

# Early Days in Grosse Pointe

by Friend Palmer

*Friend Palmer was one of the city's most prominent citizens in late-nineteenth-century Detroit. The General, as he was called by his family and friends, kept a diary and at the urging of his cousin Senator Thomas W. Palmer wrote out his reminiscences as articles for the Detroit Free Press. These articles were later gathered together in book form and published after his death in 1897. Included in this book are Palmer's reminiscences of people and places in early Grosse Pointe.*

**T**HE "GRAND MARAIS," what a garden it has become! A few years yet, and it will be hard to realize (and even now it is), that the present broad fields of corn and waving grain, and the splendid grounds and buildings of the Blue Ribbon race track were in the early days, and not so very remote either, one vast swamp or quagmire, covered with a most luxuriant growth of marsh grass and bull-rushes, the home of the muskrat and all kinds of horrid snakes.

"The bullfrog with his croaking harsh,  
And the fat muskrat, haunt the marsh;  
The wild duck floats among the reeds."

I have often been through it in its wildest state, have many times skirted its borders on the river to Windmill Point, and when a little more than a year ago, I gazed over the same country from my seat in the electric car, it was hard to believe the evidence of my senses. I have been up along the Grosse Pointe road often while this change has been going on, but it never struck me so forcibly as it did the time of which I speak.

In those days Windmill Point, with its roofless stone tower

slowly falling to decay, was always an object of great interest to me. The Point, as now, was quite a high piece of ground, and had the same stunted apple orchard. Why the mill was abandoned I never knew, nor who was the builder of it. I think it has now entirely disappeared.

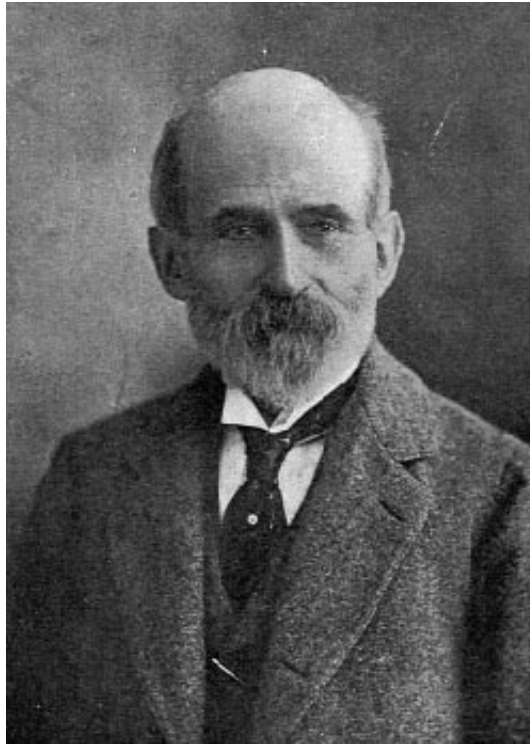
Just this side of the Country Club, on the river bank, lived Henry Hudson – "Old Hudson" everyone called him. He and his family were considered for some reason an unsavory lot, and were known far and wide through this section of the country. Besides Hudson and wife there were three or four boys. They were stalwarts all, parents and the boys, and when the sheriff or any of his deputies had occasion to visit their premises in their line of duty, they went prepared, for they were fully aware that they might meet with trouble. On one occasion Sheriff Wilson had a warrant for Hudson for some alleged misdeed. He went up to the house to serve it. Mrs. Hudson saw him coming, and divining his mission, she at once provided herself with a large basin of scalding water and stationed herself behind the open front door, so she could give it to him good and plenty. The sheriff fortunately discovered the enemy and her means of defense through the

crack of the door, and struck the basin from her hands with the heavy but of his riding whip, spilling its scalding contents over her bare feet. The outcome tickled the officer immensely. Mrs. Hudson was a masculine looking woman, marked with smallpox. She wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, winter and summer, and out of doors when the weather demanded it, a sailor's heavy sea jacket.

