



Mears enters Old Channel - 1837

CHAPTER V

SETTLEMENT BEGINS

Probably the first white settler in the Montague Area other than the french fur traders, was Job Sargent. He was born in 1794 and served with U.S. Forces Against England, in the war of 1812.

Very few persons are aware that of the few graves of veterans of the war of 1812 in Michigan, there is one in the Montague Cemetery.

There on a plain stone is the following inscription:

Hero of 1812
JOB SARGENT
Born in Dunbartin, N. H.
November 11, 1794
Died January 9, 1882
Aged 89 years and 2 months.

So far as can be ascertained, Mr. Sargent's grave is the only 1812 veteran's grave in this section of the state. Only a few of

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the soldiers of the second struggle with England ever came to Michigan because of the unfavorable report given to the homesteading committee which, at the close of the war, was appointed to secure a good tract of two million acres to be apportioned in land grants as a bonus.

Michigan was then a part of the Northwest Territory of which the capitol was Chillicothe, Ohio. According to the report of surveyors, Michigan was full of impassable swamps and dense forests. The mosquitoes were terrible, the soil was not fit for agricultural purposes. Hence it was most unsuited for parcelling out to the veterans who deserved the best that the young nation then could find for its heroes.

Why Job Sargent came to Michigan will never be known, but he came to the White Lake region in 1817, being one of the very first white men to settle in the region long before the lumbering operations had been started by the Mears and Dalton brothers.

A grand-daughter, Mrs. Ida Mead of Montague was in Montague October 7, 1860, and remembered many things about her grandfather who died after she had obtained maturity. Her father, Thomas Stanage, came to White Lake in 1847, she says, and his father-in-law came before then.

Mr. Sargent's farm was a quartersection in the north part of the village extending from U.S. 31 to the State road now known as Sikkenga Road. This land he cleared bit by bit as he needed more for the support of his family.

They did not come to Michigan with him on his first trip. He staked out a claim and worked until his money was spent. Then he went back to New Hampshire to earn more toward establishing the wilderness home. Twice he did this and then he brought his wife and several children.

There were nine of them in which was merely an averaged-sized pioneer family. One girl died as a baby in the east, and a boy, Jacob, died of consumption and is buried in New England. The other members of the second generation all of whom have died, are buried at Montague with exception of Emily who lived in Wisconsin. In Montague are Fernando, buried in the Old Channel Cemetery; Elbridge, Nathan and Mary, buried in the Montague Cemetery; and Jane and Eliza who are buried on the family cemetery located on the old farm which Mr. Sargent settled.

He was an old man, as Mrs. Mead remembered him. He would occasionally tell of the war and his experiences, but this part she has forgotten except that he saw active service in some of the fighting on land. His last few years were spent as an invalid. First he became blind and then he lost his mind and was in bed a long time before he died.

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Mrs. Mead's mother, Mary Stanage, cared for her father during his last four years of life, and in return for this care received a portion of his land in the old gentleman's will.

In the early 1800's the lower lakes regions were growing and building, a restless nation was pushing further and further, west, building as it went. Chicago, Milwaukee, busy bustling new cities sprang up on the west shore of Lake Michigan.

The call was for lumber, the raw material to build; the market was big and getting bigger.

Stories of Great Pine Forests stretching for mile after unbroken mile across Michigan were told wherever adventurous men gathered: Stories of White Pine straight and tall 150 feet or more in height, perfect trees for the masts of sailing ships, trees five feet in diameter, thousands of feet of lumber in just a few logs. These tales reached the ears of Charles Mears son of a Massachusetts sawmill operator of Scotch descent.

In 1837, at the age of 23, Mears was operating a General Store in Paw Paw, Michigan, with two of his brothers. The stories of White Lake and its vast stands of pine fell on fertile ground and Mears became anxious to reach this virgin territory in order to obtain title to some of the valuable timber lands ahead of the speculators already coming in large numbers from the East.

An exploring expedition was decided upon and a small craft was built for the purpose.

Mears left Paw Paw in April, 1837, "in a small clinker-built skiff," accompanied by his brother, Albert, then a lad of fifteen; and two other men named Herrick and True, bound for White Lake. They went down the river to St. Joseph, and then followed the beach to the mouth of White Lake. The trip was a rough one, lasting nearly two weeks, on account of bad weather, during which time they repeatedly capsized, and ran out of provisions before reaching Grand River, but in the early part of May, they passed Chief Wabaningo's Village on the narrow flats between White Lake and Lake Michigan about where the present Government Channel is located. The Ottawas had a large cultivated field of corn and squash growing in the area, about seventeen wigwams made up the Village. A short time later they reached the mouth of the White River, where they found two men holding down a claim north of the Old Channel for one Hiram Pierson, of Chicago. It was just two years prior to this that the last treaty was signed with the Indians, whereby their title to that part of the State lying north of the Grand River was extinguished. This part of Western Michigan had not as yet been surveyed and placed on the market. The first patent to any land around White Lake was not granted until 1841.

