



Loading at White's Mill - 1880

CHAPTER VIII

LUMBER AND A GROWING AMERICA

The construction of the first steam mill at the Mouth by Rev. Ferry in 1850 opened the way for the rapid expansion of the steam mill in the Montague Area.

Mills were built as follows:

In 1855 Mr. Jewell built a steam mill in Maple Grove to the west of the present Barteau Boat Works. It was sold in 1860 to Heald, Avery, Murphy and Crepin, one of the best. Joseph Heald came in 1857 and explored White River, traveling to the head waters in a canoe--the first to do so. He purchased 12,000 acres of pine land on White River. He cut the first logs put into White River above what was known as flood wood and rapids. Other lumbermen claimed logs could not be run down stream. Heald personally supervised his first drive which was successful. He was one of the originators of White River Log and Booming Company. Up to 1882 he had done more than any other man to develop the lumber resources of this region. His mill cut 150,000 feet a day and was one of the largest, employing 65 men.

G.A. Rodgers, in 1855, built a steam mill just west of the present site of the White Lake Yacht Club. Indeed, some of the timbers of this old mill have gone into the foundation of the club house. This mill passed successively through the hands of Rathbone and Cone,

RAYDON LUMBER

Cone and O'Brien, H. B. Cone and Sons, Green and Company, Green, Kelsey and Company and finally into the hands of Captain James Dalton. It was known first as the Cone Mill, later as the Governor's Mill (after Rathbone) and finally as the Dalton Mill.

In 1855 Rodgers and Hill built a steam mill on Long Point, now owned by duPont and used as their pumping station. This mill was sold to Luscombe and Pierce in 1859. In 1871 it was purchased by I. M. and B. F. Weston, later by Hafer and Weston. Mr. Rodgers drowned of Long Point.

In 1856 Mr. Whittacker and Moses Hall built a steam mill on the road between Whitehall and Montague where the present Covell Park is located. The mill was sold to Thompson and Covell, then to William Weston, Hinchman and Covell, then to Staples and Covell who tore it down in 1875 and erected a new modern mill. The engine in this mill was built by Montague Iron Works at a cost of \$3,200.00. Total cost of the mill without the site was \$30,000. This was the last of the saw mills on White Lake. It burned in 1917. It employed 75 men and in later years was the M. T. and L. G. Covell Mill.

In 1857 the Daltons built a steam mill on what is known as the Dowie property, now owned by Hooker Chemical Company and used as water works and wharf. This mill burned down in 1868 and the Daltons purchased the Green Mill at Michillinda located just south of the present White Lake Yacht Club.

In 1857 a steam mill was built by Hornellsville Lumber Company known as the New York Mill and located just south of the present Whitehall Leather Company. It was sold in 1870 to Weston, Smith and Company and then to J. Alley and Company. It employed 60 men.

No additional mills were erected until 1865, or until after the close of the Civil War and the resumption of immigration to the prairies of the mid-west. Within a decade after the war, so great was this immigration that a demand arose for Michigan pine such as the world had never known before, and lumbering began to grow with the strides of a new industrial giant.

The pine timber near the lower end of the lake had been exhausted, and the lumbermen were then beginning to look to the river as their main source of logs. Practically all of the steam mills that came in after the war were located as near the confluence of the river as they could find sites. Around them grew up the villages of Montague and Whitehall.

With the transfer of the main activities from the Mouth to the new twin villages at the head of the lake, the population and trade of the village at the Mouth began to decline rapidly. The men who had been employed at the old Ferry Mill were obliged to go up the

lake to find employment. Bruce retained his store at the Mouth for several years thereafter, and the farmers who had settled on the cut-over land to the north of the lake divided their trade between the Mouth and the flourishing villages at the head of the lake, but even this in time came to an end. The colony of Irish fishermen alone remained at the Mouth.

In 1865 Ferry and Dowling built the famous Red Mill which was located at the present Dowling Street and C & O Railroad tracks in Montague. It employed 50 men. In addition to sawing lumber, it made lath and 200,000 boom wedges each year. It was a well managed mill.

In 1865 Lewis and Carless built a steam mill which passed through the hands of Lewis and Hopkins, Franklin and Lewis, Lewis and Covell until it passed into the hands of A. J. and C. E. Covell, later C. E. and M. B. Covell. It was located just north of the Whitehall Leather Company and employed 60 men. It was one of the better managed mills.

