

BRIGHTON AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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“Here Just To Be Here”

George H. Ratz stepped off the four o’clock D.N.&L. with a calmer than usual look on his face. He held a leather satchel in one hand and a paper bag full of black cherries from the Eastern Market for his mother in the other. Exactly one week had passed since he said his farewells to his colleagues at the Treasury Department in Washington. He enjoyed the excitement of life in the capital but, truth told, his decision to return home was not that hard. Now approaching their seventies, his parents were slowing down and needed help. The “son” in George B. Ratz and Son was about to take over ownership of the family business at the corner of Hyne and Main.

George strolled leisurely down Main Street taking everything in that he remembered seeing as a small boy when he went to town with his parents and sisters on Saturday evening shopping trips. He crossed the trestle bridge over the Millpond, stopping to pause at the millrace to the south that had captivated him even then. “I am content to be home, and a small town is where I belong,” he thought. Just then, a passenger from the train who had been following him tapped on his shoulder. “I beg your pardon, son. I trust that you will not mind my tracing your steps from the station...James Oliver Curwood is my name and I am here just to be here.”

“Very pleased to meet you, sir, but should I know you from somewhere? And what, may I ask, brings you to Brighton?”

“As I previously stated, I am here just to be here. I am a poet and journalist—perhaps you will not have recognized my name. I was told by one of my colleagues at the State Journal that this village is most representative of the quaint beauty of Michigan towns. I have not been misled, I can assure you. Stand at this spot on the bridge for a few moments and you will understand why!”

George was puzzled by what the stranger said. He was used to the hustle and bustle of city life, to the effusiveness of people who passed you by every day, just a short distance away from the monoliths a nation had erected to honor its heroes of the past. What was so special about this vantage point near Main and West Streets that would prompt someone to say he was “here just to be here?”

What Curwood, one of Michigan’s foremost writers of the day, said made sense indeed. To the north of Main lay the town hall, its red, white and blue American flag with forty-six stars waving from an overhead balcony. At the summit of the hill where it stood was the red-bricked St. Paul’s Church. Trimmed in modest Victorian gingerbread and set off by a quaint belfry, it was built shortly after the village was incorporated. Anchoring it like buttresses were the slopes of the Old Village Cemetery. Most of the town fathers, early residents and Civil War veterans slept there peacefully—the Lees, Maltbys, Cases and Appletons, to name a few--some distinguished, some less so.

Marked by a modest stone just outside St. Paul’s sacristy was the grave of John McKinney, a former slave who was welcomed in Brighton as a freedman. Sadly, the village elders denied a burial plot to the man who was officially emancipated by the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution until the Rev. Dr. Wm. Clark, St. Paul’s benefactor, intervened to secure a final resting place for him. Below the cemetery were the shores of the Millpond, where the shapes of modest white frame houses and livestock grazing near Grand River Road were reflected. Rows of sturdy false-fronted stores on Main, Baetcke’s Bank and Westphal’s Hardware flanking them, lay directly to the east, and the Presbyterian Church’s tall steeple loomed overhead on Piety Hill.

The quiet of the moment was broken by whistling sounds made by lacy weeping willow tree branches over the walkway. Ore Creek surged underneath the two men, flowing to the frothy spillway that diverted it at Brighton Mills, there to be released to the rocky flats beyond. “I am much obliged to you for your insight, Mr. Curwood,” George told the man who after a few moments seemed less a stranger than old acquaintance. “I believe that this view is what drew me back home more than anything else.”

(This is an story from the book, “Con Weber’s Brighton – Portrait of Family, Church and Nation 1832-1942,” written by Paul W. Weber, a former resident of Brighton. This and Paul’s current book, “Remarkably Brighton—Still in Touch” are available on-line at various booksellers.)