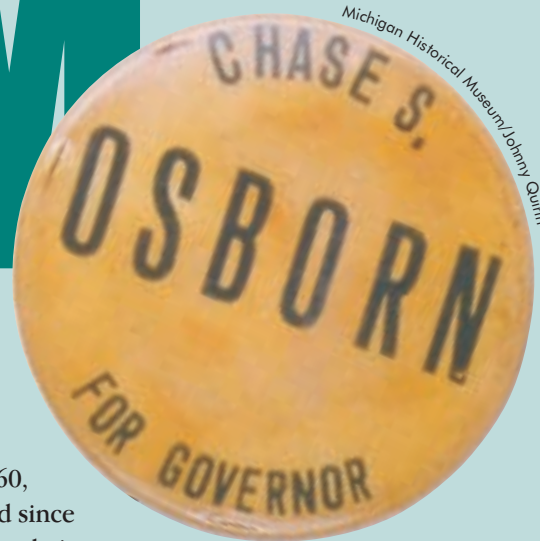


Chase Salmon Osborn was as unique as the canes he collected. These canes—many of which are hand carved—are only a few of the many items that were donated to the Michigan Historical Museum by Osborn's wife in 1981.

Photo Michigan Historical Museum/
Johnny Quirin

To a Different DRUM

by RICHARD D. SHAUL



The birth of their seventh child on January 22, 1860, worried the parents. Two children had already died since the family's move from Ohio to Indiana, and now their son Chase Salmon Osborn was developing into a sickly and "puny" youngster with life-threatening digestive problems. His parents fed him mashed green sweet corn and the "delicate pulp just inside the skin of the grape" until his health improved.

With the exception of one brief period, the Osborn family suffered from abysmal poverty after moving to Lafayette, Indiana. They were forced to live in a two-room shack with scarcely enough food to eat, subsisting on a daily ration of cornmeal and pig heart once a week. Starting school in the midst of such penury took its toll on the bright and sensitive eight-year-old Osborn. He did well enough in his studies, but because he was "so shy and bashful, it was painful for him" to speak in the presence of others, his mother recalled. Osborn was often the target of derision from his classmates because of his ill-fitting patched clothes, and he frequently ran away from home, as much toward the allure and excitement of the unknown, as from the tormenters who ridiculed him.

Being treated as a pariah toughened Osborn. Like his father, he could be "impetuous and extreme" in his conduct. This was displayed in his aggressive and erratic behaviors beyond his periodic fistfights. At the age of ten, while delivering newspapers, he emptied a twenty-two-caliber pistol directly into a gang of ruffians intent on beating him up. He missed them all. Remembering that day and thanking providence for his lack of marksmanship, Osborn later said: "I expected to kill seven boys at least and maybe more." A few years later, he abruptly left Purdue University after being embarrassed at a reception where many of his peers wore expensive suits, and he did not have enough money to afford an undershirt. Shortly after returning home from Purdue, Osborn confronted and attacked a man inside a church who had previously threatened to harm him. Disgraced in Lafayette, Osborn left home for good.

For the next two years, Osborn drifted around before landing a job with the *Chicago Tribune*. He was soon let go due to cost-cutting measures, but he had managed to save enough money, he later wrote, “to improve the quality and character” of his clothing. In 1880 he walked eighty-five miles to Milwaukee and found work at the *Milwaukee Chronicle*. Osborn was a dynamo. He always ran to his assignments and invariably scooped the competition for the best stories. Tucked visibly in his belt was a hatchet to protect himself against an irate county supervisor who—after Osborn had exposed the man’s involvement in a scandal—threatened to kill him.

By Saturday, May 7, 1881, the twenty-one-year-old Osborn could afford to marry eighteen-year-old Lillian Gertrude Jones, whom Osborn described as “the most beautiful and the bravest girl in the world.” That day, Osborn bought his bride a five-cent bouquet of flowers and a wedding trip on a Milwaukee streetcar.

