

The Leavitt Camps

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During the 1860's several sawmills and shingle mills were established along White Lake located on the western shore of Michigan. This lake between the towns of Whitehall and Montague served as an excellent shipping point for the staggering amount of lumber that would be produced during the next two decades.

The lumber producers relied upon the White River to transport logs harvested from their properties located along the river. Each year multiple log drives would bring white pine logs to the sorting boom located at the head of White Lake where they were separated and delivered to the specific sawmills for processing.

By 1880 the white pine supply had been exhausted along the main branch of the White River as well as the North Branch of the White River, but pockets of high quality timber still existed within, and outside, its watershed. These pockets were located significant distances from the river and finding an economically feasible method to bring these logs to the river was a challenge faced by the lumber producers.

The traditional method of using horse drawn logging sleighs on frozen logging roads during the winter months was not feasible due to the increased transport time required. The distance between the pockets and the river made it financially dangerous for the lumber producers. The greater the distance, the greater the risk, and one mid- winter thaw could lead to bankruptcy.

The solution to this risk was the steam locomotive, which could move a significantly greater number of logs at any time during the year. Steam locomotives had become a viable transport method by 1880 but required a sizeable investment of capital, and only select lumber producers were able to utilize this method.

Andrew J. Covell, Mark B. Covell, and Charles E. Covell, known as the Covell brothers, were lumber producers based in Whitehall. They pooled their resources to acquire 1200 acres of land located in Leavitt Township, Oceana County, Michigan that was heavy with white pine, hemlock and hardwood trees. They purchased the property on September 9, 1882, from John C. Lewis who was a local banker and land speculator. The Covell brothers paid \$100,000.00 for the property which was located 6 miles from the North Branch of the White River.

This sizable amount of money was only a portion of the total investment. The Covell brothers were familiar with steam locomotive transport and planned to use that method to move logs from the property to the river. They invested \$4,800.00 in a steam locomotive produced in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They also had to obtain the ties and rails for the railroad, as well as the right-of-way acquisition in Leavitt and Newfield Townships leading to the drop off point at the river.

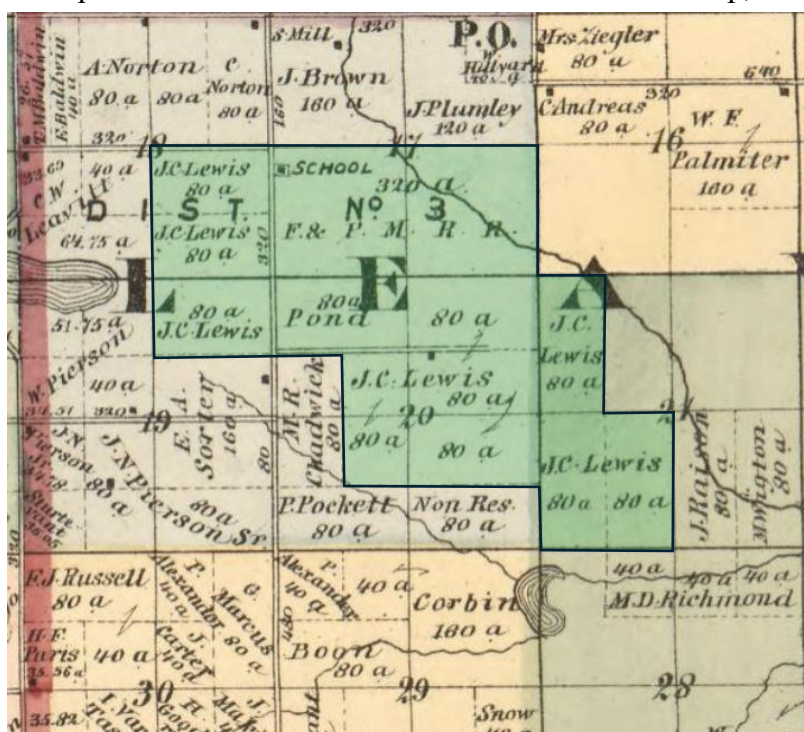


Figure 1. 1876 plat map showing the 1200 acre property in Leavitt Township, Oceana County, Michigan purchased by the Covell brothers

Shortly after acquiring the property, the Covell brothers brought in another brother, David W. Covell, (commonly called Will) to manage an army of men sent to establish a camp in Leavitt Township and commence harvesting and piling logs. The camp consisted of several buildings, and each building was considered a “camp” thus the local paper in Whitehall referred to it as the Leavitt Camps, although today it would be called the Leavitt Camp.

The Covell brothers also employed another army of men to commence working on the railroad leading from the river to the camp in Leavitt Township. These men had to make cuts and fills to maintain an acceptable grade established by the surveyor. Wooden ties and iron rails were placed once the grade was achieved.

