

Reminiscing About the Old Days in Alcona County, Michigan

Presented to the Alcona Historical Society  
By Art Piper

These are the old yarns of around a hundred years ago, more or less, that I have collected from Old Timers--Dave Barber, Albert Benson, Louie DeRosia, Rose LaLonde, Lena Decker and others. Some of these stories are the whole truth, or maybe the hole in the truth!

Alger started lumbering operations in 1872, according to the abstract of Dad's farm, where the first camp was located, at the west end of the old pole road. This railroad for the first lumbering was constructed of hardwood poles with metal straps and double flanged cast iron wheels. One of the problems was that the metal straps would come loose and wind around the wheels. The old railroad grade runs through the farm now owned by Harold and Ramona Clark, northeast to the valley of Bear Creek, (east of the place where Hector's Still was located in labor years). To follow the grade, go down the valley past the Decker gravel pit and the old Cravier farm; across the big swamp, and you will find the grade where it cuts through the sand road that runs from the cemetery to the old Ramey Settlement, south of Ossineke, and on to Lake Huron, where the logs were made into rafts and towed to market. This area is now a State Park. This is where Alger went broke, and took partner by the name of Smith, and started again at Alcona.

In the late 1800's there were two saloons in Black River, and an illegal one in the swamp between Black River and the Sand Hill Road. There used to be an expression that lasted to my time, "Fill 'er up again Mrs. Rasche." The story goes--Black River had a volunteer fire department; as the telephone hadn't been invented yet, the fire call was a loud clanging of the church bell. Seems the saloon caught fire, and one very excited "Patron of the Arts" ran to the church, and forgetting himself, he woke up the priest with, "Father, Father, the saloons on fire, ring da bell to beat ole Jesus." Father's reply was, "Let it burn!"

Black Jack LaLonde put in the first telephone line about 1912 or so, a one wire ground system. It ran from Black River to Spruce; the rent as I recall was \$14.00 a year. Each customer had a different ring; Dad's was two longs and four shorts. When the phone rang you could hear all 26 receivers being taken down. One lady, Stella Putman, had a clock right by her phone, and when she was listening you could hear the loud tick-tock and the strike--Bong, Bong. News in those days was scarce, but gossip was plentiful. French was spoken at one end of the line, English in the middle and Norwegian at the other end. At times it got pretty jumbled--you had to yell a little.

Entertainment was scarce of a Saturday night. The Caledonia Scotchmen used to go to Black River to try to clean out a saloon--nothing personal--just a good fight, and a few black eyes and knocked out teeth.

Did you ever hear the story of Gene Oliver and the bear? Gene kept sheep, and bears got into the flock and ate a few. Gene got a large bear trap, with teeth, and a bucket of honey; he set the trap at the base of the tree and the bucket of honey in the tree above. The scene changes--it is dark, and comes Mr. Bear--he reaches up and gets the honey, and sits down

on the trap. "YEOW" with a wild leap he was gone, but left the family jewels behind in the trap. I still think of it every time I see Gene.

I mentioned a still on the head waters of Bear Creek near Straw Hill. When M-10 was built north of Lincoln past what is now Lost Lake Woods, gravel was hauled from the pit at Bear Creek and State Road, by sleigh and horses, one yard per load, on an iced road, up Butter Nut Flats, across Russell Alstrom's field (now Laub) to Roe Corners, where there was a boarding house and horse barn. Seems like the cook had a very large nose, and a nasal drip. A very large drop would swing back and forth on the end of his nose like a pendulum of a clock. The boys used to bet on whether the drop would land in the bacon or the eggs.

As this was very cold weather, the boys had to have a little good natured alcohol in their veins to keep them warm---so Hector had a still, and called his booze, Hector's Red. A cow was his undoing!

When farmers milked their cows in the morning, they just opened the barn yard gate, and let them go where they may, to eat the neighbors' corn and cabbages, perhaps. In the line of good neighbor policy, the loser chased his cows over to eat the cabbages and corn of the first cows' owner. Well, so the story goes, Bill Bierke's cows found a yummy--the mash of Hector's Still; the cows came home drunk and one of them died. So Bill called the law; Herman Dhenke was the Prosecuting Attorney. The sheriff, by the name of Toot, had to raid his favorite supply house! They got Dad's team of horses and George Snowden's wagon to haul the still, barrels, mash and drunken bumble bees--they like it, too. They didn't find Hector; apparently Toot tipped him off. Some years later, he was killed in a foundry, when an overhead load of steel fell on him. Wonder if they squeezed any alcohol out of him.

