

Life In A Lumber Town

Thompson, Michigan

Thompson is located 6 ½ miles west of Manistique and began as a sawmill town. It was built by E.L. Thompson, president of the Delta Lumber Company. The town initially had three streets that were four blocks long, with a population of approximately 500 people. There were numerous company houses, a company store, grocery store, two candy stores, a barber shop, three saloons, three churches, the town hall, mill and a shipping dock with a tramway.

In the 1890's, the dirt streets were lit with oil torches and pedestrians would walk on sidewalks made of wooden boards. The post office and the only telephone were located in the lumber company office. Fresh drinking water was piped to town from the flowing well just north of the village. Water boys carried water to the men working at the mill and the docks, while rain water was used for cleaning and washing clothes.



A thriving lumber town.

Early descriptions of Thompson often refer to the unofficial divisions of Swede Town, Dog Town and Indian Town. Residents of Dog Town lived north of town and were said to have at least two dogs per household. Indian Town was on the lakeshore, where the local Native Americans spent the winter. Many of the Swedish residents, who built their own houses, lived in one area down by Lake Michigan. The Lutheran church in Swede Town was founded in 1865.

Thompson also had two other churches; St. Frederick Catholic Church built in 1900 and the Methodist Mission Church founded in the early 1900's.



Looking north; Lumber Company Office is the closest building on the right side of photo.



Swedish Lutheran Church.



Big Spring was a recreational area for early Thompson residents.

In the early days, travel was by boat, walking overland or by trail horse. The tug Anderson would take passengers to and from Manistique for 50 cents round trip fare. Eventually roads were built. In the winter, horse teams pulled rollers to pack the snow, which was then sprinkled with water to form ice. This provided a smooth surface for sleighs to travel.

Later railroad spurs were built to connect the lumber camps to the mill, and passengers were allowed to ride to local attractions like the Big Springs.



Horse drawn carriages were a popular method of travel.



Thompson school house. This is now a private residence.

There were as many as eight schools at one time. Two were in the village and the rest were in outlying areas. In the late 1890's there were only about 200 students enrolled, but law required that if seven or more children of school age lived within seven miles of each other, a school must be built and a teacher provided. School was required for children ages 8-14.

Later, many of these Thompson children proudly served their country in several wars. One of the first veterans was Abraham Brown who told of shaking hands with Abraham Lincoln while recovering in a Civil War hospital. Another veteran, Albert Smith (shown at right), received the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1921.



Albert Smith, Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.



The Lumber Company Office and Post Office.



Street scene in 1909.

Thompson had a hospital, serviced by doctors and midwives, located on Pine Street. Midwife Mrs. Kate Squires, considered an Angel of Mercy, would come anytime day or night with her little black bag. She was a proud Native American who combined herbal medicine with her work as a nurse for Dr. Tucker.

The early Chippewa settlement was near Silver Creek, west of Indian Lake. During the summer months, they lived in bark huts and wooden buildings and when fall came moved to the north end of Thompson on Lake Michigan. Many men worked for the lumber companies and the women sold baskets.



The Squires family portrait
Courtesy of Eric Webb