

Lumber Era Ended Too Soon  
The 1800s – the Century of the Sawmill  
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(The following article which was originally written by W. L. Lipka, appeared in the Special Centennial Edition of the White Laker Observer on January 30, 1974. Where available, pictures have been added to enhance the article.)

If we close our eyes and picture our White Lake area before the white man came, there would be a dense virgin forest of strong, stately and straight pines extending to the water's edge, the water lapping on the beaches of beautiful White Lake and Lake Michigan.

Its only inhabitants were the Indians and the only roads Indian trails which extended from Muskegon through Whitehall to the Trading Post, along Lake Michigan through Duck Lake, the Mouth into Claybanks and from the Mouth at times close to the Old Channel Trail through Montague and up White River basin again to the Trading Post.

At that time, White River and all the streams of this area were very much larger than they are, as we see them today.

The Indians lived in a land of bountiful paradise, but all was not peaceful for them, as in 1864 a great Indian battle took place. A band of Pottawatomie numbering 900 to 1,000 warriors had a palisaded village located on the north end of Robert Cockerill's farm in White River Township. They had cleared land for corn, squash and pumpkins and were known as the "Nation du Feu". They were called neutrals because they did not join the six nations to fight against the English. Some 2,000 warriors of the neutrals, who were of Iroquois stock, came from the south attacking the Pottawatomie with the battle raging for 10 days.

This camp was supplied by a large ditch with water from Pierson Creek and this supply was shutoff, forcing them to flee from their camp. Many were killed and those who escaped fled to Indian Point where women, children and all the warriors except a very few who escaped going north and then back to their people in Wisconsin were killed.

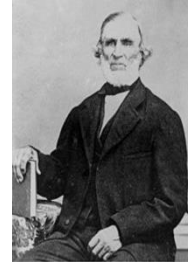
This battle is verified by records in the Smithsonian Institution.

The Ottawa moved into this area but then disease made them leave. The Pottawatomie returned for a time until about 1825 when Ottawas returned and drive them south of St. Joseph and into Illinois.

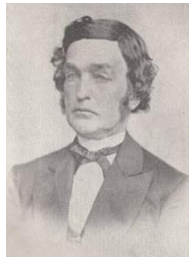
The most dramatic event to take place was the annual return of the fur trader, with excitement, thrills and much celebration. If one was on top of Pigeon Hill looking north, you'd get a first glimpse of the French bateaux fleet coming to the Mouth, to Duck Lake and back up White River to the Trading Post where a log house built to store remaining provisions for the winter. You would see the Indians coming down the various trails to these points to trade their furs for provisions.

All this took place before a single tree had been felled or a white settlement started. Being a land of plenty for the Indians, it was estimated that there were 3,500 or more living here.

At Duck Lake on one of the oldest historical spots, a small log cabin had been built before 1800 by Joseph La Framboise who worked for John Jacob Astor Fur Co. Joseph was killed by an Indian. His widow, Madame Le Framboise, was a very remarkable woman – a half breed educated by the French. She carried on here until her retirement and was succeeded by Rix Robinson in 1821 who became the greatest trader of them all and Astor’s western Michigan agent. His reputation for honesty and his close friendship with the Indians made the Indians friendly towards the white man when he came.



Rix Robinson



Charles Mears, c. 1856

Some had come as early as 1821 but the beginning was in 1837 when Charles Mears and his brother, Albert, then a boy of 15, and two older men, came from Paw Paw to enter the Old Channel of White River. Here they found two white men living at the Mouth.

Mears went on up to Silver Creek where he found the log cabin at the Trading Post and many Indians, but most of all, the large virgin white pines.

Thus begins the history of the saw mills on White Lake and Duck Lake.

In 1838 Charles Mears built a water-powered saw mill – the first – located at the Mill Pond on South Shore Drive in Whitehall. Here he erected the first boarding house and a barn. In 1848 he also built a water mill at Duck Lake and later a stream mill there, with a general merchandise store. He also had a store at the Mouth.

In 1844 James Dalton built the second water-powered mill at Silver Creek, where Mears had first stopped. This caused a feud between Mears and Dalton as Mears said there was only enough timber for one mill.

