

Articles

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The Dune Faun: Diana of the Dunes' Male Counterpart

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"It is a country for the dreamer and the poet, who would cherish its secrets, open enchanted locks, and explore hidden vistas, which the Spirit of the Dunes has kept for those who understand." Earl H. Reed

"I looked admiringly at his slim brown body flashing in and out of the tent. It was irresistible. Quickly I threw off my clothes and galloped up into the Graveyard Blow-out, free as air. It was remarkable how much easier climbing was, now that I too had become a Dune-Faun. What, with my clothes on, had been heat, was now delightful warmth." Webb Waldron

Loners

Because the northwest corner of the state was Indiana's "Last Frontier," to quote historian Powell A. Moore, a strange assortment of squatters, misfits, thrill seekers, and nature lovers made the Lake Michigan dune lands their home or playground throughout the nineteenth century. Among them were runaway slaves and escaped convicts, army deserters and sociopaths, scientists and preservationists. Even after the United States Steel Corporation bought up 9,000 acres of land along seven miles of shoreline, it still left large areas of virtually virgin beach, at least for a decade or so.

One visitor who fell in love with the dunes was artist and author Earl H. Reed. During excursions there he met and made etchings of numerous recluses with such colorful nicknames as Catfish John, Doc Looney, Old Sipes, Happy Cal, Jedge Blossom, and J. Ledyard Symington, whose stories appeared in Reed's "The Dune Country," published in 1916. Rather than romanticize them, Reed characterized them as, by and large, grotesque, morose loners who "have sullenly sunk into the hermit lives that harmonize with the dead and tangled roots which the roving sands have left uncovered to bleach and decay in the sun and rain." ¹

The most well known "Hermit of the Dunes" was George Blagg, an eccentric Civil War veteran who fought for the Union despite being a Southerner. For a quarter century starting around 1880, he lived off his soldier's pension, from handouts from sympathetic acquaintances, and on whatever berries or vegetables he could grow or gather. He did some fishing and hunting and by his makeshift home, which he called Sand Hill, had a little chicken coop that kept getting raided by weasels. In a letter

dated February 14, 1880, Rose Howe wrote of spotting him on the way to market carrying a basket containing two live chickens and jars of canned fruit. Margaret Larson, who met him when she was a child, recalled his tall, stooped frame, soulful blue eyes and long curly black hair and beard. In his old age his hair turned yellowish-white.

There was an undeniable air of intrigue about George Blagg, but he suffered from delusions that “anarchists” were out to get him and was more an object of pity than emulation. He’d repeatedly tell people he met, “I want you to know I have never killed anybody.” Even so, he carried a Winchester rifle with him and claimed to be patrolling the dunes against interlopers.²



Alice Gray as Diana of the Dunes

Perhaps because their stories lacked romance or an uplifting moral, none of these men captured the public imagination like a brash, uninhibited woman who in 1915 came to live a similar hermit existence. In time, a legend grew, promulgated in part by local and Chicago reporters alert to an irresistible human interest story, of “Diana of the Dunes,” a beautiful young nymph who appeared in a flowing white gown along the Lake Michigan shoreline at sunrise or twilight to bathe or swim in the nude. In an offshoot of the Diana legend some claimed to have glimpsed her with a male companion. In Roman mythology Diana, the daughter of Jupiter and sister of Apollo, was goddess of the moon and the woodland. The very name suggests mystery and romance, and the tale of “Diana of the Dunes” contains elements both of innocence and eroticism, ingredients that lent themselves to myth making. The legend grew up early in the twentieth century during an age of industrialization when many people fantasized about living an existence unencumbered by society’s demands and unfettered by its restraints. The fascination with this folktale has grown exponentially in the past 100 years. In 2010

Janet Zenke Edwards concluded that it “serves to enrich and preserve its [the Region’s] past, reveal local mystery and explore universal kinships.”³

The inspiration for the Diana legend was Alice Mabel Gray, a University of Chicago graduate who had made frequent trips to the Northwest Indiana dune lands. At age 34 she quit her job as a stenographer and editor for an astronomy magazine in Chicago and moved into an abandoned shack (in all likelihood, the one that had belonged to George Blagg) near the present community of Dune Acres. She named it Driftwood and compared herself to the debris washed onto the beach of which it was fashioned. Inspired to flee the conventional world by a line in Lord Byron’s poem “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” that went “In solitude, where we are least alone,” she acted on her reoccurring fantasy after falling in love with an older man uninterested in marriage and upon learning that her employer was paying her much less than men doing the same job as she. So in one sense her action was a pre-feminist statement. Another theory is that she did it on a dare after entertaining suicidal thoughts.

