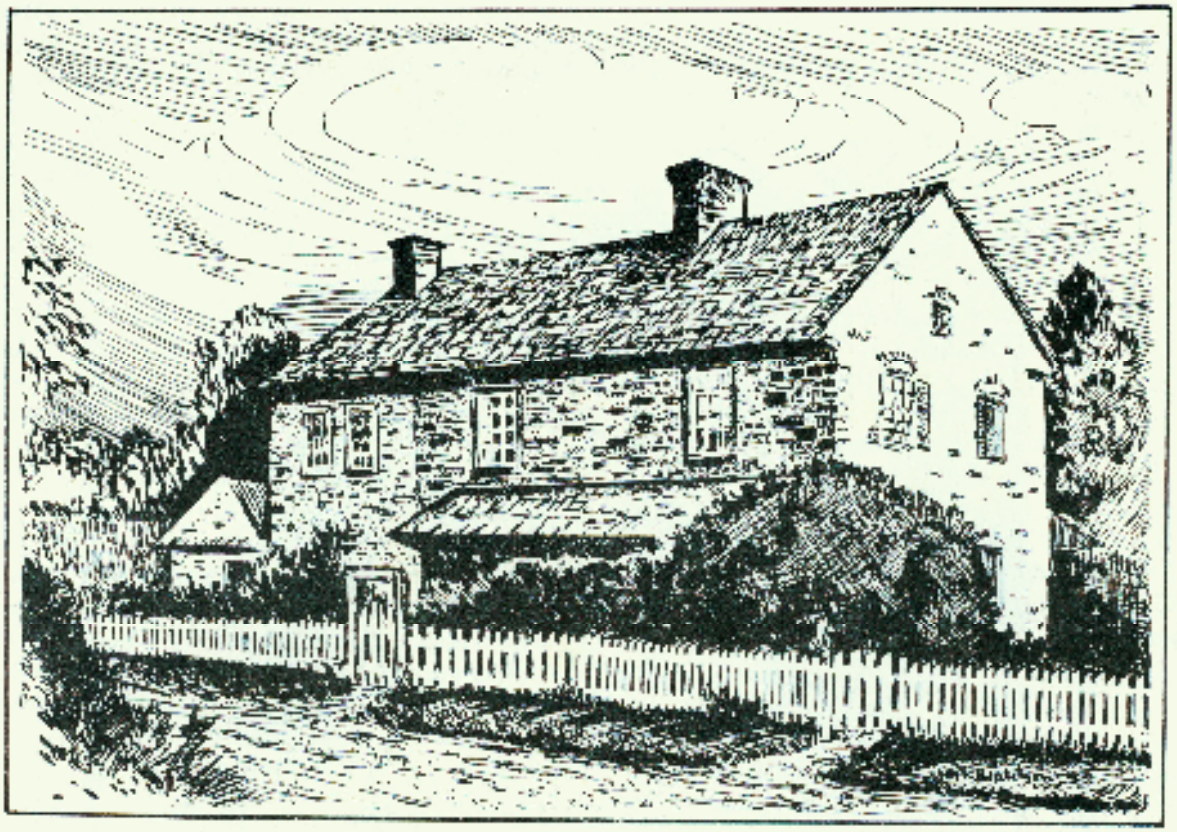


THE ANCESTRAL HOME OF THE KEIM FAMILY

—Drawn by James M. K. Waldron

The Keim Family of Lobachsville

By JOHN E. ESHELMAN

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ON October 5, 1911, while the farmer folk of Oley and Pike were gathering in the harvest, news spread from farm to farm that Betsy Keim had died at her home near Lobachsville, in her eighty-second year. The passing of this aged spinster, somewhat of a recluse, brought to a close the history of one of the most unusual and remarkable families to have lived in this section of Pennsylvania.

