



Grosse Pointe Historical Society

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Pierre Provencal Adopts Children Left Orphans by Detroit Cholera Plague

From the WPA circa 1930

“It was in the year 1819, that Pierre Borgeat Provencal failing in health, determined to leave mercantile life and go into the country and try farming. He therefore brought a large tract of land in-as the old deed says “a place known and called Grosse Pointe on Lake St. Clair.” Mrs. Weir, the present owner still holds the deed dated 1819, and written in its old time quaintness.

“Later he married Euphemia St. Aubin, the ceremony being preformed in the old St. Anne’s Church by Rev. Fr. Gabriel Richard, on February 1st 1831.

“The spot chosen for the home was practically in the forest. A section must be cleared and a house built. Across the rude roadway, where now runs a fine macadamized highway, swept and swirled the waves of Lake St. Clair, all around was a wilderness. In 1869, the house still stood amid it groves of maples planted by the hand of Pierre Provencal and the everlasting pines which were a part of nature's original offering.

Here the young couple settled. As the time passed on and the wealth began to increase and no children came to brighten the little home, Pierre Provencal and his young wife conceived a plan, to spend their money usefully and benefit humanity. There was no Church or school in the vicinity, but there were plenty of children in the surrounding country who needed care.

“Back at the house, Pierre Provencal erected another building, smaller but comfortable, he furnished it, and started his scheme of charity. One by one children were brought to the Provencal home. They were all different ages, but all very young, one of them being only five days old. All were orphans, all from families of Detroit whose parents died from the Cholera Plagues’ of 1832, ’34, and 1849.

“Three of whom were his nephews, Benjamin, Isadore, and Adolph Vincent, sons of Nelson and Clothilda Vincent. Names of the other orphans are not attainable.”

Pierre Provencal conducted this orphan's home at his own expense. For many years it continued, and from first to last no less than twenty-four orphaned children were raised on the old farm. As the children grew to the age when they might be educated, teachers were supplied and schools established in the home.

“One of the remarkable results of this venture is that fact that everyone of those twenty four children not only grew to maturity, but everyone became a useful and respectable citizen, some of whom still live in Detroit and vicinity. As they grew up, one by one, and left the old farm to go out into the world for themselves, Pierre Provencal gave to each enough of this world's goods to make a start in life.

“After a good many years there came at last into the Provencal home a daughter. They named her Catherine. She was the only child, and is now the only living direct representative of the old Provencal Family. Mrs. Catherine Weir is the widow of Judge James D. Weir, late of Detroit.

“The little girl arrived on a Christmas morning and like the numerous adopted children, grew up on the picturesque old farm on the banks of Lake St. Clair.

“There was no church or chapel for many miles around and the commodious farm house was always open. In the east parlor, in the midst of the old time furniture, a Confessional box and an Altar were erected, and here services were held, confessions made and communion administered by a priest who came from Detroit each Sunday. If on pleasant Sundays so many people came to worship that the house would not hold them, they would kneel upon the wide veranda and offer their prayers in hearing of the swishing waters and the sighing pines. Everyone round about came to know of the open door at the Provencal farm and of the open handedness of its owner. And when crops failed the poorer farmers and the winter was hard and bitter, provisions ran low, then from the more spacious granaries of the Provencal farm food was distributed and none who came went away empty handed.

“In her early womanhood the one daughter and her husband traveled in Europe for a year, upon returning took up their residence at 659 Jefferson Ave, East where Mrs. Weir and her daughter still live.

“Pierre, wanted to die in his own home, but the fates decided otherwise. Mr. Provencal came down to the city on business and stopped with his mother-in-law who lived on the corner of St. Aubin and Jefferson, this was in February 1869. While there he was stricken with apoplexy and died. Judge Weir brought the sad news to his home. Mrs. Provencal lived only three years after the death of her husband, she too had hoped to die in the old home, but she passed away at the Jefferson Avenue residence of her daughter in March 1872. Both Pierre Provencal and his wife were buried in Mt. Elliott Cemetery. And so it came about that there was never a death in the old Provencal home.

“The old place is now known as the Weir Farm. Mrs. Weir and her daughter Isabel have spent many quiet summers there.

“Miss Isabel Catherine Weir died February 11th, 1903, at the family home 695 Jefferson Ave. East and is Buried in Mt. Elliott Cemetery.

“Young, joyous, gifted, gracious, constant to duty, strong in a faith and a piety that were the inspiration of every generous deed; she possessed in a marked degree the characteristic virtues and graces of the admirable Madame Cadillac, impersonated by her on the occasion of the Bi-Centennial celebration of the founding of Detroit, July 25, 1901.”

“The old Provencal home know as p.c. 618, was located on what is now Provencal Boulevard, between Lake Shore Drive and the Lake in Grosse Pointe Farms, and is named after Pierre Provencal.”

“The Shores of the lake as well as the river were then lined with the picturesque windmills of the French ‘habitants’ and the air was full of their legends and their superstitions”.

This is now the property of the Country Club. The old Provencal home is now located at Lakeview Avenue, and Grosse Pointe Boulevard, where it was moved some years ago by its present owner, Judge John LaBelle.

“The Plague of 1854”

Another charitable family of old Grosse Pointe was that of the Moran family of Grosse Pointe Farms. During this last cholera epidemic of record, Mary A. Moran, wife of Richard R. Moran, who had considerable experience nursing the sick, decided to do all within her power to alleviate the suffering of the stricken families in Detroit.

“She therefore at her own expense opened a nursery in her Grosse Pointe Home, having obtained a positive cure for Cholera made from Indian herbs. She brought many of the children from the poor, stricken families unable to care for them, to her home and there cured them as well as supplying medicine to the parents in Detroit. As soon as the parents were able to again care for their children they were returned to them and another group of children were taken in hand.

“This charitable work was carried on throughout the cholera epidemic which existed from May 25 to the end of August in 1854.

“Richard and Mary Moran raised three sons of their own, who are still living at a ripe old age and all active in business life. The eldest, Fred G. Moran, age 80, is Highway Commissioner of Grosse Pointe Farms, Wm. B. Moran, age 78, conducts a real estate and insurance business at his home. Gilbert M. Moran age 75, is connected with the American Life Insurance Company in Detroit. All three are hale and hearty and reside in Grosse Pointe.”

Resources:

- Consultant; Nelson R. Moncamp, Detroit Artist, 4505 Hurlbut, Detroit, Mich. Great Grandson of Pierre Provencal.
- Bibliography Story, by Mrs. Pruella Jane Sherman, 1899
- Ex Librarian, M.S. Provencal.
- Papers, Burton Historical Co, Detroit Public Library.
- Consultant; Gilbert M. Moran.918 Lakeshore Drive, Grosse Pointe Michigan.



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