THESIS

This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

Comstock Park:
MILL TOWN TO BEDROOM SUBURB

presented by

David Wier

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in History

Major professor

Date August 5, 1981

O-7639

COMSTOCK PARK:
MILL TOWN TO BEDROOM SUBURB

By

David Wier

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

1981

ABSTRACT

COMSTOCK PARK:
MILL TOWN TO BEDROOM SUBURB

By

David Wier

This work is a local history. The development of a small West-Michigan village, Comstock Park, is explored while the significance of the events that fostered or hindered its growth are analyzed. The major thrust of this thesis is to relate the familiar home environment with the larger themes in state, national and world history. Comstock Park is an unincorporated village that is in the process of being rapidly assimilated into metropolitan Grand Rapids. Therefore, the relationship between the fringe village and its parent city receives special emphasis.

A wide range of materials are used for documentation including books, magazines, journals, public documents, manuscripts, newspapers, family records, letters and oral interviews. Considerable emphasis is placed on oral interviews with senior citizens so many anecdotes are included that may have purely local significance. They are included because many incidents drawn from local history may be used to enrich our lives in the future.

PREFACE

My interest in local history began in the fall of 1969 when an uncle, Clarence Wier, convinced me to respond to an article entitled "History of Comstock Park" that was published in a community newspaper. Homer L. Burch, the local historian who wrote the article, concluded his brief history by stating "some local individual or group should rise to the challenge of today--to research and develop the history of Comstock Park to the last detail." Teaching social studies at Comstock Park High School at that time, I decided to respond to the challenge of the need for a "Village Historian."

After interviewing a number of the older residents in the community and reading limited selections from original sources, I started to write historical articles in the Comstock Park Observer. Interest in local history grew encouraging its introduction into the high school curriculum where students joined in the research efforts and assisted in forming a senior citizens' organization, whose members added to the store of information used in newspaper articles and a slide presentation developed around a historical theme.

In the spring of 1979, feeling a need for an enriched historical background and improved research and writing skills, I enrolled in the Graduate School at Michigan State University as a history major. M.S.U. provided encouragement through Dr. Emily Z. Tabuteau, Dr. Paul Duggan, Dr. Frederick Williams and Dr. David LoRomer as they provided the confidence I needed to improve long neglected academic skills. Furthermore, Dr. Justin L. Kestenbaum, who served as my academic advisor, provided valuable

assistance by broading my historical background and directing my research.

This project has been constantly encouraged by my own community where senior citizens, students, colleagues, neighbors and family members have provided support. However, among those who have given assistance Clarence Wier has been a special source of inspiration. Therefore, it is to Clarence that "COMSTOCK PARK: MILL TOWN TO BEDROOM SUBURB" is dedicated.

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INTRODUCTION

The area north of Grand River has a history that is closely linked to the growth and development of Grand Rapids. Early pioneers ventured into the Grand Rapids hinterland for a variety of reasons. Some sought the freedom of owning and living off the land, others anticipated wealth from exploiting the few natural resources demanded by growing industries, while a few went north when they could no longer endure the hard times that frequently visited the infant city. Eventually these pioneers clustered around small villages and created a rural culture that depended on Grand Rapids as a market for their agricultural goods, as a supplier of tools and manufactured products for the farm and home, and as their communications link with the outside world. Grand Rapids was off the main path of westward migration, because of the location of the Great Lakes, and it was forced to forage closer to home for trade. Thus, Grand Rapids became the warehouse and distribution center for the thinly populated villages and farms in Kent County. Therefore, as Grand Rapids grew from a small pioneer village to a modern city, it produced a spin-off effect whereby larger enterprises accelerated the growth and development of some of the surrounding villages and towns.

The small village of Comstock Park, located north of Grand Rapids on the southern boundary of Alpine and Plainfield Townships, was one of these off-shoot villages the history of which reveals a multitude of responses to stimuli that originated in the parent city. The little settlement at Comstock Park, formerly called Mill Creek, experienced an erratic growth

rising and falling with events that were produced outside its own rather vague boundaries. Other communities experienced similar relationships, especially with the economic development of Grand Rapids; some prospered while others, like Plainfield Village, became ghost towns. Comstock Park has experienced little prosperity in recent years, but it has maintained its identity and refuses to pass away.

However, as the metropolitan area of Grand Rapids expands northward, it poses a threat to the continued existence of Comstock Park. Will the people of Comstock Park again be forced to respond to outside forces beyond their control or will they elect to shape their own destiny? Insight can be gained by looking to the past when similar forces altered the lifestyle of the village. Because Comstock Park has remained unincorporated and has failed to develop the political machinery to plan its future, it appears likely that it will again respond complacently to the influence of the larger city. Therefore, the small village which has known four names may someday add a fifth, Grand Rapids.

Comstock Park, and other towns and villages that are located on the fringe of a city, cannot stop urban growth and, possibly, would not elect to if they could. Still, these small villages and towns have often had a rich heritage. If their past is not researched while their identity exists, it probably never will be, and they will pass into oblivion. Local people may make many uses of the past as they reach out into the future. This work is written so the people in Comstock Park, and other communities like it, may look back and reflect on their origins while looking ahead and planning the type of environment and lifestyle they desire in the future.

CHAPTER I

PIONEERS AT NORTH'S MILL, 1837 TO 1866

Mill Creek is a small stream that flows from Cranberry Lake in section six of Alpine Township in Kent County to Grand River in the southwest corner of Plainfield Township. The Mill Creek valley was located half way between the Indian settlements of Plainfield, where the Rogue River empties into the Grand, and Chief Noonday's camp on the west side of the Grand River rapids. Indian moccasins had worn a path between these villages long before the white man arrived and named the route the West River Trail. Charles E. Belknap, a Grand Rapids historian, recalled "there was a trail that followed the river bank either way from the Council pine more miles than I know--upstream to what Frenchmen termed the River Rogue, since corrupted to the Rogue River."[1] The trail followed the ridge that paralleled the swamps along the river and provided the traveler with an impressive view. Franklin Everett, an early Grand Rapids annalist, provided a glimpse of the view the Indians enjoyed for he found "from Grand Rapids to Plainfield, and about that village, there was comparatively little timber, so that the traveler on the old trail could see quite a distance about him."[2] This trail became a route familiar to the

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[1]Charles E. Belknap, The Yesterdays of Grand Rapids (Grand Rapids: Dean-Hicks Company, 1922), p. 52.

[2]Franklin Everett, Memorials of the Grand River Valley (Chicago: Chicago Legal News Company, 1878), p. 41.

pioneers of Alpine and Plainfield Townships, and its mid-point, Mill Creek, is the focal point of this study.

When Rix Robinson arrived in 1821 and achieved the distinction of being the first settler of Kent County and when Louis Campau, a fur trader, followed him in 1826 and became the first white settler in Grand Rapids, they found the Ottawa Indians living in this area to be a peaceful people. Arthur S. White attributed their peaceful nature to "the terrible whipping administered the Indians by Mad Anthony Wayne in 1794," and he claimed that Wayne "had destroyed forever the spirit in them of open defiance and obstruction to the coming of the strangers at least in this section."[3] Albert Baxter records that the local Ottawa were "peacefully and amicably inclined, often aiding and succoring the pioneers in time of need, providing game or fish, and exchanging courtesies with them of various kinds in a neighborly and friendly spirit."[4] Canote, a chief of the Plainfield bands of Ottawa, was an example of the peaceful Indian who stood high in the estimation of the early settlers. Those who knew him "all bear testimony to his high character, to the savage majesty of his person, his generosity, and desire to accomplish good everywhere at every time."[5] However, Canote must have become dissatisfied with living so close to his white neighbors for he left Plainfield in 1838 and was never heard from

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[3]George N. Fuller, ed., Historic Michigan: Land of the Great Lakes, Vol. III: Kent County by Arthur S. White, ed. (National Historical Association, Inc.), p. 19.

[4]Albert Baxter, History of the City of Grand Rapids (Grand Rapids: Munsell and Company, 1891), p. 43.

[5]The History of Kent County, Michigan (Chicago: Chas. C. Chapman and Co., 1881), p. 158.

again.

Canote was not the only Indian to vanish from the area; many left because they were angry with their chiefs for signing the Treaty of Washington in 1836 in which the Indians ceded all their lands north of Grand River to the United States. The Indians sold this huge tract of land for an annual payment, designated reservation property, hunting privileges on public lands and a package of short term fringe benefits. For the next twenty years, Indians from all over Western Michigan journeyed to Grand Rapids and gathered on the islands and river banks a week or two previous to Indian payment day. When the Indians reported for their money, "they would identify themselves, receive their payment, sign their receipt, and take their leave into the waiting arms of their unscrupulous white brothers who met them with a whiskey jog in one hand and a credit card in the other."[6] The treaty ended Indian domination of the Grand River Valley, for as soon as it was signed the federal government opened a land office in Ionia, and the land was quickly taken up by the white settlers. In October, 1857, the government made the last Indian payment in Grand Rapids, and the Indians never returned to the islands and the river banks along the rapids.

The Indian treaties and annual payments gave rise to an interesting myth concerning the half-breed Potawatomi Wabasis and his buried treasure. The legend was presented in verse in 1870 by Mrs. Minerva Jennie Kutz of Oakfield Township when she composed the poem "Wab-ah-see, The White Swan;

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[6]Donald Chrysler, The Story of Grand River (Grand Rapids: Grace Publications, 1975), p. 7.

A Legend of the Sleeping Dew."[7] Mrs. Kutz erroneously cast Wabasis as a treacherous character, and while describing the events of his death, she made reference to a treasure that Wabasis had buried.

> And here and there his vengeful soul
> Led on the hunt for hidden gold;
> Then in some lone and tangled fell
> Would ring his wild, unearthly yell.[8]

Sometime between 1862 and 1870 Wabasis attended a green corn dance on the Grand River flats near Indian Mill Creek and was warned that he would be robbed on his journey back to his village at Wabasis Lake. The old chief left the corn ceremony and followed the West River Trail to the home of Michael Smith three miles north of Mill Creek. Homer Burch, a prominent local historian, explained the visit:

> Wabasis and Smith had long been friends and Wabasis had always been a welcome visitor at Smith's home. But that evening he declined Smith's invitation to stay for supper with the family and, instead borrowed an old unused, iron baking kettle laying by the house and, with it, vanished off . . . into some nearby woods. After a rather lengthy absence Wabasis reappeared at Smith's, this time without the baking kettle, bid Smith a brief goodby, and again resumed his journey.[9]

Later in the evening, Wabasis was ambushed and murdered with a rock where the old Plainfield-Sheridan trail crossed Rum Creek. James Roberts, a pioneer farmer who lived in the area, found the body of the chief and notified the Indians at Plainfield. The Indians buried Wabasis on top of

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[7]Homer L. Burch, "The Chief Wabasis Story," Rockford Register, November 12, 1970, p. 4.

[8]Chapman, op. cit., p. 154.

[9]Homer L. Burch, "The Chief Wabasis Story," Rockford Register, December 10, 1970, p. 4.

the ground, surrounded by a low, log crib covered over with a roof of logs and slabs."[10] Wabasis went to the Happy Hunting Ground, but rumors of the buried treasure continued to tantalize the white man. Many people believe Wabasis buried a fabulous sum in gold which he received from the government in payment for his tribe, but Burch has provided strong historical evidence that the treasure was probably nothing more than Wabasis' "pitifully meager savings of silver coins."[11] However, the legend has provided some interest in Indian history, especially among those who would like to find the treasure and possess Wabasis'wealth.

Immigrants from the eastern states, especially New York, began to settle in the Grand Rapids area in the 1830's. The immigrants came by way of the Erie Canal and ventured by wagon or river scow into the Michigan wilderness to the Grand Valley village that Lucuis Lyon, a pioneer of Grand Rapids, described as the "garden of Michigan."[12] In 1836, the population of the town was somewhere between 500 and 1,000 and the pioneers were anticipating fabulous growth.[13] Settlement produced wild speculation in land and local banks were extending easy money. However, when Andrew Jackson required gold for the purchase of federal land, the local banks were destroyed and Grand Rapids began to suffer the effects of the Panic of 1837. Dillenback and Leavitt, who published the first history of Grand Rapids, reported that "for several years succeeding 1837, this was

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Fuller, op. cit., p. 42.

[13] Ernest B. Fisher, Grand Rapids and Kent County, Michigan, (3 vols., Chicago: Robert O. Law Co., 1918), p. 80.

a very 'blue' place. Folks were terribly poor, and real estate was hardly worth the taxes."[14] Hard times stopped immigration, and many of the pioneers returned to the East. Those who found conditions difficult in the village of Grand Rapids sought land in the countryside, built cabins and lived off the land. The hardship caused by wild speculation taught the Grand Valley pioneers a valuable lesson as they later experienced "more sober judgement and a healthier growth."[15]

The lands north of Grand River were surveyed prior to the signing of the Treaty of Washington, and Robert Clark, an early surveyor, died while working in the vicinity of Mill Creek. The surveyor was the forerunner of the pioneer, and the Old Residents Association has left a monument in memory of Clark on West River Road. However, the eager pioneers did not wait for the completion of the survey or the land sale but settled north of the river under conditions they called pre-emption, building their log cabins and staking out their own claims. Chapman states "it was no uncommon thing to see white men and the Indians tilling their corn in the same fields, in amicable proximity to each other" at this time.[16] When the pioneers secured their claims during the land sale of August, 1839, "the red man vanished from the scene, leaving naught in memoriam but the bones of his dead."[17] When the settlers discovered that the soil of the region was fertile and the village on the rapids needed lumber to grow,

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[14]Dillenback and Leavitt, History and Directory of Kent County, Michigan (Grand Rapids: Daily Eagle Steam Printing House, 1870), p. 38.

[15]Fuller, op. cit., p. 38.

[16]Chapman, op. cit., p. 1309.

[17]Ibid., p. 28.

they ventured to Ionia to stake their claims at the government land office. John Ball, an early surveyor, described the great land sale as follows:

> When the public sale of these lands came on . . . the great question was, how to raise money to pay for their lands, for they had expected to have made it by their farming. Though told there was no danger, they were so fearful that speculators would bid off their land, that they went to Ionia with clubs to fight them off. But the speculators did not come, as they had had enough of land speculation in 1836.[18]

When Indian land was about to be placed on the market, there was considerable local speculation over the pine lands north of the river. Lumber from this area was to be used to supply the material for the early village crafts. Wood products played a vital role in the evolution of early Grand Rapids supplying such enterprises as making staves to be used in barrel manufacturing, especially barrels for the plaster trades; the manufacture of sleighs and buggies, which began in 1840; the building of pole boats and steam vessels for the river traffic; cabinetmaking, which began with William Haldane in 1836; and the manufacture of funiture, which began on a large scale with the business of William T. Powers in 1847.[19] Solomon L. Withey, an early judge, realizing the importance of good pine land, wrote a letter to his brother-in-law dated April 23, 1836, the same year as the Treaty of Washington, in which he described land speculation north of the river as follows:

> I have applied for fine lots of pine land up Grand River, but there is such a press of business at the land office,

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[18]Everett, op. cit., p. 28.

[19]Fuller, op. cit., pp. 77-90.

> one cannot know under six or eight days whether he can get it or not, and if two men ask for the same land, the same day, they must agree which will have it, as it is set up at auction.[20]

The pine lands that were located along streams, like the valley of Mill Creek, were especially prized because water power could be used to run a sawmill. Sawmills were constructed as soon as land was available and "most of the lumber used in building in the village was furnished by mills located outside of the village limits, up and down the river."[21]

The first sawmill constructed in the Grand Rapids area was built in 1832 on the west side of the river on the grounds of the Indian Mission. The mill was placed around sixty rods from the mouth of Indian Mill Creek and was "just a cheap mill appropriate to the circumstances of the time."[22] The mill was provided under the terms of the Treaty of Chicago 1821, and Haynes Gordon was given the task of erecting and running the facility. Using an undershot flutter wheel to drive a sash saw, the mill had a capacity of about 1,500 feet of lumber per day.[23] After the Indian Treaty of 1836, lumbermen pushed north to tap the pine along Mill Creek. The stream was surrounded by large stands of white pine, particularly in the northeast corner of Alpine Township, and "for about five or six miles from its mouth the water was sufficiently good for manufacturing purposes."[24] The

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[20]Ibid., p. 71.

[21]Ibid., p. 84.

[22]Everett, op. cit., p. 3.

[23]Carl Addison Leach, "Paul Bunyan's Land and the First Sawmills of Michigan," Michigan History, XX (Winter, 1936), p. 81.

[24]Dillenback and Leavitt, op, cit., p. 31.

creek ran through a series of swamps and was bordered on either side by clay bluffs. A few settlers had pre-empted land in the western part of Alpine in 1836, but the Mill Creek pines were relatively untouched. Three Frenchmen, Peter Labelle, Joseph Genie, and another whose name has been forgotten, had built a mill on government land and operated it for two or three years before they vanished.[25] Little is known of this mill, but a few trees were cut, and the Frenchmen became Alpine's first loggers.

The pioneer lumbermen from Grand Rapids staked their claims along Mill Creek in 1837 and immediately hired contractors to erect their mills. The tasks associated with building an infant industry in the primitive surroundings of Mill Creek must have been considerable:

> The story of these early sawmills, the difficulties attendant upon getting in the machinery, the problems of building the mills, and the lives and character of the pioneers who built them, all is filled with interest. The great forest of Michigan did not yield without imposing hardship and struggle upon those who sought to conquer it and gain its wealth. Their tools were primitive and the forest was vast, remote, and unrelenting. But the sawmill was the indispensable adjunct of early settlement. Lumber was used everywhere.[26]

The first successful milling operation on Mill Creek was conducted by George C. and James M. Nelson. The Nelson brothers moved to Grand Rapids in 1836 from Milford, Massachusetts, and purchased the store of James and Dwight Lyman on Waterloo Street across from the Eagle Hotel.[27] To secure the lumber to erect a house on the lot he purchased in the Kent

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[25]Chapman, op. cit., p. 554.

[26]Leach, op. cit., p. 73.

[27]Baxter, op. cit., p. 109.

plot, the Nelsons supplied Barney Burton with the means to erect a sawmill on land they acquired on Mill Creek.[28] Nelson's Mill was located along the south line of section thirteen in Alpine Township where the creek flows under the present Seven Mile Road.[29] The Nelsons built a series of sawmills in the Grand River valley and for twelve years conducted a large and profitable business. In 1863 James and a third brother, Ezra T., purchased a half interest in the Comstock Furniture Factory and operated as manufacturers for the remainder of their lives. Eventually, the Comstock interests would be bought out, and the Nelson Matter Company would emerge as one of Grand Rapids's leading furniture plants.[30]

The Nelsons found competition amidst the Mill Creek pine in the person of William Harmon Withey, the brother of Judge Solomon Withey, when he built a mill south of the Nelsons and embarked upon a career in lumbering. Withey came to Grand Rapids from the State of Vermont where pine had been rapidly falling to the stroke of the axe. In Grand Rapids he found Harry Ives, a carpenter, constructing a house for his brother Solomon; when Ives had completed his work, Withey contracted his services and sent him up into the woods of Alpine.[31] During the winter of 1838, Harry Ives built Withey's Mill on the northeast corner of section thirty six of Alpine Township. Ives and his crew had to pack their provisions

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[28]Charles Richard Tuttle, History of Grand Rapids (Grand Rapids: Tuttle and Cooney, 1887), p. 119.