On an ancestral farm one mile northwest of the village of Lobachsville, in Pike Township, Berks County, there were living in the closing years of the 19th century a lone brother, John M. Keim, and his five maiden sisters: Sarah, Catharine, Anna, Elizabeth and Susanna Keim. Being exceptionally thrifty, they became quite wealthy, although the family lived as in a past century, carrying on the management of their large estate in the same manner as their forebears of 1750. From early dawn until the close of day the sisters could be seen working in the fields with their farm laborers even until some of them were well advanced in years.

The rich farmland was filled with the most primitive implements. They raised and spun the flax with which their clothes, table cloths, and bedding were made. Over a huge fireplace they cooked their food, using the same crane, pots, and utensils that had served the family for four generations. For lighting the kitchen several fat-lamps were used.

Their fine farm of 320 acres, situated mostly in Pike Township, extended beyond its borders into Oley and Rockland. The numerous ancient farm buildings surrounding the house gave the appearance

of a small village as one approached the place from Lobachsville.

This tract of land had the distinction of having standing on it, as late as 1913, more than 100 acres of virgin timber, believed to have been the last stand in this part of Pennsylvania. The mammoth black walnuts and great oaks, with a scattering of white pines, had been known throughout the Oley Valley for a hundred years as "Keim's Big Woods." During his lifetime John Keim protected this rich heritage from destruction by an untiring vigilance. Hunters and trappers were strictly forbidden the right to trespass in any season of the year. Within the memory of the oldest inhabitants, the Keims were never known to have felled, or given orders to fell, a living tree on the property. The supply of dead and fallen trees was more than adequate for all their needs during their lifetime. The family truly proved to be good stewards of this valuable inheritance.

So determined was John Keim to have this woodland preserved after his death that he left this stern instruction in his will, made in 1844: "My sisters and their survivors of them shall have the right to cut and take wood for fuel whenever they shall see fit to do so, at all times taking the dead or down trees first; for the erection of buildings and repairing of buildings; but no other timber shall be cut down by my sisters during their lifetime, nor by the children of any of them, or by the children of my deceased nephew, Isaac W. Keim, when the estate comes into their possession. Should any of them by any means whatever have the timber on the land cut down, such of them shall immediately forfeit his or her interest in my estate . . ." Poor old John Keim! Could he have foreseen what eventually happened to his highly prized oaks and walnuts, in less than twenty years after his passing, he would have moved uneasily in his quiet grave in the orchard family burying-ground.

On their ancestral acres, the Keims lived a life of ancient self sufficiency which extended well into this century. Modern improvements and new methods of farming interested them not at all.

The great great grandfather of this family, Johannes Keim, was the earliest pioneer to locate and seat land in what is now the Oley Valley. In 1698 he staked off and laid claim to a large tract of land, after which he returned to Germany in 1701. He later married there, in 1706, Bertha deTurk, with whom he returned to America, arriving in Philadelphia in 1707. They located the following year in the forest, on the borders of the spring of one of the upper tributaries of the Manatawny, about one half mile west of the present village of Pleasantville. At the time of the occupation of the Manatawny valley by Johannes Keim and his few neighboring settlers, the Oley hills were the frontier limits between Philadelphia and the hunting grounds of the Indians. The original Keim homestead was a log cabin built about 1708; in it all the children of the first wife were born.

Their youngest son, Jacob Keim (1724-1799), married, about 1752, Magdalena Hoch (1730-1804), daughter of Johann Hoch, who lived in the same locality. He presented the young couple with "the plantation" (already described), upon which, in the summer of 1753, they had a sturdy stone house built by masons brought from Philadelphia. As the family prospered and grew larger, a wing was added to the north end, forming the dwelling-house as we see it today. Architecturally, the house is not an outstanding one, but it is typical of the simple and unpretentious structures built of native field stone which were quite numerous throughout southeastern Pennsylvania. Originally, the house had a red tile roof made from clay dug in the neighborhood. An interesting feature still to be seen today are the brick arches above all the windows. The front garden was at one time enclosed with a pale fence and gate, but these were taken away more than forty years ago. Several of the original outbuildings remain, still in a good state of preservation. The old barn was replaced by a new structure in recent years. Gone, too, is the luxuriant boxwood which grew at the southeast corner of the house, the tiny slip for which was probably rooted by Magdalena Keim when she first planted her garden. An unappreciative tenant farmer had mutilated this magnificent shrub to the extent that it finally died in the severe winter of 1933-34. It had grown to such mammoth proportions that in 1900 it had reached to a second story bedroom window, and at that time it was undoubtedly the oldest bush boxwood in the county.

