

The Sidway home, now within the confines of Beaver Island Park, typified Grand Island in its social hey-day.

By CY KING

GRAND ISLAND has had its share of ups and downs but today it is definitely on the upswing again as an integral part of the community life of Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier.

Destined to play no small part in the renaissance of Grand Island is WBEN's new transmitter. Its powerful, 5000-watt voice soon will be spreading farther the fame of Buffalo and the Frontier as a center of culture and entertainment. The transmitter, itself, will enhance the natural beauties of Grand Island. Majestic 475-foot towers, set in the wide open spaces of a 52-acre site and the artistically-designed transmitter house at Bush Road and Beaver Island Boulevard seem destined to become Island landmarks.

WBEN's new voice will link a colorful past with this promising future. For the new transmitter, a symbol of ultra-modern civilization, is being erected on land where occurred many a stirring scene of early frontier days. Happy aborigines gliding through the lush, game-filled forest, a duel between hot-blooded Buffalo gentry, war between nations and civil war and, in later days, gay parties at Island clubs and fine homes of the men and women who made Frontier history.

LONG before the white man set foot upon the new world, Indians lived, fought and died on what is now called Grand Island. Archaeologists were convinced that when from a mound on Lot 11 of Grand Island, just next door to WBEN, potsherds, bone and flint implements were excavated. Nearby were found iron axes, knives, brass kettles and a Jesuit ring, proving that the Neuters who settled the Niagara peninsula had a certain contact with the French at an early period.

Robert W. Bingham, director of the Buffalo Historical Society, tells in his history of Grand Island how, in the Spring of the year 1679, Father Louis Hennepin passed this island.

"Father Hennepin," Mr. Bingham writes, "if not the first white man to see Grand Island, was, at least, the first one to write about it."

It was, in fact, this Franciscan missionary and companion of Rene Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle, who gave the island its name. Describing Lake Erie and vicinity, Father Hennepin told of "d'une grand Isle." The smaller island to the northwest he called "Isle la Marine."

THREE-QUARTERS of a century later, soon after the British captured Ft. Niagara in 1759, George Dember, royal engineer of the 60th Foot, British Army, mapped the Niagara Valley. He translated the French into "The Great Island" and "Navy Island." Squaw Island, Dember named Beaver Island and Strawberry Island, Meadow Island. (The present Beaver Island was not located on Dember's map.)

In the interim, while in the possession of the French, the Great Island was interwoven with the history of the Niagara Frontier. The adventurous Tonty built his famous ship, the Griffon, and had her towed from the shipyard opposite the north end of the Island, up the river to Squaw Island, where the Griffon was fitted out for its venturesome voyage.

The first Englishmen to see the Great or Grand Island were MacGregorie and Roesebloom, two traders who had the misfortune to fall into the hands of the French. This was in 1687.

THERE is a legend, which some historians suspect is not in accord with facts, that at the bottom of Big Burnt Ship Creek, which separates Buckhorn from Grand Island, are the wrecks of two French ships, sacrifices to the French desire for haste in their retreat from the region after the memorable battle with the British in July 1759.

Twenty-five hundred French and In-

dian warriors sailed down the Niagara River on their way to the rescue of French troops besieged at Ft. Niagara by the British. The relief expedition rested "at the great island above the little fort" and the next day, July 24, 1759, marched over the portage road, down Lewiston Heights and to defeat at La Belle Famille.

Some frontier historians doubt the legend of the burned ships on the grounds that records do not show any evidence of the French building large boats after the construction of the Griffon.

THROUGH the years of their struggle for domination of America, both French and British worked ceaselessly to enlist the support of the Indians. One of the consequences of this fierce rivalry was the massacre at the Devil's Hole in 1763 and, eventually, the surrender by the Indians of all their rights, save hunting, to much land in the Niagara Valley, including Grand Island.

The Devil's Hole massacre was the result of French artifice and British blundering. The French convinced the Indians that the British intended to enslave them. They cited the British practice of using wagon trains instead of Seneca carriers on the portage as the French had.