The locomotive was delivered to Whitehall and mounted on a sleigh. Six teams of horses were employed to pull the locomotive through the countryside to a spot approximately 4 miles Northeast of the small town of Ferry, Michigan, where it was placed upon the narrow gauge railroad and prepared for operation. Twelve logging cars were also transported to the site via the same method. Many early settlers in the area must have marveled at the site of an 8 ton locomotive being transported through the snow covered landscape by a sleigh and horses.

The railroad was completed by April 1883, and the steam locomotive arrived at the camp to find huge piles of logs awaiting transport. The logging crew had been active during the winter months establishing the camp and harvesting logs and it was time to get them to the river.

For the next four months the locomotive was tested for its capabilities. At an average speed of 12 miles per hour the locomotive could pull a maximum of 57 tons, and with an average of 2,000 feet per car was capable of delivering 80,000 feet of logs per day, and 10 million feet annually. By the end of September 1883 nearly all of the 2.5 million feet of logs harvested up to that point from the Leavitt camp had been driven via the river to the logging boom at Whitehall.

Logging activities continued at the Leavitt Camp during the remainder of 1883 and into 1884. In March 1884 the first serious accident occurred when Charley Whalen had a foot crushed by a rolling log, resulting in the amputation above the ankle. On March 18, 1884, John Corcoran attempted to jump onto the tender of the steam locomotive but misjudged the speed and was caught up underneath. Once the locomotive was brought to a stop, Corcoran was found in the rear trucks of the fifth car, being rolled by four fully loaded cars. Terribly mangled, Corcoran died two days later from his injuries.

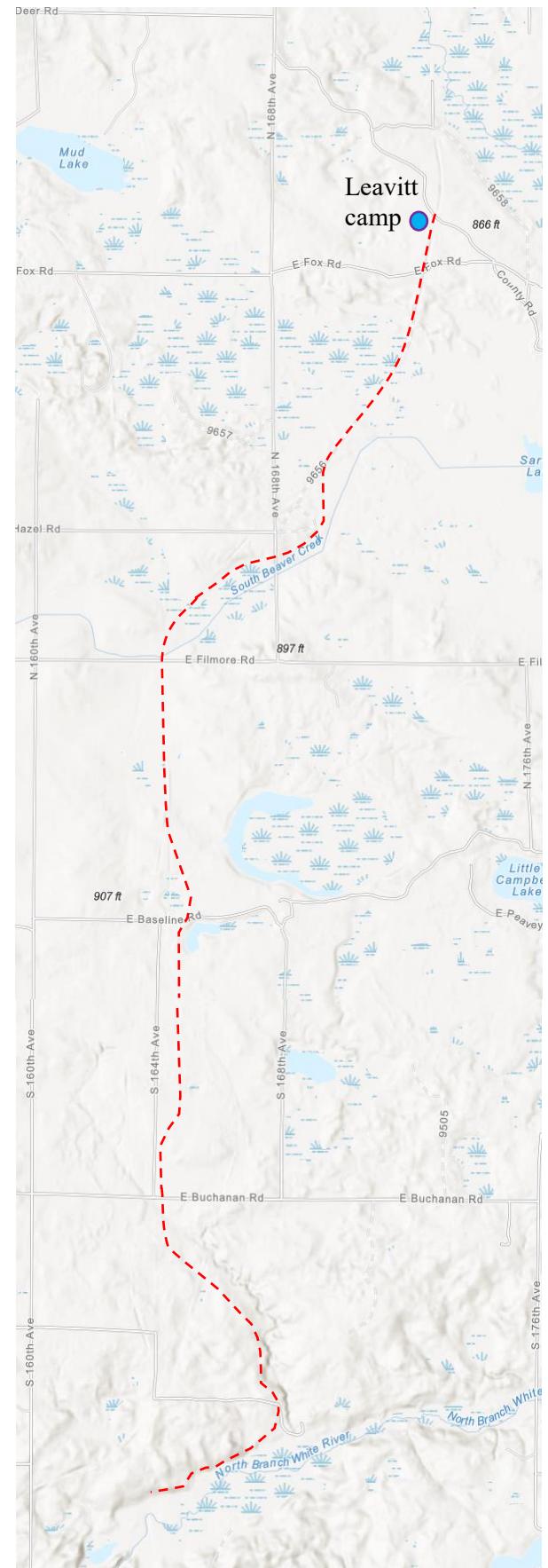


Figure 2. Leavitt Camp railroad, Leavitt and Newfield Townships, Oceana County, Michigan

The performance of the steam locomotive was greater than expected but took a toll on the railroad grade and equipment causing the camp to suspend operations for three months starting June 1884. The locomotive engineer, Adolph Shelandier, and Will Covell, along with a few men, stayed at camp to complete maintenance and repairs on the grade.

