



# The Town of Ricketts (1890-1913)

The town of Ricketts arose at a site on the Wyoming-Sullivan County border along Mehoopany Creek. It was chosen in the summer of 1890 by the Trexler & Turrell Lumber Company, which had contracted to cut about 5,000 acres of virgin forest land near Lake Ganoga that was owned by Col. R. Bruce Ricketts of Wilkes-Barre. At the same time, Ricketts also leased a smaller tract adjacent to Trexler's tracts for timbering to Albert Lewis, another major lumber manufacturer who was building or acquiring mills in the region in Mehoopany, Lopez, Stull, Harvey's Lake, and Dallas.

The center of the ghost town of Ricketts today is located 4.4 miles north of the present park entrance to Lake Jean at Ricketts Glen State Park on Route 487. Here, immediately below the Pennsylvania Fish Commission access road which bears right to Mountain Springs, a small bridge crosses Mehoopany Creek. To the right of the site, before crossing the bridge, there was once a street lined with homes, a church, and a lodge hall. The bridge site was roughly the location of a dam which impounded creek water in "downtown" Ricketts in Forkston Township in Wyoming County. The mill pond here supported, over time, at least four different mills. Immediately on the other side of the Route 487 bridge, a railroad bed to the right leads past an area along the creek once alive with the workings of mills. A little further up the

rail bed there once bloomed a commercial center with a railroad station, company store, hotel, school, and company houses.

In the other direction, upstream from the bridge on Route 487, about three-quarters of a mile into Colley Township in Sullivan County, was another more substantial log dam and pond which once impounded countless logs for the huge Trexler & Turrell lumber mill. Here, at "uptown" Ricketts, surrounding the mill, were auxiliary buildings: for example, the blacksmith shop, planing mill, and grease house, which served the mill works. In the neighborhood there were other house-filled streets, barns, and a two-room Sullivan County schoolhouse, a substantial community which disappeared nearly eighty years ago.

During the summer of 1890, Albert Lewis built a water-powered mill in lower Ricketts over Mehoopany Creek, in Wyoming County, but his operations here would only last until 1894. Lewis's partner in this early operation was F.L. Sittser. Their firm may have floated logs from Splashdam Pond, located on a nearby tributary, to their millsite on the creek near the county line. More importantly, in the same 1890 summer, the Trexler firm was building a more substantial steam-driven mill a short distance upstream from the Lewis site in Sullivan County. The timber leases with Col. Ricketts to lumber in the area were originally



limited to the immediate tracts surrounding Lake Ganoga, since Ricketts had planned to sell most of his land—45,000 acres—to a British syndicate. But by April 1891, the sale collapsed and the Trexler firm, with whom Ricketts had confidence, had its contract continued, a relationship which would last another 22 years.

The Trexler company devoted the 1890 season to mill construction, allied buildings, labor retention, and initial timbering activities. Too, railroad lines to Ricketts were still under construction and lumber stock would have to be either hauled to Lopez or stockpiled until the railroad to markets was opened. Trexler

planned to harvest 5 million feet in 1890, and 12 million feet in 1891, with a “stumpage fee” totaling \$50,000 to Col. Ricketts for 1890 and 1891.

#### Building the Town

The community of Ricketts was quickly built over the next three years, particularly after the main railroad line from Towanda to Wilkes-Barre was opened in 1893, along with the Ganoga Lake branch line from the mill town to the summer resort at the lake.

The town began to bloom as 1891 opened. In January 1891 a Ricketts post office designation was established, initially in Sullivan County, but it was moved to the company store in Wyoming County in November 1891 with E.G. Trexler as postmaster. The town hosted the two saw mills of Lewis and Trexler, a company store, barber shop, and a growing population. J.R. Pennington, a Lopez butcher, opened a meat market at Ricketts in competition with the company store, but was ousted by the Trexler firm. By September, a schoolhouse—presumably the Sullivan County school—was under construction at uptown Ricketts,

the lot a gift of Col. Ricketts. It would be followed by a second school in downtown Ricketts in Wyoming County. A three-mile road from Jamison City to Ganoga Lake was underway. It was constructed down the mountain as a public road and as a route to haul hemlock bark from the Ricketts tracts to a tannery in Jamison City.

During the early months of 1892, a Loyalsock Railroad crew of eighty men, commanded by J. Ross Rahm, was building the last couple of miles of railroad between Ricketts and its terminus at Bean Run, where it would connect with Albert Lewis’s log railroad which was under construction from Noxen. The Loyalsock crew slept and boarded in railroad cars as they built the railroad one mile at a time. When a mile of track was completed, a construction train and supplies were moved up to a new construction site. The gang moved forward to cut down trees, another followed to clean the debris away, and a third crew followed to blow out stumps with dynamite. Meanwhile, D.B. Cope, railroad boss for Albert Lewis, was completing the line from Noxen, and the two lines could have been quickly joined by March 1892. However, Lewis, who actually constructed his log line for sale to the Lehigh Valley Railroad, would not permit connection of the two railroad systems until business disputes with the Lehigh Valley were settled. Through 1892 and mid-1893, trains would only run south from Towanda to Ricketts.

A full season of activity dawned the spring of 1892 for the town of Ricketts. New men were arriving in town to work. There was a housing shortage and more company homes were planned. There was not a shortage of dogs or rats, however, and it was suggested that the place should be renamed “Dogtown.” Trexler was moving rail ties into the



woods for logging lines and crews were cutting tracks to bring out bark, and peeling would begin in late May. On May 8, 1892, the Ricketts Sunday School was formed at the schoolhouse. George Thrasher, from Albany, Pennsylvania, opened a shoemaker shop in Ricketts and the company hired W.B. Hoffa from Bernice as a butcher. Burton Douglas signed a one-year contract to carry the mail between Ricketts and Lopez for \$300.

The woods were active with trail blazing, the running of log rail lines, and workmen at various jobs in the forests. In June 1892, there was a bark camp near Ricketts and also at the Barnes and Kipper sites. Lumber and bark camps were named after either the camp boss or a well-known site. The Sweeney lumber camp house burned in mid-June and the men lost everything except the work clothes they were wearing. The company tore out stalls in a barn and installed bunks for the men for shelter.