The next generation to inherit the estate was John Keim (1756-1841) and his wife Susanna (Wrisher) Keim (1757-1825). During their ownership additional neighboring land was purchased, which increased the tract to 320 acres. They were followed in line of descent by another Jacob Keim (1787-1863), who married on May 5, 1815, Catharine Moyer (1787-1841). They were the parents of eleven, among whom were John M. Keim and his sisters. The records of this family from inscriptions on the gravestones in the Keim burying-ground and the Oley Churches are complete.



Betsy Keim sitting on the back porch of the Keim Manor Home, in the early 1900's.

Children of Jacob and Catharine (Moyer) Keim:

(1) Esther, b. March 18, 1816; d. April 25, 1841; unmarried.

(2) Benjamin, b. August 3, 1817; d. April 18, 1899; married, in 1843, Abigail Weiser, daughter of Jacob, and a descendant of Conrad Weiser. She was born October 28, 1817, and died February 9, 1894. Both are buried at the Oley Churches. Benjamin was a farmer by trade and lived on a farm adjoining the ancestral home. The only descendants of the family are through this line. Two children: Isaac Weiser Keim and Catharine W. (Keim) Merkel. Both deceased.

(3) Sarah, b. August 2, 1818; d. October 12, 1887; unmarried.

(4) Daniel, b. September 13, 1819; d. December 3, 1894; unmarried.

(5) Jacob M., b. June 17, 1821; d. June 3, 1887. Married to Caroline (_____) ? She was born May 21, 1829; died November 12, 1884. Both are buried at the Oley Churches. In their latter life they lived on a small farm in Oley township. No children.

(6) John M., b. December 25, 1822; d. March 16, 1897; unmarried.

(7) Samuel, b. June 4, 1824; died April 18, 1845; unmarried.

(8) Catharine, b. October 10, 1825; d. October 25, 1918; unmarried.

(9) Anna, b. November 18, 1827; d. April 3, 1875; unmarried.

(10) Elizabeth, b. November 24, 1829; d. October 4, 1911; unmarried.

(11) Susanna, b. October 15, 1831; d. November 21, 1869; unmarried.

An unusual feature on the Keim estate is the existence of two family burying-grounds. The smaller one, located in a field and farthest from the house, contains the first generation who settled there in 1753, together with several relatives and neighbors. It is surrounded by a substantial stone wall. The larger graveyard, also wall-enclosed, is situated to the rear of the barn in what had once been a thriving orchard; and in it lie the last three generations of Keims. The inscriptions on the well-preserved gravestones are recorded in German.

The furnishings of the house consisted mostly of the walnut furniture that had been in use from the days of the first generation. For heating purposes, in addition to the large kitchen fireplace, two woodstoves were placed in the downstairs rooms; one of which was a square-cornered stove made by John Potts, founder of Pottstown and owner of District Furnace in the early part of the eighteenth century. This stove is on permanent exhibit in the Iron Room of the Historical Society of Berks County. Chairs were few in number, benches were used instead, especially around the four sides of a large walnut kitchen table which was necessary to feed the additional farm hands engaged at hay and harvest time. Sometimes this number reached to fifteen or more. In the bedroom used by the five sisters, each had her own bed pushed right against the other. At the foot of each bed stood a walnut chest where the sisters kept their personal belongings. No chairs were in any of the bedrooms. There were no closets. All wearing apparel hung on handmade wooden pegs fastened to the partitions along one side of the room. In an outer room a large fieldstone, placed flush with the flooring, got hot from the hearth downstairs, and here the sisters warmed their bare feet on cold nights before getting in bed. Carpets were unknown. Every week the bare floors in the downstairs rooms were scrubbed until they were spotlessly clean.