Though the *Gary Evening Post* labeled her a hermit, Alice frequented the Miller Library, socialized with kindred dune lovers, and attended family functions in Michigan City although the relatives tended to disapprove of her lifestyle. Poet Jeannette Vaughn Konley wrote: “She came once a year to the village store/ Where ogle-eyed townsmen crowded the door.” In fact, she contributed to her own notoriety by providing excerpts of her diary to the *Chicago Herald and Examiner*.⁴

In time Alice came to live with a rather unstable boat builder and handyman named Paul G. Wilson in a shanty in present-day Ogden Dunes that the lovers called the Wren’s Nest. Tall and powerfully built, Wilson kept unwanted curiosity seekers at bay. In May of 1922, local deputy sheriff Eugene Frank suspected that Paul, perhaps with Alice’s help, was breaking into other people’s summer cabins. A confrontation ensued during which the officer shot Paul in the foot and pistol-whipped Alice, crushing her skull. He was arrested, but authorities subsequently dropped all charges against him. Reporters had a field day over the incident, ridiculing Alice as some kind of a freak and referring to Paul as “Diana’s caveman mate.”

Alice died three years after the incident with Sheriff Frank from uremic poisoning or kidney failure. Afterwards, an editorial in the March 1925, issue of the *Prairie Club Bulletin* noted that “her fresh spirit and fair-mindedness left its impress, incorrigible individualist though she was. She knew every native plant and animal, every mood and color of lake and dune.” Relatives ignored her request that her body be cremated on a funeral pyre atop a tall sand dune and opted for a traditional cemetery burial. Historian Powell Moore called her a “tragic recluse.” The tragedy was not that she had shaken off the “shackles of conventionality,” as the *Gary Post-Tribune* put it. She found considerable freedom and happiness in the dunes, at least for a time. Her quest for solitude failed because the world would not leave her alone.⁵

Au Naturel

During the Roaring Twenties a group of intrepid young women living near Michigan City formed a group called the Dune Dancers. According to area resident Don Van Vomen, “Their claim to fame, shocking in those days, was to dance on the beach in very sheer veils. One by one in the moonlight, as dusk was coming, they would release their veils until they were dancing nude.” At this same time male clubs formed whose members embraced the physical culture movement and commonly disrobed when away from gawking strangers. Some were open to those who embraced a gay or bisexual lifestyle.

The same year that overzealous law enforcement officer Eugene Frank destroyed Alice’s dream of escaping civilization’s constraints, noted travel book author Webb Waldron visited the southern shore of Lake Michigan gathering material for a book illustrated by his wife Marion Patton Waldron entitled “We Explore the Great Lakes.” One chapter described an encounter near the present Indiana Dunes State Park with a naked beachcomber that Waldron nicknamed “The Dune-Faun.” In Roman mythology fawns were forest gods, half human but with goat’s horns, who provide guidance to needy travelers – Waldron’s use of the word “Faun” was intended to idealize the unencumbered lifestyle that the stranger symbolized. The Dune-Faun lived half the year as a violin instructor in the Chicago area but spent summers close to nature in a tent at the mouth of Graveyard Blow-out. Becoming a nudist helped him commune with his natural surroundings.

Nudism as a social movement spread from Germany to the United States during the 1920s as a healthy way of counterbalancing the stresses of modern industrialized, urban life. In contrast with Europe, where social nudism eventually gained a large measure of acceptance, in America self-appointed guardians of public morality viewed displays of nudity in a sexual context as immoral. Even so, during the 1930s the largest nudist club in the United States, the Zoro Nature Park, opened in Northwest Indiana.

