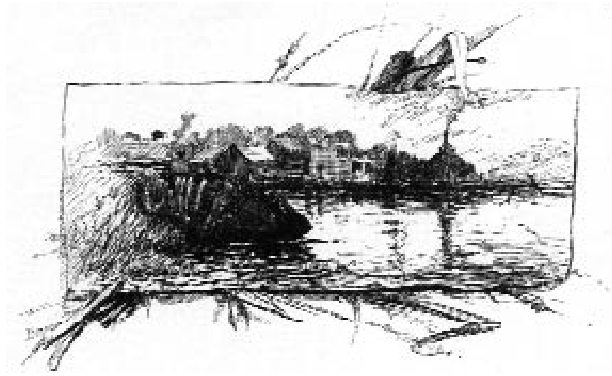

Grosse Pointe and le Grande Marais

By Mina Humphrey Varnum

In this article, first published in Detroit Saturday Night, February 26, 1916, Mina Humphrey Varnum tells her story of "Grosse Pointe and le Grand Marais."

Oh, de Frenchman, he no like-a die in de fall
When de mash ees full of game.
An' de beeg musk-rat, she's sleek an fat.
An' de bull-frog, jus' de same,
Bob-a-le, bob-a-lo
Bob-a-le, bob-a-lo
An' de bull-frog jus de same.

LE GRANDE MARAIS (the big marsh) situated a few miles above the old French town, La Ville Detroit, must have been a veritable land of plenty to the early French habitants that lived on its borders, for the "beeg musk-rat" and the bull-frog were in undisturbed possession, then.

The words, le grande marais, are meaningless to the army of people who pass along the "river road" from Detroit to Grosse Pointe and beyond, as is also la cote du Nord, the name the French gave to all that section of waterfront lying east of what is now Woodward Avenue.

No one ever considers calling the point on which the lighthouse is situated "Presque Isle" and yet that was its every-day name when the French people bumped over the old corduroy and soft sand of the river road nearly two centuries ago. Later it became Windmill Point.

Le Grande Marais was indeed a "big marsh." It is said to have extended over the vast tract of land lying between the Grosse Pointe lighthouse and Conner's Creek, and to have reached as far inland as the Clinton road. The old river road took a turn around this, because roads could not be laid across it, and the Jefferson avenue that we now know does not follow the route of this old road. In some places it ran much nearer the river; at Water Works Park, where the Van Avery roadhouse flourished, it ran nearly to the water's edge.

Beginning with Windmill Point the grosse or larger pointe extended into Lake St. Clair beyond what is now the line between Wayne and Macomb counties, past Milk River, or River au Lait, to the small bay known for many years, and on all old land descriptions of that section, as L'Anse Creuse.

Following the coming of Cadillac in 1701, all of the land from the boundaries of the small village of Detroit to beyond

L'Anse Creuse were, from time to time, given out to French settlers by grants from the Commandant of Detroit and the Governor of New France and confirmed by the French king. These farms were long strips of land with frontage on the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair, so narrow that the families in the little white-washed log dwelling could call across to each other and so pass the news of any important event or choice bit of gossip all along the water front.

The houses were built close to the water's edge and usually were surrounded by cedar pickets for protection. In the rear were orchards of apples and pear trees, the seeds for which it is said were brought originally from France. A little farther back corn and wheat were planted, sufficient for current needs; and beyond that the wilderness remained unbroken until the coming of the American settlers after the Revolutionary War.

The Grande Marais was low, flat, marshy country covered with a most luxuriant growth of wild grass, and this was public property to be cut by any one who would take the trouble. What was not cut was usually set on fire in the winter and would burn for days. As there were similar marsh fires along the mouth of the River Rouge at the same time, the people of Detroit were given free displays of fire works for the flames would leap through the dry grass illuminating the sky above the marsh so that it could be seen for many miles. Anyone can gain a vivid realization of the stillness and weirdness of this section of the water front when it was the home only of the French habitants and wild animals by taking a canoe and paddling at sunset along the shore line of the Canadian "Flats." The song of the bull-frog can still be heard, the noiseless slipping and sliding of water creatures among the rushes, the call of the birds and wild-fowls among the waving rice while the intenseness of the great quiet that exaggerates the mystery of the little noises, still thrills and excites the imagination.