At about the same time, a telegram dispatched to the *Chronicle* read, “Send up a young fellow not afraid to run a newspaper.” The plea came from the *Mining News* in Florence, Wisconsin. The infamous Mudge gang, a band of killers and thugs, had hastened the departure of the previous owner-editor. The weekly newspaper was for sale and Osborn was asked if he wanted to buy it. After securing a loan for \$2,500, Osborn accepted the offer.

After Osborn’s presses started rolling out stories condemning Mudge’s activities, the gang wrecked the newspaper office, fired shots through the windows of the building and tried to kill Osborn. To protect themselves, workers at their presses were armed with rifles. A citizen regulator group was formed by Osborn. He also received encouragement from the state’s governor to “Go after them, boy,” as well as a promise to send state troops to help. When the paper printed more articles indicating the governor’s support, the Mudge gang quickly dispersed and ceased their operations. According to the *Milwaukee Chronicle*, “through his newspaper and a vigilante band . . . [Osborn] wiped out a notorious white slave ring.”

Florence, Wisconsin, was centrally located in the developing Menominee iron range. When things settled down at the newspaper, Osborn devoted more time to investigating the region’s ore deposits. His expertise in locating iron ore was recognized and he was called upon to explore the Echo Lake area in Ontario, Canada. Unfortunately, no usable iron ore deposits were found. Instead, Osborn discovered Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. He was “fascinated,” he later said, by the area surrounding the little town along the banks of the St. Mary’s River. After four years with the *Mining News* Osborn sold the newspaper, realizing a profit of \$10,000. In 1887, he brought his family to the Sault and with two partners purchased the *Sault News*. While he retained editorial control of the newspaper, Osborn rarely was involved in its daily operation, and for the next several years Osborn hunted and fished the wilds of Canada and the world, while searching for iron ore.

After moving to Sault Ste. Marie, Osborn became heavily involved in politics. His active participation in state and national arenas led to various appointments: postmaster at Sault Ste. Marie in 1889; state fish and game warden in 1895; commissioner of railroads in 1899; and regent of the University of Michigan in 1908. As commissioner of railroads, Osborn had a seat installed on the cowcatcher of an engine where he sat inspecting the twelve thousand miles of Michigan railroad track.

During Osborn’s tenure as railroad commissioner, he was approached by a physician living in the Sault who complained about the absence of a medical registration law and state licensing examinations needed to improve standards for the practice of medicine in Michigan. Giving the doctor his unqualified support, Osborn had him

A hearty man not afraid of the outdoors, Osborn enjoyed hunting and spending time on Duck Island (near Sault Ste. Marie) or at Possum Poke (near Poulan, Georgia).





Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of Shoultice Library, Lake Superior State University

draft the necessary language for a bill and take it to his state senator for legislative action. The Michigan legislature passed the measure, but strong opposition convinced Governor Hazen S. Pingree not to sign it. Osborn followed the governor to his Detroit home where he forcefully argued for the passage of the bill. Osborn did not leave Detroit until the next morning when he saw that Pingree—who had appointed Osborn railroad commissioner—had signed the document. The result was the Michigan Medical Registration Act of 1899. It served as a model for thirty other states and, according to Dr. E. H. Webster writing in the *Evening News*, played a significant part “in making America the medical center of the world. . . . Chase S. Osborn drove a golden spike in ending up a chaotic period in medicine.”

While living in the Upper Peninsula, Osborn acquired and sold thousands of acres of timber at a considerable profit. But it was iron ore that interested him. He became the “Iron Hunter”—the preeminent finder of large ore deposits. Osborn stated: “Iron ore and steel are of greater importance than wheat, because there are many substitutes for wheat. There is none for iron ore.” His uncanny ability to locate iron ore led to discoveries in northern Canada and Africa. His customary 25 percent profit share earned him millions of dollars. With more money than he believed he needed, Osborn was ready to turn his attention toward greater public service and philanthropy.