In 1865 Parks, Leitch and Company built a steam mill. Later it was W. H. Parks and Son and was sold to Fischer and Keller. The mill burned down a second time in 1875 and was not rebuilt.

In 1866 George E. Dowling built his shingle mill just north of the present Dog and Suds Drive In.

In 1866 N. U. Booth built the first planing mill. It burned in 1869 and was sold to George E. Dowling who had it rebuilt.

In 1866 C. L. King built his mill which was located to the rear of the present Roesler Service Station. One of its products was butter bowls.

In 1866 A. B. and D. C. Bowen built their shingle mill which was located south of the Red Mill. Bowen's dock extended out into the lake.

In 1866 Cooks steam mill was built just below Oswald Grotefeld's Ravenswood. Charles Henry Cook, born in Hillsdale and a graduate of Hillsdale College, came to Montague in 1866. Fourteen years before this, his father had purchased extensive pine lands up White River. This mill employed 30 men. Mr. Cook was also a large fruit grower, having 9,000 peach trees covering all Hooker property and residential area south and west of Ravenswood. His income from the fruit trees in 1881 exceeded \$4,000.

In 1866 Johnson and Miller built a shingle company in Whitehall.

In 1866 a shingle mill of Covell, Nufer and Company, later Covell, Ocobock and Company (later C. E. and M. B. Covell), operated day and night and employed 50 men at peak season.

In 1868 Geddes and Company built a steam mill. Later the machinery was taken out and the site sold to N. V. Booth who erected there the Norris Shingle Mill.

In 1872 Frank White's steam mill was built on the lake at the foot of Knudsen Street in Montague. It was a more modern mill. C. Smith was engineer, John Ohrenberger and G. Henderson were the head sawyers. It employed 50 men. Frank White was a brother-in-law of E. P. Ferry. There were two Frank White docks made of edgings extending out into the lake.

In 1874 Temple Roller Mills were built on the flats at the foot of Knudsen Street or to the north of Frank White's Mill. This mill burned out twice in six months and then moved to Muskegon to be known there as Hartshorn Company.

In 1875, Nufer Cedar Company built by Nufer and Carleton, was located just north of C. E. and M. B. Covell Mill. It was one of the last mills to close down.

In 1881 Smith and Fields built a neat steam mill on a site near where Dalton's Mill had burned in 1868 near the boundary line of Montague and White River Townships. It was cutting 50,000 feet in a 12 hour day and employed 35 men.

In 1881 the Wilcox steam mill was built on a site of the Mears water mill and was one of the last mills built in this area. It was quite extensive being built on spiles out about 300 feet in the lake. It had 20 million feet of logs in the river in 1881.

Linderman Mfg. Company located to the east of Nufer Shingle Mill, used refuse and cull lumber pieces to make boxes; also shingles, heading and stave milling.

Erickson-Steffee Planing Mill was located at the site of the present Keith Construction Company of Montague. It was a busy mill for many years, even after the saw mills had closed.

Two other companies directly related to the lumber industry that were very important to the economy of the area were:

The Montague Iron Works, built in 1868 which built marine engines for the steam tugs used extensively on the lake and mill machinery and engines for the mills.

The Eagle Tanning Works was built in 1866 and is still in operation as the Whitehall Leather Company which made use of the readily accessible Hemlock bark in the tanning process.

By 1880 the stillness of the Wilderness was a thing only to be remembered.

From dawns first light to dark the high piercing whistle of the whirling seven and eight foot diameter circular saws of some 24 steam powered sawmills were shattering the silence that had prevailed for thousands of years. Every few seconds the sharp whistle was punctuated with an explosive screech as the whinning blades bit deep into a hugh pine log, and reduced it in seconds to a stack of clean fresh board.

The sharp sweet smell of pine sawdust rides the wind for miles,

and an off shore breeze carried that resinous smell far out over the wide waters of Lake Michigan. It has been said that many a sharp nosed skipper of a fog-bound lake wind jammer followed his nose to a safe anchorage by riding the sawdust trace.