By January 1893, the Trexler company had graded the nearly four-mile branch line from the saw mill at Ricketts to a log-house station at Lake Ganoga, but the opening of the Lehigh Valley Railroad line through Ricketts was delayed after nearly five feet of snow fell in late February. The snow was still three-feet deep in mid-April. In early May the Hotel Ricketts, 40-feet wide and 60-feet long, was opened with F.D. Shantz from Newfoundland, Pennsylvania, as the manager. Heavily-built and talkative, Shantz would be quite successful as “landlord” of the popular hotel built on the crest of a small rise overlooking the company store and downtown mills. The lumber men were anxious to have a hotel in town to buy beer; dances were held Saturday nights in a community hall, and it was a nuisance hauling beer from Lopez which was

a “wild” town and permitted alcohol sales. Undoubtedly, the men grumbled incessantly when Col. Ricketts insisted his town and the hotel would remain “dry,” with the tacit approval of the Trexler firm. Another tale holds, however, that the Ricketts House originally did sell beer. But workmen were only paid at the end of the month. If a workman was employed in mid-month, he was paid in groceries from the company store until regular monthly paychecks began. But some men would swap groceries from the store for beer or liquor at the hotel. One day someone substituted sand for sugar that was illicitly traded for beer. The sand ended up in “Cocky” Turrell’s oatmeal for breakfast at the hotel, and the “boss man” thereafter ordered a “dry” town.

By mid-1893, there was talk of the railroad from Towanda to Wilkes-Barre finally opening. In the meantime, the town was alive with humming saws, crashing boards, and rumbling rail cars. Along the hillsides, small armies of men crept over piles of lumber everywhere—and in mid-May it would sometimes still snow. The Lehigh Valley Railroad finally settled with Lewis, and the through line from Wilkes-Barre and Harvey’s Lake to Towanda was opened on July 1, 1893. The mill town of Ricketts could finally boom with all outlets open by rail traffic. At his Lake Ganoga estate, Ricketts’ brother, Frank, deaf from a childhood bout with scarlet fever, managed the North Mountain House, catering to an increasing summer resort business. In fact, as the trolley and train lines were

opening Harvey’s Lake as a resort for the general public, Ricketts’ Ganoga estate was becoming the fashionable private resort for the Wyoming Valley money crowd. General lumbering within a half-mile of Lake Ganoga was prohibited, but while clearing for building lots



near the hotel in October 1893, workmen cut down a hemlock tree six feet in diameter. A ring count indicated the tree was 532 years old.

Ricketts was not a seasonal community. The mills generally ran all year. In the winter months, snow was actually welcome. Logs would be easily skidded on the snow to be piled along the railroad. Otherwise, it was extra work to haul the logs in a dry winter season. Skating parties were the most popular form of recreation at Lake Ganoga or sometimes at the mill dams or local ponds. In November, the hunting season opened, but lumbering and hunting would annihilate the deer by 1912, when the last native deer was reportedly killed. For the indoor crowd, a literary society, mostly for the women, was formed in January 1894. The Sunday School seemingly had failed and the following month a new one was organized with E.G. Trexler as superintendent; with the company boss as head, the townspeople would have to attend-even if the temperature did hit 30 degrees below zero the last Sunday in February 1894.

Church services were held every second Sunday at 10:30 a.m. at the schoolhouse with an Evangelical preacher from Dushore. In March 1894, the communities of Bernice, Lopez, Ricketts, and Shinerville were organized into a separate Bernice and Lopez Circuit, and a novice, but well-liked minister, Rev. F.H. Foss, formerly a printer, provided services to Ricketts on Thursday evenings.

Several well-known community members were already in place by May 1894. William Colt managed the company store, assisted by Lorin Tresslar. Colt would move to Pittston in 1895 to be replaced by Tom Kennedy. G.M. Peet was a company blacksmith; Joshua Zacharias had the meat market and managed a boarding house. The principal saw filer

at the big mill was J.C. Dyer. James Hadsell had charge of sixty men at the lath mill. Lath were narrow strips of wood used to support plastered walls in home construction. In one day the lath mill alone was cutting 87,000 feet of lumber, producing 30,000 pieces of lath daily; if laid end-to-end, it would stretch nearly 23 miles.

During the winter of 1894-1895, Albert Lewis left the Ricketts area. The Albert Lewis mill in Ricketts, which may have been largely idle for two years, was dismantled in December 1894, and the machinery relocated to Lewis's mill operations in Crellin, West Virginia. Lewis, of course, was extremely active at Stull and Harvey's Lake with his own lumbering and ice-cutting operations along Bowman's Creek, and did not pursue any future business arrangement with Col. Ricketts. There was an undisclosed, strained relationship or rivalry between them, perhaps due to Lewis's advantage in the ice business at Bear Creek. Ricketts may have decided to retain the advantage in the incredible lumber business Ricketts and Trexler shared at North Mountain.

There were two additional enterprises added to North Mountain. Trexler and Col. Ricketts formed an ice company which erected an 80 by 100-foot ice house near the railroad station at Lake Ganoga, and by January 1895 the company's 175 men were cutting and shipping a large number of railroad cars of ice to Philadelphia and New York markets. The Lehigh Valley Railroad was also a major buyer of ice to be used in hauling meat and perishables. The business was so successful that the Ganoga Lake Ice Company was incorporated on April 21, 1897, by J.H. Turrell, H.C. Trexler, William R. Ricketts, G.H. Heintzleman, and E.G. Trexler. The ice company was partly formed to provide Col. Ricketts' son, William, an enterprise of his own to manage. The Colonel's trusted



servant, John H. Green, was also active in the daily management of the company.

Trexler and Turrell also expanded its operations in December 1895 to a mill they erected in Noxen after purchasing 1,100 acres of Sullivan and Wyoming County timberlands, which Col R. Bruce Ricketts owned with other business associates. This sale followed an earlier report in January 1895 that Trexler and Turrell had planned to purchase 15,000 acres of lands from Col. Ricketts. But these accounts are in error. In 1895, Col. Ricketts only intended to lease an additional 15,000 acres to Trexler for timbering in the Mehoopany Lands, selling 1,100 acres to Trexler in a more removed area serviced by Trexler's Noxen mill. For a time Trexler and Turrell also had a small mill at Kasson Brook, north of the immediate Ricketts tracts. In late 1896, the Trexler firm sold its Lopez operations to Jennings Brothers.