Osborn was a Republican in his political philosophy, but a liberal-minded progressive in action. As railroad commissioner, Osborn exposed rampant waste of resources and corruption in state government. Convinced of the need for reform, he entered the 1910 race for the Republican nomination for governor. The incumbent governor, Fred M. Warner, endorsed his lieutenant governor, Patrick H. Kelley, as his successor. But there were problems in the Warner administration, including conflict of interest scandals, a huge deficit bankrupting the state and the mismanagement of the prison system. The *Lansing State Journal* reported Osborn as saying: “There has been too much politics and too little practical business in the affairs of the state. Michigan has an empty state treasury, politicians are drawing fat salaries for jobs that should be abolished and it is the duty of someone to clean up. I propose to do that.”

Toward the end of a hard campaign, an event occurred that created a sizable uproar. At a Republican dinner in Ionia each candidate was asked to make a few comments. Expressing a need for financial accountability, Osborn added, “What we must have is a watchdog of the treasury. [Lt.] Governor Kelley is not a watchdog. He is more like a big, kindly, friendly Newfoundland dog.” The usually mild-mannered Kelley rose from the speaker’s table “with

Osborn (left, in the back seat) visited Van Buren County while crisscrossing the state by automobile during his 1910 campaign for governor.



Osborn and his companion, Stellanova, spent twenty-five years together before the couple married in 1949.

his jaw stuck out and fists clenched” and approached Osborn yelling, “You can’t call me a dog.” Osborn quickly went into a defensive posture, but Kelley was blocked by others before reaching him. Some in the audience cheered while others jeered Kelley’s conduct. A few days later, Osborn and Kelley shook hands and amicably resolved the incident. At the end of the campaign, with only four candidates left, Osborn received 88,000 votes in the primary while Kelley, in second place, received 52,000 votes. In November, Osborn defeated the Democratic nominee. To date, he is Michigan’s only governor from the Upper Peninsula.

As Michigan’s chief executive, Osborn met resistance immediately. By declaring himself a one-term governor and concentrating on reforms rather than worrying about offending anyone and losing the next election, he acquired instant lame-duck status. If his opponents thought that they could outlast him or that he could not hurdle the obstacles they were about to throw in his path, they were mistaken. Had they not heard about this man who had fought off thugs in Wisconsin, hiked 2,200 miles with a backpack into the Arctic Circle and Antarctica, walked completely around Lake Superior and also canoed its entire shoreline and survived malaria and the bite of the tsetse fly in South America and Africa?

Osborn was found to be as tough in his resolve as he was physically. He was able to enact a workmen’s compensation law, allowing disability payments for workers injured on the job, regardless of responsibility, and payments to the families of employees killed on the job without the families having to initiate a lawsuit. The law served as a model for other states. He removed the Michigan National Guard from the influence of partisan politics, closed state departments that were not performing satisfactorily and created a surplus in the treasury. He fought unsuccessfully for the prohibition of alcohol, against well-financed opposition, but he prevented breweries from owning saloons. Osborn was a strong proponent of suffrage, but he could not overcome the entrenched prejudice against the vote for women. His term of office ended in December 1912 and, true to his word, he did not seek reelection.

For almost two years Osborn and his wife traveled to some of the most exotic and remote countries and islands in the world. Upon his arrival back in the U.S. he was prodded into running—though unsuccessfully—for governor in the 1914 election. He lost the bid for his party’s nomination for the U.S. Senate in 1918 and 1928 and even declined an offer to be Herbert Hoover’s vice presidential running mate.

Forever imprinted into Osborn’s consciousness was his family’s early struggle with alcohol and the injustices of living in poverty. Out of these experiences he became a relentless advocate for prohibition, for nationalizing the transportation systems and utilities and for the redistribution of wealth. When accused of being a socialist, Osborn replied: “I believe in the socialism of Jesus Christ . . . and no other kind of socialism.” For Osborn, it was simply a matter of doing what was right and living “not to thyself alone.” Some pundits were certain that had Osborn run for a second time following his first term, he could have been the Republican nominee for the presidency in 1916 with an excellent chance of being elected. But Osborn’s progressive leanings and his unwillingness to compromise alienated powerful Republicans, and they quashed any future chance he may have had in politics.

