39".00

Although the DIARY shows this account for only one year, receipts and Annual Statements found among his papers show that he continued as School District Treasurer for about twenty years more.

Sone four years after the Bakers arrived in Wisconsin, word was received that one of Grace's brothers (I believe it was Richard Bone) expected to emigrate and wished their aid in selecting a farm. Grace was in transports at the thought of seeing some of her own people again and urged her husband to find a farm near by for her brother. The Childs farm was for sale. The south-east corner of that farm was only a quarter-mile from the northwest corner of the Baker farm; the farm buildings were only a mile and a half distant. Urged by his wife, lest the opportunity of near- neighboring be lost, John purchased the farm promptly. It was not quite as large as his own farm, only 179 acres, and it cost approximately the same, $1500.00. But after everything was settled and an installment paid, the news came that the brother had changed his mind; he would not emigrate. So, John was "stuck" with the farm.

The diary makes no mention of this episode. How badly in debt it put him, I do not know. But a man who had made a living for a family with six children, a widowed mother and younger sisters on a farm of twelve acres (including Coudray Park) in England could manage somehow on nearly 400 acres in America. By this time he had seven sons; eventually be had eight. The oldest, William, was sixteen years of age, but small in size. John, though only twelve, was a young giant; he grew to be six feet four and three-quarters inches tall. Julius was ten and Frank eight. At ten a boy could drive a yoke of oxen to the drag or a wagon. A labor force was growing up and in the meantime farm hands could be hired.

In spite of early discouraging years, Baker affairs prospered sufficiently for John to plan more commodious and up-to-date living quarters. These he proposed to locate over a quarter mile north of the original cabin, on a sitely hill, overlooking a creek. One gets a hint of parking plans from his remark that this hill was a goodly site for a country seat. On a smaller scale it very much resembled the site of Treludick. One of the first steps in developing this "seat" was the planting of a five acre orchard north of the house, against the county-line, Walworth and Waukesha counties. This orchard contained Talman Sweets, Russets, Snows, Yellow Transparents and other good varieties of apples, Early Richmond cherries and a pear tree. Wild plums were to be had along the creek and black raspberries along the fences.

I gather that this orchard was planted during the Late 1880's, according to an incident related by grandfather. He was pulling out some stumps by means of horses. Frank was helping him and when the team made a lunge to yank out one stump, the chain broke, and flew back so hard that when grandfather stepped in front of Frank to protect him, the flying chain broke grandfather's leg. So, Frank must have been a stripling under fifteen years of age, I judge. Hence the year was before 1860. The house was built in 1861.

In 1861 too came the Civil War. William, the eldest son, was a lieutenant in the company which was formed at Albion Academy, which he attended. But when the company was mustered in, the lieutenant was rejected as physically unfit. John, the giant, was 20 and Julius was 18, both old enough for service, But their father would have none of it. President Lincoln depended on volunteers to fill the Union amies for quite some time and when the draft was resorted to, John Baker and several other men of like substance paid considerable sums to keep the draft off the Town of Troy.

I suspect that many of the fights the Baker boys got into in after years might be traced in part to the resentment which other families bore them, families whose sons and brothers went to war. For example, soon after the war was over, on the Fourth of July, at Eagle, a certain veteran invited Will into a saloon to have a drink. This was directly contrary to Will's inclinations and he refused, courteously. But the would-be host was persistent and finally, Julius interceded and, as he did so, put his hand familiarly on the shoulder of the ex-soldier. The latter instantly hit Julius a stunning blow on the nose – and the fight was on. Others took a hand; Frank and Jim joined in. An opponent, seized a sword from the sheath of an "officer of the day" and was about to cut Frank down. But a neighbor, Arthur Rockteacher, whom I heard tell it, was using a cane that day, and at the heighth of the saber stroke, he caught it with the crooked head of his cane, in such a way as to sprain the wrist of the would- be killer. "Big" John was not with his brothers that day - he had gone to Palmyra instead of to Eagle for his celebration. Frank considered the odds too great to fight it out and so, back to back the Baker boys fought their way to their horses and got away. But there were many individual fights after that.

Apart from war there was near tragedy at home during the war. The diary records, after a long lapse in entries,

“1862, March 8. The horse that I bought (from) James Webb kicked Wm. B. in the head".

A more complete story was related me many times somewhat as follows: One morning right after breakfast Will went out to harness the team to do some work in the field. Dinner time came and Will did not appear. The others finished dinner but still Will did not appear. So, one of the boys was sent to the stable to hurry him up. At the stable, Will's unconscious body was found lying underneath one of the horses, known to be somewhat of a kicker. How they got him out without exciting the horse into trampling him, I never heard.

