

The early years of Washburn marked by buzz of sawmills

CJ 4/25/13

Prior to the founding of Washburn in 1883 there were several settlers on the Chequamegon Bay shore, between Wanebo Road and Memorial Park.

An 1855 survey map shows a dwelling labeled Vanderventer, at the mouth of Thompson Creek. Farther northeastward along the coast there are two dwellings marked on the map as unknown, another labeled Butterfield, and then another as unknown. A sawmill and a settlement site, known as McClellan, consisting of a boarding house and a two dwellings, was located to the east of Memorial Park.

Forty-five years later, at the height of the great lumbering boom around Chequamegon Bay, in 1900, Washburn's waterfront was lined with docks and sawmills. Located from west to east were: the C.C. Thompson mill; the S.C. Cook mill, directly down from 8th Avenue West; and the Bigelow mill, directly down from 6th Avenue West.

Each sawmill had a dock, extending far into the bay, for shipping lumber and other mill products to Chicago and other ports on the lakes. Farther east along the coast, a city dock was constructed in August 1895, directly down from Washington Avenue.

Beyond the city dock, between 1st Avenue East and 2nd Avenue West, a large U-shaped dock was constructed by the Omaha railroad in the summer of 1883, with a grain elevator and dock forming the west arm, a commercial dock with a large warehouse forming the east arm, and a coal dock connecting the two arms.

By 1910 the sawmills were gone and their docks were slowly falling into ruins. All that remains of the mill docks are a few piles and the sandstone pedestals for the mill steam engines, sad monuments to Washburn's glory days as a mill town and Great Lakes port.

In 1937 the coal dock, which ceased operation in 1931, was briefly resurrected, and an occasional coal carrier — many times the size of earlier vessels — docked at Washburn's waterfronts. They were unloaded by two huge caterpillar bucket cranes, controlled by operators in elevated cabs from which they could see inside the ship's hold. The coal was piled on the dock, then loaded into hoppers from which it was dumped into railroad cars or huge trucks.

Articles in the Washburn News in the summer of 1889, during the height of the lumbering boom, provide detailed descriptions of Washburn's three sawmills.

The A.A. Bigelow sawmill, erected in 1887, was the largest mill on the bay. It contained two circular saws and two gang saws (a saw with several parallel blades) and could saw 307,000 board feet of lumber in an 11-hour shift. The mill was powered by 14 boilers, producing high-pressure steam for two large steam engines.

In addition to the sawmill, the company operated a shingle mill (for roofs) that produced 130,000 shingles per day, and a lath mill with a capacity of 45,000 laths per day. Laths were used to make plastered walls before the introduction of wallboard.

Two steamers with towed barges transported about 3,700,000 board feet of lumber to Chicago every two weeks.

The S.G. Cook sawmill consisted of one circular saw and one gang saw, with a capacity of 175,000 board feet during two 11-hour shifts. A lath mill produced 75,000 laths per day and a shingle mill 15,000 shingles per day. Nine boilers produced steam for a 225-horsepower steam engine that powered the machinery. The mill and storage yards had an elaborate system of pipes to distribute water for fire protection and were illuminated with 140 "Edison incandescent lights." The mill was operated by a crew of 187 men, whose combined wages amounted to \$7,500 per month.

The C.C. Thompson sawmill included a circular large saw, a gang saw and a band saw and had a capacity of 250,000 board feet in 21 hours. A shingle mill produced 15,000 shingles per day and a lath mill 40,000 laths per day. The mill machinery was powered by two large steam engines, fed by seven boilers.

Fire protection was provided by pipes that extended throughout the mill and yards, which were illuminated at night by arc lights. Nearly all of the output of the mill was transported by ship to Chicago.



Lars Larson

■ has been a guest columnist for The County Journal for many years.