

## **May – The Huron River**

*Patricia Quick, Rockwood Area Historical Society*

Have you ever taken time to take a really good look at the Huron River? There are places along the shore, visible from the road, that are as pretty a scene as can be viewed in all Michigan. The clouds of red-bud and hawthorn trees, blossoming along the river in the spring, is a sight to behold. The lazy stream in summer, with the large white sycamores, and graceful, pale-green willows, is cooling and refreshing to the eye. In the fall the crimson-red, the purple, brown, and gold of the autumn leaves reflecting in the water creates a scene that any artist would love to paint. Even in winter, the inky blackness of the rushing current between the icy, snow-covered banks is a chilly, thrilling sight.

Ask a former student of the U. of M. from anywhere in the U.S.A. or a foreign country about the Huron River. He will appear puzzled for a moment, then will smile as memories of under-grad days, of boating, or merely strolling along the river come flooding back. It is safe to say that even though the Huron River is not significant or important, it truly is a river known 'round the world.

In 1966, two boys digging in the sandy bank at Cara Lane and Huron River Drive found bones and Indian artifacts. A spokesman from the University of Michigan stated that an Indian village could have been located here as early as 500 BC. So you see the river has been in this area for quite some time.

The Riviere Aux Huron first appeared on a map drawn by Joseph Gaspard de Lery in 1749. It is shown on another French map dated 1752. Jean Baptiste Sanscrainte (John Soncrant) came from Quebec in 1765 and settled on the north bank of the river at present day West Jefferson. He sold this property to Gabriel Godfroy in 1796. On early maps you will see the name "Godfroy" on many acres of land throughout this area. Notations on a 1790 map are as follows:

"The Riviere Aux Hurons is navigable for large canoes for 100 miles. There is a portage of 64 chains to the Grand River, thence to Lake Michigan. The Riviere Aux Hurons is a very rapidly flowing stream with a sandy bottom".

It was a land of plenty for the Native Americans. The lakes and rivers provided food and transportation. They journeyed down the river to the British Ford Malden at Amherstburg where they bartered for trinkets and hatchets.

A 1798 church census shows twenty Protestant families and eight Catholic families living along both sides of the river. In 1803 the Office of Indian Affairs sent Jouett to conduct a census of sorts. He reported The Riviere Aux Hurons deep, with gentle current, navigable for large boats for more than twenty miles. In this same year, 1803, Gabriel Godfroy provided a ferryboat for travelers using Anthony Wayne's trail across the Huron River. His tenant farmer Claude Campeau worked the farm and operated the ferry. Mr. Campeau operated the ferry until the War of 1812. The first bridge across the Huron River was hastily constructed by the troops of Gen. William Hull's American Army on July 4, 1812. The soldiers laid additional logs on Anthony Wayne's corduroy road to enable the supply wagons to cross the low-lying marsh at this time. March of 1817 saw a survey party paddling up the Huron. They sought the site of the Indian portage to the Grand River. In his journal, Joseph Fletcher writes of the rain and bitter cold. The survey lists meander posts, claims, types of land, trees and their diameter. Except for the marsh and swampland, the most frequent description reads: "Very good farmland, heavily timbered". Distances were measured in links and chains.

Gabriel Godfroy constructed a new and large toll-bridge in 1817. His tenant farmer, Claude Campau was the "Toll-gatherer". Father Gabriel Richard writes of a Lower Huron Village settlement at this location in 1822. James McCloskey purchased 56 acres on the south side of the Huron River, at the bridge in 1822. He sold this land to Peter Godfroy in 1825. The ownership of the toll-bridge was transferred by grant from Gabriel Godfroy to Peter Godfroy of Monroe in 1825. Peter, in turn, sold this land and the bridge to Jean Baptiste Rousseau (John B. Rousseau) in 1830 with the stipulation that free passage be given to all members of the Godfroy family, their servants and hired hands, and all their horses, carts and carriages. Free passage was also granted to the Mail Stage traveling north and south on the Military Road.

Further upstream, in 1818, a Mr. Chamberlin began the operation of a sawmill. Six families settled in our present Rockwood area. A boat christened "The Experiment" was the first large vessel to ply the waters of the Huron in 1833. It took one week to sail from Ypsilanti to Detroit. After making but one trip it was sold for service on the Rouge River. Various mills sprang up, all along the Huron River. Soon the first scows, large flat-bottomed boats with canvas sails, appeared. They carried lumber and cordwood down the river to Detroit and Toledo. The scows bore the name The Napoleon, The Michigan Flower, The Franklin, The Louisa, and The Superior. A sloop was also christened The Superior. A drawbridge across the Huron River is shown on maps at this time.

The coming of the railroads in the 1850's marked the end of river-boat freight traffic on the upper Huron River. John Strong built various mills near the Chapman Road crossing (Dixie Highway), starting in 1863. It wasn't long before steam barges loaded with apples, cordwood, lumber, and mixed freight plied the Huron River. Traveling at six miles an hour they sailed from Strong's Landing, at the bridge, to Detroit and Toledo. The Alice Strong, The Cora Strong, The Mayflower, and The Ida Burton sailed their way past the swing-bridge at the railroad in South Rockwood and on through the new swing-bridge at the Military Road. Excursion rides were given on The Alice Strong during the summer months, and there were "moonlights" on the Ida Burton, with a fiddler playing for dancing on the deck. It is said that during the winter months, cordwood from Strong's Mill was piled on high ground all along the river, (hopefully above the spring floods). Cordwood was piled all the way from Strong's Landing to the swing-bridge at the Military Road.

Before the days of the automobile, and for a long time thereafter, pleasure boating on the Huron River was a favorite pastime for Rockwood area dwellers. There were boats tied to back-yard trees and docks all along the river. Boathouses clustered the shoreline at both the Dixie Highway and U.S. Turnpike bridges. Ice-skating and sleighing on the river and on the lake were favorite winter sports. During the early nineteenth century dip-netting for clams was a profession for some, and recreation and pocket money for others. The fresh-water pearls were sold to dealers in Detroit. Some sold clamshells to button factories for the manufacture of "Mother-of-Pearl Buttons". The horrible pollution from French Landing and other industries up-river spelled the demise of the Fresh Water Clam in the early 1920's.

The swing-bridge was replaced by a cement bridge in 1930. The interurban bridge and the Dodge Park bridge have come and gone. The expressway bridge was built in 1954. The Dixie Highway bridge was recently rebuilt. The railroad bridges remain. The Huron River, our link to the past, still flows on.