

History Explorer

A publication of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

April 1, 2010

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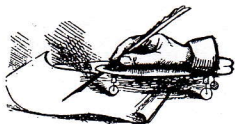
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Craig A. Whitford, Editor

History Explorer is published during the months of September to May by the HSLG. Articles and news of historical interest are always welcome.

The Grand River Eel



Some historians place the first sighting of the giant Grand River Eel in 1641 by Charles Raymbault, Isaac Joges and a Jesuit named Henri Grande after whom the river is named. Both the Ojibwe and Chippewa tribes living on Grand River had their own legends of a creature in the river the Ojibwe called the creature Yucitsmel. Today, it is affectionately known as Shiny.

With hundreds of documented sightings, Shiny is described as a creature with a long thick body, 15-50 feet long, four fins and a long tail – much like a Veronanguilla (a marine eel extinct for more than 55 million years).



An image from the 1940s of Shiny near the site of the Grand River Plant

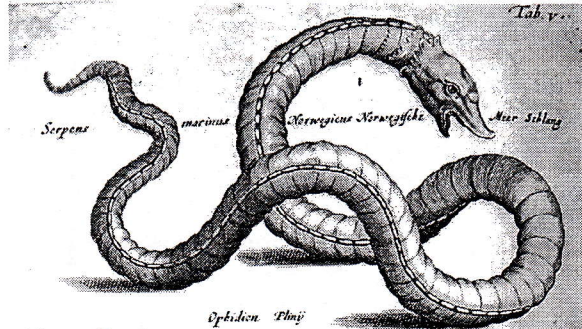
An Ojibwe tale of the Grand River Eel

THE GOLDEN EAGLE AND THE WATER-MONSTER.

"In village are two chiefs. On east side Golden Eagle is chief, and is liked by all but Evil-Spirited-Persons. In games life of person is wagered. Little Bear, nephew of Golden Eagle, goes to play hand-game and asks uncle to go with him. Uncle Running Deer refuses, but at last consents.

On entering lodge where hand-game is going on, Golden Eagle is asked to sit on high hump which is covered up. After game people leave and Golden Eagle starts to rise, but finds he is stuck to hump, which begins to move. It is water-monster and moves toward the river. Golden Eagle tells Little Bear that so long as he can see tassel at end of bow he will know that his uncle is alive. Monster goes to bottom of river, and water goes over head of Golden Eagle and then tassel at end of bow

disappears. Soon afterward every one leaves village. Only old man and woman and two grandsons remain. Boys shoot birds near river for fun. One day they bear singing. They tell grandparents, and old man tells them of drowning of Golden Eagle, who must be



The earliest known drawing of a Yucitsmels from Morin de Toulon Journal des Savants

singing. He says if there is any flesh on him he is still alive. Old man instructs boys to heat many rocks and throw them into the river. They do so and the river dries up, showing water-monster. All go to river and cut up monster. Inside are bones of Golden Eagle. They find some pieces of flesh on bones of fingers. Bones are put in lodge, which is set on fire. Old man calls on Golden Eagle to come out, and fourth time he comes out same as before and having his 'bow and arrows. He asks first where people are. Golden Eagle goes

Continued on Page 4

Join Us...

Thursday, April 15, 2010: Lansing's Theaters. Presented by Jim "Side-kick" MacLean & Craig Whitford The stage is set for a wonderful tour Lansing's Theaters through photographs, playbills and movie posters. No tickets or reservations are required for this historic production. Friend's Auditorium - 7:00 P.M.

President's Message

Doug Johnson

The Saga of Usa Forester

One of the perks of HSGL presidency is receiving occasional inquiries from our web site, lansinghistory.org. Last month such a request led to my discovery of an illustrious citizen of Lansing who he is not widely known today. Along the way, a rich knot of tantalizing fragments emerged. It may be easiest to follow the story if broken into two portions.

The saga begins with the query, "What can you tell me about Usa Forester?" This background was given: Japanese or Chinese by birth, Forester was brought to the U.S. as a boy in the capacity of "body servant" to a William K. Rogers. It is said that Rogers was a soldier of fortune who enjoyed great success as part of the "Ever Victorious Army" in the service of Chinese warlords engaged in one of the deadliest civil wars in history. An estimated 20 to 50 million perished in the Tai-Ping Rebellion between 1850 and 1865 making it one of the deadliest wars in history. Efforts to confirm the account given in the query, however, encounter serious obstacles. A brief description of these obstacles becomes the second portion of our story today.