[29]Innes and Tinkham, Map of Kent County, 1855 (Chicago: H. Acheson Litho.).

[30]Baxter, op. cit., p. 462.

[31]Elizabeth C. Withey, person interview, Grand Rapids, Michigan, February 20, 1977.

through the woods and snow to their camp, where they spent the winter erecting the mill. The loggers lived on meager provisions; "in the spring their principle food was rice and sturgeon."[32] However, "while at work in the woods, Ives got out and framed the timber for a house erected the following summer by E.B. Bostwick, on the Fulton Street hill. This house for several years afterward was the mansion of Louis Campau."[33] Throughout the eighteen forties and fifties Ives took his gang of men and packed their tools and supplies from one mill site to another along Mill Creek and Rogue River.

William Withey built a house next to his mill and with his wife Sarah E. and their two children, William E. and Sarah C., conducted lumber operations through the area. The Withey homestead was undoubtedly a busy place as the Census of 1850 shows six laborers, Mary and Israel Smith, Sam Wilcox, James Sinclair, Ambrose Hall and C.H. Ives living with the Withey family. Withey's Alpine estate was valued at $5,000 in 1850 making him the wealthiest land owner in the Mill Creek valley.[34]

Withey had civic interests that went beyond lumbering. Sometime during the early 1840's he cut the logs to construct a small schoolhouse in section 36 of Alpine in the vicinity of his home and mill. When Alpine Township was formed in 1847, the organizational meeting was held

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[32]Baxter, op. cit., p. 663.

[33]Ibid.

[34]U.S., Seventh Census of the United States 1850: Population, Kent County, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

at the Withey School, and Withey was elected justice of the peace.[35] "the students at the Withey School were the children of the early pioneers and Indians," claimed Hudson Lamoreaux, a local druggist from a pioneer family, whose father, William S. Lamoreaux, told him about attending the school as a young boy.[36] The Census of 1850 shows several of the neighborhood children attending school. They included, from Section 1 of Walker Township, Simeon Berry 16, Alonzo Berry 9, N.R. Morman 6, Warren Roberts 8, Henretta M. Tyron 12, and C.A. Lamoreaux 14; from section 31 of Plainfield Township, Henry North 16, Cyrus North 14 and the children of John Davenport; from section 25 of Alpine Township, William E. Withey 11, Sarah C. Withey 6, Ruth A. Abel 17, Henry Abel 15, William Abel 12, Sarah Abel 10 and Charles Abel 7.[37] The list is undoubtedly incomplete, but it does provide a sample of the students in Comstock Park's first school. This school was still in use in 1871 when Dillenback and Leavitt published their history for they cite "District #9 fractional has a very old building known as the Withey school house."[38] District #9 fractional included portions of Walker, Alpine and Plainfield Townchips, and it is still in existence today. However, the name of the school has been changed to Comstock Park.

In 1842 Withey acquired additional property in the northeast corner of section 25 of Alpine from Henry C. Smith where he expanded his lumber

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[35]Dillenback and Leavitt, op. cit., p. 32

[36]Hudson Lamoreaux, personal interview at the Hudson Lamoreaux home, Comstock Park, Michigan, December 29, 1971.

[37]U.S., Seventh Census 1850.

[38]Dillenback and Leavitt, op. cit., p. 32.

operations by building another mill on Mill Creek just south of the present bridge on Six Mile Road. This mill produced "large quantities of shingles" along with lumber and lath, resulting in the name of Withey's Shingle Mill.[39] Stephen Wier, this writer's great-grandfather, cut off several fingers while cutting shingles from the wood blocks fashioned at the mill.[40] Withey cut a road between his two mills, which the Alpine Highway Commissioners called the Withey Mill Road. Shingles were transported by wagon down this road on their way to the Grand River where steamboats would take them to market.[41] In 1865 William Withey died, and the shingle mill was sold by his heirs to Aaron Leland.[42] Withey had wisely invested his lumber dollars, resulting in his success in the field of transportation. He was one of the directors of the Kalamazoo Plank Road and for thirteen years ran stage lines between Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo.[43] When the railroad entered Grand Rapids in 1868, Withey invested in the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad and discontinued staging. Aaron Leland and John Stonehouse continued to mill lumber and shingles at Withey's old mill sites for many years.

The village of Comstock Park is located in section thirty-one of Plainfield Township near the mouth of Mill Creek. The village was formerly known by two names associated with milling activity, North's Mill

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[39]Dillenback and Leavitt, op. cit., p. 32.

[40]Clarence Wier, personal interview, Comstock Park, Michigan, April 17, 1977.

[41]Alpine Township, Records of the Commissioners of Highways, Nov. 9, 1878.

[42]Dillenback and Leavitt, op. cit., p. 32.

[43]Dwight Goss, History of Grand Rapids and Its Industries (Chicago: C.F. Cooper and Co., 1906), p. 195.

and Mill Creek. Daniel North, the pioneer settler in the village, arrived in Grand Rapids in 1834 and two years later relocated in Plainfield Township. In 1838 North erected a sawmill at the site where the bicentennial waterwheel has been erected as a monument in Mill Creek. North purchased and logged section thirty-one of Plainfield and the land surrounding the present village of North Park.[44] North also owned timberland in sections twenty-eight and thirty-three of Plainfield and"in the spring of 1843, as late as April 9, . . . crossed the river on ice above the rapids with a loaded team," undoubtedly headed for his mill on Mill Creek.[45]

Having built a home on the bank of the creek north of their mill at the site now occupied by the United Church of Christ, the Norths are regarded as the first settlers in Comstock Park. The memorial stone in the foundation of the church marks the location of the pioneer cemetery where the Norths were buried. The North family gave the property to the church and buried underneath it are "Mr. and Mrs. Daniel North, Hugh, Daniel, Claracy, Lavina, Nathaniel, Harriett and Henry North; a laborer who worked for Daniel North and a traveler who stopped at the Norths', was taken ill and died."[46] The North home was a simple one-room building constructed from rough-cut lumber; it was razed about 1915 when the old Baptist Church was moved to its present site. Billy Precious, the last village blacksmith in Comstock Park, was the final occupant in the humble North home.

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[44]Chapman, op. cit., p. 1307.

[45]Baxter, op. cit., p. 544.

[46]Comstock Park Congregational Church, Golden Anniversary Booklet September 16, 1960.

Many early pioneers in the Mill Creek valley, including Andrew Jackson Lamoreaux, found winter employment with Daniel North at the mill and in the woods.[47]

Daniel North sold his mill to William H. Withey in 1843. Withey operated the mill until his death, when it was sold to Eli Plumb, who had built a grist mill across the creek in 1866.[48] Plumb's descendants conducted milling operations from these sites until the turn of the century. A few of the older residents in Comstock Park still remember the old sawmill. Silas Dutton was the last operator of the facility, and he piled his lumber across the tracks from the Grand Rapids and Indiana railroad.[49]

"Rafting" lumber down the river, especially along the rapids, demanded skill. "Rafting" lumber through Grand Rapids began in 1838 when lumber from the Alpine sawmills was sent to Grand Haven.[50] Belknap described the detailed process of building lumber rafts:

> First came long, heavy stuff for a foundation, then shorter lumber for cross piling. By a system of overlapping or shingling, the lumber was woven into many thick layers. In times of good water the rafts were two feet thick. Heavy pieces at the top were pinned at the ends and to the bottom sills, with tough hardwood split from riverbank trees. All the tools needed were an ax or an auger. When the raft was finished, there was often added a deck load of shingles and lath.[51]

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[47]F. Morris Lamoreaux, personal interview, Comstock Park, Michigan, December 29, 1971.

[48]Lynn G. Mapes and Anthony Travis, Pictoral History of Grand Rapids (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), p. 71.

[49]Clarence Wier, personal interview, Comstock Park, Michigan, April 14, 1977.

[50]Tuttle, op. cit., p. 119.

[51]Belknap, op. cit., p. 133.

Once the rafts were out of Mill Creek they were sent to the quiet waters above the rapids, now Riverside Park, to await shipment through the rapids when the water was low.[52] "For twenty years from the commencement of the lumber trade," recalled Baxter, "the only profitable avenue for shipment to other markets was by floatage to Grand Haven and shipment from that port by lake vessel."[53] After 1858 the railroad eliminated the need to raft lumber. However, during their heyday, the lake schooners shipped the rafted Alpine lumber from Grand Haven to Chicago, where "the fertile but virtually treeless plains of Illinois and Iowa were being rapidly settled with an insatiable demand for lumber."[54]

Other mill operators appeared after 1840. Between 1846 and 1850 Harry Ives built another mill on the creek in section thirty-six of Alpine for H.S. Wartrus. Wartrus operated mills in Grand Rapids on Mill Street, just below Bridge Street, and he was known to have taken considerable Alpine timber.[55] Another mill was built in 1845 by Colton and Phillips near the facility operated by the Nelson Brothers. Colton's Mill cut heavily from section twenty-four of Alpine Township, processing nearly a million feet of lumber per year.[56] In 1871 Gideon Colton was the sole proprietor of the mill, but "the pine had become so scarce that the mill was doing a comparatively small business."[57] The circular saw was in

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[52]Homer L. Burch, personal interview, Grand Rapids, Michigan, February 23, 1977.

[53]Baxter, op. cit., p. 427.

[54]Homer L. Burch, From Sawmill to City--The Long Years Passing, (Rockford: The Rockford Register, 1968), p. 18.

[55]Baxter, op. cit., p. 188

[56]Dillenback and Leavitt, op. cit., p. 30.

[57]Ibid., p. 31.

common use by this time, resulting in an increased volume which rapidly depleted the timber reserves of Alpine. A circular saw was also operating south of Colton in 1867 on section twenty-five. In 1863 John Stonehouse had erected a water-powered mill on Mill Creek, but it was destroyed by fire in 1867. Stonehouse built a steam sawmill on the site, and for many years it turned out large quantities of shingles and also some lumber and lath. In 1868 the Wolverine Pump Works, S.N. Edie, proprietor, was erected on section thirty-six of Alpine, one-half mile north west of the Mill Creek post office. This facility was "located on a small branch of Mill Creek, whose waters" gave it motive power, and was "furnished with facilities for manufacturing five thousand pumps per annum."[58] From 1860 to 1876 there was a good market for wooden pumps; F.B. Day and S.N. Edie were the principal pump manufacturers in the Grand Rapids area, sending pumps out in peddling wagons to the surrounding counties.[59]

Many of the pioneer settlers in Michigan came from New York, and those that settled in the Mill Creek valley were no exception. The Lamoreaux family was one of the early pioneer families to settle in Mill Creek, arriving in the early 1840's,and their family history provides a typical pioneer experience. The Lamoreauxs were French Huguenots who left France around 1685 when Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes and destroyed their religous liberty. The Lamoreauxs were forced to change their faith or journey to a foreign land. After living in Holland and Belgium, they moved to Canada and made their home in the New World. Arriving in Canada

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[58]Ibid., p. 32.

[59]Baxter, op. cit., p. 502.

during the Colonial Wars, their sons were conscripted into the French Army. Lamoreaux names are listed among the fatalities at the Plains of Abraham in 1759. Life in Canada was difficult for the immigrant family, as Huguenots were still a French minority; therefore, they moved to Yates County, New York around 1800, where they lived until the late 1830's when they moved westward to Michigan.[60]

The leader of the pioneer clan which came to Mill Creek was Andrew Jackson Lamoreaux. In Yates County, Andrew married Sally Francisco, and she gave birth to six children: Samatha, Lester, Elisabeth, Florence, Charity, and Andrew Junior. The family spent their time in New York working on the Erie Canal. The older children rode mules on the tow path pulling the boats, and during the winter, they caulked hulls and prepared the boats for the spring. While working on the canal, the family developed a desire to join the immigrants and go west; therefore, when Sally died in 1840, Lester, the oldest son and an accomplished blacksmith, built a covered wagon and enlisted the family oxen to take the family westward. The family journeyed to Toledo, Ohio by wagon and continued on to Jackson, Michigan by rail and stage.[61]

While the Lamoreauxs wintered in Jackson, they prepared for the second leg of their journey, the trip down the Grand River. Lester built a scow on the ice of a Jackson mill pond, and in the spring it brought the Lamoreauxs to Kent County. Lester's craft was a flat-bottomed boat with

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[60]F. Morris Lamoreaux, personal interview, Comstock Park, Michigan, December 29, 1971.

[61]Ellen L. Ericksen to David Wier, February 26, 1975.

a bow and a long sweep which was used for steering. The scow contained one room, a cook stove, rocking chair, trunk and a few farm implements.[62] While they were floating westward, the family apparently had trouble keeping little Andrew aboard. To remedy this situation, somewhere around Lansing where the river current increased, grape vines were tied to the back of the scow so they would trail along behind in the water. Thus, if Andrew fell off, all he had to do was grab hold of the vines and holler until he was rescued.[63] When the Lamoreauxs reached Egypt Valley in Ada Township, they stayed with Ambrose and Teneyeh Lamoreaux who had settled there earlier on an eight acre site.[64] The family then settled briefly in Paris Township where the present city of Kentwood is located. In 1842 Andrew Lamoreaux purchased 240 acres of land in section 1 of Walker Township for $1.25 per acre from John Ball, an early engineer and surveyor whose fees were often paid in land.[65] Lamoreaux's three parcels of eighty acres apiece were located on West River Road, and they included a good portion of what is now Greenridge Country Club. Andrew and his sons cleared the land and farmed during the summer while winters were spent working in the sawmills on Mill Creek. His first wife having died in New York, Andrew Lamoreaux married Emma Brown Weed, who served as step-mother to the six children and assisted him in his farming enterprise.[66]

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[62]Howard Silbar, "You couldn't keep the Lamoreaux's down on the farm," Grand Rapids Press, June 19, 1977, p. 27.

[63]F. Morris Lamoreaux, personal interview, Comstock Park, Michigan, December 29, 1971.

[64]Illustrated and Historical Atlas of Kent County, (Chicago: H. Blendon and Co., 1876).

[65]Marian Ray, "Public Service a Lamoreaux Tradition," Advance, March 6, 1979, p. 1.

[66]Ellen L. Ericksen to David Wier, February 26, 1975.

Morrison and Commager state that "comparatively few Huguenots came to America; but those that did were of such high quality that they rose to positions of prominence and acquired an influence out of proportion to their numbers."[67] The experience of the Lamoreauxs in Kent County seems to have followed the general Huguenot pattern of success. The first Lamoreaux family in Mill Creek built a home on the high bluff overlooking the Grand River valley. The farm house was surrounded by barns and farm machinery. Lamoreaux farmed his 240 acres until his death in 1876; he was buried in the one-acre cemetery that was detached from the original Lamoreaux estate and is now known as the Mill Creek Cemetery. Several Lamoreauxs still reside in Comstock Park and Kent County, and they have assumed roles of leadership and service. In 1841 Henry A. Johnson wrote a poem for the Lamoreaux centennial that depicts the experiences of the Lamoreaux pioneers:

> A century has passed since Andrew and Sally
> Envisioned a home in a far distant valley,
> A valley of forests and of rich fertile land
> That lay in its splendor by the side of the Grand.
>
> They came as a family and as pioneers bold
> Oe'r trails that were new, by land we are told.
> And by water from its source to its shores in the west
> The goal of their dreams, the land of their quest.[68]

The Hackmuth family was another group of pioneers that had great impact on the development of the Mill Creek area. The Hackmuths trace their ancestry back to the Alsace-Lorraine district of Europe where

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[67]Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager, The Growth of the American Republic Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 93.

[68]Henry A. Johnson, "The Saga of the Lamoreaux Family," 1941, Courtesy of Ellen Erickson, Comstock Park, Michigan, December 30, 1971.

Henry Hachmuth and his family watched Bismark, the Iron Chancellor, rise in political stature. The Hachmuths anticipated the political turmoil coming to their native land and emigrated to Canada where Henry established a successful glass blowing factory. Family oral tradition boasts that Henry Hachmuth was a world champion glass blower, defeating an Englishman to capture the title. Champion or not, the glass enterprise in Canada was short lived as the factory was destroyed by fire. Without the tie of his business, Hachmuth and his family left Canada and journeyed to their new home in the west.[69]

The Hachmuth family arrived in Kent County around 1849 and settled in the Alpine Avenue area where they established an inn and operated the toll station on the Newaygo State Road. To contribute further to the support of his family, Henry Hachmuth went into the wine business and raised grapes on his Alpine farm. Hachmuths sold wine in the Grand Rapids area, and when the inn was closed, it was converted into a farm home and the wine business became just another source of revenue on the family farm. Like most farms the income was seasonal, depending on the type of crops to be harvested. Hachmuths sold raspberries, peaches, apples, grapes, wine, cabbages, sauerkraut, butter, eggs and ice. By the turn of the century, when Henry Carr Hachmuth was running the farm, the inventory revealed assets totaling $4,500 dollars.[70] Henry Carr was the grandson of the elder Henry, and he built the farm into one of the more prosperous enterprises in the Mill Creek area.

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[69]B. Taylor Hachmuth, personal interview, Comstock Park High School, June 2, 1972.

[70]Henry Carr Hackmuth, Farm Ledger 1908-1916, Mill Creek, Michigan April 1, 1908, p. 2.

When the Civil War broke out, the economy of the Mill Creek valley began to shift to agriculture. With the development of agriculture, the power of Mill Creek was again tapped, this time to grind grain. Without a grist mill, the pioneer wheat harvest in rural Kent County was a difficult operation. White described the harvest by showing how grain "was cut with a cradle, threshed with a flail, cleaned with a sieve and bagged to be ground in Grand Rapids."[71] The rural area around Mill Creek apparently developed following the pattern of Grand Rapids as described by White, "While man must have shelter, thereby creating a demand for lumber, he must eat. To supply the imperative demand for flour the first grist mill . . . was put up."[72] The farmers in Alpine and Plainfield Townships began tilling the soil as rapidly as the woodsmen could clear away the big trees; therefore, by 1860 there was an imperative demand for a grist mill on Mill Creek.

The need for a local grist mill was supplied by the Plumb family. Eli Plumb, an early Walker Township settler, "bought North's Mill and erected the flouring mill and the Plumb home during the war. The mill started doing business after the war in 1866, with Henry and A.D. Plumb as their father's partners."[73] Plumb's Mill, called Mill Creek Mill, stood on West River Road where the veteran's memorial is presently located in Comstock Park. Plumb's Mill became the center of milling activity in the sparsely settled community, and although it was not large,

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[71]Fuller, op. cit., p. 68.

[72]Ibid., p. 84.

