

# Johannesburg

The Johannesburg Manufacturing Company, controlled by the Salling, Hanson and Michelson families, was incorporated in 1901 for the purpose of lumbering large stands of virgin hardwood timber owned by them in eastern Otsego County. A site was chosen for the mill and the town to be built around it in the center of this area. The town was named Johannesburg, after Johanna Hanson, wife of the president of the Company.

Before the Company could begin operations much work had to be done. The mill had to be constructed, houses built for the workers, a water system installed. A crew of workmen was hired to dig the water mains. The workers were divided into two groups, one starting at the south end of town and the other at the shore of Johannesburg Lake. Every Saturday night the progress of each group was measured and the winning group was rewarded with a barrel of beer.

Public buildings were constructed. The Brick Block built by Frank Michelson at one time contained a drug store, a bank, a doctor's office and a theater. Silent movies were shown at the theater; during the changing of the reels a local pianist entertained. The upstairs contained a large dance hall and several apartments. For a time, dry goods were sold in the basement.

Across the street to the north the Company store was built. Groceries, dry goods and general supplies were sold here. Some of the mill's employees were paid in script, much to their dissatisfaction, which could only be spent at this store. The first manager of the Company store was Will Woodburn. From 1916 until 1926 Andrew Larson was manager. Following him, until the closing of the mill in 1929, A. J. Pearsall managed

the store. Since then the store has been privately owned.

John Rassmusson was given permission to build a hotel across the street to the east from the store. The first floor contained a dining room, kitchen and living quarters for the hotel manager, a saloon, barber shop and pool hall. Two of the hotel managers were Lindsamons and Downings. Roy Bentley was the barber. Saturday night was the lumberjack's night in town and the barber shop was a busy place. Men played cards or pool while waiting for a haircut. On the second floor were the rooms for mill workers without families. The hotel even boasted a smaller third story used mostly for recreation.

Completing the square of public buildings was the railroad station. Constructing a railroad was also a first for the Company. A branch line was built to the Michigan Central line which connected Grayling with Lovells and Lewiston. When the Michigan Central took over this branch, regular passenger service every day except Sunday, was established. Later a line to Gaylord was built and the line to Lewiston was discontinued. The railroad was Johannesburg's life line. It brought in supplies and hauled out lumber. It brought in new settlers and provided residents access to the outside world. One winter, following a terrible blizzard, the railroad was blocked for over a month and supplies in the "Burg" ran dangerously low.

Among the first to arrive in Johannesburg were skilled workers who had been employed by Salling and Hanson in Grayling. They lived in the hotel until homes for their families could be constructed.



Early Johannesburg looking south