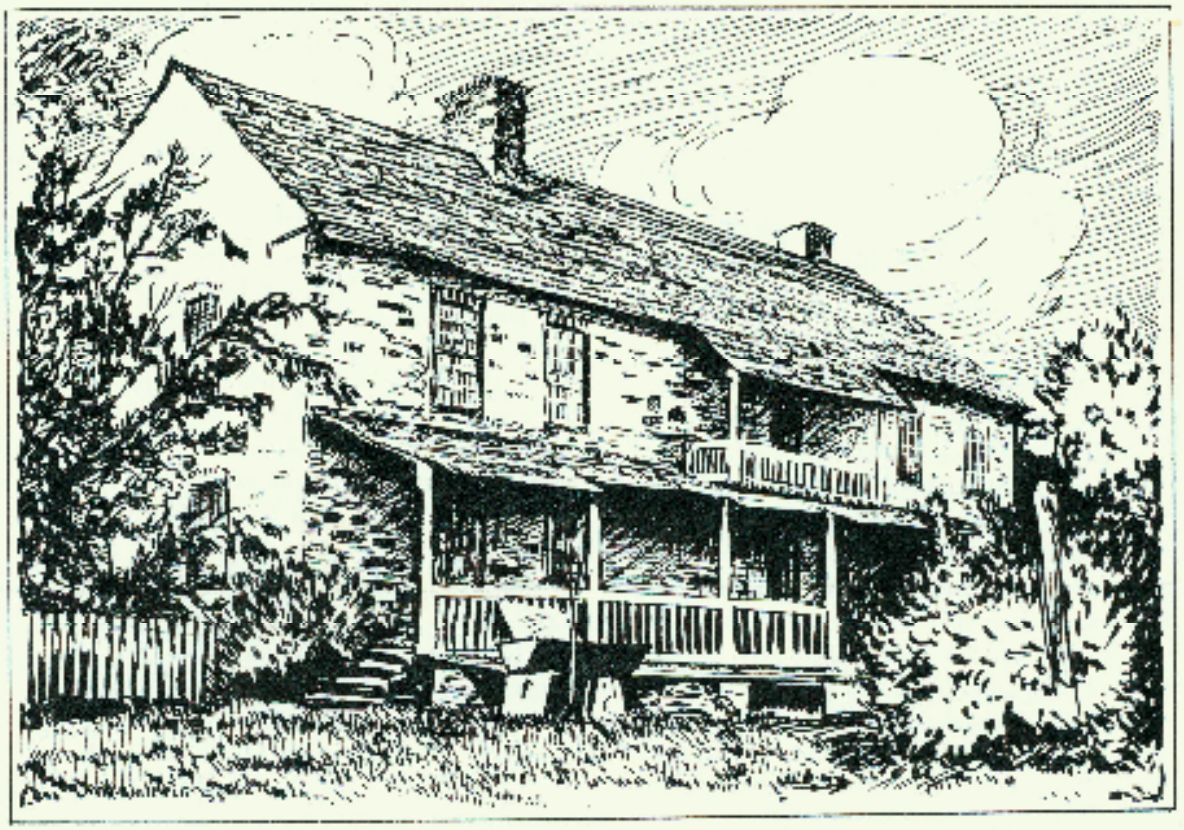
The late William Parker and his wife Sarah, an aged couple who lived in the neighborhood of the writer at Oley Furnace twenty-five years ago, related many interesting stories about the Keims and the strange manner in which they lived. As a young man, William Parker had been employed as a farm laborer by John Keim, and he lived with the family nearly twenty years. After he married and moved into the hills above the Oley Furnace, he and his wife were frequent visitors in the Keim home up until the last sister died.

Because they had only meagre educations, the interests of the Keims were centered in their place of dwelling and in their daily labors, and extended only to what was doing and happening within a radius of a very few miles. All the sisters were very suspicious of strangers. If any such appeared along the roadway, they hid behind the old boxwood in the front garden, parted the branches, and peered out, watching until the stranger was out of sight. They

Betsy Keim (1829-1911), last of the five recluse sisters to live in the ancestral home.