The sounds and smells of a lumbering town of the 80's and 90's were as distinctive as the visual pictures that met the eye. Standing on a high bank overlooking White Lake in the 80's the scene was one that is hard to picture looking at the White Lake Area today. Lumber was king, lumber was everywhere, floating on the surface of the lake were great rafts of logs, towing from the booming grounds in the lower reaches of White River to the many mills scattered down the length of the lake each raft with its huffing-puffing cocky little steam tug bullying and snorting at its charge, five times its size. Along both sides of the lake were the mills sawmills, planing mills, shingles mills each with its small cluster of workers homes close by. Each, with its long docks reaching like fingers out into the lake.

Docks crowded with the graceful tall masted lakes lumber schooners and wooden hulled steam powered lumber hookers each vying with the other for more speed, more carrying capacity, for these were the peak years of the lumbering era.

The disasterous Chicago Fire of '71 gave a tremendous surge to the lumber market. The demand for Michigan pine to rebuild the emerging giant at the foot of the lake and the rapidly developing prairie towns to the west seemed insatiable. The cut of board feet of pine reached over a million feet a day.

The twin cities straddling the White River, Montague to the north, Whitehall to the south grew and grew. They were raw and rough at first and they bred a hardy breed.

It took a good man to work 12 hours a day, at the mill, go home take care of a garden plot, do his chores and spend some time with his family. But if you asked a Riverman who spent his waking hours riding and fighting, bucking, charging logs in swift water he'd say a mill hand had it easy, and a Woodsman who swung a razor sharp double bitted ax hour after hour or manhandled 18 and 20 foot logs 5 feet in diameter onto sleds in the dead of winter, or forced a two man saw through logs until his arms felt dead on his shoulders. Ask him he'll tell you, mill hands and rivermen don't know what work is.

Then there were the sailors, each trip on the lake was an adventure into the unknown for Lake Michigan is famous for sudden vicious squalls, and long hard blows with icy breath that sweep down the long lake from the Straits of Mackinac, building waves that can hammer and pound a proud ship to pieces in minutes.

Yes, ask a sailor, he'd tell you those, landsmen, they sure had

it easy.

These were the men all of them together who built the Montague Area some were drifters, some were solid stubborn men, some were good, some were bad, but they are our heritage and we should be proud of them, they lived a hard life.

In the fall of the year hundreds of axmen and teamsters with horses and yokes of oxen penetrated 20 to 80 miles into forest desolation, scarcely cutting a rough, narrow road over which the necessary supplies were conveyed during their stay in the winter. Huts and temporary stables for animals were erected, tree after tree sank to the ground under pitiless strokes of their axes. The valuable parts of the tree trunks were cut into logs of proper length, drawn on sleds by horse and oxen to creeks and river banks where they were stored in huge piles awaiting the spring drive.

Driving logs on White River in an early day was a business requiring considerable nerve as well as skill. The men engaged in the work were constantly in danger of being drowned or crushed in jams and roll-ways. They were generally a lot of hardy, active fellows who were ready to take the risk, as the work commanded good wages and there was no lost time, Sunday included, from the day their names were enrolled on the pay list.

As the lonely winter wore away and signs of spring appeared, rivermen began to come in from the woods and congregate at the headquarters for all the camps along White River. From about the middle of March to the first of April the saloons did a rushing business. The general rule for the riverman was to first buy a suit of clothes, including boots with a hundred corks (sharpened bits of steel in each). A red sash to tie about the waist completed the outfit and next to go to the saloon and blow the balance of his cash. This last proceeding generally terminated in black eyes and a bloody nose. When his money was all spent, he was ready to start up the river to the point the superintendent assigned him 20 miles or more away. His friend, the saloon keeper, had equipped him with two quarts of the execrable fluid and packages of peerless tobacco, shook his hand and off he started on foot. All day he trudged along a trail obstructed by fallen trees often leading through swamp and swale. About 9 p.m., footsore and weary he arrived at the camp, which consisted of a heap of blazing logs 'round which the men gathered after the day's work was over. Their wet garments hung upon poles to dry, while they regaled themselves with all the delicacies a wilderness afforded, a tin cup of very strong tea, a tin plate of which was served boiled potatoes, salt pork, baked beans and warm biscuits. A little to one side was a large tent furnished with hemlock boughs and coarse blankets. This was the sleeping apartment. On the opposite