Other business and community pieces were also joining the town fabric. A popular lodge in rural areas in the 1890s was the Patriotic Order of the Sons of America. A POS of A Hall was built at Ricketts around 1896, the first building north of the Lutheran Church. The initiation rites were usually harmless tricks. A shoeless, blindfolded candidate would be led down a corridor while the men hit his toes and head with "sawdust clubs"-tubes of muslin filled with sawdust. The blindfold was removed and the candidate could see another member heating a branding iron. The blindfold was replaced again and a long wait followed. As the candidate was expecting the branding iron, a piece of ice was sent down the back of his neck. Then the candidate would have to stand on a short step ladder where he was told the floor was strewn with broken glass and nails. When ordered to jump, he was caught in a

blanket and tossed around. The rites concluded after the new member kissed a picture of a jackass. Thereafter, he was a full-fledged member of the humorously-named "Arabian Degree Klan" of the Ricketts POS of A order. The order had 30 to 40 members; it was a social club but members could also buy sickness, accident, and life insurance through the club.

After construction of the POS of A Hall, community dances, formerly held at the town hall, were moved to the lodge house. Dance music was simple, usually a fiddle and organ. Traveling medicine and lantern slide shows were shown at the hall, and Baptist and Methodist Church services were also held there.

On March 8, 1897, the St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized at Ricketts. The Rev. Christian Kraemer of Noxen was named pastor. The building, 32-feet wide and 48-feet long, was erected during the year and was consecrated on Sunday, December 4, 1897, when the final \$60 to pay for it was collected. Rev. J.L. Miller succeeded Kraemer at this time.

On October 12, 1897, the Ricketts Manufacturing Company was formed to operate an excelsior mill in downtown Ricketts at the site of the Lewis mill. G.N. Ruff from Allentown relocated to Ricketts to operate the new mill. Excelsior was a form of packaging material made from shredded spruce wood. The excelsior mill only ran about three years. The site was later reconstructed for a stave and barrel head mill until the town closed.

The main sawmill in uptown Ricketts originally had a circular saw-about six feet in diameter. Then, a band saw joined the circular saw. In 1898, the Ricketts sawmill eliminated the circular saw and added a sec-



ond band saw increasing its capacity to 100,000 feet daily. One, or usually two, log trains made regular trips each day to the mill pond. On its logging railroad in the woods and at the mills, Trexler and Turrell used two Climax locomotives weighing 25 tons each. The first Climax was purchased in 1893 after Trexler's initial second-hand locomotive was wrecked in the May 1893 accident. A second Climax was purchased in 1895. In 1901, the company purchased a 37-ton Heisler, followed by a 70-ton Shay locomotive in 1902, with the company purchasing their last locomotive, another Climax, at an uncertain later date. By 1900, the complete community was in place and extremely productive until the abrupt close of operations when the timber reserves were depleted 13 years later.

The community itself referred to the lower mill complex in Wyoming County as "downtown" and the main sawmill area in Sullivan County as "uptown." The initial mill downtown was the Albert Lewis mill. After Lewis left Ricketts in 1895, the sequence of mill operations in downtown is not precisely known. An excelsior mill was located here for a few years (1897-c.1900), but the principal mill was the Trexler stave and barrel head mill. The Lewis mill was converted to these operations by the Trexler and Turrell company. Certainly, for a time, the old Lewis mill was used to air dry staves. After the stave mill fire in 1908, air-drying sheds were constructed across the creek. In 1909, a grist mill was also built in downtown to provide feed for the Trexler horse and mule teams used in the timbering industry.

Further up the track in downtown Ricketts were the company store, the Ricketts train station, a section foreman house, a barber shop, and a footbridge over the creek to the old town hall, which was converted at a

later date to a company house. On the hill, of course, was the hotel. At this site, the Bowman's Creek Branch entered the town and split into a "Y." The main line turned right to Lopez; the 3.85-mile Ganoga Lake spur line ran along the creek from the downtown area, 1.45 miles to the main sawmill at uptown, and 2.4 miles to the Ganoga Lake station. The Trexler logging lines generally ran off the Ganoga Branch railroad line, but Trexler also had trackage rights over a section of the main railroad line from Ricketts east to Opperman Pass, a distance of two miles. Trexler would have run additional log rail lines from this stretch of Lehigh Valley track.

In the area behind the company store, on a hill overlooking the downtown mills, was additional company housing. For a time, there was also a one-room Wyoming County school, smaller than the Sullivan County school, only a short distance away.

On the other side of the creek in Wyoming County, along a street named Church Row, there was a line of homes including the company physician's house, the substantial Turrell home, and the Lutheran Church. Here, too, began a series of homes occupied by skilled employees, the mill wrights, sawyers, and saw filers. This area has been partially dozed out and landmarks no longer can be traced. But Whipple Street, named after George "Zeke" Whipple, the "woods boss"-a middle manager-may have begun here, crossing into Sullivan County, with Mill Street shooting off towards the big dam and the sawmill.

In the Whipple Street area was located the POS of A Hall, the Sullivan County school, and additional homes along Mill Street for the "higher ups." There was also a large barn on Mill Street which handled



fifty teams of horses. Finally, the big sawmill was located at the head of the crib-dam on Mehoopany Creek, a small industrial area crowded with rail lines, lumber yards to the rear, and service buildings-including the blacksmith's shop, and in later years separate planing and lath mills-beyond which there was additional housing for mill workers.

### *Life in the Woods*

A crew blazed out main roads into the forest, followed by cross roads between them. Two man crews-a fitter and a spudder would work between the main roads. In the hemlock forests this work occurred in the early spring because sap running in the trees made stripping bark easier. The bark on the hemlock trees was stripped to sell to area tanning firms. Bark from other trees was not marketable and was not stripped. The crew initially cut a "butt ring" from the hemlock tree, a three-foot strip of the bark around the lower tree, which made sawing the tree easier. Using a crosscut saw, the men cut through the butt ring and felled the tree. They would cut the top off from the fallen tree and then slit rings around the bark every four feet to the butt or sawed end. The tree tops were not harvested but left to rot. The fitter would then move to another standing tree to cut a "butt ring," while the spudder, using a special tool, peeled off the bark on both sides of the fallen tree in roughly three or four-foot high sheets. The bark could fall away in a single sheet from around the tree but most

often it tore off in two or three pieces. Limbs, too, would have to be chopped off with an ax.