"The Grande Marais was low, flat, marshy country covered with a most luxuriant growth of wild grass."

But the water front along the Grande Marais and Grosse Pointe was not always quiet. During the day the many windmills that made prominent landmarks to the voyageurs on the river were busy grinding the corn of the farmers and Indians. The long arms turned and groaned as the wind pressed against the tattered sails so that the sound could be heard for miles. Bands of Indians—Hurons, Ottawas, Foxes, Pottawattomies—were coming and going both on the river in their canoes and on the shore road on their ponies. Voyageurs setting forth for Mackinac and the hunting grounds of the Mississippi and Wisconsin invariably passed along the river and usually camped at the farther end of Grosse Pointe their first night out.

As late as 1820, when Governor Cass and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, with a company of distinguished gentlemen started for Sault Ste. Marie to treat with the northern Indians, the first camp was made at Grosse Pointe and the next day a large party of gay people, the aristocracy of the city, drove out on the river road to bid them God-speed and to wish them a safe return.

For many years in the months of June the orchards along the river front held thousands of Indians, their squaws and papooses, who were on their way to Malden to receive their annual presents from the British government. The beach for many miles would be lined with their canoes, while their tents and bright camp-fires dotted the landscape.

On still calm evenings the Indian war drums and hammers could be heard up and down the river; during the years from the coming of the earliest explorer until only a century ago, their blood-curdling war cries echoed across river and lake, and brought terror to the farmers of the region.

In the spring of 1712, at the time of the attack on Fort Pontchartrain by the Fox Indians, the final battle was fought at Windmill Point, between the Foxes and the allied Indians who were helping the French. There all of the braves of the Fox nation were massacred by the allied Indians and their squaws and papooses taken into captivity. The river road must have witnessed many heart breaking and tragic scenes at this time as the captive women and children were driven to Detroit.

There were other Indian wars in this vicinity, different nations attacking the Fort at Detroit in 1703, in 1707 and in 1746. At the time of this last siege the great Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas, defended the Fort as an ally of the French. Later in 1763 he entered into conspiracy with other Indian nations and attacked the fort at Detroit, then in the possession of the English.

At the time of this Indian war the river road, the Grande Marais and Grosse Pointe were the scenes of Indian councils, thrilling escapes of English prisoners from the savages, raids, massacres, the flights of frightened cattle, war dances, intrigues, wholesale murders and other events which present day imaginations almost fail to grasp.

"Milk River Bay — Grosse Pointe."
Illustration from Picturesque Detroit and Environs, 1893, courtesy of the St. Clair Shores Public Library.

It was at Grosse Pointe that Pontiac assembled his allied forces of Hurons, Ottawas and Pottawattomies, after the massacre of the Fisher family, on Hog Island. (Belle Isle); and it was at Grosse Pointe that his camp was established during the seige of Detroit, although an advance guard was stationed at the Meloche farm nearer the town.

It has been variously estimated that Pontiac had from 600 to 3,000 Indians in his army. Probably the number was about 1,000. There were enough of them, however, to make the whole of Grosse Pointe and the road along the beach a panorama of moving savages, their naked bodies daubed with bright colored paint in fearful pictures and symbols; their heads covered with feathered war-bonnets; and tomahawks, guns, knives and other arms at their sides or in their hands ready for instant use. The moonlight must have fallen on weird moving pictures at Grosse Pointe and the entire cote du Nord during this summer of 1763.

In 1761 Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of the Indian tribes for the English visited Detroit and made the following entry in his dairy:

> "Monday (September) 14th . . . I took a ride before dinner up toward Lake St. Clair. The road runs along the river side, which is all settled thickly nine miles. A very pleasant place in summer but at other seasons, too low and marshy."

The battles of the War of 1812 in the region of Detroit were mostly fought below the town, at Brownstown, Frenchtown, and the River Raisin. Grosse Pointe and the Grande Marais were comparatively quiet, except as they were traversed by various war parties, and expeditions.

The troops for an expedition under General McArthur were camped at Grosse Pointe in October of 1814. They went from there to Swan Creek where they crossed the St. Clair River to the old town of Baldoon and then marched to the Thames River.

