

Blendons Landing

Bustling era of sawmills en

By David Saunders
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SOUTH BLENDON — Tall white pines, dancing only to the wind, once filled this isolated countryside. Only furry animals needed the precious wood for shelter from the wind and storm.

As they danced to the sound of their own drummer, another drummer in the distance was pounding his own beat.

The invasion of this wood in the mid-1800s was by white settlers comprised mostly of Germans and Englishmen, as they began to chop away at the wilderness.

"Timber-r-r" soon became the sound often heard in South Blendon during the early days.

Logging rail lines branched out from this hamlet during the 1860s and 1870s. Lumbering was the sole industry then. There was also a stagecoach line nearby and by 1880 the first church was constructed by the inhabitants who began arriving in the 1870s — the Hollanders.

When the Hollanders began to move in, the lumbering region was largely owned by the Blendon Lumber Company. So was most of the township. Today it is mainly an agricultural center. South Blendon is bounded unofficially by 48th and 60th avenues, and Port Sheldon and Baldwin streets.

Most of the history of the area is contained only in the minds of local historians. A lot of this information was handed down to them.

According to local oral historians, there were six sawmills operating at various stages in and around the South Blendon area between 1850 and the turn of the century.

The first mention of sawmills begins with Mrs. Luke Hubbard's father, Ernest Seydel. He used to talk about an old boarding house for lumberjacks, located at 48th Avenue and Baldwin Street, which burned down in the 1870s. Mrs. Hubbard, 3297 Spring St., Hudsonville, said her father told her the Hayden Mill was located there at one time, but has no idea when it was active (prior to 1864). Ernest Seydel, born 1862, was the son of C.A. Seydel, one of the first settlers in the area.

Prior to 1876 a mill operated on Baldwin Street. According to Norm Kunzi, 73, 6255 Baldwin St., this was Cole's Mill (located a half mile west of 64th Avenue on Baldwin). His grandfather, Horace Atwood, came from New York to work in the mill nicknamed "Bugmill."

Atwood rafted the logs on the Grand River to Grand Haven. As a sailor, he had traveled three times around the world. Kunzi said he remembers his grandfather telling him "there was an Indian village in Eastmanville and they would stay there overnight."

The logs reached the Grand River on quickly-fashioned, thin-steeled rail lines. The logs were stamped with the signature "BL" with a sledgehammer-like instrument for identification, then floated down the river to a Grand Haven sawmill.

Grandfather Kunzi built a mill himself in the 1880s, located across from his house. Another mill, Timmer Mill, was located on the northwest corner of 56th Avenue and Baldwin Street. Ernest Seydel worked this mill in the 1880s. It closed in the 1890s. Kunzi Mill was the last of these three to be torn down, Kunzi recalls (between 1900-1910).

Working in a sawmill was dangerous, if one wasn't careful. Kunzi said his Uncle Edson had his arm ripped off after he got it caught in the sawdust chain.

Two sawmills on Port Sheldon in South Blendon were active in 1876, according to the 1876 plat map. One was the Ohio Mill, according to Gerrit Elzinga, 6640 Tyler St. A man named Tuller ran the mill, Kunzi said, before the turn of the century. It was owned by C. E. Storrs in 1864. These mills also do not exist today. The only remnants are rail lines, which are still being uncovered.

Ohio Mill was located south of one of the two stores on Port Sheldon Street. All mills were built on knolls. The store still stands (one mile west of South Blendon Reformed Church). It is now a meat processing store. The other mill was a very small one, notes Elzinga. It was located on the southeast corner of 48th Avenue and Port Sheldon, according to the plat map, directly south of property owned by J. R. Hall.

On the southwest corner of 48th Avenue and Port Sheldon Street, a small general store opened in the 1890s. This was owned

by John VanFarowe. It later burned and a new one was put up. The site now contains a building for a coffee service warehouse. Two years ago a grocery did operate there.

The present meat processing store opened first as a general store. It was owned by John Poskey and later Harold Vrugink.

In addition to the two stores and two sawmills on Port Sheldon Street, South Blendon had a post office before the advent of rural free delivery. It was located one block south of Port Sheldon on 56th. There was also a grist mill (west of 56th), Elzinga said.

The logging industry was not the only activity during the early settlement of South Blendon.

A rambling stagecoach thundered along the route below South Blendon and to the east, from Holland to Grand Rapids in the mid-1800s. Part of that line is now Paw Paw Drive in the Holland area. Near South Blendon there was a halfway house, called Deregt House, or the "Right House," which functioned as a rest stop for weary travelers, Elzinga explained.

Part of that line is still in evidence today. About three-quarters of a mile east of South Blendon there is a row of maple trees. These were planted along the line.

Between 1864 and 1876 a railroad was proposed from Grand Haven to Toledo. The area was graded, but the firm went bankrupt.

The English and Germans did not farm the lowlands of South Blendon because they felt the area was unsuitable for farming. But they did work the more fertile land in the northeast portion of Blendon Township.

When the Hollanders arrived, they put their expertise to work draining the fields. Their knowledge was gained from working the poor farmlands of Vriesland in The Netherlands.

Although the roots of South Blendon come from the logging industry, the actual settlement didn't occur until the Dutch arrived. When they came they began to drain the land into what is now Rush Creek and established an agricultural region.

"About half of the people in the area were of Vriesland (Province) background, which is very low land in

nds as 20th Century begins

The Netherlands. So they came over here very knowledgable," Elzinga said.

"The original timber was cut off during the Civil War," said the 75-year-old Elzinga who farmed the area all his life. "White pine was the favorite of loggers because it was easily worked and ideal for building. When my folks came here there was a second growth," he added.