The bark was left for a time to flatten and dry out. Later it was gathered and pitched into piles of one cord each along the road. The crew was expected to cut four cords of bark daily. The bark was either taken by train in special cars designed for bark-hauling or loaded into wagons and hauled to area tanneries, for example, Noxen, Jamison City, Powell, and Elkland. The barking process ended in late July and early August and did not resume again until the following spring.

The felled trees generally lay in the woods to dry out until the late fall or winter when they were taken by various methods to the mill. In the meantime, crews had to "flog knots"-trim the trees of knots to make them relatively smooth so the horse teams could haul them. After flogging, the log cutters, a three-man crew, entered the woods. One man measured the trees and marked them for cutting into various lengths. He could also help cut away underbrush around the fallen timber. The two sawyers followed to cut the trees with cross-cut saws.

Trexler and Turrell had about fifty horse teams which were used in the woods. Wagon hauling in the woods could be arduous work. Sometimes "corduroy" roads paved with half-logs were built to keep wagon loads of bark or logs from getting stuck in wet areas. Heavy wagons could also overrun and crush a horse-team trying to haul a wagon load down a steep mountainside-particularly true for the steep descent of bark shipments into Jamison City. Rope and pulley rigs were sometimes used to hold wagons and guide their descent down the mountains. More often special devices using chains to lock up wagon wheels were used to brake the wagon's descent.

Throughout the forests there were crude trails built which patterned the mountainsides. Horse teams traveling the "skid trails" hauled the



logs on wagons to a log slide, stream, or railroad site for shipment to the mill. If enough timber could not support construction of a railroad spur line, horse teams sledged out the timber on the winter snow when it was more efficient. A log slide was a wooden chute in which logs were placed and slid to a piling site. From 1890 to 1892 before the railroad was built, a log slide was used to shoot logs to the Ricketts mill pond. Thereafter, log slides were generally not used at Ricketts with the exception apparently in one or two outlying areas. A swollen spring stream or “splash dam” could float logs to a mill pond, and was used by the Albert Lewis firm in Ricketts and Stull in its early logging operations. Once the Ganoga branch of the Lehigh Valley Railroad was operational at Ricketts, log railroad spurs were built from it by the Trexler and Turrell Lumber Company. These spur lines went into the forests all over the North Mountain area.

At various rail sites, the timber was loaded in Trexler and Turrell’s log trains. Trexler had five locomotives over a period of time after its first locomotive was damaged in 1893. Logs could be manually dumped into the railroad cars from temporary inclines built along the track, but on heavy jobs or major sites a “Barnhart” loader was used. This steam-driven machinery was fitted on rails on top of the log railroad cars. It picked up the logs and loaded them on cars, filling the train from the rear cars up to the front cars of the train.

### *Life in the Camps*

The camp house was constructed from rough, unfinished boards from the company mill. Tar paper covered the exterior; rolls of brown or red building paper covered the inside walls. On the first floor there was a

kitchen and large dining room with tables running the length of it, with hardwood benches for seats. After a ten or twelve-hour shift, which began at Too a.m., the men poured into the camp house. The food was usually plain with plenty of potatoes, canned vegetables, and salt-cured meats. Wild fowl was a treat if available in the summer. Some camps raised pigs which ran loose until butchered in the late fall when pork would be served. A plain second room with a pot-bellied stove and hardwood benches along the walls served as a gathering place or recreation room. A sand box near the stove and buckets of sand around the room served as spittoons for the men who chewed tobacco.

The second floor served as the bunk house with beds two and three decks high made of rough lumber. The camp operator or family could also have separate quarters upstairs. Some beds had mattresses, but most beds were lined with hemlock or spruce boughs. Bed bugs and lice were a common problem, and in the spring the men would stock the beds outside, burn them, and build new beds.

Unlike the town of Ricketts, the woods camps attracted many immigrant laborers, particularly “Hungarians,” a convenient phrase which encompassed several East European nationalities. German and Italian immigrants were more easily identified. There is some evidence that the camps could sometimes be segregated by nationality, forming a community with shared language, food preparations, and ethnic manners, and presided over by a work foreman who had some skill in the crew’s native language. The available evidence, however, does not suggest either ethnic hostility or rivalry among the immigrant work camps.

The “wood hicks” paid for their room and board. A typical wage in 1906 was \$1.60 a day working in the woods. Room and board cost 60¢ a day. Board included breakfast, noon dinner meal, and supper. If there



were purchases at the company store for clothes, tobacco, or other items, these charges, too, were deducted from the employee's pay at the end of the month.

A typical boarding house served fifty men. The boarding house operator was an individual and helper or a married couple who contracted to run the house for whatever profit could be made. The house managers hired any additional help. The boarding operator purchased food from suppliers in Lopez or the Ricketts company store, which delivered it by a railroad hand car or the log train. Traveling butchers sold beef and lamb-13¢ a pound for beef. Food was cooked on one or two big stoves which had three lids across the top. The cook baked 30 to 35 loaves of bread a day and 10 to 15 pies. Breakfast was cereal, meat, potatoes, and pancakes. Fifty lunch pails were packed each morning for the men. Each contained four slices of bread, meat, cookies, fruit, and pie or cake. There was a filled coffee cup on top of the pail, but in the winter the coffee froze and the men were lucky if they could warm it enough to drink. After returning from the woods at the end of a winter day, the coffee was usually frozen solid and it would take a couple of hours to thaw out the lunch buckets to ready them for the next morning. Meat, potatoes, vegetables, and cake or pie was served for dinner-with lots of vegetable soup. A cellar, preferably near an underground spring, kept meat and vegetables relatively fresh.

