

## **John Kroner on Cornelius Berdan**

As we go through life some people touch us more than others. Neil Berdan was one who has left some interesting stories of the days that used to be.

His parents bought the property of 33 acres where the Cavallini School is today around 1898. Neil was about 6 years old and his brother George was ten years older. George was the farmer, with his father, while Neil worked away from home. Some of the places where he worked were Erie Brakeshoe in Mahwah as a fireman on the railroad from Jersey City to Port Jervis and in later years as a fireman in a large Paterson silk mill.

When World War I began, there were seven called from our town. Neil was one of the first to go to France. After he came home from the war he began working at the Erie Brakeshoe in Mahwah. He had no car at that time and he walked to work. Went west from his home between where Bogert and Reynolds schools are today to today's Aspen Way, Fawn hill to Stoneledge to Carlough Road. The walk so far was through fields, lanes, and woodland. The rest of the way was mostly dirt roads to Mahwah.

When Claire Tholl made maps of early Upper Saddle River and a few of the surrounding towns, Neil was a great help to her. Many phone calls with questions and answers went between them.

One of the stories I recall from Neil was the Indian beech tree on Hidden Glen Road where the Indians who worked on the Hopper farm (Cider Hill) would go under during a thunderstorm. "No record of a beech tree ever being struck by lightning," he said.

Another story: the original road toward Ramsey went west between the Bogert and Reynolds Schools to the base of the hill, then south to present Lake Street just east of Forest Ridge today. In 1823 the road was built west as it is today. The horse-shoe turn was made in 1923. I remember that.

He knew all the mills along the Saddle River from the New York State line down to Saddle River. There were nine in Upper Saddle River. He knew the names of the owners and which were sawmills and grist mills. One of the last mills to operate was the Hopper mill on the east side of the river opposite from the Berdan home. After a rainstorm and the river was high, they would begin sawing logs at daylight. "I could hear the singing of the saw while I was still in bed," he remembered.

Speaking of his school days, one of the best teachers he had was Joseph Ware. In his early years Ware went west with George Custer's 7th Cavalry as a schoolteacher for the officer's children. Fortunately, Ware returned east before the massacre at Little Big Horn in Montana where the entire 7th Cavalry, 264 men including Custer, lost their lives, June 26, 1876.

Joseph Ware taught school in Upper Saddle River in the early 1900s. "The only way you can educate yourself is by reading." He told this to his class many times. Neil never forgot it.

It was in the latter part of Neil's life that he became seriously interested in Indian artifacts and began reading about them. He had many books on Indians. He would come to our farm looking for arrowheads after a rain. On cultivated fields the soil was dark because of

the rain but the stones dried off and were light gray. Easy to spot an arrowhead if there was one. He traveled all the way over to Tappan and even up to my brother Fred's farm in Cairo, New York, Greene County.

Some days he was lucky and some days not. In Upper Saddle River he found the most in the Hess Court area. Clair Tholl says there was an Indian encampment there.

What he will be most remembered for will be his collection of over 500 arrowheads, spearheads and other artifacts that he gave to the Historical Society. They are priceless.

If I could describe his life as I knew him, it would be four words. Interesting, honest, truthful and sincere. These are the things I remember of Neil.

Thanks for the memories. John Kroner.

#### Mr. Berdan's Letters to Claire Tholl

When Claire Tholl was working on her history and historic map of Upper Saddle River, she wrote letters to Mr. Berdan asking questions. She saved his answers, which her family donated to the Historical Society. The following are excerpts from those letters which illuminate an Upper Saddle River from a different day and time.

10/1/64

Dear Mrs. Tholl:

You will notice on your map on East Saddle River Road the lands of A.A. Hopper. Mr. Hopper died in the year of 1912 at the age of 82. He often told me that when his grandfather was a boy, the Indians were still in Saddle River. His grandfather used to tell him that when the electrical storms came in the summer time, the Indians always went under a beech tree south of what is now Hidden Glen Road by the edge of the brook. It was one of the largest beech trees that I knew of.

The Hopper family had their first saw mill on the same brook. Then it became so that they could only operate the mill in the winter time when the water was plentiful. Then they went and built a mill on the main Saddle River brook. [The mill mentioned in the article on page 6 on eels].

Sincerely, Cornelius Berdan

10/64

Dear Mrs. Tholl:

Now we will get to the five stone houses [in Upper Saddle River that burned].

House #1 stood on the present day lands of Harry Himsel [Ranch Road] at the foot of the hill. Burned about 1902. House #2 stood on present day lands of Mr. John Kroner, formerly A. Smith property. Present Kroner house stands on the same site on East Saddle River Road. Burned about 1903. House #3 stood on Lake Street north side formerly lands of Terwilliger [opposite Union Avenue]. Burned about 1924. House #4 stood corner of West Saddle River Road and Sparrowbush Road on the north side south of where present house is. A family lives there now by the name of Morris. Burned about 1900. Belonged to Mr. William Post. House #5 stood on West side of West Saddle River Road. When I was a boy it belonged to Martin Tice. Burned about 1920.

Sincerely, Cornelius Berdan

Dear Mrs. Tholl:

Yes, I have seen a lot of changes in the Borough. I was only five years of age when my Father bought the farm in 1898. I lived there sixty-three years.

In my last letter about houses burning in U.S.R. I left this one out. I saw this myself and what I see I have to believe. Our neighbor's cat had kittens in their cellar. One day the cat carried the four kittens down to our place and put them in our barn. Two days after that the house burned. How did the cat know the house was going to burn?

When Fred Filer told you I did a lot of trapping he told you right. But as for me walking to the city, that he is wrong. I walked to Ramsey to get the train for New York. And I not only had skunk pelts. I had mink, muskrats, raccoons and foxes.

I used to sell all my furs to one of the leading raw fur houses on West 29th Street in the heart of the raw fur district.

In those days the raw fur business was flourishing but today it is nothing.

Sincerely, Cornelius Berdan

12/13/67

Dear Mrs. Tholl:

Yes, you are so right. The pond on the south side of the road was built by George Richardson when he bought the property. At that time there was no electric in the borough. So he built a hydroelectric plant in there to make his own electric. Shortly after the Rockland Electric Co. came in and I do not think he ever used it much.

Sincerely, Cornelius Berdan

2/16/68

Dear Mrs. Tholl:

In regards to the Richardson dam, Mr. Richardson bought the property in 1906 or 07 [on the east side of West Saddle River Road almost to Hillside Avenue]. What year the dam was built I cannot say. But I do remember it being built. It was built by Roberts & Straut Mason Contractors of Suffern, NY and they have been long out of business.

Sincerely, Cornelius Berdan

5/2/68

Dear Mrs. Tholl:

My great grandfather was born in 1816 and was married in 1844 and did not teach school any more after that. From then on he took over the farm in Glen Rock which my great grandmother fell heir to.

Sometime if you happen to see Mrs. Goetschius ask her if she can ever recall of ever hearing her father say where the school was located when he attended school.

In looking in a book I found an invitation to a barn dance to be held at the feed mill of Wm. Post of Upper Saddle River on Friday evening October 31st 1902. Ladies donate cake. Gents assessed.

Sincerely, Cornelius Berdan