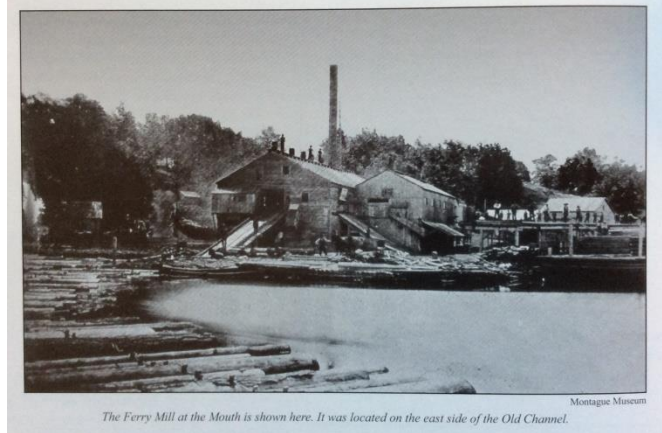
In 1845 Hiram Hulbert built a water-powered mill at Carleton Creek, which he sold to I. E. Carleton in 1851. Carleton was a great community builder as supervisor and later as a state senator. He also tried to get the county seat in this area. At this point in time we were known as White River Township; also at one time, Oceana Township.



The waterfall at Brown's pond, on Sand Creek, was located near the site of Brown's original watermill. The picture above dates from the early twentieth century when the site was known as the Rochdale Resort.

From 1845 to 1847 E. Brown built the last of the five water-powered saw mills on Brown's Pond known now as Fruitvale or Rochdale. These were all before the coming of steam mills. There are beautiful falls at this location which one can visit today.

The first steam mill in the White Lake area was built in 1850 at the Mouth, which was also called The Stump, Ferrysville, New White Haven and White River. This mill, built by the Rev. William Montague Ferry, was just below Weber's resort on the old channel. It was first operated by Scott and Stebbins, then in 1854, by Noah Ferry until 1862 when he enlisted during the Civil War.



*The Ferry Mill at the Mouth is shown here. It was located on the east side of the Old Channel.*

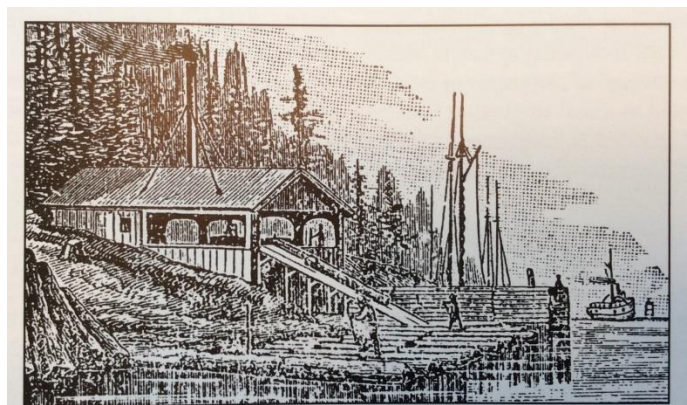
Mills had been built or were being built on White Lake. Beginning on the north shore was a stream mill built by Mr. Jewell in Maple Grove at Barteau Boat Works. The mill was sold in 1860 to Heald, Avery, Murphy and Crepin. Heald had purchased 12,000 acres up White River and was the first to cut the logs and float them down White River. Later, Covell, Dowling, Staples, Cook and maybe others purchased all the land along White River, some as far as White Cloud.



*This picture is dated 1854, probably one of the earliest saw mills in this area. It was located in Maple Grove where the Goodrich boats once landed, now often referred to as the Coal Dock. Apparently the scene is considerably changed. Picture also from the Charles Ohrenberger collection.*

In 1855, Rodgers and Hill built a steam mill on Long Point, now owned by DuPont. It was sold to Luscombe and Pierce in 1859. IN 1871 it was purchased by I.M. and B. F. Weston. (Mr. Rodgers drowned off Long Point.)