—Drawn by James M. K. Waldron





The rear of the Keim home as it appeared in 1900, showing the ancient wooden trough, supported on two logs, which was used for washing.

—Drawn by James N. K. Waldron

were quite friendly, though, with some of their long-established neighbors in Pike and Oley.

Their oddness was particularly shown whenever a new farmhand was employed by the brother. While the laborers were "washing up" at an outside water trough, the sisters would hurriedly place the food on the table in the large kitchen, immediately retire to the smaller kitchen where the cooking was done over the fireplace, and not appear again until the new farmhand had left for the fields or the barn. Perhaps in a week or ten days they would lose their shyness, come out, and engage in conversation if the new worker met their approval.

When the first automobiles passed their house, Catharine (Kitty) and Betsy were the only two sisters still living. Rather startled as the machines came around a bend in the road, they called them "devil wagons" or sometimes referred to them as "the lightning coaches." Neither of them had ever ridden in a trolley car, train or automobile. They almost never left the farm.

Many years before Betsy died, she expressed the desire to see a market-house. A neighbor woman who had a stand in a Penn Street market was willing to take her along one Saturday morning. Betsy was a large woman with enormous hands and a chin that sprouted a beard. For the trip to Reading she wore her faded blue sunbonnet and an old mixed calico dress; her feet were shod with heavy field shoes. She was ready for the journey! In the market-house she was regarded with such curiosity and attracted so much attention that a policeman had to be called to disperse the crowd that gathered around the neighbor's stall.

As long as the eldest sister, Sarah, lived, she was the cook and did the baking for the family. She rarely worked in the fields with the others. After she died, some of them complained the meat wouldn't be roasted through or the bread baked done. Then all the sisters shared in the duties of preparing the food.

On winter evenings, five spinning wheels were brought out from an inner room and the sisters, by the light of two fat lamps, spun the flax and wool with which their garments and bedding were made. The rise and fall of the whirring of the wheels filled the winter kitchen. The brother and the hired men sat near the hearth, mending shoes and harness, repairing tools, or making rat-traps.

After Betsy died, there was found, stored carefully away in old chests in the attic, homespun linen

made into ninety-seven table cloths, forty cases for featherbeds, and twenty-seven home-made woolen coverlets bearing names and dates—some of them seventy-five years old.

Old John Keim was described as a man of stern character and ceaseless activity throughout his long life. He put tremendous energy into tilling the soil and sawing the wood needed for heating and repairing. Showing a deep affection for the wild creatures that lived in his woodland, he became furious when hunters shot the grey squirrels that abounded among the enormous oaks and walnuts. Billy Parker told the writer in his homely way: "After a night of deep snow, old John Keim, before he did eat himself something, used to go over in the big woods under some old fir trees, shovel open a clearing, and scatter grain, hickory nuts, and walnuts for the partridges and grey squirrels. Why, they got so tame that they would fly or crawl up on his shoulder; it for sure looked nice. Sometimes the snow was quite black and you could hardly walk for the birds around. This didn't matter if it was a poor nut year; the half of the crop always got saved for the squirrels and the wild birds. Once, old John caught Davey Scheidt shooting at the squirrels, and he had the law on him, and I heard say, it cost him a heap of money . . ."

An unmarried brother, Daniel Keim, was somewhat estranged from the rest of the family early in life. He learned the tanning business at Sunbury, but in his latter years he became a wanderer, working for the farmers in Oley and Pike. Although quite wealthy, he often cut wood for acquaintances for his meals. He had a chest of personal belongings in the old homestead and he was given the privilege by his brother and sisters of putting things in or taking them out. After this matter was attended to, lingering or resting in the house was denied him, and he had to be on his way. At one period in his life he lived in the half of a double house in the village of Friedensburg. In 1879 a number of burglaries took place there. Becoming alarmed because he had his wealth hidden in the house, Daniel shouldered a half bushel of coin in a grain bag and carried it to Reading on foot, depositing it in a bank. Much of it was in gold.