To the surprise of many, in 1924, after forty-three years of a marriage that produced seven children, Chase Osborn and his wife, Lillian, legally separated. They never lived together again, but neither sought a divorce. In his sixties, Osborn spent time pursuing his many interests and accepting invitations to speak. The boy who grew up too shy to recite in class was now much in demand, becoming in the process “among the remarkable speakers of all time in America.”

In 1924, Osborn met Stella Lee Brunt, a thirty-year-old Canadian student at the University of Michigan who shared his interests in writing. She soon became his secretary and dedicated lifelong companion. In a move that shocked all who knew him, Osborn adopted the orphan Brunt in 1931. She later claimed, “The adoption principally was for appearances. . . . I wanted to marry him. But that was not possible.” At Osborn’s request she changed her name to Stellanova (“New Star”).

Osborn’s philanthropy was legendary. Years after being governor, he commented: “One day I suddenly realized that I had 30 million dollars. . . . I said to myself, what possible use have you for all that money? You have been a hog and you’re going to stop being one today. . . . Why shouldn’t I give it away?” Over his lifetime Osborn gave up all of his assets but kept a small annuity to live on. He gave away thirty islands to relatives and friends, and one to Tulane University. He disposed of his twenty-nine newspapers for the benefit of others. He gave properties to the University of Michigan, Olivet and Alma Colleges, even Purdue University. He gave to the University of Michigan his extensive rare book collection. He gave to the city of Sault Ste. Marie church bells, an illuminated cross, valuable statuary and paintings and one thousand elm trees to line the city streets. He denied few requests for financial assistance from someone in need. The gratitude expressed by the recipients of this redistribution of wealth embarrassed Osborn. He often declared, “It is a great joy for me to give, and why should I be thanked for doing something that makes me supremely happy?”

During the summers Osborn and Stellanova stayed on Duck Island in the St. Mary’s River about twenty miles southeast of Sault Ste. Marie. Before hard winter set in they migrated to Poulan, Georgia, and lived in his former hunting camp dubbed “Possum Poke in Possum Lane.” Osborn even gave away these two homes, but kept a life lease. Each site had a dwelling designated Big Duck or Big Poke, mainly for guests, with some amenities. This was not the case for Little Duck and Little Poke where conveniences were sparse, and where Osborn stayed. Both locations were on “Osborn Time,” which meant that the clocks were set at least two to three hours ahead so that everyone would get to bed and rise early to extend their daylight hours. Osborn slept in a tent on a bed of balsam tips, getting up long before sunrise to bathe in the river, regardless of the weather. Afterward, he shaved in the dark while standing on one foot to improve his balance and agility. Meals were announced by a bell rung eight times. Those at the Osborn table were allowed to have as much food as they could eat, but if they did not eat everything taken, they received smaller portions at the next meal. The Osborn Doctrine was clear: “No one has a right to waste what means life.” Not even guests could escape this pronouncement.

Whenever things got a little dull, Osborn energized the situation—often in a manner that highlighted his eccentricities. *Collier’s Weekly* magazine reported an event that likely occurred when Osborn was in his early fifties. While on Duck Island with friends, Osborn

Osborn’s house-boat, complete with an outhouse, was affectionately dubbed “The Waterbug.”



In his seventies, Osborn, shown here on Duck Island, performs a Native American dance. This handwoven basket was given to Osborn as a gift and later donated to the Michigan Historical Museum.

spotted a 150-pound bear swimming in the river and “decided that he wanted that bear.” Jumping into a boat, he rowed alongside the shocked animal, slipped a rope around its neck and began hauling it to shore. The bear protested the nerve of this aquatic interloper and climbed aboard the boat three times only to be manhandled and thrown back into the water each time by Osborn, who received substantial claw wounds to his neck and shoulder. The bear was now so tangled in the rope and the bow of the boat that Osborn was fearful of being capsized, and he was forced to use his hands to drown the bear. In response to this rash behavior, Osborn commented: “I had caught bears before and I never dreamed that I’d have so much trouble with that one.”

