

Early Development of West Bloomfield-An Overview

By Eleanor Pekkala

An enchanting area of rolling land, woods, and water, West Bloomfield's very name was inspired by the wild flowers that early settlers found blooming in the area. Rare lady's slipper, fringed gentian, dogwood and shadberry tree[s] were some of the flowers indigenous to the Township. West Bloomfield was originally part of the township of Bloomfield, one of the two townships that comprised Oakland County as set off by proclamation of Governor Lewis Cass in 1819 (1). Then on June 28, 1820, the county was divided into Oakland and Bloomfield townships. In 1827, a further division was made, and on April 22, 1833, the township of West Bloomfield was created.

The rolling terrain of West Bloomfield was forested when the Indians lived here, and did not lose this characteristic until the white man's ax felled trees to clear the land for his fields and farms. Another important topographical feature, its sparkling lakes, waterways and ponds, ranks West Bloomfield as second in water area in the United States (2), and served as a lure to the pioneers of the 1800's.

As fate (or rather Army incompetence) would have it, the development of West Bloomfield was unnecessarily delayed. The French had been the earliest explorers in the area, but they were mainly concerned with locating and mapping waterways to serve as the transportation lines of their trapping and trading empire. British influence and concern was centered primarily in Detroit and control of the Detroit River, and did not radiate out of this hinterland. American interest in Michigan developed slowly until the War of 1812 when an Act of Congress (May 6, 1812) required that six million acres of land should be surveyed and set apart for the American veterans, including two million acres in Louisiana, two million acres in Illinois, and two million acres in Michigan. Lands were surveyed and appropriated for the soldiers in Louisiana and Illinois, but the surveyors reported that there was not enough land fit for cultivation in Michigan. They described mostly low wet land with a thick growth of underbrush, intermixed with bad marshes and generally heavily timbered with beech, cottonwood and oak. The surveyors considered the land between swamps and lakes as barren sandy soil on which scarcely any vegetation would grow except scrubby oaks, and erroneously reported that only one acre out of one thousand was suitable for farming (3). The effect of this report was two

fold: first, it gave a false impression of the state's interior; and second, it provoked Congress to pass a law in 1816 repealing the 1812 Act affecting Michigan.

However, in 1817 and 1818, a few venturesome pioneers braved the dangers of the terrible morasses depicted in the Surveyor General's report and found it to be misleading. Although the land was swampy around the perimeter of Detroit, it changed into good soil if one ventured far enough out. The turning point for the eventual settlement of West Bloomfield was the expedition by Major Oliver Williams and his companions in the fall of 1818 (4). The exploring party, with the blessings of Territorial Governor Lewis Cass, left Detroit and followed a road being built by U.S. soldiers as an extension of Woodward Avenue. The party was then led by a guide on an Indian trail (5) and entered the eastern boundary of the township along what is now Long Lake Road. Going due west the[y] arrived at Orchard Lake, traveled around the northern shore and crossed the isthmus separating Orchard and Cass Lakes. Following a slightly northwest path, the soldiers came to Union Lake, changed their course to a northeast direction and went off toward Waterford. Their notes and charts were used to make land office maps and the boom was about to begin!

In the 1820's, settlers began coming to West Bloomfield in large numbers, especially from New York State. Pioneers were lured here by the descriptions and advertisements of good soil, abundant water and cheap land. Many of them came overland to Buffalo, New York, and then by schooner to Detroit. From Detroit they were usually brought by wagon team to Pontiac and adjoining areas. These first settlers found a wilderness far different from present day West Bloomfield. There were acres of forest to be cleared for farmland and roadways, and the beautiful lakes that gave West Bloomfield the nickname "lake township" were there to be discovered and named. In the eastern section of the future township were Pine, Black Walnut (later just Walnut), Long, Cranberry and Lord's Lake (now Hammond). Cass and Sylvan dominated the north section. Orchard, Upper Straits, Woodpecker and Morris lay in the central section and Union, Scotch, Green, Pleasant, and Lower Straits were discovered in the western section. Pine Lake had the greatest altitude, being 400 feet above the Detroit River.