[73]Mrs. Henry Hachmuth, "History of Comstock Park," Comstock Park News, December 21, 1917, p. 1.

it was sufficient to care for the needs of the local farmers.[74] Milling at Plumb's was a rather simple operation in which water power was used to turn the grind stones that converted the grain into flour. The grinding was done in the basement of the mill where water from the mill pond turned a wooden turbine which, accompanied by wooden gears and machinery, turned the stones. Grains of all kinds were brought to the mill where they were ground and bagged. Most of the business was transacted on the main floor of the mill, where customers would deal amidst grain waiting to be ground and bags of flour. The Plumbs produced flour, buckwheat flour and graham flour, but they also handled oats, corn, hay and straw. In the spring, farmers would journey to the mill to purchase the seeds to sow in their fields.[75]

With the advent of the roller process in milling, the old wooden machinery and grind stones in Plumb's mill became obsolete. However, the mill continued to operate until 1911 when a spring freshet on Mill Creek washed out the dam and destroyed its power source. Charles and Arthur Plumb, sons of Henry, were operating the mill at this time, and Andrew Martin was their miller. After the flood, the mill stood idle, a landmark with pleasant historical associations for local residents, until the spring of 1917 when it was torn down. Often various rumors or legends develop among local residents in relation to old abandoned property. From 1911 to 1917 Plumb's Mill was not exempt from such talk. The following tale was printed in the American Miller in 1916:

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[75]Ida and Frank Lovell, personal interview, Lovell home, Comstock Park, Michigan, December 2, 1971.

> Some residents of the village of Mill Creek and farmers in the vicinity declare that the mill is haunted and that on moonlight nights, two ghostly figures can be seen, playing cribbage in the wheel room. A fantastic story of the love of two men for one woman, the success of one, the murder of the triumphant suitor and the suicide of the loser, is breathlessly connected and whispered about of evenings at the village store.[76]

The village stores were predominately saloons at this time, and the disappearance of people needed some explanation. The story is fantastic and contains little truth, but it became part of the heritage of Comstock Park.

The Plumb family developed a four or five acre estate around the old mill. Beside their home, they also built a general store and two large barns. The Plumb home was located across the street from the Lamoreaux Drug Store where the Lydell Park sign now stands. In 1928 the Conservation Department owned the house, and they gave it to the Congregational Church to make room to expand the fish hatchery. The church moved the house up on Lamoreaux Drive for use as a parsonage. The house still stands and is one of the oldest structures in the community.[77] Eli Plumb also built a small store across the road from the flour mill for Frank Seymour, an Alpine resident who owned 80 acres just north of Plumb. Seymour ran the facility for two or three years; then the Plumbs took it over and ran it themselves. Mrs. Henry Hachmuth briefly described the history of the business:

> Years later the small store was replaced by a two story frame building and was still later enlarged by a one story addition, where a general merchandise business was

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[76]C.W. Shafer, "A Ghost-Haunted Mill," American Miller, November 1, 1915, p. 879.

[77]Ellen L. Ericksen to David Wier, March 27, 1969.

[78]Hachmuth, op. cit., p. 1.

> carried on by Henry Plumb and his sons, and later by Charles alone, and Mrs. Plumb conducting a millinery business in connection for one year. The Plumbs discontinued the business in 1915 after controlling it continuously for about fifty years.[78]

The Plumbs sold the store to George Roup, a native of Sparta. The old building still remains on main street having housed a plethora of businesses.

The Plumb family not only ran the first grist mill and general store in old Mill Creek but also established the first post office. The post office was established on October 28, 1868,with Eli Plumb appointed as the first postmaster. Plumb ran the post office out of the mill, and it "was just a small desk, as the mail was very light."[79] The post office was transferred to the general store when Eli Plumb became the second postmaster. The Plumbs ran the post office for thirty years before John H. Baker took over on February 4, 1899.[80]

Plumb's two barns were located on the site now used by Lamoreaux Drug store as a parking lot. These barns were originally built to shelter the family horses and provide a warehouse for their horses and delivery wagons. Since sleeping quarters in the barn lofts were also rented to teamsters, the facility was referred to as "Plumb's Livery." The livery burned in 1911 or 1912, and Lou Sherman, a teamster for Neil Lamoreaux's Ice Company, died in the fire. Many rumors concerning the

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[78]Hachmuth, op. cit., p. 1.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Comstock Park Rotary Club, "Dedication Ceremonies: United States Post Office," Comstock Park, Michigan, May 19, 1962.

cause of the fire circulated among the village old timers, but the truth will probably never be known.[81]

The Plumb influence on the community produced a conflict over a name for the village. When Daniel North settled in the area in 1837, the place was referred to as North's Mill. Homer Burch declares, "In 1866 when the G.R. and I. railroad was built north along Grand River to Cedar Springs, its second station five miles north from its starting terminus on West Bridge Street at Grand Rapids, was named North's Mill."[82] When the post office was established in 1868, it was named Mill Creek, after the stream that passed throught the center of the village. Burch further states, "Sometime following the 1870's the railroad station name was changed to North's Station and then to Plumb's Station and later also became Mill Creek."[83] Thus, during the nineteenth century, the community was known by three names. On June 8, 1906, it was given its fourth and present name when the name of the post office was changed to Comstock Park.[84]

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[81]Clarence Wier, personal interview at Clarence Wier home, Comstock Park, Michigan, December 2, 1971.

[82]Homer Burch, "Comstock Park History," The Preview, August 25, 1969, p. 10.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Rotary Club, "Dedication Ceremonies," May 19, 1962.

CHAPTER II

MILL CREEK VILLAGE, 1866 TO 1906

After the Civil War, two railroads constructed through the area began Mill Creek's post-pioneer period. Railroads played a vital role in the development of the community, as enterprises were attracted by good transportation facilities. Historian Richard Lingeman agreed that "railroads did indeed bring prosperity by easing access to such natural resources as timber, by providing transportation to market of local agricultural products, and by bringing raw materials to the local manufacturer and goods to the local merchant more cheaply."[1] The railroads were built north of Grand Rapids to connect already existing towns and ship lumber, and Mill Creek was fortunately selected as the junction for the Grand Rapids and Indiana and the Grand Rapids, Newaygo and Lake Shore railroads. If Mill Creek village had not already existed, a village undoubtedly would have sprung up around the railroad junction similar to the way towns developed in the American west. Rail transportation was a valuable asset to a community in a culture based on horses, and since the community had two rail lines, growth was expected.

The Civil War delayed railroad construction in Western Michigan; but

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[1]Richard Lingeman, Small Town America (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), p. 164.

when it was completed, there was a local construction boom.[2] George J. Leisgang, an ardent local railroad buff, has written the following account of railroad construction through Mill Creek:

> The G.R. and I. dates back to its organization in 1854. It was not until after the Civil War . . . that rails were first lain. This section of track (through Mill Creek) began in 1867 when a portion of the line was completed from Grand Rapids and terminated at Cedar Springs.[3]

The first section of the G.R. and I., which extended 21 miles north of Grand Rapids, was completed in December, 1867. Since the state granted twenty mile original land grants to the railroad, the rails were extended twenty miles each year.

Lingeman analyzed the influence railroads had on many small villages and towns, and his findings are applicable to Mill Creek. He states "a railroad by itself was not always salvation; at times it would be only a temporary boom, stimulating industries that later were to go under, giving the town a few bracing breaths of prosperity before it returned to somnolent stagnation."[4] However, the railroads did keep Mill Creek alive while neighboring communities were perishing. When the railroad turned and went through Rockford instead of following the river and going through Plainfield village, which was located north of Mill Creek on the confluence of Rogue River and was larger and more prosperous, Plainfield was doomed to become a ghost town as it relied on riverboat transportation. Therefore,

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[2]Willis F. Dunbar, All Aboard (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 110.

[3]George J. Leisgang to David Wier, September 21, 1977, Letter in author's local history file, Comstock Park, Michigan.

[4]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 165.

Comstock Park did not begin as a result of the railroads, but rail transportation undoubtedly played a major role in its continued existence.

A second railroad--the Grand Rapids, Newaygo and Lake Shore--was constructed through Mill Creek in 1871, and on May 19, 1872, it "saw the first section opened for operation, from Grand Rapids to Sparta, a distance of 14.7 miles."[5] The line was extended to Newaygo in 1872; three hundred passengers joined a September 11 excursion for the first run to Newaygo.[6] The G.R.N. and L.S. was a lumber railroad like the G.R. and I. with eighty per cent of its tonnage consisting of lumber and forest products. From 1871 to 1881 the road operated at a loss of $36, 552.28; therefore it was consolidated with several other roads into the Chicago and West Michigan Railway Company on September 30, 1891.[7] The C. and M.W. ran the troubled line until January, 1900, when the Pere Marquette Railroad took possession of it.

A number of depots have serviced Mill Creek's two rail lines. The first depot was built on land which "was given to the railroads many years ago by the father of Dana Stowell for a station without any expense," and it was apparently destroyed by fire.[8] When the fairground was located in Mill Creek in 1891, The Telegram-Herald announced that passengers were

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[5]Paul Wesley Ivey, The Pere Marquette Railroad Company (Grand Rapids: Black Letter Press, 1919), p. 242.

[6]George J. Leisgang to Don Strange, an engineer C. and O. Railway Co., April 6, 1978, Letter in author's local history file, Comstock Park, Michigan.

[7]Ivey, op. cit., p. 243.

[8]Hachmuth, Comstock Park News, December 21, 1917, p. 1.

landed at the new depot built by the C. and W.M. and G.R. and I. on the west side of the grounds.[9] The main mode of transportation to the fair was by train. Passengers received a round trip ticket from Grand Rapids to Mill Creek for 15 cents with trains running at fifteen minute intervals. However, in 1902 the Grand Rapids Street Railway Company extended their electric lines across the river to the fairground resulting in a rapid decline of passenger train traffic.[10] Streetcars took over most of the local transportation market because they were more convenient as they delivered passengers much closer to their homes. Therefore, in 1905 the railroads responded by abandoning service at Mill Creek. Huntley Russell, the State Senator from the area, pressured the Railroad Commission and the legislature to restore service at Mill Creek, and they responded with restored service and a new depot. Mrs. Hachmuth noted the inconvenience during the interim period when "the name of Mill Creek was removed from all time cards of both roads, and no tickets sold to or from this point for about two years, and all persons desiring to get to Mill Creek had to go to Fuller Station, three miles away and drive back along the railroad track to Mill Creek with their baggage.[11] Passenger and freight service were restored, but they did not bring the village prosperity. With the increased popularity of trucks and automobiles and the devastating impact of the depression on Comstock Park, rail service was stopped again, and to date it has not been revived.

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[9]"Up the Rolling Grand," The Telegram-Herald, September 2, 1891, p. 1.

[10]West Michigan Fair, Premium List 1902, p. 19, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library.

[11]Hachmuth, op. cit., p. 1.

One of the most spectacular wrecks on the G.R. and I. occurred on the morning of August 15, 1900, when a telegraph operator by the name of E.R. Wells fell asleep in the Mill Creek depot. The Northland Express, a limited that carried four sleepers to the Michigan resort country at the end of the track, was one of the finest trains on the road, and Wells allowed it to pass Mill Creek while he was sleeping.[12] Was it possible for a telegraph operator to sleep while a train passed a station fifteen feet from where he was sitting? This apparently happened, for Wells was awakened by the Howard City telegraph operator who told him to hold the northbound train in Mill Creek as he was sending one south. Wells, unaware the Northland Express had already come through, acknowledged the request. The two trains collided just north of Pierson with five hundred passengers on board. Eight people were killed, including all four engineers, and many people were seriously injured. The locomotives were both destroyed.[13] Operator Wells' nap caused an intensive investigation from which the railroad concluded, "the theory that all negligence which causes serious disaster will always be found to have been more or less habitual is still worthy of respect."[14]

Transportation was vital to village growth, and in 1883 Mill Creek was given further impetus when a new road was constructed. On July 27, 1883, "the Canal Street Gravel Road Company was organized by Mr. Comstock

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[12]Edward Masselink, "The Great Train Wreck," Grand River Times, March,1981, p. 5.

[13]Harold B. Norman, "Had G.R. and I. No. 5 passed Mill Creek," Trains, January, 1974, p. 34.

[14]Ibid., p. 35.

and began construction of a gravel toll road for ten miles north from the Grand Rapids city limits, along Monroe Avenue to North Park, across Grand River on a wooden bridge, built in 1884, to Mill Creek and thence north along the north side of Grand River over an old sand trail road to Plainfield Village and Plainfield bridge."[15] The officers of the company included Henry Plumb, president; John E. More, secretary; John W. Champlin, Treasurer; while Francis Letellier, Henry Plumb, John W. Champlin, Nathaniel W. Stowell and C.C. Comstock served as directors.[16] Stowell provided the gravel for the road from the hill on his land in Mill Creek. The area today is referred to as Stowell's Terrace. The new road, currently West River Drive, was considered "the best gravel road north from Grand Rapids and cost $25,000 including the first North Park bridge at $3,500.[17] A toll gate was erected on the road by the C.W. and M. crossing which was managed by Frank Lamoreaux. Ida Lovell worked in the toll booth when a young girl as an employee of her parents. The toll booth was still operating in 1899 with the tolls applied to the upkeep of the road. Travelers were taxed according to the number of axles on their buggy or wagon with riders on horseback paying the smallest fee.[18]

On August 22, 1885, the State of Michigan made a decision that had

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[15]Burch, Preview, August 25, 1967, p. 10

[16]Baxter, op. cit., p. 543.

[17]Burch, op. cit., p. 10.

[18]Ida Lovell, personal interview at the Lovell home, Comstock Park, Michigan, March 24, 1971.

tremendous impact on the development of Mill Creek. The state selected Grand Rapids as the site for a Soldiers' Home to house the "disabled, decrepit, aged or indigent soldiers" who had served in the Civil War.[19] Michigan had been overlooked by the federal government; the Board of Managers of the National Homes had decided "that it is inexpedient to establish a soldiers' branch home in the State of Michigan, because of the proximity of that state to branches already established at Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Dayton, Ohio."[20] Michigan, having provided 93,000 volunteers in response to President Lincoln's call, responded to the federal government on June 5, 1885, by establishing its own soldiers' home. The Michigan Soldiers' Home was built on the 132 acre Nelson Farm three miles north of Grand Rapids. The citizens of Grand Rapids purchased the estate for $16,500 and deeded it to the state. After the site was selected, the facility was quickly constructed, and on December 30, 1886, Governor Russell A. Alger was on hand to dedicate the building that was later to be known as "Old Main."[21]

The first noticeable influence of the Soldiers' Home being located in the north end came in the form of improved transportation facilities. The Soldiers' Home was placed in Grand Rapids "with the promise, direct or implied, that some means of transportation to the site would be provided. In fulfillment of the promise, and also for the development of north end real estate interests, the North Park Street Railroad Company was organized

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[19]Baxter, op. cit., p. 366.

[20]Gerald Elliot, "Making Good the Solemn Promise," Grand Rapids Press, March 11, 1973, p. 24.

[21]Baxter, op. cit., pp. 367-368.

on August 21, 1889, and incorporated with a capitalization of $100,000."[22] Charles Carter Comstock, a wealthy north end lumberman, provided $94,000 of the total cost of the line. The company built the North Park line as as extension of the Taylor Street line, which was operated by the Valley City Street and Cable Railway Company, starting "from the north line of the city at Taylor Street past the Soldiers' Home to the bank of Grand River at what is known as the town-line or gravel road bridge."[23] The line was two and one-half miles long and operated by a steam dummy. A single fare from Sweet Street was ten cents with fifteen cents charged for a round trip.[24] Passengers heading to Mill Creek from the street railroad had to pay a toll to cross the bridge at North Park and finish their journey on foot.

In Streetcar Suburbs Sam Warner states "many of the founders and investors in street railways were real estate speculators who wanted to attract new customers for their land.[25] Comstock's generous support of the street railway may have had economic motives as he owned most of the real estate in the north end of Grand Rapids. Furthermore, under C.C. Comstock's prompting, the North Park Street Railway Company built a pavilion, called the North Park Resort, at the end of the line. The pavilion was an attractive building which offered boating, swimming, picnicing, dining, dancing and entertainment to those who traveled to the north end. In 1891 Comstock

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[22]L.G. Stuart, "History of the Grand Rapids Street Railways," (unpublished typewritten paper, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library), p. 9.

[23]Baxter, op. cit., p. 541.

[24]Stuart, op. cit., p. 9.

[25]Sam B. Warner, Jr., Streetcar Suburbs (New York: Antheneum, 1974), p. 60.

donated ninety acres across the river from the pavilion for use as a fairground. Such pleasant surroundings tempted people to abandon their homes in the city and settle in the new neighborhood developed by Comstock. Yet, they continued to be employed in the city so the street railroad was used to commute back and forth to work. Furthermore, with the extension of the streetcar lines small villages like North Park and Comstock Park were integrated into the dynamics of metropolitan society. Thus, C.C. Comstock's $94,000 investment probably produced considerable profit when real estate prices rose, and he started to sell off his land.

The North Park Street Railway Company was purchased by the Consolidated Street Railway Company in 1894 and electrified. Overhead feeder lines were installed, and a five cent fare was levied on a trip from Grand Rapids.[26] In 1902 the Grand Rapids Street Railway Company was running the line and "built a double track steel bridge across the river and laid a track into the fairgrounds to the main entrance."[27] Later in the year the line was extended to the north end of the fairground and Mill Creek.[28] The inhabitants of Mill Creek were now within a few minutes ride to the center of the city for eight cents, five cents for the fare and three cents for the bridge toll. The streetcar had tremendous impact on the village. It broadened the cultural and economic horizons of the community as men and women could ride to the city to work, shop or seek entertainment. Young people also profited for they could now obtain an education beyond the

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[26]Stuart, op. cit., p. 9.

[27]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1902, p. 19, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library.

[28]"For Right of Way," Grand Rapids Press, June 9, 1902, p. 1.

tenth grade by attending a city high school or enjoy city amusements like Ramona Park or the theater. Thus, the streetcar broke down the traditional barriers of rural isolation in Mill Creek and drew the community into the metropolitan environment.

Placing the Soldiers' Home one mile from Mill Creek had a vital and enduring effect on the life of the community. Since federal law prohibited drinking establishments within one mile of a Soldiers' Home--and Mill Creek was exactly one mile from the Home--bars sprouted like mushrooms. During the late 1890's, Judge Burt's saloon, Mike Hayes' saloon, the North Star Hotel, Fred Echternach's saloon and Nick Fink's Riversite Hotel began operating in Mill Creek. A well worn path soon led across the bridge to the Soldiers' Home. The race track and the fairgrounds also encouraged the saloon trade, since they attracted people into an area that was supposed to be dry. By crossing the street the patrons at the fairground could visit the bars in the Mill Creek business district, which became a popular adjunct of the fairground. The Grand Rapids Press revealed the relationship between the fair and the Comstock Park bars in an article published in 1909 which dealt with a new policy at the fair of not granting pass out checks for patrons to visit Mill Creek.

> But the rule not to grant pass out checks worked another hardship on some of the fair visitors. "I love your State Fair, but oh your Mill Creek," was the refrain which has been howled by an ever increasing number all week. The reason? Well, it was all because there was no beer sold on the fairgrounds. And not even a pass out check for the concessionaires to allow them to get over to the wet precincts.[29]

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[29]Grand Rapids Press, September 17, 1909, p. 7.

