This article is taken from The Cleveland Plain Dealer during the build up to Cleveland's bicentennial in July 1996. Notice the contrast between people's lives described in the article and the picture on page 2.

Life could be rough during pioneer days

New England farmers around the turn of the 19th century had an idealized version of life in the newly opened Western Reserve lands in Ohio. They had visions of cheap and fertile lands instead of the hardscrabble, thin soil they broke their backs over in Connecticut and Vermont. They could picture woods full of game to supplement a hearty diet from their crops.

CLEVELAND: A LOOK BACK

Bob Rich

The Connecticut Land Co., which owned much of what is now northeastern Ohio, didn't exactly disabuse them of their notions. After all, it wanted to unload at a profit the 3 million acres it bought from the state of Connecticut.

The reality, though, was vastly different.

When settlers arrived in the reserve after a killing journey over roads hacked out of the forest, the bitter reality set in quickly.

After building some sort of shelter, the men would spend their entire days in the field getting in a crop.

And the women? They washed clothes for huge families, made raw cloth from cotton and flax, cooked, churned butter — work that turned young girls into old, worn-out women in a few years.

The log cabins were so crude that one settler said, "We hung up a quilt, and that, with a big bulldog, constituted the door."

Here's what Mrs. Joel Thorp did when she found herself alone with three small children in their Cleveland log cabin after her husband left to look for food for his starving family.

First, she looked, unsuccessfully, in the cracks of the logs for a few kernals of corn; then, she emptied her straw mattress on the ground and picked it over to get a few mouthfuls of wheat that she boiled and gave to the kids.

Finally, with her heart hammering in terror that she would miss, she used their last musket ball to shoot a wild turkey, which kept them alive until her husband got home!

Even 20 years later, a visiting doctor, Zerah Hawley, reported visiting sick children in one-room log cabins that didn't even have a fireplace or a chimney — the fire was built right against the cabin logs and the smoke escaped through a hole in the roof.

A more prosperous two-room cabin meant that the hogs and the cows lived in the second room.

Some of the young women, said Hawley, according to historian Harlan Hatcher, "dock the hair square behind, leaving it about six inches long, which gives them a very uncouth and forbidding appearance."

Hawley had dinner with one pioneer family: They had one knife and one fork which they gave to him.

The others ate with a shoe knife and an old razor blade with a wooden handle. Food was served in a single large dish in the middle of the table.