Then there is this story from Rose LaLonde--this neighbor of hers spoke very slowly, just dragging his words out. He was trying to court this girl, but she didn't want him, and didn't know how to handle the situation, but sometimes things solve themselves; one day Rose asked him how he and his girl friend were getting along. He said he didn't go over there anymore. When Rose asked him what had happened, he replied with his slow manner of speech, "Well---I---went-over--one--night--and--we--were settin'--on the --davenport--and I--wasn't sayin' nothin'---and ---she--wasn't-sayin'-nothin'---; the --cat--was --sittin'--by--the stove--washin'--herself--. She'd lick--one paw---and-rub--it-over--her--ear-and--then--she'd lick--the other--paw--and-rub--it--over--the other--ear--. So--I--says--to--her--"I-bet--you--can't --do--that"--but--when--she--turned-to-look--the--cat--was --licken' --its--ass.-- --She--told--me--"Get--out--and --don't ever--come--back." The moral of this story is----- "Don't ---ever---trust----a-----cat!"

Harrisville, I am told, was started by a family by the name of Harris. They were so dishonest and crooked, that they were known as those Harrisvillains, hence--Harrisville. The town until recent years went by D&M train time (Central time), one hour slower than Lincoln and the surrounding towns. I recall going to Harrisville and having to wait an hour for time to catch up with me. Lincoln and Harrisville never got along too well; in fact, the only thing that kept them from shooting at each other was that hill in between.

Albert told me about the story of the flour sacks--brand name--"Family Use Flour"--Back in the lumbering days, flour came in large cotton sacks, and the ladies made undergarments of them; one day Albert was coming home from Black River, and as he came over the sand ridge, there was an old log house on the south side opposite the Paukett place, and on the clothes line was a huge pair of ladies panties---across the seat was printed---Family Use--.

They used to tell of Albert and his father going to Alpena with horse and cutter. Alcona County was dry at that time. The old Irishman liked a nip for snake bite once in a while, so had bought a jug in Alpena. Well, on the way home, the horse shied at something and ran away, dumping sleigh and all into the creek. The old man crawled out, shook the snow off, and said to Albert, "Albert, is the jug broke?" He lived to be 99. His headstone can be found at the cemetery on the sand ridge.

George and Sam Roe are remembered by Roe's Corner and Roe Road---George weighed about 101 pounds, without his celluloid collar, and Sam about 275 on the hoof. Sam would give the shirt off his back to you; you wouldn't do so well from George.

Reverend George Roe served a church south of Spratt--the church is still there. On a Sunday morning he would start out with his trotting horse and buggy--the horse would take the bit in his teeth, opened his mouth wide--the air would go in one end and out the other--George called him "The Whistler."

Sam patrolled the old M-10 with a grader pulled by two large stallions--a roan and a bay--if when driving a horse you met them, the two studs would be walking on their hind feet. It was quite a show!

Alex' story--Alex Ellison that is----

Alex had come from Norway like the rest of the Scandinavians, on the small English ships. The fare from Norway to Alpena was \$37.50. They worked for Alger, Smith and Company for one dollar per day and board. Alex had just received his "Citizenship" papers and was very proud of his new Citizenship.

This happened in about 1912: some woman had shot her employer to death on the street of Harrisville--he had been doing a little bragging to the boys about the goings on in his office--so she met him on the street, pulled a double Derringer and shot him dead. The case came to trial--Alex drew jury duty, so he went to Harrisville to do his duty. Being a shy man, he stopped at the saloon to "splice the main brace," and probably put in too many splices. The room was rather warm, and when asked if he knew the defendant he said no. The he was asked if he had formed an opinion, to which he replied--"Yaw, I tank he should have shot the son-of-a-bitch a long time ago." The Judge jumped up, ordered the remark stricken from the record, and Alex never to serve on a jury again. Incidentally, the jury found the woman not guilty!

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