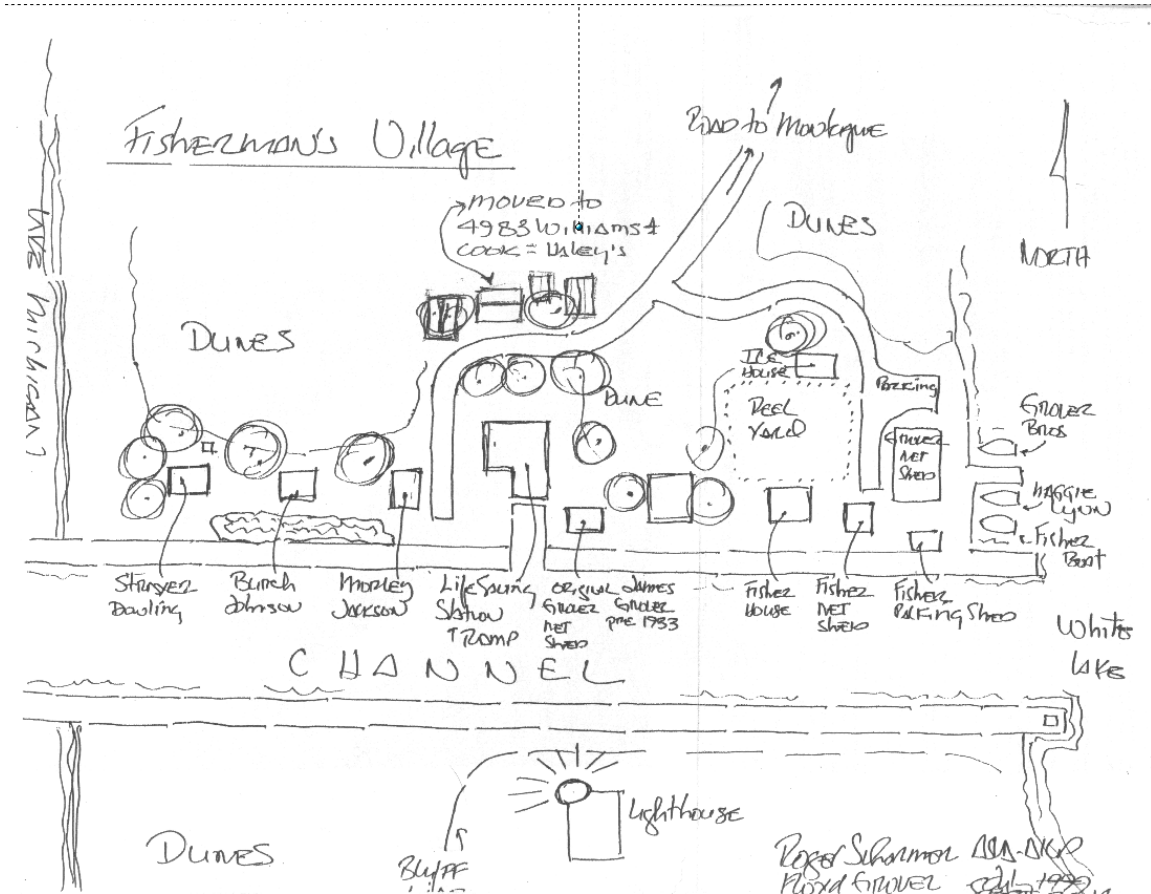


# White Lake Area Historical Society



# White Lake Area Historical Society



## Great Lakes fisherman recalls rugged winters at sea

By BARB AARDEMA

Chronicle staff writer

### Fishing.

The word conjures up visions of lazy afternoons on a quiet little pond, summertime battles with feisty salmon on the Big Lake, and easy comradeship among folks tracking bobbers along channel walls.

But it's winter now, and winter — not summer — is the time to fish for profitable returns, says old-time commercial fisherman Floyd Grover.

GROVER, 90, who fished the waters of Lake Michigan out of White Lake for years with his brother Hallard "Jim" Grover has vivid memories of those times.

