



Settlement at Mouth - 1850

## CHAPTER VI

### THE FIRST WHITE SETTLEMENT

The real beginning of the City of Montague was at the Old Mouth of the White River where it entered Lake Michigan. A Village of some size flourished at the old mouth for nearly forty years. It was variously known as "Stump" or "Stump Postoffice", as "Ferrysville", and the "White Haven"; and more familiarly as the "Mouth". The first name may allude to the fact that a hollow stump was used as a repository of the mail as it came up the beach from Grand Haven, S. J. B. Watson acted as Postmaster. The second was the name that the Ferrys tried to attach to the settlement after they had built a steam mill there. Just as the men of the lake called the mouth of the Grand River, Grand Haven, so they called the mouth of the White River, White Haven. When, however, the government established a post office there, in 1854, the first one on the lake, they named it the White River Post Office, with A. A. Caine as Postmaster. On a large map accompanying a Gazetteer of the United States, published by Lippincott in 1854, you will find the settlement designated as the White River Vil. No other settlement is shown on this map along the east shore of Lake Michigan until you come to the Indian Village, Cross Village, just south of the Straits. The plat of the village as recorded is under the name of the White River Village. It was, however, known probably

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Doris, Ike, Mike, Gail, Steve, Leta-Mary, Matthew

to more people as just the "Mouth", just as the school at the top of the hill, and the cemetery hard by it, are still known to this day as the Mouth School and the Mouth Cemetery.

Our history of the Village of White River is fragmentary and indefinite. We have already mentioned that when Charles Mears came here, in 1837, he found two white men holding down a claim north of the Mouth for one Hiram Pierson, of Chicago. The next mention that we have is that of a grand celebration that was held at the Mouth on July 4, 1846, at which time "Hulbert, the hotel keeper, furnished a salt-pork dinner, after which a swimming match was held."

Another account states that the first Fourth of July celebration in White River was held at the Mouth, in 1848. "In the presence of fifty Indians and twenty whites. Captain James Dalton was the orator of the day and after a sumptuous repast of pork and beans the whites hurrahed, the Indians who felt quite patriotic, joined in the shouting. The schooner Mitchell raised the flag. There was about a half a dozen of the fair sex in White River then."

In 1850, Rev. William Montague Ferry, of Grand Haven, began buying extensively of pine land on the north side of White Lake, and erected the first steam sawmill in the area at the Mouth. Around this mill grew up a small hamlet of mill workers, a colony of Irish fishermen settled there later. Scott and Stebbins ran the Ferry mill for four years, then it was sold by the Rev. William Montague Ferry to his sons, Thomas W. Ferry, and Noah H. Ferry. Thomas became United States Senator for Michigan and President pro-tem of the Senate. By virtue of the latter office he became Acting Vice President of the United States upon the death of Vice President Wilson in 1871. Grant's term expired on March 4, 1872, which was on a Sunday. Hayes was not inaugurated until noon on March 5. So it may be said that this first steam mill on White Lake was owned in part by a man who became President of the United States for a day.

A vivid picture of life as it was at the Mouth settlement in the early 1850's is well portrayed by an account written by Mrs. Peter Hobler.

In the year 1850, my husband, myself and baby, with a girl for help, started from Milwaukee in a lumber vessel for the wild pine forests of Michigan.

After two days and one night of rough weather and sea sickness, we anchored at the mouth of White River and came ashore in the vessel's yawl. It was all two strong sailors could do to keep the yawl along side of the vessel until the passengers could be let down into it. Among six or eight shanties there was one somewhat larger than the rest, dignified by the name of "Hotel" and to this we

were directed. Once inside we were not only sea sick but homesick. We were shown to a large room roughly boarded up containing six beds, the one we were to occupy having a small curtain to draw in front of it. Upon examination we found the mattress and pillows to be made of marsh hay, with bedbugs, fleas and mosquitoes for company, and quarreling, drunken Indians outside, making the night hideous. Sleep was impossible. The breakfast consisted of black coffee, with maple sugar of the Indians' make, and no milk; some fat salt pork and cold beans poorly cooked, some bread without butter and black molasses.

