

CHAPTER X

THE DOLDRUMS

Somehow our early lumbermen seemed to overlook one vital point in the economic structure of the area.

They seemed to think that the timber supply was as inexhaustible as the air and water; that the great deep forests of beautiful tall straight pines, the hemlock, cedar, walnut, oak and other trees that so completely covered the great State of Michigan, would furnish an endless supply of logs for the mills to cut into lumber and shingles. Apparently they had no idea of the vast amount of lumber being produced by the great saw mills of Muskegon, Saginaw, Bay City; Cadillac, Manistee, Empire and Honor, as well as those on White Lake, all cutting deeply year by year into that great natural resource without replantings.

So, after some 60 years, one fine spring day in the late 80's when workmen inquired at the office of one of the mills on White Lake as to when the mill would need them, they were utterly astounded to learn the mill would open no more, that it was through, that the timber was exhausted. As a result, so many families left the Village of Montague that it actually was impossible to sell their small homes, many of which were vacated and abandoned. Let it here be said that the problems of a declining or shrinking community are far worse than those of a growing community. Empty dwellings, empty stores, deteriorating buildings, run down streets, closed schools, and declining public revenues are extremely discouraging, and great credit is due the businessmen of that period who carried on bravely under those adverse conditions.

So ended an era. The great lumber days of Western Michigan ground to a halt, not slowly, but with sickening suddenness the timber was there one day gone the next. The only hope for the area was farming and a very few industries.

Staples and Covell's mill operated seasonally into the 20th Century. The Nufer Shingle Mill and Box Factory operated the year around. These two industries plus the Tannery and the Montague Iron Works afforded the total employment of that day, and today, of these only the Tannery remains.

The spirit of those 'courageous people who stayed in the area is reflected in the following article written in 1898 by Ed. Phelan of Whitehall.

"Dim and rapidly growing dimmer are the pictures that once went to the making up of the highly colored panorama of White Lake's racy past. The once conspicuous and important river driver,

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his superlatively crimson mackinaw, with sash and eye to match, and his peculiar penchant for speedily divorcing himself from his ninety days' salary, has now ceased to be an important trade factor.

The fog of business stagnation hovering over us during the period of our evolution from the lumbering interests to more general ones is now lifting and our little spark of hope for the mere continuance of forming a dot on the map has been fanned by substantial proof into a flame of certainty of not only continued existence, but that our pretty villages will win places well up to the commercial front. The lumberman, the riverman, the pinery and the mill have done yeoman service. To them we owe our very creation. We cannot, however, deem ourselves chargeable with any ingratitude if now we wave to them a reverential osculation from our finger tips and turn to extend a welcome to the summer outer, the fruit grower, the farmer and the factory. In the cases of the three first mentioned, every element of speculation has been removed and the geometrical progression, which we cannot now check if we would, must inevitably land us, if not on the pinnacle, at least on the roof of fame in their respective interests. Our beautiful resorts are perhaps intitled to the first consideration, as in conjunction with their direct benefits there are auxiliary ones as sure as taxes to follow. To capital attracted by the beautiful lake, its harbor, shipping advantages and miles of unused dockage will offer convincing argument that must tempt to investment for factory sites.

In defense of our claim of being fruit growers little need be said, since we have in evidence some of the finest orchards in Michigan's famous fruit belt, while the products of these sell regularly as select or fancy fruit on the Chicago and Eastern markets. It is but fair to add, however, that while we are favored by the climatic conditions and peculiar quality of soil that have made the belt, of which we are the center, famous, we have the important additional advantage of almost absolute absence from frost, not afforded those sections farther removed from Lake Michigan. Regarding our agricultural advancement, we only invite investigation of our almost marvelous growth during the past ten years.

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