Although very eccentric in his manner of living, Daniel enjoyed walking about the countryside talking to his acquaintances in Oley. He attended all funerals, some at a considerable distance, walking the entire way. He was never known to wear an overcoat. In December, 1894, while attending a funeral in Hill Church, he died suddenly as the service was about to begin. He left an estate of upwards of $30,000 and eighteen small properties in and near Friedensburg.

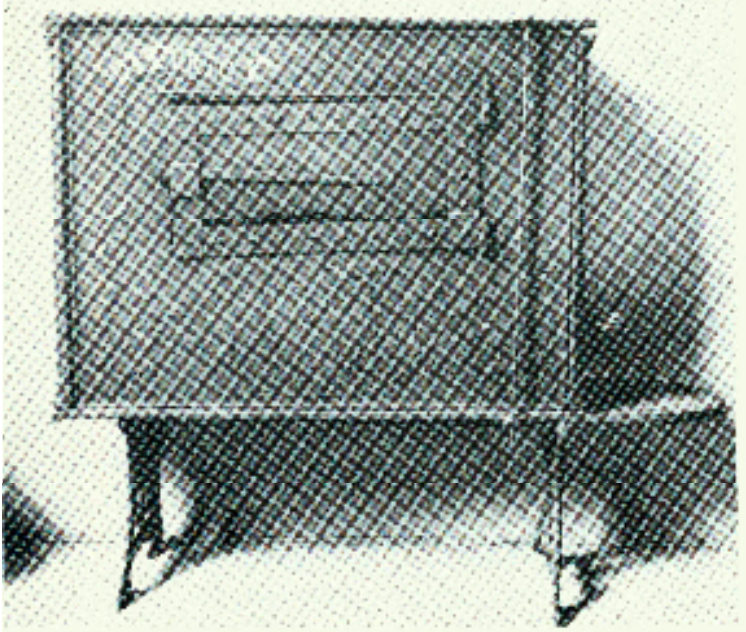
After Betsy Keim died, it was necessary for the executor and the heirs of Isaac W. Keim to search the house thoroughly from attic to cellar, because it was generally supposed that the sisters secreted their wealth in unexpected places, as recluses are so frequently accustomed to doing. The executors were well rewarded in their intense search. The bottom of the kitchen wood-chest was filled with gold and silver coins, covered with a deep layer of chips from kindling wood. A fifty pound lard can in the attic was found to contain $8000, more than half of it in gold coins. An old apple-butter crock contained $100 in colonial notes dating from 1775 to 1778. Large sums were also found in old cupboards and bedroom chests. When one mattress was carefully examined, money was found sewed in its folds.

It was said by some of the Keim neighbors that in a business transaction the sisters would never accept paper money of any denomination, but always demanded that they be paid in coins. This objection was believed by some to stem from their fear of fire breaking out and consuming the bills, while others gave it as their opinion that too much risk was involved with the possibility of rats and mice carrying off the paper money for nests.

When Kitty was stricken with her last illness,

An early ten plate stove used in the Keim home until 1911. It was cast at District Furnace in the 18th century, and is now exhibited in the Iron Room of the Historical Society of Berks County.

—Photo by N. Gulley Finch



she refused to go upstairs to bed. Before dying on the kitchen woodchest, she quietly said: "Nearer, only nearer to the stove. I'm so cold." Later Betsy was heard to weep and say: "Now that Kit is gone, who will wash for me?"

Many were the tales reported from the Lobachsville countryside of strange happenings and apparitions seen around the Keim home, not only while the family lived but after they passed away.

"Hadn't the double-locked kitchen door suddenly opened and closed as quickly, one spring evening, while the girls sat spinning? Didn't they *make awful* that this foretold bad luck coming within the house? And didn't Ann suddenly sicken with the fever next morning, crawl down at the firecorner to warm herself, and die there before old John could pow-wow for her?"

