

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

The Clementine Bath House and Murphy Hotels

by Nelly D. Longstaff



View of Cass Avenue ca.1910, with Methodist Church at left and Clementine Baths at right

The Clementine Bath House was built in 1892 by **B.B. Coursin** of McKeesport, Pa. He purchased the property on the corner of Cass Avenue and Walnut Street in 1889 for \$12,500. **Theophilus Van Damme** was the architect for the building, and **George H. Nichols** was the builder. The cost of the building was \$65,000. It was constructed of red pressed brick with stone trimmings and had wide verandas. In the summer these verandas were graced by hanging baskets of flowers and filled with comfortable rocking chairs for the guests.

There was a large office and lobby area, originally paneled in quarter-sawed oak with a tile floor. In later years, this paneling was removed and replaced with cane stone. This made the lobby much lighter. On the left side of the lobby was a ladies parlor with wicker furniture, a piano, and area rugs. On the right was a cigar stand and a card room for the convenience of the male guests. In the back of the lobby and desk area were separate sections of the bathhouse for the men and women bathers. There were nine sleeping rooms on the second floor and another in the tower.

In 1904, Mr. Coursin sold the Clementine Bath House to his friend, **John R. Murphy**, of Allegheny, Pa. for \$65,550. Mr. Murphy had been coming to Mount Clemens for the baths for many years. He was at one time the chief of police of Allegheny and was also a representative to the Pennsylvania state legislature. He was referred to sometimes as the "Chief."

In 1904, Mr. Murphy built the Clementine Hotel behind the bath house on North Walnut (this building was still standing in 1998 and housed **Rumors Restaurant**). This small hotel was connected to the bath house by a covered passageway and furnished additional accommodations for people here for the baths.

In 1911, after the death of his first wife, Mr. Murphy married **Nellie D. Metler**. She had worked

in the bath house since its opening, first for Mr. Coursin and then for John R. Murphy. Her niece, **Lena Metler Longstaff**, said that she sold the first bath ticket ever sold at the Clementine. She was born in Haldimand County, Ontario, April 23, 1862, daughter of **Moses and Eliza (Halyburton) Metler**. Nellie D. went to Alpena, Michigan to be with her uncle, **Gideon Burton**, probably soon after his first wife died in August, 1889. It is likely she went to help care for his three small children. Gideon remarried, and the family story is that she found work caring for the children of another Alpena family. They came to Mount Clemens for a visit and brought her with them. She sought and found employment in the newly-opened Clementine Bath House.



An example of the fine ceramic tile from the floors of the Clementine, which was imported from the Jackfield Pottery in Shropshire, England.

Mr. Murphy built a new home at 167 Cass Avenue shortly after they were married. It, too, was designed by Mr. Van Damme. The High home which was on the property was moved to the rear of the lot. It was torn down later. The Murphy home now houses the administrative offices of the Mount Clemens school district.

Mr. Murphy had a cottage on the North River Road called **Allegheny Villa**. Before the bridge was built, it was accessible only by boat.

Nellie Metler's mother, **Eliza Burton Metler**, came to live with her some years after her husband, Moses, died. At one time they lived in a house behind the bath house on Walnut Street. Later Eliza operated a rooming house on Cass Avenue west of Miller Street, known as **Metler Cottage**. This was later the **Altman Hotel**. My mother, Lena Metler, came to Mount Clemens from her home in Fort Erie, Ontario about 1913 to assist her aunt in the management of the bath house and the new Clementine Hotel. In 1917 she married **Thomas G. Longstaff**, a Mount Clemens native.

In 1914, Mr. Murphy added two stories to the original hotel and bath house. Again the architect was Mr. Van Damme. **Hubarth and Schott** were the builders with **Hatzenbuhler and Cudworth** as the plumbers. This addition provided 37 new sleeping rooms. An elevator was installed for the convenience of the guests. The center of the building was open to the top floors and had public areas for the guests on each floor. Now we would say there was an atrium. The hotel section was leased to **George C. Fenton** and for some years was known as the **Hotel Fenton**. The furniture came from **F.J. Schutt**, and **Thomas Griffith** supplied the linens and bedding supplies. **DeWitt Cooke**, a retired theatrical man, was in charge of the cigar stand in the lobby.