The brothers fished into the winter months, as long as they could find or break into open water.

"Winter had the best money-making months," said Grover. "The cold wasn't so much, but you had to buck the ice."

It was about this time of year, 40-some years ago and before the Grovers had their own boat, that Floyd Grover had to walk a mile to shore on the ice after the boat he was crewing got stuck during a blizzard. That kind of memory isn't one that is lost over time if you're part of a family whose life is the lake.

"We got caught out," Grover said. "A blizzard hit. The harbor closed and we had to stay out."

"THEY WERE gone 25 hours," recalled his wife, Margaret, a woman who with her children worried and watched until her fisherman was home each night.

In the days before ship-to-shore radio, the fate of Great Lakes fishermen was in question until their tugs appeared on the horizon at the end of the day. The family recalls White Lake lighthouse keeper William Bush keeping an eye out for the area commercial fishermen, often blowing the harbor's fog horn to guide them in.

During that 1920s blizzard, Grover was the youngest on a fishing boat owned by Harvey Nedeau, so he was elected to bear the message of the crew's plight to someone on shore.

"We were down near Elks Park," Grover said. "We had just a little coal, barely enough to keep a fire going. The boat was kind of crippled. There was ice on the tiller and it was impossible to steer under our own power."

"I TOOK the message ashore in the afternoon, walking down to Grand Haven. The next day an airplane came and dropped a bag of coal on the ice. They put bacon and bread and some other stuff in there too. The ice was like pavement. There was no danger to walk on it."

Another trapped boat, the Indian, was within sight of Nedeau's Helen N. that day. The Indian was closer to the still-open shipping lane so its crew was provided with a hot meal by a passing car ferry, Grover said.

The ordeal ended when the Helen N. was towed into harbor, its tiller still frozen tight.

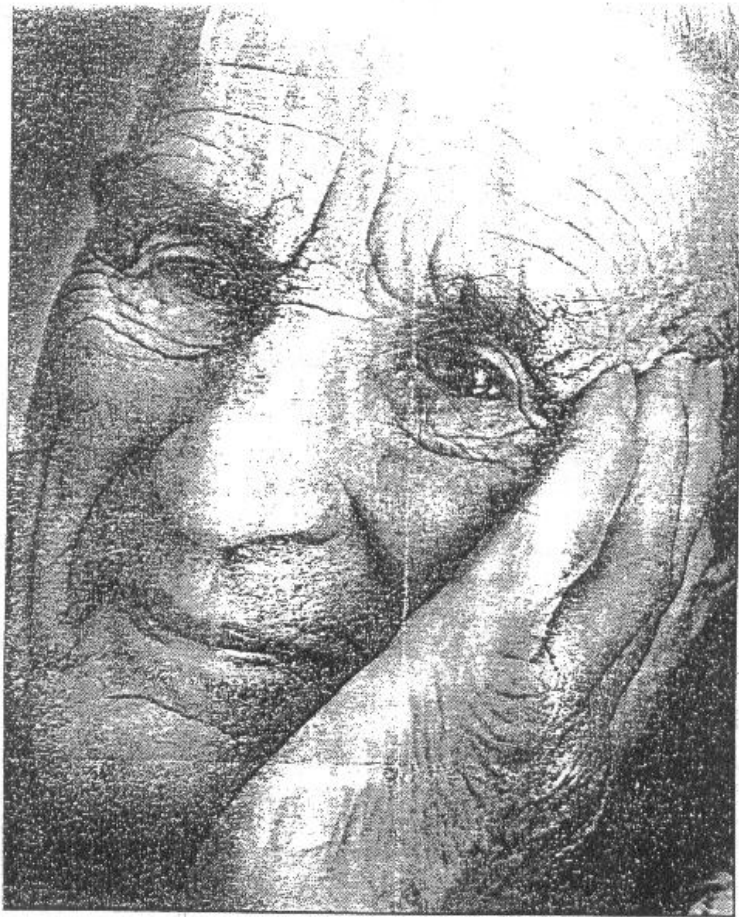
Even after that chilly experience, Grover decided to stick by the sea. In 1933, Grover and his brother started their own commercial fishing business.