One of the boys was sent on horseback to summon "Doe” Salisbury. It was evening by the time "Doc" arrived and Will was still unconscious. "Doc" happened to be sober that afternoon and after a look at the patient ordered grandmother to boil a kettle of water and grandfather to beat a silver dollar into a thin sheet. Then with tweezers he began picking away the straw and filth from Will's smashed in temple. With scissors sterilized in the boiling water, he sliced the skin back from the wound, and having sterilized the tweeters in the meantime, began picking away the bona splinters. One calk of the horse’s shoe, evidently, had smashed in the temple, for after the splinters had been removed, an opening about the size of a silver half-dollar was left in the bone case.

Grandfather beat the silver dollar into a sheet as thin as paper by hammering the coin on an axe which served as anvil. Then it was boiled for several minutes in the kettle. After it was cooled to body temperature, "Doc" fitted it over the opening in the bone, carefully drew the shreds of skin over it and sowed them together. For the rest of his life that piece of silver took the place of bone as a part of Will's skull. I remember hearing him say that he could not sleep on that side very long, because of an ache which would develop. I believe that one leg was broken, also, which had to be set.

I have often speculated on the type of man "Doc" Salisbury was. He came from the "east". Why? He was a man of superior education and evident ability.

Country doctors, at that time knew little about the "germ theory" nor antisepsis. But apparently “Doc" Salisbury did. However, he was pretty much a drunkard. When he arrived to set grandfather's leg, after the accident in pulling stumps, he was drunk and knew he was drunk. He would not begin work on the leg until grandmother had boiled some vinegar for him, which he drank, with some hot coffee for a chaser, and the “shakes" which followed had passed off. Then he did a workman-like job such that grandfather never limped but only predicted rains from the pain in that leg. Did "Doc" Salisbury leave the “east" for adventure, or from some sense of disgrace because of his appetite for liquor? Or did he drink to excess after he reached the "west" to escape boredom?

Every major war seems to produce an increased demand for wheat, and this was the case during the Civil War. While Will was set apart for a scholarly career, as befitted the eldest son of a "squire", John, Julius, Francis and James were old and big enough to work in the fields. With 385 acres of land, of which at least 250 could raise wheat, there was a substantial income, and so in 1864 the Underhill farm of 120 acres adjoining, on the east, the original 206 acres was purchased. This cost $3800 - more than both the previous purchases combined. Of course, this higher price reflected the current profits from wheat.

For several years after the Civil War, the price of wheat remained high. I am not sure, but I believe it was because quotations were in "greenbacks" of which some $3.00 were required to equal $1.00 gold. But about this time Wisconsin land became “wheated out”, that is, it would no longer produce a good crop of wheat. When grandfather first came to the country, he was horrified to see farmers burn their straw; for in England, as in China, everything of this sort was saved and ploughed under to return to the soil as much fertility as possible. But his Yankee neighbors laughed at this idea, saying that Wisconsin was virgin land and the fertility would last for centuries. But in the late '60's the fertility did give out, as shown by poor yields of wheat. John Baker had never burned his straw but kept it heaped in stacks, and when he saw what was happening, he ordered his boys to tear down these stacks and let the cattle tramp the straw into the snow. Then, the following spring, this rotted straw was ploughed under and at the next harvest he was rejoiced by a better crop of wheat than his neighbors gathered.

These better crops and the continued high prices permitted more purchases of farms. In 1867 a small tract of 19 acres adjoining the Childs farm, which he had purchased for Richard Bone in 1854, was the next acquisition. It had a few old buildings and was consolidated with the Childs Farm.

With so much wheat to harvest, and only a matter of two or three weeks in which to cut it, unless great losses were to be suffered, either from being cut too green or so ripe that much of the grain shelled out, obviously a large force of cradlers must be employed. I have heard father say that many a year on a Sunday as grandfather inspected his fields and observed how much the grain had ripened since the preceding Sabbath, he would suddenly become so affected by the size of the task ahead as to break out in a sweat and then sit down almost in a faint. “H'11 this w'eat to be out! We shall never get un done in time", he would murmur. But in a few minutes, the spell would pass and he would become all energy. "You, Frank, get h'on an 'oas and call Norm Markley an' 'is crew. You, Jule, you call Samp Bottrell an 'is crew. Tell mun to come Wednesday". Then, grandfather himself would make preparations and early Monday morning he would drive off to Prairieville (Waukesha) or to East Troy to buy the barrel of whiskey which must be provided the cradlers.

