

*Please return
to C E Bellamy*

Kee-No-Shay
Plaster Creek

For many years after the coming of the white man to the rapids of Grand River, the small stream that has had so prominent a part in the commercial life of Grand Rapids, now commonly called "Plaster Creek", was known to the Indians as "Kee-No-Shay", or "Water of the Wall-eyed Pike".

As was the custom of the American Indians, every stream of any importance had a significant name or term. White men did not always sense this, so we have "Sand Creeks" and "Fish Creeks" in every valley of the State.

By the unwritten laws of the Ottawas, families inherited their home rights, living for generations upon streams where fish were plenty, and forest life abundant.

Fur traders were first to disturb the Indian. Then ^{came} the missionary, ~~came~~ with a long face, and an interpreter to translate the Word of God from a printed volume ^{these} to men of the forest whose "Great Spirit" was the sun in the sky; ^{to these} ~~they were~~ men and women who saw the Great Spirit in the trees, ^{in the} flowers, ^{in the} birds, even in the thunder-head clouds floating about on summer days.

To the legendary lore of those first days of the Mission located on the west bank of the River, at the Rapids, we are indebted to John R., son of Rix Robinson, the first white man who settled in the valley of the Grand River. He had a full-blood Ottawa mother and a high-grade American father. John R. was graduated from a University as a Methodist clergyman, and at times came to preach in the warehouse-like church at the end of Bridge Street Bridge, in the "Fifties".

It must have been my admiration of the man, his fine physique,

Kee-No-Bhay--2

his eloquence, his interpretation of the Bible, or it might have been a courtesy to the man, most skillful of fishermen, that inspired me to give up a fine out-of-doors day to occupy a hard board seat in the church where he preached.

In those days, the mission buildings were weather-beaten shacks, occupied by cattle running at large. At the old stone-built forge in the smithy, boys of my style and clan roasted corn, and pigeons roasted at dusk.

At night the place was haunted by "Jimmie O'Callaghan", who imagined himself a town constable, when, armed with a shillalah, he was the missionary, who kept the boys on the run.

Chief Black Bird's home was on the north point of the Black Hills, ~~where he~~ ^{he} overlooked his village, that was on the west side of the river where is now the Phoenix Furniture Factory. From there he could see far up and down the river, and the many mound burial places of his people were in full sight.

The ways of the "Fur Trader" made him "Hostile". He lighted a fire when storm clouds ruled the sky. He listened to the carousing of the village people, wild with the white man's fire-water, supplied by the fur buyer. There is proof that Black Bird, with his band of Grand River Indians, ~~was~~ ^{was} at the burning of Buffalo in 1813. He led them home, by way of the waters of lake and rivers, their canoes loaded with plunder: muskets, axes, copper kettles, blankets, bolts of blue wool cloth and strings of glass beads.

It is not strange that the early whites claimed the Chief hostile, that he burned the first mission building, cast into the river the fire-water of the trader, and spurned the white man's printed book.

Black Bird ruled by inheritance the territory drained by the "Kee-No-Shay", "Water of the Big-eyed Fish" the wall-eyed Pike.

In the following years, the mission was re-built, on the site of the burned buildings. On a spring morning, all the Indians of both villages at the Rapids assembled at the Mission, sitting about on the ground. There came Chief Noonday in a canoe from the head of the Rapids, and Black Bird, sitting in a canoe, paddled by his two squaws ~~and~~ garbed in blue French clothing, as befitted a Chief. From out of the lost channel, into the boulder-strewn rapids they came, ^{through} ~~in~~ foaming eddies, "singing waters", to the outlet of the brook that is now hidden away from sight in one of the many West-side sewers.

The missionary, a small man, in a plain black coat, opened his Bible on a small table, reading the lesson to an interpreter. That sermon must have been a dismal failure. There was nothing to inspire, to thrill, those "Savages", whose God was visible everywhere in hill and valley.

At its close, it was said by a white man present that Black Bird stepped to the table, turning the pages of the Bible. Then, in displeasure, he folded his arms across his chest, ^{and said,} "Indian no see Great Spirit". Leading the missionary outside of the house, he pointed to the sun, then to the river-bank trees in the bloom of spring, to the cascading rapids, ^{and} to the Council Pine, a lone sentinel that had sheltered many council fires. In a most dramatic way, he told of "Man-a-boo-sho", the creator of all that is good, and who from his pack had created, as he traveled far, the fish and the beaver. Then leading the way, followed by his women, to the river bank, he departed the way he came.

The following Sunday he returned in state, as befitted a chieftain, with a water-worn, creamy rock, that glistened in the sun, in his canoe. It was a "sermon in stone," but the mission preacher was not a geologist, and read his lesson with a weak voice, alarmed at the hostile attitude of the Indian. When the Bible was closed, the Chief

led the way to the canoe, holding the preacher's hand as in a vise, and seated him, like a captive, in the bottom of the canoe, which seemed guided by a magic paddle safely between the bowlders in the river bed. It is not hard to imagine the state of mind of the missionary when the canoe, like a phantom, glided into wild woods, winding up the waters of the Kee-no-shay, finally coming to rest at the foot of a cascading water-fall, brilliant in sunshine and shadow.

Far away in the making of Michigan, some down-deep power had lifted a ledge of rock that came edgewise to the surface, a nature-made dam, to hold back the waters of the creek, until, by centuries of time, channels were worn, leaving glistening minarets of golden yellow spires. A fairy story of castles, ^{this was} to the simple people of the forests. I have nothing in the traditions of the missionary, that tells the sort of man that came to convert the Indian from his belief in the "Great Spirit", but that journey and its ending must have convinced him that the Indian had the best of the argument.

A sample of that ledge rock was sent to Detroit, where a geologist pronounced it "gypsum", and when ground between mill stones into fine powder, it was found to be valuable as land fertilizer. Advertised and sold as "Land Plaster", in the following years it seemed easy to apply the name to the stream, where the first rock was quarried and ground.

The life of the mission was brief. It did not appeal to the red men, as did gypsum quarries and mills to the white man.

Black Bird, after a time spent on the Reservation at Pentwater, returned to build a wigwam and chant his "song of Death" on the Black Hills, in the year 1868. Many more than one hundred years he had lived in the out-of-doors and communed with the great Creator.

Kee-No-Shay--5

But not until the last of the Indians and those early-day white men did the term, "Kee-no-shay" give way to that harsh, unlovable, muddy term, "Plaster Creek". Then, the pollution of the waters had banished the wall-eyed pike, and others of the finny tribe, and their memory is but a dream.