



Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society - Research Article  
West Bloomfield Canals  
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Allowing canals to mean unusual channels rather than simply man-made water routes, the "first" canals in West Bloomfield still exist in the deepest parts of our numerous deep lakes. These "fishing holes" were arteries that carried away glacial melt waters some 10,000 years ago from the fronts of the receding glaciers. My research shows that the orientation of their coordinates are remnants or archaeological traces of the line of retreat of Michigan's last ice age here in West Bloomfield.

It is no wonder that our first immigrant settlers were well aware of canals, since many arrived here via the extremely successful New York barge and Erie canals. Those were begun in 1817 and opened in 1825. The benefits of many profitable eastern canals easily carried over to grandiose plans in West Bloomfield. The first proposal was conceived by Colonel Peter Van Avery, a Franklin Village resident. Among his 1500 acres was what we now call the Franklin Cider Mill, located on the Franklin branch of the Rouge River. Because of the great potential on the Franklin economy of his mill and others spaced a mile or so up and down the river, Van Avery conceived the idea of increasing the flow of water through the mills. Simply drain Orchard Lake during times of drought! He actually began digging a canal running out through the Gilmore farm south of Pontiac Trail. The house was later known as the Emmendorfer Rycus and McIntyre home. The canal was to connect with the creek and run down through the old glacial valley behind what is now Krogers. From there, it would connect eventually to the Simpson Lake wetlands and run on into the ephemeral Franklin creek tributary. Fortunately for us, the plan was quickly averted. The mystery of Peter's unfortunate death in 1859, being found one morning entangled in his own wagon's wheels after spending the night in Pontiac, has never been solved.

Of course, all of the mills, including the Bigelow brick and tile kiln and mill bridging the valley at 14 Mile Road and Inkster, had small sluice canals that carried needed water to the water wheels. If anyone is aware of any of these traces, we would like to record their existence.

There is a possibility that about this same time, canalization of Black Walnut Lake's outlet occurred for the multi-purpose of increasing flow to the Franklin Creek, as well as draining some of the lake's wetland. One must remember that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers first arrived in Detroit in 1841. Their mission was to dredge out the Soo canal and all of the mouths of rivers draining into the Great Lakes, facilitating the lumber company's ships and barges carrying their harvest off to the big cities or iron ore to the mills. The primitive drafts of most natural harbors were originally around four feet deep. Seeing the COE success led many to affect their own private projects. Those that were unsuccessful claimed simply that "the bottom of the river ended up too close to the top of the water", largely ignoring any resulting damage to the environment.

There were fewer environmental watchdogs around West Bloomfield then; David Ward and his son Willis, although land developers by definition, still did much in the late 1800's and early 1900's to preserve our wetlands by controlling canalization. Granted that the rerouted Grand Trunk rail line prompted by David in 1870 did disrupt marshes, their overall conservation efforts were accomplished in two different ways: by either purchasing the lakes and surrounding basins, such as Woodpecker, Cranberry, and Morris lakes, or by legally stopping the farmers from draining the wetland swamps, such as the court injunction that stopped the lowering of Pine, Orchard and Cass lakes.

The need for well drained bike and automobile trails also threatened our hydrologic system. Willis, in his 1917 treatise on roads reported that "the wild proposal of dredging a canal several years ago from Cass Lake to the bridge north of Scotch School for the questionable benefit of a few rods of road saved was happily nipped in the bud". Who did the nipping is not known.

Why Chief Pontiac or some of his kin didn't dig a canal between Orchard and Upper Straits lake to facilitate the principle portage point between the Clinton and Huron rivers may be because it was not much needed. U of M professor Hinsdale, in his 1930 Archaeological Atlas of Michigan claimed that remnant beach research showed that the pre-history ground water table was about five feet higher than present. This would have shortened the portage and may have even connected the two lakes, thus forming the one Huron River that was shown on some of the early regional maps!

Practically all of our larger lakes have some canals that appear to have been formed in the twenties era when the resort boom was peaking and the State Conservation Department did not yet have control of the public waters. Although an environmental disaster then, I believe our canals are now an overall positive contribution to our wetland habitat. Some of these canals could just as well be called lagoons, since they were often constructed to fill surrounding lowlands, and not necessarily to serve as hydraulic conduits. The following map indicates the length in feet of canals for each major lake. All told, over ten miles of canals have been identified. Accounting for a map scale correction and numerous private dredgings, West Bloomfield has over 11 miles of canals. Since Stockholm, Sweden is the "Venice of the North" perhaps we could adopt her as a sister, what with all of our mutually handsome smart children, strong wives, and common canalities!