Ticket takers at the fair were apparently the subject of abuse by men with a terrible thirst, who "threatened, cajoled and offered to bribe, but the only thing that went was the purchase of another admission ticket for everyone of the thirsty party."[30] Many excuses were given to leave the grounds and visit Mill Creek including:

> It is estimated that there was something like 20,000 or more farmers' rigs which had been left over at Mill Creek and their owners were desperate in their desire to get over there to feed their horses without having to pay another admission to get back. And they usually had quite a party of friends with them to assist in the feeding.[31]

The business connection between Mill Creek and the Soldiers' Home was temporarily interrupted on March 8, 1903, when "a heavy flood and ice jam carried away three spans of the old wooden bridge and the last of the wooden trolley bridge. Thereafter, for awhile a temporary public skiff ferry replaced the old wooden bridge at 10¢ a trip across the river; and Mike Hayes, a Mill Creek saloon keeper, put on a free ferry . . . for old soldiers from the Soldiers' Home . . . who patronized his saloon."[32] Hayes' ferry was named the "Kent" and "was a strange combination made from joining two river scows, the paddle wheel from the old steamer "Hiaeshutter," and an old tractor. The tractor was run onto the scows, the wheels blocked, and a belt strung between the power drive and the paddle wheel."[33] The ferry was constructed by Edward Dutton, who with his brother Silas was running the

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Burch, op. cit., p. 10.

[33] Chrysler, op. cit., p. 45.

sawmill in Mill Creek. The maiden voyage of Dutton's "Kent" was described in the Evening Press on September 12, 1903:

> Captain Edward Dutton ordered fireman Edward Dutton to get up steam for the maiden trip. The fire box doors slammed musically and the blower hissed in the tall stack. The steam gauge needle crept around the dial. The safety valve felt the added pressure and drummed. "Board the Walker side," quoth Captain Dutton. Engineer Dutton snapped the reverse lever into the "back" notch of the quadrant. Deckhand Dutton threw off the lines and Engineer Dutton gave the traction engine a bare inch of throttle. The cylinders groaned and hissed and puffed. The cranks turned. The Hiaeshutter paddle wheel groaned and moved, and the water of the Grand was beaten into foam as the new Kent swung clear of the bank. Engineer Dutton gave her a wide throttle and the Grand sung a useless remonstrating song at the flat cutwater.[34]

The saloon business was saved! A new steel bridge was completed in 1904 at a cost of $30,000, and the economy was back to normal. The "Kent" quickly passed the way of earlier river steamers; its role had been fulfilled.

The railroads, the West River Toll Road and the streetcar brought improved modes of transportation, but like other small towns in the Middle West in the late nineteenth century, Mill Creek depended on horses. Most houses had a barn where the family horse and buggy were kept, and the local business district provided the establishments that supported this horse culture. Richard Lingeman provides a description of village horse culture in Small Town America:

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[34]Chrysler, op. cit., p. 47 and "North Park Ferry," Grand Rapids Press, September 11, 1903, p. 9.

> There were, of course, stores where the farmers stopped off to pick up supplies before the trip home and the saloons where he wetted down the dust in his throat. There were livery stables, carriage makers, blacksmith shops, harness makers, feed shops, the establishment that made horse troughs, hitching racks and town pumps, and the assembly place for the commerce to and from the farm--the depot, stockyards, elevators, restaurants where farmers and teamsters caught a meal in mid-journey.[35]

Lingeman's description was intended for a larger village than Mill Creek, but the role the horse played in community development applied to all areas in the midwest. Horse culture was manifest in Mill Creek through its blacksmith shops and livery stables, while the harness races at the fairground truly emphasized the horse's exalted role. The late nineteenth century relied on horses as modern man does the automobile, and their pungent aroma constantly reminded local folk of their presence in the village.

Mill Creek had two blacksmith shops located on main street. The first shop was built by Lester Lamoreaux, the elder son of Andrew Jackson Lamoreaux, an accomplished blacksmith when he arrived with his family in the early 1840's. This shop was located on the north bank of Mill Creek, across the road from the present fire station.[36] In later years, George Ellis and Billy Precious operated this blacksmith shop. In 1905 Ed Joyce opened another blacksmith shop on West River Road in the south end of the village. This building, a wooden frame structure with sliding doors and few windows, was always surrounded by wheels, broken farm implements, buggies and wagons, that were always in need of repair. Inside the shop facilities were provided along the north wall for two teams of horses,

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[35]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 264.

[36]Chapman, op. cit., p. 1311.

with a work area to the south centered around the anvil and forge. The rear of the shop was cluttered with pieces of metal and wood that were used in the process of repairing wagons and machinery.[37] The blacksmith shop was a favorite place for children to visit for they would witness "sparks flying, the clang of heavy hammer on the anvil, a kicking or biting horse being shod, the labyrinth of old wheels, part of plows, pieces of cultivators, odd and ends of metal, tires being set, bobsleds shod or mended, a hame repaired or the thousand other jobs" that were being performed by the village blacksmith.[38] Lingeman provides further insight on the blacksmith's trade pointing out that "he made nails and horseshoes for a starter, but he also fashioned chains, tires, reaphooks, bullet molds, yoke rings, axles, animal traps, files, shears, locks, keys, adzes, ploughshares, hackel teeth, bits, saws, and the metal parts for a variety of implements for home and farming, such as spinning wheels, looms and flails."[39] U.P. Hedrick, who wrote about his Michigan childhood in The Land of the Crooked Tree, found "the most satisfying time to visit the blacksmith's shop was in mid-winter, when sparks were flying in all directions and the fire in the hearth heated the shop while snow was falling outside and an Artic gale blowing."[40] The Mill Creek blacksmiths were especially busy during fair week and the harness racing season, when they were frequently called to shoe the horses at the track. With the decline of the fair and

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[37]Clarence Wier, personal interview in Clarence Wier home, Comstock Park, Michigan, March 8, 1972.

[38]U. P. Hedrick, The Land of the Crooked Tree (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 263.

[39]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 145.

[40]Hedrick, op. cit., p. 267.

the advent of the automobile, the trade of the blacksmith began to slow and eventually it came to a halt. The blacksmith shops were torn down and service stations appeared on main street.

The livery stable was another business supported by horse culture. The first livery in Mill Creek was owned by Eli Plumb and was built during the 1860's . Plumb's livery burned in 1911 or 1912. Nick Fink was operating a livery stable next to his Riversite Hotel at this time. The Fink livery was also destroyed by fire. Early residents recall running hose from the tannery across the street to save the hotel; however, the livery was completely destroyed. Fred Echternach entered the livery business when Fink's establishment burned. A portion of the old Echternach livery still remains; it houses Ludge Tool and Die. Echternach's livery had a a large hay loft, a room for wagons and carriages off the Lamoreaux Drive entrance and stalls for horses on the main floor. Echternach, who also operated the saloon in front of the livery, raised race horses at the site which he raced at the local track.[41]

The livery stable provided shelter and feed for the animals, but like the blacksmith shop, it served as a social center and loafing place for the men of the town. Lingeman provides a description of the small town livery stable that may have been characteristic of those that operated in Mill Creek.

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[41]Howard and Ida Lovell, personal interview in the Lovell home, Comstock Park, Michigan, March 24, 1971.

> Typically, they were two-story box like structures of unpainted wood, the walls covered with tin signs advertising various patent remedies for ailing horses. They exuded the stable smells of horses, manure, feed, and hay. There was a rude office with wooden chairs, a desk, a cot for the night man, and a potbellied stove, around which loungers gathered in winter.[42]

The livery stables and blacksmith shops were the places where town gossip was shared. "Horses . . .and appropriate rigs were hired for weddings and funerals, so stable owners were likely to be the first to know about marriages and deaths, or which of the town's young bucks had hired a rig to go on a spree in a neighboring town--and in what condition he returned," claims Lingeman.[43] Many of the world's problems were undoubtedly settled in the community livery stables, and with the decline of horse culture, the community lost another of its exclusively male preserves.

One of the most pleasant ventures undertaken in the small community of Mill Creek was the West Michigan Fair. The fairground was the fruit of the political and philanthropic endeavors of Charles Carter Comstock, and for over forty years, thousands of people from West Michigan were provided with a wide range of spectacles and sporting events at the local site. In the autumn after the peak of the harvest season, farmers would journey to Mill Creek with their wagons loaded with the best fruits of their labor selected for competition and display at the fair. Residents of Grand Rapids and the surrounding cities and towns would join the rural crowd displaying manufactured products and retail merchandise that appealed to the farmers' tastes and often reflected the latest in agricultural

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[42]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 264.

[43]Ibid.

technology. When the fair was not in session, West Michiganders would watch for advertisements in the local newspapers announcing harness races, sporting events and in later years automobile races. Thus, in the late nineteenth century when agricultural values dominated community life, the fairground and the race track played a significant role in the social and economic life of the people. However, with increased industrialization in West Michigan, rural men left their farms and sought employment in city factories, resulting in the decline of the fairground until it became a casuality of suburban living.

The origin of the West Michigan Fair can be traced back to November 17, 1890, when C.C. Comstock offered to donate ninety acres of ground to the West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society, provided $50,000 was raised for improvements.[44] The Comstock property was located on the west side of Grand River just north of the bridge where the U.S. 131 freeway and Woodland Paving Company now stand. During the summer months, Comstock used the teamsters from his lumber camps to dike the river and fill in the swamp, and by 1890 they had landscaped a fairly attractive site.[45] When Comstock donated the land, the deed specified that the property could "be used for fairs and exposition grounds and for the holding of exhibitions, shows, religious and political meetings, for a race track for the speeding of horses and for other purposes of like nature."[46] A special provision was included in the deed which required the fair

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[44]"The Riverside Fair," The Evening Leader, December 9, 1890, p. 1.

[45]Ida Lovell, private interview in the home of Howard and Ida Lovell, Comstock Park, Michigan, March 24, 1971.

[46]Goss, op. cit., p. 580.

association to subscribe $50,000 for development, which they raised by selling four per cent bonds for a twenty year period. The West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society made the Michigan Trust Company trustee for $100,000 in bonds "to be paid in installments of 25 per cent respectively in March, May, July, and September of 1891, the proceeds to be used exclusively in improving the grounds."[47] The bonds sold quickly, $14,000 having been raised at the first subscription meeting.

Before the fair was located in Mill Creek there was great controversy over the wisdom of placing it on the Comstock site. The Comstock grant, which may also have been designed to promote development of north end real estate, created a deep rift between two fair organizations, The West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society and the Kent County Agricultural Society. During the latter half of the 1800's, the Kent County organization had sponsored fairs on land they owned south of the city, near Jefferson Avenue and Hall Street. A sizeable fair complex had been established on the Hall Street site, and the West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society rented the land and facilities from the Kent County organization each fall in order to hold its fair. With the advent of the Comstock grant, the West Michigan organization had to solve the dilemma of continuing to rent the Hall Street site or accepting and developing the property in the north. Amidst some bitter political manipulation, the decision was made to abandon the Kent County organization

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[46]Goss, op. cit., p. 580.

[47]The Evening Leader, December 9, 1890, p. 1.

and promote the new fair.[48]

Between 1891 and 1897 the people of Western Michigan were provided with two fairs involved in intense competition. The Kent County Agricultural Society continued to operate a fair on the Hall Street ground, and the West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society developed its new fairground in Mill Creek. Charles W. Garfield of the Grand Rapids Savings Bank, a promoter of the Kent County association for forty years, told "of how he went out to the new fairgrounds to the north and took a photograph of the place when it was covered with water--the photograph to be used for campaign purposes."[49] Garfield owned land in the south end of Grand Rapids, and he resented Comstock's attempt to "steal" the fair and place it on his property. In 1891 both fairs were held during the same week, September 14 to 18, and both organizations competed through newspaper advertisements, posters and major attractions to draw the larger crowd.[50] After 1891 the fairs were scheduled for different weeks, but competition among them continued until 1897 when the Kent County organization, realizing that it could not compete successfully with the newer fair, abandoned its operation and the Comstock fair emerged supreme. In 1902 the Mill Creek organization was reorganized as the West Michigan State Fair, with the word "State" included in the title because those behind the name change believed

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[48]"Offer of Grounds Recalls Old Fair Rivalry," Grand Rapids Press, October 15, 1915, p. 2.

[49]Ibid.

[50]"Kent's Popular Show," and "Ready for the Crowds," The Evening Leader, September 15, 1891.

"that 'Michigan's best fair' was to be too big for any sectionalism in the name."[51]

The West Michigan State Fair was housed in a variety of impressive structures. Upon entering the fairgrounds, patrons passed through one of two entrances that were flanked by thirty-two foot towers that contained offices and adjoining waiting rooms. The main entrance was located on the west side of the grounds adjacent to the railroad depot, and the other was placed south of the grounds to accommodate street railway patrons who had to walk across the North Park bridge. After paying the admission fee, the crowds followed wooden plank walks that led to the major buildings and fair attractions.[52]

The most impressive building on the fairground was the Art Hall. The Premium List of 1894 described the building:

> Has a rotunda center 106 feet in diameter; height to base of flag staff 110 feet. The building is in the form of an octagon cross, with eight wings, extending from the center, of rotunda. Four of the wings at right angles to each other are 44 x 80 feet each, two stories high 22 feet posts, with gallery extending all around the dome or center. The other four wings are each 32 x 80 feet, one story 12 feet posts. There are eight entrances, each flanked by octagon towers; the two-story towers are 50 feet high, the spans through the building from end to end are 266 feet.[53]

The Art Hall was painted a light cream color relieved with white. When

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[51]"Michigan's Best Fair; Its Races and Features," Grand Rapids Press, September 27, 1902, p. 1.

[52]West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society Fair, Premium List 1894, p. 25, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library.

[53]Ibid., p. 27.

the building was completed in 1891, the Honorable C.E. Belknap joined an inspection excursion and remarked, "splendid accomodations for manufacturers to exhibit. The Art Hall is the best lighted in the country."[54] Belknap was impressed with the amount of glass used in the structure as all of the lighting was natural.

A wide variety of exhibits were displayed in the Art Hall. When the fair opened in 1891, the following exhibitors were among those who had rented space for their displays:

Spring and Company--dry goods
Julius A. J. Friedrich--musical instruments
Nelson, Matter and Company--furniture
Valley City Milling Company--flour and meals
G. Zwingeberg--furs
Groskopf Brothers--trunks and travel bags
Heyman and Company--household furnishings
Belknap, Baker and Company--carriages and harnesses

Fruits from Kent County; local art; baked goods; sewing and quilting; manufactured goods; and church, school and club displays rounded out the items shown in the Art Hall. The most popular exhibits throughout the 1890's always centered around furniture. The Telegram-Herald noted in 1891 "the furniture show is complete as might be expected. Mahogany, antique oak and birdseye maple are shown in elaborate fashions."[56]

The horse barn was another focal point on the fairground. The horses were stabled in a facility "219 x 312 feet, 40 feet wide, enclosing a

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[54]"Up the Rolling Grand," The Telegram-Herald, September 2, 1891, p. 1.

[55]"Ready for the Crowds," The Telegram-Herald, September 15, 1891, p. 1.

[56]"Plenty of Fine Sport," The Telegram-Herald, September 16, 1891, p. 1.

square or court in the center 139 x 234 feet with track inside for exhibiting horses."[57] The enclosed court provided an ideal quarters for inspecting stock and awarding premiums. The court was considered an innovation in 1891 because it protected the judges from being molested by curious and intruding spectators. The main entrance of the horse barn was flanked by two octagonal towers that were used as offices by the superintendent of the horse department.

Those who exhibited horses were charged an entrance fee, usually one dollar per horse, and a stall fee. The fair association provided free bedding for the stalls and sold hay and oats to exhibitors at regular market prices. The horses were shown in their stalls, and during exhibition hours, the doors to all stalls were opened. Colorful banners were hung over the doors announcing the breed of the horse and the name and residence of the owner. Competitions were open to both pedigree and non-standard breed horses with premiums awarded to the winners in the following classes; standard bred roadsters, roadsters not standard bred, carriage and buggy horses, saddle horses, horses of all work, coach horses, Belgian draft, Percheron or French draft, Clydsdale or English shire, grade draft horses, jacks and mules, and Shetland ponies. Each year judging standards were posted in the horse barns, which included such characteristics as form, general beauty, style, action, matching and evenness of gait. Cash premiums in each class ranged from around fifteen dollars for first place, eleven dollars for second and seven dollars for

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[57]West Michigan Fair, Premium List 1894, p. 27.

third.[58]

The cattle barn was located north of the horse barn and also fronted the midway and grandstands. The cattle barn was built on the same design as the horse barn with minor alterations. In 1897 three hundred head of cattle were exhibited in the cattle barn, and they were shipped to Mill Creek from all over the midwest.[59] In 1903 fourteen classes of cattle were exhibited, including shorthorns, Devons, herefords, Jerseys, calloways, Aberdeen-Angus, Holstein-Friesians, red polled, Gurnseys, Ayrshire, polled Durhams, grade cows, pure bred fat cattle, and grade fat cattle. Premiums were awarded to various aged bulls and cows, heifers, yearlings, heifer calves, herds and sweepstakes, like a bull and four get. The champion in each class received a blue ribbon and $15 while a red ribbon and $12 was awarded to second and a yellow ribbon and $8 dollars went to third.[60] Dudley Waters of Grand Rapids, owner of Maryland Farms, and Martin Buth, Sr. of Comstock Park, owner of Creston Farm, were local favorites in the cattle department, competing in the Holstein-Friesian class. While the judges inspected the cattle and awarded ribbons and premiums, farmers who hung around the livestock barns would circle them anxiously awaiting their decisions. While the men lingered around the livestock barns "their wives and daughters made the rounds of the commercial exhibits in the main building and inspected the needlework and other exhibits in the women's building."[61] The horses and cattle were all

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[58]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1903, p. 45, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library.

[59]"Its Gates are Open," Evening Press, September 6, 1897, p. 1.

[60]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1903, p. 29.

[61]"Livestock Draws Farmers," Grand Rapids Press, August 31, 1926, p. 1.

paraded around the race track in front of the grandstand on Wednesday of fair week in the grand cavalcade of the animals.

The sheep and swine buildings were located north of the cattle barn at the end of the midway. Two buildings housed the sheep exhibits, and one was provided for the swine. The sheep and swine buildings were separated by a service entrance where livestock and machinery were brought into the fairgrounds from the railroad loading docks. Pens were located in the center of the buildings with a six foot covered walk around them. The stock was separated according to breed so spectators could compare their merits.[62] Sheep and swine exhibits were popular during the early days of the fair. In 1897 the Evening Press reported "In the hog department there are 425 snorting rooters grunting away merrily" and "of the meek sheep and lambs there are 350 on the grounds and more to be placed."[63] These exhibits were especially popular with the children. The Press discovered "children under 10 years of age found it extremely difficult to peer into the pens and inspect the sheep and swine exhibits. Fathers' and mothers' arms grew tired lifting their offspring to vantage points where they could survey the bleating sheep and the grunting, squealing hogs."[64]

The original purpose of the fair was to promote agriculture and industry, and during its early years, an educational atmosphere prevailed.

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[62]West Michigan Fair, Premium List 1894, p. 27.

[63]Evening Press, September 6, 1897, p. 1.

[64]"Children are Honored Guests as Fair Opens," Grand Rapids Press, August 30, 1926, p. 1.

