



Reminiscences of Fred S. Northam

1611 Chicago Avenue, Evanston
February 22, 1976

Even at 71, I would consider myself a young old-timer in the History of Wilmette. It is a little strange to think that during my lifetime we have literally come from the Victorian Age through to the zip-coded atomic age.

The Old Settlers Association should have most of the particulars about the early settlement of the territory, and certainly I can add little that. When you are growing up, you care very little about your antecedents, and then, when you do care, it is too late. Everybody is long gone who could help.

From the time I was born in 1904 in what was then called the Llewellyn Park section of Wilmette (around the 4th and Linden Streets “L” Terminal area) until my Mother’s passing in 1933 – these are my years in Wilmette.

Many of my formative years here were spent in exploring. I loved the woods. The Gage family, who are cousins in two related families a generation or two away, owned a large amount of land on the Northeast side of town. Most of the property, even when I was small, was primeval, wooded forest land, and was almost untouched since the beginning of time. A joy to be in and explore. Land untrod except by small folk, echoing still the presence of the recent Indians. Bent trees to mark trails were still around, and some trails were dimly evident even then.

We all knew the Spring beauties: buttercups, red trillium (which we called ‘bloody butchers’), white trillium, blue, purple, and yellow violets, dog-toothed violets, hepatica, and many others. I even knew a secret place to find the fringed gentian (scarce, even then). Even snowdrops and ferns of many varieties were plentiful. Black walnut, butternut, and hickory nut trees were all around. Sassafras trees, too. (Grandmothers made spring teas of the root.) To clear the blood, they said. Ugh! Horrible.

Most of my early memories are centered around the 900 block on Linden Avenue. The Kirchbergs lived next door (the jeweler family). There were a lot of them. One of them, Elizabeth, pulled me out of the undertow current at the lake. By the hair yet. I am in her debt. I was only three or four, she was not much older. Next to the Kirchbergs was another house, then the Catholic priest’s house and east of that the Francis Xavier Church. (Gone now).

Father had a prize garden at this address, and a picture was to be taken of it. All of the Northam younger children were in the picture. Only I, under duress. Frankly, I was scared of the photographer. He had long, flowing white hair, a long mustache, a goatee, a splendid large black hat like Rembrandt used to paint, and a long black flowing cape, which he threw up over his head when looking through the camera. He also put some white powder in a pan arrangement and snapped a cap down on it hard to make a flash. TERRIFYING. His name actually was Thomas S. Gillette. He called himself T. Slater Gillette—a real character.



I lived then for a short time in Glencoe – remember Halley’s Comet. Also when the powder mill blew up at Racine, Wisconsin. Period.

We then moved back to Wilmette, as Father had rented a brand-new house for the staggering sum of \$35.00 a month. 1614 Elmwood Avenue. Our next door neighbors were the builder owners—John (Yon) and Emma Anderson). They were good people She looked like Mrs. Katzenjammer, with coiled black hair with a bun on top. John (Yon) looked like the big fair Walrus-mustached and capped Carpenter that he was. Father rented another lot east and laid out a tennis court. He also rented a large plot back of the house on the prairie, for a garden. There was a farm house back there, very old, and Grandma Bell still lived there with her son. She was very old, and talked with a guttural palsied voice. She taught my mother how to cook red cabbage the German way. GOOD!

Back of Grandma Bell’s farmhouse clear up to Kenilworth Station was prairie: Thorsen’s Field. About a dooryard west of our house and running along the fence next to John Anderson’s place was a boardwalk running along the western boundary of Thorsen’s field, from Elmwood Avenue to Kenilworth. West of this walk and fence was the golf course. It occupied all the land in back of the houses on the North side of Elmwood Avenue from about 1625 Elmwood up to Ridge Avenue, and extending North to West Kenilworth. North Shore Country Club, now on Glenview Road.

A few houses west of our house lived a family named Tarkington. I used to see an old uncle of the family study us while we played. We had animal funerals, etc.—the things that kids do. I have always had a thought in my mind: was this Booth Tarkington? The daughter (about my young sister, Althea’s, age) was named Marian. The groundskeeper’s family lived just in back of the Tarkington’s in the Club-house. The Long family had a son and daughter—George and Eunice.

From this Elmwood Avenue home, I went to Logan School. My paths to school varied little. Stopping to pick up buddies as I went south on 16th Street – Harold Lundberg --and south of there, a Gathercoal or two. My third grade teacher, was a Miss Biggs. I recall that she picked me up and kissed me when I took her a bunch of peonies (Mother made me). Yuchh! Actually, now that I think of it, she was quite a doll.

Across from Logan School was a shed. An old man (Everybody looks old to a seven-year-old) was making something out of molten glass. A real glassblower in Wilmette! I don’t know if this was a Mr. Mitterwaller or not, but the fattest boy I ever saw lived in the house there. We used to call him “Bubbles” Mitterwaller.

Living on the Northwest end of town, we often used the stores in the town of Gross Point at Lake Avenue and Ridge Road. Right across from the big Catholic Church, St. Joseph’s, and due west was the store of the Mueck family. I used to go there for penny candy. The bell tinkled when I went in this typical country store. No One Around. I would wait. Then from way back in the store I could hear her coming. Large (very large) Mrs. Grandma Mueck. Breathing very loud and asthmatically. Finally she arrived. “Vott Cha Vont,” she would say. It was mostly a licorice whip or a large black ball to suck (it changed color each layer). It took an endless time to decide. She was a patient woman.