Incited by the French, Seneca warriors fell upon a British convoy in 1763 and massacred all but three of the British. The others and the wagons were thrown into Devil's Hole, a point a few miles below Whirlpool Rapids.

SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON, the British commander, ordered retaliation but before the grim command was carried out a council was called. Seneca orators expressed regrets at the impetuous conduct of the warriors and the land rights were ceded the British in reparation.

There was a minor complication, however. Years before, as a token of their regard, the Senecas had given Sieur de Chabert or Joncaire the Elder title to all the lands on both sides of the river, including Grand Island. Joncaire had returned to France where he was jailed in the Bastille for double dealing. Released, he went to England and swore allegiance to the British crown—and petitioned the king to return his Niagara property to him. The petition was denied. The king kept the land.

At the end of the Revolutionary War, the eastern shore of the Niagara became United States property but it wasn't until 1796 that the British surrendered the frontier posts, such were the difficulties of enforcing the peace treaty. Grand Island remained disputed territory until after the boundary survey following the war of 1812.

ALTHOUGH the British had given the United States the land which the Indians had ceded to the British, some Indians felt that the title reverted to them. So, in 1812, a group of Indian allies of the British landed on Grand Island.

Red Jacket, famous Indian orator and leader of the day, appealed to the U. S. Indian agent in Buffalo for permission to drive the invaders off the island. However, what might have been a bloody clash was averted when the invaders withdrew.

The year 1812 also is notable in Grand Island history for the duel that took place in a wooded glade. Gen. Peter B. Porter wrote an article for the Buffalo Gazette, charging Brig. Gen. Alexander Smyth with cowardice. The general was incensed. He challenged Gen. Porter.

Their respective seconds met, arranged the formalities and, on a cold, blustery day, on Dec. 15, the principals and their attendants met at Dayton's Tavern below Black Rock and were ferried to Grand Island. Each fired one shot. Each missed. There were explanations, Gen. Porter apologized, Gen. Smyth retracted certain uncomplimentary remarks he had made, they shook

hands, and another incident of the Frontier became history.

STILL obscure was the title to Grand Island. New York State claimed sovereignty but the Indians maintained claims to it. New York State then purchased Grand and several neighboring islands from the Indians for \$11,000. Incidentally, Grand Island, with an area of about 17,386 acres, is 3466 acres larger than Manhattan Island. Obviously, New York State did not make the advantageous deal negotiated by Peter Minuet with the Indians in 1626. He bought Manhattan for a consideration of about \$24.

Another crisis in Grand Island affairs developed immediately. Squatters rushed to stake out home sites. They refused to leave and the Legislature was forced to pass a special law, authorizing the sheriff to remove "certain intruders from Grand Island in the Niagara River."

It was an amazing chapter in Frontier history. The squatters literally established a separate little nation on the island, under the leadership of "Governor" Pendleton Clark. For four years, Governor Clark and his followers lived beyond American or Canadian law.

HOWEVER, the "rebellion" was short lived when that forthright man, Sheriff James Cronk, was armed with the authority to evict. On Dec. 9, 1815, the sheriff enlisted Lieuts. Hodge and Ostrum, and 28 or 30 of the militia, to assist him. They assembled at Main

and Eagle Streets, marched to the river and went to the Island late in the day.

Early next morning, they began to visit each of the families in turn. Each was given its choice of moving to Canada or the United States and given an opportunity to remove personal possessions from their houses, which then were burned. Five days of this and, at last, the militia marched to the home of "Governor" Clark, who obviously had been expecting them. His possessions already were loaded on boats. Many of the squatters went to Canada but Clark returned to the American side and established what is now the Village of Pendleton.

A few days later, it was learned that the Wiggins, Lundy, Morton and Dennison families had returned. They argued that the sheriff had done his duty—they had been ejected from the island—so he couldn't evict them again. History is obscure but it appears that these four families won the argument and were permitted to stay.

