

*The History of Petoskey Area*

*Written By  
Harriet Kilborn  
In 1960*

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Henry **McConnell** heard the whistle blow, left his game of seven-up at **Ingall's** saloon, and went to watch a historic event-the arrival of the first train in Petoskey. The steam locomotive had penetrated the wilderness to Little Traverse Bay and a chaotic, exciting new chapter of history was only a winter's breath away.

It was five o'clock the evening of November 25, 1873 when the inspection train whistled to a stop. There was only a baggage car and two private coaches for the officials of the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad. The **Talcott** brothers who had the contract for building the railroad, Michigan's Governor **Bagley** and newspaper reporters accompanied the directors and officials of the railroad on this 193 mile inspection trip from Grand Rapids to Petoskey, the end of the line. The trip was necessary to validate the state's land grant to the railroad for completion of the line to that point.

George **Gage**, reporter for the *Grand Rapids Times*, saw the occasion in romantic light. He was the first to describe Petoskey's famous Million Dollar Sunset. To him the gorgeous colors of the horizon, plus the white and glistening snow loading the ground and tree branches made a scene right out of "*Tales of Arabian Nights.*" He also saw frightened, but curious Indians popping up from behind trees and bushes. To Henry **McConnell** it was a disagreeable evening. The air was damp and a mist hung over the bay. A light snow had fallen and the ground was covered with slush and mud. A few Indians had turned out to try to catch a glimpse of Governor **Bagley** but none of them were the least bit scared. **H. O. Rose** was on



Hand to do the official "welcoming" honors. In the words of **McConnell**, the visitors "*remained about an hour and then left us to settle down for the winter.*" **H. O. Rose** was the architect of Petoskey's future. He had vision, drive, experience in frontier development and money to carry out his plans. His timing was perfect and he, with an able assist from the grand old **G. R. & I Railroad**, would play an important part in turning an Indian settlement into a booming village in five years time and a bustling, dynamic city by the turn of the century. Only one more winter of isolation remained. The early gamblers on Petoskey's future didn't spend the winter of 1873-'74 twiddling their thumbs, but it was a good time to take stock of what had gone on before, the present situation, and what might develop with the opening of transportation in the spring. **R. H. Little** of Massachusetts and his brother, **Dr. Wm. Little** of Reed City arrived in Petoskey the summer of 1873. They pitched a tent on the shore, about where the **Pere Marquette depot** stands, and by winter had a house up. It was drafty, but better than a tent. **R. H. Little** wrote a most interesting account of their early experiences.

On the evening of their arrival they engaged a room for the night in a "small building" which in the morning they discovered was in a group with three others, one of which was a small mission church, with a bell mounted between two posts near the door." The church was the **Catholic St. Francis Solanus mission church**, build in 1859. This little church, twice restored, still stands on its original location in Petoskey.

Proceeding on their tour of inspection that first morning, the **Little** brothers followed a wagon load of the merchandise brought in by **H. O. Rose**, "*on a trail toward the east for about half a mile and turned in at Grandfather Petoskey's residence which was quite a large building, and in which Mr. Rose had secured two rooms for his store. We then preceded along the trail toward the east and crossed over the Bear River Bridge and on up the hill toward where two of Petoskey's sons resided with their families in log houses a few hundred feet apart. They had quite a few acres cleared along the hillside, but patches of small trees had grown up here and there on it, and only cultivated a small garden patch near the dwellings. This was the eastern limit of the Bear River settlement and there Petoskey was afterwards plotted.*" According to **Mr. Little's** account, the main settlement of the Indians was back from the shore, along the banks of Bear River. Up the hill from this settlement was the mission home and school of **Andrew Porter**.

One of the things the **Little's** enjoyed was attending services at this **Presbyterian Indian Mission** for the novel experience of hearing a sermon delivered a few words at a time, then having one of **Chief Petoskey's** sons repeat it in Indian. They also enjoyed hearing the Indians sing. The Indians, **Mr. Little** wrote "*were good law-abiding citizens and could be depended upon.*" He credited the missionary, **Andrew Porter**, with "*accomplishing a good work amongst them.*"

**Andrew Porter** arrived, with his mother and sister, at the mouth of Bear River on June 1, 1852. The mission had been granted 80 acres of land on the high ground about a half-mile southwest of the shore, for their use in establishing the mission and school for the Bear River band of Indians. A few years later an additional adjoining 80 acres was deeded them for further enlarging the mission farm. Lumber for building the school and home for the **Porters** was on the shore when they arrived. After the back-breaking work of cutting trees, hauling the lumber up the steep hills to the site and constructing the building, the work of the Mission got underway.

