

THE LEELANAU ENTERPRISE, Thursday, July 11, 2002

Omena's varied past: 150 year history includes missionary, big resorts.

By Cymbre Sommerville Foster of The Enterprise staff

During much of Omena's 150-year history, the town has defined itself as a haven for resorters. The tiny town on the bend in the bend of the road had a very different inception.

Omena was first known as "New Mission," a village founded as a result of the revised State Constitution of 1850. The document extended rights of citizenship to persons of Indian descent who were not members of a tribe.

Problems had developed at Old Mission, located near the tip of the peninsula that bisects east and west Grand Traverse Bay. An influx of white settlers threatened to push out Indian residents who were only given use of their land for five years as a result of an 1836 treaty. It didn't matter that resident Indians thought the arrangement was permanent; they soon found that they needed a new home.

An 1850 treaty had given Indians the right to purchase property, leading Reverend Peter Dougherty, the first Protestant missionary in the Grand Traverse region, to suggest that Natives set aside a portion of their government payment to acquire new property. Since land on Old Mission Peninsula was unavailable, they looked westward.

Chief Ahgosa, a member of Dougherty's mission, and several other Ottawa and Chippewa families bought land on the bluff at Omena Point about a mile east of where the village now stands. They arrived to find that Chief Shabwasung and his Ottawa band [Chippewa, according to "The History of Leelanau Township, p.9.] were already encamped on the point to the north of the bay; property that Chief Ahgosa and his families had purchased. Ahgosa settled farther north, and his village became known as Ahgosatown. Both bands became part of New Mission, eventually named Omena.

In 1852 Dougherty followed them by sloop, which also carried the belongings of Lewis Miller and his family. Also on board was a 17-year old from Racine, Wisconsin named a George A. Craker.

"I believe they were a unique community relative to others in Leelanau County because of what the U.S. government did in 1852," said Bill Marbach, an Omena resident and historian. Marbach's father, a Presbyterian minister, came to Omena in August, 1928 to serve in the church, and returned for the following 36 summers to preach.

Dougherty established the New Mission School on 600 acres at Omena Heights that was purchased by the Board of the Presbyterian Missions in 1853. He built a two-story building with lumber brought from Old Mission, and began teaching some 50 children in the fall. Children lived and studied at the school, which ran until 1868.

Craker taught farming at the mission school, as he and his family became active members in Dougherty's church. In 1858, Dougherty built the Grove Hill New Mission Church, which was later named the Omena Presbyterian Church where services are still held each summer. Today it stands as the oldest Protestant church in Leelanau County.

The New Mission manse was erected the same year a short distance east of the church. It is said that the bell in the church was cast from pennies contributed by Indians. To the right of the church is an Indian cemetery, where the first interment was made in April 17, 1855.

" According to the early settlers, Rev. Dougherty was responsible for the present name of the village. It was his custom, when approached by the Indians with information or a question, to reply in the Indian tongue, "O-me-nah?" which meant, "Is it so?" This amused the Indians, who gave him that nickname and afterwards suggested that the village be given the same name," wrote Edmund M. Wittell in "100 Years of Leelanau."

In the meantime, Lewis Miller began a trading post in 1852 and the first post office was established in 1859 in the boardinghouse of Aaron Page. [Mary Egeler, 15 years old daughter of John Egler, Jr. from Wuerttemberg, worked for Lewis Miller at the trading post in 1860.]

In 1868, Dougherty sold the mission farm to Valentine Miller, who was from Iowa. Miller built the first dock, where large steamers carrying people and crops and wood came and went. The dock was destroyed by a storm in 1880.

It was the end of Dougherty's mission that signaled a new beginning for Omena. The mission ceased operations because of financial difficulties. In 1884, the schoolhouse was sold to a Cincinnati businessman who converted it into The Leelanau Hotel. He also added two other buildings and built five summer cottages. It was operated until 1914, and then closed. The facilities were turned into a girls' camp in 1923, and in 1929 was torn down.

With the mission gone, the future of the church was questioned. Indians worked to keep the building standing, according to Betty Armstrong, the great-granddaughter of George A. Craker. Armstrong has spent hours researching courthouse records and other documents related to Omena, and contributed a great deal to the "History of Leelanau Township" book.

"When the mission was abandoned, the Indians kept the church alive. My great grandfather wrote, "Peter Dougherty has left us and I don't know what to do, the building is old and in need of paint...'But they just went on together and sang and prayed there even without a pastor.' It's really a marvelous story," said Armstrong.

She fondly recalled Chief Ahgosa's son, David, and his grandchildren Jacob and Paul, who served as interpreters in the church for Indians who didn't speak English. "One of my first memories as a child is Chief Ahgosa's son, David, sitting in church every Sunday with a patch over one eye, as one of the interpreters." One of her favorite people was chief Ahgosa's grandson Jacob. "He taught in the church every Sunday morning. He was one of the most wonderful people I have ever met."

