

## Mills – Mears to Wilcox and Alburna Resort

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Charles Mears, son of Nathan and Lucy Mears, was born in North Billerica, Massachusetts, on March 16, 1814. He had three brothers: Edwin, Nathan and Elbert (later called Albert) and a sister Lucy Ann. Unfortunately, the children were left orphans very early in life by the death of their mother in 1827 and their father a year later. Guardians were appointed for them, and they were sent to academies of the day to finish their education. Charles taught one or more country schools, then went to Lowell to learn the cabinet trade, and was in the lumber and provision trade there in 1835-36.

Since the Mears brothers no longer had family ties to hold them, and their sister had been married in 1836, they were eager to start on their great adventure. They made their way to Paw Paw where they opened a general store under the firm name of E. & C. Mears & Company, the business consisting of buying and selling anything which the few settlers and many Indians might wish to purchase or dispose of.

In early 1837, Charles and his younger brother Albert, along with two other men, Charles Herrick and Benjamin True, made their way to White Lake. Charles Mears built his mill at the mill pond in late 1837. He built the dam and placed the mill directly over the waterfall in order to get the maximum power from the waterfall. He built a one- and one-half story boarding house and several other shanties. He also maintained a small store. The mill was operated by Mr. Stanton and then a Mr. Brown.

The site on which Mears built his mill belonged to the Federal Government at the time he was working there. The land wasn't surveyed or made available for sale until 1840. As soon as it was available, Mears bought it for \$1.25 per acre.

On June 1, 1854, Charles Mears sold the property to John P. Brown and Ziba Grist for a sum of \$6,000, with a cash payment of \$850, giving them a certain bond for a deed which does not appear of record. They rebuilt the Boarding House. After a time, it was known as Brown's Place. They made further payments of principal and interest and carried on the business there for some years but did not seem to be very successful. In November 1858, the sum of \$3,624.33 was still due. In February 1860, Brown decided to leave the area and gave Mears a quit-claim deed for the mill site as well as various parcels of land in the area.

Mears then sold the mill to Alexander M. Thompson in 1863. He had come to Whitehall in 1862 from Muskegon where he owned a sawmill. Thompson owned the mill for about 10 years before selling it to Howard and Farnum Ellwood of Indiana. They sold it to a Mr. Vary, who then sold it to the Wilcox Company.

Charles Mears married Caroline "Carrie" Middleton in Pentwater in 1874. They had three children: a son who died in 1875; and 2 daughters: Carrie in 1880 and Lucy in 1883. Mrs. Charles Mears died in Chicago in June 1894 at the age of 43. Charles died there a year later in June 1895 and daughter Lucy died in November 1897. Daughter Carrie went on to live until the age of 77 years. She died in Pentwater in August 1957. All of them are buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Chicago.

By the Spring of 1881, the mill was owned by Sextus N. Wilcox of the Wilcox Lumber Company. Other members of the firm included: Charles W. Wilcox, Sr., George G. Wilcox, Vice President; George W. Smith, President; and Miles Standish, Treasurer. Being of some means, the company tore out the mill and built a new more modern steam mill on piles about 300 feet out in the lake. The machinery was shipped from a mill at White Cloud and required about a hundred men to operate it. At that time, the Wilcox mill was one of the largest mills on the Lake, was capable of cutting 100,000 feet of lumber in one day. That year the company had 20 million logs in the river.

In June 1881, S. N. Wilcox and a companion drown near the mouth of the Manitou River, north of Duluth, Minnesota, while fishing and looking at pine lands along the shore.

In March 1888, the old watermill dam near the Wilcox mill broke away and did considerable damage. The street was washed out and the railway track was undermined. The Wilcox company office basement was flooded. Repairs were made as soon as weather permitted. By the end of the year, the Chicago and West Michigan Railroad began taking up the tracks leading to both the Wilcox and C. G. Alley mills. This began the last year these mills operated.

In August 1891, the Wilcox Lumber Company sawmill was sold to a syndicate of mill men from Manistee for \$6,000. The machinery, frame and all, were taken down and moved to a place called Twin Lakes. The land itself was not sold to them.

In September 1891, George W. Smith of the Wilcox Company died. In 1895, Mr. George Wilcox of Chicago and former owner, was in town and looked over the old mill property down by the lake but no disposition of the property was made at that time.

In October 1898, the Lonsdale Stock Company, comprised of L. T. Covell, H. E. Staples and his family members, owned the former Wilcox property. They sold 40 acres to Alfred Burland which included the former mill boarding house and he opened the Alumar Resort. It is believed that the name "Alumar" is the combination of Alfred's first and last name, and his wife Martha: *AL*fred – *BUR*land – *MAR*tha. Alfred Burland had married Martha Hueston in 1871 and they had three sons: Earle H. (1872-1899), Edgar Putnam (1874-1948) and Verne Robert (1878-1937). Alfred died in 1910; his wife Martha died two years prior in 1908. Their son Robert took over the operation of the resort. The rates in 1913 were \$8.00 to \$12.00 per week with special rates for families for the season.

Alumar was the first resort in the White Lake area to be electrified, power being generated by the waterfall. Guests were attracted to the site because they could keep their boats anchored in the protected area by the point. The grounds of the property were converted into a playground where guests could play croquette, tetherball, and tennis.

In September 1917, C. S. Ford, a real estate agent from Chicago, obtained the Burland property. It was surveyed and platted into lots, of which there were twelve that were to be sold off. The portion with the house and waterfall was sold to J. W. Currow, who remodeled and modernized the house and beautified the grounds.

Around 1935, the property was sold to Ira Jack Lyons and it came to be known as the "Lyon's Den". Jack's daughter Irene Lyons and her husband Col. Emmett Kelly were the next to own the house. It has since been sold a time or two and remains a private residence today.