SOVEREIGNTY of the United States over Grand Island still was a matter of dispute after the War of 1812. A boundary commission, on which was Gen. Porter, was named to fix the frontier. The commission decided to run the international line down the center of the river.

"But how about Grand Island?" After lengthy consideration, the commission decided that the deeper arm of the Niagara should be considered the main stream of the river. The west arm was found to be the deeper, so Grand Island finally and forever became United States property.

Something of a trade was involved, for with its acquisition of Grand Island, the United States surrendered its claim to Long (or Grand) Island in the St. Lawrence River.

THE inevitable work of civilization, subdivision, was stamped on the island in 1825. The state ordered a survey so as to divide the tract into farm lots. The state realized \$76,230 for the land it had purchased for \$11,000.

Among the purchasers of the land was Samuel Liggett of New York, agent for one of the most visionary characters ever to be associated with the Frontier, Maj. Mordecai Noah. Maj. Noah was editor of the National Advocate and a prominent Israelite. He had a dream of a mighty city on Grand Island which would be a sort of new Zion, a refuge for Jews. He intended to call his city Ararat.

A cornerstone actually was cut and a dedicatory ceremony held, although, unfortunately, inclement weather forced Maj. Noah to conduct it in St. Paul's Church in Buffalo rather than on the island. The stone, memento of one man's great dream, is on display in the Buffalo Historical Society.

PROVING once again that there is nothing new under the sun, the idea of pre-fabricating boats in one place and

A New Era Dawns On Grand Island

Days Before the Nation Was Born Recalled As WBEN's News Transmitter Lifts Area From Honorable Past Into Modern Future

assembling them in another—a feat for which Germany and Russia are taking bows today—was the fundamental principle behind the earliest industrial development of Grand Island.

In the 1830's, a site was cleared opposite Tonawanda and thereon was built a steam grist mill and a saw mill with room for 15 gangs of saws. This mill is said to have been the largest in the world in its day. Houses, a church and a large wharf were built. The community was named Whitehaven in honor of Stephen White who lived on Tonawanda Island.

At Whitehaven, white oak from the island and elsewhere around the lakes was fashioned into the timbers of ships rating from 400 to 700 tons. The prepared timbers were floated to New York and Boston and there assembled into ships. The project was abandoned by the East Boston Company in the late 1840's.

GRAND ISLAND never has been a really populous place. When the so-called squatters were driven to the Canadian or American shores, the population was approximately 150. The census of 1940 showed 1050 residents of Grand Island.

The nearest approach to the latter figure was recorded in 1900 when enumerators counted 1022. After that date, the population steadily declined until in 1930 only 626 were resident on the island.

Originally, Grand Island was part of the Town of Buffalo but in 1836, when Tonawanda Township was set apart from Buffalo, it became a part of the former. Grand Island became a separate town Oct. 19, 1852.

THE hey-day of Grand Island, not including recent years or the promising future, began as the 19th century entered its second half. Lewis F. Allen built a beautiful Summer home called "River Lea" at the head of the island. Elbridge Gerry Spaulding, who carved a niche in political history as the congressman who was the sponsor of the legislation which resulted in the printing of the "greenback" currency, built the second Summer residence on Grand Island.

Mr. Allen was so impressed by the beauties of the island, particularly a strip near the head of the island on the southwest side, that he was convinced it would make an excellent watering place for the tired businessman and his lady of that day. The resort was named Falconwood, after the eagles and hawks who nested in the tall trees nearby.

IN 1860, the steamers Falcon and Chifon were built. They were the first

of a grand company of pleasure boats that transported gay parties from Buffalo to what must have seemed like another world—to the Island. Later there also were the steamers Niagara, River Queen and Fanny White.

Other prominent Buffalonians built homes on Grand Island: Frederick

Law Olmstead, Charles B. Marshall, the Townsends, the Matthews family, W. E. Andrews, Col. George F. Hayward, Justice Harlan Swift, Albert Ziegele, H. T. Koerner, John J. McWilliams, James W. Tillinghast, Franklin Sidway and many others.

