

Chapter Four: Historical Setting

Historical Setting

The City of Grayling is blessed to have been the historical center of activity within Crawford County. Due to the early settlement of the land that now contains the City of Grayling, it now contains some of the more significant historical sites within the County. As with most communities, Grayling developed around waterways, and early settlers were drawn to the water resources of the Au Sable and Manistee Rivers. These navigable waters were attractive to trappers and local Indian tribes as ways to transport their goods. Early settlers named the area “Grayling” after noticing the abundance of fish in these rivers. These natives were soon followed by lumbermen who saw profit in the towering pines of the Grayling area.

The earliest lumbering was done by the French in order to build forts, fur-trading posts and missions¹. The British, and later the Americans, used Michigan’s hardwoods to build merchant and war ships.



Michigan’s timber was divided by an imaginary line from Muskegon and Saginaw, north of which White, Jack and Norway Pines grew, as well as other conifers. Harvest of the White Pine, many over 200 years old, 200 foot tall and five feet in diameter, began the heyday of the lumber industry. Michigan’s pine became important as the supply of trees in the Northeast States was eventually depleted. By 1880, Michigan was a leading producer of lumber, and many felt that the huge forests of Michigan would last for many years. However, within the 20 year period between 1870 to 1890, most of the trees were cut.

The logs were far too big and heavy to take from the woods by dragging, so the loggers made ice-covered roads, where the logs could be pulled on sleds. The logs were taken to the banks of rivers, where they were piled twenty to thirty feet high, awaiting the spring thaw. When rivers melted, the logs were pushed into the swollen rivers and floated to the mills. When the mill had cut the wood into boards, it was dried and then put on

¹ Source: www.michiganepic.org

ships heading to various areas. The wood from the west side of the state was shipped to Chicago, from which it was sent by train to the plains states to build homes, cities and railroad tracks.

As technology improved, the wood in Michigan was more quickly taken, especially with the introduction of the logging railroad in the 1850's. These small engines and their portable narrow gauge track could haul in all weather, and made it possible to log farther away from the rivers.

In 1872, the “Crawford Station” was built in Grayling to accommodate early logging activities, but the City saw the majority of development after the First World War, when the lumber industry was still vibrant. Local railroads were built to access the north from the south, and a more traditional settlement began. The first known settler was Michael Sloat Hartwick, who built the first hotel in Grayling in 1882, known today as Chief Shoppenagon’s Motor Hotel. As the forests were slowly cleared, early settlers began to market the area as an attractive agricultural area. However, as those interested began to discover the sandy soils and short growing season, they realized the area’s resources were more conducive to recreation. As attractions such as the Hanson Hills toboggan runs and area hotels were built, and as the modern highway system extended north, Grayling was poised as a convenient destination for tourists seeking the many recreational opportunities of the area.



The “Village of Grayling” was originally platted in 1874 by the Jackson, Lansing and Saginaw Railroad Company. The original Village encompassed the areas between Lake Street and Ingham Street, and between the then named Pine Street (which does not exist today) and Chestnut Street. Other plats emerged shortly thereafter and most of the City, located within the current City limits, was platted by the early 1900s.

An important figure in Grayling’s history was Chief David Shoppenagon, who arrived in the Grayling area during the 1870s. He was known for his trapping and hunting capabilities, especially along the Au Sable River. Though only a short story of his significance is etched on the historical marker at his gravesite located where the I-75 Business Loop crosses the Au Sable, his legacy as a local story teller, sportsman, and political leader is still prevalent today.



The last lumber mill in Grayling was closed in 1927, when the timber resources began to dwindle. However, one small tribute to the industry still remains. Due to the generous donation of over 8,000 acres of forest land, now known as the Hartwick Pines State Park in the 1920's, much of the greater Grayling area has been kept from development. Today, the Hartwick Pines State Park, dedicated in the name of Edward E. Hartwick, a lumberman killed in World War I, still contains almost 50 acres of the only remaining native Monarch pine trees in Michigan. The park is significant to the historic lumbering industry, but also to the modern landscape, as the exclusion of this land from development has helped shape the land use patterns in the Grayling area. This resulted in less development potential and fewer municipalities within Crawford County than are typical; Crawford County includes only 6 townships, and Grayling is the only city within the County.

Another significant event that shaped the City was the establishment of Camp Grayling, located off of M-93 in Grayling Township. Founded in 1913 by the lumber baron Rasmus Hanson, Camp Grayling now includes approximately 147,000 acres and attracts tens of thousands of military personnel to the area annually. Indirectly, the increasing activity at Camp Grayling continues to contribute to the economic vitality of the greater Grayling area.



The Au Sable River Canoe Marathon is an event established in 1947 that has helped shape the character of Grayling. The race, which celebrated its 66th anniversary in 2013, is an annual 120-mile canoe race down the Au Sable River from Grayling to Oscoda. It is considered the world's longest, toughest non-stop competitive canoeing event, where paddlers race during the darkness of night. The canoe marathon, which attracts upwards of 70 teams, takes about 15-18 hours to finish. The

race is always held the last full weekend in July during the town's annual Au Sable River Festival.

