

## Otsego Lake Village

In the late 1850's to mid-1860's lumbermen Gratwick, Smith and Fryer, located on the AuSable River in Oscoda, purchased several thousand acres of land in Chester, Charlton and Otsego Lake Townships, Otsego County. They sent crews to build dams on Lower Chub Creek and the outlet to Otsego Lake in 1969 and 1970 near the present AuSable Club buildings. Because of an extremely wet spring, the dams went out and the venture was unsuccessful. Several of the crew remained to make their homes in the area.

Other lumbermen, Smith, Kelly and Dwight, purchased much of this timberland. They also purchased many parcels from "homesteaders" and encouraged homesteading by Civil War veterans so that they would be able to acquire the timber in that manner. In 1872 a small lumber camp was located in the northwest corner of the tract of land and a settlement started. Invitations were extended to men with families to select choice building lots and erect dwellings. Some early settlers were George A. Finch, Adam Assal and Blackford Smalley. Lumbering was carried on that winter by Alfred Stewart at Otsego Lake and at Chub Creek by C.S. Brink.

Cutting of timber from the town site and the building of houses, business places and the mill progressed rapidly. Houses were built for Osborne H. Kellog and Fred Smith, both of which are still standing and in use today. Others were built for John Hammer, Susan A. Hooker, Adeline Murray, DeWitt Wilson and many others during a two year period.

A large two story structure was built housing a library and township hall below and an opera house above, complete with stage and dressing rooms. A small one room school house was erected but was soon replaced by a two story, three room building. With the physical and financial help of the townspeople, a Methodist Church was constructed nearby. A three story hotel built by Charles Powell supplemented the boarding houses in 1879. A baseball park, surrounded by an eight foot board fence, complete with advertising and bleachers, was constructed by the Company and businessmen. Two grocery stores, a drug store, two dry goods stores, a general store and a butcher shop supplied the material needs of the citizens.

The Company permitted no liquor to be legally sold in the town but rumor has it there was but little hardship since a drug store, the hotel and two "Blind Pigs" accommodated those in need. (Author's note: 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 the writer used to be quite proud of the fact that he knew a man who



**Banking ground where cut timber awaited loading onto the train.**

"went to college.")

On March 12, 1875 the County of Otsego was organized with the community of Otsego Lake as the County Seat. The first election was held on April 5, 1875; 174 votes were cast, of which Otsego Lake Township had 76, Livingston Township had 49, Charlton Township had 36 and Elmira Township had 13. The first County officers were as follows: Judge of Probate - Nathan L. Parmater, salary \$250. Sheriff - Samuel Livingston (for whom Livingston Township was named. He never qualified and C. C. Mitchell was appointed at the first meeting of the Board of Supervisors) salary \$250. County Clerk - Charles L. Fuller, who was also Register of Deeds, salary \$1,200 and board and expenses. County Treasurer - Elijah C. Morse, salary \$550. Prosecuting Attorney and Circuit Court Commissioner - Wm. R. Kendrick, salary \$800. Surveyor - Alfred Stewart. Coroners - C. C. Mitchell and Judson Hooker, salary \$25. Superintendent of Poor for three years - Adam Assal, salary \$25 a year.

The first meeting of the Board of Supervisors was held May 1st, 1875 in the Charles Brink Boarding House at Otsego Lake Village. Present were: Charles F. Davis of Elmira, Reuben Murray of Otsego Lake, George H. Smith of Livingston and Thomas G. Woodin of Charlton. At this meeting the Board bargained with Otsego Lake school district for the use of the upper part of the school house for two years to be used as a county building. A building committee was also appointed to look toward erection of suitable county buildings. Later a site was bought of Smith, Kelly and Dwight for \$1,000.

The village plat for Otsego Lake was officially recorded on June 12, 1875.

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 Court House. The following spring a county seat war developed, so the story goes, when some "gentlemen" from the more populous northern townships in the County hired a number of woodchoppers from Petoskey to come over to work in Livingston Township, gain a resident vote and thereby the northern part of the County won in the spring election and the County Seat was permanently located at Gaylord.

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

Smith, Kelly and Dwight continued to operate the mill until about 1882. When they closed out their operation the mill was leased to several smaller businessmen, one being Frank Buell. He logged many small parcels near Crooked Lake (now called Manuka) and Buell Lake (now called Arrowhead) and continued to log until the late 1890's.

Other lumbering operations, large and small, were carried on in and around the village by many including: David Ward Lumber Company, Dodge Shingle Company, Thomas Tooey, Fred Smith, Blade, Hopkins and Smith, and Sage and McGraw.

For the first few years Otsego Lake was the most important trading center of the County and the most populous; in 1884 approximately 800 people had homes there. However, as the lumbering operations slackened in the 1890's and early 1900's, many residents moved elsewhere to find work. Several buildings burned causing the insurance companies to cancel all insurance in the village. By 1912 only ten 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 fourteen children attended the school. During the 1930's the population dropped to seven families with five children attending school.

About 1947 there began an awakening of interest in the community once again and since that time there has been a gradual building up of permanent homes and summer residences.



**Big Wheels manufactured by  
Hoff Mitchell Company**



Looking Southwest from Otsego Lake Village



Otsego Lake Village looking Southwest - showing the Brink Hotel in the center.

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Lumbering in Otsego Lake area.



Shingle Mill