



Fur Traders Passing Pigeon Hill

### CHAPTER III

#### FRENCHMEN AND FURS

Father Marquette, the prince of Jesuits was probably the first White Man to note the existence of White Lake and the White River upon whose northern shore Montague was to be built.

The famous priest sick and enfeebled after a winter spent in a rude hut on the Illinois prairie passed the mouth of the White River on his way home to the Mission at St. Ignace in the spring of the year 1675, this was to be his last journey for somewhere between White Lake and Ludington he succumbed to his illness and was buried just to the south of the mouth of the Pere Marquette River.

Father Marquette made his last entry in his diary on April 6, 1675. Thereafter, his record was kept by Father Claude Deblen, who wrote that some Indians who had been hunting in lower Michigan during the winter of 1677 stopped at Marquette's grave on their return journey and decided to remove the remains to their church at St. Ignace. The grave was easy to locate as it was marked by a large wooden cross. "Accordingly," Father Deblen wrote, "they opened the grave and uncovered the body; and, although the flesh and internal organs were all dried up, they found it entire, so that not even the skin was in any way injured. This did not prevent them from proceeding to dissect it, as is their custom. They cleaned the bones and exposed them to the sun to dry; then carefully laying them in a box of birch-bark, they set out to bring them to our mission of St. Ignace."

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A later record states that "the site of this mission chapel and the remains of Marquette were discovered two hundred years after his burial by the priest of the village, Rev. Edward Jacker. The remnants of a birch-bark box, a number of bones, and part of a skull were unearthed. Most of these relics are now in the possession of Marquette University at Milwaukee."

In 1679, LaSalle's friend and Lieutenant, Henri de Tonti, passed by on his way to join LaSalle at the mouth of the St. Joseph. In neither account is there any mention of White River.

Except for maps, there seems to be no further record until 1760. In the fall of that year Father Peter Francis Charlevoix coasted along our shore and wrote some interesting descriptions of it, but he did not mention White River by name. He was the first, however, to mention the lakes beyond the outlets of the rivers into Lake Michigan.

In 1779, Samuel Roberts piloted "His Majesty's Sloop Felicity" down Lake Michigan. He mentioned in his log that he passed White River on October 31 at 3 P.M. and came abreast of Muskegon River at 5 P.M. This is the first mention of White River in the written records.

The next visitor of prominence was Henry Schoolcraft, for many years Commissioner of Indian Affairs. He came up the lake in 1821 and described the coast near Muskegon quite minutely, calling it "lonely and dreary." He added that "some White settlers had pushed as far north as White River." But they could not have been numerous or permanent, for in recording that G. W. Rodebaugh came here in 1831 to take a census of the Indians, no mention is made of white settlers.

The oldest historical spot in the White Lake region is where the Scenic Drive comes winding around the southern shore of "Jibshi Sagagen," or Duck Lake, as we know it today. Near the highway, where it dips down almost to the sandy beach of Lake Michigan, for many years stood the first building erected by the white man in all this region. There is no written record of when this cabin was built but it has been reliably told that one hundred and seventy-five years ago is not improbable. The location of this ancient cabin was east of the old road and close to the south side of the mouth of Duck Lake, overlooking Lake Michigan, according to John R. Robinson, son of the famous trader, Rix Robinson.

In fact, John Robinson was born in 1826 in this weather beaten old structure, and his description of the crude abode reads something like this: It was a one-story hut-maybe 14 to 16 feet-with a narrow porch and facing west. The inside walls were plastered with a solid mass, called "cat and clay", a mortar composition

made of chopped straw and swamp moss. Even the old fireplace chimney, constructed from four long poles placed wide apart at the bottom and narrowing toward the top, was packed and shaped and made fireproof from this home-made mixture. The roof was of rough bark slabs. The cabin possessed a door and a window to the west, there were small windows to the east and south, and huge logs standing upright formed the outer walls of the hut.

John Robinson was always under the impression that the place had been built by Joseph LaFramboise, for from his earliest recollection, the log cabin where he was born was old and weather-worn. LaFramboise, a Nova Scotian, was at one time Western Michigan's agent for the John Jacob Astor Fur Company, and in 1790 had been given a land grant by his employer. LaFramboise was killed in 1809 and if the cabin had been built by him it would have been between the years 1790 and 1809, and probably was erected immediately after his coming to the White Lake region, for the Duck Lake post was one in a unit of twenty trading stations established in the latter part of the Astor regime. These trading posts were in the "fur chain" from the Kalamazoo River to the Grand Traverse Bay country, with LaFramboise's headquarters on the Grand River at a site where the city of Lowell now stands.

One version of LaFramboise's death is that he was killed by an Indian, following a quarrel because he had refused to sell the Indian liquor. Vivian Lyon Moore, in his poem, "A Pocahontas in Michigan," related that he was stabbed in the back while kneeling in prayer. LaFramboise was succeeded by his widow, one of the most remarkable women in the history of our state. She was a half-breed educated by the French, possessing extraordinary ability, personality and beauty, and successfully continued the peltry business until her retirement. Colonel William Montague Ferry, who we might claim as a local authority because of the extensive interests of the Ferry family on White Lake during the lumber days, says of her: "It may come as a surprise to many to learn that the first pioneer was a lady, and woman of no ordinary character, a shrewd trader and a bold adventurer." For a period of about thirty years, first with her husband and later on her own account, Madame LaFramboise came down the east shore with her bateaux laden with stores and goods to exchange with the natives, and beached for several days at Duck Lake, before proceeding on to the other posts under her management, or to her headquarters at Lowell.

