

Hiram (Portage County)

David R. Anderson

In 1856, John Udell of Jefferson and a frequent visitor to family in Hiram, boasted that he had traveled “in my whole life, at an extremely low estimate, . . . 110,410 miles” of which 76,075 had been on foot. His is one of many accounts, written from the middle of the century through the Centennial Year of 1876, that attempt to create a record for a new generation of what it was like to come to the West in the early years of the nineteenth century. These accounts of the routes taken to the Western Reserve and the conditions which travellers met with on the way, intend for the most part not so much to create a historic record of modes of transportation as that they attempt to convey the seemingly insurmountable hardships encountered on the way. A letter of Theresa Maxon of Hiram to her parents in Connecticut in 1824 is a litany of troubles: “Such a road no human being ever see! No pen can describe it. Could I see you I could not tell you one half of the badness of the road.” And if complete first hand accounts were missing, it has sometimes led to twentieth century speculation; Ellen Dillely wrote in 1930 of an early Hiram settler: “We should like to read of the crossing of rivers, of storms, of mishaps, of travel, of chance encounters with immigrants on their way west or on their way back to the East. But Mary Hutchison has left us no account of the incidents of the trip. We can only imagine that all these things and more occurred.” Joy or anticipation of a new life are remarkably missing from these recollections. What might we conclude from the tone of these travel documents about their audience or intended purpose?