In 1857 the Daltons built a steam mill on what is known as the Dowie property, now owned by Hooker Chemical Co. The mill burned in 1868 and the Daltons purchased the Green Mill at Michillinda located just south of the present yacht club.

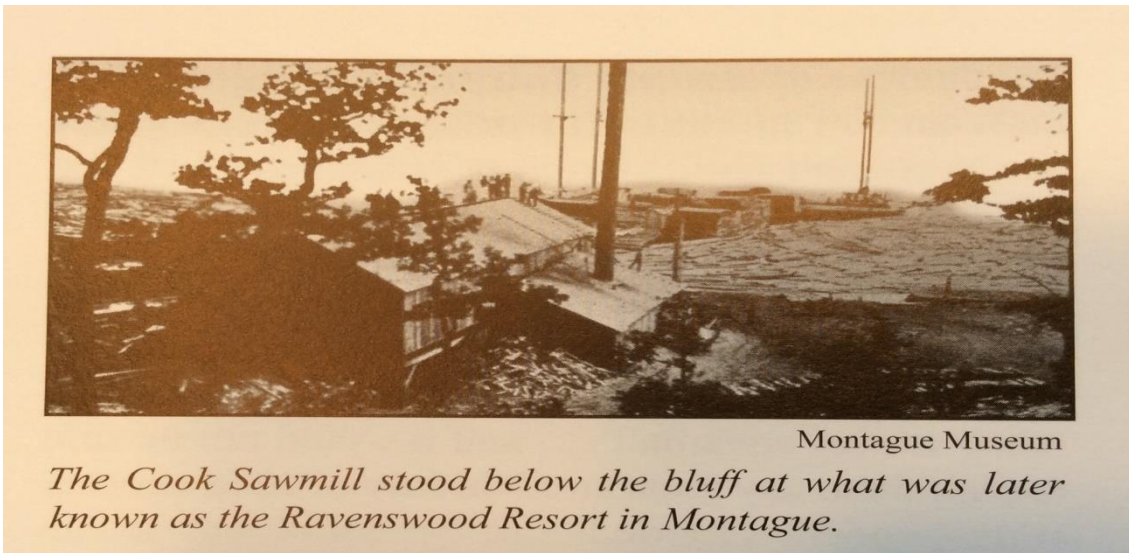


*An early lithograph from a booklet entitled Montague and Whitehall Illustrated shows the Dalton mill at Short Point.*



In 1865 Ferry and Dowling built the famous Red Mill located at Dowling Street and the C&O tracks in Montague. Besides sawing lumber they made 200,000 boom-wedges each year.

Charles Cook's steam mill was also built in 1866 just below Oswald Grotefeld's Ravenswood. Fourteen years before this his father had purchased extensive pine lands up White River. Cook also owned many acres near his home now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Grotefeld and had an orchard of 9,000 peach trees. At that time, and up through 1881, Cook's income exceeded \$4,000 per year.



The year 1872 found Frank White building a steam mill on the lake at the foot of Knudsen Street. It was a more modern mill. White was the brother-in-law of E. P. Ferry. He built two large docks of edging extending out into White Lake.

The year 1874 found Mr. Temple building his roller or curtain rod mill in the flats by Frank White's Mill. This mill burned, was rebuilt and burned again. Later it was moved to Muskegon and was known as the Hartshorn Co.

In 1881, Smith and Fields built a modern steam mill on Dowie Property near where Dalton's mill had burned.

In 1856 Moses Hall built a steam mill on the road between Whitehall and Montague where Covell Park is now. It 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. Total cost of the mill without the site was \$30,000. The mill operated successfully and was the last of the saw mills on White Lake. It burned in 1917 and was owned then by M.B. and L. T. Covell.

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

In 1865 Lewis and Carless built a steam mill which passed to Lewis and Hopkins, Franklin and Lewis, Lewis and Covell – and then it passed to A. I. and C. E. Covell and later to C. E. and M. B. Covell. It was located just north of Whitehall Leather.

In 1865 Parks, Leitch and Co. built a steam mill later owned by W. H. Parks and Son. Then it was sold to Fischer and Keller. The mill burned down a second time in 1875 and was never rebuilt.