It was on this corner a door or two south of Lake Avenue of the West side of Ridge that I saw my first movie. Long before the Central or Village Theatres. A silent very early version of the three musketeers (1912?) We sat on folding chairs in an empty store, a sheet or wall for a screen. A fun time.

After my father's passing in 1915, we moved to 423 Tenth Street. We were living there when the big snow of 1918 occurred. Everyone shoveled streets and walks. My brother Carleton was overseas. I was the only man of the house (14). We lived here during the tornado that did a lot of damage to the East side of town. The tornado ended up going into the lake about where the old Stanley Gage home stood at Chestnut and Sheridan. My grandfather, Horace Greeley Drury, built this home.

I went to Central School - went into a brand new school— in either 7th or 8th grades, the Byron Stolp School. My mother, Mrs. Lillian Drury Northam, was on the School Board. This too is long gone. After that, New Trier [High School] (about 7 or 8 hundred students at most then). We all walked to school--even the affluent. North to Chestnut, then duck through the last of Gage's Woods, and on north to Winnetka Avenue.

Memorial Day and the Fourth of July were big events in the town in those days. A big parade. The remaining veterans of the Civil War and the Spanish American War in honored positions in the march. A long walk through the whole village way up to Gross Point to the Catholic Cemetery where we saluted the Honored Hero Dead. Patriotism was big then. My grandfather, Horace Greeley Drury, a past President of the Village, used to team up with his neighbor, Mr. Burnett, directly south from grandpa's house which was at 622 Central. They strung a rope across the street and hung a large American Flag there each national holiday. My late brother Carleton Drury Northam's family now has this flag. It has 46 stars.

I recall visits from Grandfather H.G. Drury's cousin, Portius Gage-- I tried to avoid it, but he too picked me up and planted a wet whiskery kiss on my face. He looked like one of the Smith Brothers of cough drop fame. He drove one of the first cars I ever saw, a Stanley Steamer.

Speaking of cars, it seems to me I recall that one of the McDaniel boys drove a Stutz Bearcat—Wow!

Mother's last home was at 2247 W. Lake Avenue, and was that out in the country when we first moved in! Cattle pastured all around. Nothing back of the house for a good half mile. Nothing across the street. Prairie everywhere, but along Lake Avenue- big ditches on both sides west of Ridge Avenue. No street lights. No sewer and water except--like we had septic tanks and wells, cisterns and automatic pumps. This was better than some had. Mother was living here when she passed away in 1933.

From the time I was a little sprout, I accepted responsibility. I was sent often when little as were many other young children to do small errands. I usually carried a note. I even crossed the track (the Northwestern) to go to Brinkman and Schultz Grocery. Frank Smith's Grocery and Wilming's Drug Store—all on West Railroad (Greenbay Road). Smith's Store was Kinney's (but that is before my time). Did any of you buy Yummy's at Wilson Bakery, or stop in for a treat at Muniere Brothers' (in the Brown Building) or a soda at Rennecker's or Snyder-Kazel drug store, who had super soda fountains.



Who could forget Miss Anna Law, our librarian in the old red brick Carnegie Library at the corner of Wilmette and Park. Now replaced.

I used to love to watch the blacksmith shoe horses in the old barn near Ridge on the south side of Wilmette Avenue-South side (Still there-remodeled). East from this barn--truck farms for several blocks. Right into the village. Was this Hoffman Land? I remember that Gertrude Braun, our neighbor on Lake Avenue, had a Maxwell car.

Long ago, I watched the first shovels of dirt taken up when they dug the drainage canal. I recall the night that they “sneaked” the end of the “L” into the terminal at 4th and Linden in one night.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS!—Bosh!

You walked everywhere. There were ashes to carry out. Carpets to beat. Old drafty big houses hard to heat. If you got a bad cold and developed pneumonia, you had two choices--get to the Crisis and either live or die.--no antibiotics. The town sewer emptied into the Lake at Chestnut and the Lake—real pollution. A mother was saddled with a bunch of quarantined kids all summer. Typhoid was still around. Polio was a dread: called it Infantile Paralysis.

To go in swimming, the girls wore shoes-long black stockings-bloomers-a blouse with skirt attached-and a bathing cap. Sunday was spent walking, or sitting on the front porch just looking at other folks walking by doing nothing. A big deal! Sunday headline in the Chicago Tribune might be in 1912—“PRESIDENT TAFT GOES TO THE SUMMER WHITE HOUSE. (Ho Hum.)

(I’m delighted to have lived so long. My mother would have fainted at the beach these days.)

Oh yes—I recall when the large Catholic convent and school were built (on Ridge Road in Gross Point). We heard that it was built on shaky ground and was slowly sinking! Some of us Protestant kids used to go up on occasion to see (wouldn’t want to miss that). Still around after 60 years.

The old Village Hall is gone now- but I am proud that during my lifetime, it was draped in mourning for my great uncle Edwin Drury; my grandfather Horace Greeley Drury; and my mother Lillian Drury Northam. All public servants to the Village of Wilmette, and whom, in this bicentennial year, I consider patriots, too.

So far, I have discovered that the blood of ELEVEN PATRIOTS of AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR flows in my veins.

I AM PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN.

MAY GOD PROTECT US ALL.

Respectfully submitted,

Frederick Stickney Northam