

## LIFE ON THE ISLAND

When we first came to the Island we had absolutely nothing except some household goods, tools and a team of oxen. We came too late in 1884 to attempt any crop. Father was a good carpenter and obtained work at Fort Totten and used to come home to the claim every Saturday night. Mother was an excellent nurse and used to be gone as long as three weeks at a time. This left my brother Leonard and myself rather homeless. I was only six and Leonard four and a half years older. It was decided that we should live with my brother, George, who was twenty years older than myself. He was a hard worker and believed every one else should work. We disliked it very much while we lived there because we had to follow the cattle, during the day, barefooted. The Island was covered with brush, briars and nettles and our legs were a mass of scabs all summer long. I don't believe George took into consideration the fact that we were pretty small teens to follow the work he always laid out.

One summer he had a large garden and it was our duty to hoe that garden. I don't suppose there is a place in the U.S.A. where it gets hotter in the summer than on that Island. No breeze stirs and the heat of the sun reflects from the ground and trees until neither man nor beast can stand to work in the middle of the day.

We were particularly interested in the melon patch and watched their growth with a longing eye. When they turned ripe George selected a few and took them to the house. We were given a small feed on melons but never enough. While in conversation one day with Frank Hoadley, our neighbor boy about the age of Leonard, he sympathized with us and said we did all the hoeing and should have all the melons we wanted. He said, "Boys, I'll

*This excerpt is from the article "Recollections and Reminiscences of Graham's Island" by Usher L. Burdick.*

tell you what to do. Go out some night and take as many as you want. Eat what you can and hide the rest in the brush for future use. I will go with you and help on the job." That sounded good to me as all I could think of were those luscious melons.

We met that very night, according to agreement, and gathered about twenty melons. We ate what we could and carried the rest into the brush. We must have had a guilty conscience because we went to our own home that night instead of sleeping in George's hay loft, our usual place in summer. We picked out the right day—Saturday—for we knew Dad would come from Fort Totten that night and would be home.

Father arrived and we were jubilant, as we always were, over his coming but we were particularly so that night. We went to bed in our own house and enjoyed a real secure slumber.

About sun-rise some one rapped on the door and, lo and behold, there stood George with a good sized ash sapling in his hand. Father asked him what brought him around so early Sunday morning. "I came," said George, "to collect for the melons these kids of yours stole last night. I intend to give them a thrashing that they will remember," and he stepped into the house with his whip. Dad was a very good natured man, but he was all man. He had gone through too much to be afraid of anyone. As George stepped in father arose and said, "Just a minute, George, before you start whipping. If there is to be any whipping done around this shack I will attend to that myself." This didn't seem to impress George and he kept coming closer to us. Dad's anger was up and he told George if he took another step forward he would have a man to fight instead of just whipping kids. George knew Dad better than we did and this last statement of Dad's had its effect. When the fuss quieted down, Dad said that he would investigate the matter fully and if we were guilty he would certainly deal out the punishment that he thought just under the circumstances.

Well, we were saved from an awful beating and after breakfast Dad looked us straight in the eye and said, "Boys, did you steal George's melons?" We didn't even hesitate in our answer of "NO." We believed at the time, and still think, we had an interest

in the melons and if it came to court we would be upheld. Along about noon Frank Hoadley came strolling along and the first thing Dad asked him was, "Were you with these boys last night?" "Yes, sir," said Frank. The next question was, "Did you help them steal George's melons?" The answer Frank made was a good one. He said, "Mr. Burdick, I didn't help these boys steal any melons and what is more I haven't seen a water melon this year."

That ended Dad's investigation and the incident drifted away to the forgotten past. Years and years later, and after I was graduated from the University of Minnesota, Dad met me at Minnewaukan with a team and buggy and we drove to the Island. We were reminiscing about the early days on the Island when Dad turned and looked at me and said, "I have always been curious to find out the truth about that melon deal of George's. I would like to know if you had any hand in taking those melons?" I said, "Dad we took the melons, but figured we had as much interest in them as George did. I have just been graduated from the law school and it is elementary that one who toils and cultivates the soil of another is entitled to his share of the crop." "Is that what the law says, Usher?" said Dad. "That's the law," I said, "and no possible question about it." Dad said, "By humphrey, I should have studied law myself, because I knew all the time you took the melons but thought it served George about right. I agree with the law."

We had had some differences with brother George right along. A few weeks before the melon deal we had planned to attend the greatly heralded Fourth of July at Grand Harbor, about eleven miles north of our place. We gathered up a few pennies here and there, by doing odd jobs for people, and were all set to take in the event of all events in those days. I remember John Hunter told me he would give me a nickel to try to ride one of his suckling colts. I got that nickel.