The rule was that at the end of every round of the twenty-acre field, a cradler would take a drink of whiskey -- as much as he could drink from the jug with one breath. No fair, taking a second breath. Grandfather’s boys did the binding and shocking; he did not allow them to drink. Although he had taken a pledge in 1853 not to drink intoxicating liquor, the scandal is that John Baker would take a "wee drap" with his cradlers, for purposes of sociability. It would have seemed queer to them if he had not.

Of all the cradlers in the vicinity, Norm Markley was outstanding. He was of a gorilla type, short legs, broad back, enormous, long arms. He out a wider swath, with a faster swing and less fatigue than any other man. He always took the outside cut and was the only man thereabouts who as a matter of course, cut across the next cradlers' cuts without waiting for them to come up even. In that way he cut from five to ten per cent more in a day than any other cradlers. Had any other man presumed to assert his superiority in that manner, it would have meant a fight. But

all admitted Norm Markley to be a "better-man". Norn passed it off, in case a strange cradler took exception, by saying that he was in a hurry to get back to the whiskey jug.

By this time John Baker was indulging in visions of power. With such a labor force as eight sons and over 500 acres of land he could confidently look forward to the time when he would have a hundred acres for every acre he had owned in England. He would be the head of a clan with a power which none in the neighborhood would dare to attack. He sent all of his sons, and his daughter to the academies at Albion, Milton and Waukesha, so that they might be worthy of their position in the clan. Also, during the slack winter season, they could teach school and earn good cash. But during the summer they worked on his farms and he threatened with disinheritance any who were minded to leave home and start out on their own.

But something in the atmosphere of the times, perhaps, was working among his boys similar to the ferment which led to the emigration from England. At any rate, in 1870 he bought for the two oldest sons, Willian and John, from Lynn Smith an 80 acre farm, near Troy Center. It was a full mile from any other land he owned and cost $2100.00. Up to this time, for several years, "big" John had served his father as foreman, in which capacity he directed the other boys at their work. But in his old age, grandfather told me that John was not a good manager, and it is just possible that the device of an independent farm was grandfather's shrewd method of getting a change of foreman without offending his son.

John Baker's next foreman was his son Francis. Francis was younger than Julius and not so big. Jule was a humorist, full of fun and good nature, always ready to tell a story, or outline a "pipe dream" on how to make a fortune or get the work done without effort. But because of these traits which made him a charming companion, he was undependable and unbusinesslike. Frank was a different type. The contrast in the success which attended these three brothers in later life, when they were "out on their own", attests the shrewdness with which John Baker appraised his sons.

Soon after Francis, or Frank as he was generally called, became foreman, Wisconsin became "wheated out" again. The Bakers had branched out into sheep and cattle, but barnyard manure was insufficient to keep up the productive capacity of the land. Wisconsin at this time had set up a few agricultural experiment stations and these issued bulletins from time to time. These bulletins were written in language rather too technical for most farmers to understand. But Frank had attended Milton Academy two winters and so could get the gist of them. A former teacher, Will Morrison, was now Superintendent of Farmers' Institutes, and this added interest to the bulletin which Morrison sent his former pupil. Guided by grandfather's practical advice as to what had been done in England and the theory outlined in the bulletins, Frank was able to plan some experiments for himself in the rotation of crops.

As you know, it has been discovered that it will not do to plant the same crop on the same land too many years in succession. Up to this time the general practice was to sow wheat year after year on the same field. The rotation which Frank worked out for his father, and which was adopted for the neighborhood for many years, was something like this: first year, corn; second year, wheat; third year, oats; fourth year, hay; fifth year pasture; and then plow up the pasture and plant corn. For a few years, that rotation enabled the Baker farms to produce good crops of wheat and other grains; and as a result a modern frame barn with basement was built in 1871 and more farms were bought. Grandfather's youngest brother, James, with the latter's son William J., who had recently emigrated to America, built the barn.