A year later, in September, a band of marines under Lieut. Alexander T. E. Vidal from the British schooner, Confiance, anchored "at the rapids of the St. Clair River" landed at Grosse Pointe and, according to the oath of John Miller, Henry Tucker, Charles Rivard, Charles Nowlett Green, (the latter a lieutenant in the First regiment of Michigan militia) and other residents of the Pointe, did forcibly "seize the said Thomas Raynor and hustle him towards the canoe. The said Thomas Raynor strove to get from them as much as he could

but being intoxicated could not make any effectual resistance and he was taken by force on board the canoe."

As the right of the English to search American vessels for British sailors was a large issue in the War of 1812, the landing of a party of British sailors on American territory and the seizing of a sailor must have created great excitement along the shore. One of the "deponents" swore that the said Thomas Raynor was a member of a party of men who were coming from a camp a mile or so along the shore. When they saw the canoe with the British officers and sailors coming toward Grosse Pointe "the party all scattered. Deponent went towards the woods and while lying in ambush," witnessed the abduction. The case was tried and Lieut. Vidal was fined $612.48, on October 13. But an entry of October 14 in the records of the Supreme Court states that Lieut. Vidal was acquitted.

On Grosse Pointe, so far along the shore that his Private Claim, No. 231, had its frontage along Lake St. Clair in what is now Wayne County, with its rear across the line in Macomb County, dwelt Commodore Grant with ten lovely daughters. His house was called "The Castle," and was so popular with the naval officers in the ships stationed in the Detroit River, and with the army officers at the Fort in Detroit, that every day was a gala day and every evening a "social function." It was at the castle of Commodore Grant that the one and only harpsichord owned in Detroit at that time was placed. Its being there was rather a joke, for it was so dilapidated that it was useless, and Commodore Grant complained to its owner, his friend Dr. Harpfy, of Detroit, and Dr. Harpfy had Mr. John Askin come and take it to his store house in the village. Mr. Grant's private claim was occupied before 1796, and was confirmed in July, 1808.

By the time Michigan was ready to be admitted into the union, and become a state, the country of the Grande Marais, Grosse Pointe, L'Anse Creuse, and as far along the shore line as Swan Creek, was well settled, and but few Indians were to be found. A census taken in 1836 gave 180 Chippewas residing at Swan Creek, and but 230 at Black River, near Port Huron, as the only Indians in the vicinity.

New roads were being built; some had been built even earlier than this; the old Moravian road which "runs in a line straight through the bush" from a temporary Moravian settlement near Mount Clemens to Detroit, was built in 1785. This avoided the Grande Marais and the undulations of the shore line.

Some time soon after the conclusion of the War in 1812 a stage line was established between Detroit and Mount Clemens, which ran through the Grande Marais along the shore of the lake and the banks of the rivers. Capt. Benjamin Woodworth, the genial proprietor of the Steamboat Hotel, who owned the stage line, was one of the prominent citizens of Detroit.

When it was decided, in 1874, to place the Water Works for the city of Detroit on the Van Avery farm, on the Grosse Pointe Road, the tide of emigration towards Hamtramck and Grosse Point began. Before many years the intervening country was laid out into city lots, the lines of the old private claims of the French period became entirely obliterated, the Grande Marais was filled in with rubbish from the city and dirt dredged from the river; the river road became Jefferson avenue, graded, straightened, leveled and paved with asphalt, and neat lawns now cover the old time hunting grounds of the French habitant, the bull-frog and the "beeg musk-rat."

Mina Humphrey Varnum was born in 1874. She married Thad S. Varnum, a prominent newspaperman. Mrs. Varnum worked as a beat reporter for the papers, covering every type of story from fashion to crime. She was assistant editor for the Michigan Historical Commission and was a regular contributor to Detroit Saturday Night. Mrs. Varnum was appointed assistant publicity manager of the Michigan State Telephone Company in 1921, the first woman in the country to hold so high a position. Mina Humphrey Varnum died in 1954.

ILLUSTRATION CREDIT: Page 29 illustration from Picturesque Detroit and Environs, 1893, courtesy of the St. Clair Shores Public Library.