Log transport operations resumed in September 1884 resulting in 50,000 feet of logs being put into the river daily, and railroad spurs being built on the Leavitt camp property. By February 1885, 5 million feet of logs had been transported to the river, and it was expected that 6 million more would be transported by June 1885. This expectation was accurate as during the month of March 1885, 1.8 million feet of logs had been cut and skidded while over 2 million had been delivered to the river. By June 1885 logging operations at the Leavitt camp had been completed and the camp was shut down.

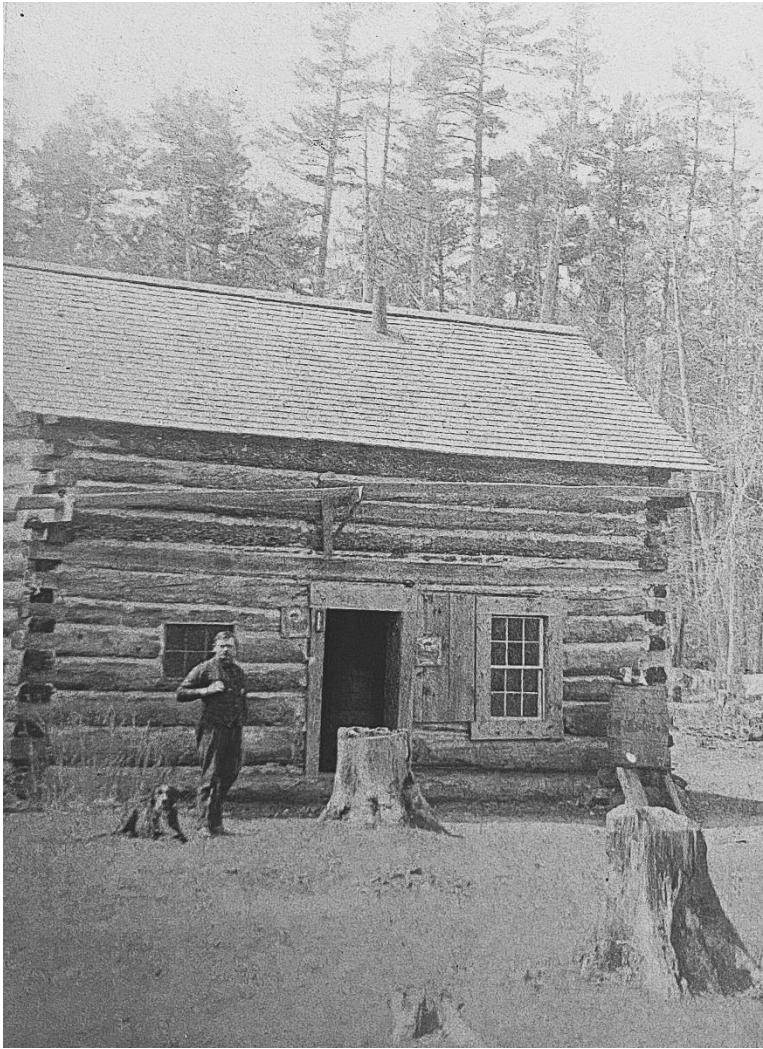


Figure 4. Loading logs for transport



Figure 3. The railroad construction crew poses for a photo

The steam locomotive had performed much better than initially thought. When the property was acquired in September 1882, the Covell brothers speculated that it would take about 5 years to complete the logging operation, but in reality, required less than 3 years to harvest the estimated 22 million feet of logs. This was an



amazing accomplishment at the time and left the Covell brothers with 1200 acres of land, camp buildings, a steam locomotive and a railroad to be addressed.

Will Covell and his wife Lucinda opted to make the camp their home and had moved themselves and their 2 children from Whitehall to the 1200 acre property. 960 acres were fenced in and farming practices commenced.

On January 1, 1886, their log home caught fire and they barely escaped. Shortly thereafter they decided to move back to Whitehall. Later that same month the locomotive, cars, rails and ties were transported to Whitehall for storage, and the blacksmith outfit used at camp was sold to the New Era Lumber Company.

The Covell brothers owned the property for next 3 decades. Parts of the original 1200 acres were sold as time went by and only 600 acres remained by 1913. Eventually the land was reclaimed by the State of Michigan on failure to pay taxes, and as a result became part of the Manistee National Forest. The camp buildings were reclaimed by mother nature, and no evidence of their existence can be found today.

Figure 5. Will Covell and dog in front of his log cabin home