When the morning of the Fourth came, big hearted George sent us out to hoe the potatoes. That seemed like the crack of doom to me because I wanted to see the Fourth. My brother Leonard wasn't easily turned from what he intended to do but said nothing to me until we had hoed down the field and out of sight of the house. He then threw his hoe in the brush and said, "Come on,

Usher, we are going to the Fourth." We made a circle through the woods and lit out for the Hoadley farm, expecting that Frank would go with us. He didn't go but I do not recall what prevented him from doing so. An old man named "Deafy" was working as a hired man at the Hoadley farm. When he found out where we were going he volunteered to go with us. We started, at once, to cover those eleven miles in the hot sand and dirt, barefooted. It got to be a dreadful journey before we reached Grand Harbor. I have never seen a road, not even that across the deserts of Arizona, Nevada and California, the equal to the road we travelled that day. We stopped at the Whitten farm, about half-way to Grand Harbor, and Kate Whitten—who was the only daughter in a motherless family—insisted that we stop for a while and have lunch. She must have been the best cook in the country for I never tasted any better food before or since.

We finished our trip and arrived at the Great Celebration. Our finances were at a low ebb. Leonard had fifteen cents and I had John Hunter's nickel and one more. I made two purchases immediately after arriving. I paid five cents for a bunch of fire crackers and bought two big oranges with the other nickel. I remember how disappointed I was when I discovered that one of the oranges was partly decayed and valueless. I ate the other orange in a hurry so I could start in with the fire crackers, but in my hurry I lit the fuse on a cracker before I got it extricated from the bunch and the whole thing went up in a matter of seconds. I presume it wasn't ten minutes, after I landed in Grand Harbor, until I was broke flat. What a feeling to be at a great celebration—broke. Leonard saw a roulette wheel in operation and went over to put a dime on it. I protested and told him he might lose it. "Well," he said, "we might as well be broke as the way we are," and at that he placed his dime on Number Six. Away went the dial of the wheel in its whirling course around the board. I never took a breath until that needle stopped. It stopped on Number Six and the man running the wheel handed Leonard a silver dollar. I was too over-joyed to speak. Now we were rich when a moment before we were poor. Leonard was smart enough not to play again and I don't think he ever played a roulette wheel after that.

We had more good luck in store for us. There was to be a horse race of a half mile winding up through the streets of Grand Harbor. The Stoesser boys had a good running horse and so did Jim Hunter from Poplar Grove. Hunter's mare was a thoroughbred and looked the part, but he could get no one to ride her. She was a quick starter, as all good race horses are, but she was also headstrong. As she would leave the post she would make such furious lunges that none of the boys would attempt to ride her. Jim saw Leonard standing in the crowd and said, "Kid, I will give you \$2.00 to ride this mare and half of what she wins." "It's a deal," said Leonard, and he climbed upon the mare. The judges had some difficulty in starting this race and the horses scored three or four times. Finally the word, "Go," was shouted from the grand stand and that mare went out like a sky-rocket. Leonard had a handful of her mane and was able to withstand her first lunges. She straightened out and ran like a machine and won the race by half of Grand Harbor's main street.

The money won was \$10.00 so Leonard wound up with \$7.00 to the good, making his winnings \$8.00 for the day.

Jay Wirtz, later of Leeds, lived at Grand Harbor then and was standing in the crowd when the horses came through to the finish of the race. The stirrup from one of the horses struck him in the temple and painfully injured him.

We had another treat in store for us that day. There was to be a great speaker there to address the people—the Honorable Martin M. Johnson of Petersburg, Dakota. I got up as close to the speaker's stand as I could. That was the first public speech I had ever heard and of course Mr. Johnson made a great speech—he was noted for that. I was all taken up with that speech and decided right there that some day I would be a public speaker.

This was in 1886. I never saw Martin M. Johnson again until 1909 when he was elected United States Senator from North Dakota by the Legislature of which I was Speaker of the House.

This Fourth was such a wonderful day that we forgot all about going home until midnight. To start walking home, eleven miles at midnight, was quite an undertaking. Fortunately for us, Joe

Whitten, brother of Kate Whitten, mentioned herein, had come to the celebration by row boat up Grand Harbor Bay. He volunteered to take us all back to his place so we walked down to the water's edge, about two miles south of Grand Harbor, and started down the bay towards home. A terrible storm came up that night and we were forced to shore two or three times. We finally arrived at the Whitten farm at daylight and went to bed. Kate didn't have many provisions on hand—no one had in those days—but she did cook pie-plant or rhubarb, and she served a delicious breakfast of pancakes and rhubarb sauce. We stayed there all night and walked home the next day.

In 1887 we did not attend any celebration, but in 1888 we attended the celebration at our county seat, Minnewaukan. That proved to be another great day for the Burdick kids.