Returning to Usa Forester, information about his life in Lansing was readily available using the card index developed over many years by staff at what is now the Capitol Area District Library's Downtown Branch. Cards were created for many individuals and events of potential interest with references to newspaper articles and other key reference works. Contents of the newspapers and numerous reference works are not comprehensively indexed in any other way. Filed under his name, two cards bear four citations.

The most complete story of Usa's life in Lansing was published in 1928 in Frank Turner's "Account of Ingham County From Its Organization." Turner's account is worth reproducing at length. Reflecting the confusion and lack of care prevalent at the time, Turner begins by stating that Forester was born in Japan although other accounts quite definitely identify Forester as Chinese. Turner continues,

"[Forester] was brought to America when a small child, by an American, Edward Forester, of New York City. He was adopted by Mr. Forester and was given the symbolic name of Usa, United States of America. He attended school in New York state, then entered a dry-goods store as an errand boy and in two years was advanced to take charge of the white-goods department. ... In 1869 he came to Lansing. For a time he worked for Mark Cowles, then went to the H. A. Lee dry-goods store. Next, he entered into partnership with H. P. Hitchcock in a book, stationery and wall paper business, the store being where the American State Savings Bank now



The Opera House Block, formerly known as Baird's, Buck's and the Gladmer Theatre. This was the location of Usa Forester's first store. It was located on the first floor at the corner. Forester occupied his store when this building was still operated as an Opera House. FPL&A/CADL.

stands. This association lasted five years and Mr. Forester became attached to the Emery and Forester book, stationery and wall paper establishment and later entered the same line of business on his own account, where the [Buck's] opera house is now located. Mr. Forester then built the store at 215 North Washington and there conducted his business until his retirement several years ago. Much credit is due him for his pluck and splendid business management. He started a poor boy, worked hard and gained the respect and confidence of all. He has been a resident of Lansing fifty-five years."

Continued on Page 3

Mark Your Calendar... The Leavenworth Photograph Collection

with Mark Harvey, State Archivist

Mark Harvey, state archivist for Michigan will present at 1 PM on the Leavenworth Photograph Collection during the Collector's Showcase. This collection is the largest known for the city of Lansing. Originally working as a commercial photographer in northern Michigan R.C. Leavenworth relocated to Lansing in 1919. The slogan on his company car was "Anything photographed, anywhere, anytime." The company continued until recent years and now is a permanent part of our state archives.

**Saturday, May 1, 2010
1:00 P.M.**

**Capital Area District Library
Friend's Auditorium**

For Additional Information: Doug Johnson, 484.8802

Usa Forester continued from Page 2

Forester married Miss Sallie J. Amos, of Lansing, in 1880 according to the *Lansing Republican* of February 3, 1880. Turner reports she died in 1913 after bearing one daughter, Margarite, who married William E. Wood and who died in 1918. Mrs. Wood bore two children, Montie and Robert.

In 1887, Forester was acclaimed "Lansing's Pride!" along with eleven other manufacturers, merchants and tradesmen on the 50th anniversary of Lansing's founding. The *State Republican*, on September 6th, acclaimed Forester "one of Lansing's most determinedly enterprising merchants" and boasted "elaborate preparations are already under way for the display of the grandest array of fancy and holiday goods this market has ever seen."

His place in Lansing is further illuminated by the appearance in 1931 of a page one *State Journal* story reporting his death in Florida. The report stated Forester was last actively engaged in business more than 15 years ago. It continued, reporting Forester was the owner of numerous pieces of Lansing property.

Usa Forester's effect on Lansing could be felt well into modern times. A 1961 report found in the Stebbins real estate record collection indicated that the property at 215 North Washington was owned at that time by the U. H. Forester Estate. An adjacent property noted its owner as the Margaret F. Wood Estate.

