

Grosse Pointe Historical Society

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Tales of Windmill Point

V2.0

By Jef Fisk

Narrator

In the dawn of the 18th century - that would be about 300 years ago - French Gouverneur Antoine de la Monthe Cadillac journeyed to this region to build Fort Pontchartrain on the site that today is now known as Detroit. The name Detroit comes from the French "d'etroit", which means "the narrows"... a reference to the place where the waters between Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair narrow into a river. Building a fort at "the narrows" would make it a stronghold for the French military and would give them control to the only known water entrance to the Upper Great Lakes, an area known to be rich in furs.

The English coveted this passage to riches, but knew that an attack on the fort would not be likely to succeed and would be too costly to bear. So they resolved to wait until the right moment to attack. A moment when the French would relax their guard. A moment when there was a chance for defeating the French in their own fort.

Complicating things for the English was the fact that defeating the French also meant defeating several native-American tribes who were allies of the French. The Hurons, the Pottawatomies and the Ottowas. These tribes, although friendly to the French, were skilled at the combat of the day and were considered fierce warriors.

The English waited more than a decade. At last, the moment for which they had waited appeared to present itself in the spring of 1712. The French commander of the fort was away and had left his assistant, Jacques-Charles Du Buisson, as temporary commander of the fort. The Ottowas and Hurons and others had not yet returned from their winter hunting trip in the deep forests of the Michigan wilderness. To make things worse, Du Buisson had a force of only 20 men with which to defend the fort.

The English had native-American allies of their own, notably, the Fox and the Mascoutin tribes from Saginaw Bay, who were mortal enemies of the Hurons and Ottawas. The English managed to instigate these Saginaw tribes to journey to Fort Pontchartrain to attack the French, so they could gain control of the region.

Fortunately for the French, Du Buisson got word of the approaching foe and ordered all of their food and other supplies to be moved from the outside storage houses to within the walls of the fort. He also sent word to the Huron and Pottawatomies that he was in danger and asked them to come quickly to his aid.

When the English-ally tribes arrived at the Fort, they did not attack right away. Instead, they pitched their tents almost within range of the French guns and lit their campfires so that the fort-dwellers could see them. These goings-on would normally be interpreted as gestures of friendship. But Du Buisson was too experienced to be fooled by the craftiness of these enemy tribes. As the days passed, the number of Fox tribesmen grew and their actions became more raucous. It was clear that an attack would soon be underway.

The stress on the small group of Frenchmen in the fort began to take its toll. They grew weary from the long hours of attentiveness required by their vigil. Along with this weariness came the fear that must accompany long hours of thinking about being so grossly outnumbered. The fear that their beloved Fort Ponchartrain would soon be crimsoned by their own blood. This was another way in which Du Buisson showed his genius. He inspired his command by leading the way real leaders do, with deeds. He joined in the watch, alongside his men. He also stirred the pride of the command by relating heroic stories of French soldiers at other far and desolate forts. He was aided by the gentle French minister Deniau, who reminded them of their distant homes and loved ones. He told them to put their trust in God. Encouraged by the two leaders, the men regained their bravery and held on.

Finally, on May 13, the Ottawa, led by Chief Saguina, and the Pottawatomies, led by Chief Makisabe arrived with their warriors in full war armor. They were soon joined by the Hurons. Their war whoops shattered the silence of the forest and, at first, terrified the anxious hearts of the French soldiers. Still other tribes arrived to help the French, if only because they were blood enemies of the Fox. Chief Saguina approached the fort and assured Du Buisson:

Chief Saguina

"Behold our tribes are all around you. We will, if need be, gladly die for you, only take care of our wives and children and spread a little grass over our dead bodies to protect them against the flies."

Narrator

The English allied Fox were driven back and, in the thick darkness of a stormy night, retreated to Windmill Point at the entrance to Lake St. Clair, 8 miles north of the fort. There, they fortified themselves.

The Ottawa, Huron and other tribes pursued the Fox and were soon engaged in continued fierce combat. For many days, the Fox retained their stronghold. And for many days, Du Buisson tried in vain to stop the dreadful slaughter, pleading with Chief Saguina to show mercy.

Du Buisson

"Chief Saguina, the Fox have surrendered. They have run away. Please stop the massacre. There is no reason for more carnage."

Chief Saguina

"My brother, shall we let them escape so they can re-fortify themselves and attack us in the night? Have you forgotten that the Fox were all too willing to attack you when you were defenseless? No. Let us stop the bloodshed today, by destroying the Fox so they can no longer hunt the Ottawa and the French. Let us complete our mission."

Narrator

And so the mission was completed... In the end the ground was red with the blood of more than a thousand Fox. The crimson earth and blood-curdling victory cries of the victors, mingled with the agonized groans of the wounded, made so fearful a picture that the French soldiers, who were used to war and carnage, turned away with sickened hearts.