The Lake far was bought in 1873. Lake died about 1870. The farm was "wheated out" and badly run down in all respects. It did not sell promptly and the heirs wanted their money. So, one of Lake's daughters (I'm indebted to Will J. Baker for this paragraph) came to Grandfather and offered the place to him for $4500.00. It contained only 158 acres and so was three times as expensive as his first 206 acres, which was far better soil. But wheat was still profitable. She claimed that this was a thousand dollars less than the place was worth, but, she said, "You can pay me cash and I’ll be through with it. Nobody else around here can pay me cash and there'll always be trouble collecting payments." Whether he

was flattered by the reference to his financial ability or merely "fell" for a red-haired woman, I do not know, but he finally closed with her at $4250.00. About the only feature of the place to recommend it was an eight-room frame house, good by standards of the time. It adjoined the Childs farm but was separated from other Baker land by a half-mile. Three years later, he bought the Bottrell farm which adjoined the Underhill place and raised his contiguous acreage to nearly 500. The Bottrell farm was almost as large as the Lake farm, was much better soil and cost only $3600.00. However, it had only log buildings.

The "country seat", as it appears today.

It is owned by Lavi Baker, a grandson, and is operated by Gerald Baker, a great-grandson of John Baker

The John and Grace Baker house as it appeared in 1997

In the early 70's, Willian married Resepha Coombe and took her to live on the Lynn Smith farm near Troy Center. For reasons that are not peculiar, the young

bride did not take kindly to keeping house for the other partner in the farm, John. So, two years after the Bottrell farm was purchased, Willian bought the "Morrison" farm of 320 acres, 240 of which adjoined the original 206 acres on the south and on the west. The other 80 acres consisted of wild, timbered hills and swamp, slightly removed and good only for pasture. It was not ideal for that, because in order to reach it, cattle had to be driven through woods belonging to John Chapman. This "old eighty" is the site of the "Devil's Kitchen" so named because of the quantity of fire-flies.

The Baker holdings by this time consisted of the following:

	Date of Purchase	Acres	Cost	Purchased from	Remarks
1	1849	206	$1,500	Francis Draper	310 pounds sterling
2	1853	160	$1,500	Childs	Possibly 179 acres
3	1864	120	$3,800	Underhill	
4	1867	19	$600	Jule Reeves	Buildings for the Child farm
5	1870	80	$2,100	Lynn Smith	For John and William
6	1873	158	$4,250	Lake Estate	
7	1876	148	$3,600	Bottrell	
8	1878	320	$8,000	Wm. DeWitt	Bought by William
		1211	$25,350		

In connection with one of these purchases, possibly the Underhill farm, 41 acres of marsh, near Lake Lulu was acquired, additionally. In the early days, it was desirable to obtain winter feed, for stock that did not have to be sown. So, farmers often bought marsh land at a distance from their other holdings.

At the time of the purchase of the Morrison farm, William could not have had much money of his own. He gave a mortgage which it took him many years to pay off, but I feel sure that his father advanced some of the "down" payment for him. Hence I have included the Morrison farm with the rest. The western 120 of this farm and a half of the "old eighty" were sold a few years ago, by T.C., the youngest son of William Bone Baker. The south 120 and the other half of the old

eighty" are still owned by William John, the eldest son of William Bone Baker. On this portion, the Baker schoolhouse still stands.[1] Levi Baker, youngest son of Richard, now owns the original 206 acres, thus making the term still appropriate, "Baker's corners". All of the rest of "Squire" Baker's holdings have passed out of family control. But during his lifetime, it was all held by his sons except for the Lynn Smith eighty, near Troy Center, which John sold about 1885 when he moved north to Eau Claire county. Grandfather could still have walked several miles in a straight line on Baker land, except for the Betts forty which intervened between the south forty of the Child's place and the west forty of the original farm. And his ownership had been a hundred times the area of that in England. A diagram of these holdings is given on the next page.

It is worth remarking that on all of the places except the Bottrell farm, barns, houses, sheds, fences, ditches, etc. were added from time to time. The cost of replacing such improvements has increased from year to year and a prudent owner increases his insurance of the fire risk accordingly. In several cases of sale during recent years, the price received by the owner was little more, or even less, than the insured value of the buildings, leaving the portion paid for the bare land much less than the price paid by John Baker when he acquired these farms. And in the case of the Lake farm, at least, the fertility had been vastly improved during a half-century of building up the soil by means of liming, commercial fertilizer and selling nothing off the farm except on four feet or in cans.

