

Byers Homestead

By Glen Ruggles

Two generations of the Byers family have resided at this site, said to be the home of the first white settler in Commerce Township. Abram Walrod came here in 1825 from New York state and built a log cabin in what is now the Village of Commerce. The present early Victorian frame house erected prior to 1850 replaced the log cabin. Now a country store, the barn is believed to have been a blacksmith shop. Other buildings on these grounds include a chicken coop and pantry. Traversed by the Huron River, the area attracted settlers, many of whom came westward via the Erie Canal which opened in 1825. Inhabitants named their village Commerce hoping that its early growth would signal the beginning of a business center. Now a quiet residential village, the community features this picturesque and historic homestead erected by the Commerce Township Area Historical Society.

Huron River in Commerce looking north at Commerce Mill (center) and Byer's farm house (right). This site is just north of Commerce Lake.

The Story of Commerce

Glen Ruggles

The Commerce Roller Mill

Every town and village had a mill. A mill for cutting lumber, grinding flour, processing woolen goods or for anything that could be milled. Every stream in Michigan offered an opportunity. Divert the stream, build a dam, create a mill pond, dig the mill race, create the power, and the wheels would turn. It was an ingenious process, and the millers of Michigan were brilliant. They could foresee great opportunities that others would pass by. And, without the mill, it's doubtful that the farmer would have been as successful as he was. The local mill was similar to the local bank. Often working on a percentage basis, the miller not only processed the farmer's grain, he created a market for the surplus product, whether it was raw corn, feed grain, or whole-wheat flour.

The miller was often the first settler in the area. Oakland County's first mill was built in Pontiac by Colonel Stephen Mack in 1819. The second one was built on Paint Creek in the present city of Rochester during the same year. Both were sawmills. As the population moved west, so did the mills. It was 1832 when Elizur Ruggles built his mill in Milford. In 1837, three years after the formation of Commerce Township, the Commerce Roller Mill was constructed in Commerce Village on the shores of the Huron River.

Joseph and Asa Farr, along with Amasa Andrews, were the builders of the grist mill. While its ruins today are commemorated as a historic site, during its ninety years of commercial activity, it served the farmers and communities of Oakland County. Over the years the mill had many owners. After Andrews and Farr, there was Seymour, Crossman, and Hoover, and a variety of others. By the 1890s, one of Michigan's most famous milling families had purchased the mill and, today, many old-timers still recall Milton Parshall as the village miller.

The mill in Commerce was of the "undershoot" type. Outside the mill, the water was usually harnessed by some kind of wheel. If the water was carried to the top of the Mill wheel, it was called an "overshot"; if the water hit the wheel dead-center at the level of the wheel's axis, it was known as a "breastshot"; and if the water was carried beneath the mill, it was known as the "undershot" kind. This was the Commerce Roller Mill.

From 1918 until its closing in 1926, the mill was operated by Isaac Lutz and his son, George. But selling flour wasn't what it used to be. More modern flouring processes and mass production techniques were winning the market away from the village miller. Naturally, many thought that anything made in a bigger mill was better, and maybe it was. But sometimes, it wasn't any better at all. And, the loss of farmland in west Oakland County tended to further diminish the value of the Roller Mill in Commerce.

As World War I ended and the Roaring Twenties captured the nation's attention, the Mill limped into its final stage, providing whole wheat and white flour, and even shucking farmers' corn. And, although its customers were as varied and distinct as the Orchard Lake Seminary and the Clinton Valley Hospital in Pontiac, its difficulty in competing in a modern and mechanized society would soon force its closing. Isaac's failing health and George's desire to explore new careers gave the Mill its final shove. In 1926, after 90 years of serving the village and western Oakland County, the mill closed.

For 13 years the mill lay in a state of ruin and disrepair until it fell victim to fire in the early morning of September 6, 1939. The Pontiac Daily Press reported that the old structure, “a landmark of the village for more than 100 years”, had caught fire at 1:30 a.m.

“Located at the eastern edge of the village, on the right side of the Pontiac-Commerce Road, the three-story frame building had not been used for ten years. It was owned by the Leroy Pelletier estate and valued at between \$10,000.00 and \$15,000.00. Nothing could be done to save the structure as the fire spread rapidly through the old dry timbers. Walled Lake fire department was called and closed the highway as a precaution in case the walls fell outward. Sparks were scattered over a part of the village but because of the recent heavy rains, started no fires. The nearest buildings were about 250 feet away. The first mill was built in 1837, and replaced by the structure which burned this morning in 1843”.

Throughout the 1940s and ‘50s the site of the mill and its ruins reverted to a more natural state. Overgrown with shrubbery and trees, the area developed into an unofficial nature trail that local residents enjoyed. Perhaps many wondered why there was such a huge dried-up ditch with large chunks of cement and steel jutting out of it. But it offered an unusual view of the Huron River as the shores of the river became overgrown and took on a wild appearance.

In 1980, Commerce Township purchased the mill property from the Boron Oil Company and is preserving it as a passive recreational park for Township residents. In 1983, the Michigan Youth Corps built two log bridges across the river to provide better access through the park.

On April 5, 1984, the Michigan Historical Commission designated the site as historic and, on September 22, 1984, with the erection of a two-posted historic marker, the State of Michigan formally dedicated the ruins of the Commerce Roller Mill.

Looking back at the more than forty years since the Commerce Roller Mill burned to the ground, only the most wishful thinking can conjure up thoughts of it being rebuilt. But there is a comfort in knowing that the ruins of the mill are preserved as a historic site; and a further comfort in knowing that through the preservation the lives and actions of early Commerce Township will be commemorated through the years.