



HISTORY OF AMAN PARK: A GIFT FROM JACOB AMAN

To Accompany May 2020 Program: *Plants & Ecology of Aman Park*

By: Kayne Ferrier, Program Committee

In 1900 Jacob Aman purchased the property that today is named in his honor for \$5,050. Even though he had donated the property to the City in 1926, he retained "life estate" use of 10 acres that he could timber and cultivate as a modest farm for himself.



Based on this agreement, Jacob became supervisor of the park and as such, he established walkways and picnic areas and other areas that pleased him. He thought about the possibility that the City might establish an orphanage there to give kids, who like him, were left alone in the world.



At one time in the 20th century, the City considered opening a School of Forestry there. It has been primarily used as a natural park and has served as an educational resource for several decades to higher education institutions like Calvin University and Grand Valley State University.

Jacob Aman was born on April 9, 1849 in Starr County, Ohio. His parents were immigrants from Alsace-Lorraine, a German-influenced territory in France. Aman reported that his father died when he was 13 and he was put out to fend for himself. He considered himself a “half-orphan.”



Jacob Aman
—Cut by courtesy
Grand Rapids Herald.

He married Sarah Gaul on September 25, 1872, came to Grand Rapids in 1875, and by the time of the 1880 US Census, they had 4 children: George, 7 yrs, Minnie 5 yrs, Nellie 3 yrs, and “Inie I” (Ina Irene) 9 ½ months.



Aman earned his living as a carpenter. He is credited with building many homes on the city's West Side. Some call this house “The Wedding Cake House”, it still exists at the NE corner of Dayton and Indiana SW.

In 1880 he and Sarah lived at 18 Dayton SW; a location that no longer exists nor does a subsequent address at Tolbert and Earle. In 1882 they moved to Park St. SW.

Aman divorced in 1890 and by 1900 purchased a large parcel of land that included rich forests and floodplains along Sand Creek in the eastern edge of Ottawa County, on Lake Michigan Drive.

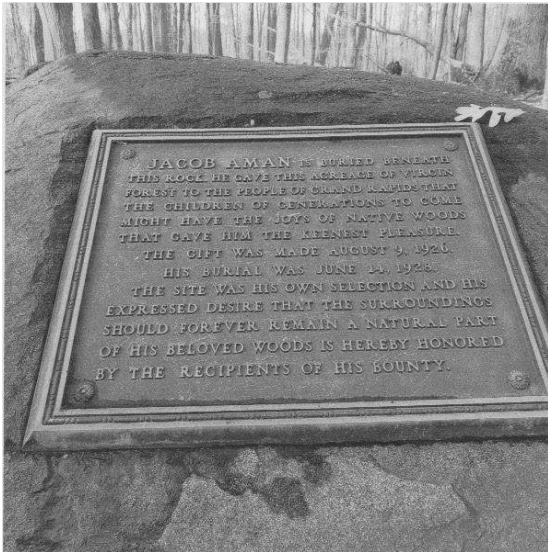


The park initially was 254 acres in size. Two of Aman's neighbors added to the park by donating property. In 1924 Dr. Joel C. Parker donated 22 acres and William F. Sweet donated 40 acres. Both Mr. Aman and Mr. Sweet are buried in Aman Park. Here we see the plaque and boulder marking the site for Mr. Sweet.



By 1926, as an aged man, Mr. Aman chose to donate the 254 acres of woods and farmland that had been his home for 26 years to the City of Grand Rapids. He saw that Grand Rapids was growing and believed it would need a park at its western border.

A gift of real estate of this size, especially while the country was still in the grips of the Great Depression, made news across the state.



Jacob Aman lived the rest of his life among the birds and other wildlife, eventually sleeping on a cot in a what can only be described as a shack. He contracted pneumonia in July 1928 and died in Blodgett Hospital on July 11, 1928.



Jacob chose to be buried in his park at a site he had pre-selected. He wanted to remain among the birds, flowers and trees--Nature--that he loved so much and that brought him peace.

For five years in the 1930s the City had grade school and high school children plant oak seedlings and walnuts in a dedicated 50 acre tract in an attempt to reforest the park. Additionally, the City used this greenspace as a tree nursery.

The City of Grand Rapids permanently granted 15 acres of Aman Park, including Root Beer Lake (formerly known as Lake Jacobina) to the Indian Trails Camp in 1953. Initially the Rotary sponsored a camp on the site for children with disabilities.



The Wild Ones River City Program Committee wanted to add historical context for Aman Park to supplement the cancelled guided hike and wildflower tour that was scheduled for May 18, 2020. Many thanks to Kayne Ferrier for doing this research and for writing this piece.

KAYNE L. FERRIER, MLS is a retired public librarian. She worked for the Grand Rapids Public Library for 23 years. Following a brief retirement period, she was hired by the City of Grand Rapids Water Resource Recovery Facility to organize their library and write its history.

SOURCES:

- Various readings found on Newspapers.com; the Aman vertical file in the Grand Rapids Public Library's Local History Department that included old Grand Rapids Herald and Grand Rapids Press articles about Jacob Aman and his donation of the park property to the City; The Story of Grand Rapids by ZZ Lydens; Keep on the Grass: A Brief History of Grand Rapids Parks by the Grand Rapids Historical Commission.

- Images:

Contemporary sign at entrance of Aman Park, Wedding Cake House, William Sweet plaque and boulder, and Lake Jacobina - Kayne Ferrier

Trillium on page 1, Craig Elston of CDE Nature

Black and white photo of plaque on boulder for Jacob Aman – Joan Meyer

Rolling hills of Trillium with log in foreground – Google images.