In 1851, the Bear River Indians had petitioned the **Presbyterian** Board for a school for their children. They asked in the petition that the children be taught in English, not in the Indian language, and this was done at **Mr. Porter's** school. The reports sent back to headquarters during the years indicated that the children were making good progress in writing, spelling, reading and ciphering. The attendance record was not too good. Except for periodic lapses-at maple-sugaring time, etc. -the situation was improved by providing each child with bread and molasses at noon. The **Porter** women were stuck with the bread-making and as a rule it was a daily chore, twelve loaves a day.

**Andrew Porter** attempted to minister to the physical as well as spiritual well-being of the Indians of the settlement. He had good help from his mother who had some training and much experience in practical "*doctoring*" in her home community in Pennsylvania. He tried to improve the food situation by clearing land

and getting a productive farm going. In 1855, he persuaded the Board to finance the building of a dam and grist mill. With flour \$10.50 the barrel from Cleveland, this would be a "*Rainbow in the North*" for the Indians, he wrote. This was the first harnessing for power of the waters of Bear River.

The great bug-a-boo in his efforts to help his Indian friends, was his fear of their finding access to alcoholic beverages. He censured those who sought to provide it more than he did the Indians for drinking it. Over the years he was quite successful in keeping liquor out of the settlement. It was most distressing to him when the workmen building the railroad got within walking distance of the settlement and saloons catering to their thirst began to flourish.

By 1867, the **Presbyterians** were running out of money and it seemed likely the mission would have to be discontinued. In January of that year **Mr. Porter** was deeded the mission farm for the sum of \$661. No money changed hands. It was given him in lieu of salary and work continued. By 1871 the government funds were also exhausted and the mission school was officially closed. **Andrew Porter** gave up his efforts in 1875 and went back to his Pennsylvania home. He returned later, to be with his son **Reuben**, a dentist in Petoskey, and died here in 1899. In his over twenty years of service to the Bear River Indians he had also been the Postmaster of Bear River, a supervisor of Emmet County, the Probate Judge and a farmer. The **Andrew Porters** were indeed, Petoskey's first white family.

He and his **Ignatius Petoskey** was the headman in the Bear River village when the **little's** arrived in the summer of 1873. numerous sons, as well as the other heads of Indian families in the village, had made their selections of land in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty of 1855. Additionally, **Chief Petoskey** had bought land from the government so that he owned much of the land on which the city of Petoskey now stands. According to a reporter for a national magazine who made a sight-seeing trip to the area in 1876, the old Chief was "the best-heeled Indian he had ever come across."

**H. O. Rose** was the first to get his 200 acres, which joined the Petoskey property on the west, platted and recorded. **Dr. Wm. Little** applied for a post office east of the river and for the job of Postmaster. The name chosen was Petoskey, in honor of the Chief. The official appointment was made on December 5, 1873 and as of that date the name of the post office was changed from Bear River to Petoskey and **Wm. Little** was the new Postmaster. The official word was not received until March and at that time **Dr. Little** and his brother drove to the mission and returned with all the papers pertaining to the office and the mail in their overcoat pockets. They had, during the winter, built a hotel which they called the **Rose House**. They made a small addition to it in order to make a place for the mail and to carry a stock of drugs and medicine. **Dr. Little** was the **first physician** in town and he and his brother were one of the **first to go into the hotel business**.

**Dave Cushman** had also been building a hotel, the **Cushman House**, until the advent of **The Arlington**, considered the luxury hotel of the north. The first hotel was owned by "Pa" **Smith**, a board shanty, good enough for 1873, but sufficient only for a woodshed by 1874.

**H. O. Rose** and **Amos Fox** already had a store built and stocked with goods. In the spring **Mr. Rose** brought in horses and built a dock. By the time transportation opened in April, the town was ready to receive any visitors sent its way by the **G. R. & I.** and **Mr. Rose** was ready to start manufacturing and shipping lime - Petoskey's first industrial development.

The **G. R. & I.** had land to sell and was promoting settlement vigorously. It also promoted sightseeing, publicizing far and wide the beauty of the wilderness-the clear, health-giving air; the pure, sparkling lakes and streams with fish in abundance; the unspoiled forests of pine and hard-woods and the romantic adventure of vacationing in Indian country. In the fall of '74 a portion of Emmet County land would be available for homesteading and in the spring of '75 the remaining government land would be put on the market. **Civil War veterans** could homestead twice as much land as others. Would people come to the end of the line, Petoskey, to see and/or to settle?