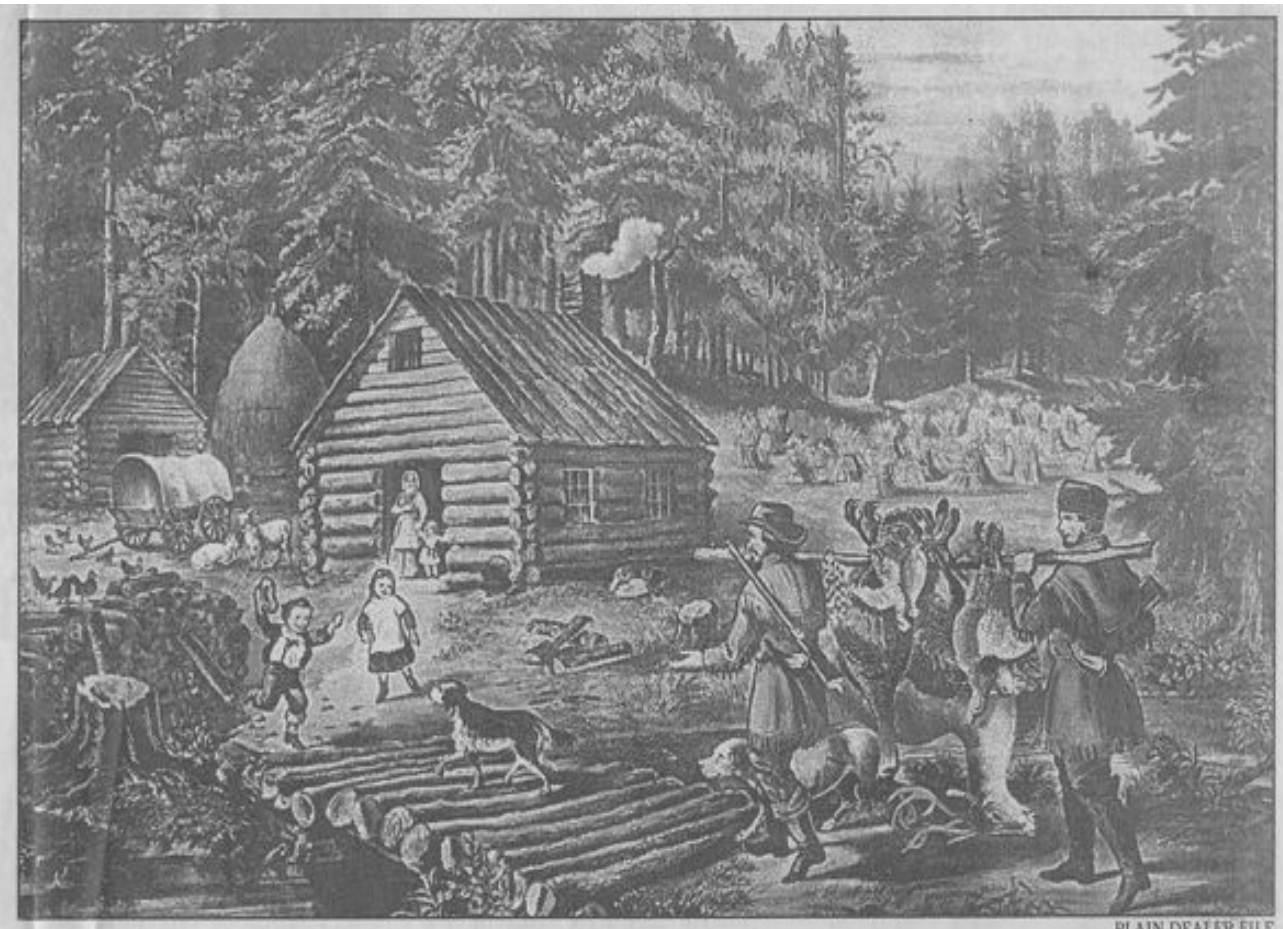
Under these often grim circumstances, settlers took their fun where they could get it, and tiny little Cleveland saw its chance to become a party town on the Fourth of July, 1801, when all the local citizenry decided to hold a "grand ball."

Since there were only a few cabins down by the Cuyahoga River, the choice of a ballroom was easy: Major Lorenzo Carter's two-room log house on the hill near the corner of Union and Superior lanes.

The elite of that frontier community was there — 12 women and 20 men — and they danced to the fiddle of the Master of Ceremonies, Major Samuel Jones.

Gilman Bryant was there; his father had set up Cleveland's first whiskey still and cut the first mill-stones in the area.

He described, many years later, his date with one of Nathaniel Doan's daughters, whom he took to the party: "I waited on



PLAIN DEALER FILE

The promise of fertile fields and plenty of game lured New England farmers to the Western Reserve, where they found reality was far different than this idyllic painting depicts.

Miss Doan, who had just arrived at the Corners, four miles east of town. I was then about 17 years of age, and Miss Doan about fourteen.

"I was dressed in the then style — a gingham suit — my hair queued with one-and-a-half yards of black ribbon, about as long and as thick as a corncob, with a little tuft at the lower end; and for the want of pomatum, I had a little piece of candle rubbed on my hair, and then as much flour as could stay without falling off.

"I had a good wool hat and a pair of brogans that would help to play 'Fisher's Hornpipe,' or 'Hie, Bettie Martin,' when I danced. . . .

"Notwithstanding the floors were of rough puncheons, and their best beverage was made of maple sugar, hot water and whiskey, probably no celebration of American independence was more joyous than this."

The next time you fly to Cleveland and see thousands of lights down below, think of that lonely cabin in the middle of the wilderness and the sound of a fiddle floating over the trackless forests as Gilman Bryant and his friends fought off the terrible loneliness of the frontier with Cleveland's first party.

Rich is a local history instructor. This column appears each Sunday leading up to Cleveland's bicentennial in July 1996.