

North Hill School – Empire Knitting Works

By Barbara Bedau Brow
White Lake Area Historical Society



North Hill School also known as the Holland/German School and later Empire Knitting Works.

In July 1884 a new schoolhouse was voted to be built on the North Hill.

The plans for the school were made by Architect VanZalinger of Muskegon. The two-story building was 38 x 38, contained 4 large rooms, and included a basement. It was brick veneered. The cost was \$4,000, \$3,650 was borrowed at 7% interest and paid by 1891. The price paid for the land at Stanton and School Street was \$250.

November 1884, the new school was being roofed. By April 1885, the new school was completed, and the work accepted by the Board. Elmer S. Curtis of Whitehall was the contractor.

There were two teachers employed but it only went to the third grade. The school was used for about 13 years. In 1902 the Board transferred all the students to the Knudsen Street school. After that the building was used for basketball practice only.

In 1906, Mr. Jacob Schuessler and family came to Montague from Chicago and settled on the former Herman Kepka farm which was located on Ochs Road. It later became part of the VanFrank farm.

Mr. Schuessler brought with him 6 knitting machines and at his farm he began the manufacture of worsted sweaters, jackets, and stockings. They also made stocking caps and scarves. As his products were of good workmanship and excellent quality, he soon had more orders than his limited quarters could produce.

Looking for larger quarters, he came upon the two-story brick schoolhouse known as the North Hill School, on School Street. Mr. Schuessler's son Carl was an employee of the Empire Knitting Works located at 147 W. Van Buren Street in Chicago, and owned by Mr. Joseph Kaufman, also of Chicago. Through Carl, Mr. Kaufman became interested in Mr. Schuessler's dream for a larger knitting plant in Montague, and after several meetings with the Montague Board of Education, a contract was entered into in the early part of 1907. The local school district gave a 5-year lease of the school property to Mr. Kaufman, with an extension of 5 more years, providing a stipulated sum in wages be paid out per year.

The stipulations of the contract were: the Village of Montague or the Board of Trade were required to repair the broken windows and the roof, and the property was to be free of taxes and insurance. Mr. Kaufman was to install a suitable gasoline engine for power and was to pay for the installation of all the machinery. He was required to employ a manager and 10 boys and girls, and to increase this number to 25 as rapidly as possible. Mr. Kaufman was required to pay wages ranging from \$6.00 to \$12.00 per person per week, and it was agreed that if he paid \$3,000 in wages per year for 10 years, the School District would give him a deed to the property. A bit of controversy arose with the inclusion of the manager's salary in the \$3,000 require wages per year. A compromise was reached whereby only \$1,000 of the manager's salary was included.

Mr. Schuessler's son Carl was given the position of Manager with full control of operations. He moved to Montague and took an active part, not only in the operations of the business, but also in the affairs of the Village as well as the Presbyterian Church.

The business prospered and grew, giving nearly 50 people employment over the years. As successful as it was, in December 1909, it was announced that the Empire Knitting Works was packing up and moving to Chicago. The chief reason for leaving was the scarcity of labor during the summer months and the new state law which prohibited factories employing female help over 54 hours per week.

Some of those who worked at the mill over the years included: Bertha Green, Anna Fehrenbach, Jennie Noordhof, Eva Deneau, Amelia Schuessler, Violet Delmater, Edna Hulberg, Mae Delmater, Mable Snow, Ada Voss, Clara Kroll, Lillie Viehl, Fred Kessler, Ben Young, Edward Hulberg, Gertrude Noordhof, Maude Paquette, and Fred Kroll.

In January 1921 the North Hill school became a thing of the past as it was completely razed. It was reported that there were 65,000 good bricks, three or four cords of limestone for foundations, and some excellent quality lumber besides about 6,000 laths.