

A VISIT WITH A LADY WHO KNEW DETROIT AS A FRONTIER POST.

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In the year 1800, in the village of Castleton, Rutland Co., Vt., a girl baby was born and she was named Jane M. Deming. Today, as the widow of the late John Palmer, she lives at her pleasant home, No. 69 Lafayette avenue, a remarkably well preserved and very entertaining lady, and one, too, who has probably the most distinct remembrance of various details in the history of Detroit during the first half of the present century, of any person now living. The other evening a representative of The Free Press called on Mrs. Palmer and found a lady seated in a rattan rocking chair reading a paper and apparently as deeply interested in current affairs, local and general, as though she had just begun the study of life and its mysteries. She was attired in black, and as she arose smartly to greet her visitor she showed that she was a trifle above medium height, that her clear, blue eyes lightened up a face which, while it showed the work of years somewhat, was courtly and hospitable. Across her nose rested a pair of silver-bowed spectacles, on her head was a tasteful white lace cap, in the fluffy folds of which, and as a natty finale to the top of her head, rested a pale, purple silk bow, an admirable color foil to the white hair curls, two on each side of her forehead, which peeped from beneath the front edges of her cap. Altogether she was a picture of peaceful, refined and vigorous old age, quite uncommon and decidedly attractive.

"Yes. I'm an old settler here," she replied to the inquiry of her visitor, "and I find that my memories of those early days in Detroit remain quite vivid and readily at hand."

"When did you come here?"

"I reached Detroit in July, 1820. I came west by invitation of my brother, John J. Deming, who was confidential clerk for Judge Witherell and also inspector of revenue at this point. My father escorted me from Castleton to Schenectady, where I expected to be met by Judge and Mrs. Witherell, but instead I was met by my brother. Together we traveled by stage to Buffalo, the journey lasting seven days. You know the Erie canal was not then built. After a night at Buffalo we took a stage ride of three miles to Black Rock, where we took passage on the steamer Walk-in-the-Water, the pioneer steamboat on the great lakes. I remember my brother had to pay \$18 each for our passage to Detroit from Buffalo, and I remember, too, that the boat was towed down the creek to the lake by the use of oxen. I think it took three days for us to reach Detroit, which we did without mishap."

"Was the Walk-in-the-Water a comfortable boat?"

"We thought it very comfortable and in our eyes it was a very large and wonderful craft. I recollect the cabin was up on deck, so to speak, and that it had, I think, six berths on either side with a free or walking space of perhaps eight or ten feet between the seats, which extended in front of the berths and lengthwise of the cabin. Of course such a boat nowadays would not be considered safe as a means of transportation across Detroit river; but you must bear in mind I am talking of a steamboat 69 years ago."

"What was the appearance of Detroit at that time?"

"My brother and I lived with Judge Witherell's family on Atwater street, near Brush street, and I remember that the town was still surrounded by a palisade with pickets about twelve feet high, with loop-holes every few feet. I also remember that there was a block house, a firm, well built and well preserved affair, on Jefferson avenue, near and, I think, just above where Brush street crosses the avenue. This line of cedar pickets extended from the river north and parallel to and a short distance east of the present line of Brush street. At a point about where Brush and Congress streets now cross each other the palisade turned to the west and extended on a line parallel to Michigan avenue, to a point about midway between Griswold and Shelby streets, and thence south to the river. The fort stood on what is now the southeast corner of the site for the new government building, with the cantonment on the west and extending to the Cass farm or what is now Cass street. The entrance to the parade ground was at what is now the head of Wayne street, and the cantonment was inclosed by a line of pickets set close together and five or six feet high. The old building, which was torn down to make room for the old Whitney opera house, was, when I

came here, occupied by Capt. Clitz, the father of Gen. Clitz, and like all of the buildings—officers' residences, soldiers' barracks, storehouses, hospital and the like—was built of logs and clapboarded."

"And the society—"

"Our society in those days consisted of the army officers and their wives, the old French families and the few Americans, but it was delightful. We had superior men and women here in those days—men and women who were competent to shine in any phase of courage testing, labor tiring, or social elegance; who could walk, ride, handle a canoe, hunt, fish, attend to household labors, do the honors at a social gathering or a formal event of any kind, and all with equal grace and skill. We were all friends—Indians, soldiers, French and Americans—all sociable and interested in each other. I tell you our lives were more pleasant, I believe, than are the lives of society people of the present day."

"What was the business of the place?"