Shortly afterwards, the few remaining Fox returned to Windmill Point to cover the bones of their warriors. Those bones continued to appear, unearthed by aggressive plows for over a hundred years.

[Pause]

And just about a hundred years later, a young French settler built a stone mill on the very place on Windmill Point at which the massacre had taken place. New to the area, Jean and his older sister Josette created the mill from the ground up.

Jean was a quiet, depressed man, different from the other laughing, and pleasure-loving Canadians typical of the settlement. He rarely visited the fort and, stranger still, never spoke to the smiling, attractive young ladies who were the daughters of the other residents.

First Young Girl

You look troubled.

Second Young Girl

Oh... yes. I just came from the fort. There was a young man there, selling grist, I think. I might have seen him once before, but it was a while ago. Anyway, he looked so... so cheerless. I've never seen anyone look so sad.

Young Man

That was probably Jean. He and his sister run the grist mill out on Windmill Point.

First Young Girl

He lives with his sister?

Young Man

Yes. They built the mill a few years ago and have been there ever since... But he is extremely shy and only comes to the fort for business.

Second Young Girl

He's actually rather handsome... but why is he so gloomy?

Young Man

I can't remember where I heard it, but it is said that, before he and his sister came here, he was rejected by his first love. I guess he never recovered.

First Young Girl

Oh, that IS sad.

Narrator

Josette was much older than her brother. Besides being half owner of the mill, she was renown for her outstanding skills in the kitchen. The favored few, who had tasted the fruits of her cooking, spoke of it as a highlight of their existence. It was said that her preparation of duck with pear demiglace could melt the heart of even the hardest frontiersman.

Life went on, without event, moving ever forward, a repetition of days, seasons and years. The river flowed calmly on and the birds sang their songs, for nature has no moods. Feelings and emotions are reserved for the realm of man.

One day Josette fell sick. Jean attended her as carefully as he could. In the quiet of the evening, he wondered what would happen next.

Jean

[Cautiously] Josette? If something terrible should happen, to whom would you leave your share of the mill?

Josette

[Mildly put out] Jean, how indelicate of you to ask such a question!

Jean

[Being persistent, but somewhat polite] Perhaps, but everyone must pass sometime. I'd just like to know what your wishes are so that I can see that they are met.

Josette

[Indignant] Well, I don't see the need. I'm not THAT ill and I plan to live a long time. I'd prefer not to discuss it any further!

Jean

[Somewhat forcefully] Just the same, it is important that we discuss these things.

Josette

[Building in anger and intensity] It is clear that all you care about is this mill and yourself. I am quite sure that the only reason that you are caring for me is so you can get my money when I die. Well, do not spend too much time caring for me, because you'll get none of it. Do you understand? NONE OF IT!!! Now leave me alone!!

Narrator

Jean tried, in his clumsy manner, to soothe her. Being aware of his weaknesses, he sent for some of his family to reason with her, but this infuriated her all the more. One night in a fit of pique, she wildly:

Josette

[Screaming in anger] I would sooner leave everything I own to the devil than leave a single franc to any of you!! Leave me!!

Narrator

Josette recovered. Perhaps just for spite. Although Jean and their family thought that her seemingly evil declaration must have been delirium brought on by her illness, in her continuing stubbornness, she made it clear that she would not give in to her family's requests.

One evening, a few months later, Josette did not appear for supper. Nor were there any stirrings from her room. Alas, she was found residing quietly, between her sheets....

Dead. That same night, while the candles threw their dim shadowy light across the room of the dead, a furious storm arose from nowhere, as the day had been fair. Lashing huge waves against the shore, the winds howled fiercely around Windmill Point as fierce streaks of lightning a hundred miles long bolted in and out of the black as charcoal billows of clouds chased each other across the sky and magnificent and deadly claps of thunder shook the very ground on which the mill was built. The family huddled there, shuddering with fear, crossed themselves and prayed.

All at once, a tremendously deafening bolt of lightning ripped through the stone mill, cleaving it in two. A revolting smell of sulfur filled the air and a fiendish laugh was heard to emit from the smoking ruins, loud above the raging storm. The devil had come to claim his share of the mill.

And, for years afterward, when a northeast storm blew from the lake, making the night hideously frightening by its echoing bombastic claps of thunder, it was said that a hairy figure, with a horned head and forked fiery tipped tail, his mouth and eyes glowing with flame, could be seen in the mill, trying to put together the ruined machinery to grind the devil's grist. And a visitor to Grosse Pointe would see the swampland around Windmill Point illuminated by flames, inhabited by a monstrous creature trying to coax the guest to help grind the devil's grist.

In the end, only one of the two stones remained. And today that stone resides in the Gardens at the Grosse Pointe War Memorial. The other stone has never been found.