"YOU HAVE to have some breaks," he said. "To start it was pretty skinny (but) we were on our feet already when things tightened up during World War II."

"There are droughts in the sea as well as on land," said his daughter, Kathryn Wackernagel.

Floyd Grover passed on a legacy of work and memories to his children. Mrs. Wackernagel recalls working with cousins, untangling nets in the net shed that stood beside White Lake Channel. The girls also had to "clear the hooks" during summer months when lake trout fed near the surface and hooks, rather than nets, were their fathers' tools.

"They had to be cleared just so, so when you would put them out they would sing a little," said her father. As he spoke his hands flew through the motions of baiting hooks that were spaced on lines a rod apart. The hook line was rigged to feed out over the edge of the boat on a roller. There were 400 hooks in a box,



and the fishermen used two to three boxes per trip, said Grover's son, Floyd Jr.

THE BAIT WAS chubs, a small fish which the fishermen had netted closer to shore. They picked up the chubs in the early morning, then set out for the day. On the way back in, the crew was kept busy gutting their catch, preparing it for shipment to Chicago and other markets.

The younger Grover joined his father and uncle on the Grover Brothers fishing tug when he was only 11.

"I had to stand on a box to see out the pilot house windows," said Floyd Jr. "The first morning out dad showed me how the compass worked. It was fun at first, but it didn't take long for it to become work. I had to steer all over the lake."

THE ELDER Grover is a lifelong West Michigan resident. Born on a farm in Shelby, he recalls his father's summer boat livery on Stony Lake. As a young man he worked for a time in a machine shop, but decided the open waters were more appealing than indoor work. With his brother, and later with their sons, the Grovers fished commercially out of White Lake for several decades.

Their first boat was the Signora. Grover Brothers was the name of their second boat. The 1935 wooden tug was the first they commissioned and even helped build on the site of the present Wesley Marine Service and Shear Water Boat Shop on White Lake.

The first of the Grovers' boats were followed by all-steel tugs. The Maggie Lynn, named after Floyd and Hallard's wives, Margaret and Lena, was one; Grover Brothers II was the other. The steel tugs have been copied since by other boat builders and still are in use on the Great Lakes.

"They were rugged and very seaworthy," said Mrs. Wackernagel.

"THEY HANDLED good," said Grover. "We used to figure if you had a Burger Boat, built by the Burger Boat Co. in Milwaukee, Wis., and a Kohlenberg engine you were set high."

The seaworthiness of the vessels was tested in winter squalls, ice-clogged channels and frozen depths.

Fishing areas and techniques varied with the seasons. Bobber hooks were used from late May until June or July. By mid-August, the fishermen set nets for trout near a reef in the middle of the lake. It was in again from September until October, seeking white fish near the beach, "as close as you could, in six feet of water and out, just about scraping the bottom," said Floyd Jr.

WINTER RUNS took the Grovers back to the middle of Lake Michigan where the plentiful trout schooled in 150-foot depths after fall spawning runs. To find just the right spot every time, "you would set a course and you would sound," said Grover. A chunk of iron attached to a line marked in fathoms was the sounding tool that told the fishermen how deep they were.

They set three or four gangs of nets during the winter when the trout ran in the deep water. Each gang was three miles long.

Grover recalls meeting Wisconsin fishermen near the reef, the Wisconsin crews staying west of the reef, and the Michigan fishermen staying east of it, each within their respective state boundaries.

GROVER acknowledges his wife's and daughter's concerns about the dangers of working on a hard, metal, slippery deck in all kinds of wind and weather. He went overboard once, grabbing a fish box as he went to keep him afloat. Another time the nets got tangled in the rudder and he had jump into the lake to clear them.

"When I was thinking how far it was to the bottom, I got kind of scared," he said.