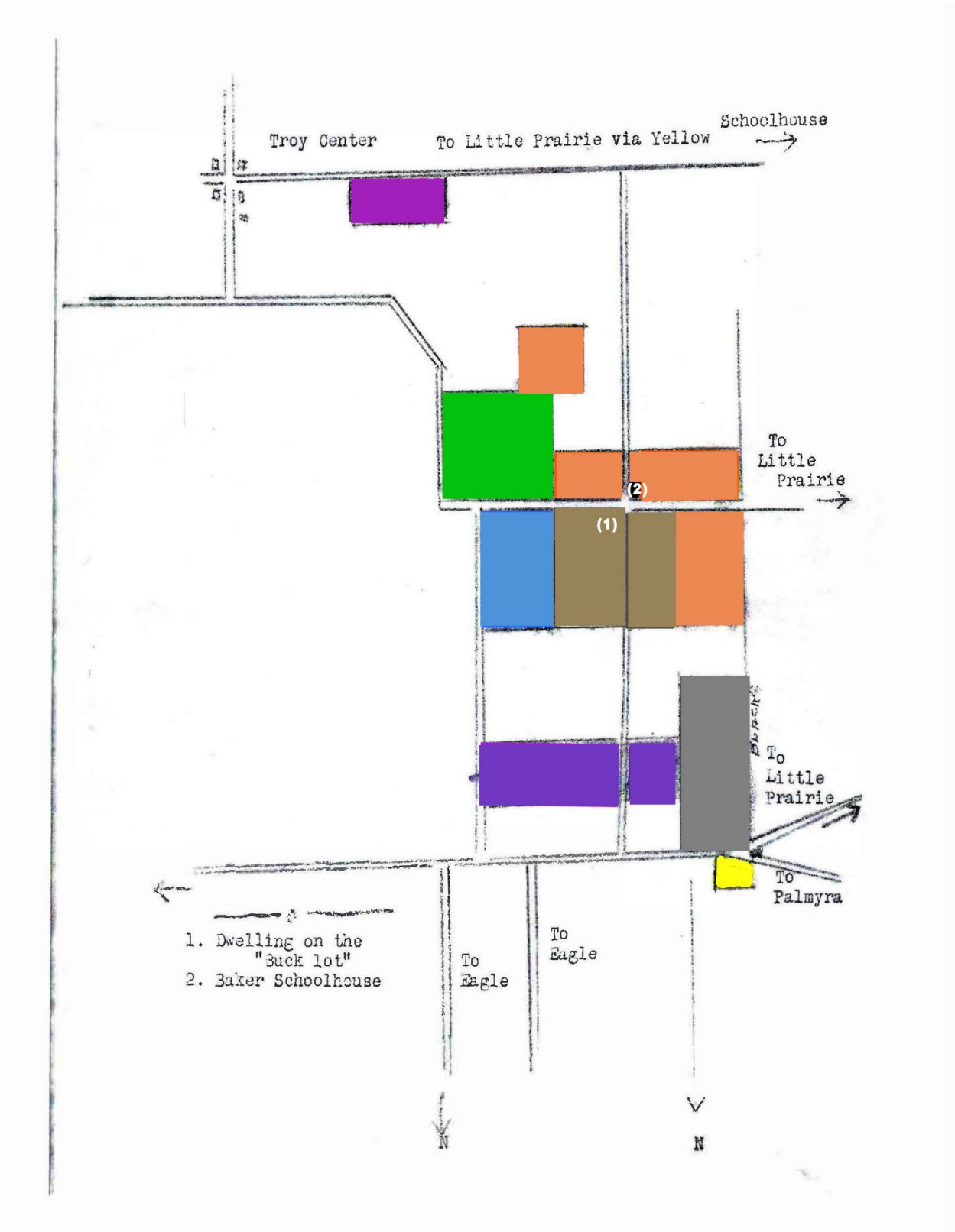
[1] The district has been "consolidated" and the school closed, but Will J. Baker has purchased the building which still stands on the original site.

KEY TO MAP

Color	Bought from	No. of acres	When bought	Inherited by	Remarks
	Draper	206	1849	Edwin & Alfred	Ed willed his portion to Alf. Alf sold to Levi, son of Richard.
	Childs	179	1853	Julius	Frank bought 109 acres
	Underhill	120	1864	Ed & Richard	Divided by them
	Reeves	19	1867	Julius	Sold in the'90's to VonRueden
	Smith	80	1870	John	Sold 1885 ?
	Lake	158	1873	Frank	
	Bottrell	148	1876	Ed & Richard	Ed sold to Dick in the 1900's
	DeWitt	320	1878	William	
		1230			

(1) This farm was never held in the name of John Baker.

(2) Certain marsh lands of perhaps a total of 80 acres are not included. These were bought so as to secure a source of hay without having to break up new land.


Troy Center
To Little Prairie via Yellow
Schoolhouse
To Little Prairie
(2)
(1)
To Little Prairie
To Palmyra
To Eagle
To Eagle
1. Dwelling on the "Buck lot"
2. Baker Schoolhouse
N
N