side of the first was a smaller tent for the cook's supplies. Here was another fire where the cooking was done. Two crotched sticks were driven into the ground, a pole laid across to support the two or three iron pots in which the boiling was done. Tin ovens open to the fire were used for baking. This department was presided over by a male cook who could chew and smoke as much tobacco as any of the boys. After supper the evening's entertainment began. It was usually opened by White-Water-Bill and concluded by a thrilling story from Roll-Way-Jack. At its conclusion the men "turned in" to sleep if they could, or if wakeful to be serenaded by "hoot owls" or the hum of the hungry mosquito. At the first flush of dawn the stentorian voice of the cook was heard calling "Turn out boys," and soon the camp was alive. The men appeared with boots in hand that required much pulling and kicking against stumps with some very loud talking before they were settled to their owner's satisfaction. After a douse of cold spring water they were ready for breakfast and the day's work. They shouldered their peavies and headed by the foreman, they struck out in Indian file through the swamp and woods until they reached a high bluff at the foot of which is the head of the jam. The logs were piled in great confusion from bank to bank and extended up the river for a mile or more in a solid body.

Below the river ran clear and smooth and wound off through the swamp like a huge snake. The men went down the hill and after considerable lifting, rolling and chopping the jam was broken and the logs began to move. The great body of water above sent them down with ever increasing velocity, often tearing trees from the bank and sending them breaking and crashing down stream with the logs. This the river driver called a good haul. The hauling of a jam in rapid water was very exciting work. Many a man was thrown headlong into the water for being more daring than the rest. This was a common occurrence, and as the sun rose higher and warmed the air, this little episode was soon forgotten as the men jumped on the logs as they went rolling and whirling down the river, often having to lie down on the log to get under overhanging branches. Men got to be experts and some would handle a 'log as easily as others could a canoe. The men scattered along the river in places where the logs were most likely to jam. The men above broke them loose and those below kept them moving on over this division to the crew below, and so on to the sorting grounds at the mouth of the river.

Farther up were another crew who cleaned up the drive. It consisted of two gangs of men called the jam crew and the sackers. During the driving some logs were crowded out along the shore. The sackers rolled these back into the river and were continually

wading in the water all day. When the logs were sacked into the rear of the jam, the jam crew broke them loose and stopped them a mile or so below by swinging a boomstick across the river. This was done to raise the water so the sackers could float the heavier logs that always hung behind the jam. After the sack was brought in the jam was again moved, and so on until late in the season the last log was sacked in and delivered to the White River Log and Booming grounds where logs were sorted by owners marks stamped into the cut end of each log, with a marking iron, made into rafts and hauled to various mills. The White River Log and Booming Company was incorporated in 1870. During its 31 years existence it brought down the river to the mills over one billion feet of logs. At times it used 200 river drivers and 100 men to sort, raft and deliver logs to the various mills. The office was located in the Franklin House, 1903 was the last drive down White River.

The fate of one of these early river drivers was brought to light many years later quite by accident.

Near the turn of the century, Andrew MacFarlan of Montague sat in a hotel lobby, along with a number of other men, watching the rain come down in torrents, filling the gutters to the proportion of brooks. Business had virtually come to a standstill because of the downpour. To pass the time, the group fell into a conversation that eventually led to the subject of "finds". After a few experiences had been related, Mr. MacFarlan remarked that he, too, had a "find" and he drew from his pocket a small brass pistol.

"My boy was hunting at Burying Ground Point," he said, "when he discovered a skeleton at the edge of the river. Around the feet were beads indicating that the man had worn moccasins and at the waist was this pistol. Because of the moccasins, he thought the man was an Indian and he brought home the skull as well as the pistol. When I saw the skull I knew it was that of a white man."

"Let me see that pistol," said one of the men.

After looking it over carefully, he asked, "Where did you say this was found?"

"About three miles up White River," Mr. MacFarlan answered, "at the mouth of Silver Creek."

"That," said the man "solves a mystery that has puzzled me for twenty years. I was running logs on White River at the time. They piled up at the point and I sent a man named John Bocker to break the jam. He never returned and I wondered what became of him. Now I know. He was killed when the logs broke loose. This is the brass pistol he always wore in his belt."

The WHITE LAKER

Leonard, Wanda, Chris & Michelle Anderson