They did both. The next five years were lively. They were also cruel, hard years. The stream of visitors getting off the train at Petoskey of 1874 reached torrent proportions the summer of '75 and '76. The sight-seers, well-dressed men and dainty ladies in pretty summer dresses with matching parasols, stepped off the train elbow to elbow with men in sturdy work clothes, here to pick out a homestead; with a motley crew of land-lookers, speculators and just plain people looking for work or a new business opportunity. They found a few wagon trails about the village and houses and business places going up in seemingly higgledy-piggeldy fashion. For the women sight-seers, it must have been difficult to become ecstatic about the view and at the same time hold up their skirts to keep them out of the dust and mud while they picked their way around stumps and wild raspberry bushes to see what there was to see in new Petoskey.

It's a wonder they didn't take the next train south, but they stayed. They registered at hotels and rooming houses and took boat excursions, and came back the next summer for more of the same. The most famous trip was the Circular or Inland Route up the coast line of Little Traverse Bay, into Lake Michigan and around to Mackinac Island, on to Cheboygan then down the chain of rivers and lakes to what is now Conway. Until the priceless little Dummy trains were in operation, the excursionists were jolted back to Petoskey from there by wagon and team.

Life was more difficult for the homesteader. There were few roads where they needed to go to find available land so they walked. Before the land was opened for homesteading the Indians had made their selections. They were canoe Indians and any land they wanted was on or very close to water. The homesteaders had to go deep into the forest to find their forty or eighty. They walked to get there and they toted their supplies on their backs. Many of them were **veterans of the Civil War**. Some of them were men who had lost their shirts in the Panic of '73 and needed a new start.

Very few of them were woodsmen or experienced farmers and few of them had much more than money enough to get here. Some of them expected to be able sell the trees on their acreage for the capital to get started. In many cases the trees were burned for there was at that time no profitable way to get them out to market. It was more important to get a place cleared for a potato patch than to worry about burning up trees.

These were the **Mossbacks** this of country. These were the men and their families who sometimes lived in holes dug in banks until they could get cabins up. They toiled from sun-up to sun-down and they darned near starved to death.

Even the squirrel stew got thinner and thinner. In the spring of '77 fearful tales started coming into Petoskey-the **Mossbacks** were starving. Petoskey people scrounged their pantries for extra supplies. The word was relayed to Grand Rapids and the good people of that town hastily gathered supplies. On the heels of the relief train from Grand Rapids came the miracle-a great flight of the **Passenger Pigeon**, seeking a nesting area. There was another great flock the following spring, but that was the last one. **The Passenger Pigeon** was never found in large flocks again and by 1914 the species was extinct.

When the pigeon came they were trapped by the hundreds of thousands and shipped out to the large city markets by the boat loads. It seems now a horrible episode of carnage. At the time it was an unexpected cash crop from the sky. Whether for ultimate good or bad, the money made because of the arrival of the pigeons was sufficient to give many of the homesteaders the cash they needed to see them through the most difficult years of starting a farm.

In 1875, another bonanza landed on Petoskey's doorstep. The **Methodists** came looking for a summer Camp Meeting site and chose what is now **Bay View**. The Petoskey people worked hard and together to provide the inducements necessary to get them to locate here. Their valiant efforts were well rewarded. The **Methodist Camp** became an immediate success. People bought lots, pitched tents until they could get summer homes built and stayed all summer. Additionally, boat loads and train loads of people came for special occasions, such as

Big Sunday and other Camp Meeting sessions. Culture was thus introduced during the first stage of development and had a profound influence on the future growth and development of the whole area.

Petoskey was booming. As one old-timer put it, land was changing hands so fast all one had to do to get some was reach in the air and catch a deed going by on the breeze. It was now time to get properly organized for the great future ahead. A public meeting was held on November 30, 1878 in **McCarthy's Hall**. **Hon. J. C. Pailthorp** was in charge. A committee was appointed to plat the territory to be incorporated and take steps necessary to secure a village charter from the legislature. **H. O. Rose, John O. Hill, A. S. Lee, W. M. Everett** and **George S. Richmond** were the committee members. In February of 1879 an Act of the Legislature made Petoskey an incorporated village. **H. O. Rose** was elected village President. Now the proper legal condition existed for orderly improvement and growth. Now maybe the speckled pigs, and other livestock, would no longer be permitted to roam free in the village.

The "look" of things changed rapidly. Streets were being graded, board walks laid down and street lighting was provided. Substantial homes were being built and kept nicely painted. The business district was being greatly expanded and improved with better and more attractive buildings. New businesses were opening, better and more luxurious services were available. The first waterworks was built in 1881. That same year the schools were graded in accordance with state laws.

