

OUTLET MILLS: The Lake's Ghost Town

Introduction

Before settlement at the Lake began in the early 1840's most of the lands surrounding the Lake were purchased by Mathias Hollenback, the richest man in northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional land purchases at the Lake continued with his son George Hollenback.

In 1792 Hollenback employed Matthew Scouten as caretaker at the Lake and its earliest settler. Daniel Lee arrived at Lee's Pond, later Allentown, now Loyalville, in 1806. Joseph Worthington arrived near Sunset in 1806.

But true settlement at the Lake did not occur until the Lake's outlet stream, Harvey's Creek, was developed for lumbering in 1838.

The Hollenback Lumber Town (1838-1866)

The Lake properties of Matthias Hollenback, who died in 1829, were undeveloped for many years. Hollenback's only son, George M. Hollenback, was born in 1791, and as a young man, he joined his father in the merchant trade. As merchants the father and son also engaged in a number of manufacturing enterprises including lumbering, grist and saw milling. The Lake lands would remain untapped until 1938 when George M. Hollenback would take advantage of his father's foresight in acquiring the tracts.

With an additional 1835 purchase of the Outlet lands and along Harvey's Creek, Hollenback planned to expand his enterprises to timbering at the Lake. Preparation for the timbering industry at the Outlet began in September 1838 when Hollenback sent John Fosnock (or Fosnot) to the Lake to clear the Outlet stream. At this time there was already an old dam where the Lake emptied into Harvey's Creek. This may have been a natural dam of brush or a crude dam built earlier by Hollenback. A half-mile channel from the dam to the mill seat on the creek was cleared and the mill dam constructed. The channel was six feet wide at the bottom and twelve feet wide at the top and created a sixteen foot fall to drive logs from the Lake. The saw mill was constructed under the supervision of Hiram Morris in the fall of 1839, and in May 1840 Jacob Sorber built a grist mill on the stream for Hollenback. At this time it took a full day for a round-trip from the Valley to the Lake

over crude roads laid by land owners. A company house was built at the North Corner from which men would timber the North section of the Lake. Apparently, a road from the North Corner to the West Corner, and then over the mountain to the Outlet, was developed at this time.

In November 1840 Hollenback made an arrangement with John Urquhart for a partnership in the new timbering industry at the Lake. John Urquhart, of Scottish ancestry, was originally from New Jersey, but he settled in the White Haven area in 1836, where he became a pioneer of the lumber trade along the Lehigh River. In 1840 he moved to the Wyoming Valley where he entered into the Harvey's Lake partnership with George M. Hollenback. His family lived in a graceful home that fronted on the River Common. Urquhart spent most of his time at the company's operations at the Lake, returning to his family only on Sundays to spend the day with them.

In the initial years the timbering industry was known as John Urquhart and Company, but later it was commonly called Hollenback and Urquhart. Hollenback and Urquhart jointly owned eleven large tracts covering nearly all the lands contiguous to the Lake and the Outlet stream.

In addition to the Hollenback and Urquhart timbering operations, new settlers developed milling and related industries on Harvey's Creek, Pike's Creek and Beaver Run (which became Ruggles). The Hollenback and Urquhart operation at the Lake gave the name Outlet Mills to the village on Harvey's Creek. The main road ran from the Outlet Mills to Lehman on a fourteen mile trip to Wilkes-Barre. The daily round trip was a long, arduous wilderness journey. In Wilkes-Barre the lumber was loaded into canal boats. The North Branch Canal, which the wealthy George M. Hollenback helped to develop, carried the lumber to commercial outlets along the Susquehanna River basin. After the late 1840's the canal was supplemented by railroad systems. All of these early mills were likely water-powered.

The Hollenback and Urquhart operations at Outlet Mills peaked in the early 1850's. The Lake mills cut 609,574 feet of lumber in 1852, 970,246 feet in 1853, 755,207 feet in 1854, and 697,762 in 1855. In the winter of 1854-1855, oxen teams hauled lumber from Outlet Mills to the Inlet to build the Rhoads Hotel. Hollenback and Urquhart also began to sell farming plots to settlers in the area, frequently in fifty acre parcels. In 1858 the Hollenback and Urquhart operation had forty acres of improved land, several

hundred acres of unimproved land, six houses, eight outhouses, a double saw mill, a grist, lath, and planing mills.