Osborn and Stellanova spent many hours answering correspondence and collaborating on books and various articles in the Little Duck and Little Poke cabins. During his lifetime, Osborn authored or coauthored nine books. He had a fertile and inquisitive mind and was interested in the natural sciences and how things worked. He posited theories on the causes of earthquakes and tidal waves, discovered the source of the firefly’s luminescence and asserted that in the future people and freight would travel coast-to-coast in less than three hours propelled inside vacuum tubes.

As Osborn got older and became disabled, he and Stellanova spent the greater part of each year at Possum Poke. In January 1940, for his eightieth birthday, the state of Michigan proclaimed “Chase S. Osborn Day.” That same year, Osborn gave his thoughts about dying to *Redbook* magazine. “I love life,” he said, “but I am so curious to see what goes on afterward that sometimes, honestly, I can hardly wait.” In 1945 he suffered from a broken hip and was nearly blind from cataracts. His general health deteriorated over the next few years. Through it all, the devoted Stellanova remained at his side. By the early spring of 1949, it became clear that Osborn, now eighty-nine, had only a short time to live.

To the end, Osborn displayed his penchant for the unexpected and his ability to get both friend and foe to wag their heads. On April 9, 1949, he had the adoption of Stellanova annulled and less than an hour later as he lay on a cot, too feeble to stand, the pair were married. Stellanova recalled, “He wanted to marry me. . . . We cared a great deal for each other.” Two days later, he passed away from pneumonia. His last words to his wife were, “Thank you.” Stellanova lived to the age of ninety-three and was buried alongside her husband on Duck Island.

Osborn was recognized as a brilliant man of unparalleled knowledge and unbridled energy, with a lifelong compassion for helping ordinary people. He was straightforward in his opinions to the point of being rude, fair-minded but a hard taskmaster and not one to compromise. He was unconventional, fearless in his actions and nearly always unpredictable. During his lifetime, Osborn made thousands of friends from all over the world and some bitter enemies. Loved or hated, those who knew him agreed that there would never be another “cultured savage” like Chase Salmon Osborn. ■

A frequent contributor to *Michigan History*, **RICHARD D. SHAUL** is a resident of Palatine Woods in Mackinac County. He wishes to thank Mary M. June, reference librarian at Lake Superior State University, and Cheryl A. Shaul and Aaron R. Shaul for their assistance in preparing this article.

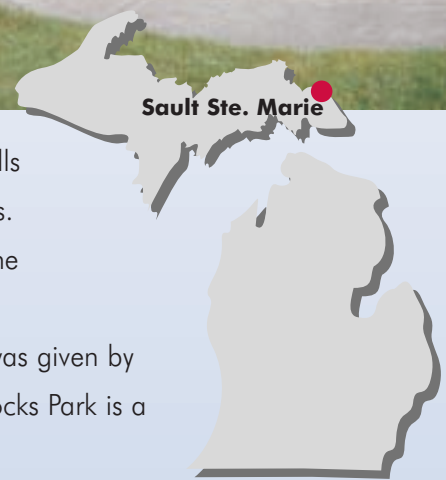


Michigan Historical Museum/Johnny Quinn



If you go...

SAULT STE. MARIE has benefited greatly from Chase Salmon Osborn. One of his early gifts was more than a thousand elm trees to line the city streets. Other gifts include eleven bells for the St. James church tower, an illuminated cross and statuary and paintings. Osborn had Locks Park's "Torii," a traditional Japanese archway, shipped to the city from Japan.



The Capitoline Wolf on the grounds of the Chippewa County Courthouse was given by Osborn to the city in 1909. The sculpture grouping above at Locks Park is a memorial to Osborn.



In 2002 about \$1 million from the sale of a painting Osborn had given the city in 1915 was used to set up the Governor Chase S. Osborn Trust Fund. Interest from the trust will be used each year to fund local projects or events that relate to the city's history.

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