There were two Indian reservations here when the white settlers migrated to West Bloomfield. One reservation was on Orchard Island (now called Apple Island) in the middle of Orchard Lake and the other was a plot of 107 acres on the south end of Orchard Lake. These reservations had a brief life as orchard nurseries and many of the later orchards in the area got their start from trees grown here. In September 1827, the

reservations were sold at auction by the U.S. government for eleven shillings per acre to Mr. George Galloway of Palmyra, New York.

The first individually known settler to West Bloomfield was John Huff from Gaines' Corner, New York, who started clearing on the southwest shore of Pine Lake in 1821. Since he did not register his claim, the honor of being the first legal land holder goes to Benjamin Irish, who acquired property on the west side of Wal[n]ut Lake in 1823. James Herrington of Cayuga County, New York, claimed the township's southeast section in May, 1823, selling off part of his acreage to other settlers who helped to develop it. One of these settlers, Abel Bigelow, discovered that a good portion of his farm was underlaid with clay of excellent quality for brickmaking. He became the first manufacturer of bricks in the township.

Other pioneers to the township in the year 1823 included Rufus R. Robinson who settled in the most northeast section; William Aunett, a settler near present day Green School; and Linus Parker, who claimed the northeast quarter of section 34 which later was known as the John DeConick farm. A young Scotsman recently arrived in New York, George Malcolm, also came to West Bloomfield in 1823. He had been told of beautiful Michigan and heard of a "goodly land where a man could soon build a home, and become independent of the fluctuations of trade" (6). So Malcolm took his family by steamboat to Albany, by canal boat to Buffalo and then on the "Sheldon Thompson" to Detroit. He left his wife in a hotel in Detroit and started walking north on the Saginaw Turnpike. He and his companions soon ran into mud and clay paths on the trek to Royal Oak, which boasted two overnight lodging places. Malcolm eventually made his way to West Bloomfield and claimed land west of Green Lake which he named "Greenplains". In later years, Mr. Malcolm served the township as a trustee.

A gentleman from England came to West Bloomfield with the idea of colonizing this area with people from his native land. This Englishman, Edward Ellerby, purchased a piece of property southeast of Walnut Lake for his future colony and built a large log house which he considered so impressive that he named it "Ellerby Castle". His dream of founding an English community here never materialized although he made several trips to England to recruit settlers.

Men did not come to West Bloomfield just to farm. In 1825, the Reverend Loban Smith, a circuit preacher, came to minister to the settlers' souls. Reverend Smith lived here a quarter of a century and was well known in Oakland County. He officiated at

worship meetings in school houses, homes, barns, shops and out in the open air; and was much sought after for weddings and funerals. Another minister, Reverend J.J. Young lived near Woodpecker Lake and was an active preacher for more than 40 years in Oakland County.

Sharing of housing, bartering of good and trading of skills were all facets of daily life in early West Bloomfield. A basic necessity of a pioneer family coming into the area was shelter, an essential for protection from the weather as well as from the wolves and bears which roamed the forests. It was quite common for a new family to be housed with more established settlers while their own log cabin was being built. John Ellenwood and his family were typical examples of this; they arrived in the township in 1825 and settled on the eastern shore of Pine Lake near John Huff's farm. Since Mr. Huff was engaged in the business of building a tavern house in the new and rapidly growing town of Pontiac, the Ellenwoods were able to live in Huff's large log house while they built their own home (7).

Money was another necessity in short supply. Barter of goods or services was used as much as possible. Farmers who did not have the money to purchase cows or oxen worked out trades with their neighbors; they might board a cow through the winter for another farmer and use the milk, or shares of a harvest might be a payment for the use of oxen and equipment to break up and prepare the fields for planting. For necessities or luxuries that could not be traded or produced at home, a man might leave his farm and work for someone else to earn extra income. The Reverend Smith, mentioned earlier, found he could not always earn enough from his preaching activities, so he and his brother Stephen, who settled on the southern shore of Pine Lake, became trappers to supplement their income. Pine Lake in the 1820's was teeming with muskrats; the brothers claimed to have been able to catch as many as a dozen in a single night (8). Each pelt was easily worth four shillings, which was more than could be obtained for two bushels of the best wheat. This crop was so plentiful and the means of transportation so limited that it could hardly be sold, regardless of quality. It was frequently used as food for livestock instead.