A story about two grown men socializing in the nude would have struck many readers as homoerotic during an age when being openly gay carried with it a social stigma. Little wonder, therefore, that the image of “the Dune-Faun” never rivaled “Diana of the Dunes” as a source of fascination to readers. Even so, like Diana, the Dune-Faun, to author Waldron at least, represented innocence. Perhaps in our hopefully more tolerant age it is time to introduce the story of the Dune-Faun to a new generation of beachcombers and dune lovers. After all, for several generations young men have gone skinny-dipping in Lake Michigan at locales with such nicknames as Bare Ass Beach without being looked on with a jaundiced eye. ⁶

The Dune-Faun⁷

By Webb Waldron

Flatness. Railroad tracks crisscrossing in every direction. Factories. Steel-mills. Ugly towns. South Chicago, Hammond, East Chicago, Gary.

Somewhere I changed from the local train to an interurban car. The line, aiming toward Michigan City, ran parallel to the south shore of the lake. Beyond Gary, glimpses of dunes off to the left across seas of marsh grass. An occasional station where passengers with knapsacks climbed down. One of these, Tremont, was mine. Two jitneys waited in the dazzling August sunlight. "Bus for Waverly Beach!" I got in and the machine struggled away through the hot sand. I was bent on exploration of the dunes, and someone had said that Waverly beach was the best starting point.



Waverly beach, where the jitney deposited me, had no distinguishing feature. A lunch-counter, a few cottages, a broad beach. On each hand towered the dunes, those great piles of sand that wall the south and east and west shores of Lake Michigan. I struck eastward.

For half a mile or so there were cottages along the foot of the dunes, then nothing but dunes and lake. A mile farther, a foursome of lovers camping sketchily; that was my last glimpse of civilization. The beach near the water was smooth and hard. I struck out more and more briskly, yodeling a careless song. Once, out of a sense of duty, I paused and crossed the beach to the base of a promising dune and started to climb it. Since everyone had said that the dunes should not by any chance be omitted from the story, I felt that while here, I should know them more intimately. My knowledge was immediately increased. I learned that a dune resents being climbed. I took one step up the white slope and sank back two. Then I struggled vigorously. In five minutes I had gained perhaps ten feet up the slipping slope, and above towered an immense incline yet to conquer. I discovered, too, that while it was cool on the beach, here, a hundred feet back from the water, it was frightfully hot. I gave up and resumed my course eastward.

Two miles, three, four – how far had I come? Empty lake, dazzling sand, sky – these were the world, a virgin world. No trace anywhere of the foot or hand of man. And only two hours and a half ago I had been sweltering in the grimy, screaming Loop. It was incredible. I might be a thousand miles from the Loop. I was.

And then I saw much farther than that.

At first it was but a speck far down the beach. A piece of driftwood, perhaps. Presently I saw it move. It was a creature, a man, crouching at the water's edge. He made a quick motion as if to dart away across the sand; then, seeming to decide that I was harmless, he crouched again, working busily, but giving me an occasional wary glance.

When a hundred feet away, I had the impression for a moment that he was garbed from top to toe in a

dark brown suit. Then I saw that he was not a man, after all. He was a Dune-Faun, innocent of clothes, burned to a mahogany tint.

He rose. He was medium height, slim and good-looking.

“Good morning.”

“On a hike?”

“Yes.”

I glanced down at the garment he had been scrubbing.

“So you do wear clothes sometimes.”

He grinned. “Yes, I have to go down to Waverly now and then, for grub.” He pointed. “I live up there. Will you stop a minute?”

Back from the beach, near two twisted, flat-boughed cedars, was a tent with a big canvas water-bag hanging from the protruding ridge-pole. Between the trees swung a hammock.

“I live here,” he repeated.

He caught up his washing and I followed him across the beach.

“You see, I put the tent right in the mouth of this blow-out, so I have a breeze one way or the other all the time.”

“Blow-out. So this is a blow-out.” I gazed up at the great hollow scooped out of the rampart of the dunes, its sides dotted with gaunt, dead half-buried trees.

“That’s Graveyard Blow-out,” he explained. “Have you been up to the top of any of the dunes?”