"What did Hettie Youse and her man see one evening in Keim's lane as they were coming home from a visit to her sister in New Jerusalem? Old John, for sure, shoving at an upstairs window, by a fat lamp, and he already in the ground all of three months . . ."

"And what did Beriah Angstadt see when he was coming out of Keim's woods, near dark in the fall, from hunting groundhogs? Old John standing at the graveyard wall and pointing at the ground, as if to show where some of the money was hidden. And buried since spring! Some thought he meant it kind to old Beriah as old John liked him so good . . . but Beriah didn't stop a minute to look back again, but made for the road, stumbling over stones and stumps, just to get quick away . . ."

"And what happened to Manda Soyler's two girls after eating blackberries in Keim's graveyard? Their teeth soon started to rot . . ."

"What came over Betsy the time Sallie Sassaman picked the wrong five beans in the back garden? She got that cross her eyeballs laid out on her cheeks, and a many a one saw it too . . ."

"Which one of the old girls cast a spell on old Herbein that he couldn't shoot his gun off the time he sneaked in their woods after partridges . . .? Sure, strange things happen around Keim's place . . ."

The sale of the household goods of the Keim family was held, commencing at noon, on November 8, 1911, and it lasted until sundown the afternoon of the 10th. It was the first public sale, and the only one, held on the premises. Up until that year it was considered the largest gathering of antique dealers and collectors ever brought together in Eastern Pennsylvania. The sale was widely advertised, and it was estimated that 5,300 people attended the three day vendue, some coming from New York and Massachusetts. By actual count 56 automobiles and 500 other vehicles were on the grounds or in the narrow lanes leading up to the property. Nearly every farmhouse in the Oley valley was represented by one or several members of a family. As the hour of the sale drew near, the roadways swarmed with country folk coming in all directions, even taking shorter routes across the fields. Some of the older folk likened the sale to a large church picnic.

Many of the antique household furnishings brought prices unusually high for those days. This astounded the more primitive inhabitants living in the hills of Pike and Oley, who were not then aware of the interest arising in the furniture, fitlings, chinaware and utensils of earlier generations, which were then being sought by collectors in increasing numbers throughout the Pennsylvania countryside.

Some of the pieces and articles sold and the prices paid for them will be of interest to the reader:

Square-corner'd woodstove made by John Potts, founder of Pottstown and owner of District Furnace in the early part of the 18th century	$ 78.00
Sally Ann Woodstove	25.00
Grandfather's Clock, showing moon and date, by Fix	100.00
Grandfather's Clock, twenty-four hours	35.00
Walnut Dining Table	34.00
Inlaid Walnut Desk and Bookcase combined.	31.00
Walnut Wardrobe	26.00
Walnut Chest	14.50
Walnut Chest	17.50
Daniel Keim's Chest, five feet high	9.00
Clothes Chest	6.00
Chest	4.50
Grandfather's Chair	11.50
Two Solid Hickory Chairs	3.60
Two Old Hickory Chairs	3.85
Six Beds ..... ($7.00; 2.00; 6.00; 8.00; 7.25; 3.00)	33.25
High Post Bed	1.80
Three Wood Stoves ..... ($1.00; 3.50; 2.00)	6.50
Six Spinning Wheels ($1.50; 1.30; 2.50; 4.50; 4.25; 6.50)	20.55
Tin Horn, four feet long, that sounded the dinner hour for one hundred years	1.50
Four Stove Plates ..... ($2.25; 3.00; 3.25; 6.25)	16.75