The clear evidence of Forester's prosperous presence in Lansing is in sharp contrast with the story of the means of his departure from the Orient. The problem is clear by comparing two sources. Exhibit One is a *New York Times* article of April 8, 1887, with a byline in Lansing. It identifies Usa Forester as a Japanese merchant of high standing and recounts his story. There Forester stated that, after being captured during the 1857 Chinese rebellion, he was released by William Kissane who made Forester his "body servant." Kissane and Forester then went touring in Europe. So, here we have Usa Forester pointing to William Kissane as the agent of his rescue.

Exhibit Two is an extensive article in *Cosmopolitan* that ran from October through December in 1896. In these recollections of the Tai-Ping Rebellion (mentioned at the outset of this article), General Edward Forester describes saving an eleven-year-old Chinese boy from certain beheading. He then states he made the boy his companion, educated him in New York state schools and, upon reaching manhood, his

companion settled in Lansing. General Forester's article continues with an account closely matching other accounts of Usa Forester's life in Lansing. So, here we have General Edward Forester saying it was he himself who made the rescue.


What are we to believe? Who was the rescuer? We know from a veritable blizzard of over 70 articles found in the *New York Times* from 1853 through 1887 that Kissane had many encounters with the law. Described in these articles are trials for insurance fraud, murder and arson in the burning of the riverboat *Martha Washington* on the Mississippi River in Arkansas, a guilty verdict for forgery, reports that he severely beat a witness for the prosecution from one of his trials, an escape from custody by jumping out the

restroom window of a moving train, and several other instances of generally being a criminal. At the end of this collection of articles, with outstanding charges on his head, Kissane is reported by several observers to have disappeared to Nicaragua where he soldier of fortune in Nicaragua, eventually being arrested by the US Navy and returned to the US. Kissane surfaced in California, living under the name William K Rogers after establishing himself as an upstanding businessman over many years. Does this sound familiar?

We have no evidence placing Kissane/Rogers in China except for Usa Forester's very brief account. It is difficult to imagine Usa Forester could be mistaken on such a key fact of his own life but such would not

be out of character with the other hijinks encountered in this tale.

If Kissane was responsible for Usa Forester's rescue, how did the Chinese lad come to be called "Forester" rather than "Kissane" or "Rogers".

We close this tale of mystery and loose ends with news that as these words were being written, an academic paper was to be delivered regarding our General Edward Forester at the 2010 National Conference of the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association. The title: "General Edward Forester (1830-1901): Correcting the Biography of an Inveterate Liar" Perhaps General Forester's published account was one of fiction. I hope to reach Professor Gordon Knight to outline my confusion, request a copy of his paper, and solicit his thoughts on the identity of the rescuer. 

www.lansinghistory.org



Photograph of 215 and part of 219 North Washington Avenue. These were the two stores in the three-unit block Forester developed and occupied beginning in 1887 or 1888. Stebbins Collection documents indicate that 215 and 219 were still owned by the Usa H. Forester Estate in 1961 and 1942, respectively. FPL&A/CADL.

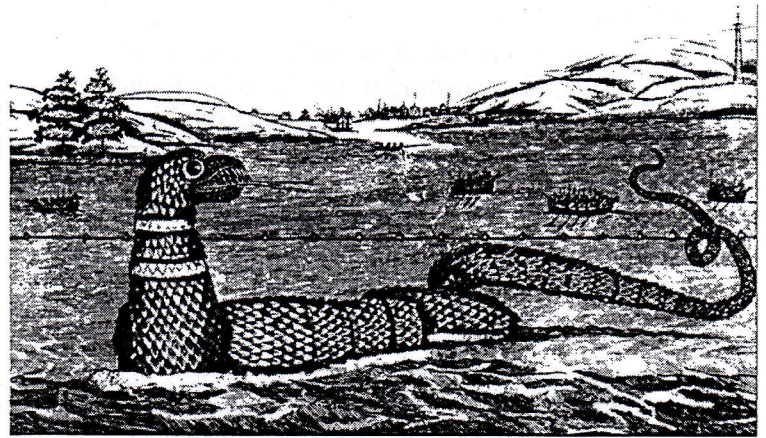
Grand River Eel, continued from Page 1

hunting every day and when boys grow he gives .them power to become great hunters. Many people gradually return to village, Little Bear among them. He finds his uncle alive and they are first and second chief. All people remain human beings, except those who went off and never returned."