Mr. Murphy died in 1917. Shortly after, Nellie Metler Murphy purchased the **Eastman Hotel** and renamed it the **John R. Murphy Hotel**. It was located on the south side of Cass in the block between Gratiot and South Walnut. The Town Square building stands there now.

The Eastman was built by B.B. Coursin in 1900, but was owned and operated by the Eastman family. It was five stories high and for many years the tallest building in Mount Clemens. It was primarily a commercial hotel, although in the summer months it housed many visitors here for the baths. For many years the Western Union office was located off the lobby. In the rear of the building was a doctor's office, housing at various times **Doctors Norton, Campbell Ward, P.T. Mulligan, and Julius Stone**. the property extended to South Walnut Street. At one time during the late twenties or early thirties there was a miniature golf course there. Later it was a gas station. A small building was added by Lena M. Longstaff on the west of the hotel to house **The Gown Shop**.

In 1926, Nellie D. Murphy died, and Lena Metler Longstaff inherited the properties from her. Thomas G. Longstaff left his employment at the **Detroit-Michigan Stove Company** to assist his wife in the management of the three hotels and the bath house. The family moved to the house at 167 Cass at that time.

I thought it might be of interest to tell something about the mineral baths and how they were given. The Clementine had two wells that were over 1000 feet deep. The mineral water was pumped up and stored in large tanks and heated before it was used for the baths. The water had a high sulphur content that accounted for the odor many people found offensive. It turned the silver coins dark also. Mother used to say that the town merchants could tell when the season began because their cash registers were filled with the blackened coins the bathers had handled. *Cutter's Guides* give an analysis of the mineral content of the water.

The people who came for the baths usually stayed for three weeks, taking a "course" of 21 baths. They would come in and make their arrangements upon their arrival in town. At the time I was in the business, baths were sold for \$1.00 a bath or 21 baths for \$20.00. The attendant's fee was separate and paid directly to the attendant. In 1916, the baths were 50 cents, with the attendant's fee 25 cents. In 1964, the baths cost \$2.00. The business was very competitive, and the prices in later years were not adequate to maintain and upgrade the facilities.

After the visitor bought his tickets he was taken in to the bath house area to meet his attendant. If he had been there before, he would usually ask for the person who had cared for him through his previous course of baths. If new, he would be assigned to the attendant with the least number of bathers. A time for the bath would be arranged.

At the set time the bather would come down in his bathrobe if he was staying at the hotel. Or he might be picked up and delivered to the bath house from the rooming house at which he was staying. In the early days, many people walked from nearby establishments. He would then go to the desk where he was offered a lock box for his valuables.

Then for his bath! The attendant would "draw" the bath, tempering the water to the desired temperature. People were advised not to have the bath water too hot as this could be very debilitating. They were assisted into the water where they stayed for about twenty minutes. The attendant would give them a massage while they were in the water. The tubs were very large and deep and were porcelain lined. They had a head rest for the bather. The water was very corrosive, and the outside of the tubs looked pretty grim. The stalls around the tubs were marble, and the floors made of tile. The marble seemed to resist the effect of the water. The water was almost black and was quite buoyant.

After the bath, the patient was assisted out of the tub and wrapped in a flannel sheet. Then he was taken to a leather covered padded cot in the adjoining private room to rest for about a half hour.

Sometimes hot packs were put on arthritic knees, etc. The bather would then get dressed and go to the community "cooling" room where he could stay as long as he wished.

Most people liked to take their baths early in the day so they would have time for other activities. In the height of the season, when about 400 baths a day were given at the Clementine, baths would be scheduled as early as 4:00 a.m.

The fact that the Clementine had two wells was a great asset. In season the pumps were going almost continuously and sometimes breakdowns occurred. The bath houses that had only one well sometimes had to borrow water from their competitors. In the spring the wells were "pulled" and generally checked to be ready for the busy season. Oil well workers from Ohio were often imported for this chore. The only owner who worked on his own wells that I remember was **Mr. Feldman** of the **Arethusa**.

Most bath houses ran their own laundries for the many towels and flannel sheets used. **Mr. George Simms** ran this at our bath house for many years. His wife was one of the attendants. The water was very hard on these items and off-white terry towels were used. As many as ten or twelve towels might be used for one bather. The regular hotel linens were sent to a commercial laundry.

As I mentioned earlier, the business was very competitive. The bath houses employed "runners" to go out and solicit customers for them. These men would meet the incoming street cars and trains and talk to the visitors. They would offer them transportation for themselves and their luggage and extol the virtues of the bath house and hotel they represented. In later years they even went to Detroit to meet the trains there. Many efforts were made to eliminate this practice, but without much success.