Grover sold out to his brother and nephew in 1947. He said pollution took care of much of the lake trout by then.

"It's really kind of sad when you stop to think about it," said Grover. "Like the timber, they're gone. Pollution was the worst of all. Everything has its day, and that's it."

# White Lake Area Historical Society



CELEBRATE WHITE LAKE

FISHERMAN'S VILLAGE

It's all been cleared and altered, but our walk will take us from Grover Brothers Fishery at the White Lake end of the pier past the Fisherman's Houses, the Life Saving Station and on to the Lake Michigan shoreline where Cassius Dowling long occupied a small cottage.

For many years, centered around the Life Saving Station (1887) and the White River Lighthouse (1875), were the houses and outbuildings that created Fisherman's Village. Stretched out along the north channel wall, these buildings turned their backs to the natural old channel outlet to White Lake and fronted on the new channel constructed in 1870. The timing of the White Lake Channel couldn't have been better for the lumbering communities of Montague and Whitehall, for the great Chicago fire was in October 1871. The rebuilding of Chicago created a great demand for Michigan lumber and brought two decades of prosperity to White Lake residents.

In the 1890's, after the giant trees had disappeared and the mills had closed, White Lake residents turned to promoting their scenic resources and water land amenities as a means of economic survival. The era of "White Lake the Beautiful" had begun with tourist and cottage owners enjoying the pleasures of scenic White Lake.

Since the 1860's, members of the Irish colony at the mouth had been selling lake trout, whitefish, and sturgeon to the residents of the lumbering community. Fishing as a source of income took on new directions in the 1920's when the Grover Brothers, John Fisher and other residents docked their fishing boats along the old wooden pier channel wall. Grover Brothers had a successive line of boats beginning with the Signora (1928), Grover Brothers (1935), Maggie Lynn (1941) and Grover Brothers II built in 1945. The 1940's were a time of abundant catches with a record catch of 5,600 pounds of dressed fish in one day. We'll explain more of the functions and the design of this fishing village as we tour the north channel wall. The 1989 Muskegon Chronicle article on Floyd Grover tells the Grover Brothers story very well.

Let's look at some old photographs and do some exploring.

Roger P. Scharmer  
ASLA-AICP  
July 1999  
SEPT 2014

# White Lake Area Historical Society



## White Lake Life Saving Station 1875

Soon after 1875 a life saving station was built next to and about the center of the north pier of the channel. For years it had a crew of seven or eight men. There were living quarters for the captain and sleeping quarters for the crew, and later small houses were built near the pier. An inclined runway was built from the water up to the station for launching boats. During the operation of the station men patrolled the beach north and south of the pier with lanterns at night. There was an auxiliary building or large boat house painted white which stood almost at the edge of Lake Michigan a few hundred feet north of the south pier where a large life saving boat was stored in case of storm and not being able to get out of the channel. For years oars were the only power and later inboard motors were used. The south pier was a double decker, could be used for walking at pier level or in case of storm elevated walking, with a light located at the west end of the pier. In 1915 electric lights replaced the kerosene lights both at the lighthouse and at the end of the pier.

Captain William Robinson was the first lighthouse keeper from 1875-1915. William Bush, a son-in-law, was assistant and succeeded Robinson until 1941 when it was closed.

Later the lighthouse was used as living quarters, and the lights were electrically operated and serviced by the Muskegon Coast Guard. The lighthouse has later been sold to Fruitland Township for \$6,250 perhaps to be used as a museum.

In 1946 the Coast Guard Station was put up for sale.

R. John DeFraga was White Lake Harbor Master from then on for awhile and had a 36 foot life boat and a 26 foot surf boat, both self bailing and self righting. The building was finally sold and moved to the Holcomb lot a short distance away. A new residence was built in its place by Hallard Grover who is a fisherman. This has now been torn down and Natural Resources bought the Grover property. Montague owns Medbury Park here. --Research by W. L. Lipka



THE LIFE SAVING CREW



CAPT ROBINSON