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Keim Family

Hanger for Hearth	2.00
Flintlock Gun	4.25
Two Fluted Stiegel Charcoal Goblets ($3.05 each)	6.10
Large Charcoal Stiegel Goblet	7.50
Stiegel Tumbler	7.50
Pewter Soup Bowl	3.20
Pewter Plates (10 cents to $3.00)	....
Pewter Plate, 8"	1.30
Dutch Ware Pepper Shaker	4.00
Teapot	6.75
Dutch Ware Flowered Cream Jug	4.00
Small Wine Glasses ($4.00 to 5.00)	..
Round Perforated Tin Lantern	2.10
Brass Fat Lamp	3.75
Snuffers	4.30
Dishes (75 cents to $15.00)	....
28 Homemade Woolen Spreads, some with names and dates, ($2.00 to 24.00)	212.00
3 Other Spreads ($18.00; 13.50; 14.00; 11.75; 6.00)	63.25
Spread—1835 (Sarah Keim)	24.00
Spread—1839 (Esther Keim)	16.00
Spread—1847 (Catharine Keim)	24.00
Spread—1848 (Anna Keim)	12.00
77 Homemade Linen Table Covers ($2.00 to 6.20 each)	....
Homemade Sheets	25.00
Coverlets ($25.00 to 100.00)	....
Bed Ticsings	5.00
Homemade Liner Chaff Bags ($2.00 to 4.00)	....
Homespun Yarn	1.45
Hundreds of Yards of Homemade Linen in pieces ranging from 4 to 45 yards, sold 50 to 90 cents pr. yd.	....
900 lbs. of Homemade Soap (sold in lots of 10 to 15 lbs.) at 8 cents to 10 cents per lb.	....
Flax raised on farm ($1.20 to 1.40 per half bushel bag)	....
Hand-forged Hay Rake	1.00
Crude Wooden Mouse Trap	.50
Homespun Thread	.35

In the spring of 1913 Mahlon H. Boyer, lumber merchant of Pine Grove, purchased the Keim farm; shortly thereafter he and his son, Charles M. Boyer, established a modern sawmill and converted the immense tract of woodland into marketable lumber. The black walnut logs were shipped to Germany, presumably to be used in the making of fine furniture. The oak lumber was sold to Harlan & Hollingsworth, ship-builders of Wilmington, Delaware, to be used in the construction of large vessels. Because the use of horses and wagons to convey the lumber would have been too tedious, a Pierce Arrow truck transported the wood to Fleetwood, the nearest railroad station, six miles away.

The Keim farm is still owned by Mr. Charles M. Boyer, who has a tenant farmer, Mr. John Sitler and his family, living in the old homestead, and the widespread acres are still kept in a fine state of cultivation.

Some thirty years ago the writer and his neighbors, William and Sarah Parker, visited the old farm. They had not seen the place since the day of the sale. We walked around the house and through the garden. Old Billy Parker seemed completely bewildered by the changes that had been made since the farm had passed out of the Keim family. Occasionally, he would stop and slowly shake his head as he surveyed the premises intently. Finally he said: "Ei, ei, ei! This, for sure, don't look like Keim's place no more! Here, I wouldn't want to work again. I liked it best the way old John and the girls had it. Why the old tile roof ain't on the house no more; and here at the street a pale fence and gate once stood. Just look, Sarah, they made something new to siphon the water from the ground. This sure was good tasting water. Old John's grandfather had it piped down from the big woods, through wooden pipes, more than a hundred years ago. And just see up there the fancy barn the new owner builded, Sarah."

When old Billy finally looked in the direction where the virgin timber had formerly stood, he was completely overwhelmed with dismay and burst forth indignantly:

"What would old John Keim say if he knew from this 'cuting down of their woods? And, all plowed over now, and a big cornfield all around!"

"Yes," said his wife most resentfully: "New people always spoil things when they move on a place. Maybe, for all, Keims know of this changing their house around and the ruining of their woodland. They ain't always laying up in the graveyard. They come back when the moon is bright and watch things off. I could name a many a one that saw them already. They are mighty displeased that their big woods got so spoiled that they holded so long in the family, back to the time of the Indians."

Returning down the lane from the old burying-ground which we visited, old Sarah turned and contemplated the broad, bare autumnal fields over which she had trod often so many long years ago. She knew this would be her last visit to the Keim farm. She was then full of years, and walked along with labored breath. Again she looked back toward the graveyard wall, as if silently bidding a final farewell to her old friends, now gone these many years.

"Yes, well," she quietly said, as she resumed walking. "Now they're all in the ground, and as it do say in the Bible: 'They do rest from their labors.'"