

The Farmers Picnic

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Wilderness greeted the early settlers of Whitehall and Montague as they labored to bring civilization to these small towns on the west coast of Michigan. The logging industry fueled the rapid growth of these towns, and by 1880 life had become easier...to the point where people could engage in recreational activities more readily.

During the summer months, particularly July and August, many people would participate in picnics. Groups such as the Masons, Odd Fellows, churches, and even families gathered for these occasions. These picnics were not just for local individuals, as many would come from extended distances to participate.

One of the earliest and most popular spots for picnic activities was originally known as Weston's Grove. This picnic location was sandwiched between Lake Michigan and the Western end of White Lake, south of the lighthouse. Privately owned by Isaac M. Weston and managed by Asa W. Slayton, it was developed as a public picnic area with a well, a dock, and other amenities that make for a pleasant picnic.

Many people enjoyed Weston's Grove for its pleasant breeze from Lake Michigan during the uncomfortable heat and humidity that typically came with a Michigan summer. Access to the site was by boat until 1884 when a road was constructed across the Eben Sprigg farm.

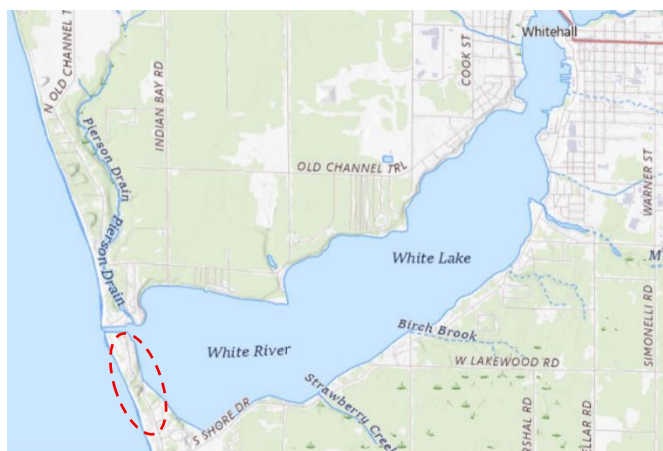


Figure 1. Weston's Grove

It was inevitable that Weston's Grove would be developed, and in 1883 Staples and Covell acquired the property from Weston. They commenced developing the area as a resort by constructing cottages and the White Lake Resort hotel while picnic activities continued. The area was called by different names but eventually became known as Sylvan Beach.

As time went by those who rented cottages or stayed at the hotel became disgruntled having to share the area with picnic participants who would just "show up" without paying, while they endured costs for their stay. Some picnics became raucous, interfering with paying resorters, and this led to eventual blocking of picnic parties from using the grove. Many locals were unhappy with this change because the site had always been available for their use.

Other picnic sites were found that people could enjoy. In 1895, the farmers of Claybanks Township, Oceana County held their first picnic at the farm of Edward Barr. They called it the harvest picnic and held it in a cedar grove on the property, leading it to become known locally as Cedar Grove. This picnic was developed as a way for farmers to give thanks for a bountiful harvest of crops. It became an instant success, bringing people from Oceana County and Northern Muskegon County.

On August 19, 1898, it was estimated that nearly 3000 people attended the harvest picnic. A pier had been built into Lake Michigan at Cedar Grove so people could attend by boat. The steamer "Eleanor" provided round trip service from Montague and Whitehall for a mere 50 cents and also provided excursions out into Lake Michigan for 25 cents. The majority of participants arrived by horse and buggy traveling surprising distances.

Participants were greeted with a large evergreen arch with “Welcome” inscribed in the middle. A large flagpole and grandstand were erected for people to enjoy music from various bands, choir presentations, flag drills, and orations from scheduled speakers. At noon, all participants would sit down to their respective picnic lunch prepared by the farmers’ wives.



Figure 2. 1904 Harvest picnic

After lunch the picnic officers were selected for the ensuing year, and entertainment continued with one or two scheduled speakers and a baseball game between two local teams. Many would remain for the bowery dance in the evening which often continued into the early morning hours of the next day. All in all, the picnic was an opportunity step away from the daily labor of survival and enjoy camaraderie and entertainment.