In looking back through some old materials that I have, I found some information about the attendants at the Clementine. My mother said that in the prosperous days, there were twelve men and ten women attendants. Among the men were **Bert Campeau, Louis Lozen, Gus and Otto Reick, William Brass, James Trombley, George Weiss, Leffey Laforge, R.B. Roy, Frank Roberts, and William Howland**. Among the women were **Mrs. Lydia Guiette, Mrs. Strobe, Mrs. Meyers, Mrs. George Simms, Mrs. Charles Carter, Mrs. Reick and Mrs. Frank Carter**. I remember also **Mrs. Frank Daly, Mrs. Steevens, Mrs. Wilbur, and Mr. and Mrs. Howard Brusseau**. These people prospered with the bath industry and educated their children, many of whom became prominent Mount Clemens citizens. I remember **Roman Eyth**, who was for many years manager and day clerk of the **Murphy Hotel**. He was formerly associated with the **Sherman House**.

The depression was a major factor in the decline of the mineral bath industry in Mount Clemens. At the same time the younger generation began to look to their doctors for other cures for their ailments. The advent of vacations based on the automobile trip had an influence. People no longer wanted to go and stay for three weeks for a leisurely holiday.

In the early 1930s, a major drive was made to bolster the ailing industry. **A.D. Brewer** was secretary of the **Board of Commerce** and **Donald R. Westendorf** was the city mayor. In 1934 and 1935 a Health Fiesta was held. The whole city joined in the planned activities with school being closed in the afternoons of the two-day celebration. There was a queen (**Eleanor Ullrich**) who went to Washington to present a sample of the mineral water to **President Roosevelt**. There were parades with men in bathrobes and an old white horse, a banquet with **Lowell Thomas** as the speaker, a ball, an air show, a boat show, and many other activities.

In 1935, the second Fiesta was held, chaired by **Dr. O.C. Fluemer**. Along with the usual parade and other activities, a Governor's Day was held with **Governor Frank D. Fitzgerald** in attendance. An attempt was made to establish a National Health Sanitarium. Despite these efforts the bath industry was in a gradual decline.

In 1946, the Clementine Bath House and Murphy Hotel and the Clementine Hotel were sold by my parents to **Frank Rich** of Baltimore, Md., yet another visitor for the baths who became involved with the business. He renamed it the **Murphy-Clementine Baths**. Baths were given until 1965, when the property on which the wells were located was sold to the city of Mount Clemens to expand the Cass Avenue parking lot.

Mr. Rich made many changes, converting much of the building to small apartments. He made stores all along the Walnut Street side of the property and enclosed the spacious porch for more rental space. At one time he imported painters from Florida to modernize the building, and they painted in light blue. It was a far cry from the gracious building of the early 1900s. In 1971 it was sold to the **G. and S. Corporation** with **George Steeh** as board chairman. The building was razed in 1973.

In 1978, the **Mount Clemens Bank** bought the property and converted it to a small park. Later they added an automatic teller outlet. It is hard for me to believe, as I look at it now, that this area held the fairly large hotel and the long corridors of the bath house that I remember.

For more information about the Murphy Hotel and Clementine Baths, we recommend:

- Vocino, Rosemary. "Murphy-Clementine Antiques are For Sale," *Macomb Daily*, October 13, 1972, p.B1.
- Wilczynski, Gordon. "October Demolition Set for City Landmark," *Macomb Daily*, October 11, 1972.
- Selwa, Robert. "Murphy Hotel Faces Ax Soon," *Macomb Daily*, April 11, 1972.
- Peruzi, Joseph. "Clementine Hotel Damaged by Fire," *Macomb Daily*, April 16, 1970.
- Thomas, Emlyn. "Murphy-Clementine Fire Routs 53," *Macomb Daily*, November 10, 1965 p.1A.
- "Murphy Hotel Changes Hands : Clementine Baths Sold by Mrs. Longstaff," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, October 7, 1946, p.1.
- "Death Summoned John R. Murphy at 7:45, Today," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, February 19, 1917.
- "J.R. Murphy Comes to Town," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, February 5, 1904.
- "The Beautiful Clementine : Something About the New Bath House to Open Next Week," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 12, 1893, p.1.