

# THE OUILMETTE HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Wilmette Historical Society

## VOICES FROM WILMETTE'S EARLY DAYS

The founding generation of Wilmette knew a very different village than we know. Their reminiscences, preserved in the files of the Historical Museum, vividly convey just how strange and wild and often wonderful this place could seem to pioneers coming for the first time to a tiny settlement in the woods. Here are a few brief excerpts from these remarkable documents.

### **Benjamin Franklin Hill (1830-1905)**

[Hill came to Wilmette as a child in 1837.]

In the winter of 1837 I began my acquaintance with Alexander McDaniel. He took up a claim where the village of Winnetka now stands, built a log house and kept "bach" there. He worked hard clearing his land, chopped cord wood and got our square timbers, all of which he rafted down the lake to Chicago. Mr. McDaniel was an energetic young man of excellent habits.. I also recall distinctly Timothy Sunderland and Charles Beaubien, new settlers who came in during the winter of '37. They lived in the vicinity of the present residence of Henry Gage [Sheridan & Chestnut].... Old Ouilmette, who had formerly lived here, came back with a part of his family and lived on the Ouilmette Reservation. There was a man by the name of Clark, known as "Indian Clark," because of his dark complexion, who lived over West of the North branch. He kept about a hundred ponies that used to run over the prairie in summer and in the timber in winter and get their living the best they could. He was a great hunter and I recall seeing him on his hunting trips with two ponies – one to ride and the other to pack his game. Sometimes he returned with as many as three deer – two slung across the game pony and the other behind himself on the riding pony. For several years my father [Arunah Hill] kept a cooper shop at Gross Point, supplying Gage's mill and the pork and beef packers of Chicago with barrels. He employed a good many men, and among them were characters that lent a charm to these early days.



*continued on page 5*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### **Stroller Walk "Linden Square"**

Sunday, September 9

3:00 - 4:30 p.m.

*See page 3*

### **Walking Tour "St. Joseph Cemetery"**

Saturday, September 15

10:00 OR 11:00 a.m.

*See page 3*

### **Community Event "Amazing Race: Wilmette"**

Sunday, September 30

1:00 - 3:00 p.m.

*See page 3*

### **Walking Tour "No Man's Land"**

Sunday, October 7

1:00 p.m.

*See page 3*

### **Community Event "Preservation Awards" and new book, "Wilmette"**

Sunday, November 4

2:00 p.m.

*See back page*

For more news, visit our website:

[www.wilmettehistory.org](http://www.wilmettehistory.org)

*continued from page 1*

**J. Melville Brown (1863-1948)**

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 that time, and there not being room in the wagon for all, some of us walked behind. 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 northeast corner of Central Avenue and 11th Street. It was then owned by a man named Rudolph, who farmed a small clearing to the east.

**Mary Gage (1848-1939)**

When we moved in the Fall [of 1875] ours was the only carriage conveyance there. Dr. Stolp's was the second one. No hotel, and in sixty years since, still none of account. Our Fall was pleasant, so we went out with baskets on our arms and gathered hazel- and butternuts. In the Spring there were ferns, from Bracken to dainty Maidenheads, in great profusion; also trillium, jacks and carpets of blue and yellow violets. In summer we donned veiled hats and covered our arms with stocking legs and picked luscious red raspberries. Our pier [known as Gage's Pier] attracted Gross Point fishermen who used to pass with long strings of perch when schools of them came in. Those were my early days of Wilmette.

**Harriet Kirk Gates (1876-19?)**

[Harriet and her parents and siblings moved to Wilmette in 1877.] I well remember our street, Forest Avenue, as a dirt street, covered with grass except for the two wagon ruts. And the woods so thick to the east of our



house [1044 Forest] that we couldn't see Wilmette Avenue. I also remember the time when the Congregationalists held their church services in the wooden schoolhouse. I couldn't see why my mother went to the schoolhouse to church when there was a perfectly good Methodist Church with a steeple on it. My mother also remembers the first sidewalks which were three board sidewalks, the boards laid lengthwise and of course the walks were only on one side of the street. The big ditches are still a vivid memory to me. After a big snowstorm my father stepped off the wooden sidewalk in the dark and wallowed for a long time in that big ditch filled with snow. He was not a drinking man, either.

**Esther Dunshee Bower (1879-1962)**

When my father brought his family to Wilmette in September 1887, there were about seven hundred people in the village.... The school building consisted of a room facing Tenth Street and two rooms forming els. Each room had its own outside door. If your access was through the Tenth Street door you were a Fourth, Fifth or Sixth Grader, and your work was supervised by Miss May L. Sheldon, who lived with her brother Frank. To me she was a very ancient person, but I now know she could not have been over thirty.

**Henry B. Gates (1860-1946)**

When we first came to Wilmette [in 1887] there were no electric lights, water, gas or public improvements. Everyone depended upon their wells for water and many of us boiled and filtered the water. At night most of us who had occasion to go out in the evenings carried lanterns. When the first Country Club was formed [1897], we had a shack in the woods east of 10th Street and north of Elmwood. Saturday nights we took our luncheons and had family picnics. Those that played golf played across Sheridan Road and back. This was the beginning of the North Shore Golf Club, also Ouilmette or Shawnee Country Club [now Michigan Shores Club]. There was also a baseball grounds on Lake Avenue near Sheridan Road. I have never lived in any Village or City that I became so attached to as Wilmette.