The opening of the Lake to timbering and milling drew settlers to the Lake. Settlers would purchase land near the Lake from Hollenback and Urquhart with all timber reserved to the timbering firm. Among the early settlers were the brothers Josiah, Nathan and Stephen Kocher in 1838, with Daniel Casebear and John Fosnot in 1839 (Simon Anderson followed in a year or two at the Fosnot farm). In 1840 Mosas C. Perrego, Jacob Sorber, Jonah Bronson and Jonathon Williams settled on Lake lands. Lake Township was created in 1841 with Williams, Stephen Kocher and John Fosnot as the earliest supervisors. Usually, the land that the settlers would farm was purchased by an installment sales contract. Hollenback and Urquhart would purchase crops from the Lake farmers to feed the company workmen and the horses and oxen that hauled cut timber to the mills. The farmers also drew credit or cash by hauling wagon loads of timber for the firm. Eventually, as the settlers paid their land contracts, they acquired title to their farms.

Business at Outlet Mills expanded in 1849 when Jonathon Williams built a saw mill at the Outlet for Nathan Kocher and Daniel Urquhart, a son of John Urquhart. The Outlet was the center of business activities at the Lake. A post office called Lake was created at the Outlet on November 1, 1850, with Lewis Allen as postmaster. (The Outlet post office closed in 1890.) In the same year, Hollenback and Urquhart opened the first store in the township for the benefit of their employees and maintained it until 1860.

The Later Years (1870-1900)

In September 1866 Hollenback and Urquhart sold their Harvey's Lake interests to John L. Hoffman and William H. Hoffman for \$40,000.00. The Hoffmans were lumbermen from Allentown. In July 1870 John L. Hoffman sold his interest at the Lake to William A. Hoffman who continued the Hoffman Lumber Company operations at the Lake.

The entire population of Lake Township was 597 in 1870, and most of the activity at the Lake was centered at the time at Outlet Mills. William A. Hoffman died shortly after he acquired sole ownership of the Hoffman Lumber Company in 1870. The Lake properties of the company were sold in May 1873 to satisfy debts of the Hoffman Estate. The properties were managed by Peter Weikle who

apparently had a financial interest in the lumber company. He continued the lumbering operations at the Lake under the Hoffman name.

In 1873 a dam along Harvey's Creek, likely the site of the present creek dam, supported a sawmill. Below there was a second dam for a planing mill to finish sawn lumber into commercial planks. A grist mill was located along Locust Tree Road, and further down the creek was another sawmill. About 10-12 structures, for lumbering purposes and homes, were along the stream. In addition, there was the community church and school.

Under Weikle, the Hoffman Lumber Company continued to have financial problems, and it was reorganized in April 1877. But the Hoffman Lumber Company survived only a few more years. In October 1880 Peter Weikle obtained the Lake properties at a sheriff's sale in satisfaction of debts owed to him by the Hoffman Company. The following month Weikle sold all his Lake properties to Ephriam Troxell for \$12,000.00.

The principal landowner at Outlet by the late 1880's was Ephriam Troxell (1823-1903). In the early 1880's the Wilkes-Barre lumber firm Sturdevant and Goff operated the lumber mill(s) for Troxell. In 1886 Albert Lewis seemingly leased the mill. He was also building a railroad to the Lake at Alderson where he would build a steam-powered lumber mill. By 1888 Sturdevant and Goff again leased the mill which was rapidly declining in production - with lumbering shifting to Lewis's enterprises at Alderson and Stull (near Noxen). In the Fall of 1887 Troxell relocated from Wilkes-Barre and built a home along the Outlet road. Robert Parks was foreman for Troxell's farm and related operations. The grist mill and a company store (and post office) were now leased to George Herbine while Joseph Large Briggs managed the sawmill. Outlet lumbering may have ceased around 1890. A 1893 report stated the sawmills had nearly vanished. In 1895 Troxell built the stone-arch "ox-bridge" which still crosses Harvey's Creek below the outlet dam. In March 1897 J.H. Stephenson & Son were operating the Troxell grist-mill.

In October 1899 Albert Lewis purchased from Ephriam Troxell the timbering rights to the huge lumbering tracts that ran from behind the Inlet area around the Lake to Sandy Beach. All trees in excess of eight inches in diameter were included in the transaction. The agreement, however, protected trees under twenty inches in diameter which grew within two hundred feet of the lakeshore or along Harvey's Creek.

Logs cut on the Troxell tracts were hauled by wagon on the Lake road to the Alderson mill. Log rafts would also be strung together with saplings and rowed to the Lewis mill. At times a steamer may have been used to haul the log rafts. During the winter, if ice conditions on the Lake were appropriate, logs would be sledged over to Alderson from the Outlet.