The midway had few rides, side shows and gaming tables. Farm machinery exhibits took up most of the space between the buildings and was housed in tents on property north of the grandstand. Manufacturers displayed windmills, water systems, manure spreaders, silo fillers, thrashing machines, choppers, grinders, wagons and a multitude of other farm implements. The Premium List of 1913 stressed the educational and improvement function of the fair claiming "as a distributing mart for livestock of all kinds and for extending the intercourse among men engaged in the livestock industry, there is no agency yet known that can approach it in this field of endeavor."[65] Later, when country boys began to leave the farm to work in a factory, they had less interest in agricultural exhibits and were looking for more citified attractions.[66] The fairs responded and during the twentieth century presented their patrons with the glitter of the midway. Lyman A. Lilly, secretary of the West Michigan Fair in 1917 reflected this change when he stated the purpose of the fair was for "the education, amusement, and entertainment of everyone."[67] As the twentieth century progressed, the agricultural and educational functions of the fair started to disappear because of the changes introduced by industrialization and urbanization.

The climax of the fair was usually centered around hotly contested harness races "which drew the best animals and drivers on the state

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[65]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1913, p. 13, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library.

[66]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 310.

[67]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1914, p. 13, Michigan Room, Grand Rapids Public Library.

circuit."[68] The West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society built seven speed stables on the north end of the fairground that accommodated up to 185 horses. The horses raced on a mile track in front of wooden grandstands which seated 4,500 people. The rooms under the grandstand were used for dining and refreshment.[69] Lingeman describes the role of harness racing at a county fairground as follows:

> The center of many a town's fairgrounds was a wooden grandstand and race track, where races were held in spring, summer and fall, with the county fair meet the world series of the season. On the final day, families brought picnic baskets and arrived early to pack the grey, weathered-lumber grandstand, with its splintering wooden seats, or else crowded close by the track so that, when the horses came pounding into the stretch, the marshalls had to yell at them to get back and give them room. As the horses neared the finish line, the entire grandstand stood and cheered; plenty of bets were riding.[70]

The horses at the fair were the cream of the local horse population. Many hours had been spent in training them, and they were specially bred. The bet became an adjunct to the racing and indicated the confidence the horseman had in his finished product.

From the very beginning, the track of the West Michigan Fair provided the people in the area with the opportunity to enjoy quality harness racing, and one may legitimately question if racing was not the purpose for having the fairground established. Horse flesh from all over the midwest was shipped to Mill Creek, making local residents as familiar with big names on the track, like Doc Tanner and Pop Geers, as contemporaries are with popular athletes and athletes and television personalities. The

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[68]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 310.

[69]West Michigan Agricultural and Industrial Society, Premium List 1894, p. 27.

[70]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 310.

speed stables were the first facilities to be used on the fairgrounds. In 1891 the Telegram-Herald reported that "about fifty horses are now in training on the course. The stalls are nearly all secured and some fine strings are on exhibition."[71] Each owner rented space at the speed stable, and employees cared for the needs of the horses and equipment. The local speed stables were probably very similar to the ones Sherwood Anderson described in Tar: A Midwest Childhood:

> There was a board floor and a long row of box stalls on each side and in front of each stall there was an opening with iron bars so he could look through but the horse inside could not get out. A good thing, too. Tar walked along slow, looking in. "Fassig's Irish Main; Old Hundred; Tipton Ten: Willing-to-Please; Saul, The First; Passenger Boy; Holy Mackerel." The names were on little tickets fastened on the front of the stalls.[72]

The speed stables were a favorite lounging place of race fans at the fairgrounds. Anderson states, "on the bench in front of the stable, on summer afternoons when there weren't any horses being worked at the track, the men talked--sometimes of women, sometimes of why God let certain things happen, sometimes of why is a farmer always growling."[73] Anderson had a job as a stable boy at the track and went around "in horsey evil smelling pants."[74] His mother reluctantly consented to having her son working at the stable because she thought the association would be bad for him. Anderson admitted the stable life had its base nature:

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[71]Telegram-Herald, August 19, 1891, p. 1.

[72]Sherwood Anderson, Tar: A Midwest Childhood (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 174.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Sherwood Anderson, Return to Winesburg, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 106.

> I dare say the associations were bad, too. What profanity the boy heard! There were men about the stables who were artists at it.
>
> Tough women hanging about, too--and con men, flash men of all sorts.[75]

Anderson's experiences in Winesburg, Ohio were similar to those of many young men growing up in Mill Creek who hung around the speed stables. The speed stables were located next to the row of houses built by the Mill Creek Tannery so the race track became an integral part of the education of inquisitive tannery youth.

The race track in Mill Creek was a mile oval extending from the North Park bridge to Mill Creek, and it was constructed of heavily packed dirt which was watered and rolled on race day. A half-mile track was constructed inside the mile oval in 1903. The local track soon earned the reputation of being one of the fastest tracks in the midwest. In 1891 at the first fair on the new fairground, Nelson covered the mile in two minutes and ten seconds to establish a track record.[76] Nelson's record created interest in holding another race in 1891, and it proved to be local harness racing's finest hour.

On October 8, 1891, the Comstock Driving Park was the scene of the most famous horse race ever staged on a Grand Rapids track. Two royal stallions, Nelson, owned by C.H. Nelson of Maine, and Allerton, owned by C.W. Williams of Iowa, met for a race billed by its promoter Don J.

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[75] Ibid.

[76] "Down Goes His Record," Telegram-Herald, September 19, 1891, p. 1.

Leathers as the trotting world's championship. These horses were the finest trotting horses alive, and they raced for a $10,000 purse, a fabulous sum for that day. The race was to be decided on the best three of five heats with the owners doing the driving.[77] Both horses had trotted the mile in record time, and the excitement generated by the match swept the whole country. Grand Rapids was exuberant over the race as a week prior to its running the hotels were filled with horsemen, who constantly discussed the horses. Local newspapers were filled with gossip concerning the drivers, and the condition of the horses was reported daily. Bets were placed; the Morton House established a betting ring in its pool room with Allerton given a 25 to 20 edge. Local fans placed their money on Nelson, as he had set the record at the fair in September, and they were eager to challenge the western money.[78]

On October 8 race fans poured into Mill Creek from all over the country. Special excursion trains arrived from Maine, Chicago, Terra Haute, Detroit and other cities of Michigan. By race time 20,000 spectators crowded around the track, having paid one dollar admission to the grandstand and an extra dollar for a reserved seat. A temporary grandstand was erected where unreserved seats were sold for fifty cents. The blanketed horses and colorful drivers seated in their fragile sulkies were paraded around in all of their splendor to the delight of the enthusiastic crowd who were eager for the race to begin.[79]

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[77]"Throw Up Your Hats," Evening Leader, September 25, 1891.

[78]"All Is Now Settled," Evening Leader, September 30, 1891.

[79]"Most Famous Horse Race Ever Staged on a Grand Rapids Track," Grand Rapids Herald, August 22, 1915. p. 2.

Nelson took the first heat in an unimpressive two minutes and thirteen seconds. In the middle of the second heat, C.H. Nelson turned to see how far he was ahead and pulled his horse to the pole. Valuable seconds were lost, and Allerton took advantage of the mistake and won the heat and the next two races. Thus, the glory of the great race was denied to Nelson as he was defeated three heats to one by Allerton. Local fans rationalized that Nelson was still the best of the two horses, but his driver was a fool. With a record of two minutes and seventeen seconds Allerton left Mill Creek as the world's class trotting champion.[80]

The harness racing events stages at the fairground during the 1890's were sponsored by the Grand Rapids Horsemen's Association with Don J. Leathers serving as president. Leathers was responsible for the successful Nelson-Allerton race, and the following year he led the Horsemen's Association into another ambitious scheme. During the summer meetings of 1892, the association hung up purses aggregating $50,000. The Evening Leader reported, "It was the first time in the history of horse trotting that an American association had hung up . . . a stake or purse of this magnitude without entrance charges."[81] The results of the summer season proved to be disastrous and "the association not only lost a pile of money but to some extent lost its nerve."[82] To pay off its losses, members of the Horsemen's Association had to dip into their own pockets. Leathers contributed $1,000 to the effort, but "chagrined and discouraged,

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[80]"Allerton," Evening Leader, October 8, 1891, p. 1.

[81]"Horse Talk," Evening Leader, November 18, 1892, p. 2.

[82]Ibid.

[83]"In Good Old Days," Evening Press, August 13, 1904, p. 1.

no meeting on any scale half as pretentious has ever been undertaken,"[83] the Press reported in 1904. The Horsemen's Association provided conservative purses until it was replaced in 1903 by the Furniture City Driving Club. The Press concluded, "there is little question if the bold and progressive spirits who controlled the destinies of the Grand Rapids Horsemen's Association had been less ambitious the future of racing events in this city would have been more propitious."[84]

The small village of Mill Creek received further impetus in 1896 when the State selected it as the site for a fish hatchery for the propagation of black bass. In 1894 F.B. Dickerson and Horace W. Davis of the State Board of Fish Commissioners engaged Dwight Lydell "to conduct some experiments, in the hope of perfecting a method by which black bass might be propagated for distribution."[85] Lydell set up an experimental station in Cascade and soon discovered that the male bass was responsible for building the nest and caring for the eggs. Lydell's discovery upset one of the pet theories of the scientists as they supposed the role of mother to be indigenous to the female. Lydell continued to experiment with black bass, resulting in developing methods for their artificial propagation.[86] The State Board of Fish Commissioners were impressed with Lydell's work, and in 1896 they spent $500 to purchase a five acre patch of land in Mill Creek for the establishment of a bass hatchery. In 1897 the Evening Press

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[83]"In Good Old Days," Evening Press, August 13, 1904, p. 1.

[84]Ibid.

[85]"Best in the World," Evening Press, August 16, 1902, p. 1.

[86]"To Raise Black Bass," Evening Press, September 25, 1897, p. 7.

described the site as:

> Just within about two stone throws north of the State fairgrounds, the C. and W.M. Railway Company's tracks cross Mill Creek and at this point is as pretty a little bit of scenery as cultivated country affords. The tracks are built upon an embankment about twenty feet in height, and in a little valley at the base are the hatcheries.[87]

During the winter of 1896 and 1897, the legislature appropriated $1,500 for the construction of ponds, dams, mains and general site development, and Horace Davis was assigned to oversee the construction.[88] Two storage ponds and twelve breeding ponds were constructed, and on September 24 the ponds were stocked with black bass that "were obtained from the Kalamazoo River near Galesburg, and from the Grand River below the dam in Grand Rapids."[89]

The outcome of the hatchery at Mill Creek village was a disappointment for the first two or three seasons. In 1897 the hatch was lost because of the incompleteness of the ponds and two spring freshets on Mill Creek. The State reported:

> The soil being light, the rain dissolved and washed the sloping sides sufficient to roil the ponds; these will have to be walled or cemented. In addition, two remarkably heavy precipitations, practically cloudbursts, occurred very inopportunely, roiling the creek to a disastrous degree just as the height of the bedding season.[90]

A retaining wall was constructed out of stone along the south bank of

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

[89] State of Michigan, Thirteenth Biannual Report of the State Board of Fish Commissioners for the Calendar Years 1897 and 1898 (Lansing: Robert Smith Printing Company, 1899), p. 12.

[90] Ibid., p. 11.

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Mill Creek in the following year, and the ponds were put back in operation. Several ponds were added to the small hatchery, and by 1903 the State had concluded, "through the resourcefulness and tireless energy and efforts of the overseer, Mr. Lydell . . . one obstacle after another has been overcome, one problem after another has been solved, until today the production of bass on a certain and stable basis, and of a size and age to insure good results when set free in wild waters, is an accomplished fact."[91]

Mill Creek was selected as a hatchery site because of its excellent rail facilities and the abundance of water on the hatchery site. J.K.V. Agnew of the C. and W.M. Railway made several trips to the hatchery premises to study the possibility of arranging a sidetrack to accomodate the institution and undoubtedly applied pressure to have the hatchery built along company lines.[92] The creek was a resource essential to the development of the hatchery, and a dam was built above the facility from which water was piped to the ponds. A good spring located in the bluffs west of the hatchery was piped to the hatchery grounds and provided a good supply of water for the hatchery building. The State emphasized the role of water by reporting in 1904:

> The volume of Mill Creek is abundantly ample to support not only the ponds already completed, but also an extention of the pond system over the entire valley between our dam and the mill pond at Mill Creek village, which would more than double the capacity

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[91]State Of Michigan, Sixteenth Biannual Report of the State Board of Fish Commissioners for the Calendar Years 1903 and 1904 (Lansing: Robert Smith Publishing Company, 1904), p. 13.

[92]Evening Press, September 25, 1897, p. 7.

> and output of the plant. We look forward to the acquirement and development of the remainder of this valley at the earliest possible date.[93]

The fish biologists were optimistic about the future of the hatchery in Mill Creek in 1904. The facility had a small two story frame hatchery building with a tank room, pump room and an office on the first floor and a workshop and bedrooms on the second floor. The tank room was equipped with a fifty-jar battery for the hatching of walleyed pike.[94] A residence was erected in 1903 for the superintendent on the high bluffs to the east so he could overlook the grounds, and a horse barn was constructed at the base of the hill along the creek. The hatchery made an appeal for visitors to inspect the site, except during the spawning season in the spring, and the State started to develop their growing enterprise into a tourist attraction and a park. In the years ahead the Mill Creek Hatchery would be declared "The finest equipped and most productive fish hatchery in the United States."[95]

Mill Creek experienced further growth in 1897 when it was selected as the site for the location of two tanneries. Rail transportation was once again a significant factor in the development of the community, as the tanneries were required to ship an abundance of tan bark, hides and leather by rail. The tanneries had nine railroad sidings running through their grounds in 1907, and chuffing locomotives switched cars from track

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[93]State of Michigan, Sixteenth Report--State Fisheries, p. 13.

[94]Ibid.

[95]State of Michigan, Department of Conservation, Division of Fish Culture Operations, Report for Fiscal Year 1921 and 1922 (Lansing: State Printing Office, 1923), p. 86.

to track.[96] The tanneries like the fish hatchery and the fair would never have been located in Mill Creek had it not been for the railroad junction.

The first tannery was built in Mill Creek in the spring of 1897 by George Metz; it was called the Mill Creek Tannery. Metz, who lived on the corner of Four Mile Road and West River Road, constructed his tannery between the Grand Rapids and Indiana railroad tracks and the Grand River, just north of Mill Creek.[97] Metz employed between twenty-five and thirty-five men in his business, which he named the Grand Rapids Leather Company. He also built the brick building on the corner of West River Road and Leland Street (formerly called Metz Street) in 1897 which is now occupied by the State Bank of Michigan. John Baker started a general store on the main floor of the building, called the Mill Creek Mercantile Company, while the second floor was used by the International Order of Odd Fellows.[98] Metz became a successful local businessman, and the Metz building in Grand Rapids was named after him.

A second tannery, the Michigan Tannery, was built just north of the Mill Creek Tannery in the fall of 1897 by John Bertsch, of the Cappon and Bertsch Leather Company of Holland. Cappon and Bertsch started in an old log building in Holland in 1857 and "in 1880, competing at New York, they took the gold medal for the best non-acid sole leather made in the United

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[96]Standard Atlas of Kent County, Michigan (Chicago, George A. Ogle and Co., 1907), p. 45.

[97]Clarence Wier, personal interview at the home of Clarence Wier, Comstock Park, Michigan, November 15, 1971.

[98]Hachmuth, op. cit., p. 1.

States."[99] Cappon and Bertsch opened a store in Grand Rapids in 1869, and when Metz started his tannery in 1897 in Mill Creek, they built next door to compete for the leather market.

In 1902 George Metz sold the Mill Creek Tannery to the Wallin Leather Company, a Chicago based operation that opened a tannery in Grand Rapids on South Front Street in 1881, and they later also purchased the Michigan Tannery. The Wallin Leather Company, as the two tanneries were then called, did a prosperous business until they were sold to the Union Tanning Company, a New York syndicate, during the first World War.[100]

The tanning industries played a major role in developing housing in Comstock Park. At the peak of their operation they owned forty-seven homes and two tenements. The houses were rented by the workers at the plant for 50¢ to $1.25 a week; the rent was deducted from their pay checks.[101] The tannery rows were made of two story frame houses that were identical in design. Rolled roofing, wood siding, small porch, wood pile for the stove, standard outhouse, possibly a pig pen or chicken coup, and a family garden were the embellishments of the tanners' home environment. Humble by today's standards, but the tanner was a proud independent man who was happy to have a job whereby he could support his family. Many of the older residents in Comstock Park today were raised on tannery row. The row houses stood on Leland Street, West River Drive and between the G.R. and I. tracks and the Grand River. A few of these structures still

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[99]Baxter, op. cit., p. 494.

[100]Wier, op. cit.

[101]Ibid.

remain, and from them one can catch a glimpse of humble tannery row architecture.

The late nineteenth century brought great change to the village developing around Mill Creek; the railroads, street cars and improved roads increased communication and broke down rural isolation. Economic and cultural ties were being established with the larger mass society. With the fairground, tanneries and the fish hatchery starting out in the 1890's the local residents approached the future with optimism expecting rapid growth. People traveled to Mill Creek to visit the fair and the hatchery or to attend the harness races run at the local track. Mill Creek was establishing a reputation in Western Michigan as a progressive community. It appeared eager to tackle the problems that would be introduced by urbanization and industrialization. The inhabitants of Mill Creek expected great things in the future.

CHAPTER III

DEVELOPMENT OF COMSTOCK PARK,1906 TO 1940

At the turn of the century, Comstock Park was a tannery village and in many ways resembled the typical mill town of the late nineteenth century. The tanneries expanded north along the river, a resource they exploited by disposing of large amounts of industrial waste there. They erected power plants, tan yards, beam houses, drying lofts, storage buildings, extract plants and bark sheds. Tan bark dominated the area as it was piled in long rows along the railroad sidings. Busy locomotives brought in hides from the Chicago and St. Louis stockyards and took out finished harness and shoe leather, while towering smokestacks poured black smoke into the air as warm summer breezes carried the repugnant odor of rotting flesh and strong chemicals throughout the community. The tanneries owned and operated their own general store, the Mill Creek Mercantile Company on Metz Street, where workers could purchase food on credit, and they also owned most of the village real estate, including forty seven houses and two tenement buildings where their employees were housed. During the peak of their operation, the tanneries employed around five hundred men, including many street car commuters from Grand Rapids.[1] The village had two hotels, the Riversite and the North Star, which boarded tannery workers and provided amusement during their leisure hours. Tanners worked a

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[1]Clarence Wier, personal interview at the home of Clarence Wier, Comstock Park, Michigan, November 15, 1971.

fifty-four hour week for around twenty dollars, with their rent deducted from their paychecks.[2] Thus, the Industrial Revolution brought unbridled capitalism to the banks of Mill Creek, with success now determined in the village by rate of growth, weekly profits and net earnings on laborers' paychecks. The tanneries lured workers from their subsistance farms and introduced the wage earner to the agricultural and business oriented class structure of the village. Furthermore, the tanneries produced a few boom years to the small village that had been known as Mill Creek.

