

THE YESTERDAYS

So the ax was exchanged for shovels, the ground about the trees was rounded up, the roadway graded on either side and today we still have the Bostwick, often termed by the old residents the Nelson, elms gracing the city highway.

The Blendon Hills

About eighteen miles below the Rapids, on the south side of the river, are the Blendon Hills, in the early days noted for their forests of oaks and pine.

The lumbermen went through the pines on some tracts, selecting only the best of the trees and from these only the clear stock, making a jungle with the cuttings on the ground and leaving a maze of tote roads and blind trails. As if by magic these cut-over lands were quickly covered with a growth of high-bush blackberry brush, loaded every season with delicious fruit.

Many townspeople went berrying, paddling by canoe or going down the river in the steamboats. Sometimes parties formed with an outfit for camping out, and over the campfire put up tubs and jars of blackberry jam; others stayed over night and returned home to preserve the fruit.

One day eight or ten of us twelve-year-old boys paddled away from the yellow warehouse with a two or three-day outfit—one tent, blankets and baskets of rations, a butcher knife or two to kill bears or maybe Indians—the bravest bunch of boys that ever said goodbye to the mothers who had helped carry the duffle to the dock.

It was afternoon when the fleet landed at Blendon and to carry everything up the river bank, set up the tent and get the first meal was a great event. Some of the boys ate up half of their two days' rations that first meal. They were busy cutting hemlock for beds and gathering wood for a campfire until nearly dark, when an Indian we knew about town landed in his canoe and while he cooked a fish over our fire for his supper, told the crowd a bear story—a real thriller. He assured us that bears lived on blackberries and that all the pine slashings were full of them. While he talked he sandwiched in a loaf of our bread with his fish. When he left, Eddie Morrison and Henry

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Leffingwell fixed up the fire. We got inside, tied down the flaps and tested our knives.

Billie Westerhouse was used to sleeping between feather ticks and the hemlock boughs didn't appeal to him, but he finally got settled under the blankets just as all the owls between Haire's Landing and Lamont began to hoot and call. One little kid began to cry for his mother, but the finishing touch to the crowd was the falling of a rotten basswood tree a few rods from the tent. Just why it came down on that night of all others is not to be explained, but sun-up found us on the way home with a fine load of stories of the bears and Indians who had tried to sever our earthly connections, but never a blackberry for the mothers.

The Fitch family, living at the corner of Stocking and Bridge-sts., were berrying in Blendon Hills, when Cordelia—as I recall, about a sixteen-year-old girl—became lost in the slashings. The alarm went out and for three days all the campers were searching. The steamboat reported at the Rapids and every available skiff came loaded with helpers, among them several Indians.

I hunted with one of the Indian boys and we got caught several miles from camp as night came on. He crawled under a small cedar and fastened all the boughs together and we slept as comfortably as in a tent. The third day Cordelia was seen by a steamboat crew on the river bank fourteen miles below Blendon, though "wild like deer," as one Indian explained.

She disappeared again in the forest and it was only after a race that she was captured, her clothing torn to rags on the brambles and briers. She lived to become the bride of Edward L. Briggs and to furnish our Kent Scientific Museum with a fine collection of shells and rare treasures from many lands.

The Blendon Pines and Oaks

In the early days of the settlement of the Grand river country, eastern capitalists were told of the wealth of Michigan forests, to be obtained for a song.

The pine was what the speculator sought and many personally or through agents bought up vast tracts.

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The Yesterday of Grand Rapids

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Dick thought you might not have seen this before
Carl

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John Ball had little money of his own but was the trusted agent for many. He was a born woodsman and the happiest days of his long and useful life were spent in companionship of the trees.

In one of his early adventures, he sought a forest of pine reported to be south of the Grand river, between the Rapids and Lake Michigan, which only Indians and trappers had invaded; a region of rivers, lakes, swamps and level plateaus where the tree tops were so dense that the sun rarely penetrated. The surveys were largely guesswork. In 1836 Mr. Ball sought this tract but found a wonderful forest of oak and in a three days' tramp only an occasional lonesome pine. This oak covered the hills known later as Blendon, eighteen miles down Grand river. Then suddenly the pines were before him.

Mr. Ball at once entered at the land office, probably the one at Ionia, a claim to forty-one eighty-acre lots, paying the entry fee and other requirements. He reached, however, the limits of his capital and was finally compelled to forfeit his payments and other parties secured the lands.

Several years later Robert Medler, ship builder, needed oak for the yard at Mill Point, near the Haven. Men went into this oak forest and helped themselves. Standing trees had so little value that no one objected. In fact, there was only the government to object and its agents were far away. The logs on the high banks of the river when rolled into the water sank like so much iron. To float them a pine was pinned to either side and they were floated to the shipyards. There the builders claimed them to be live oak and Capt. Flint, U. S. naval contractor, accepted them as such in the construction of the U. S. bark Morgan.

I do not know the origin of the name Blendon but the Blendon Lumber Co. was formed and a rush made to secure the oaks. Logging camps, sawmills, landing docks and shipyards sprang up and the entire country boomed. Pioneer farmers found a ready market for everything they raised.

Two-masted lumber schooners towed up the river by tugs received the lumber direct from the mill, towed back to the

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lake and sailed away to the sea. Often rafts of long masts were towed which eventually fitted ocean ships.

The men who came out of the east to lumber this new country were equal to the trees they made war upon.

When the Civil war called, Alvin C. Litchfield, manager of the Blendon company, captained one of the companies and under Custer won the star of a general. Out of this country went the Brennans, Weatherwaxes, Lowings, Boyntons and so many others that there were none left on the farms or in the mills. The quietude of Sunday settled over the land.

After war days, the echoes of the ax and saw, the chanty of the river man and the farmer were heard again until the last oak and pine disappeared. In their stead came the cabin, the apple tree, and the honey bee. And finally came the man in the speed wagon, all unconscious of the past were it not for the stump fences which say so little but mean so much to the few who understand.

Mr. Foster, one of the six-foot lumbermen who served with the Old Third infantry, is living in the city today. He can take you to a pine stump six feet across the top, the living tree of which was more than one hundred feet to the first limb.

The Walnut Forest

There were three classes of men who came from the east to Michigan in the early days. The settler who came to make a home—he was the man who came to stay, the foundation of the state; the trader who sought a fortune in the wild life of the forest, the furs of the beaver and his kin; the speculator who recognized the value of the great wilderness of pine forest.

It seemed as if all the wealth in eastern money centers was brought here to be invested in the pine.

River bottom lands were thickly grown with walnut, butternut and great elms; ridges were covered with oak and cherry, and the plateaus with maple and all sorts of valuable trees, but the speculator saw little value in them as compared with the pine. The hemlock was a poor relation and treated with small courtesy.

As late as the fifties, the present site of the Wyoming car