Blendon Township was surveyed in 1833 but for various reasons it was not regarded as a desirable piece of land, because it lay back from the Grand River and the highway, according to an 1878 almanac of the region. Produce listed in 1875 consisted of wheat, corn, other grain, potatoes, hay, wool, butter and maple sugar. Farm animals filled the township. There were 20,000 bushels of grain and 700 tons of hay produced then. Two post offices served the population of 639, but no business district existed.

Curiously, South Blendon is not located due south of North Blendon. At one time it did, but North Blendon moved west and changed its name to Bauer. Elzinga said a man named Bauer bought the land after the Blendon Lumber Company "was a thing of the past," and named the town after himself because he was the biggest landowner in the area.

Bauer at one time boasted a creamery, three stores, a feed mill and a blacksmith shop, Kunzi said.

In 1876 the Dutch found no established church in the area. A group of people began to gather for religious services under the leadership of Feltje Vrugink, Gerda's great uncle. The meeting church held services wherever it could — in barns, houses and stores.

The first sanctuary was built in 1888, at its present location, on an acre of land donated by Anthony Vrugink. There was a breakup in 1881 after the Free Mason question arose but two years later the two churches joined together again.

In 1889 the church organized with the names of Holstege, Elzinga, Nieuwenhuis, Stedeman, Kalkbrenner, Williams, Ter Meer, Vrugink, Beemers, Mous, Makken, Sikkink, Steffens and Vinke. There were 35 in that first membership.

With the congregation in need of a minister, the members built a parsonage in 1885. Gerhard De Jonge became the

first minister in 1887. A new church was built in 1891 and the old one was moved across the street after it was sold to John Van Farowe, and converted into a general store. This burned later and another store was built on top of the ashes.

Construction on the present church began in 1955.

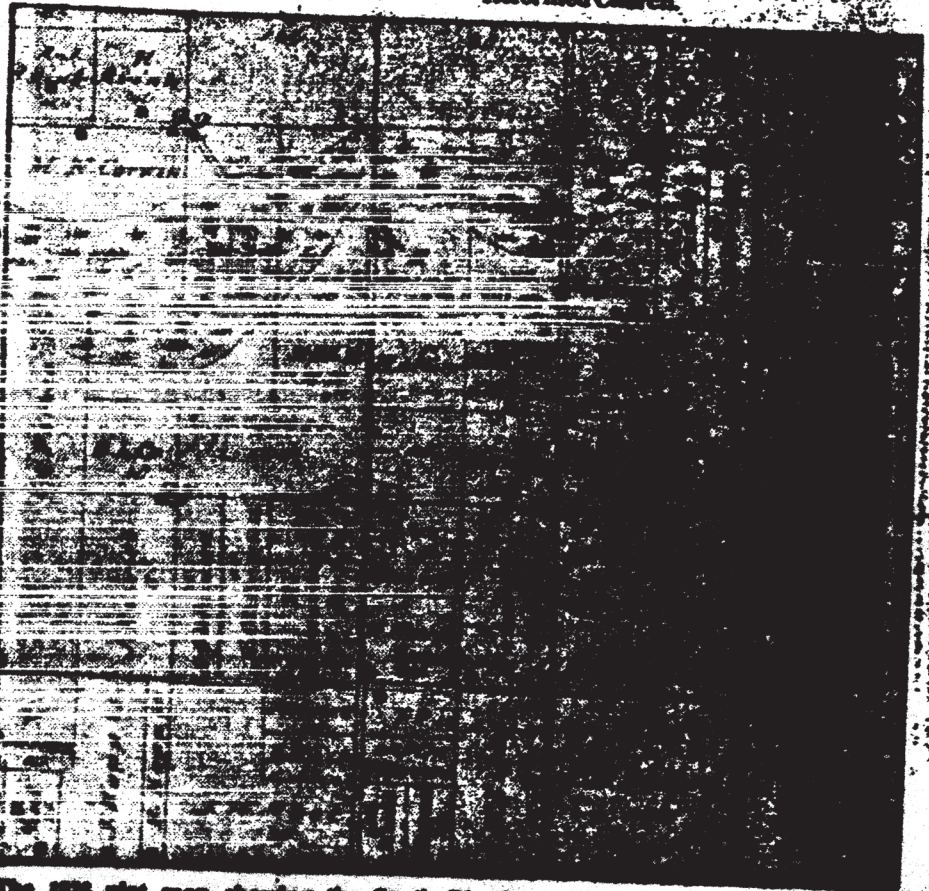
Herman Vrugink, the oldest active member of the church, remembers the commemoration in late April because on April 2, 1936 a tornado went through about 1 1/4 miles south of South Blendon.

Herman Vrugink's grandfather settled in South Blendon in 1872, buying 100 acres from C. Reimer. Vrugink's grandparents arrived directly from The Netherlands after making a stopover in Grand Rapids. They settled 1 1/2 miles west of the present church. Herman Vrugink lived there for 85 years before moving to his present location.

Vrugink, a former dairy farmer who will be 80 on Feb. 13 and married 35 years to the former Dorothy Johnson on Feb. 24, attended the schoolhouse at Port Sheldon. The first one was built in the 1880s but was destroyed by fire in 1908. The existing school (between 28th and 60th avenues on the north side) was later erected. It is now used for storage by Hudsonville Public School.

Schooling there only went through the eighth grade. Final exams were taken in Holland at Hope College. Every child in Ottawa County went to Holland for their exams. To get there, Vrugink said he had to walk 3 1/4 miles to Vriesland before hopping a train to Holland. He graduated in 1914 and the exams lasted two days.

Now new residences dot the landscape, and there isn't a dairy farmer among the 170 families attending South Blendon Reformed Church.



The 1876 plat map showing the South Blendon area.