With the strenuous effort required to build new homes, start new businesses and improve the village it's a wonder there was energy left for social and cultural entertainment. The Petoskey citizens took time for these things, too. A Brass Band started practicing in 1875. That same year a **Dancing Club** was organized and dances were held at McCarthy's Hall. The Dramatic Club, started in 1877 provided numerous plays. There were organ recitals, concerts and all sorts of social functions. The village boasted a pretty good baseball team. By 1896 Petoskey was a well organized, beautiful little town of around 4,000. In that year it was incorporated as a city.

The new century would bring drastic changes. Petoskey would have to bend and change to keep up with the times. The new century would witness the rise and fall of the railroads. Today the lonesome toot of a diesel drawing a few cars of freight, is occasionally heard in the town. At the turn of the century railroad passengers and freight service was rising to its peak performance.

By 1882, the **G. R. & I. Railroad** had completed its main line from Petoskey to Mackinaw City. In 1892 the **Chicago and West Michigan Railroad** completed its line from Traverse City to Petoskey. (Name changed to **Pere Marquette** in 1900 and to the **Chesapeake and Ohio** in 1947). Dummy trains were running back and forth from Petoskey to Bay View every fifteen minutes and between here and Harbor Springs every thirty minutes. Frequent runs were made to Conway and Oden. Counting everything that moved on rails, there were times when up to 90 trains moved in and out of Petoskey each day. Shortly after the end of World War I the little Dummies had to die on the rails, so to speak, be sold for scrap and the Dummy station and the over walk came tumbling down. The service in and out of Petoskey on the main lines diminished in portion to the increase in miles of highway satisfactory for the newfangled automobile, and in the increased efficiency of this vehicle as a transportation device.

Today the only way to get a ride on the beautiful waters of Little Traverse Bay is to own one's own boat. Ferry boats and boats sight-seeing excursions commenced operating in 1874, were plentiful by the turn of the century and largely out of business by 1930. The automobile and the shift from tourism to settled summer communities were largely responsible.

**Bay View** was the first summer colony to get started, but others followed. By 1900 there were numbers of them on the shores of Little Traverse Bay and various inland lakes. Summer homes were being built at a rapid rate and the same people were returning to the north summer after summer. Souvenir-hunting tourists were a dime a dozen but the summer residents were looking for home furnishings, groceries and clothing. Petoskey was equal

to the challenge and blossomed out with proper shops to fit all needs. As a shopping center Petoskey had, still has, no equal in the north.

The automobile and the gradual exodus of people out of Petoskey hotels and rooming houses to cottages on the lakes was a sad blow to those in the hotel business. The Arlington, luxury hotel of the north and the beautiful "homey" **Cushman House** both burned and were not rebuilt. The **Perry**, now known as the **Perry-Davis**, of all the fine hotels during the first decade of 1900, is the only one still in business. They have, in the main, been replaced with motels.

Today Petoskey comprises an area of approximately four square miles and has a population of over 6,000. It has over 32 miles of paved streets, a good sewage disposal system and water supply. Both electrical and gas facilities are available for heat and light. It has excellent schools, a two-year college, churches of many denominations and a vast array of medical talent and facilities. Winter Sports activities, vigorously promoted by Petoskey in the 1920's and '30's, were renewed following **World War II** with the advent of outstanding ski areas in the north. The area now has national prominence as a winter, as well as summer playground.

Lucky are the year-rounder's who experience all seasons as they pursue their ordered course around the calendar of days. Sloppy spring-north slopes still patched with snow, deer coming out of swamps in herds to feed in clear meadows, trilliums in the woods. Joyful summer-sunshine and rain; hot days, cool nights; breezes, cooled by the big waters, fresh and pure; sailing and swimming time. Magnificent autumn, cool and serene. Trees in a breathless array of colors, yellow to deep red. And Indian summer, the "never-never" time of the year. Time to walk in the woods and hear the crackling of dry leaves underfoot before winter settles in. Bare branches lacing the skyline, snow sifting down, heralds winter. Icy blasts freeze the bay, skyrocket fuel bills, unpredictable winter-blizzards to rattle windows and quiver nerve-ends; sub-zero, bright, crisp, clear days; windless gray days when the sky is lost beyond the curtain of snow. On the ground the drifts pile up, but the big flakes drift down so slow and easy they seem pinned in the air. Shovel to get out, shovel to get home. And then it is spring again.

The endless variety of the days, the clear air, the landscape, gets in the blood and firmly roots generation upon generation to this spot. Fortunate are we for the vision and enterprise of the hardy few who first saw the sunset over Little Traverse Bay and built a town on the cliff and up the surrounding, terraced hills.

Petoskey, hub of a beautiful area, continues to serve it with all the commercial, business and professional skills at its command. It works hard to keep up 'with the times and thus far has succeeded rather well. Petoskey is a good place to live.

Written by Harriet Kilborn

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