Fatal accidents and serious injuries were common in the lumber camps and mills. The earliest fatality at Ricketts was probably Frank Farrell, age 24, who was killed in May 1891 when a large limb of a maple tree he was cutting fell on him. In December 1891, Lincoln Ross died of injuries after a fall from a railroad car. In March 1892, the 18-

month-old child of John Gregory was scalded in an accident at home and died. In June 1892, a limb fell on the shoulder of William H. Green, gashing him terribly, and he later died. A similar accident killed Michael Shay in January 1893. Saws and axes caused frequent injuries. Men fell from railroad cars or were caught in mill machinery. A young man tried to change a gang saw in the main mill while some gears were still running-a process he saw the regular workmen do repeatedly without difficulty. But his pants got caught in the machinery and he bled to death. The loss of an arm or leg was not uncommon in timbering operations. Injured men were usually taken by train to the hospital at Sayre, in Bradford County, or sometimes to the General Hospital in Wilkes-Barre. The Ricketts community and the Trexler company made an annual contribution to the Sayre hospital for its medical services.

Ricketts did not have a cemetery. Lumber towns were not designed as long-term communities. The community people were often natives of nearby towns and deceased persons were sent to their hometowns for burial. John Sidelahn, an immigrant worker, was killed in July 1896 when he fell in front of a log train and two railroad cars ran over him. The immigrants from Eastern Europe were apparently superstitious, refusing to touch a deceased worker, and would not assume responsibility for the body. Invariably, burial arrangements for Hungarians were left to the charity of the settled townspeople-which oddly enough were sometimes called the "white folks" by the immigrants.

Particularly tragic deaths occurred in early 1914 at a Trexler and Turrell mill near Noxen the winter after their mill at Ricketts closed in 1913- On Saturday, February 14, 1914, Joseph Kelley and Jeremiah Sheehan, workers at the South Mountain camp of Trexler and Turrell,



walked five miles over snow-covered ground to Noxen for supplies. Unfortunately, they lingered in town until mid-afternoon. During the return tramp to camp, a blizzard overtook them and the temperature fell below zero, actually much colder due to a driving wind. The men were caught in the drifting snow and became exhausted. They eventually collapsed 300 feet apart and froze to death overnight only a short distance from their lumber camp. Their bodies were discovered by a search party the following morning. Kelley, age 50, handsome and deaf, was an unusual man. He was well-educated, a world traveler, and had been in the Navy. He may have been a professional boxer, which may have caused his deafness. He was also well-read, traveling to Noxen each Saturday to buy or borrow books and magazines and to enjoy a little time at a bar. When found frozen near a fallen tree trunk - a desperate refuge -he had clutched in his arms his favorite companions-books and magazines. The Kelley family buried him at Forkston, but Sheehan was a stranger to the community and he was buried by the local poor directors of Noxen.

Illnesses, too, especially during the severe winter months, took a toll. Particularly heart breaking were the deaths of infants and children. Arthur Harford, age 3, died of pneumonia in December 1895, as did Anna Hanke, age 9, who died of diphtheria. A company blacksmith, G.M. Peet, lost his wife in May 1898 in childbirth. Peet shortly ran the following newspaper ad: "Wanted: A woman to take care of a four week old child. G.M. Peet, Box 85, Ricketts, Penna." Typhoid fever, from infected water, regularly occurred and was often fatal. In 1900, a typhoid epidemic occurred, along with a rash of pneumonia patients. The company physician this year was Dr. Frank Watkins. He and

Walker Allen, the local barber, treated the patients, losing only two of their fifty patients.

### *The Sawmill Operations*

The main Trexler and Turrell sawmill at uptown Ricketts on the Ganoga Branch was a major lumbering center in the region, second only to the Jennings mill in Lopez. In January 1895, Trexler employed 350 men who each earned \$1.40 a day. The company had already cut 2 million feet of hemlock in the 1894-1895 season, with 4 million more feet to cut in the next few months. Trexler was nearly finished with earlier Lopez operations and would soon transfer its main office in Lopez and additional men to Ricketts.

The Trexler and Turrell mill at Ricketts had an easy capacity of 75,000 to 80,000 board feet daily and generally cut 10 to 12 million feet annually. In 1894, it was estimated the mill would manufacture 100 million feet of lumber during the life of the community, but eventually it would cut five times this amount. The Trexler and Turrell mill at Lopez could cut 50,000 feet daily. In Lopez, the Jennings Brothers mill was even larger, averaging 80,000 feet daily, 15 million feet annually, with immediate timber available for 125 million feet and additional tracts in sight. Another lumberer, Kipp, had a smaller mill at Newell, midway between Ricketts and Lopez. Kipp was cutting 50,000 feet daily with a reserve of 80 million feet. Sullivan County had an estimated 1.25 billion feet of hemlock timber alone, which lumberers were cutting at the rate of 110 million feet annually.



A detailed description of the Ricketts mill was not recorded. But it would have been similar to mills in the region at the time. After the harvested logs had been hauled and dumped into the Ricketts mill pond, they were sorted and moved by the pondman to the bottom of the jackslip (sometimes called “jackladder”), a ladder-like device which was inclined from the pond to the mill. The lugs on the endless chain of the jackslip would catch the logs and singly move them up the slip into the mill building. Logs were sent into the mill with the top or small end first. In some lumbering operations, the butt or large end contained the indented mark of the woods cutter, which was easily visible to a worker called the “scaler,” while the log was still on the center deck above the mill opening. The scaler could then credit the log to the appropriate woods boss, who often worked in some lumbering operations on a commission basis for the lumber company. But at Ricketts, the commission system was apparently not in use and Trexler and Turrell is believed to have paid a standard wage to the various wood bosses.

The scaler immediately inside the mill controlled which way the log would be thrown from the center deck. Usually, the long logs were thrown to the right and the short logs to the left by a steam operated piston which came up through the center deck. The logs rolled right or left down the inclined log decks until they were stopped by a log loader, an ‘L’-shaped device which rolled one log at a time onto the log carriage.

Two or three men stood on a log carriage which was a moveable ‘shot-gun’ or piston fed device similar to a large sled. The setter rode the front and the dogger rode the rear. The setter controlled one set of

dogs (clamps) to fasten into the log. The dogger had two, and sometimes three, sets of dogs to fasten into the rear portions of the log.

