

Time Tracs by Jim Ingram

(Michael Cribbins, Lake Orion's cane carver)

Decorated canes were used extensively by men in the US from the Civil War into the early 1900s. They weren't just for the infirm but were used by younger men as articles of fashion and indicated one's status.

The cane is definitely a male thing. It's an extension of the man carrying it. It can signify his politics, profession and interests.

Michael Cribbins was an extraordinary cane carver. His canes today are prized by collectors and bring handsome prices. He was truly a sculptor of wood.

He used primarily wood of diamond willow trees and utilized the natural flow of the wood to shape his canes. He would scrape the dead wood away to produce the holes and gnarled effect.

Backgrounds were articulated with concentrated fine punch marks. The handles were usually plain elongated knobs. I have one that is painted green with gold dots on it and another with a mother-of-pearl insert.

I can best give a sense of Michael Cribbins' canes by describing the two that he carved for my great grandfather at the turn of the century. They are both carved with his name, John C. Belles. He was a prominent Orion business man and local office holder from the late 1870s until his death in 1911.

Both are embossed with the symbols of the fraternal organizations to which he belonged -- the Masons, Eastern Stars and Maccabees.

For decorations he used fish, birds and various animals. On one, a long lizard with a protruding head is carved facing down the shaft. On another the head and neck of a giraffe appear.

He liked Civil War paraphernalia such as a rifle with bayonet and a shield with flag. The date 1861 indicates the date Cribbins entered the Civil War, not the date of carving.

One cane is dated 1908 which is probably the date carved. The other cane which is larger and not as finely carved is probably older, made in the late 1800s.

The words "Orion" and "Mike" which are Cribbins trademarks are carved on one cane. The later cane is carved with "Lake Orion, Mich." which may have been a forerunner to the name change from Orion to Lake Orion that occurred in the 1920s.

This later cane is topped by a face with Jimmy Durante nose, two beads for eyes, ears and a mouth with beard below which does not at all resemble my great grandfather. It also has the initials CWM carved on it which is a mystery to me.

Cribbins' great grandson, Abe Lake of Sault Ste. Marie, has a cane that Cribbins evidently carved for himself. On it he carved his Civil War record -- 1861(enlisted), Co. A-7th Michigan Infantry, Wounded 1863 at Fredericksburg. Abe is also in possession of Cribbins' set of carving tools.

Cribbins great great grandson, Roy Lake, of Waterford has done genealogical research on the family and much of my information comes from him.

Cribbins was born in Ireland in 1839. His family emigrated to the US. He enlisted in the army at St. Clair and probably went to school in that area.

It's been reported he carved a cane for his boyhood friend, Thomas Edison, but the story is unsubstantiated. Edison did live and attend school in the same area but would have been eight years younger.

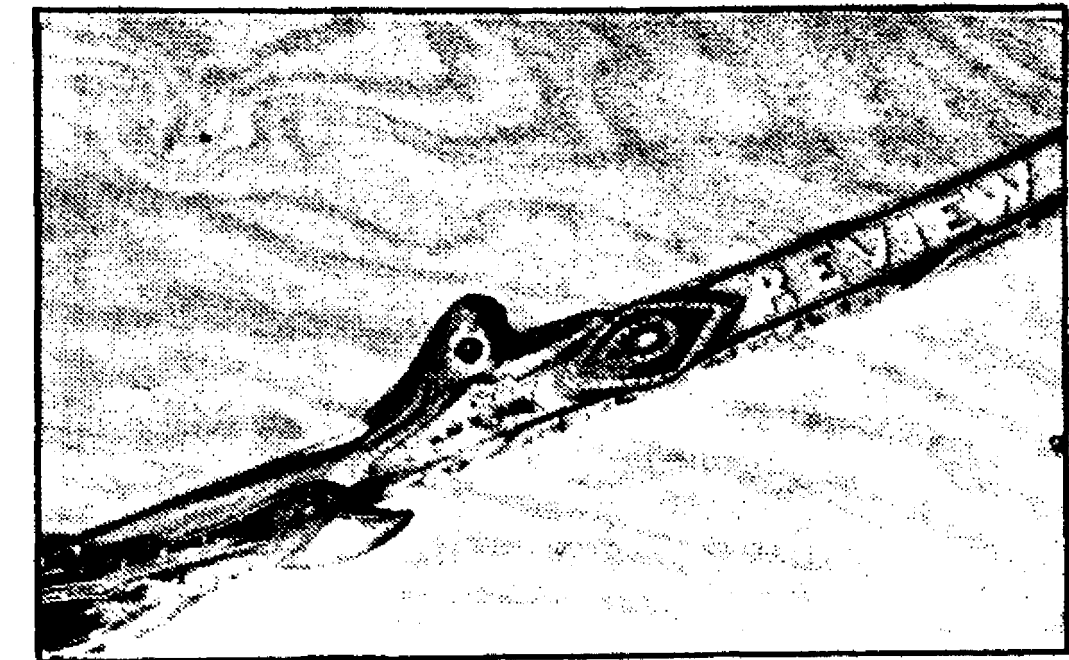
It appears Cribbins met a relative of his future wife while in the Army of the Republic, possibly in Washington DC where he was stationed in the Invalid Core after being wounded. He was discharged in January 1864. It's felt he came to Orion soon after and married Emerence Elder of Orion.

The couple had one child, a daughter Clara Mae, born in 1869. They lived in a home at Shadbolt/Market

(now North Broadway). His family reports he did a variety of things to earn a living -- carpenter, photographer, boat livery -- but carving was always his hobby.

The Orion Assessment Role has Cribbins paying taxes on the W. 1/2 of Lot 7, Block 8 from 1875. In the Pontiac and Oakland County Directory of Business -- year of 1887, he is listed as: prop city livery, poultry breeder, stables opp depot, h (home) cor Shadbolt and Market. The depot would have been the present site of Concord Drugs.

Cribbins died in 1917 and both he and his wife are buried in Evergreen Cemetery in the village of Lake Orion. Clara Mae married into the Deere family and continued to live in Orion. She later married Irwin Lake and lived in Oxford.



An example of one of Michael Cribbins' masterpieces. He used mainly diamond willow trees to carve his canes. Cribbins died in 1919 and is buried in Lake Orion.