One early settler, Jedediah Durkee recounted his life and experiences in a letter dated August 21, 1874, a copy of which is in the Archives of the Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society. Jedediah wrote: "I built a log house, and to aid those who had no dwelling, I took about twenty new-comers in the one new house. To pay for expenses, I used to go four or five miles a day to work, and had one dollar per day with oxen, and

50c per day for self. I wanted then, as ever since, to keep out of debt. I was often without meat, but occasionally killed a deer or a bear. I have seen as many as three wolves cross on the ice of Pine Lake at one time. After three years I built a good frame barn. To get 1000 feet of lumber I worked a week with oxen to pay for the same. Wanting more lumber to finish my barn, I exchanged the following articles for the same: an overcoat, a pair of deer-skin breeches, and a pair of deer-skin mittens. My wife made the pantaloons and the seam the length of the pants was adorned with a ruffle made of slits of the deer-skin. Working for Mr. Archibald Philips, I slept in a room in the winter, where a board being off, the snow came in so as to cover the bed and floor two inches thick, and in putting on my deer-skin pantaloons, I had indeed a snow bath.

As many as 500 Indians used to pass on a trail, through my farm, on their way to Detroit to get their annuities. Some camped at Orchard Lake, and at the village of Pontiac, then containing about 400 inhabitants. For $\frac{1}{4}$ of a pound of tea, I worked about one day. Wheat was four shillings per bushel. As to school, I paid for the services of a teacher one winter, a new milch cow, worth \$25, and hog weighing 300. Then my wife used to be left alone for a week at a time with three small children. Wolves were so [n]umerous that I had to build high enclosures to save my sheep from their ravages. After they had killed forty sheep near our place, one hundred men turned out in pursuit of them. I used to go 3 or 4 miles and split rails at four shillings per hundred and went [a]fter a number of miles to help at a raising. ...

Esquire Ellenwood lost, by fire, his house and all its contents, and I took them and his family of twelve persons into my house, making 24 inmates. They lived with us about 2 months, till he could build. If Revolutionary times "tried men's souls", from the above statement who will not say but that the Pioneers of the great and flourishing Wolverine State, passed through a similar ordeal? May those who enjoy the fruits of the labor of the Pioneers of Michigan, feel grateful to the Author of all good." (9) So spoke Jeddiah Durkee of those early years.

The 1830's brought more rapid immigration into the township and the choice farmlands were claimed. The "Scotch Neighborhood" started with the arrival of James Dow from Lifeshire, Scotland. Dow and his family settled on 270 acres of land on the isthmus between Orchard and Cass Lakes. This first settlement on Orchard Lake is still known as Dow Ridge. The youngest son, Peter Dow, was an important and colorful personage in the township, serving on the township board and also as a member of the State Senate. He played a pioneer role in the ecology movement by preventing a ditch

being dug between Sylvan and Cass Lakes. Mr. Henry Clay Ward wanted to lower Cass Lake and turn the marsh between the lakes into pasture land. Peter Dow along with other Scotchmen owning a part of the marsh went to court to stop this action (10). Dow is also remembered for his role in forming a curling club on Orchard Lake, thought to be the first such club in America.

The increasing civilization of the area brought a greater need for roads, schools and post offices. Roads were vital as communication links and for transportation of goods; as early as 1823 the first township road was cut through and used. It came down from the northeastern corner by Hammond and Long Lakes, then went south around the corner of Pine Lake, serving as the basis for the route of present day Middlebelt Road. In 1828, approval was granted for a Pontiac to Adrian Road (now known as Pontiac Trail) to cut diagonally through West Bloomfield, passing by Orchard Lake and going southwest through Walled Lake, Ann Arbor and other points downstate. Commerce Road was laid out in 1831 between Orchard and Cass Lakes, running west below Green Lake and into Commerce Township. In many cases, roads were cut around lakes, becoming quagmires in the spring as the result of little grading and poor surfacing. Other trails were along ridge lines or "oak openings".

After the township was organized, a panel of settlers was appointed as "overseers of roads". John Ellenwood, one of these overseers, played an important part in surveying and laying out most of the roads in West Bloomfield as well as some of the major roads in Bloomfield and Southfield Townships. At a later time, General F.S. Strong, Jr. platted much of the land and laid out many of the roads in what is now the city of Orchard Lake.