Legend of the Birth of Yucitsmel

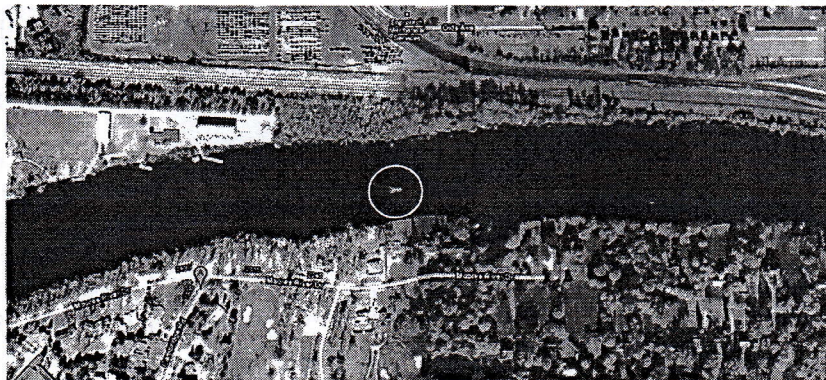
Young men started on a journey. As they went they found deer tracks and followed these. They followed the trail during the day and at night they camped. At last they rejoiced to see that the tracks were becoming fresh, and walked faster. Day after day they followed. Then there was a hill before them. At the bottom was a cave. The tracks of the deer led straight toward this. The young men followed the tracks and at last reached the cave into which the deer tracks led.' Well, let us follow it, for we want to find the place where the deer live," said one of them. They agreed, and entered. They went one behind the other. Far in the hole they came to running water: it was clear and good and they all drank of it. Then they started on again. The deer tracks were in the mud but gradually became dry again. Then the men saw a faint light before them, just as it is at dawn. "It looks as if the cave had an opening at each end," said the leader. Then they found that it was indeed a passage through the hill. When they emerged, they looked around and saw herds of deer scattered in every direction, standing in the field and along the streams and by the rivers, raising the dust as they went down to the river, and coming out of the water. "Well, we have indeed found the deer; we shall have food and robes and moccasins and ropes and everything else," they said. And they went back to report that they had found the deer in plenty. They went into the cave again where they had come out, going back now. Where the running stream had been when they came, they found a being lying across the passage. His body filled it to the top. "Who can it be lying in our way?

What shall we do?" they said to each other. They built a fire against the body and kept it up. As it burned the fat flowed, running down from the body into the fire. They kept up the fire until at last they had burned the body in two. "Ya, my friends, it cooks well; it must be good to eat," said one of them. "Don't! my friend; leave it; it is a powerful thing." his companions said to him. "It must surely be good to eat. See how white its meat is. I think I shall try it," said the one. They urged him not to eat it, but he insisted. "Well, then, it is you who are doing it," his friends told him; and he ate of it. "It is good; it tastes well. Eat of it, my friends." he said; but he could not persuade them to touch it. After he had eaten they started again, passing through the body that they had burned in two. At last they got out of the cave again. At night they camped. In the morning the legs of the young man who had eaten of the owner of the waters had begun to turn white. "What did we tell you," his brothers said to him. They went on again homeward, and at night made another camp. They blamed the young man for having eaten of the animal, and



A woodcut of Native Americans battling a Yucitsmel

he was ashamed. In the morning his entire body had turned white.' It is your own fault! We warned you, but you allowed yourself to eat of it," his friends said. They went on again, and camped in another place. Next morning the young man was completely white and in shape was like the one he had eaten. He was a Yucitsmels'. They went on once more and traveled far. When they came to a spring, the young man who had become a Yucitsmels said to his brother: "Now, my friend, throw me in the water here. Whenever you go by this place, when you are at war, tie pieces of cloth above this spring. Then you will return with good black paint (victory)." Then his younger brother threw him into the spring. He disappeared in the water amidst flashes of light. Whenever his brother passed by the spring, when he was at war, he left something near it, and he always returned victoriously.'—K. 