The sawyer was responsible for the operation of the head saw, which initially cuts the timber trunks in order to maximize the lumber that can be cut from it. The sawyer stood near the head saw and controlled the log loader which flipped an individual log onto the carriage from the log deck. He also controlled a device which turned the log while it was on the carriage. The carriage with the two men moved forward, the head or band saw (or earlier a circular saw) stripped off one side of the log to begin the “squaring” process, and the carriage then retreated to its original position. By a signal to the men on the carriage, the sawyer told the men when to release the dogs so the log could be turned one quarter way for a second side cut. In four or more passes, the log was “squared.” The squared log was called a “cant.” Near the sawyer’s position, there was an order board which indicated what size lumber was needed to fill the company orders. The cant left the carriage and was then passed through a “gang saw,” a series of circular saws on a drive shaft, which in one pass through the saws, cut the cant into a series of rough boards.

The tail-sawyer stood behind the gangsaw and picked off the newly sawed boards with a long metal “cant” hook, passing the boards onto the “live rolls” which was a powered conveyor belt system consisting of multiple rollers. This conveyed the cut lumber from the gangsaw to the edger, another smaller circular sawing operation which cut off the uneven edges and any remaining bark on the boards to produce lumber pieces with parallel edges. The edger man consulted another order board to see what width boards the company needed to fill orders. After



setting the edger machine for the proper width, the board was fed into the machine. Wide boards were cut into two or more narrow boards for which there were orders.

Ordinarily, the sawmill process included a trimming process, a series of saws which cut the boards into uniform lengths. The boards were then marked into different grades of lumber and sorted for piling.

There were two other processes at the Ricketts mill. Certain lumber would have passed through the planing mill, which was added in 1898 and built behind the main sawmill. Here, certain rough dried lumber was finished by passing through a planer, a series of blades which give the boards a smooth surface before shipment.

Second, Ricketts also had a lath mill built behind the main mill. Edgings from the big mill, which were at least two inches thick, were run through gang saws that were four inches apart. Any scraps from this cutting were sent through the “hog” to fuel the boiler room fires or were sold at Lopez to make kindling wood. The edging slabs were then run through the “bolter” which cut each of them down to a uniform 11/4 by 11/4-inch size. These strips were then bundled and tied with twine. The bundles were then put through the “equalizer” saws and the lath cut to three or four foot lengths. Lath was a major commercial product used to support plastered walls in the home construction industry.

Lumber cut inside the mill was piled on small rail trucks. Boards of the same length were sorted and piled on the same truck. Several trucks were loaded at the same time. When they were full the trucks were pushed along the rails out of the mill to the pilers who either loaded the lumber into freight cars for shipment or piled it in the yards.

The pilers who stacked the lumber in the yard behind the mill wore heavy leather aprons and rude leather gloves. Each glove was made from a piece of heavy leather as wide as the palm of the hand with a strap around the wrist. It had no fingers in it nor was it made like a mitten. With use, the glove became slick as glass.

Lumber was stacked in a slightly tilted manner so rain would run off the boards much like a sloping roof. Boards were not completely stacked one on top of the other. Boards were placed between courses of lumber so air could circulate through the pile and dry the lumber. In the summer, it was cool between the piles, giving the men some relief from the heat.

Inside the mill, other operations were also necessary. Wood scrap, which was considerable, would be piled in railroad cars and taken to Lopez to make kindling wood. Ricketts did not have a kindling wood factory. In Lopez, small blocks of relatively uniform-sized wood were cut, bundled together, and tied with a tarred, flammable string with a paper tag attached to it. Kindling wood was sold by the millions in the cities to light coal stoves. The tag was lit; it fired the tarred string; the string fired the wood; the wood fired the coal in the stove.

At Ricketts the scrap pieces, unusable slabs and edging from the lumber and lath boards not sold for kindling, were dropped through the main floor of the mill to a conveyor which took them to the slasher that sawed them into short pieces. They were then conveyed to the hog which ground them into sawdust and chips. This refuse was conveyed to the sawdust storage area in the boiler room where it was burned. Sawdust from the mill operations was cleaned up about four times a day. Firemen worked the boilers day and night, usually in two shifts.



The saw filer was second only to the sawyers in pay. The saw filer's room was located to one side of the Ricketts mill in a separate room. He was responsible for sharpening the saws. One experienced filer could keep a double band-saw mill in operation. Racks along the ceiling of one end of the room stored extra saws. Saws were changed two to four times a day.

### *The Downtown Mills*

In addition to the main sawmill uptown, there were also other substantial downtown milling operations. During the life of Ricketts, there was an incredible market for barrels, which were the most common form of packaging for all forms of farm produce and manufactured products. Barrels were made from curved strips of wood called staves, and round wooden tops and bottoms, fitted together and held in place with wire. Indeed, barrel production in the United States did not even peak until 1900.

There were three grades of staves. Number 1 staves were very tightly fitted for sugar and flour barrels; number 2 staves were used for cement and other products; and number 3 staves were used for potatoes and more loose products.

Ricketts had a major stave and barrel head factory built in 1898 at the downtown log pond. Spruce or other softwood was used for barrel-making. Short logs were cut into 30-inch lengths and quartered into "bolts" by a circular "bolting" saw. The mill could produce 60,000 bolts daily. The bolts were loaded on small cars and railed into a separate two-tiered building—the steam tunnels to soften the bolts for later cutting into staves. Originally, there were wooden steam tunnels, but in

1905 new tunnels built of German concrete—which turned out to be of poor quality—were constructed at the end of the downtown mill area.

From the steam tunnels the warm, softened bolts were taken to the workmen who operated special cutting machines. They depressed a pedal and a large knife came down and cut off thin slices from the bolt. These stave "blanks" varied in width depending on the size of the log. The blanks were then either placed in a steam-operated dry kiln or air-dried in the old Albert Lewis mill, and in later years in open sheds. This wood had to be dried to remove moisture and to harden it. As production increased, several wooden sheds, Zoo-feet long, were built on the opposite side of the creek towards Church Row to air-dry stave blanks.

