

## **“Do You Remember—“ and “Homecoming” Interviews**

Last the readers of the home-coming interview column form a misconceived idea that there was nothing happening during the early days except municipal disputes and fights for a greater Lansing the following interview is inserted among the former mayor's talks to displace any such belief. It is a story of the society of early Lansing, which didn't have its well organized social clubs and charitable institutions, nor had suffrage crept into the female mine in those days.

Lansing society as Mrs. Sarah T. Merrifield remembers it contained none of these functions. But their lives were none the less full, nevertheless. Mrs. Merrifield came here when she was 14 years of age in the early forties. The women didn't look to Paris for their risqué gowns then. The hoop skirt was in vogue and the tight laced waist with millions of buttons running up and down the front. Whenever a new building went up there was always a dance on the bare floor as a salute to the opening. And the Lochinvars and Beau Brummels came from miles around, some in their carriages behind blooded steeds while others came on foot, and while the famous old tribe of Okemos Indians watched the proceedings with grim silence from their camp in the wooded forest, the merrymakers laughed and chatted and danced till the “wee small hours of the morn.”

Then there were the boat rides on the river. According to Mrs. Merrifield that formed the main source of the daily pleasure, riding up and down the river during the day, stopping up the river long enough to gather a goodly supply of wintergreen berries and flowers, and at night joining in chorus with their young beaux with nothing but the woods to echo back their delight. Mrs. Merrifield smiled a sweetly reminiscent smile tinged with a bit of sadness when she recounted the olden days yesterday.

“I hardly know where to begin,” said Mrs. Merrifield, looking retrospectively back into the past. “Things have changed so since then. We didn't have the parks and the bathing beaches and the golf and country clubs and all those modern forms of amusement. Our parks were the woods and our neighbors were the Indians. There were not more than 100 white people living here when I came to Lansing in October of 1847. I was 14 years old then. My father was a member of the last legislature in Detroit and was among those who voted to remove the capital to the interior part of the state. He came out

here with the commissioners appointed by the government to look over the land for a new capital site. We then moved here the next year in 1847. My father started the first dry goods store in Lansing. It was located away up by the mineral well bridge on Cedar st. At that time it was entirely surrounded by woods except for the street which had been cut through. The main part of town, in fact Lansing itself, what there was of it, was located in that district.

“Father then started the first hotel. It was called the Old National hotel and was situated straight across from the wooden bridge on the river bank. James Bascom was my father’s competitor in the dry goods business. His store was located across from Main st. At that time Lansing consisted of a hardware, restaurant, boarding house, tailor shop, shoe shop, about 100 inhabitants and the Okemos tribe of Indians.

“We knew the whole Okemos family and they gained our friendship in a peculiar way. The Okemos family loved to visit their brother tribes. Most of their relatives and friends lived on the Canadian side just across from Detroit. Before my father moved to Lansing we lived at Farmington, a small community near Detroit. The tribe or rather the Okemos family came through that district one day and being tired and hungry Old Okemos came up to our house interceding for something to eat and drink for his band. There were quite a number of them but we managed to fill them and they went away avowing their everlasting allegiance to our family. We didn’t know at the time that the tribe made their permanent camping place in the vicinity of Lansing and when we moved here we were surprised to find out old Indian friends. There was Old Okemos, Jim Okemos and John Okemos comprising the male constituents of the family. We didn’t know the squaws’ names. I guess they didn’t have any names. I know the squaws didn’t know anything about woman’s rights or militant suffrage for they did all the work while the males danced around and held pow-wows over long peace pipes.

“The Indians were not of the wild west variety. They were very peaceable and friendly to the whites and once you gained their friendship you had no need to fear treachery on their part. Old Okemos got in the habit of coming to our back door every morning for his breakfast and what a stomach that old brave had. He didn’t seem to care for any fancy pastry or anything like that. My mother used to set him down in the kitchen and I baked cakes for him. Forty and 50 wheat cakes was nothing as a breakfast for the

old chief. At first I placed a plate of butter at his side but he shunned it. He silently pushed it away when I wasn't looking, apparently not to offend me. He just ate the cakes devoid of any garnishment. When he got through he would drink about two quarts of water saying 'thank' and slink off into the forest again.

"There was quite an exciting occurrence one time I remember in connection with John Okemos. John was a very proud young brave and used to dress himself all up in the most glaring and conspicuous colors. He was a handsome Indian, too, and he loved to court the Indian maidens. Finally he married a pretty little Indian squaw who was generally recognized as the beauty of the tribe. Then his marital troubles began. John loved the maiden with all his heart and when an Indian loves he brooks no interference. I have to laugh when I think of it. If that Indian maiden lived now and John saw her doing the 'Turkey trot!' with some other brave, John would have his scalp before night, I am sure. He was terribly jealous of her and justly so. In those days the whites knew all the inside gossip among the Indian camps and that is how I happen to remember this incident.

John's squaw was quite a flirt, mostly because she loved to tease her jealous husband. She used to be seen walking with other young braves and in general forgetting her oath of fealty to the brave of her choice. John was advised of her unfaithfulness but remained silent. The other Indians expected him to rise up in wrath and cry for blood. But John loved this maiden, therefore, he showed none of these signs of violence. Instead, he became moody and morose. He used often to be seen walking alone at night along the lonely paths, his head down and seemingly wrapped up in deep thoughts to the exclusion of all else. Finally the storm that was raging inside of him broke. He could stand the strain no longer. So one day he dismissed his wife openly before the whole tribe.