Our household goods had been brought ashore during the night on a scow which was used in carrying lumber to the vessel. To load in those early days it was necessary to anchor the vessel about a quarter of a mile out, from where a line was stretched to a post on shore and in this way the scow was propelled by the sailors. I tried to make ourselves comfortable for the next night by furnishing a room in the other end of the hotel with our own bedding. Our attempts to sleep were baffled inasmuch as the fleas and other insects were quite as numerous and troublesome as on the preceding night. You will see that for a hotel this was a very poor excuse. The landlady claimed to be in poor health, induced I think, by her dislike for work, her help being a German woman just over who knew nothing of our way of cooking.

In a few days, my husband and another man went out to select a place to build a shanty and succeeded in finding the body of an old log house. They secured the only team which was at the mouth of the river and these were oxen, there being no horses here then that we knew of. He hauled lumber for the floor and split some shakes to cover the roof. We had brought some windows with us and the next day we moved in and put up our beds with only half a roof over us; but we had our first square meal and a clean one too. The mosquitoes bit some, but the bugs and fleas were left at the hotel. We lived here one year, and it was nine months before I saw a woman, and this was Mrs. Harvey Tower. She and Mr. Tower came one Sunday on a sled drawn by an ox team and stayed all day.

In those days, the timber was all on "Uncle Sam's" land and no one thought of buying any, but this could not always last. Someone made a complaint to the Government, the U. S. Marshal came out and seized lumber and shingles all around the lake and compelled the people to pay for the timber, so it was late in the fall before shipments could be made and supplies purchased.

The "Twin Brother" was the only boat which went between White Lake and Milwaukee. The weather being very rough it took three weeks to make the trip. Consequently, our provisions were well

nigh exhausted before she arrived. One provident individual living north of us raised some potatoes, and we were fortunate enough to secure a bag of them which was brought home on two poles. Our bill of fare for one week consisted of potatoes and flour gravy, and by way of variety, flour gravy and potatoes. This was pioneer life in earnest, but we were young and not easily daunted.

On a trip to Milwaukee and back to Grand Haven, we engaged a man to take us to White Lake in a small sail boat. We had only gone four miles when we had to put in at Black Creek on account of the strong north wind, and were wind-bound three days with a family that kept the ferry. They lived in a board shanty but were very comfortable, having enough to eat and good places to sleep. Then we boarded the boat and with a fair wind went as far as Duck Lake, and, as it was getting very rough and dark, we concluded to remain here overnight. The next morning the wind was fair for the captain of our boat to go back to Grand Haven, so my husband paid him, and we concluded to walk the beach the rest of the way. Each taking a child in arms, we started, leaving our trunk to be sent later. After going about two miles, we came to a steep bank washed by the water. If I went past it meant wet feet, so my husband took both the children and waded around the bank where he put them on the sand, then came back and carried me around. We reached home at noon having been on the road five days and a half and five nights going a distance of 125 miles. Such was the convenience of travel in the early days.

In 1846 Charles Mears built a dam across the mouth of Duck Lake, and a water power mill. Afterwards, in order to increase his production of lumber, a stream mill was built, but fire destroyed both mills, and only the water mill was replaced. Further light is shed on early day life by these Duck Lake recollections of Ebenezer Spriggs: I left Old England for America in the year 1856 intending to continue my trade of manufacturing lumber. On arriving in Chicago I was directed to Charles Mears as a reliable man who always paid his hired help. December 5, 1856, I went aboard the schooner Japan, Capt. Ryerson bound for Duck Lake, Michigan. After a stormy trip we were obliged to land at Grand Haven and walk the beach to Duck Lake. At that time, Ottawa County extended from Grand Haven to Manistee, and it was said Mr. Mears had the largest lumbering plant in the county. He used both steam and water power, had a general store and post office, and people came from miles around to trade and get their mail. Indians were plenty and came to trade too. Their "papposes" were strapped to a board and would be left leaning against a tree or any convenient thing. Animals were allowed to roam at will and one day a fierce old hog attacked and partly devoured a baby. The Indians demanded

the animal and it was willingly given them. That night they had a great fire and spirit dance and burned the remains of the child with the pig, hoping in this way to exorcise the evil spirit. The country was almost an unbroken wilderness, but to me it seemed full of God-given riches.