An aerial view of Shiny swimming in the Grand River near the Grand River Plant 2003

GRAND LEDGE, Mich., July 10 - That there is a giant Grand River Eel is stoutly maintained by a party from Charlotte who were holding a picnic on the river bank Saturday afternoon. The strange animal from behind a bend, in full view of the company. Its motions in the water were very peculiar, resembling the undulations of a snake's body. Its flat,

serpentlike head and portions of its body were visible at all times, while a long trail of agitated water to the rear indicated that a large portion of its body remained unseen, the entire length being from 30 to 50 feet. Its body must have been as large as a barrel, judging from the surface seen. The monster made toward the company at a terrific rate of speed, but when within a few feet of shore some of the women screamed and the manifestation wheeled to the right and disappeared. A minister who was present states that the picnickers had no beverages stronger than milk and lemonade and all of the party were reputable people.

The New York Times©

Published: July 11, 1887; Copyright © The New York Times

[Footnotes]¹ Much like a Hiintcabiit, a river monster who devours crying children

Encounters with Shiny should be reported immediately to the Historical Society of Greater Lansing.

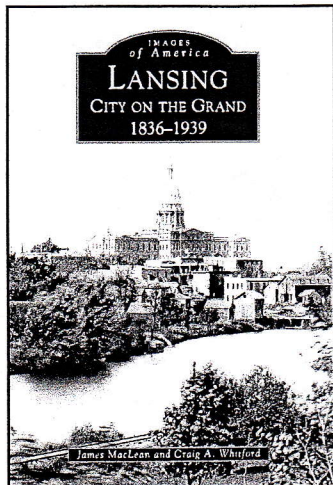
The Gift Depot

1 Give the Gift of History with a membership in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Individual Memberships: \$15/year
Family Memberships: \$25/year

2 Lansing: City On The Grand, 1836-1939

By James MacLean & Craig A. Whitford



Lansing's history as the capital of Michigan began with a legislative mandate in the 1835 State Constitution, which required that the seat of government be moved from Detroit in 1847. The result – the emergence of a new capital city on the banks of the majestic Grand River – allowed Lansing to cultivate a world-class community based in government, education, the automotive industry and entrepreneurial achievements. This book features more than 200 historic photographs that document the dynamic capital city during its pivotal first century, from the pioneer era to the inception of the Olds Motor Vehicle Company and through the eve of World War II.

\$19.99

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Check out the
Historical Society of Greater Lansing
on the web at
www.lansinghistory.org

Forest Parke Library & Archives

Research local history at the
Downtown Lansing Library!

The Forest Parke Library & Archives, (formerly the local history room) is OPEN to the Public every Tuesday evening from 5 to 7 p.m.

Local History holdings do not circulate, only inventoried materials are available and special rules and regulations will apply.

Every Tuesday

5:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M.

**Capital Area District Library
401 S. Capitol, Lansing**

David Votta, Local History Reference Librarian
517.334.1521; Email: dvotta@cadl.org

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Proudly announces the 11th Annual

David R. Caterino Collector's Showcase

The History of Greater Lansing

Saturday, May 1, 2010

10:00 AM to 4:00 P.M.

**Capital Area District Library
401 S. Capitol, Lansing**

If you collect history of the greater Lansing area and would like to share it with the public we invite you to join us as an exhibitor.

If you are a local author or artist of the greater Lansing area we also invite you to participate.

Help us fill the Gallery with History!

For an application or more information contact:

Doug Johnson, President

517.484.8802; E-mail: johnsond72@comcast.net

Give a Friend a Gift Membership in the
Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Membership Application

Please accept my New Renewal membership in the *Historical Society of Greater Lansing*. I have enclosed:

\$15 Individual \$25 Family
 \$150 Life or \$_____ Gift

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*Historical Society
of Greater Lansing*

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Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Proudly Presents...

Lansing's Theaters

with Jim MacLean and Craig Whitford

The stage is set for a wonderful tour Lansing's Theaters through photographs, playbills and movie posters. No tickets or reservations are required for this historic production.

Thursday, April 15, 2010

7:00 P.M.

Capital Area District Library

Friend's Auditorium

401 S. Capitol, Lansing, Mich.

This event is co-sponsored by CADL and the Historical Society of Greater Lansing



09/10
Timothy Bowman
401 E Willard, #10
Lansing MI 48910

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