Over decades the Indians of Ahgosatown eventually died or moved away. Armstrong clearly remembers the rows of simple houses that lined the shore and the opposite side of the road. "They never went into farming, but many of the younger people went across the bay to work in the lumber business," she said. As homeowners died, their houses were sold to cherry farmers. The village slowly evolved into cherry orchards. The last houses were torn down around 1960, recalled Armstrong.

Omena's downtown area began in 1883, when John Anderson opened a mercantile business. His son built a store with an icehouse where cakes of ice from Omena Bay were packed each winter. He also opened an ice cream parlor down the street, and would move the post office there in the summer. Paul Barth built a general store in 1889 to service big steamers. The three businesses were housed in the buildings that comprise downtown Omena today.

Anderson's store operated for 47 years. [Miles and Bea Kimmerly later owned this store. I worked there during the summer of 1955, stocking shelves, serving customers, and getting ice from the icehouse.] In 1976, it became the home of the present-day Tamarack Craftsman Gallery. Barth's store remains as the Omena Bay Country Store.

One of the bright spots in Omena's history was the addition of Solle's Bookstore, a literary oasis for residents and travelers. Opened in the 1940's, Mr. Solle came to Omena from Chicago with his wife and son to recover from a breakdown. When he first arrived, he built a house, which is still standing. At first he took it easy, but eventually began selling books from his large private collection.

"He was a big book man and really knew his books," recalled Armstrong. Eventually Solle built the bookstore, and every day he shipped boxes of books all over the world.

"It was an amazing bookstore for a place like Omena to have," she said. "He had all of the best books available." It was typical to see Solle walking the short distance every day to the post office to mail books. "I think he kept the post office going by the kind of business he supplied," said Marbach.

After Solle died his son [Gordon who married Rhea Putnam] ran the bookstore until he became mentally ill and was committed to the Traverse City State Hospital where he died. [A big treat for me was to spend the day at the bookstore with Uncle Gordon, wallowing in books!] Mrs. Solle moved back to Chicago to live with her sister. The bookstore became a private residence.

The transformation of Omena into a resort destination began in the late 1880s. Hotels originally built for lumbermen and businessmen were gradually expanded and became summer resorts. At one time eight large resort complexes flourished. "If you look at the size of Omena relative to the kind and number of hotels, it had a bit of uniqueness about it," said Marbach.

In 1872, stage and sleigh service with four-hour trips to and from Traverse City. Railroad service began in 1903, connecting Traverse City to Northport, with a stop in Omena. Passenger trains continued until 1948 and freight until 1970.

"Resorters originally came by boat from Chicago, and could take the train to Traverse City, then take a surrey the small bit to Omena," said Marbach. In its heyday, Omena was the preferred destination by the well to do, counting Henry Ford among regular visitors. "Omena had these hotels from the 1890s to the end of WWII. And there were a lot of very substantial, wealthy people coming up." Its also said Omena was visited severa1 times by General George Armstrong Custer whose wife had family in the area. "It was also visited by at least two Civil War generals as well," said Marbach.

Hotels and summer cottages sprang up as word spread. In the early 1900s, the Oaks Hotel was built and was a popular spot until it burned in the 1940s. Nearby was the Clovers hotel. "This was a really vital operation for quite awhile," said Marbach. [I worked at Clover Lodge the last part of the summer of 1955, after the close of cherry picking season eliminated my job at Kimmerley's store. It was a life-changing experience, listening to jazz and watching the musical Oklahoma performed.] The buildings were eventually torn down.

Also during the period, another prominent building was erected on the East shore. Called the Omena Pavilion, it was built in 1911 as a social center for summer residents. In 1943, the summer colony created a yacht club, and took over use of the building. In 1952, the organization took on a new name, the Omena-Traverse Yacht Club.

The Omena Inn was originally home of Rev. Dougherty, and eventually became a summer camp for children. It was closed and remained empty until being purchased and returned to its former glory as a single-family dwelling. Built in 1898, the Sunset Lodge was another large resort that flourished. Sunset Lodge is one of the few buildings that survived; it has been transformed into a bed and breakfast.

Unlike many of the county's towns, Omena never housed factories or fabrication plants. It was probably World War II that signaled the end of Omena's popularity as a vacation destination. "During the war, there was gas rationing and people couldn't get up here. Then after the war with the automobile and the airplane, people could go other places, and it changed the whole thing," said Marbach.

Armstrong agreed: "I've always said it was the car that changed things. People could buy a Ford for \$800 and they started to travel." Despite its ups and downs, Omena survived and today is home to year-around and seasonal residents.

"It's a strange thing about Omena," said Armstrong. "It has a strong hold on people throughout the generations. Some of those who are coming are fourth generation. It's a place where people think about the generations, and what people gave to the community."

#### Rinaldo Putnam Purchased His Farm In Omena From General George Custer

From a Brief History of the Villa Marquette, "In 1936, Charles Cloud gave 131 acres of land to the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus. This property came from his Mother's (Julia Cloud) estate and included 200 feet of bay frontage, the Rock House, Tower House, Tool Shed and Caretaker's house. The Tower House was originally the RINALDO D. E. PUTNAM home. [My great-great grandfather.] In the late 1860's and

early 1870's, the property was owned by General George Armstrong Custer and his wife Libbie."