A separate milling process cut square blanks for future use by cooper as barrel heads and for drying the blanks in the air-sheds, followed by additional drying in a separate kiln. Heat for the kilns was provided by steam piped from a boiler at the stave mill. The staves and heads were dried by radiation from the steam pipes. Once fully dried, the flat, rectangular stave blanks were again cut into uniform beveled pieces by "stave cutters." This was called jointing. The final stave piece was wider in the middle than at either end (a barrel bulges at the center). A helper gathered the finished staves and with a press machine packed them fifty at a time and tied the package with a tarred string. A two-man crew cutting and packing could joint 10,000 staves a day, splitting \$2.50 each for a day's work. The day's production at the stave mill was 45,000 staves. Stave jointing was hazardous work. Many men and inexperienced boys had fingers cut off in the knives. The men at the stave mill were delighted to horrify frequent mill visitors with a jar of alcohol where the amputated fingers were kept.



### *Community Life*

Housing at Ricketts was leased from Trexler and Turrell. The rates may have varied over time, but a typical charge was \$z.5o a month for a four-room house. The first floor would have a kitchen and living area; two bedrooms were on the second floor. The town did not have utility services. Only the sawmill, stave mill, and company store had electricity. The church pastor caused a sensation one winter when he rigged up a flashing electric star for the church Christmas tree. The company houses did not have any indoor plumbing or running water. In fact, only the Turrell home was fitted with plumbing, with water to his home pumped to a storage tank in the attic. Out-houses, of course, were very common. Community wells, and a major spring near the sawmill, provided water for the residents. There was plenty of wood around to chop for firewood, but there was also a hard-coal dump by the railroad trestle near the station to purchase stove coal. But people who purchased coal, rather than chopped wood, were sometimes considered “lazy.”

At its height, the town of Ricketts numbered about 800 people. A census was conducted in 1900 and 1910. The census takers in 1910 received 5¢ per person and 25¢ for each farm survey. Because of the travel and expense to cover the North Mountain territory, the census takers also wanted expense money. The government agreed to pay some expense money but reduced the head rate to 3¢ and the farms to 17.5¢. When the census takers asked the Hungarians in the woods how many children they had, a few expressed uncertainty since their wives were still in the “old country” while the Hungarians were in the American woods the last two or three years.

Ricketts was a market place for farmers from “down the mountain” who sold fruit, vegetables, eggs, and milk products. The wagon hucksters would sometimes pick up a child in the town to serve as an interpreter for the farmer as he made his way to the lumber camps. Milk was dipped and sold from cans in a railroad car to women waiting at the Ricketts station with pails.

Local farmers could also find employment in the winter at Ricketts. The company hired the farmers and their horse teams at \$5 a day to sled timber down the skid trails to the rail line. Temporary work was also available cutting ice for Lewis and Stull in Mountain Springs and presumably, too, at Lake Ganoga.

An early form of socialized medicine prevailed in the company town. Individual workman paid 50¢ a month and families \$1 a month to a fund to maintain a company physician. The physician most remembered was Dr. Kingsley, who also served as the town dentist. Tooth extractions were no problem: two volunteers from the street to hold the patient down and a pair of pliers expertly handled by the “doc” did the job. The community barber, Walker Allen, at least before 1900, was the physician’s assistant. Allen rented his shop from the company for \$4 a month. Haircuts were 10¢, up to 20¢ for extras. He made \$2 or \$3 a day. But he joined the army during the Spanish-American War in 1898. After he returned to Ricketts a year later, he sold the business for \$100 and rejoined the service.

The managers of the timber tracts had to contend with whatever natural and environmental circumstances occurred. Two substantial problems occurred in the mid-1890s. In late September 1896, a huge storm crossed Florida from the Gulf of Mexico; it followed the east coast to



Washington, D.C., where the storm center veered west towards Detroit. There was a severe trough of low pressure north of the storm, and during the afternoon of September 29, a gale began to blow from the southwest over the North Mountain. In the early morning of September 30, between 1:30 and 2:30 a.m., a great windfall swept from the south and tore through the Ricketts tracts. An estimated 200 million feet of timber, for a 30 to 40-mile width, over an area of 15,000 acres, was smashed to the ground. All of the tree tops of the fallen timber pointed north. The Trexler crews tried to salvage the bark and timber, but realized only 80,000 cords, losing an estimated 40,000 cords because of the destruction. Timbering the fallen stock was undoubtedly given priority in the following months.

A major beetle infestation of spruce trees occurred between 1895 and 1896. Spruce began dying shortly after substantial lumbering began in the early 1890s. The blight seemed to have begun below Forkston and spread south to Ricketts and Stull. Apparently, the beetles took hold in the dead stumps and limbs of earlier cuttings, spread to the live timber elsewhere, and rapidly killed the standing trees. The infected trees represented several million board feet of lumber. In 1896, the Trexler and Turrell Company built a second mill—perhaps the Kasson Brook Mill—several miles north of Stull, to quickly save about a million feet of their infested tracts. Trexler cut another 9 million feet of diseased trees at Ricketts, with an even greater amount to follow. In Stull, the Lewis company ran roads into the spruce woods to cut and haul dead trees, representing 5 million feet of lumber. These tactics worked well, and within a year the beetle infestation was checked.

There was no police force at Ricketts. At best, a constable—undoubtedly an appointed part-time position—was available. There was also a constable at Lopez, known as a much more rowdy town due to the open availability of beer and alcohol. A quick and rough justice prevailed when there was difficulty. One Saturday, a southerner named Mal Wyris, who had been drinking, was at the Ricketts House and tried to assault Charlie Jackson, a black cook at the hotel, with a knife. An assembling crowd separated them and the incident apparently was forgotten. Later, Wyris appeared again, but this time with a shotgun which was taken away from him. Later in the evening, Wyris chased after a man who left the barber shop, who Wyris thought was Jackson. This time a group of men grabbed Wyris and threw him into an empty railroad car and locked it shut. The freight train left the next day and Wyris never returned.

While Ricketts discouraged drinking, it could not be eliminated. The men would set up shacks in the woods to gather for drinking parties and card-playing, presumably on Saturday nights and Sundays—the only time they were free. A drunk in town could be locked up in a room overnight at the company store to dry out. But some accounts state that drunks were immediately fired. Labor issues were uncommon and handled on an ad hoc basis. A group of four stave mill workers in charge of the heading room asked the company manager for Saturday afternoons off if they could reach their barrel-head quota by noon. The company concurred; the men met their production standards each week and thereafter had Saturday afternoons free. The rest of the stave mill workers continued to work full Saturdays. But another time a group of men



threatened to halt production for an increase in wages, and they were immediately fired.

