

Brighton Area Historical Society

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Located several miles from the Hyron River, the village of Brighton would probably not have come into existence had it not been for the creeks which feed into the River. In early spring of 1833, in Brighton Township, Evert and Ruby Woodruff entered 160 acres of Section 34, and by the last day of May he and his family took residence. (Probably a log cabin.) During the summer Evert built an earthen dam approximately ½ mile south of the north section line on what is now known as Woodruff Creek.

In the fall he built a sawmill by the dam from which ran a sluice about one mile long. A three story gristmill, with an undershot wheel, was erected that next year near the end of the sluice. Both mills were supplied with water power from that stream. By 1835, the sawmill was producing lumber for boards to lay two floors in Benjamin Blain's cabin in the northwest corner of the Township.

Woodruff ran the mill until he sold it to Thomas Woulds and Timothy Warner in 1867 who changed the name to Pleasant Valley Mill. However in 1872 this partnership dissolved with Woulds retaining the mill. Henry Nye bought the mill in 1878. By 1934 William Ford owned the deteriorating mill and had it town down. It seems likely the advent of the rail road negated the need for a local saw and grist mill.

Aaron H. Kelly entered 63 acres in Section 6 and 208 acres in Section 7, Brighton Township, in 1833. He soon built a substantial house and then a sawmill in 1837. This mill, operated by water power (upper Ore Creek), was known far and wide in those early days and furnished lumber for many of the first buildings erected in the county. About the last work done by this pioneer mill was sawing a quantity of plank for the Detroit and Howell Plank Road. Further upstream, in Section 5, Rev. Wm. A. Clark, by 1839 had also erected a mill.

It was the summer of 1832 when brothers Almon and Maynard Maltby arrived in Brighton Township. Maynard bought 63 acres of land in Section 31, which became the site of Brighton City. But it was 1834 before the brothers built a dam across Ore Creek in the vicinity of Third Street. This supplied power for the Maltby sawmill. One of their customers was Chester Hazard of Genoa Township. During the winter 1836-37, Mr. Hazard drew whitewood (tulip) tree logs, cut on his own farm, To Maltby's Mill and had them sawed into lumber. It was principally of this lumber that the house was built. This was probably the first frame house erected in Genoa Township.

Prior to the advent of sawmills in the area lumber was drawn by ox team from Ann Arbor or Detroit. A case in point being that of Lewis B. Fonda who, in 1832, entered the W ¼ of the SW ¼ of Section 32. In 1834 he erected on it a frame house, said to have been the first in the county and at that time was regarded as a dwelling of considerable pretension. The timber with which it was built was drawn from Ann Arbor, a distance of 20+ miles, by ox teams.

The advent of gristmills eliminated the tedious hard grinding of grain or the expense of several days' travel to bring it from Detroit or Ann Arbor in order to have flour. Although Brighton Village was centered, in 1840, on the hill where Spencer Road and Rickett Road intersect the Grand River Trail, called "Upper Town", Orson Quackenbush selected vacant land in "Lower Town" to build the Brighton Flouring and Gristmill. It was located a bit upstream from Maltby's Sawmill on Ore Creek. After securing the plot, water rights also had to be obtained before building the dam. Quackenbush's mill saved farmers the long trip to Woodruff's Mill on Pleasant Valley Road, about four miles east of town.

Straddling the stream the location was on low and marshy ground. Moving dirt with a small slip scraper with one h.p. to construct the dam and spillway and form the raceway ponds north of the mill required considerable time and energy. (It seems likely the lumber for the mill was cut by the Maltby Sawmill.) Quackenbush operated his mill for a few months and then sold the mill, including all the property rights, to Rev. Wm. A. Clark. Clark died in September 1841 and his heirs sold the mill back to Quackenbush.

In 1847, Quackenbush sold the mill to the aforementioned Evert Woodruff, who, two years later, sold the mill to Lyman Judson who owned a large farm on the Grand River Road, just east of the village limits. Judson enlarged the mill, removed the old breast water wheel and installed a French turbine type of water wheel. In 1856 Egbert F. Albright and Chester Thomson bought the mill. These two made other improvements during the next 25 years the mill was owned by them.

The Brighton Mill was periodically sold to others. Up into the 1930s four was being ground at that location. However it was torn down after WW II. The city fathers had decided not to take up Henry Ford's earlier offer to buy the mill and construct a park in the valley south of Main Street.

Although the mill was gone, the sluice damn, which enclosed a quiet pond of stagnant, odorous, mosquito-infested water, was still in existence. In an attempt to reduce the negative qualities of the pond, on a hot night in the summer of 1953, a neighbor provided another small, more direct route for the water. Later that night, with a deep rumble and the "dangdest racket you ever heard", the mill pond was no more. Huge trees that grew in the cool, moist hollow came crashing down, a result of the suddenly released water. The pond on the north side of Main Street was again merely little Ore Creek. The surrounding shallow, marshy area soon made itself known to the nostrils in the warm summer sun. Before long a small control dam was built. A large culvert was installed to carry Ore Creek under the street to the south side of North Street, near where the mill once stood. The formerly pleasant hollow was filled in over the culvert and a parking lot was constructed.

Various community organizations have contributed to the enhancement of the area around the mill pond through the years making it a unique and desirable supplement to the town. Brighton Kiwanians built a gazebo on its shores to commemorate the nation's Bicentennial. Sunday evenings during the summer, hundreds enjoy concerts and the fascinating ambience that results when people play, work and exist together. It has become a gathering place for the community just as the old mill was once the center of activity.

Restorations of mills on the many streams that flow into the Huron welcome visitors. Viewers are given a taste of yesterday and a glimpse of the energy of those who preceded us.