At the French dances the boys were most always on hand, and almost sure to get into a muss of some kind before the party was over. One occasion I call to mind. The dance was given at a house on Jefferson Avenue, just above the present water works. About the usual number and quality of people were on hand, as were two of the Hudson boys, also some five or six youngsters from the city, myself among the number. The dance proceeded merrily for quite a while, and everything bid fair for an enjoyable, peaceable party. But along in the small hours it became apparent that some of the party had partaken quite liberally of liquid refreshments, so much so that it made them inclined to be ugly, particularly the two Hudson boys, and they appeared to be spoiling for a muss of some kind. The opportunity soon came. John Demas, whom very many will remember, was present on this occasion, and as usual was very busy enjoying himself. He was quite a favorite among the French girls, and his attentions were eagerly sought. It seems that John had been during the evening more than polite to the elder Hudson's "fancies," a young Grosse Pointe beauty. This angered Hudson to that degree that he determined to put a stop to it, and he did. A dance was called, the couples including Demas and his partner (Hudson's girl), and were in their places on the floor; the music and everything was ready and waiting for the "caller," when in rushed Hudson, nothing on but pants and shirt (it was in summer), a short iron bar in his hand and crazed with drink. He at once proceeded to stampede the party; pell mell, dancers, music and spectators hustled for the doors and windows, any way to get out. Hudson, after they were all out, proceeded with his bar of iron to smash the furniture in the room, knock all the plas-

tering off the walls and put out the lights, and broke up the party completely. I never learned the outcome of the matter. I presume, though, that John Demas, being the better man, came out first best.

What finally became of the Hudson family I never knew. I have, however, one pleasant remembrance of them. Adjoining their homestead was a fine cherry orchard, and I have often visited it during the season. Visitors for cherries were always welcome, whether they brought the price or not, showing that they were not so bad as they were painted. A



*Friend Palmer*

Mr. Fisher succeeded them. I think he bought the Hudson property. He opened a road-house there, and "Fisher's" was known as a house of entertainment for years and years. Who have not danced at "Fisher's," dined and otherwise enjoyed themselves under the hospitable roof?

Fisher in the early thirties was a grocery merchant on lower Woodward Avenue. He married a daughter of Coon Ten Eyck, of Dearborn, then sheriff of Wayne County. Directly after his marriage he disposed of his grocery business in the city and moved to Grosse Pointe. Mrs. Fisher carried on the business quite successfully at the Pointe for many years after her husband's death.

I knew George Moran very well and who did not know George Moran? His place on the bank of Lake St. Clair, a mile or so above Fisher's, was a welcome spot to all journeying in that direction, besides those that made it their special business to call on George. He was full of reminiscences of the early days, and took special delight in relating them. He married a daughter of the adopted son of Commodore Grant, who commanded the British government vessels on the lakes before the surrender of the country to the United States in 1796 under the Jay treaty, and he once owned the farm where George lived. The commodore died there about 1813. The homestead is there yet, or was a few years ago. It stood directly opposite Moran's place, a short distance back from the road and had a large pine or evergreen tree in front of it. The late Judge Witherell has this to say of the adopted son:

The first distinct recollection that he (Grant) has of his childhood is that he was a captive boy about three years old among a wandering band of Chippewa warriors. Whence he came, his name or lineage he never knew. The Indians had brought him to Detroit and while roaming about the street, the little captive attracted the attention of the lady of the late Commodore Grant. He was a kind-hearted old sailor, and his wife was one of the excellent of the earth. As they were riding out one day, she discovered the little blue-eyed prisoner among the savages, and his condition aroused all the sympathies of a mother's heart. She pointed him out to her husband, and asked him to buy the boy. The old tar was ever ready when a good deed was to be done. So, dismounting from his carriage, he went among the Indians, and finding the owner, he gave him \$100 for the little Che-mo-ka-mun, and carried him home, giving him his own name, John Grant. The little captive was a great favorite of the commodore, who raised him to manhood, and he well repaid the kindness shown him by his unremitting care and attention to the interests of his benefactor. Captain Grant, as he grew up to manhood, understood that he was a native of the United States, and never for a moment wavered in his allegiance, though as the adopted son of a British officer, it might have been supposed that he would have acted differently.

The captain was alive in 1854.

Reynard Creek (Fox Run, a short distance above Connor's Creek, and where the Grosse Pointe Road crosses), about five miles from the city, was the turning point in the supremacy of some of the Indian tribes. Great numbers were slain in the battle, and it is believed the vast number of human bones found in the fields of George Moran, of Grosse Pointe, are the remains of some who fell in the fight. They are evidently of great age and some have the mark of the spike of the war club in their skulls. Mr. Moran had quite a collection of these relics, also rusty knives and tomahawks, as well as quite a number of small tomahawks measuring about four inches, wrought out of native copper. They give quite conclusive evidence that the Aborigines had a knowledge of the copper deposits in the Lake Superior regions, and the skill to mine the mineral and to fashion it into various articles of use.

Commander Alexander Grant married, in 1774, Thérèse, daughter of Chas. Barthe and Marie Thérèse Campau. He was of the clan of Grants, of Glenmoriston, Scotland. He entered the navy at an early age, but resigned in 1757 to join a Highland regiment raised for the army of General Amherst in America. In 1759 he reached Lake Champlain.