I admitted that I hadn’t.

“You ought to go. There’s an easy one to climb. That one. Work up through the blow-out, than swing round and climb it from the land side. I tell you: climb up there and get the view, then come back and we’ll have lunch.”

“Oh, no! You’ve packed your food all the way from Waverly Beach.”

“I’ve got plenty on hand. I’d like very much to have you stay. You’ll be good and hungry before you get to Michigan City.”

“Well. . .” I wanted very much to lunch with a Dune-Faun.

”Then that’s settled.”

I looked admiringly at his slim brown body flashing in and out of the tent. It was irresistible. Quickly I threw off my clothes and galloped up into the Graveyard Blow-out, free as air. It was remarkable how much easier climbing was, now that I too had become a Dune-Faun. What, with my clothes on, had been heat, was now delightful warmth.

Working around the edge of the blow-out, I reached the back of the dune and saw why my brother faun had sent me there. Though the front of the dune was as nude as he, its back was clothed in marsh-grass, shrubs, and scraggly trees. I mounted rapidly. The view from the summit was indeed worthwhile. Outward, the great unbroken circle of lake, east and west the marching line of towering white dunes; inland, an unbroken sea of tangled woods. The only human trace in the whole circle of the world was the little white patch of tent down at the foot of the bluff, where a brown something twinkled in and out of the sunlight.

I tobogganed joyously down the face of the dune, scampered across the beach, and plunged into the warm lake. Then out, back to the tent, drying in the sun and wind.

“These dunes are an interesting study,” said the Dune-Faun as we sat down to delicious canned beans and coffee. “You wouldn’t think to look at them, that they travel around, would you? They do. If a dune takes a notion, it ups and goes somewhere else, and good-bye to any trees that happen to be growing on it. They get left. This blow-out, here, was a dune once. Then it moved on, and look at the poor trees. No wonder they call it the Graveyard blow-out.”

“It certainly looks like it,” I agreed.

“But sometimes dunes stop so long in one place that they get covered all over with grass and bushes. They’re anchored fast. They can’t move. They’re dead. That one you climbed is half dead. It’s only the absolutely naked dunes that are alive.”

“And the same with – men?” I wanted to say “Dune-Fauns,” but I was afraid he would laugh at me.

“Well,” he laughed, “I’m alive.”

“And I’m alive! I’ve never felt more alive in my life. Do you live here the year round?”

“Oh, no!” he laughed again. “In the winter I teach violin to the kids of wealthy North Siders.”

Violin instructor to the North Side! My Dune-Faun! I stared at him. If he had said Pan-pipe instructor

“You see,” he explained, “it’s a social as well as a professional job. I have to live out here all summer to get over it.”

I looked at his long, slender brown fingers, his finely molded, sensitive face, and it began to be

credible.

“Many people come along the beach?”

“Not many. A few hikers like you. Last week a party of the Prairie Club came along, and I went with them as far as New Buffalo. Slept on the sand. We had a wonderful time.”

I stared out over the empty, vivid-blue, the sweep of dazzling beach, then looked at our two naked selves, one on each side of the campfire. Suddenly we ceased to be Dune-Fauns; we were happy shipwrecked mariners.

“Doesn’t this make you think of the South Seas?”

“Do you want to go to the South Seas?” he said eagerly. “So do I.”

“Gee! Wouldn’t it be wonderful!”

“Wouldn’t it!”

He stared at the lake. “I suppose I’ll never get there. But I am going up to the Hudson Bay country. All this camping experience out here is just a getting ready for that.”

Finally I rose. “Well, I’ve got to be going. I suppose I’ll have to put my clothes back on,” I said regretfully.

“You’d better. Or else you’ll be so burned tomorrow that you can’t lie down. You’ve got to take this thing gradually.”

He went with me down to the beach. I thanked him for his hospitality. We shook hands and saluted.

“So long.”

“So long. Good luck.”

I strode eastward. A hundred yards up the beach I turned and looked back. He stood motionless, gazing after me – a slender, charming brown figure against the dazzling sand.

He waved again.

“So long! He shouted.