The Sidway home, incidentally, was occupied until recent years by Frank B. Sidway. It is now part of the Beaver Island State Park.

Grover Cleveland, later president, was a nephew of Lewis F. Allen and thus knew well the virtues of Grand Island as a sportsmen's paradise.

CLEVELAND and a group of like-minded men formed the Beaver Island Club in 1852 to promote "social and esthetic culture, yachting, hunting, fishing and other lawful purposes." Charles B. Andrews was the first president of the club. Cleveland was 11th on the list of 17 charter members. Later Cleveland became a director and chairman of the finance committee. The initiation fee was \$100 and the dues \$50 a year.

The Beaver Island clubhouse later became the Summer home of Charles Marshall and, at his death, the home of his daughter, Mrs. Hazel Koerner.

Gradually, resorts were established. Lorelei, built by David Bell, was one of the most popular. Another resort was the McComb House, well and favorably known to hosts of Buffalonians. Opposite Tonawanda was the Monahenga Park development whose mineral springs were allegedly possessed of great curative powers. Legend has it that the famous Indian orator, Red Jacket, drank of this water the night before his trial in 1827. Next day, sobered and rested, he made the memorable speech that acquitted him.

FLOURISHING in the latter half of the century were such resorts as Windsor Beach, Eagle Park, Sheenwater, St. Andrew's Park and Edgewater. So far as Grand Island was concerned, it truly was the period of the Gay Nineties.

Then came the automobile! The lure of easier transportation to more distant points threw Grand Island into a decline that lasted through the early part of this century. Many of the permanent residents moved away.

For a time, in the 20's, it seemed to some that the principal activity on the island was the running of liquor from Canada to the United States. Island legend has it that many a valuable cache of spirits remains to this day buried in the soil of Grand Island. There is an even grimmer side of Grand Island history in connection with nefarious activities. It is said that many Chinese were smuggled into the United States by way of Grand Island. Some unfortunate ones, so goes this story, met their deaths when smugglers dumped them overboard upon the approach of an Immigration Patrol boat.

WHAT the automobile took away from Grand Island it promises, with assistance, to restore. For the increasing popularity of motor cars and the demand for quicker routes were weighty factors in the building of the two Grand Island bridges and the five-mile express highway that connects them.