"Trading with the Indians, helping new settlers to locate at Detroit or bidding them God speed for points further west. My husband and Thomas Palmer (father of ex-Senator T. W. Palmer) sold goods in a store which stood at the corner of Jefferson avenue and Griswold street. I recollect, I think it was in 1823, I went with my husband to New York. While in New York my husband met the captain of the Walk-in-the-Water, who had visited the metropolis to get a new shaft for his boat, and then we learned that we would be obliged to make the trip from Buffalo to Detroit in a schooner, or take our choice between a ride through the dark woods of Canada or the black swamp of the Maumee country. We chose the lake route and sailed on the schooner Tiger, Capt. Blake, and after four days reached sight of the mouth of the river, but in a storm and out of provisions nearly. I recollect going on deck and while a sailor held an umbrella over me and my fire, cooking a meal of fried salt pork and fried sea-biscuit. I freshened the pork and then fried it, and then, soaking the sea-biscuit in cold water, I fried them in the pork fat. It wasn't a bad meal; and it proved a valuable one, for two or three hours later we went ashore at Colchester and had a narrow escape and considerable hardship."

"At that time the river road or Jefferson avenue extended west as far as what is now Twelfth street; that is to say it was a popular driveway that far, Mr. Godfrey's residence and trading post being just below Twelfth street. Then we had 'Mack & Conant's turnpike' on the north. What was that? It is now called Woodward avenue, but then it was a new corduroy road extending from the Grand Circus north six miles. Mack & Conant built it for the general government, receiving \$6,000 for it. You can get

an idea of what it was when I tell you that Mrs. John P. Sheldon and myself, each with an infant in our arms, started to visit Mrs. Sheldon's father, who lived in Oakland county, twenty-eight miles from Detroit. We made the six miles over Mack & Conant's turnpike and twenty two miles along an Indian trail in just two days. Rather slow, wasn't it? I know we had dinner at the north end of the turnpike in a little log tavern kept by Mrs. Chappell, and I don't think I ever enjoyed a meal better."

"Weren't the Indians troublesome in those days?"

"Not a bit of it. I've had them all over my kitchen floor as lodgers night after night. I knew them all, and there were some noble fellows among them. By the way, let me tell you about Kish-kaw-koo's death. He had killed one of Judge Riley's clerks on the St. Clair river, and the whites were trying to capture and punish him. One evening my husband came to me while I was at work in my kitchen and said, 'Jane, word has come from Beaufait (he lived at Grosse Pointe) that Kish-kaw-koo is encamped in his (Beaufait's) orchard. Sheriff Wing is going up to get him.' The sheriff got his man; he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged. The day before the one set for his execution, three of his wives came down from the Saginaw country and got permission to visit their husband, who was confined in the jail which stood near where White's theater now stands. They made their visit and went away, all tears, and the next morning Kish-kaw-koo was found dead in the jail. He had committed suicide rather than suffer death by suffocation, and one of his wives had provided him with the poison.

Another incident, which I remember, with considerable pride, is the establishment of the first free school in the then Territory of Michigan. It happened late in 1832, and Mrs. Maj. Larned, Mrs. E. P. Hastings and myself were the founders. We operated the school a year, with an average daily attendance of fifty pupils, and at an expense of about \$700, I believe, which included the cost of a small, but comfortable schoolhouse. In December, 1833, we needed some more money, and so we decided to have a fair, and that, I believe, was the first bazaar ever held west of Buffalo. We advertised in *The Free Press* that we would give the fair 'in Woodworth's long room in the Steamboat Hotel.' We had a lot of fancy articles, needlework and the like, for sale, and we had Capt. Brooks for auctioneer. The door of the 'long room' was opened at halfpast seven o'clock in the evening, and at 10:30 o'clock it was closed; the fair was ended, and we had taken in \$1,656 in money!"

"How did you do that?"

"Because everybody was interested and liberal. I recollect Oliver Newberry brought us a roast turkey, the gift of a restaurant keeper named

Lillibridge. That turkey was put up at auction and a rivalry for its possession developed between Mr. Kellogg, proprietor of the Mansion House, and Mr. Wales, proprietor of the Michigan Exchange. Before this, however, it had been sold two or three times, and finally when Mr. Kellogg bought it, we had netted \$200 from the fowl. It may be conceit on my part, but I verily believe that the spirit engendered in the interests of that first free school in Michigan was the direct progenitor of a movement which has resulted in the present University of Michigan."