In October 1895 Ephriam Troxell rebuilt the lake dam at the Outlet. (The 1838 Fosnot dam lasted only a few years and was rebuilt by the Hollenback firm. The Hoffman company replaced it around 1870.) The Lake was three feet deep at the old dam, and Troxell's improvement raised the water another two feet. When the new dam raised the Lake, it partially flooded the beach lands at the West Corner that were owned by Mary C. Lynch, wife of John Lynch, a local judge. Lynch had purchased her three acre farm at the Lake in July 1895. The Lynch family cleared the two small streams entering the Lake at the West Corner and built stone walls along the beach and streams.

When the new dam at the Outlet flooded the Lynch beach, Troxell agreed to lower the Lake by eighteen inches. The lowered water, however, created stench pools in other areas of the Lake causing health problems. But a higher water level benefited the operations of the steamboat company and the Albert Lewis lumber company. In 1899 Troxell raised the water level of the Lake and again flooded the Lynch property. Lynch filed a legal action against Troxell, and in January 1902 a court jury found Troxell responsible for damages to the Lynch lands and awarded seven thousand dollars for losses. Troxell appealed the case to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court which, in October 1903, found Troxell could be liable for damages but awarded him a new trial because of certain trial questions. Subsequently, Troxell settled the damage claim with Lynch.

By mid 1900 Troxell completed the stone dam on Harvey's Creek, below the Outlet dam, for his grist mill operation. The new dam apparently replaced an older dam built by the Hoffman Company. This dam continues to the present-day and creates a small pond along the creek.

The Early Churches

The Union church at Outlet Mills was erected by the Hollenback company in 1860 and was organized on December 23, 1860, with 15 members under the charged of Rev. James S. Ferguson. A Presbyterian church it was commonly called the Harvey's Lake Church. Ferguson was followed by Rev. Charles E. Van Allen, a

Princeton Seminary graduate, in 1864, and he was succeeded by Rev. A. Harned in 1868. But by 1870 only 17 members were reported. There were a couple of burials on the church ground, marked by field stones, but evidence of the graveyard is lost. On May 30, 1918, the church was struck by lightning and was totally destroyed by fire.

The Lake First Baptist Church was organized at Outlet on March 12, 1856. It met at the Outlet school until 1878 when a church was built at a cost of \$2,500 and dedicated on June 27, 1878. The first minister was Rev. G.W. Shearer. The church apparently lasted until the early 1930's.

The Outlet School

A school at Outlet Mills was built in late 1849 and Jonathon Williams, who earlier taught at Loyalville, was its first teacher. There is no evidence to date that the old school currently at Outlet is not the original 1849 school house. Like the other early Lake Township school houses it was one-room and served grades 1 to 8.

In September 1925 grades 7 and 8 were shifted to the new Lake Township high-school near Sandy Beach. Grade 6 left Outlet in 1926-27.

The Outlet school had no electrical service and no well. Water was supplied from area homes. In the later 1930's it served only grades 1 to 3 with Albert Crispell as the teacher. He was drafted during World War II during which time Beulah Bronson served as the school's final teacher. The school closed about 1943.

In later years the Outlet school was used for storage and, for a time, it was rented as a home - still with no electrical services (a coal stove was always the heating service).

After his wartime service Albert Crispell continued his teaching services at the Lake Township high school before relocating to Levittown. He purchased the school in 1988 and restored the interior similar to his experience there as a teacher in the late 1930's. The exterior had aluminum siding added as a protective measure following an arson fire which damaged the rear of the school.

Albert Crispell died in 1991 but measures are in place to maintain the school as a school museum for future generations.

Postscript

The only preserved evidence of Outlet Mills is the Outlet school. The site of the Union Church, lost to lightning, is known only to a few people. There is no evidence left of burial sites at the old church ground. The site, too, was located on an old Outlet road. A portion of the road (now Church Road) was relocated in 1906-08 and the church site is now in the woods along an old, forgotten section of roadway.

Along Harvey's Creek below the 1895 creek dam is evidence of 3 smaller dams which once served the old town. One of upper these abandoned dams served to divert creek water by a sluice-way to a grist-mill well-remembered from the early decades of the twentieth century. Ziba Mathers (1825-1898) operated an Outlet grist-mill, perhaps the Hollenback mill built in 1860 to replace an earlier 1840 grist mill (or perhaps a Troxell-built mill, which seems more likely). His son Elisha Mathers (1865-1920) also operated the Outlet grist mill from 1913 to 1922. The mill continued to operate until 1932 - and it was dismantled in 1953. Its foundation remains are located off Locust Tree Road.

Additional information and photographs of the Outlet area and the school are welcome. Please contact this site to offer your contributions.