The creators of this picnic had no idea how successful this activity would become. Each year more people would attend and greater attractions were sought. Commencing early on August 14, 1906, there was a continuous flow to the picnic grounds every conceivable kind of conveyance from a bicycle to a touring car, accruing to the point where nearly 1000 rigs were hitched to any available spot. Attendees found it difficult to find their friends as it was estimated that nearly 5000 people were in attendance.

The August 16, 1906, edition of the Whitehall Forum described the attendance as follows: *“From early morning rigs of every description from the swellest turnouts to dilapidated vehicles with crow bait horses, wended their way to the picnic grounds and the procession of teams arrived steadily at the grounds until long after dinner. The nearer to the grounds the more compact became the procession and at each corner numbers of rigs were in waiting to find a place in the procession, for such it appeared. Each driver endeavored to get his rig in the lead and it was a continual fight for place.”* When one found a convenient place for his horse and rig, he and his family then found it challenging to find a place to enjoy their lunch, so numerous were the people in attendance.

It was about this time during the picnic's existence that people started referring to it as the "Farmers picnic" or more uncommonly the "Big picnic" abandoning the original name of "Harvest picnic." So many attended that Montague and Whitehall were rendered deserted except for the town Marshalls and a couple of people "to watch the cows."

The 1906 picnic saw the appearance of a steam powered merry go round, owned and operated by L.D. Squires. The merry go round was extremely successful despite breaking down in the morning, taking in roughly \$25 per hour. The position of the merry go round was close to the speakers stand and interfered so much that \$13 was collected and presented to Squires to shut it down for 40 minutes, to which he agreed. Some believed that Squires purposely located his rig close to the speaker stand speculating the result, but no proof was brought forth. Later, Squires missed out on more profit when he ran out of water for the steam boiler and had to cease operation.



Figure 3. An example of a steam powered merry go round

The picnic continued to draw large crowds over the next several years but the picnic committee members were starting to burn out. The committee members changed from year to year but there was core group of individuals that were responsible for organizing/coordinating the picnic, and they had become disenfranchised as no new members were coming forth. In 1915, it was suggested that the picnic be allowed to "rest" for a year and restart the following year, but others were fearful that taking a year off would seal its fate forever. The picnic continued in 1915 as it was the 20th anniversary of the event but this marked the final effort of the committee when they opted to discontinue in 1916.

The Flower Creek Ladies Aid Society decided to take over the picnic organization in 1916. Women's suffrage was a volatile issue at this time, so the Ladies took the opportunity to show the male population their abilities. The picnic was called the Ladies Aid Society picnic and was successful by bringing in speakers, and providing most of the amenities found at previous picnics. Their first attempt at this large picnic netted the Society \$125 and provided enthusiasm for future events.

The Society continued their picnic for the next two years with the 1918 picnic garnering comment from the Montague Observer noting that “a very large crowd enjoyed the picnic at Cedar Grove last Thursday. It was a big success.” For some unknown reason the Society opted not to organize the 1919 picnic, and the Lonsdale Grange stepped up and revived the Farmers picnic.



Figure 4. Flower Creek Ladies Aid Society 1908

The Lonsdale Grange was successful in rekindling the Farmers picnic and for the next 3 years experienced excellent participation. Meanwhile, Muskegon County established a county park at Twin Lakes, Michigan in 1921 and hosted their first county picnic which competed directly with the Farmers picnic. This competing picnic may have been something the Lonsdale Grange found relieving as there was no Farmers picnic in 1922. Muskegon County hosted their 2nd annual picnic at the newly named American Legion Park in Twin Lakes on August 23, 1922, and estimated nearly 3000 attendees. Just like that the Farmers picnic blinked out of existence as the organizers were happy to have Muskegon County take the reins with picnic organization.

For 26 years the Harvest picnic, or Farmers picnic, or Big picnic, or Society picnic, whatever one chose to call it, provided one day for participants to forget about the challenges of life and enjoy the pleasure of fresh Lake Michigan breezes and camaraderie with their fellow citizens.