Epilogue

Chicagoans both, Diana of the Dunes (Alice Gray) and the Dune-Faun felt a need to escape civilization and reside close to nature; for the latter it was seasonal while for Alice it was a permanent, ultimately self-destructive life choice—although initially she may have intended her stay to have been temporary

and did return to Chicago occasionally. The Dune-Faun as portrayed by Webb Waldron welcomed company and embraced kindred spirits, such as Prairie Club members, while Alice, in the face of unwanted intrusions by reporters and curiosity seekers, in time became more suspicious of strangers. The story's narrator had a wife and lived in the world, not apart from it in baneful isolation. To both Alice and the Dune-Faun, nudism was innocent, yet while the latter embraced nudism as a summer lifestyle, Alice was not a nudist save when she bathed and swam in Lake Michigan.

While Alice's story contained elements of mystery and tragedy, as well as both innocence and eroticism, the tale of the Dune Faun was more prosaic yet touched many casual dune lovers who cherished the alluring nature of the dunes yet were not ready to cut off worldly ties. These included a significant number of gays and bisexuals who came across Waldron's manuscript and passed it around among one another as an example of an environment where true freedom of expression was possible and one could shed obsolete constraints. It spoke words of wisdom, namely that bare is beautiful, to those not hung up on notions of guilt and shame. As the narrator came to believe, as with dunes, so it is with men, that only the absolutely naked are truly alive. He compared the part-time violin instructor to Pan, the Greek equivalent of Faun, who used his flute to seduce those he desired into a world without inhibitions.

¹Earl H. Reed, *The Dune Country* (New York, 1916), cited in Janet Zenke Edwards, *Diana of the Dunes: The True Story of Alice Gray* (Charleston, 2010), 63; James B. Lane (ed.), "Tales of Lake Michigan and the Northwest Indiana Dunelands," *Steel Shavings* 28 (1998), 27.

²Lane, "Tales of Lake Michigan," 25-6; Margaret A. Larson, "Memoirs of Old Baillytown"; Armanis F. Knotts, "A Days Journey in the Dunes," *Chesterton Tribune*, June 29, 1916. The Larson and Knotts articles are in "The Story of Alice Mabel Gray, 'Diana of the Dunes,'" Loose-leaf Notebook assembled by Eva Hopkins, Westchester Township History Museum, Chesterton, Indiana. In her book Edwards spells Blagg's name with an "e" as Blagge. From the Union Soldier Service records it appears that Blagg is the correct spelling and that he was from Missouri.

³Powell A. Moore, *The Calumet Region: Indiana's Last Frontier* (Indianapolis, 1959); James B. Lane, *"City of the Century": A History of Gary, Indiana* (Bloomington, 1978), 27-34; Edwards, *Diana*, 17-21; David Hoppe, "Child of the Northwest Wind: Alice Gray and 'Diana of the Dunes,'" *Traces* (Spring 1997), 22-31.

⁴Edwards, *Diana*, 47-50; James B. Lane, *Gary's First Hundred Years: A Centennial History of Gary, Indiana* (Valparaiso, 2006), 55-7. Konley's poem contains these lines: "Her lightning stare set my pulse a-thrill, and time for a moment stood still. A strange sight to see on that autumn day, a maid college-trained, now a Duneland stray!" Lane, "Tales," 26.

5 Lane, *Centennial History*, 55-7; *Prairie Club Bulletin* (March 1925), 10. A copy is in the Prairie Club Archives, Westchester Township History Museum, Chesterton, Indiana.

6 Eddie Newell Papers (especially box 4), Calumet Regional Archives, Indiana University Northwest. Webb Waldron and M.P. Waldron, *We Explore the Great Lakes* (New York, 1923); Philip Carr-Gomm, *A Brief History of Nakedness* (London, 2010); Lane, "Tales of Lake Michigan," 26-37.

7 This is an excerpt from a chapter in Waldron and Waldron's *We Explore the Great Lakes*, which contains the Dune-Faun drawing by M.P. (Pat) Waldron. A copy of "The Dune-Faun" can be found in the Norman Bergendahl Papers (box 1, folder 19), in the Calumet Regional Archives.