

Community Established When First Dam, Mill Built By Andrew Warren

Editor's Note:—Most of the information for this article on Merrill's early history was obtained from a series of stories written by Cyril Talbot which appeared in the Merrill Daily Herald in 1930 while the author was at the University of Wisconsin. Mr. Talbot has been doing aerial survey work for the government and is living in Washington, D. C. He served in India during the recent war.

Around 1840 the territory in and around Merrill was part of a vast forest of virgin timber. Wausau, commonly known as Big Bull Falls at that time, was a striving town located some twenty miles from Merrill. At that early date Merrill was known as Jenny Bull Falls and was a frontier of northern Wisconsin.

We can visualize this area as a forest land known to the Chippewa Indians who often camped at Big Eddy and who used the present Council Grounds State Park for their powwows.

No doubt an occasional trapper, voyageur, coureur des bois and missionary used the rivers in coming to or passing through this region.

Lumbermen were continually sending explorers into the forests searching for timber that was of good grade and accessible. What is now known as the Seventh Ward was picked out as a spot containing valuable timber. Loggers from Big Bull Falls, who owned this timber, sent a handful of men up the river or over the footpaths to this locality with instructions to cut down timber enough to construct a camp for the coming workmen. The camp was located at the foot of what is now Center avenue.

Start in Seventh Ward

Lumberjacks were sent here to haul timber which was later shipped via the Prairie and Wisconsin rivers to Big Bull Falls, where the logs were sawed. These early timber owners had only a temporary interest in the region and wanted to get out as many logs as possible in the quickest way, and as cheaply as they could.

As this was happening, however, some families began taking an interest in the region as a place for a future home, even though there was little to offer except good water, timber and a little cleared land available for farming.

Used Logs for Homes

There was no mill here for the manufacture of lumber so the early settlers made their homes of logs. It is believed that the first house was built by John Feely and stood at the mouth of the Prairie river, near where First street commences. In this vicinity a trader, named Stevens, had secured squatter's title to a tract of ground. Some time before this, around 1843, an individual named M. Bollier had a trading post on the west side of the Wisconsin river, about 1½ miles below what is now Merrill. Another man, John Hogan took a squatter's claim in 1843, which he later sold to Andrew Warren in 1846.



LOG JAM AT GRANDFATHER.—One of the worst jams in this vicinity occurred at Grandfather Falls about 1885. Flood waters extended back many miles as the logs piled up. Dynamite was used to make a channel through the center of the jam and release the water. Then began the long, tedious and hazardous task of freeing the logs and getting them into the channel. Some 60 million feet of logs were snarled from the dam to Pal O'Neill's, a mile above.

The early settlers, though interested in a homestead, had to have some cash money to buy supplies and so they worked in the woods in the winter and operated their little farms in the summer. They were interested primarily in growing their own foodstuffs, as there was little or no market for surpluses.

The building of a dam across the Wisconsin river by Andrew Warren in 1847 marked the establishment of the permanent community. This dam was five hundred feet long and nine feet high. Warren also started the construction of the first sawmill at the foot of what now is Mill street.

Run by Water Power

The mill was run entirely by water power. There was some delay in the building of the mill but such men as Levi Fleming, Edward Bosworth and O. B. Smith carried on.

After the dam and wooden water wheel were constructed, the material needed in the mill had to be delivered to Jenny Bull Falls. This machinery was brought from Stevens Point in canoes, some of the heavier pieces weighing as much as 400 pounds.

When the mill was ready to operate it consisted of two "mules" or up and down saws, one with a single blade and the other with two blades. These saws, if run constantly through the day, could cut from 7,000 to 10,000 feet of lumber a day. At that

early date, a work day consisted of 13 hours.

Most of the logs sawed in the mill the first year were supplied by O. B. Smith, who cut a great deal of timber along the Prairie river in what is now the Seventh Ward. After operating the mill for about a year, Warren sold his interest to the brothers, Benjamin F. and John Cooper. At that time John was also conducting a store in Jenny. After the Cooper brothers had run the mill for about a year, Jern sold his interest to O. B. Smith.

Wanted a Railroad

The early settlers wanted a railroad and they mortgaged their property to turn over funds to the promoters of the so-called "Horican" railway enterprise, which ended in a fiasco.

Harrison Combs and F. M. Andrews, who had purchased the interests of Cooper and Smith, operated the first mill, until 1870 when T. B. Scott bought out Combs.

Scott and Andrews ran the mill until 1880, at which time Scott bought out the latter's interest and consolidated it into the T. B. Scott Lumber Co. Many improvements were made.

In 1880 the mill had a capacity of 10 million feet of lumber and two million shingles a year. In 1886, the capacity had increased to 25 million feet of lumber and 20 million shingles.

The mill was operated by the T. B. Scott Lumber Co. until 1899, when it burned.

Jenny House Is Built

To go back to the days when the first mill was placed in operation. The fact that Jenny Bull had a sawmill that employed a few men, made it of importance in the business world. Workmen, traveling men, loggers and others found it to their advantage to "make" Jenny Bull at certain times but accommodations were practically non-existent until Alexander Watson came along in the early fifties and built the Jenny Hotel. Then Z. Space built the Eagle House in 1858 and improved his rooming and boarding house in 1862.

A few of the early pioneers living here about 1855 were A. C. Norway, Henry Goodrich, George Goodrich, H. Streeter, Cyrus Strowbridge, Harrison Combs, Frank White and Joseph Newcomb.

Jenny Bull was only a village in 1850. Immigrants were pouring into the United States. They settled in the fast growing cities and the sparsely settled areas. They needed lumber.

The lumber industry attempted to meet the enormous demand. Small mills were inefficient and uneconomical. The small mills changed hands until they were bought up by the big interests.

However, as Jenny Bull was growing, the small mills supplied the lumber needed to build the homes and business places then in the making in the community.

Population Increases

Between 1855 and 1885 the population of Jenny Bull and its vicinity grew from a few families to 7,000 persons and by 1890 Lincoln county, with Merrill as its nucleus, almost doubled the number of its inhabitants to 12,000.

The life of this locality was at first limited to only a few people; then came the village supported by a few mills and the few farmers who lived nearby. But the railroad, telegraph and telephone began to play an important role in the industrial life of America and a new era was close at hand in Jenny, as well as elsewhere throughout the nation.

This new era began when the Wisconsin Valley Railroad company, completed an extension of its tracks from Wausau to Jenny, a distance of 17½ miles.

The railroad was made part of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul system. General manager of the latter was S. S. Merrill. In 1881 Jenny became known as Merrill pursuant to an act of the legislature.

The development of the community took rapid strides. 1879 M. H. McCord and H. E. Howe constructed a mill on the site later occupied by the Kinzel Lumber Co. This mill was destroyed by fire on July 19, 1881 and was re-built the following year by



SKIDDING LOGS, in the woods many years ago was done by oxen, such as the yoke shown above. Art Welby is the driver. This picture was taken in this area before the turn of the century. Oxen would be worked all winter and then be slaughtered for their meat. The horses, and the few oxen that were not used for food, would never leave the woods but would be cared for by a caretaker until the next season started.

1847
MERRILL
CENTENNIAL
1947