Several historic buildings still stand today to represent the region's historic architecture and construction. These include several storefronts along Michigan Avenue, as well as the historic homes of various lumber barons

located on Peninsular Street. Several cabins and other structures representative of the rustic days of the logging and lumbering industries are scattered throughout the area.



Areas of Historic Significance



Crawford County Historical Museum

This museum represents the original railroad station in Grayling, and is located downtown, near the intersection of Michigan and Norway. Situated near the historic rail lines that run through the City, this museum celebrates the historic lumber industry which thrived in Grayling during the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition, the museum grounds contain a railroad caboose, a military building dedicated to local ex-military personnel and to Camp Grayling, a trapper's cabin, and an old fashioned firefighting station.



W.J. Beal Plantation

The William Beal Plantation, located on Industrial Street, represents one of the more significant forest management experiments in Michigan. William J. Beal was a Michigan State University (then called the State Agricultural College) professor interested in learning about the growth characteristics of trees. In 1888, Beal planted 41 species of trees on the property to determine and demonstrate how they would grow on the dry, sandy soils of the area. This experiment resulted in the oldest documented tree plantation in the Midwest and perhaps in North America. It was also one of the first examples of forest management, as lumbermen started to realize the impact of the exploitive lumbering industry.

Today, the property is open to the public and contains a short nature trail with educational kiosks.

Hartwick Pines State Park

The Hartwick Pines State Park is a tribute to Edward E. Hartwick, a pioneer of the lumber industry. His wife dedicated the over 8,000 acre property, which now contains almost 50 acres of the only known virgin timber in Michigan. The park has grown to over 10,000 acres, which represents almost 3% of the total acreage in Crawford County.

Hartwick Pines Logging Museum

Located within the Hartwick Pines State Park, this museum is found along the Old Growth Forest Foot Trail, a 1/4 mile walk from the Visitor Center. The museum offers guided educational tours through the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries.

Wellington Farm Park

The Wellington Farm Park is a working farm of 60 acres, located on Four Mile Road in Grayling Township. The farm is a living museum of farm life and practice, paying tribute to the farming practices conducted during the Great Depression. The farm still operates using tools prevalent during that time, and the goods produced from the farm are sold at a local farm market in Wellington. Today, the park maintains a nature trail and offers many seasonal events and activities, including a reenactment of the French and Indian War. It also includes several historic buildings representative of the various blacksmith and lumbering trades of the time. These include a sawmill, blacksmith shop, gristmill, summer kitchen, farm market, and pavilion.



Chief Shoppenagon's Motor Hotel

This historic site is the location of the first hotel built in Grayling in 1882. It was named after Chief David Shoppenagon, who was known as a capable sportsman along the Au Sable. He became a local figure due to his diplomatic ability to change the emerging stereotypes of Native Americans during his time. Legend has it Chief Shoppenagon died on Christmas day in 1911, at age 103.



Fred Bear Archery

Fred Bear was an internationally known hunter, and is a locally renowned for the work he did to advance the sport of hunting in Michigan. Born in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, on March 5, 1902, Bear was raised on a farm in the Cumberland Valley. By age 21, he left the farm and moved to Detroit to work as a patternmaker and silkscreen operator in the growing auto industry.

In 1927, after watching the film, “Alaskan Adventures” featuring Art Young, Bear discovered his passion for the sport of archery. Fred Bear met Art Young and began learning to craft his own bows, arrows, and bowstrings under his tutelage.

During The Great Depression in 1933, Bear and a friend, Charles Piper started Bear Products Company, who specialized in silkscreen advertising materials such as banners and fliers for Chrysler. All the while, Fred Bear continued his work crafting archery equipment for friends, and after six years, demand for his work grew and Bear dissolved his partnership with Piper and launched Bear Archery Company.

As an archer and marksman, Bear was known for his skill, and he won the State target archery championship in 1934 and 1939. He used his growing fame to promote his archery products. In 1936, he successfully lobbied for a bow-hunting season in Michigan, and in 1942 he began filming his hunting trips in the Upper Peninsula. Fred was instantly recognized not only for his skills, but for his distinct personality, weathered face and trademark felt Borsalino hat.

Bear Archery Company moved to Grayling in 1947, where Bear began displaying his collection of trophies and artifacts. These items were the first displayed in the first Fred Bear Museum, opened in 1967. His fame continued to grow as Bear made regular appearances on television and radio programs and was featured in numerous magazines and bow hunting films.

Fred Bear sold controlling interest in his company in 1968, but continued on as President. In 1978, following a strike and continuing labor problems, the Bear Archery manufacturing operation was relocated to Gainesville, Florida, and in 1985, the museum in Grayling was also

relocated there. Fred remained active in designing products and promoting bow hunting until his death in 1988. A physical reminder of the legacy of Fred Bear remains in Grayling through the production plant that now sits vacant near the intersection of the I-75 Business Loop and M-72/M-93.

