



## **“Reminiscences of an Old Timer”**

**By J. Melville Brown**

I have been asked to tell you some incidents of my early days in this Village, because there is I think, no one else left who could remember the Wilmette of so long ago. It is with reluctance that this excursion into the past is undertaken, for trying to recall sights and sounds after a quarter of a century is like exploring in a fog.

One of my earliest recollections is of following a wagon, filled with household goods, from our home in Evanston, through a beautiful forest to Wilmette. It was in 1867, so I must have been four years old. There were five of us children at the time, and there not being room in the wagon for all, some of us walked behind, I being the youngest of the brood to walk. There were glimpses of the lake along the way to add to the quiet, primitive beauty.

For some time we did not meet any people, did not see any habitations on the way; but finally the first house sighted was a small one made of logs...now long since rebuilt and enlarged to the present Bockius residence at the southeast corner of Central Avenue and Eleventh St. It was then owned by a man named Rudolph, who farmed a small clearing in the east.

It was reported that there had been a wigwam settlement there many years before. That, however is not authentic, but some rather unusual Indian relics dug up a few years ago on my own place, a half block north on Eleventh St., make it very likely that Indians had lived in this location.

For some years after the Rudolphs left, the house remained vacant and the superstitious thought it haunted. After nightfall we youngsters hurried by with bated breath. My family spent our first night here – and the few weeks following, in the still unfinished Doe house, across the street to the north from the Rudolphs...the place you all know today as the northeast corner of central and Eleventh.

Land was cheap and could be had almost for the asking, and my father immediately started building a little home for us on the very ground where the Masonic Temple stands! That old home was moved away to make room for the Temple when this building was erected. My father's land ran from the alley to Tenth St., and back to a depth of 300 feet. For many years no lot was less than 200 feet wide.

The little settlement we had come to had fewer than a dozen homes; and was bounded, I would say, by Lake Avenue, Tenth St., Greenleaf Avenue and the railroad tracks.

There was a larger settlement more than a mile to the west called Gross Point, but in that day it was quite apart from Wilmette, separated not only by a tract of virgin forest but also by different interests and traditions. The people who lived there were early pioneers who had come largely from a place in Germany called Trier, and they or their parents spoke a foreign tongue.



I can't remember just when the district – then called “Hillville” – in the southeast section, was started; but the Lathams and Hills and a few others lived there while I was still a young lad.

Wilmette's first settler, and the most prominent when we arrived, was Mr. John Westerfield, whose farm was some distance away, running along the lake front both north and south of Lake Avenue. It was a tract of land which had long ago been acquired from the Indians by Antione Quilmette, for whom the Village was named; and Mr. Westerfield had purchased it from the Ouilmettes long before we came. He and his wife (they were affectionately called Uncle John and Aunt Rebecca by many of the Villagers) had an important role in the early development of the Village. Among the first settlers to follow them were some of their relatives, the Dinges, Gedneys, Walters and Shantzes.

The names and faces which come back to me of the people who were here when we first came or who followed in the next decade, in addition to those I have mentioned, are the McDaniels (who lived where the Walgreen Drugstore now stands), the Gages, the Springers, the Gliddens, the Boggs...and a little later, the Joys, the Wheelocks, the Gates, the Drury's, the Regers, the Dunshees, Thomas and Hattie Brooks, and many others.

Some left long ago, and are now forgotten; some stayed a lifetime and are well remembered by most of us as our founding fathers. Some who have left us, live on here today in their children and their grand-children and their great-grand-children.

The early large land owners were the Westerfields, Alexander McDaniel, the Gage family, the Dushams, Mahoneys and Henry Dinee of New York. Mr. Henry Dinee was reputed a Millionaire, and excited both envy and respect on his annual visits to the Village. He once had a very neat fence built around the triangle bounded by Central Ave., Wilmette Ave., and Eleventh St., and he promised to some time donate it to the village for a park, but his heart failed him and he sold it later for real money.

The next owner of a large part of that triangle was Mr. Caleb Gates, father of Henry Gates. He built for his family the large house facing Eleventh St. which a few years ago was changed into a two-family residence; and in the early 1900's his widow gave the land at the point of the triangle to the Congregational church for a site for the new building, which was erected in 1905.

Speaking of land owners, the Mahoney story might be of interest if you do not know it already. Long ago Dan and Bridget came here as servants with one of the very early families. They married, and invested the wages they had thriftily saved in a farm just north of Wilmette. It was before the Village of Kenilworth was born; but as the years rolled by, fine Kenilworth and Wilmette homes edged up to the boundaries of the farm – which did not belong to either Village, but to the county where the farm taxes were very light. The Mahoneys loved their land, were good farmers, and they prospered. As a boy I sometimes called at the farm when scouting through the woods in that direction, and Bridget – always glad to see me – would offer a glass of milk and a doughnut.

They had no desire to sell when old age beset them, and when their many acres could have brought them a fortune if divided into village lots; but finally, after Dan and Bridget had



gone to their rest, the elderly, unmarried daughters sold all but a small lot where the old house stood. It brought them something like a half million dollars but they did not know how to spend even a few dollars on themselves, and there was no younger generation; so a lovely little park was bequeathed to Kenilworth and all the money to the Catholic Church.