Post offices were another necessity to the settlers who wanted contact with relatives and friends back home. In 1831, John Ellenwood's home was set up as the first post office with the address of "Pine Lake". The second office, "West Bloomfield" was opened about 1833, but later changed to "North Farmington" when it was moved to the community at the corner of Fourteen Mile and Farmington Roads. The "Straits Lake" office was opened in 1836 and the fourth office, "Orchard Lake" did not come about until 1872. This last post office also served to accommodate guests at the Orchard Lake Hotel.

Although many families preferred educating their children at home, others felt a desire for a school house to accommodate more children. A log cabin between Pine Lake and Walnut Lake served as the first school house. This cabin was located not far from the little frame school house currently at Long Lake and Middlebelt Roads. The Scotch

settlement built a log school between Orchard Lake and Green Lakes. The present Scotch School, which was built in 1926, is located near the old site. A third school was started at Walnut Lake and was succeeded by a frame structure build around 1855 and now serving the Walnut Lake area as the “Snack Shop”.

The eventual locations of the area’s post offices and schools were reflections of the areas with the greatest population density. Little communities grew around Walnut Lake and Pleasant Lake in the western part of the township and in north Farmington area at 14 Mile and Farmington Roads. The first mercantile establishment was opened at Pleasant Lake as a dry-goods store, but was short lived. Although there was a small commercial center in the North Farmington area, most residents had to go outside the township for their needs until much later in West Bloomfield’s development.

A few public-houses, or taverns, were opened in the township with varying degrees of success. It was in one such public-house on Walnut Lake Road, kept by Nelson Roosevelt, that the first town meeting of West Bloomfield was held on April 7, 1834. Here leading settlers assembled and elected from their numbers the first officials of the community. The officials chosen to serve the needs of the new government included supervisor, clerk, assessors, collector, directors of the poor, commissioners of highways, constables, school commissioners, school inspectors and overseers of roads. Daniel Benjamin was elected the first Township Supervisor. In later years, there were “black knot” inspectors appointed to protect the cherry and peach orchards from the blight caused by this fungus.

Farming was the main occupation of West Bloomfield residents until the second half of the twentieth century[.] Early settlers planted corn, wheat, hay[,] rye, oats, potatoes and assorted garden vegetables. Livestock, primarily horses, cows and sheep, was also important for livelihood. Horse breeding was quite popular at one time and horse farms are still in evidence in the township. Later the farming expanded to include orchards of apples, peaches and cherries. The apple trees which were here before the white settlers, were thought to have been planted by French missionaries, or to come from seeds brought by the Indians from the French settlers in Detroit. Peaches were first planted in the 1890’s but never achieved the popularity of apples. A severe tornado in 1877 uprooted many apple trees in the Orchard Lake area (11) and blight wiped out some of the orchards shortly after the turn of the century.

Popular markets for a farmer to sell his produce at were the Eastern and Western Markets in Detroit, a six hour trip from West Bloomfield with a good walking team and wagon. After a day of selling, the farmer would spend the night in the city and return home the next day. The prices he could expect to get in 1895 were 70c for a barrel of apples and 10c for a bushel of potatoes (12).

Although the fertile soil of West Bloomfield was put to good use, the plentiful waterways were a source of disappointment to the early settlers since there were no streams of sufficient strength to turn a waterwheel, and in times of drought the water level was too low to operate the mills. Three mills were eventually built in the township during its initial growth, but none was able to become self-supporting. Mills in Farmington and Bloomfield were more successful.

There was also little in the way of mechanical trades represented in West Bloomfield. There were a few carpenters and cabinet makers, but most industry seemed to prefer to locate in Pontiac or Farmington. However, local blacksmith shops did flourish; one enterprise was located near Tam O' Shanter Golf Club on Orchard Lake Road, one in the 14 Mile-Farmington community, and one near Wilkins Corners at the intersection of Pontiac Trail and Orchard Lake Road.

As West Bloomfield grew and prospered, people came out from Pontiac and Detroit and discovered that besides having substantial farms, the township was a beautiful area for the location of their summer homes. Mr. Colin Campbell of Detroit acquired the beautiful Apple Island for this purpose, and the island, with its romantic legends of Indian maidens and braves and tales of Chief Pontiac, stayed with the Campbell family until after World War I. It was then sold to Willis Ward and remained in the Ward and Strong families until it was given to the West Bloomfield School District in 1970 as a nature sanctuary. Along the shores of Orchard Lake two large hotels were built for summer people, and an excursion ship, the "Dell", plies the lake's waters.