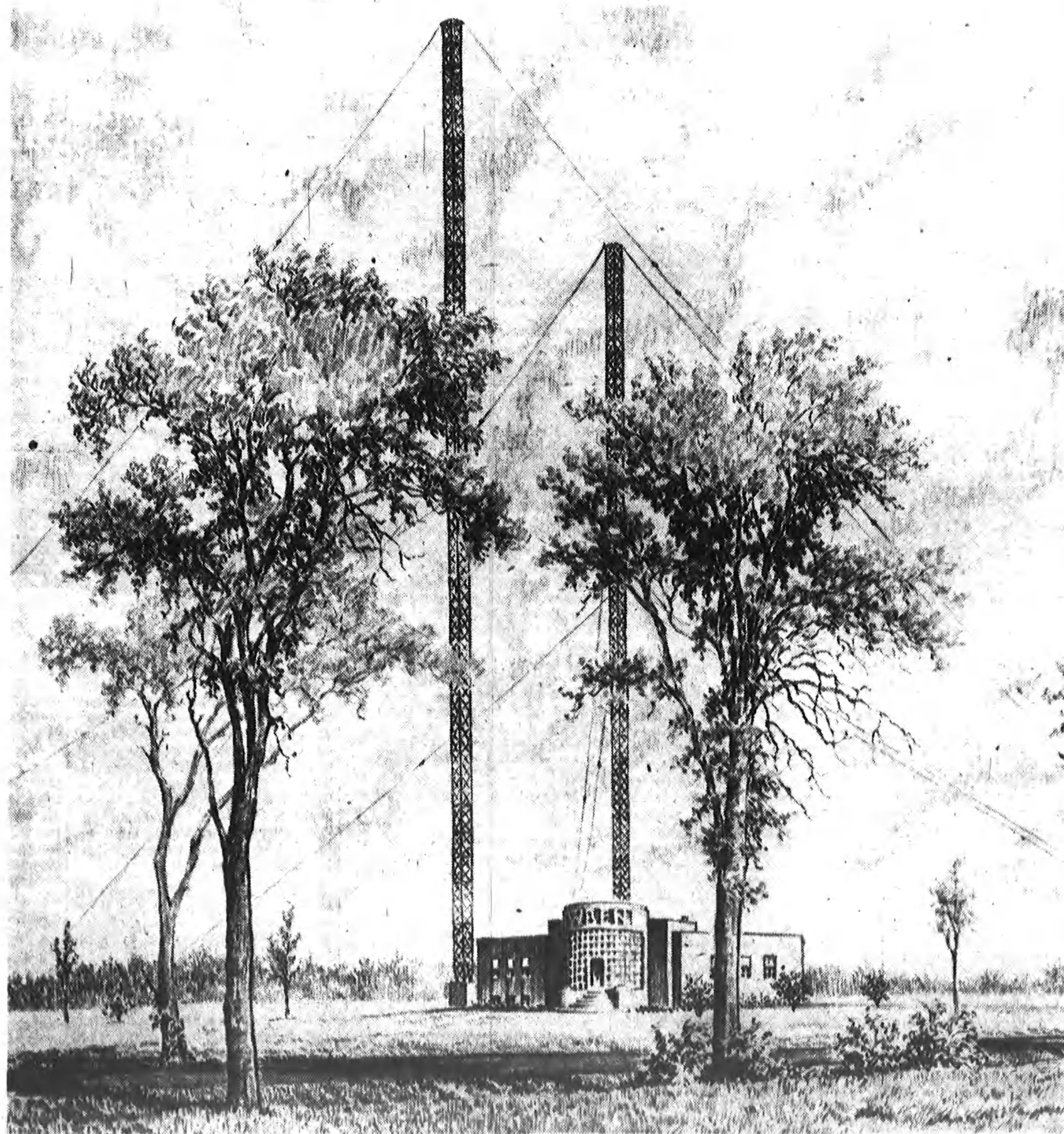
A long period of agitation for the bridges was rewarded with the first concrete expression of official approval when the Legislature created the Niagara Frontier Bridge Commission on April 12, 1929. An appropriation was made for surveys. Land was acquired in 1930, an RFC loan was obtained in 1932, plans were completed Aug. 1, 1933, and the bridges were, at last, opened to traffic on July 3, 1935.

Herman J. Alt of Buffalo enjoyed the distinction of being the first man to pay his toll. At precisely 12:02 A. M., July 3, 1933, he handed his quarter to the cashier at the South Bridge toll house. Formal dedicatory ceremonies were held on July 15, with Governor Herbert Lehman as principal speaker. He hailed the occasion as one of "momentous importance to the people of the state" and as a symbol of the end of the rural isolation of the river-bound township.

SIMULTANEOUSLY, the people of the Frontier were agitating for state appropriations for parks on Grand Island. Early realization of their dream was seen in the years 1925 to 1930 when the state purchased 500 acres at the south end of Grand Island and 389 acres, plus Buckhorn Island, at the north end. Last year the \$400,000 Beaver Island State Park was thrown open to the public.

The parks, the bridges and the scenic drives all are contributing to the promise of a brighter day for historic Grand Island. There are plans for a model community there. And there are projects considerably beyond the paper stage for extension of the parkway roads.

And today, WBEN, radio voice of the Buffalo Evening News and an integral part of this city's radio development since 1930, erected its new transmitter on the island, and is thus joining in the parade of progress which, after many years, is returning to Grand Island.



The towers and transmitter house of WBEN's new 5000-watt radio station mark the march of progress in an ancient island's history.

—Sketched by Helen G. Durston.