They camped the first night at the Mouth, and the next day stopped

at noon at Burying Ground Point, where they found a band of Indians eating dinner. They received a cordial invitation to partake, but as the bill of fare consisted of ducks eggs, some sound, some questionable, some in the poultry state, with a large roasted black snake for dessert, the offer was declined. That night they made for the mouth of Silver Creek . . . They continued up the river for three days, to the rapids . . . when they returned to the mouth of Silver Creek, and decided to locate there.

Albert Mears felled the first tree and within two weeks a cabin 16 x 20 feet had been built of split logs, and a small piece of ground cleared. Charles Mears started on foot to Paw Paw to get castings for the mill. Soon afterward True proved "untrue" by skipping out one night after stealing the stock of bread on hand, leaving Herrick and Albert alone. At the end of two months, their provisions were exhausted and, having heard nothing from Charles, they packed up their traps, got into a skiff and started for Paw Paw. At Grand Haven, Albert, thinking he had had enough of hardships, left Herricks, and got a schooner for St. Joseph.

"Charles Mears and Herrick returned that fall to White Lake with the necessary castings for a water saw mill, which they decided to build not at Silver Creek, but on what is now the mill-pond in South Whitehall. Early in 1838 the mill commenced sawing clap-boards, or siding, eight feet long, with a circular saw and a few years later an upright saw was put in. Soon after the completion of the mill, Mears built the schooner, Ranger, carrying 15,000 feet of lumber; it was the first registered craft to enter White Lake."

John D. Hanson acted as Captain. The Ranger was the first commercial vessel to ply between the port of Chicago and White Lake.

In 1845, Captain Hanson, married Miss Betsy Austin of Milwaukee. They moved at once to White Lake and thus became the first family of white settlers in the area. Their children were the first white children born at White Lake.

In 1844 Captain James Dalton, Jr., stopped off at the Mears' mill on his way to Manistee. One of Mears' men ferried him across the lake to the point where the Ravenswood resort stood in later years, where he took the trail for Manistee. He had not gone seven miles before he decided to go back to where the business section of Montague now stands. Some Indians there told him about Silver Creek. He visited the mouth of this creek and decided to build a mill there.

An illuminating comment at this point, as illustrating the conceptions that men had in those days as to the possibilities in lumbering, is found in the record that we have that Mears objected

strongly to Dalton establishing a second mill because he did not believe that there was enough pine timber around White Lake for two mills to cut.

Lumbering came to White Lake and to Michigan in the days when water power was the only available motive force that men had. Steam was still a novelty in the industry and prohibitive in costs to those men of small means. Moreover, the water mills could only operate on those streams that could be conveniently dammed with the means and facilities that these men possessed. In other words, the great body of pine that stretched for endless miles across the state meant very little to them. They could not log the timber that was back from the creeks profitably; even the creeks that they could readily dam.

The most that either Mears or Dalton embraced in their early plans was simply to log the better stands of cork pine that were available to them under these conditions. Mears believed that he alone could log all this timber himself. But Dalton, and his brother Peter, went ahead and put a water mill into operation at Silver Creek, and this mill was operated continually from that time until 1881. During the latter part of this period it was operated by Dalton and Menges.

In 1844 Hulbert and his sons came to White River from Grand Rapids, and commenced boring for salt about twelve miles up the river, salt being one of the prime necessities of pioneer life. Failing to obtain a promising well, they abandoned this venture, and built a water mill on Carleton Creek, which was purchased by I. E. Carleton, and operated by him until his death in 1871. It was at the site of this mill that Carleton wished to establish a new county seat. The fifth water mill was built about this same time on Sand Creek, at the site of the dam near the present Rochdale Inn. Around each of these water mills grew up a tiny hamlet which vied with its neighbors and dreamed of the day when it would be the chief center of population on the lake.

At about this time the first steam boat made its appearance on White Lake. The craft was constructed by building a deck over two canoes, was propelled by a wheel at the stern driven by a small engine. This primitive ship was named the "Twin Sisters" but was commonly called the "Mosquito." She was imported from Grand River by the Daltons and used by them and Mr. Carleton for towing their lumber from their mills to the "Mouth."

MURRAY'S INN
William L. Murray
W. C. "Bud" Murray