She was succeeded in 1821 by Rix Robinson, the greatest trader of them all, and one of the most influential men in the early history of Western Michigan. Born in Massachusetts in 1779, he abandoned a career at the bar to come west in 1814 on a trading venture.

He acted as sutler to the Army posts then on the western frontier, and he traded for a while with the Indians. In 1817 he established a trading post on the Calumet River; another one on the Illinois River in 1819; one at Milwaukee in 1820; and two on the Grand River in 1821, one of which occupied the present site of the city of Grand Haven. His success as a trader, his reputation for honest dealings, and his ability to get along with the Indians, attracted the attention of Astor, and when the latter organized the American Fur Company, and made Mackinac Island the capital of a far-flung empire of furs, he chose Rix Robinson as his Western Michigan agent, to succeed the aging Madame LaFramboise. Madame LaFramboise was buried near St. Ann's Church, on Mackinac Island, where her tomb may be seen today.

From that time on, until the fur trade declined, in 1834, Robinson was one of the most conspicuous figures and one of the best known men along the Michigan west coast. In 1835 he left the thrill of the fur trading trails and turned merchant. He was the dominating power in founding the city of Grand Haven and is described as a man of "unswerving, sterling integrity with a wonderful magnetic control of those among whom he moved. And was an esteemed and a worthy representative of that enterprising class of men who dared all to open the way for civilization in the Northwest."

He was six feet tall, of superb physical presence. Rix Robinson married in 1821, according to the Indian custom of that day. The bride, "Pee-miss-a-quet-o-may," was the daughter of an Indian chief. She was one of five sisters, all noted for their beauty and intelligence. One became the wife of a prominent French-Canadian trader of the Lake Superior region.

Mrs. Robinson was endowed with an unusually light and beautiful complexion. John Robinson was born March 5, 1826, in the little cabin on Duck Lake. Rix Robinson and his Indian wife were married by a Catholic priest in 1831. She died during her son's boyhood, during a stay at Battle Point on Grand River in Crockery Township. John R. Robinson was said to have been about four or five years old at the time.

Rix Robinson remarried shortly. Times were such that a wife's aid was indispensable. The second Mrs. Robinson was "Se-be-quay." River Woman, or Nancy, the youngest sister of the first Mrs. Robinson. She had been educated by Rev. William M. Ferry's Mission School at Mackinac. The marriage was preformed by a Baptist clergyman, Rev. Leonard Slater, in Grand Rapids. There were no children of this marriage.

Nancy Robinson was unusually proud of her Indian origin. She firmly believed the whites were not up to the standard of the red man. Rix Robinson shared this high esteem for the Indians, ac-

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ording to a letter written by him at Detroit dated April 25, 1846. Rix Robinson says: "Having been for some 20 years incarcerated in the wilderness with a race of people and whom I am constrained to say (although illiterate) possess a much higher grade of character for honesty and integrity than our own race."

Rix Robinson was present, as chief interpreter and counselor, at nearly all the principal treaties with the Indians of the Northwest. His control over the savages is said to be mainly responsible for the fact that the white settlers of Western Michigan met with so little resistance from the natives; and that the later penetration of the pine forests of the state by the lumbermen was accomplished in peace, and not in face of hostile attacks. Had the early lumberman been obliged to arm their lumber camps deep in the woods, as the settlers of the later west were obliged to do, then the lumber regime in Michigan would have been just as gory, and long protracted. This certainly is a remarkable testimony to any one man. Robinson in his later years occupied many public positions of honor and trust. He became a State Senator, was a Presidential elector in 1848, and a member of the State Constitutional Convention of 1850.

The arrival and departure of the Robinson fleet of batteaux, to and from Mackinac every fall, as he made his rounds serving his twenty trading posts, forms one of the most colorful stories of the Northwest. It was the one grand event that each year broke the monotony of frontier life along the west shore, and that brought a brief, dramatic interlude into the lives of the assembled host of natives. Because Duck Lake and the Old Channel were among the first stops that he made on these voyages, it is probably true that nowhere were these events more dramatic than they were right here on White Lake.

The scenes and events that must have taken place here at Duck Lake and at the Old Mouth, from 1821 to 1834, as Robinson arrived at these places, make a story which for sheer drama and color rank with the most absorbingly interesting tales of the Northwest; scenes which have no counterpart in all history; events which could not have occurred, because of their very nature, anywhere else in the world, save as they may have been repeated at the other posts along the east shore that Robinson visited.

The history of the Old Trading Post two miles above burying ground point on the White River, is shrouded completely in the mists of time. Little is known of when it was built or by whom. The only facts known are those after the arrival of Charles Mears and his brothers who found the mouldering ruins of the old house in 1837. It is believed to have been one of the earliest French trading posts in the area.