One of the more significant events that occurred around the turn of the century was a change in the village name. The reasons for the name change is still a subject of dispute, but Homer Burch provides some insight with the following:

> Along in the last of the 1870's, C.C. Comstock, a Grand Rapids industrialist and one time mayor of the city, acquired vast real estate holdings in the area and eventually the village name was changed again--to Comstock Park in honor of Mr. Comstock. Somehow the transition from Mill Creek to Comstock Park in peoples minds was slow and gradual and it was still thought of and called Mill Creek long after it became Comstock Park. It was not until 1906 that the post office was also renamed Comstock Park.[3]

Comstock had great impact on the area for he was responsible for constructing West River Road, erecting the first bridge across the river, donating ninety acres for use as a fair ground, extending streetcar service in the north end, diking the river and filling in the swamps, building the North Park pavilion and marketing north end real estate. Comstock's life was marked with success in lumbering along the Rogue River and Cadillac

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Burch, op. cit., p.10

areas, establishing a factory to manufacture pails and tubs and another to produce furniture and serving Grand Rapids politically as mayor and congressman.[4] When it was time to abolish the name of Mill Creek, C.C. Comstock was the ideal local role model of an industrial era when financial success was the mark of a great man. Thus, Daniel North's pioneer home was renamed Comstock Park while the village across the river in Comstock's backyard retained the name of North Park. The name change was contested for a variety of reasons but among them was the fact that Comstock never lived in the community that bears his name.

The fairground had an impact on renaming the village. In 1891 when the Nelson-Allerton race was run the race track was called the Comstock Driving Park, as C.C. Comstock had donated the land and promoted development of the site. Race programs continued to promote the Comstock Driving Park while fans shortened the title by deleting the word driving. Thus, the enthusiasts of harness racing simply headed for Comstock Park on race day.

Another version of the name change centers around Mrs. Frank Burt. Mrs. Burt, whose husband owned Judge Burt's Saloon, organized a Comstock Park Beautification Association to clean up the mess around the fairground and in front of the saloons. Mrs. Burt was concerned about the reputation that had been established in Mill Creek so she promoted Comstock Park as the name of the village. Mrs. Burt hired children to plant flowers and tend to the patches of grass around the village to present the image of a neat and orderly community.

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[4]Baxter, op. cit, p. 478.

A more popular version of the name change centers around the bad reputation acquired by Mill Creek. Mill Creek developed a profitable saloon trade because of the location of the Soldiers' Home, the fairground, the race track and the federal restriction against selling alcoholic beverages within one mile limit of the veterans. With five saloons, whose patrons consisted of lonely veterans, race fans and fair entertainers, the village quickly developed a bad reputation. The fair and the race track attracted a motley assortment of questionable characters who were eager to patronize and enrich the local saloons. Richard Lingeman described the small town saloon in words that are very appropriate for the establishments that operated in old Mill Creek:

> The saloons established themselves right on Main Street to catch the farmers walk in trade. Even then, they often had a closed-off, forbidden air to conceal the inner goings-on from the eyes of respectable folk walking the streets. Bars were long and solidly constructed of dark wood, echoed in the paneling on the walls. The decor included prints of race horses, prize fighters, and voluptuous nude women. Yet for all its sometimes sleazy aura of sin, many town saloons were orderly places.[5]

The patrons at Judge Burt's Saloon, Mike Hayes's Saloon, the North Star Hotel, Echternach's Saloon and the Riversite Hotel frequently sought the types of amusement that were frowned on by the village moralists. On September 6, 1903, the first church in the village was dedicated, the Baptist Church, which stood where the high school library is presently located, and the saloon trade began to receive a more determined opposition.[6] The church members took their crusade to the political arena

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[5]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 266.

[6]Hachmuth, op. cit., p. 1.

where a village name change was debated as a means of shedding the reputation that Mill Creek had acquired in the eyes of neighboring communities. On June 8, 1906, the name of the village post office was changed to Comstock Park, and Mrs. Burt and the moralists won their first victory. However, the name of Mill Creek still lingered in the minds of many of the older residents who developed fond attachments with the good old days.

Several older residents in the village claim the name change was promoted by the Comstock Park Ladies Literary Club, whose members resented being introduced at out of town gatherings as "the ladies from Mill Creek." Mill Creek apparently attracted a few "ladies of the night" whose professional reputations had traveled out into the surrounding communities. Respectable club women undoubtedly experienced some degree of embarrassment from the unsavory stigma attached to their village, but this story has limited reliability for the Ladies Literary Club was organized on February 18, 1910, when the village was already generally accepted as Comstock Park. However, the club members probably appreciated the fact that the name on the post office had already been changed.

The growth of the tanneries was reflected in the growth of the community and through the development of the school system. With the introduction of a wage earning class, the population rapidly increased, putting pressure on the neighborhood school. The old Withey School had been abandoned sometime during the 1970's, and the Mill Creek School was erected on West River Road.[7] The first Mill Creek School was a one-room wood frame structure, but during the 1890's, it was either added to or replaced for the school then had two rooms and a long roof covered porch

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[7] Ibid.

where students posed for school pictures. Students at Mill Creek School were taught in a simple atmosphere where they sat two to a desk and worked independently on their assignments until they were called to the recitation benches to recite their lessons. With only two classrooms, teachers worked with multiple classes where students studied together by age and class. Using the recitation system, younger students learned by listening to the older students recite.[8]

The Mill Creek School was simply furnished. It was heated during the winter by two Garland wood stoves, one in the front of each room. Farmers sold wood to the school board and brought it to the school by wagon or sleigh. The wood was placed in the woodshed next to the school and students were assigned to carry it in when it was needed. The teacher's first job on a winter morning was to build the fire and heat the room. Kerosene lamps were suspended from the ceiling to provide light on dark days, as the building was seldom used at night. A small anteroom was used to store lunches, coats, boots and the water bucket. The school water system was composed of a pump, located between West River Road and the G.R. and I tracks, a bucket and a dipper. All students drank from the same dipper and somehow managed to maintain a good state of health. Directly behind the school building stood two outhouses which the students called "five holers." Winter trips to the outhouses were kept as brief as possible.[9]

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[8]Mrs. Leona Wheeler to David Wier, April 8, 1972. Author's local history file, Comstock Park, Michigan.

[9]Clarence Wier, personal interview at the home of Clarence Wier, Comstock Park, Michigan, April 7, 1972.

In 1895 the teachers at Mill Creek School were Miss Evelyn Calkins and a Miss Noyce. Miss Calkins had taught at Mill Creek when the facility was still a one room school. In 1907, when Mill Creek School was replaced, the teaching staff had been enlarged by one position. Miss Jennie Noel taught and served as principal while Mrs. Hart taught the older children and Mrs. Roberson taught the younger ones. Eighty to ninety students were crowded into the two room school at this time, making it necessary to build a new facility. The tanneries had been operating for ten years, and now the school was beginning to grow.[10]

The most enjoyable time for students at the Mill Creek School was the Christmas season. The two rooms were opened up by removing wooden panels; then the school was decorated in Christmas attire. A Christmas tree was set up between the two rooms and lit by candles. Pails of water were placed on both sides of the tree for use in case of fire. Each student participated in a Christmas program by saying a piece or singing a song. This festive mood was climaxed with the giving of gifts. Van A. Wallin, the owner of the tannery, would send his teamster and sleigh to school with presents for the children. Boots were given to the boys and dolls to the girls with everybody receiving oranges, nuts and candy.[11]

Formal education ended in Mill Creek School when students passed the county exams at the end of the eighth grade. The Kent County School Board administered the eighth grade exams, and when they were satisfactorily completed, they issued a diploma. The first graduating exercises in Mill Creek were held in 1904 when J. Neil Lamoreaux, William Hartman

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

and Jay Ramsdell were presented their diplomas in the Baptist Church. Students who went on to school traveled to Grand Rapids where they attended Union High School.[12]

As the tanneries grew, the school grew; therefore, in 1908, with an enrollment of 138, a new facility was erected on the Lamoreaux farm next to the Baptist Church.[13] Clarence Wier, a student at the Mill Creek School at the time recalled the move as follows:

> I was eight years old in the fall of 1908 when we moved out of the Mill Creek School . . . to our new four-room school on the hill. When school opened in September, the Mill Creek School had already been sold, and construction was still in progress at the new site. To solve our problem school officials housed us in the Baptist Church, which was located just a little east of the new building.[14]

The new four room school was a brick two story structure with a bell tower. In keeping with the times, the name of the school was changed from Mill Creek to Comstock Park. The Comstock Park School was heated by a gravity furnace, but kerosene lamps still provided light and there was no inside plumbing. Amelia M. Doyle, a teacher hired in 1908 who taught locally over thirty years, recalled that "when she began teaching at the school, a new four-room building has just been erected . . . this provided an extra room to take care of the expansion expected from Comstock Park."[15] Older residents claim the

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[12]Ellen Ericksen, personal interview at the Ericksen home, Comstock Park, Michigan, April 5, 1972.

[13]Hachmuth, op. cit, p. 1.

[14]Clarence Wier, "Reflections on an Old School," The Schoolhouse, August, 1974, p. 1.

[15]"Honor Teacher for Service at Comstock Park," Grand Rapids Herald, undated article in P.T.A. Scrapbook, May 4, 1941

tanneries provided over seventy-five percent of the tax revenue for building and operating this school as they owned most of the village real estate.

In 1912 there was a need for another building program because 173 pupils were enrolled in the school. An addition was built on the back of the building in 1913 consisting of two upstairs rooms and a main floor auditorium. The School Census of 1915 reported 217 students, an increase of 44 in two years as ninth and tenth grades were added with the completion of new facilities.[16] Ten teachers were employed at the school in 1922, receiving an average annual salary of $1,000. The enrollment stabilized around 225 in the early 1920's; 300 volumes were recorded in the school library and all school property was valued at $30,000.[17] School business centered around personnel problems, music and athletic programs and maintenance. R. Jeffery was employed by the board to perform one of the most unpleasant tasks in the system, cleaning the vault under the outhouses behind the building. Jeffery received $15 for his service, but he had to bear the sobriquet "honey dipper" that was hung on him by the students.[18]

Comstock Park students received their eleventh and twelfth grade education in Grand Rapids until a local high school was completed in 1927. In 1922 the School Board paid $1,180 in tuition to the Grand Rapids schools,

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[16]Plainfield Township, Kent Co., Mich., School Census of District No. 9 Fractional 1915, Directors Book of Records and Accounts 1915-1922, Comstock Park Public Schools, Comstock Park, Michigan.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Plainfield Township, Kent Co., Mich., Director Book of Records and Accounts, July 12, 1914, p. 33.

and $626 was given to provide transportation for students on the streetcar.[19] Anticipating the need for a new high school, the board purchased six lots from the Lamoreaux Farm Plat behind the school for $1,500 in 1921.[20] The School Board created a building committee on July 14, 1924, "with power to act relative to erection of a new building" and Peter Buth, H.C. Hachmuth and Edward B. Joyce were appointed as members.[21] At the annual meeting in July 1925 the building committee reported a $105,000 bond sale for the construction of a new high school. F.P. Allen and Sons were awarded the architectural contract; J.P. Top was awarded the contract for general construction; J. A. VanderWalls Co. was awarded the contract for heating and plumbing; and Grand Rapids Electric was awarded the contract for electrical work.[22] The building was completed in the fall of 1926. Comstock Park High school issued diplomas to its first graduating class in 1927. The new high school contained twelve rooms and a gymnasium and was considered an excellent facility. The building was constructed at the opportune time for the tannery was still prospering and the depression had not yet arrived. The 1927 high school building served the community with little alteration until the 1960's when housing developments increased the population, and it is still used as part of the high school today.

The tanneries stimulated the development of Comstock Park producing what Lingeman called a "metamorphosis from the pioneer chrysalis."[23] One

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[19]Plainfield Township, Kent Co., Mich., School Board Minutes 1922-1930: Michigan District Record, Comstock Park Public Schools, Comstock Park, Michigan, p. 89.

[20]Ibid., p. 88.

[21]Ibid, p. 96.

[22]Ibid, p. 98.

[23]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 169.

of the characteristics Lingeman cites in this post-pioneer phase of village development is the formation of a new middle class--including "grocers, merchants, tradesmen, artisans, shopkeepers, clerks, doctors, lawyers, dentists, ministers, teachers, bookkeepers, petit officials--respectable, industrious, God-fearing, early-to-bed-and-early-to-rise, heedful of their neighbors' good opinion, bent on making money and avoiding alien ways."[24] In the post-pioneer village described by Lingeman, population began to increase, buildings were rapidly constructed and store-bought goods replaced those that had been assembled in the home.

Comstock Park experienced development similar to Lingeman's model from 1900 to 1920. Mrs. Henry Hachmuth traced the growth of the village during this period in her "History of Comstock Park" where she cites the following:

> The Mill Creek Mercantile Company was built by George Metz at the turn of the century; in 1903 the Baptist Church was constructed; in 1904 T.A. Hice started his meat market and Ed Joyce opened his blacksmith shop; in 1908 the school was built and Dana Stowell started a store; in 1909 Michael Hayes started a coal business; in 1912 Neil Lamoreaux started an ice and coal business; in 1913 Dr. Frant A. Boet opened a medical practice and Mr. Taylor opened a barber shop; in 1914 Fred Dodge opened his dry goods store and Jefferson Childs started a hardware; and in 1915 C.F. Porter opened a feed mill.[25]

By 1917 Comstock Park had a well developed main street "where people met, gossiped, bought, sold, bartered, exchanged, learned."[26] However, the village was still dominated by horse culture with hitching posts and rail fences, dray wagons delivering stock to the stores and lighter delivery

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[24]Ibid, p. 170.

[25]Hachmuth, op. cit., p. 1.

[26]Lingeman, op. cit, p. 170.

wagons taking goods from the stores to the customers. Furthermore, the aroma of horses was everywhere as they were left waiting in front of the stores along the street.

Comstock Park grew rapidly from 1900 to 1920, and in 1917 Mrs. Hachmuth claimed the community could boast of the following enterprises and institutions:

> One of the largest fish hatcherys; two tanneries; the West Michigan State Fairgrounds; Hachmuth Pure Food Co.'s plant; Comstock Park State Bank; two general stores; drug store; hardware store; two barber shops; blacksmith shop; a resident physician; a neat church building with resident pastor; several boarding houses; livery barn; a feed and grain mill; four fraternal lodges; Ladies Literary Club; an Improvement Association; a Parents Council; modern eight room school building; school orchestra; brass band; newspaper well started and a population of about 500.[27]

Mrs. Hachmuth failed to mention those enterprises and institutions that the community would not boast of, and they are noticeably absent from her list. Saloons were still the dominant business on main street as the community possessed at least five of them. One wonders if Mrs. Hachmuth elected to ignore any other enterprises that are now lost in the annals of local history. However, Mrs. Hachmuth was writing her "Apotheosis of the Small Town" where she ended her work claiming "With the natural beautiful surroundings, streetcars, railways and good transportation facilities, Comstock Park is destined to become a most beautiful and popular suburban village adjacent to Grand Rapids."[28] Her sentiments were echoed by the Comstock Park Improvement Association whose officers were J.G. Johnson, president; Frank Burt, vice-president; Hugh S. Dodge,

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[27]Hachmuth, op. cit.

[28]Ibid.

secretary; and J. Neil Lamoreaux, treasurer.[29] Town boosterism was in vogue at this time so local residents overlooked those factors that were considered negative to community growth. Village development produced optimism, so great vistas were anticipated until the arrival of the sobering experiences of the "Great Depression."

Hotels played an important role in early Comstock Park as they provided lodging for tannery workers and people visiting the fairgrounds. The first hotel, the Riversite, was established by Nick Fink I in the late 1880's. Nick Fink IV, the present operator of the old hotel, has provided the following account of how his grandfather obtained his land:

> When my Grandad squatted this land it was all cattails and swamp. He pitched a tent on it and lived in that tent. He had to keep possession, I think, for 90 days or something. And he'd sit here, they tell me, with a shotgun. And if he had to go to town or somewhere, why then his daugher would sit here with a shotgun. He squatted just one acre and a description is on the records.[30]

Fink's colorful description contains a little apotheosis of family history with some of the details having been filled in. In 1855 the property belonged to Daniel North and in 1876 it belonged to J. R. Compton. Nick Fink I probably obtained the land from Compton with the details of the land transfer lost in family legend.[31] However, when Fink acquired the site he built a twelve room hotel, which faced Lamoreaux Drive and is still standing, a stable, a carriage house and an ice house. In 1891, one year after the fairground was built, Nick Fink II helped his father

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[29] Ibid., p. 3.

[30] Eleanor Andree, "In the Fink Tradition," Accent, November 1973, p. 10.

[31] Innis and Tinkham, "Map of Kent County," (Chicago: H. Acheson Litho., 1855). and Illustrated Atlas of Kent County, H. Belden and Co.,1876.

build a twenty room addition on the hotel to cater to the needs of travelers and vistors to the fair.[32] In 1893 the new addition to the Riversite Hotel was opened with a second story ballroom suspended on bridge trusses. Nick Fink IV claims, "You'd get 200 to 300 people waltzing and the floor would swing and sway. It was designed that way."[33] However, he maintained the ballroom proved to be a bad investment for "after about four or five years they stopped having dances because they found out that dancing and alcohol don't mix."[34] Nick claimed people would start fighting and a lot of them got knocked down the stairway. Therefore the ballroom was converted into additional hotel rooms. The Riversite advertised 5 or 10 cent lunches, billiards, pool, rooms $1,00 per week and up, suites with bath $3.00 per week and up, single meals 50 cents, candies, cigars, tobacco, soft drinks and vita on draught.[35] The old hotel has had a colorful history which is reflected in the facility today with its accent on antiques.

The North Star Hotel was also built in the 1890's with the establishment of the fairground. The North Star was built by Joseph Thiel, and it operated along the same lines as the Riversite containing a bar, dining room, sleeping quarters and an ice house. The bar was located in the front of the building where one of its memorable features was the mural of Plumb's Mill that was painted on the wall. The mural cracked and was

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[32]Doug Guthrie, "Nick Fink's": mellow with time, "The North Press, July 29, 1980, p. 1.

[33]Ibid. p. 17.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Comstock Park News, Dec. 21, 1917, p. 4.

destroyed in 1920 when Mary Cordes, Joseph Thiel's oldest daughter, lowered the hotel building to its present level.[36] The dining room was called the North Star Buffet. Meals were served to boarders and the general public during the week of the fair. The kitchen was located in the back of the building and sleeping quarters were provided on the second floor. The North Star had thirteen rooms which Mary Cordes rented for $20 a month, including board.[37] Taverns were one of the mainstays of the local economy and the North Star joined the others in catering to the north end's thirst.

The village developed socially as well as economically from 1900 to 1920. As the population increased, churches and clubs became an active part of community life, and they altered the unified social structure that existed in the nineteenth century. Lingeman describes the trend toward "joinerism" in small towns and shows how it replaced "the informal sociability of an earlier time when peoples' relationships with one another cut across age, class, occupational, and organizational lines and one's knowledge of all other townspeople ranged over their entire lives. In those days people socialized freely over the whole social spectrum, and cliques were frowned upon as 'stuckuppity'."[38] When Comstock Park divided socially among the Congregational Church, Immanuel Church, the Ladies Literary Club, the International Order of Odd Fellows, the Macabees, the Masonic Country Club and the American Legion, community life became fragmented. Page Smith observed a similar process and remarked "such a

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[36]Ellen Ericksen, personal interview at the Ericksen home, Comstock Park, Mich., January 6, 1972.