There was game, particularly deer; fish, fruit, timber and good water in abundance. Wolves were numerous but bears were scarce. One need not be an expert to kill a deer or catch fish. I caught many muskellunge with a large hook clumsily soldered to a tin tablespoon. Fever and ague were prevalent and none could escape its weakening grasp. In 1861 I moved over to White Lake and have seen the rise and fall of the lumber trade.

In 1853, White River Township was organized. In 1857 a town meeting was held at Dalton's water mill on Silver Creek. Dalton was elected Supervisor. It is said that printed ballots were first used at this election. At this time White River Township included what is now eight townships. In that year Carleton and Dalton purchased the brig Oceana. One wonders whether the name of Oceana first given to the township that afterwards became Montague and Whitehall Townships, and then later to a county, did not originate from this purchase. In 1858, "the steamer Comet, with a big excursion from Grand Haven, entered the piers at the Mouth". We also have a notation that there were "great races at White River" that year.

I. M. Weston quotes a friend as relating: "I left Chicago on the schooner Levant, Captain Connell, in the spring of 1859, for White Lake, and after a rough passage of forty-eight hours we came to anchor off White Lake. . . At the Mouth was the old Ferry mill and store. On the opposite side of the bayou was Cain's and Hobb's Hotels. The Ferry store, in which I am duly installed as chief and only clerk, was the only one in White River, the store of the Carletons having been sold or closed out. The Long Point mill started up during the season, and a few goods were brought in by Luscome and Pierce. The old Jewell mill at Maple Grove, was lying idle. On the site where Montague now stands was the old Sargent house and barn. On the site where Whitehall now stands, the old Covell and Thompson mill and boarding house constituted about the only buildings. The Mears store was built during the season. The Rogers mill was bought by Rathbone and Company, and Governor Rathbone went there that season and ran it. . . During the season N. H. Ferry bought the steamer Croton, and brought her to White River. . . The school was taught by Phoebe Clark, Mrs. Mary McLaughlin teaching the "Naske" district, and Miss Nettie G. Hubbard taught in the Sargent district. Saturdays the teachers from the outside districts came to town to stay over Sun-

days. During the fall of 1859, Rev. Chapin was sent to White River by the M. E. Conference, and preached once in two weeks at the school house, and succeeded in awakening considerable religious enthusiasm. In the spring of 1860, as a result of his labors, a Sabbath School was organized, with W. H. Woodbury as superintendent; George E. Dowling as assistant, and Miss Emily Burrows (now Mrs. Captain Dalton) librarian. We had two monthly mails, and when we saw old man Brittain, or his son Ralph, with their two ponys loaded with mail bags, all hands would go up to the post office, and wait until the worthy Postmaster, S. J. B. Watson, would distribute the mail to us."

It is difficult to obtain a clear idea as to the population of the village of White River. The census figures, prior to 1880, are in terms of the Township of White River, which we have seen was successively reduced from an area that included Oceana and a part of Mason and Manistee Counties to its present size. The population of White River Township and the entire White Lake area are as follows:

	1854	1860	1864	1870	1874	1880
White River	789	374	543	1452	706	508
Oceana (Montague and Whitehall)		214	111			
Blue Lake				381	297	307
Fruitland				228	208	494
Holton					620	892
Montague					1360	1950
Whitehall					1323	1835

The census of 1860, however, showed that there were 364 people at White River, which here may be taken to mean the Old Mouth and the farming land just north of it, 11 at Mears, now Whitehall, 40 at Carleton's and 65 on the river at points beyond, according to Sheriff Sanford who took the census. This does not agree with the figures above which gives 214 as the number of people living in the old Oceana Township, but it does give us a fair idea of the number of people at the Old Mouth that year.