

EX-RESIDENT BARON WALTER KEPHART

RECALLS PETOSKEY EARLY DAYS

EX-RESIDENT, WALTER KEPHART RECALLS DAYS

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By Betty Washburne, People Plus Editor



NEWS photo by G. Randall Goss

This is the house (above) where Walter Kephart was born March 18, 1896. An early photo of Kephart appears at the left.

Memories

Ex-resident recalls early days

The following information was obtained in a three-way telephone conversation to California between Robert Ramsdell, vice president of the Little Traverse Historical Society board of directors, Baron Walter Kephart and this writer. Much of the information tallies with museum documents and memorabilia. Ramsdell says the museum appreciates Kephart's personal insight and photos and documents sent by Kephart that are on file at the museum.

By BETTY WASHBURNE
People Plus editor

What was Petoskey like at the turn of the century?

Baron Walter Downing Kephart remembers it well. Now 93, Kephart spent his youth in Petoskey and left here in the 1920s for California.

Although he's now retired and living in San Anselmo, Calif., he returns to Petoskey every five years to re-acquaint himself with the area and take another look at the house at 615 Bay Street which he called "home" for many years.

Kephart went to Petoskey schools and grew up in what he refers to as the most beautiful place in the world.

In a recent telephone conversation, Kephart said, "My Petoskey heritage can't

See BARON, page 2

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Baron remembers his youth

BARON

Continued from page 1

be bought." He said he once visited Naples, Italy, and as he looked down at the bay from the top of a hill, he thought he was in Petoskey. "The only difference — there was an old castle with turrets (in Naples)," Kephart said. "Otherwise, the Bay of Naples is Petoskey over and over."

Kephart was in Petoskey in 1961, but his planned visit in 1966 had to be postponed when he became ill. Instead, he sent a little piece of Petoskey history to the Little Traverse Historical Society museum. A bundle of old photographs, many of them taken in the early 1900s of scenes in Petoskey, have been added to the museum's collection of memorabilia.

The house where Kephart grew up is now known as the Dean home. Vernie Dean and her husband, the late Ralph Dean, bought the home in 1936. Their children grew up there and Mrs. Dean still calls it home. When Kephart was in Petoskey in 1961, Mrs. Dean took him through the house.

Since his youth, Kephart has been an ardent collector of antiques and family history. For more than 60 years he researched the Kephart genealogy and its numerous branches. This search culminated in a 183-page family history. A copy of this is also on file at the Petoskey museum.

During his research, Kephart discovered he was sixth in a long line of male Kephart descendents to be named Walter and was also entitled to hold the dormant Franconian title of Baron Von (or de) Skioldung-Erlach.

Some of Kephart's earliest recollections of Petoskey are his early schooling. He recalls Winifred Rudiman's kindergarten. He remembers Irene Gordon, Petoskey resident, who also attended the Rudiman kindergarten. Gordon also recalls Kephart as being a very scholarly young man.

There wasn't a public kindergarten at that time, so parents, if they so desired, would enroll their children in the private kindergarten.

Kephart gives a lot of credit to his early school teachers. Miss Dean, his seventh and eighth grade teacher later became Mrs. Jessup and taught at Petoskey for many years. He also recalls his music teacher, Mrs. Langworthy and teachers Miss Everest and Miss Wheelock.

Kephart, who graduated from Ferris Institute (now Ferris State University) and Wharton School of Business in Pennsylvania, retired from Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Co. as division executive in 1955. He also was a businessman and held positions in several corporations before retirement. In later years, he became an accomplished artist and credits the late Frances Pailthorp, longtime Petoskey art teacher, for his interest in painting. He took private lessons from Pailthorp and in later years, took art classes at Marin College in California. He received many prizes for his oil paintings. He also was quite a dancer and at one time appeared in the chorus of a Fred Astaire movie. The photo that accompanies this story was taken at that time.

Winter was a fun time for the youthful Kephart in Petoskey. He recalls ice skating and ice boating on the bay — skiing and tobogganing down the steep hills in Petoskey. He recalls the business community and the stores operated by the Rosenthals, Frymans, Levinsons and Wellings. The early hotels were a mecca for a burgeoning resort trade. Many people from the cities came north for their health as the clean air of Northern Michigan was particularly enticing to people suffering from asthma and hay fever. Hotels and boarding homes would be booked months in advance of the hay fever season and families would return year after year.

Kephart recalls the Arlington

Hotel, the Cushman House, King Hotel and the Perry Hotel. He was a good friend of Will H. Peck, whose father ran the Arlington.

"In the summer, I practically stayed there," Kephart said. That hotel almost cost him his life. When the Arlington caught fire in 1915, Kephart was in the building. "The hotel hadn't opened yet — they had been painting inside and I think painting rags may have caused the fire."

"I was in the back of the hotel going through the kitchen (to get out) when the ceiling fell down. That's the last I knew until I woke up and my brother was carrying me home."

When Kephart was a young boy, transportation in Petoskey was mostly horse drawn. He remembers lots of boats on the bay and ferry boats taking passengers to Harbor Springs with stops at Menomauqua and Wequetonsing. Boats also took passengers to Charlevoix and return.

Kephart remembers one of the first automobiles he saw in Petoskey. The year was 1914 and a red roadster, owned by a summer visitor, always drew a crowd when it was parked in the city.

Kephart remembers that Petoskey had quite a city zoo at one time. He remembers elk, pheasants, rare birds and such things. "It hurt my feelings when I saw that was gone," said Kephart. He also grieved when he discovered the old court house in Petoskey had been torn down. "It was such a beautiful old landmark," said Kephart. "They're restoring those old buildings out here," he remarked.

Kephart said when his sister June was married in 1914, it was the social event of the year. In those days, "the three Junes" ruled Petoskey society, said Kephart. His sister June, June Rose and June Fallass comprised the trio.

The three Junes had quite a following, Kephart said.

Some other names he mentioned were Edith Quinlan, Willis Wachtel, Frank Kephart, Floy Mesick, Marion and Milton Quaintance, Willard Hopkins, the Reinheitz sisters, Glen Hamill, Guy Hankey, Grace Arner, Charles Harwood, Rose Moyer, Bessie Hopkins, Lew Sherman, Rena Welling, Carl Crawford, Gertrude George and Ray George, C.W. Christopher and Norman Rice.

"They all left an imprint on Petoskey," said Kephart.

Kephart's father was a druggist and owned the Central Drug Store which was located at 409 E. Lake St. where Symon's General Store stands today. Kephart remembers working in his father's store when he was a young man and also working as a laborer at the cement plant which was founded by the Galster family.

He recalls the Petoskey Opera House built by H.O. Rose and Guy Harwood which was located on Bay Street just east of Howard. He remembers travelling to Bay View on the "dummy" train and says his grandmother was one of the early Bay View pioneers. She and her son, August Kephart, who had asthma, would travel to Bay View each summer.

Even at the turn of the century, Bay View was noted for its theatrical productions. The Ben Greet Woodland Players, an English company, put on marvelous Shakespearean plays, said Kephart. This was before the John M. Hall auditorium was built but the players returned for several seasons and sometimes would perform as many as five plays a visit.

"Petoskey used to have a motto — 'There's Only One Petoskey'" said Kephart, "I like that — it's true!"

Kephart says he is planning a trip back to Petoskey in 1991.