

# A Settlement Becomes A Community—Sawmills

When the first settlers arrived in the early 1840s, the Chequamegon Bay region was covered with a vast ancient forest of pine, mixed with hardwoods. The lumbermen and lumber companies who followed the settlers and harvested the forest were almost exclusively interested in the pine timber. Pine, particularly Norway and white pine, is light weight, durable, and easily cut and shaped, making it an ideal building material. The hardwoods, and what were considered inferior species of pine, were usually bypassed.

Lumbering on the bay to serve local needs began in the 1840s with water powered sawmills on Pike's Creek and the Bad River, and steam powered sawmills at Houghton and Bayfield in the 1850s. The first sawmill on the future site of Washburn was a steam powered mill, erected in the ravine on the west side of Memorial Park about 1860. Adjacent to the mill were a few buildings, the beginning of what was expected to grow into a town. The place was named McClellan after the Union General George B. McClellan and, like its namesake, soon faded into obscurity. In 1873 two sawmills were established in Ashland, the first of what would become a large wood using industry in that city.

Between 1884 and July 1887 three large sawmills were constructed on Vandeventer Bay, at the west side of

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Washburn. Construction of the Cook mill, located down from Eighth Avenue West, started in November 1884 and it began operation the following June. The Rood and Maxwell mill, located to the west of the Cook mill, was erected during the winter of 1885-1886. The Bigelow mill, located down from Sixth Avenue West, was constructed in 1886. The main product of these mills was lumber, but they also produced shingles and lath. The mills were located off shore on wharves that extended several hundred feet into the bay. Large ponds adjacent to the mills held the logs until they were drawn into the mill for sawing. Finished lumber was store on the wharves or in large lumber yards on land.

The Bigelow mill was the largest of three mills. A main building 70 feet wide by 226 feet long housed two 52 inch gang saws and two rotary saws. Power for the saws and other mill machinery was provided by two large steam engines and 14 high pressure steam boilers. Sawdust was used as fuel for the boilers, and waste material was

burned in a 95 foot high iron incinerator. Three wharves extended 1,200 feet into the bay on which ten million board feet of lumber awaiting shipment could be stored (a board foot being a piece of lumber one foot square and one inch thick). Logs were transported to the mill from logging camps in the forests on the peninsula, on the company's narrow gauge railroad. Average daily capacity of the mill in 1886 was 250 thousand board feet of lumber and several thousand lath.

These three sawmills were large-scale industrial operations with high volume production of pine lumber—their combined output in 1887 was 57 million board feet, for example. The lumber, shingles and laths were shipped by water or rail to lumber yards in Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and St. Louis from where they were distrib-

uted to build the cities, villages and farms of the westward advancing settlement frontier.

With wooden buildings and large stacks of finished lumber and many nearby sources of ignition, the mills were fire disasters waiting to happen. The first of what would be many future conflagrations occurred in October 1886 when the new Cook mill was totally destroyed by fire. Rood and Maxwell erected a mill on the Cook site that began operation in June 1887, but financial difficulties forced the company to sell both of its mills to a lumberman from Michigan. But despite fire and ownership changes, by 1888 lumbering was well established as a major component of Washburn's economy, and along with shipping, would power a great boom from 1890 to 1905.