[37]Clarence Wier to David Wier, Author's local history file, Comstock Park, Mich. January 5, 1972.

[38]Lingeman, op. cit. p. 410.

plethora of organizations is obviously a disease of the body politic in communities which have lost all sense of an integrated community life . . . . Even under the best of circumstances the organizations serve to perpetuate the fragmentations of the community and encourage the formation of enclaves and cliques."[39] These organizations promoted many profitable community services but they also provided tension among the people as they sponsored alternate lifestyles.

The Congregational Church of Comstock Park was formed on July 7, 1910, when twenty-one charter members met in the I.O.O.F. hall over Sandy Lamoreaux's general store. Reverend S.T. Morris, the minister of Second Congregational Church in Grand Rapids, assisted in organizing the local church and served as its first minister. In March of 1914 the Congregationalists relocated in the old Baptist Church, which was experiencing a declining membership, and in 1915 the Baptists gave the Congregational Church title to the building. The Congregationalists moved the old church down to the North property on Lamoreaux Drive where it is still standing. The Conservation Department gave the church the old Plumb family house in 1928, which stood on hatchery property across from the drug store, and it was moved up by the church to serve as a parsonage.[40]

Another church was established in the community during the Depression. Immanual Church held its first meeting February 20, 1935, in Jefferson Child's old tin shop, which had been moved to the rear of the Lamoreaux building. The church grew out of a Christian Reformed mission that held

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[39]Page Smith, As a City Upon a Hill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) p. 175.

[40]Comstock Park Congregational Church, "Golden Anniversary Booklet 1910-1960," September 16, 1980. p. 8.

services in the building formerly occupied by the drug store. George L. Youngs was the pastor at Immanuel when it was organized.[41] In 1937 the church moved out of the tin shop into the basement of their new building, which was completed and dedicated on October 10, 1943.

The two churches were often in conflict. Immanuel, which was organized as an independent, fundamental church, was viewed by the Congregationalists as being stiff-necked, rigid, dogmatic and fanatical while the Congregationalists were considered worldly, secularized and social by the folk at Immanuel. Cooperative efforts at spreading the Christian faith never blossomed as the two churches isolated themselves from one another. Thus, in a community that provided a splendid opportunity for spreading the faith, the Christians became another fractionalizing influence on community life.

Social organizations were also established near the turn of the century, and they contributed their share to the breakdown of community life. In 1893 the Macabees established a lodge over Dana Stowell's general store. The Odd Fellows were organized a little later and their lodge was located over Sandy Lamoreaux's general store.[42] The minutes of the West Michigan Macabee hive furnish a glimpse of the social life that was provided by the lodges. The local Macabee hive was organized on March 30, 1893 when seventeen charter members elected the following officers:

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[41]"Immanuel Church Growing," Comstock Park News, December 19, 1935, p. 1.

[42]Hachmuth, op. cit.

Lady Post Commander	- Louisa Lamoreaux
Lady Commander	- Lillian Adams
Lady Lieutenant Commander	- Lizzie Lamoreaux
Lady Record Keeper	- Nellie Lamoreaux
Lady Finance Keeper	- Mary Dunham
Lady Chaplin	- Euphemia Heath
Lady Mistress at Arms	- Nettie Walker
Lady Sargent	- Eliza Hice
Lady Sentinal	- Ida Lovell
Lady Picket	- Martha Spooner[43]

The ladies raised money for their organization by making quilts, cushions, rag carpets, slumber robes and floral arrangements for which they sold tickets and held drawings. The money was spent on welfare for the poor, care for the sick, memorials for the departed and improvement of the lodge. The ladies sponsored a variety of social activities including picnics, balls, card parties, oyster suppers, spider web and basket socials, ice cream socials and services on Memorial Day. The New Year's ball with the Sir Knights was the biggest event in the Macabee year as they involved both supper and dancing. They were frequently held at the North Park pavilion. However, the Ladies and Sir Knights did not always agree on the choice of site for their activies. For example, in January 1894 the Macabees were scheduled to hold installation ceremonies at Stowell's Hall with their families present. A question arose at a "hive" meeting concerning adequate room to accommodate such an event where L. Spooner pointed out that "Sir Knights need more room and she understood that some Sir Knights were interested in Fink's Hall. That was strongly voted down by every lady present."[44] The ladies apparently kept their men away from the town bars during their social activities. Thus, the Macabee and the Odd Fellow lodges provided exclusive social activities and community

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[43]West Michigan Hive K.O.T. Macabees, Record Keepers Book of West Michigan Hive No. 304 (Mill Creek, Mich., March 30, 1893), p. 1.

[44]Ibid, p. 36.

services resulting in a withdrawal from the rest of the community. So, the village experienced more fractionalization from the private lodges.

Lingeman writes that, "women's historical role in many towns was to form a 'society' that presupposed class distinctions."[45] The local Macabee "hive" assumed this role in Comstock Park, with their committee of three who reviewed social qualifications of prospective members, and so did the Comstock Park Literary Club. The Literary Club was organized on February 18, 1910 in the home of Louise Childs. The fourteen ladies who attended the meeting were drawn from the more prominent families in the village, including the Hachmuth's, Lamoreaux's, Child's, Hice's and the Joyce's.[46] Noticeably absent from the membership were the homemakers who were struggling to make a living with their husbands on tannery row. The club met once a month to discuss topics of interest and listen to speakers. American history and literature was emphasized and yearly announcements were embellished with quotes from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.[47] The club still exists today and is supported by women from the older families in the community.

The Comstock Park Improvement Association was also active in 1917, promoting the progressive reforms that were popular around the country at the turn of the century. The Improvement Association was motivated by village boosterism for it advertised the advantages Comstock Park offered to the prospective industrial developer, businessman or resident including

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[45]Lingeman, op. cit. p. 405.

[46]Beatrice Edge to David Wier, Author's local history file, Comstock Park, Mich., Jan. 21, 1975.

[47]Ladies Literary Club, Fourth Annual Announcement 1914-1915, Comstock Park, Mich. p. 2.

excellent rail facilities, low taxes, streetcar service, fine building sites overlooking the fish hatchery, pure spring water and fine auto roads. The local reformers boasted of the community's "fine school, church, bank, newspaper, canning factory, two tanneries, flour and feed mills."[48] The Improvement Association negleted to inform the people about the negative aspects in the local environment. The fact that the tanneries were polluting the air and water went as unnoticed as the presence of many saloons. Association memberships sold for one dollar a year, including the annual picnic, and the group advertised that "every member of the community is urged to join and help the officers make Comstock Park a better and bigger town."[49]

On May 26, 1921 Glenn R. Chamberlin presented a proposal to his brother Masons for the development of a Masonic Country Club in Comstock Park. The Masons responded to the plea and purchased 400 acres of rolling countryside next to the Lamoreaux and Hachmuth farms. The club grounds were quickly developed, and "on August 1, 1923, the cafeteria, dance hall, and a temporary nine-hole golf course were formally opened.[50] The entire complex, including an 18-hole and a 9-hole course, was completed the following year, making Comstock Park one of the playgrounds of the affluent in Grand Rapids. Few local residents possessed the social qualifications for membership in the Masons, but they were exposed to the upper class entertainment tastes through the country club. The club did provide employment for a few residents who worked as grounds keepers, cooks and

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[48] Comstock Park News, December 21, 1917, p. 3.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Masonic Country Club, The Masonic Country Club of Western Michigan (Grand Rapids: Powers-Tyson Co., 1924), p. 3.

waitresses during the summer season.

The Comstock Park chapter of the Ku Klux Klan did not leave a written record, but oral tradition still carries vivid descriptions of its activity during the Klan revival of the 1920's. The Klan found a small, loyal band of followers in Comstock Park, who donned their hooded apparel and observed cross burning ceremonies behind the establishment formerly owned by C. and M. Carpet Company. Frederick Lewis Allen described Edward Y. Clarke's efforts at reorganizing the Klan in 1920 and his account is applicable to Comstock Park:

> The time was ripe for the Klan and he knew it. Not only could it be represented to potential members as defenders of the white against the black, of Gentile against Jew, and of Protestant against Catholic, and thus trade on all the newly inflamed fears of the credulous small-towner, but its white robe and hood, its flaming cross, its secrecy, and the preposterous vocabulary of its ritual could be made the vehicle of all that infantile love of hocuspocus and mummery, that lust for secret adventure, which survives in the adult whose lot is cast in drab places.[51]

The community was very conscious of the Klan; indeed, many sat on the hill and observed their cross burnings and ceremonies. However, the Klan died in the late 1920's with the decline of the parent organization. Comstock Park was not alone in the resurgence of the Klan for most communities in the area experienced some type of Klan activity. Now, older residents prefer not to discuss this episode in their local history.

In 1932 J.E. Morris called a group of veterans together for the purpose of establishing an American Legion Post in Comstock Park. Fifteen

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[51]"A Review of Comstock Park Legion Post," Comstock Park Review, November 29, 1946, p. 1.

charter members held their first meeting in March at Stowell's Hall where they named the new post in honor of Louis Tiestler, a Comstock Park Navy man who died on October 28, 1917. In 1934 the Legion spent $50 to purchase a building from the Comstock Park School Board and $200 to obtain a site next to the school on the James Lamoreaux property. The legion grew rapidly with 76 members in 1939 and well over 300 after World War II. During the 1930's and 1940's, the Legion sponsored dances, parties, baseball teams and sent boys to Wolverine Boys State. The Comstock Park Review reflected on the brief history of the Legion in 1946 and boasted, "the following years have been too full of activities to name them all, but you may be sure any program that is for the good of the community you will find the American Legion, Louis Teistler Post No. 47 behind it."[52] The Review did not express the view of all the people in Comstock Park because the churches and temperance organizations, like the Comstock Park Women's Christian Temperance Union, that met in the school, were opposed to many Legion functions, especially an important source of Legion revenue, their popular bar. Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman discovered a similar situation in Springdale, a small town located in upper New York. They claimed, "the Springdale Legion does not command the respect of the respectable groups in the community. Though some of its means and methods are acceptable, it symbolizes 'loose-living' and an unwillingness to cooperate with the churches."[53] The Legion's reputation in Comstock Park closely parallels the Springdale Legion with the temperance and religious community as its major critics, especially during the

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[52]Ibid., Comstock Park Review

[53]Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, Small Town In Mass Society (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), p. 25.

early period of its growth. However, the Legion endured well beyond the Temperance organization and is regarded as a rather banal organization by the religious community today. The Legion established a veterans' memorial in Dwight Lydell Park, has held a number of Memorial Day parades and annually places flags on the graves of the veterans in the Mill Creek cemetery.

The Industrial Revolution had a profound impact on Comstock Park as it produced the technology that integrated village life with the norms of national culture. New ideas were often introduced through the fairground where the latest gadgets and inventions were brought for exhibition and display. For example, one of the most popular forms of entertainment at the fair involved experiments in flight, ranging all the way from balloon and parachute drops to primitive flying machines. The fair may have inspired Comstock Park's aviation inventor, who is regarded to have made the first successful flight in Kent County. Nick Fink, Jr., the proprietor of the Riversite Hotel, invented a pedal powered aeroplane from bicycle parts and two large box kites. The "Fink Airship No. 1" was constructed at a cost of $300 with the Knape Machine Company doing the machine work, the Rempis and Gallmeyer plant preparing the brass and aluminum castings and Charles A. Coye fitting the ducking.[54] The Grand Rapids Press described the principle of the plane:

> In beginning the flight the operator mounts the bicycle and starts off. The horizonal rudder is tilted at a slight angle and when the speed of the machine reaches a point where the air pressure on rudder and planes is sufficient to overcome the force of gravity the machine goes up gradually. Then the propeller, turning at from eight hundred

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[54]"Travel in the Air," Grand Rapids Press, June 24, 1905, p. 3.

> to a thousand revolutions a minute is intended to keep the aeroplane in motion.[55]

On June 24, 1905, two years after the first flight at Kitty Hawk, Fink successfully tested his aircraft. He flew off the roof of the Riversite Hotel from a point opposite his barn and headed east where he "rose in the air at once and mounted higher and higher until it soared out of the protection of the hotel building. There a treacherous south wind swept it out of balance and out of its course. It struck a telegraph post and fell a distance of about twenty feet to the ground a partial wreck."[56] Fink broke his collar bone, but he was not discouraged with the results of his experiments for he believed that he had proven that his principles of flight were sound.

Comstock Park witnessed its next flight two years later when A. Roy Knabenshue brought his "Air-ship" to the fair. Knabenshue had drawn large crowds at the state fairs in Brockton, Massachusetts and Columbus, Ohio before coming to Comstock Park. The local fair association offered him $1,000 for each successful flight for five days.[57] Knabenshu's gas-filled craft was the hit of the fair as it flew "over the race track and in circles over the grandstand until the theory of successful navigation of the air, was demonstrated to those present."[58] However, Knabenshue may not have achieved the limits of his contract for his "Air-ship" ended up in the middle of Grand River during one of his exhibitions. The

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1907, p. 17.

[58] "Last Day Proves a Big Success." Grand Rapids Press, September 13, 1907, p. 2.

Press reported, "The operator sat on the framework looking very unhappy until two boats pushed out from shore and towed him in."[59]

Western Michigan had to wait until 1910 for its next exhibition in flight when Bud Mars brought his Curtis aeroplane to Comstock Park. Gusty breezes kept Mars on the ground, but he did manage one partial flight where he nearly circled the race track but could not gain altitude. Bud Mars' 1910 failures increased the excitement when the news was released in 1911 that J. Clifford Turpin had arrived in town with a Wright biplane.[60] Turpin's plane was "a 40foot machine . . . equipped with a 30 horsepower engine."[61] Turpin increased the excitement over his flight by offering passenger space to a Grand Rapids resident, resulting in numerous applications, to participate in the first flight over the city. On September 12, 1911 the Press declared, " Grand Rapids has seen its first aeroplane in flight."[62] Turpin flew south at an altitude of 600 feet for six minutes circling Fuller Station and the Gunn Furniture factory. The following day his passenger, J.E. Worthington, was given an aerial tour of the northeast side of the city. While returning to land, a fouled spark plug forced an emergency landing on a swamp on the east side of the river next to the Huntley Russell home. Worthington got more than he bargained for as the emergency landing produced a severe test for his nerve.[63]

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[59] Ibid.

[60] "In Spite of Wind," Grand Rapids Press, July 18, 1910, p. 3.

[61] "Is In Full Blast," Grand Rapids Press, September 11, 1911, p.1.

[62] "Turpin Braves a Real Gust Wind," Grand Rapids Press, September 12, 1911, p. 1.

[63] "Dropped 400 Feet," Grand Rapids Press, September 13, 1911, p. 5.

Aviation exhibits were popular at the fairgrounds until the early 1930's when the facility closed down. Stunt flyers, like Lillian Boyer, Ruth Law, Ethel Dare, Al Key and a host of others performed parachute drops, plane transfers, loops and death drops to the delight of the suspense filled audience in the grandstand.

The invention and mass production of the automobile produced conflict between the values of a culture developed around the horse and the values introduced by the automobile. The social transition from one mode of transportation to another occurred during the heyday of the West Michigan Fair, and it can be observed by tracing the type of entertainment provided in front of the grandstand. During the 1890's, everything at the fairground centered around harness racing, and the horse was declared king of entertainment. With the invention of the automobile and the aeroplane the role of harness racing declined while aerial exhibits and automobile races increased in popularity. Furthermore, as the fair began to lose its agricultural base and adapt to urban and industrial values, the evidence of horse culture continually diminished.

The first automobile races were held at the fairground on Saturday, September 26, 1903. They were sponsored by the newly formed Grand Rapids Racing Club, and 1,900 paid to watch Carl Fisher defeat Earl Kaiser.[64] The following year, 4,000 race fans attended to watch Barney Oldfield and his Peerless Green Dragon race against Carl Fisher and his Premier Comet. The drivers did not race in competition but against the clock. Barney Oldfield set the best time while establishing himself as a local hero at

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[64]"Fisher the Victor," Evening Press, September 28, 1903, p. 2.

the track.[65] In the following year Oldfield returned and defeated Paul Lefevere. Gambling became a problem with early automobile races, probably as a result of the betting activity associated with harness racing; therefore, auto clubs constantly tried to avoid it. In 1905 the Press warned there would be "no gambling on the grounds and that special officers will be on hand to prevent any repetition of the way pool sellers got in last year and conducted their boards on the sly."[66]

Races were not held locally from 1906 to 1908, but in 1909 Louis Chevrolet showed up and defeated Ralph DePalma. Louis Arms, a colorful sports reporter for the Press, described Chevrolet's race stating, "mile after mile that little cardinal streak thundered along beside the low, white fences, leaving huge clouds of yellowish dust in its rear."[67] From 1910 to 1920 Barney Oldfield dominated the local competition, and Louis Arms described Oldfield in words that probably reflected the attitude of the local race fan:

> The magic of the name brought thousands to Comstock Park who solidly banked the home stretch and the first and fourth lanes. Barney is the protagonist in the field of circular track racing. He is progressive. The man with the Bowery slant to his cigar, in his ten years of experience has always been just two ahead of his times. When it was recherche and good form to bang through fences and climb trees at sixty-miles the-hour clip Barney always insisted on making the biggest hole in the fence and was hanging

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[65]"New Track Record, "Evening Press, October 19, 1904, p. 8.

[66]"To Be Here Early." Evening Press, October 3, 1905, p. 6.

[67]Louis Arms, "Sets New Record," Evening Press, September 18, 1909, p. 8.

> from the uppermost bough. He did it with greater eclat and more frequently than other drivers hence the word auto racing and Barney Oldfield became one in the same.[68]

Auto polo, dubbed the "undertaker's delight," was introduced in 1914, and it was frequently sandwiched between heats in future races. No major accidents were reported in auto polo, but on June 17, 1923, Bernard McCale of Detroit crashed through the fence and was killed in front of 3,500 specators.[69]

In 1924 races were sponsored by a new organization, the Grand Rapids Speedway Association, but they ran into a new problem. Local churches presented petitions to Sheriff William Smith requesting him to halt all Sunday races. In response to church pressure, the Sheriff stated, "As a result of the protests voiced from many sources I have ordered against any more Sunday racing."[70] Friction between racing associations and conservative groups continued as automobile racing declined in the late 1920's. In a last ditch effort to save the fairground during the "Great Depression", Barney Oldfield and Ralph DePalma were brought back to take part in a race program. The race drew a light crowd, forcing the owners of the fairground to sell out after the fall fair.[71] Automobile races had to wait until the depression and World War II had run their course before they were revived once again on the Comstock Park Speedrome track.

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[68]Louis Arms, "Benz Bumps Mark, "Evening Press, September 17, 1910, p. 6.

[69]"Motor Racer Killed While 3,500 Watch, " Grand Rapids Press, July 18, 1923, p. 1.

[70]"Sheriff Puts Ban On Sunday Races," Grand Rapids Press, August 20, 1925, p. 26.

[71]"Famous Drivers to Race at the Fair," Grand Rapids Press, August 9, 1935, p. 2.