There were a couple of murders at Ricketts. Sometime about 1905, a domestic-revenge murder occurred. A woman who was a domestic worker for Col. Ricketts in Wilkes-Barre was having difficulty with her husband. The Colonel permitted her to transfer to his Canoga estate. There she met and began seeing Arthur Potter, a woods crewman. In later weeks, two strangers appeared and made friends with Potter. They persuaded Potter to take them fishing on a boat on a nearby lake. The next morning Potter had disappeared. A friend went to the lake and saw an oar floating in the water. A search party grappled the lake and discovered Potter's body. At first Potter was buried as the victim of an accidental drowning. But doubts lingered and the body was exhumed. A physician found no water in Potter's lungs to indicate drowning and he appeared to have been struck hard behind the left ear. The strangers were located but evidence of murder was inconclusive and a grand jury failed to indict the men.

On January 15, 1914, Charles H. Stanford, a section foreman for the Lehigh Valley Railroad, found George Orr, a laborer for the Lake Ganoga Ice Company, inside Stanford's shanty near the Ricketts railroad station. A quarrel followed and Stanford hit Orr with a double-edged ax, crushing Orr's head, after which Stanford inflicted sixteen additional ax cuts on Orr's body. Some boys heard the fight and called the station agent. Peering through the window, the station agent saw Stanford sitting morosely in a chair and Orr in a pool of blood on the floor.

Constable J. Lawrence Miller and Dr. J.L. Christian from Lopez were called to the scene. At first, Stanford barricaded himself in the shanty, but when Stanford opened the door, Miller grabbed the ax from him and a railroad crew overpowered Stanford. Orr was still alive and was lifted onto a train to be taken to the hospital in Wilkes-Barre, but he died on the way in Bean Run. Stanford claimed Orr tried to steal a watch, but it was more likely Orr had taken food. But there was little sympathy for the quick-tempered Stanford who was not well-liked in the town. Curiously, however, the attack occurred in Wyoming County, the arresting officer was from Sullivan County, and the death occurred in Luzerne County.

There were two substantial disasters at Ricketts, both occurring in the spring of 1909. At about 6:30 a.m. Monday morning, April 19, 1909, the number four boiler at the lumber mill at Ricketts exploded. The night watchman, "Mep" Barnhart, had failed to notice the water had run low in the system, super heating the boilers. He tried to fill the boilers with water too quickly—a known recipe for disaster—and the explosion followed. The debris flew all over town. Rivets from the boiler flew into the trees at Keipertown, a lumber settlement a half-mile from town. The only fatality was H.A. Barnhart, the watchman's brother, who was killed when a brick blown out of the boiler house foundation flew 200 yards and crashed through the roof of George Grimes's porch where Barnhart was standing. The brick hit Barnhart and crushed his skull. A half-century later, during town reunions, former residents still remembered exactly what they were doing when the boiler blew.

Five weeks later, on Friday, June 4, 1909, at 11:30 a.m., the drying kiln at the heading mill in downtown Ricketts caught fire and com-



pletely destroyed the mill. Spontaneous combustion, activated within the kiln due to the 250-degree temperature inside, caused a sawdust fire. Debris fell on the cord to the mill whistle and it blew until the steam ran out. Two hundred men tried to dampen the fire which spread over an acre of ground and threatened the stave and grist mills. The fifty men in the plant lost work for a time until the heading mill was rebuilt. An estimated \$10,000 in stock was lost.

### *The End of the Town*

In July 1911, an account stated that the Trexler and Turrell mill in Ricketts, improved over the years to a daily capacity of 125,000 board feet, had cut over 500 million feet of lumber since 1890 when the mill opened, five times the estimate made in 1894 for the mill's probable life. Over the years, the log train lines had reached ten miles to the northeast and eight miles south and west of the mill. At this time, Trexler and Turrell were operating three locomotives over 22 miles of logging tracks utilizing about 62 logging cars. Production was 80,000 feet daily, less than capacity and diminishing rapidly. Only one more year of timber tract was left to serve Ricketts, unless the Trexler company could secure another tract thirteen miles away from the Central Pennsylvania Lumber Company, a conglomerate which began operations in the region in 1903.

In August 1912, Adam Schoch was in charge of the sawmill, with J.C. Cornell as foreman of the stave and heading mills. William May was chief clerk at the company store, with Emery Schock as the store bookkeeper. G.J. Heintzelman was still the postmaster and Trexler and

Turrell accountant for the town. G.N. Peet, the former Ricketts blacksmith, had moved to Lopez.

The last full season of lumbering was in 1913. The final tract cut by Trexler and Turrell was in the Cherry Ridge section located northeast of Lake Jean. The company was unable to obtain additional tracts from the Central Pennsylvania Lumber Company, which itself wanted to expand near the Ricketts area. By the fall of 1913, Trexler finished stave cutting at the Ricketts mill, and the company closed its operations. By the end of 1914, the town was nearly deserted and only five families still lived there.

As Ricketts closed, Trexler and Turrell continued a small mill operation at South Mountain above Noxen, at least through 1914. The Trexlers and J.E. Turrell joined with Col. Ricketts to form the Big Run Manufacturing Company (1914-1922) at Sonestown at the mouth of Big Run further west in Sullivan County. Col. Ricketts held a 20 percent interest in the Big Run company. The company

made sugar barrel staves and heads. The company transferred its number four Heisler, number five Shay, and number six Climax locomotives from Ricketts to Big Run, but the Climax may not have been used there. Big Run employed about eighty men, some of whom transferred from Ricketts. The Big Run operation closed three years after Col. Ricketts' death. The Trexler firm did not continue operations elsewhere in North Mountain after Big Run. H.C. Trexler and his family associates, of course, had massive industrial and commercial operations in Allentown where they were headquartered. Indeed, North Mountain was a relatively small enterprise for Harry C. Trexler compared to his other Lehigh Valley enterprises.