The Registrar of Deeds at the County Courthouse in Leland (July 2002), Mrs. Sue Calhoun Stoffel, confirmed that General Custer had owned property in Omena at that time. She said they had records back to 1858 in hard cover, not easy to read, but open to anyone that was interested. She then said that a Dale Stowe had done extensive research on this a few years ago. Dale Stowe confirmed that Daniel Bacon had owned the property, and when he died in 1866 he left it to his daughter Elizabeth, his only child. It was the entire Town of Omena; part of Omena Point and around the Bay to where the Villa is now. He said, yes, he had seen an entry in the books that Rinaldo D. E. Putnam had purchased the property from General Custer between 1871/73. He also stated the originals were sent to Monroe, Michigan (south of Detroit) to be signed.

Dale Stowe related to Thelma Putnam Mayham that there is documentation that Custer had visited Omena. He traveled to Traverse City and took a boat to Omena. It is also recorded that he visited with George A. Craker, an early settler in Omena. This could be been in the period of September 1867 and September 1868 when he was on suspension.

As to how Gen. Custer got control of his wife's property, we can only assume that it was when she became ill and couldn't administer her estate. We don't know how and when Rinaldo Putnam came into contact with Gen. Custer.

George Armstrong Custer was born December 6, 1839 in New Rumley, Ohio. After graduation from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. (1861), Custer served in the Civil War, attached to the staff of General George B. McClellan. At 23 he became brigadier general of volunteers in command of a Michigan cavalry brigade.

In November 1862, Custer went home to Monroe, Michigan to await further orders. There was a party on Thanksgiving Day; he met Elizabeth Clift Bacon, born August 9, 1842 in Monroe, Michigan. She is the daughter of Daniel Stanton Bacon and Eleanor Sophia Page. Daniel was born about 1810 in Woodstock, Connecticut, and died March 18, 1866 in Monroe, Michigan where he is buried. He was a Probate Court Judge. George married Elizabeth Bacon on February 9, 1864, at the 1st Presbyterian Church, in Monroe, Michigan. George Custer later divorced Elizabeth; as far as we can determine, she never married again. She died April 4, 1933 in New York City (91 years old), and was buried April 1933, at West Point Military Academy.

Gen. Custer distinguished himself in numerous Civil War battles, and, during the closing days of the war, his relentless pursuit of the Confederate commander in chief, General Robert E. Lee, helped to hasten Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Virginia on April 9, 1865.

In 1866 Custer was ordered to Kansas to take part in General Winfield S. Hancock's expedition to awe hostile Plains Indians with the military strength of the U.S. Army. Instead of waiting for supplies to be loaded at Ft. Harker, he went to Ft. Riley to visit his sick wife and was court-martial led in 1867 at Ft. Leavenworth and suspended for one year without pay. He went home to Monroe, Michigan where he waited out his suspension.

Increased hostility of the Plains Indians, however, led to his reinstatement, and in September 1868 he rejoined the 7th Cavalry in Kansas. In November his command surprised and destroyed the Cheyenne chief Black Kettle's village on the Washita River.

Custer evidently divorced from Elizabeth about 1867 as he married an Indian woman, Monasetah, on November 27, 1868 in Texas. Their child is Yellow Bird Custer, b. 1869, died date unknown.

In 1874 Custer led an expedition to investigate rumors of gold deposits in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The region had been recognized by treaty as the sacred hunting ground of the Indians, primarily the Sioux and Cheyenne. The gold rush was on, however, and the U.S. government directed that all Indians move onto reservations by Jan. 31, 1876, or be deemed hostile.

Custer, now a lieutenant colonel under the command of General Alfred Terry, was in command of one column of a projected two-pronged attack near the Little Bighorn River in Montana. Custer was ordered not to use the trail discovered by Reno to avoid forewarning the Indians of their presence, otherwise he was given freedom to act as he deemed appropriate. Believing there to be 800 -1000 Indians, each command was given the okay to attack the Indians if they came upon them by surprise rather than let them escape.

On the 24th, Custer disobeyed Terry's orders and followed the Indian trail, arriving on the night of June 24, 1876. At around three o'clock in the afternoon, Custer received erroneous information that the Indians were attempting to flee. Terry's column was to join him in two days. Instead of waiting for Terry, Custer decided to attack a village of Indians in the valley of the Little Big Horn on June 25. Of the more than 200 men who followed Custer into battle, not one lived to tell the story; including two of his brothers, Thomas and Boston, his nephew, Harry Reed, and his brother-in-law, Lieutenant James Calhoun. A single horse, Comanche, survived and for many years appeared, saddled but riderless, in 7th Cavalry parades.

The bodies were initially buried at the battle site, but a year later the army returned to exhume and relocate them as per their families. George Armstrong Custer was re-buried with military honors at West Point, October 10, 1877.

Source: "7th Cavalry Regiment Early History"