"He assembled the braves together in front of my father's hotel. They all squatted around in grim silence waiting for developments. Then John marched slowly up to the center of the group, his wife following after with her head drooping. He spoke to his tribe in the Indian tongue, led forth a pony from the background and then placing his wife astride the animal shouted with fiendish fervor in English, "Go! Go! Bad squaw! Go far 'way! Never come back!" And with a cut of the whip across the pony's flank the animal leaped through the woods out of sight.

“John migrated deeper into the forest for several weeks. Old Okemos was asked concerning him. The old chief shook his head dubiously, ‘He’ll come back, he love, love no good, he’ll get over, squaw no good, ,must lickum squaw, he’ll come back,’ grunted Old Okemos.

“Old Okemos proved a truthful prophet. John did come back. Ever since that they called him ‘Yankee’ John. I don’t quite see how the name applies. I expect most Yankees in the modern age would have sued for a divorce had they been in John’s moccasins. It was about three weeks when John returned to the fold. He was thin and gaunt and looked as though he had endured untold hardships of fatigue and hunger. But he was no longer the John of the dark period. He went about with as light a spirit as ever and seemed never to have had a disappointment in love. He would brook no mentioning of his wife’s name, however, for once when a brother Indian asked him something about her John gave him such a dark scowl that it was thought better to keep the matter silent thereafter.

“Three months passed in the history of the tribe. There came a day when the Indians gave their annual elaborate celebration of the death of their famous leader, Pontiac. From morning until night the woods and streets were full of the noise of their activities. Along in the afternoon they all gathered for a big feast in the cleared space near my father’s hotel. Just as the braves were jumping up and filing into a circle for their war dance a shrill cry of a woman pierced the sky and all heads were turned to the north. Far up the street which is now called Washington ave. we saw a figure tearing toward us on a pony. With a clatter of hoofs and a great cloud of dust the horse raced into the Indian pow-wow and John’s Indian bride sprang lightly off her mount. Spying her husband who stolidly stood apart from his tribe she rushed to him and threw her arms around his neck. ‘Kish me John! Kish me! I love!’ she cried appealingly. But John stood like a marble statue looking far over her head into the blue of the sky.

“ ‘Me know you not, squaw, go! Go! Go to h---!’ And with lightning-like swiftness he threw the maiden on the pony and again cut the animal across the flanks. The pony dashed away and John’s bride never came back.

“The next year after we came here the town began to settle rapidly. This had been made the capital seat and a general influx of people ensued. On this side of the river a bowling alley, a billiard room and a bakery was started. There are a few of the old

residents who will remember my father's name, John Thomas. I know Dan Mevis well for he lived here then. My father owned all the land about Washington ave. having gone to New York and purchased it from spectators.

“We used to hold the dances in the hotel on Cedar st. No there were no ‘turkey trots,’ ‘Texas tummies,’ ‘Boston spreads’ and all those new-fangled dips and slides. We danced the old round dances, the shottish and the quadrilles. It would make a great picture to have a maiden of those days bedecked with wide hoop-skirts attempting the gyrations of the Frisco ‘bear’ dance—I guess that’s what they call it. Then it was ‘all balance—lady in the center—all hands ‘round.’ No, we didn’t trot turkeys, we ate them.

“I remember one dance which lasted far into the next day. It was when the old Benton house was opened in 1848. The boys and girls and married people came from miles around to attend and it was the largest festivity held in the early days.

“I remember the first marriage ceremony that was ever performed in this city. It was when William Hinman and Sarah Bush were married. The old residents will remember her father, C. P. Bush. I stood up with the bride. We had a big dinner afterwards and danced long into the night.

“In those days it was solid dense woods from River st. to Washington ave. There was a path through the woods from River st. running diagonally and coming out where the New Grand hotel now stands. The forests were cleared very rapidly after the capital was moved from Detroit here.

“Colonel Burr, an old settler, bought a lot on Kalamazoo st. just off Washington ave. and built the first log residence house in the woods. His daughter lives on the same site now, I believe—Mrs. Phelps. The young folks of today would think it a dull life I suppose to have lived in those days. But we had lively enough times. The clerks in the capitol organized a singing club and they had some fine voices, too. We used to take the boat trips up the river in the day time. Generally the girls went alone in the day and picked flowers and wintergreen berries. The ground used to be just covered with large luscious wintergreen berries. And on the way back we would sew or crochet. But in the evenings the boys went with us and we all sang the old songs.

“Playing cards in the evening was quite a popular pastime also. There were four girls in our family and generally there were some boys up to the house in the evening. I

remember when I first saw Mr. Merrifield. He was very bashful and hadn't been used to mingling with girls. It was at a dance when he stood around on the edge of the hall looking at the dancers but not venturing forth himself. My father saw him standing to one side aloof from the rest of the merry-makers and asked him if he wasn't going to dance. He said he didn't know anybody. Father told him he had three daughters to introduce to him but Mr. Merrifield declined. About a month later he was induced to dine with us and from that time on his bashfulness faded away.

“When we first came to Lansing, D. V. Bell was auditor general and his son was deputy. Mr. Bell married one of my sisters, who now lives in Washington, D. C. She is coming to the home-coming, as is also my other sister.”

*State Journal 8/9/1913*