

Early Settlement on Manuka Lake

By Kenneth A. Krug

While researching early habitation of Manuka Lake in Hayes Township, Otsego County, Michigan, it became clear that there is a limited supply of written historical records pertaining to Manuka Lake. There are many oral histories and accounts of experiences at Manuka Lake, and some of the readers may be aware of documents or oral histories of which I am not aware. I encourage the reader to contact either myself or our webmaster if they have a contribution to make. Our goal is to compile a comprehensive history of Manuka Lake for our current and future residents.

The earliest settlements made in Otsego County were undoubtedly seasonal habitations made by Native Americans of the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi tribes as they visited the area to hunt and gather in the forest, lakes and streams of Otsego County. Evidence of Native Americans in Otsego County existed in the form of ceremonial or burial mound. Mr. Eugene Oshsner wrote of these mounds in one of his articles that were included in volume 2 of *A Step Back In Time*;

*“There are remains of prehistoric fortifications in Ogemaw County and a couple of mounds were excavated early in the century on the shore of West Twin Lake in Lewiston and several ancient mounds once existed near the south end of Otsego Lake.”*¹

After the Civil War, white settlers began moving into the area. On June 16, 1911, the Herald Times newspaper began publishing the manuscripts of William H. Smith, a Civil War veteran and early settler in Otsego County. In more recent years William Granlund wrote about Mr. Smith’s manuscripts in newspaper articles and his booklet entitled *A Step back In Time*. He speaks of early settlement on Manuka Lake in the following passages;

“In April, 1868, A. A. Dwight outfitted a small settlement party in Almont, Lapeer County, which consisted of six men, a foreman and a yoke of oxen. The groups literally hewed their way to the shores of Crooked Lake, now named Manuka, and began to open up the forest and build log cabins. It should be noted that this settlement location is under dispute, as the first settlement in the county. Another account lists Company Farm Lake (Tecon Lake today) as the first settlement area. Both lakes are in the same general area.

Not much farming was done in the first season, as many difficulties were experienced. The men were forty miles from their base of supplies located at Spencer Creek, near Alden, and their “toting” was of necessity and done on the back of oxen. During the winter they gave up, folded their tents, and left in disgust. The settlers at the western end of the route were disappointed at the failure of Dwight and his crew to establish a new rendezvous for homesteaders in need of work.

¹ Ochsner, E, *A Step Back In Time*, Otsego County Historical Society, vol 2, (page 5).

*In the spring of 1869, at the instigation of Dwight, a second expedition headed by Charles S. Brink again set out from Almont. Instead of oxen, Brink's crew used draft horses, and the men were all experienced woodsmen. The men cleared about 25 acres near Company Farm Lake. The summer, though, was one of the wettest on record, and an early frost ruined most of their crop. By September the state road had been extended from the farm site into section 25 of Otsego Lake Township, near the headwaters of the North Branch of the AuSable River... ”*²

It would appear that the seasonal hardships experienced by many of us that live in Otsego County are nothing new. These early settlers also experienced early snows, late and early frosts, and other seasonal fluctuations that made early attempts at settlement difficult. They did, however, succeed in their settlement and in the harvesting of the natural resources of the county, as we can see from my final quotation, which appeared in autobiography of David Ward, an early lumber cruiser and eventually one of Michigan's great lumber barons. He wrote this notation in the early spring of 1854 while investigating the value of the virgin pine forests of Otsego County;

*“The morning of the second of April found us camped at the southeast end of Otsego Lake about where the Smith, Gratwick sawmill now stands. From this point a tract of some nine miles of cork pine extends along the west side of the lake and beyond, and was the finest and most extended that I ever saw. The view of the opposite shore of the lake was mostly hidden from our sight by a point of land extending into it, but what we could see was also timbered with tall, beautiful pines. You can little appreciate the exhilarations of our feelings and spirits at the sight.”*³

We can only imagine the beauty and abundance of our county in its pristine form. But the existence of written and oral histories can help us visualize and appreciate what this area had to offer early travelers and settlers. We still enjoy the beauty of this county's many lakes and streams and trails today.

The primary sources for this article were a series of booklets by Mr. William (Bill) Granlund for the Otsego County Historical Society entitled *A Step Back In Time*. These booklets consist of interviews and recorded reminiscences from many contributors, compiled into booklet form. The current and future residents of Otsego County owe Mr. Granlund a huge debt of gratitude for the time and energy he devoted to this project. I believe that these booklets are still available at the Historical Society and are well worth the asking price. Another excellent resource for exploring the history of Otsego County is a hardbound *Pictorial History* of Otsego County (ISBN: 1-56311-8602) which may also be found at the Otsego County Historical Society at 320 W. Main St, P.O. Box 1223, Gaylord, Michigan 49734. The Historical Society also maintains a web site at <http://www.otsego.org/ochs/>, where it has many interesting historical photos posted.

² Granlund, W, *A Step Back In Time*, Otsego County Historical Society, vol 2, (page 7-8).

³ *Pictorial History*, (2002), Paducah, Kentucky, Turner Publishing Company, (page 6).