

GAYLORD HERALD TIMES

News at the speed of life Est. 1875

Online Publication, Copyright © 2008, Gaylord Herald Times
P.O. Box 598, 2058 S. Otsego Ave., Gaylord, MI 49734 · (989) 732-1111 · 877-819-6170 Toll Free

A Step Back in Time: The history of Otsego Lake Village recounted

Friday, July 9, 2010 1:19 PM EDT

Bill Granlund

The Village of Otsego Lake, by Fred White (March, 1975)

Many official records of Otsego Lake and the county were lost or destroyed in 1877 when the county seat records were surreptitiously removed from the courthouse at Otsego Lake.

For a period of time a review of the county records reveals either through carelessness, incompetence or intent, much of the information does not exist as it does in other counties.

The history of a small village is inseparable from the events of its surrounding area. Therefore, the history of Otsego Lake includes areas in the southern part of the county. Otsego County was surveyed in 1857 and 1858 by the United States government.

During the years of 1853, 1859, 1862 and 1868, David Ward, who later was the owner of the Ward Lumber Company, bought thousands of acres of pine forest from the government in what is now Hayes and Otsego Lake townships.

During this period, Gratwick, Smith and Fryer, primarily through agents acting on their behalf, purchased thousands of acres of land in Chester, Charlton and Otsego Lake townships. Gratwick, Smith and Fryer were located at the AuSable River in Oscoda.

The company cut pine logs which were floated to their mill. Timber not within an economical sleigh hauling distance from the AuSable River had to await the arrival of the railroad.

In 1872, a small camp was located in the northwest corner of a tract of land which was platted in 1874 as Otsego Lake. Transportation to the site was either by foot or stage coach, which ran from Acme in Grand Traverse County to Alpena. The plat was recorded in 1874 by Smith, Kelly and Dwight on June 12, 1875, with Charles L. Fuller, Register of Deeds.

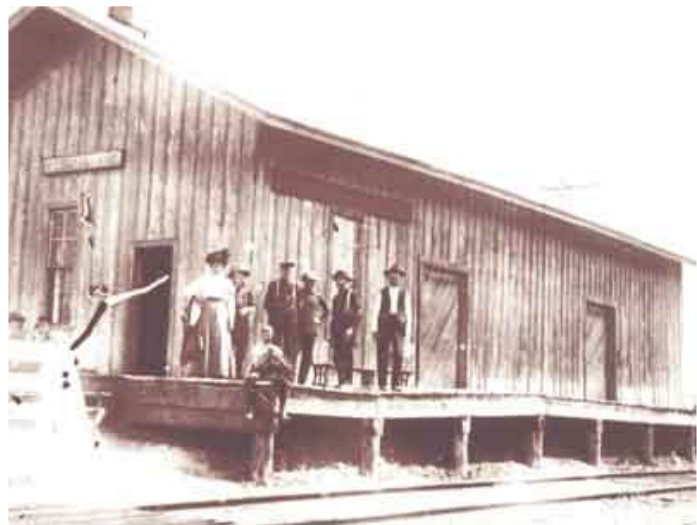
Much of the timberland belonging to Gratwick, Smith and Fryer was later purchased by Smith, Kelly and Dwight. The group also purchased a number of parcels from homesteaders. It had been reported they encouraged much of the homesteading by Civil War veterans so they could then acquire the timber in this manner.

Lots in Otsego Lake were being sold prior to the recording of the plat in June 1875. The earliest recorded date was for Lot 1, Block 25, sold to Osborne H. Kellog in January 1875. The cutting of timber from the town site and building of houses, businesses and a mill progressed quickly.

Beginning in 1875, houses were built for Osborne H. Kelly and Fred Smith. Both homes are still standing and in use today. Other homes were built for John Hammer, Susan A. Hooker, Adeline Murray, Dewitt Wilson and many others during a two-year period.

A three-room, two-story building housed a library and township hall on the first floor and an opera house, complete with stage and dressing rooms on the second floor, was built. A Methodist church was built behind this building with the financial and physical help of the townspeople soon after.

A three-story hotel supplemented the boarding houses in 1879 and was built by Charles Powell. Two livery stables provided transportation.



By the early 1900s most of the forests around the Village of Otsego Lake had been logged off and many families moved elsewhere to find work. The railroad station saw the number of freight and passenger trains diminish and it was torn down in the 1930s.

A baseball park, with an 8-foot tall board fence, complete with advertising and bleachers, was completed by the company and businessmen. Two grocery stores, a drugstore, two dry goods stores, a general store and butcher shop, supplied the material needs of the townspeople.

The company did not allow liquor to be legally sold in the town but rumor has it there was but little hardship since a drugstore, the hotel and two "blind pigs" accommodated those in need.

One of the "blind pig" operators, as an old man, always referred to his "penance days" in Jackson Prison, as "when I was in college." As a youngster I used to be quite proud of the fact I knew a man who had gone to college.

Dr. N.R. Gilbert purchased a lot in 1879 and may have been the first doctor in the town. There are records of a Dr. Warner and Dr. Leighton being available from 1884 to the middle 1890s.

Exact chronological dates have not been found by which to trace the history of the village. A review of available land transfers, old diaries and reliable verbal information from several sources indicate the following information to be relatively accurate.

Gratwick, Smith and Fryer sent crews to build dams on Lower Chub Creek and the outlet to Otsego Lake near the present AuSable Club building in 1869 and 1870. Because of the alleged incompetence of the foremen both projects failed and the foremen were fired. It has been remembered by the old-timers that some of the work crews remained in the area.

Smith, Kelly and Dwight were purchasing land from 1871 to 1888 and apparently operated a mill until around 1882 but the exact date had not been determined. When the mill closed, their operation was leased to several smaller operators, one being Frank Buell. Buell logged many small parcels near Crooked Lake; now called Lake Manuka and Buell Lake; which is now called Lake Arrowhead, and was lumbering until the late 1890s.

During the 1890s and early 1900s people moved away to find work. Many buildings burned causing insurance companies to cancel all insurance in the village. By 1912, only 10 families remained in the village.

The railroad station became a "flag stop" except for a mixed freight and passenger train. There was one grocery store and only 14 children attended the school. In the 1930s, the population dropped to seven families and five children attended school.

In 1947, there was a renewed interest in the community and a rebuilding of summer homes and permanent residences gradually took place.

Like many small American towns, Otsego Lake, established and nurtured by a single resource, be it timber, copper, gold, silver, coal or iron, the village withered and died after it had exhausted its resources.

Others towns in the county experiencing the same fate were Waters, Johannesburg, Elmira and the abandoned Berryville.

There are thousands of similar examples throughout the state. Their history is largely unrecorded with only a few scraps of information salvaged from almost accidentally preserved family mementos and official government records.

Bill Granlund is a retired Gaylord High School principal and an Otsego County historian.

Related Links:

[Click to print this page.](#)