Johnson and Miller build a shingle mill in Whitehall in 1866. That same year Covell, Nufer and Co., later Covell, Ocobock and Co. and still later, C. E. and M. B. Covell, built a shingle mill and operated it day and night during the peak season.

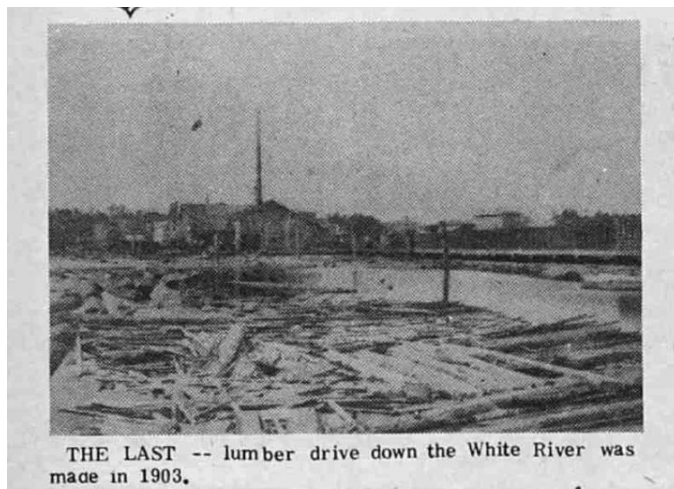
In 1868, Geddes and Co. built a steam mill but later the machinery was taken out and the site sold to N. V. Booth, who erected the Norris shingle mill.

In 1875, Nufer Cedar Co. shingle mill was built by Nufer and Carleton and was located north of C. E. and M. B. Covell's mill and was one of the last to operate.

Linderman Mfg. Co., located where Lipka Ice & Fuel is now, used refuse and cull lumber pieces to make boxes, shingles, heading and stove milling.

Erickson and Steffee Paving Mill, located where Montague Keith Construction Co. is, was a busy mill for many years after the saw mill ceased.

In the year 1881 the Wilcox steam mill was built on a site about 300 feet out into White Lake on pilings. This was out from the Mears water mill at the Mill Pond and was the last mill built. Thus, the first and last mills were approximately on the same site. In 1881 this mill had 20 million feet of logs in the lake.



The mills on White Lake employed from 30 to 75 men at each mill and many of these men, when the mills were closed for winter, joined the hundreds of axemen who went up the river into the forests to cut the logs and drive the oxen. The horses skidded and hauled the logs to the creeks and river to be floated down to the White River log and booming grounds in the spring. There 150 to 200 men

sorted these logs, made them into rafts and tug boats hauled them to the various mills. In the early days men worked 12 hours a day, then 11 hours and finally 10 hours and were paid by the day, not the hour. The last drive down White River was made in 1903.

So, if one was standing on a high bank on White Lake in 1880 or thereabouts, they would be overlooking a scene of great activity, seeing the mills all around White Lake with their tall black pipes issuing volumes of smoke, mill whistles blowing, docks reaching out into White Lake, masts of vessels from far away ports loading lumber, tugs towing rafts of logs to the mills, scattered houses among the large pine stumps, huge saw dust piles and the spicy odor of newly cut pine lumber would be heavy in the air.

Our lumber helped to build Chicago after their disastrous fire in 1871. Unfortunately, too many mills were built and out lumbering days ended many years too soon. Visiting a mill in operation was also an interesting experience.

The Mouth was the first settlement and when the Ferry milled closed and mills were built on White Lake, many families there had to leave their homes, moving closer to the new mills. This area was called the Deserted Village of white River.

In the early days, what we called the Tannery, now Whitehall Leather Co., built in 1866, was the life's blood of this area through hard times and for these many years it has been a paycheck for many families to this very day. Also the Montague Iron Works built in 1868 has the same record.

The history of the Trading Post and Duck Lake as well as early days in Montague and Whitehall and the surrounding areas are most interesting and our early pioneers who wrote this history and to those who collected and saved this, we all own a thank you.