When we first came here in 1857, I am sure there was no school, no church, no store, no train which stopped at Wilmette! A little later one train a day each way did stop here; but even then I remember that when my brother Gilbert and I wanted very much to see the big city fourteen miles away, and to buy there a birthday gift for our mother, we walked all the way to Chicago because the train fare would have so depleted the little fund we had saved for the gift.

The first store in Wilmette – and the only one for some time – was owned by Mr. Henry Kinney, and was located on what is now Green Bay Road, half way between Central and Wilmette Avenues. Mr. Kinney sold us our groceries, was station agent, postmaster, express agent, Village Treasurer---and general confidant and friend of the needy!

The old hard coal stove in the rear of the store was a meeting place, and the starting point of many a story or bit of gossip . . .while neighbors waited for Mr. Kinney's cry, - "All up! . . .All out!" Meanwhile the cracker barrel had suffered.

If there was no church at first, our religious training was not entirely neglected . . .for we were sent, barefooted in summer, through a jungle-like Indian trail to a Sunday School held in a small meeting house about where the Evanston Hospital now stands. And very soon thereafter the Wilmette Union Church was formed and began holding services in the little schoolhouse; for Wilmette had then acquired a school – the first public building to be erected. It was a three room frame building on the site of our present Central School. There was a bell in the little cupola or turret which served for weekdays and Sundays, and sometimes provided adventurous boys with opportunities for midnight mischief. The first teacher was Miss May Sheldon, and some of the lads who sat on those hard oak benches became business and professional men of more than local fame.

Before I was twelve Father, through an accident, lost the sight of both eyes; and after that it was a struggle for Mother to care for the family. The older boys sought work on farms in Wisconsin, leaving me to be the man of the house. I was glad of any work, and accepted the offer of caring for the school building . . . the pay to be \$9.00 a month. It involved much more than sweeping it out and dusting each afternoon after school – while the other boys enjoyed a nearby ball game. There was wood to saw for the three huge stoves; the fires to care for, oil lamps to fill and clean if they had been used the night before for some Union Church or other meeting; and there were many other things to do. When I realized the magnitude of the job, I thought I really should get \$10.00 a month, and screwed up my courage to ask the trustee (one of our late prominent citizens) for a raise, but was flatly refused and told that \$9.00 a month was a lot of money for a boy of my age to be earning!

One vivid memory is of watching in awe and wonder, for many hours, a great expanse of lurid sky to the south of us. It was in October of 1871. Our elders were apprehensive for they knew a terrible fire must be raging somewhere not very far away. There was no radio to tell us



about it; even the telephone had not been invented then . . .we had no telegraph station in Wilmette, and only that one train a day!

Today in Wilmette, we would get news more quickly and in more detail about some disaster in the most distant part of the globe, than we were able to get then about the great Chicago Fire only fourteen miles away!

I will refer to some general Village conditions in the 1860's and 1870's when we were still a very primitive settlement. In the 1880's there was quite a population growth...and from 1890 on, rapid change and improvement – as well as growth – took place. We changed from a romantic, unimproved but beautiful little hamlet in the woods to an up-to-date thriving, suburban town.

While still a hamlet in the woods, our few roads were dirt . . .or corduroy – lined by deep ditches to carry off the surplus rains. The old plank sidewalks were continually getting out of repair. The street lamps, few and far between, were the oil burning kind. A request for a lamp in some dark benighted section caused heated discussions at Village meetings.

Each household had its supply of lanterns always carried on dark nights, and a procession heading to some public gathering reminded one of a lot of gigantic fireflies. There was a lot of genuine sociability displayed when we gathered about a warm stove to light our lanterns for the homeward journey. And, believe it or not, the winters were colder and the snows deeper then, than now.

In the woods to the north, before Kenilworth was laid out and drained, water often stood high like a marsh – and in winter turned to ice. Then the night skating of the young people in and out among the silhouetted trees, holding aloft their flaming flares, was a vision to remember.

There being no drainage system except the ditches, pools and ponds were frequent and many . . .breeding hordes of mosquitoes and many frogs. They croaked hoarsely the night through; - which reminds me of a rare holiday with Harry Westerfield and a friend of his. We speared a hundred or more of these noisy things, roasting their legs and eating them with coffee and lunch. It was really an epicurean feast.

We all had a well for drinking water, and a cistern for soft water; and it was often necessary to prime the pump in summer, and to thaw it out with hot water in winter.

Indians were not infrequent visitors in the early days, and when they were about we boys kept rather closely at home because of fearful but entirely fanciful tales told of them. I recall hiding in a small space behind the kitchen stove in abject fear of them!

There may be families forgotten who should have been mentioned, and perhaps not complete accuracy in what I have told . . .to all of which I lay charge to a faltering memory and nagging years; and, as this is to be my swan song, I beg forgiveness from you all.

*J. Melville Brown*  
*May 17, 1945*