The township's lakes were made even more accessible by the construction of a new rail line, a spur of the Grand Trunk-Air line Division, which stopped at a depot in Orchard Lake. Before the rail line construction, people came by rail from Detroit to Pontiac and then used a horse and buggy for the four or five mile trip to the lake. Also, by 1893, Orchard Lake Road was famous for its gravel surface which permitted faster and smoother transit. Summer colonies sprang up on all the lakes as the area became more accessible and fashionable. A Detroit-oriented Club, "The Interlaken" was located

on Pine Lake and the Cass Lake Club, a social club for Pontiac residents was located at Cass Park on the eastern shore of Cass Lake.

The turn of the century saw motor cars chugging out to the lakes, and brought the opening of the Detroit United Railway, an electric streetcar service. This early “rapid transit” system, commonly called the “Interurban” brought even greater changes to a still largely rural West Bloomfield. Farmers were able to send their produce and dairy products to the Detroit markets on the D.U.R. streetcars and cultural and educational opportunities for their families opened up with the low fares; students could attend high school in Pontiac and the populace could take advantage of the cultural benefits of Detroit. Even more important to change in West Bloomfield was the fact that the D.U.R. opened the area to land speculators and developers. Lots around the lakes were especially in demand and the character of the area began a gradual shift to the suburban life of today. The area called “St. John’s Crossing” by the interurban people is now becoming the commercial center of the township. St. John’s Crossing was the Maple Road stop which was so named because six farms adjoining this area were all owned by Johns: John Watt, John Case, John Beattie, John Voorheis, and John De Conick.

In the 1930’s West Bloomfield became the setting for an interesting and successful social experiment. Senator James Couzens obtained federal funds for the creation of a low income housing project. The residents received their home loans in return for using their acre or $\frac{3}{4}$ acre parcels to raise food products. The surplus food and produce raised in their gardens was sold at a common market at Elder and Commerce Roads. This community, Westacres, has flourished, and with residents enlarging and modernizing their homes, has become a desirable community. Westacres reflects in microcosm the West Bloomfield of today. The agricultural basis of existence had diminished, while the natural beauty and topography of the area lure more and more residents to settle here in their search for that elusive area described by early settlers as “a wondrous place”.

Appendix A

Footnotes

1. County Evolution in Michigan 1790-1897. p. 12. Territorial Laws, II: 798. All the territory gained under the Treaty of Saginaw in 1819 was attached to Oakland County in 1822.

2. Martinez, Charles, "West Bloomfield Township." Article reprint, 1974. "Within the boundaries of West Bloomfield are 19,900 acres of which 14% or 4000 acres are in the form of lakes".

3. Copy of actual letter by Edward Tiffin, Surveyor General's Office, Chilicothe, Nov. 30, 1815, to the Honorable Josiah Meigs, Commissioner General Land-Office, Washington, D.C.. Early History of Michigan, Bingham, p. 16.

4. Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collection, Vol. 22, p. 417.

5. The most important Indian trail at the time of the organization of the County was Saginaw Trail which ran on a line between Detroit and Saginaw. Another important trail much used by Indians led from Mount Clemens to Orchard Lake. It subsequently proved to be of advantage to the early white inhabitants of the County. The end of this trail was marked by a tablet fixed on a boulder at Orchard Lake which read: Pontiac and his braves returned to Me-na-sa-go-ning after the Battle of Bloody Run". (This writer could not locate the tablet).

6. Scrapbook. Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society collections.

7. History of Oakland County, Michigan. Everts Publishing House, p. 313.

8. Op. Cit., P. 312.

9. Letter by Jedediah Durkee to the Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society. Contained in the Society's scrapbooks.

10. Van Coevering, J. A. The Story of Orchard Lake Community Church, p. 4.

11. Campbell, Caroling. Oakland County Pioneer Papers. "Memoirs of Honorable Charles Bartelette Boughtner." P. 159-166.

12. Author's personal interview with Mrs. Wendell Green.

Appendix B

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