Hanson Hills

Hanson Hills has a rich history of activity and controversy. Opened in 1929, it was the first downhill ski area in Michigan and the second to open in the Midwest. The "Snow trains" brought many people to Grayling where they would board flat bed trucks for the ride to what was then called the "Grayling Winter Sports Park". The Michigan Snow Queens were crowned and honored at the annual Winter Carnival, famous for the elaborate ice sculptures built by local people. The old toboggan run was an attraction that thrilled many. Another exciting attraction was the 66 ft. ski jump that was built in 1934.

Hanson Hills was willed to the State of Michigan by Rasmus Hanson for military or recreational use and is still controlled by the State of Michigan's Military Board. It was during the time when the area was called "Bear Mountain" that great growth was seen and the ski resort had 22 slopes for downhill skiing, the "Polyhedron" hotel, the "Little Smokey Railroad", and the "Fred Bear Museum" were all a big part of the excitement at what we now know as "[Hanson Hills Recreation Area and Winter Sports Park](#)". When the heirs to the Hanson Estate found private individuals making money on the property they attempted to take the land back. Their reason for the action was that the lease stipulated that the land was to be used only on a non-profit basis. The Bear Mountain Area was ordered "boarded up" in 1973 by Judge Roth. The hotel and lifts were disassembled and sold, the Fred Bear Museum, Little Smokey Railroad, the Pine Knoll Campground, the House of Flavors Ice Cream Store, and Dillons' horseback riding stables all closed also.

Volunteers came forward that winter to try to keep a few hills open for children to downhill ski. It was soon after this that Grayling Recreation Authority was established as a result of a lot of volunteer work. With the cooperation of the Michigan National Guard and the State Military Board, a special law was made to allow the "Authority" to work on a non-profit basis. The Grayling Recreation Authority (GRA) is a government "consortium", made up of representatives from Grayling Township, Crawford County, the Crawford AuSable Schools and three members at large.

In the beginning, the main goal of GRA was to maintain and run the ski operation. Now GRA has added to its priorities year round sports programs for Youth and Adults. Year round, quality recreational activities

are supported by 1/2 mil of taxes and user fees. GRA keeps prices at a minimum so as to be accessible for as many participants as possible. (Content copyright 2013. Grayling Recreation Authority. All rights reserved).

The Grayling Fish Hatchery

The Grayling Fish Hatchery was founded in 1914 by timber baron Rasmus Hanson. He hoped to restore the Grayling to the Au Sable River system; ironically its disappearance was caused, at least in part, by the massive habitat destruction caused by logging and the Grayling became extinct in Michigan. Nevertheless, the Hatchery continued to play an important role in natural resource conservation. In 1926 it was sold to the State of Michigan. It continued to be operated as a fish hatchery and tourist attraction until the mid-1960s when it was abandoned. In 1983, after lying dormant for nearly 20 years, the State turned the hatchery over to Crawford County with the stipulation that it be operated as a tourist attraction. Although management of the hatchery has changed over the years, it has been operated as a tourist attraction since 1983.

The Rialto Theatre

At the turn of the 21st century, the Rialto Theatre stands now as one of the oldest continually operated family owned theatres in the United States. The Rialto Theatre was founded in 1915 by George N. Olsen. The original structure was completely destroyed by fire in 1930. A new theatre (the current building) was built on the same site and was completed the same year. The large marquee on the front of the building was added in 1940. The theatre seats 194 people and has a balcony.

Over the years, the theatre has gone from live shows with silent films, through black and white, Technicolor, Stereo, Cinemascope, 3-D, and automated projection systems. In a remarkable display of longevity and willingness to adapt, the Rialto continues to provide first rate, reasonably priced entertainment for the community of which it has been a part of for nearly a century.

Since they began, the movies have been woven into the cultural fabric of society, and reflected the changing landscape of American taste, mores, and values. In a very real sense, the landmark at 302 Michigan Avenue

has been an observer and participant in this fascinating slice of American life.

In 1999, management and ownership of the Rialto passed to the 4th generation of family members. Management and operation of the theatre by family has continued in the same grand tradition as that of its founder.

Former Mercy Hospital Grayling

In 1911 construction of a 20 bed hospital located on US 27 was completed and opened by the Sisters of Mercy. Reports of the time say there was no finer, better equipped, well-staffed hospital anywhere in northern Michigan.

The number of patients admitted to the hospital grew and grew finally becoming so congested that the need for a newer and more up-to-date facility was required. In 1956 construction was started and a new fifty-bed, million dollar facility was opened in 1958. The old hospital was torn down.

Since its opening at its current location in 1958 there have been many additions and improvements. In 2013 Mercy Hospital Grayling earned several very prestigious awards when it was named: one of the nation's 100 Top Hospitals; one of the nation's 100 Great Community Hospitals; and A 100 Top Hospital Everest Award. In 2015, the name was changed to Munson Healthcare Grayling Hospital.