General Amherst, desiring able officers for his fleet on the lake, commissioned Lieutenant Grant to the command of a sloop of sixteen guns. After the conquest of Canada, Grant was ordered to Lakes Erie and Ontario. Detroit was then an English garrison, and it was here that he met his fate in Thérèse Barthe. He built his castle, as it was called at Grosse Pointe (its site is at present occupied by T. P. Hall's summer residence, "Tonnancour.") It was a place noted for the courtesy of its host, and his open, generous hospitality. Tecumseh and his warriors were frequent guests at the Grant castle. In 1805 the commodore belonged to the executive council of Upper Canada. In a letter to his brother "Alpine," dated from York (Toronto), July 5, 1811, he says:

My duty where my naval command requires me is such a distance from here that I cannot travel in the winter when the legislature meets, but I come down at my ease in the summer and take some sittings in the council. A gentleman who has served his country upwards of fifty-five years requires some indulgence and my superiors allow it to me.

He was a man of commanding presence, a great favorite and a good officer. He had ten daughters who are represented by the English-Canadian families of Wrights, Robinsons, Dickinsons, Woods, Duffs, Gilkersons, Millers, Jacobs and Richardsons. Mr. Jasper Gilkerson, of Brantford, has been in charge of the Indians in Canada for many years. So faithful has he been to his charge that any promise made to the Indians by him has always been kept by the government. A worthy representative of his grandfather, Commodore Grant, who, when administrator, with the power of giving free grants of land, never granted any to his family or their connections.

Mr. Provencal, a French gentleman, owned a farm a short distance above George Moran's. He was one of the old school, and of commanding presence. Presume many will remember him.

I have omitted thus far the "Church farm," so-called, this side of the Cook farm. I think Beller's garden is a portion of it. I do not call to mind the name of the original owner (I think the Chenes claimed some ownership), but I will remember the small Catholic church that stood on the bank of the river above Beller's and just this side of the late Levi Dolson's tannery. It was called St. Phillippe's. "When the rays of morning creep down the gray spire of St. Phillippe's and cast its shadow o'er the way, just at the foot of Grand Marias, the wooden cock that at its peak stood opening wide his gilded beak." Also the St. Phillippe's college for boys, adjoining the church. This school was quite celebrated in its day, and many scions of our first families used to attend it. There

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Residence of George Sunderland, Grosse Point Tp., Wayne Co., Michigan.

were some fine French pear trees on this farm, and they were included in the Beller property. They remained of vigorous, sturdy growth until quite recently, but their constant use as hitching posts gradually killed them and they went the way nearly all their kind have gone in the past few years.

Next this side of the residence of Abraham Cook (Cook farm), between it and St. Phillippe's, lived one of the Chapoton families. There were sons and daughters, but their personalities have faded from my memory. The only thing in relation to them that I remember is that they kept tavern, as did Peter Van Avery.

Somewhere between Connor's Creek and Hudson's (Fisher's) lived the McQueens. Along in the early thirties, our hired man and myself used every fall to make excursions in a two-horse wagon to Grosse Pointe, and Milk River points, exchanging Jackson ware, that my uncle turned out at his pottery, where is now West park, for apples, cider, potatoes, and other farm products. These trips usually occupied two or three days' time. We were welcome guests, wherever night overtook us. One night, I remember, caught us at McQueen's. It is the only all night stopping place that I do recall, and the reason that it remains in memory, arises, I presume, from the fact that during the night there was quite a fall of snow, the first of the season, and in the morning the ground was covered to the depth of nearly two inches. That night we had bargained for a quantity of apples, which we were to gather ourselves. The orchard was located in front of the house, between it, the road, and the river, and it is the gathering of those apples I

never can forget, nor the McQueen's.

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SOURCE: Early Days in Detroit. Detroit: Hunt and June, 1906.

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Friend Palmer was born in New York in 1820 and came to Detroit at an early age. His father was a soldier in Detroit and an 1812 veteran. Palmer derived his local history knowledge from the eyewitnesses that gathered around the Palmer hearth. He graduated from the University of Michigan when it was located in Detroit at Larned and Bates streets and went into the bookbinding business. During the Civil War he was Assistant and finally Quartermaster General of the State of Michigan, a post he held until 1871. Palmer then went into the real estate business before finally retiring to live with his cousin, Senator Thomas W. Palmer. Friend Palmer kept a log, or diary, for many years of the comings and goings in the Palmer household. These logs make up the story of Detroit society at the turn of the century and served as the basis for his book Early Days in Detroit.