Bicycle and motorcycle races enjoyed brief popularity between 1890 and 1920. The annual Plainfield road race was run on Decoration Day, with riders starting on the fairground track before making a circuit around the river while crossing from West River Drive to Coit Avenue via Plainfield bridge. The Evening Press reported seventy or more cyclists completed in 1899 in front of 20,000 spectators. As cyclists entered the village of Mill Creek and approached the finish, "a dash in the face from a bucket of water as a rider swept past the mill pond made him finish with a clip that was a testimonial of stored up energy."[72] Cyclists came from as far away as Chicago to compete in the Plainfield race. However, like the horse races, the bicycle races eventually gave way to the automobile and died out. Later, around 1915, motorcycles enjoyed some popularity with auto events on the fairground track.

The automobile began to compete with the streetcar during the 1920's as the major means of transportation. The streetcars did a prosperous business during the first decade of the 20th century, and they were the main link between Comstock Park and the city. Dr. Lynn G. Mapes, a historian at Grand Valley State College, provides a glimpse of the streetcar experience:

> Trolley riders could drop their mail in a box attached to the front of the streetcar, purchase the Grand Rapids Herald from a box behind the motorman, or peruse the weekly copy of Trolley Topics that entertained with jokes, helpful hints, lists of cultural activities and the ever present promotions for the North Park Pavilion or Ramona Park.[73]

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[72]"Ford the Winner," Evening Press, may 30, 1899, p. 1.

[73]Lynn G. Mapes, "The Street Car Era," Grand Rapids Magazine, March 1975, p. 49.

During the 1920's, the popularity of the automobile increased rapidly while the number of streetcar riders decreased. Mapes reported that 79% of the Kent County families owned automobiles in 1925. The streetcar companies struggled in vain to defeat the increased use of the automobile, but their days were numbered. Between 1932 and 1935 the streetcar lines were abandoned, and the company transferred to busses.[74]

Thousands of spectators traveled to the West Michigan State Fairground on June 24, 1926 to witness a fireworks extravaganza sponsored by officers of the Street Railway Company. The event was designed "to mark the passing of the old streetcar and the introduction of rolling stock of ultra-modern types."[75]

Twenty of the old streetcars were lined up in front of the grandstand, soaked with kerosene and ignited by Mayor Elvin Swarthout and L.J. DeLamarter, vice-president and manager of the railway company. The big event was preceded by a fireworks display which included a frame-work of fireworks that presented the company's slogan, "Don't worry. Relax. Ride the Streetcar. The safest place in town."[76] That evening the crowd did not realize how little time the new streetcars would have or how much alteration the automobile would bring about in their society. Vidich and Bensman studied the village of Springdale and remarked on the influence of the automobile:

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[74] Ibid., p. 51.

[75] "Thousands in Joyful Goodby", Grand Rapids Press, June 25, 1926, p. 1.

[76] Ibid.

> The development of the mass-produced gasoline engine formed the basis around which a social and economic reconstitution of Springdale took place. The automobile established an intimate connection between Springdale and the outer world and provided new business and occupational opportunities in the form of gas stations, repair shops and road construction and maintenance. It made possible the R.F.D. and in conjunction with the radio, a comprehensive daily contact with events and happenings as reported in the mass media.[77]

Comstock Park experienced a similar transformation with the introduction of the cheap, mass produced automobile. The "burning extravaganza" at the fairground in 1926 and the chant "goodby streetcars!" was symbolic of one of the major turning points in Comstock Park history. The automobile accelerated the process of integrating village life with that of mass society. Commuting to work in the industrial center of Grand Rapids became an established social pattern for the local resident. Furthermore, the automobile took people away from their homes and broke down neighborliness. Lingeman notes, "when ownership of automobiles became widespread in the 1920's, it was "de rigueur" for every family that owned one to pile in on a Sunday and go for a drive in the country, rather than have leisurely Sunday dinners attended by numerous friends or relatives. Automobiles also altered courtship patterns among the young, removing them from the porch swing under the parental eye and taking them off to the dimly lit roadhouses that were springing up along the highways outside of town."[78] The automobile increased the tempo of village life and tended to blur the simple elements of the neighborhood environment with those of the complex urban centers.

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[77]Vidich and Bensman, op. cit., p. 10.

[78]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 412.

Electrification was another outside influence that altered community life in Comstock Park. One of the side effects of extending streetcar service to the community in 1902 was partial electrification. Several business establishments purchased electric power from the Grand Rapids Street Railway, but the quality of the service was poor as lights would blink on and off when the streetcars passed by. However, most businesses and homes were still illuminated by kerosene and gas lamps or portable power units until power lines were established. In 1911 the Grand Rapids-Muskegon Power Company surveyed the area around the Soldiers' Home, North Park and Comstock Park and decided to extend their lines to provide service for the area. The lines reached the fairground in August 1812 and immediately altered the style of the fair. Eugene D. Conger, Secretary of the West Michigan State Fair noted:

> With power on the grounds for use in the buildings it will be possible to have machinery in operation, as was done last year to a limited extent only. Having lights on the ground will make it possible to keep the Fair open evenings, and thus afford an opportunity for residents of the City, to attend the Fair without loss of time from their regular employment.[79]

The change in the fair was not nearly as great as that in the electrified homes. During the 1920's most families were receiving electrical service and purchasing electric washing machines, refrigerators, stoves and a multitude of other labor saving devices. Albert Blumenthal, the author of Small-Town Stuff, interviewed the manager of an electrical company during this period who claimed he did "not know of a woman with electric lights in her home who has no curling iron. Next in order of frequency,

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[79]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1912, p. 13.

he says, are the electric iron, toaster, vacuum cleaner, percolator, hot plate, sewing machine, and, last of all, three electric stoves and two mangles."[80] The ladies in Comstock Park enjoyed the labor saving devices just as much as those in Blumenthal's Mineville. The Lynds also reported similar results in Middletown. They declared "No other changes in Middle-Town's homes have been as marked as the adoption by the bulk of the community of these various conveniences, used only by a few of the very wealthly in the nineties."[81] Labor saving devices provided an increase in leisure time in the family resulting in more trips to Ramona Park for amusement or Grand Rapids to visit the theater. The more domestic sort began to settle down for the evening around the radio to listen to programs like "Amos 'n' Andy." Blumenthal declared, "If the automobile actually is breaking down the family by increasing the mobility of its members and causing them to spend little time at home, it would seen that the radio is an effective antidote."[82]

World War I gave Comstock Park a fresh infusion of patriotism which was especially apparent at the fair. In 1917 Lyman A. Lilly, the Agricultural Secretary of the fair, made a strong appeal for the farmers to produce and bring large exhibits to the fair. He declared:

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[80]Albert Blumenthal, Small-Town Stuff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), p. 390-391.

[81]Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, Middletown (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), p. 98.

[82]Blumenthal, op. cit. p. 387.

> In this time of unusual conditions, when we are facing a war of unknown length, when tons of food are sent to the bottom of the ocean doing no one any good. When it is up to the United States to feed the armies of Europe, as well as our own, we cannot help feeling that food is king.
> With these facts before us, it behooves us all to use every means at our command, not only to produce all the food possible but to encourage others to do the same.[83]

In 1918 the fair association provided premiums for the largest acre production of wheat, oats and rye, which were paid in War Savings Stamps. The Premium List of 1918 declared, "The Government is looking to the fair to help win the war and we have had that idea in mind when making up our premium list."[84] During the war, flags adorned the buildings; entertainment adopted a patriotic theme; war slogans were displayed with exhibits; and the fireworks grand finales thundered out the glories of freedom, liberty and democracy. The fairground became the center of a crusade to rally the folk on the home front to greater war production.

There was also feverish activity at the tanneries across the creek from the fairground where the blue collar workers were making their contribution to the war effort. Trains were busy bringing supplies and shipping out processed leather that was essential for manufactured goods demanded by the army. World War I was still fought with the aid of the horse. The tanneries used horse hide to produce the leather that was used to make hame covers for the animals pulling the wagons and artillery in Europe. During the war, the tanneries experienced rapid growth,

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[83]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1917, p. 5.

[84]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1918, p. 5.

employing 500 men, while filling the demand for war material through government contracts.[85]

The emotional excitement of war produced an aftermath that had even greater impact on Comstock Park. The voters of Michigan responded to public sentiment for prohibition and approved a statewide prohibition law that was to go into effect on May 1, 1918, and on January 16, 1919, the necessary thirty-six states ratified the Eighteenth Amendment. Saloons were the most popular business in Comstock Park, and John Barleycorn was now declared illegal. Lynn Mapes maintains opposition to prohibition in Grand Rapids was apparent from the start. He states, "the billiard and soft drink parlors that replaced many saloons were often accused of serving hard cider and other illegal beverages."[86] If Grand Rapids was tempted to resort to the speakeasy, Comstock Park was even more inclined. Frederick Lewis Allen discovered the direct result of the Eighteenth Amendment "were the bootleggers, the speakeasy, and the spirit of deliberate revolt which in many communities made drinking 'the thing to do'."[87] Allen's impression of prohibition is in line with the situation that existed in Comstock Park. With Alpine Township producing an abundance of apples, hard cider became the favorite drink in the saloon community. The Grand Rapids Press reported, that Nick Fink, the present proprietor of Fink's Bar, helped roll the barrels into

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[85]Clarence Wier, Personal interview, Clarence Wier home, Comstock Park, Michigan, November 26, 1971.

[86]Lynn G. Mapes, "Saloons and Prohibition," Grand Rapids Magazine June, 1975, p. 21-22.

[87]Allen, op. cit., p. 82.

into the basement and let the cider run from the hose into pitchers upon the bartop."[88] Fred Olsen, a Press reporter, interviewed Fink and furnished the following account:

> They were arrested once and fined $400 because the alcoholic content of the cider tested four percent.
> "They pinched Echternach the same day, but they charged him $200 because his only tested two percent," Fink explains. "I know it to be a fact that they never sold one drop of moonshine or one drop of home brew in the building," Fink will say with pride. "There's never a danger of poisoning anyone or hurting them with hard cider."
> They paid no sales tax, and no liquor tax. They did not have to purchase a liquor license. Bookkeeping was simple. They had established sales in a commodity that nearly everyone wanted to help ease the pain of unemployment, bankruptcy and foreclosure.[89]

A sign on the Riversite Hotel advertised, "We sell near beer here because there's no good beer sold near here."[90] However, some moonshine was obtained locally, for older residents recall it being passed around in fruit jars outside the dance hall. Small stills provided for home consumption while the enterprising sort ventured out into the woods to set up a small scale illegal trade. Curb dispensers of liquor sold some home brew, especially on the fairground.

Prohibition was a major problem on the fairground. In 1921 the Press reported, "A small army of detectives and plainclothes men will be on the grounds at all times working among the crowds . . . making it

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[88]Fred Olsen, "Look Me in the Eye, Abraham Lincoln, and Tell Me That I Need a Drink", Wonderland Magazine, January 31, 1971, p. 5.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Maurice Wier, personal interview at the residence of Maurice Wier, Comstock Park, Michigan, March 28, 1981.

next to impossible to loot pockets, sell liquor or disturb the peace."[91] Lyman Lilly expressed the intent of the management when he stated, "We are told that considerable liquor has changed hands at a number of fairs in the state, but we believe we are prepared to prevent the illicit traffic at this fair."[92] However, older residents who attended the fair testify of carpetbaggers selling their illegal liquor regardless of the efforts of police or the fair management.

Prohibition was undoubtedly difficult to enforce in Comstock Park. Blumenthal discoverd in Mineville "The hectic and hounded lives of the proprietors or bartenders of the 'joints' are made easier by their large and energetic supporting body of the public."[93] The experience of the Eighteenth Amendment revealed that laws can not be enforced when the people elect to disobey. The citizen who patronized the Comstock Park bars had developed a habit that went beyond the reach of the law when the larger society elected not to enforce it. The bars did sell alcoholic beverages, and the people continued to drink them. Thus, in 1933 under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt the prohibition law was repealed.

The Great Depression dealt Comstock Park a blow from which it never completely recovered. By the late 1920's the community was a prosperous village with a substantial mainstreet trade, a tannery, fairground and fish hatchery. In 1925 a new high school was constructed

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[91]"Would Have Fair Safe for Crowds," Grand Rapids Press, September 9, 1921, p. 2.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Blumenthal, op. cit. 192.

and the community had a very optimistic attitude toward the future. It appeared that early goals of the Comstock Park Improvement Association were about to be realized. Prohibition did create problems for a few merchants on main street, but they were managing to survive. Some bar owners were even beginning to be regarded as community leaders. Now, the Depression ushered in an era of gloom while community growth and expectations came to an abrupt halt. When the depression had run its course, Comstock Park had lost its fairground, tannery and bank. The people were spending more time at home where they worked subsistence farms, but when they sought employment, they were compelled to commute to Grand Rapids. The spirit of economic independence was plucked from the village, leaving the people at the mercy of the fluctuating trends in the larger mass society. Comstock Park was stripped of its industrial base and destined to become a bedroom suburb of Grand Rapids.

The fair was in a state of decline when the depression arrived and probably would have eventually became a casualty of industrialization. Several problems had dealt the fair a crippling blow, but fire was its number one enemy. On July 19, 1911 the grandstand was totally destroyed by fire, and it also burned the roof and cupola of the Art Hall. The fair association carried $3,500 of insurance on the grandstand, but cost estimates for replacing it ran from $40,000 to $50,000.[94] A new concrete grandstand was erected, but the costs ate up the fairs profits for several years. Then on July 14, 1920, the Art Hall was destroyed by fire. Mary Echternach, a Comstock Park resident who lived over her

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[94]West Michigan State Fair, Premium List 1912, p. 15.

father's saloon, discovered the fire and notified the Grand Rapids Fire Department. Even so, "Within 20 minutes the flames had reduced the eight wing structure to a smoldering mass of ruins."[95] When the fire department arrived on the scene, they made no effort to save the building but concentrated on saving the blazing grandstand and other buildings. Comstock Park men dammed York Creek to provide a water supply to fight the fire, and their efforts combined with the fire department prevented greater loss.[96] The fire was so intense it ignited the roof of the Zindel North Park pavilion across the river, and spectators could not endure the heat to stand on the bridge.[97] The fire damage was estimated at $25,000, but Lyman Lilly estimated the replacement value between $40,000 and $50,000. The loss put the fair association in an economic bind as the Art Hall was only insured for $5,000. Exhibits that were scheduled to appear in the Art Hall were transferred to the carriage building while the place that the Art Hall occupied was used for concessions.[98] The fair peaked with the passing of the Art Hall and never again recovered its former grandeur.

Furthermore, the fair encountered problems of a moral nature during the 1920's that contributed to its decline. As the fair departed from its agricultural and educational base, it developed more citified attractions, where gambling sharks and "hoochie koochie" dancers fleeced

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[95]"Fairgrounds Fire Razes Art Hall," Grand Rapids Press, July 15, 1920, p. 1.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Ibid., Clarence Wier, private interview at senior citizens meeting, Comstock Park, Mich., December 11, 1980.

[98]Grand Rapids Press, July 15, 1920, p. 1.

country boys with rigged wheels and sleazy sideshows. The Grand Rapids Board of Education threatened to withdraw their support of the fair in 1917 when it issued a statement declaring, "Unless the board of directors of the West Michigan State Fair agrees in writing not to allow vulgar, indecent and immoral shows on the grounds the Grand Rapids Public schools will make no exhibition at the exposition next fall."[99] The fair association attempted to appease the conservatives, and in 1922, under President Frank G. Row, they got their way. Row maintained, "The West Michigan State Fair never will become a great fair until it eliminates gambling and becomes more purely an educational exhibit, spiced with the proper amount of clean amusement."[100] Row did not realize that the fair had already lost most of its educational value to the thrill of the midway and its many vices. All gambling was eliminated at the fall fair, which meant a loss of around $8,000 to the fair management, and side shows were strictly regulated. Lyman Lilly reported, "After thorough investigation, it was found that very few of sufficiently high grade shows are procurable and the management is placing only those which there are no objectional features. There will be so few of the pay attractions that the free acts in front of the grandstand will be more liberal and of the very highest standard."[101] Thus, the big wheel, the man with three thimbles and a pea, the seller of soap with dollar bill attachments and

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[99]"Cleaner Fair Shows or Schools are Out," Grand Rapids Press, June 5, 1917, p. 9.

[100]"Fair's Officials at Variance over Games of Chance," Grand Rapids Press, September 18, 1922, p. 1.

[101]"Fair Bars Wheel Games This Year," Grand Rapids Press, October 29, 1922, p. 2.

the girls in the burlesque shows were all sent to work elsewhere. With the vices eliminated and police everywhere present to enforce prohibition, many traditional fairgoers also began to seek their amusement elsewhere. When attendance declined, the profits declined, and the West Michigan State Fair was forced into receivership.

With the losses resulting from fires and poor attendance, the West Michigan State Fair was placed in receivership by Circuit Judge William B. Brown on July 16, 1927. A petition for receivership was filed on behalf of "Louis D. Moody, Addison Keller, as the Keller transfer line, Harry E. Morris and John V. Morris as Morris Brothers, Earl T. Cotton as the E.T. Cotton Electric Co. and the Comstock Park Lumber Co."[102] Council for the petitioners showed the fair's liabilities for September 30, 1926 as $110,000 against fixed assets of $158,564. Judge Brown granted their plea and appointed C. Sophus Johnson and Olive Jones as joint receivers to carry on the business of the association.[103] The receivers made considerable progress liquidating the debt in the 1928 fair, but when the depression arrived, their efforts were futile. Fairs were not held in 1931, 1932 and 1933 but they were revived in 1934 and 1935. In 1934 the fair attempted to obtain support as part of the New Deal, and it was under private ownership, being obtained by a stock company.[104] The following year automobile races were promoted to draw

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[102]"Value of Grounds Important Issue in Fair Squabble," Grand Rapids Press, July 15, 1927, p. 1.

[103]"West Michigan Fair," Michigan Tradesman, July 27, 1927, p. 32.

[104]Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 20, 1934, p. 1.

the crowds, and the big names, including Oldfield and DePalma, were brought back to the local track.[105] However, these late efforts could not overcome the influence of the depression, and on November 16, 1936, Judge Brown ordered a $60,000 bid by the General Fiduciary Corporation for the fairground property accepted.[106] Thus, Comstock Park saw its last fair in 1935. Capital Lumber and Wrecking Company soon came in and salavaged the materials that existed on the grounds. Local folk who were frequent visitors at the fair remember it with nostalgia. Their feelings are similar to those expressed by Sherwood Anderson in Winesburg, Ohio where George Willard and Helen White took a night walk through the old fairgrounds. Anderson states:

> There is something memorable in the experience to be had by going into a fairground that stands at the edge of a Middle Western town on a night after the annual fair has been held. The sensation is one never to be forgotten. On all sides are ghosts, not of the dead, but of living people. Here, during the day just passed, have come the people pouring in from the town and the country around. Farmers with their wives and children and all the people from the hundreds of little farm houses have gathered within these board walls. Young girls have laughed and men with beards have talked of the affairs of their lives. The place has been filled to overflowing with life. It has itched and squirmed with life and now it is night and the life has all gone away.[107]

The depression claimed the tanneries as another casualty in Comstock Park. During World War I, Van Wallin sold the tanneries to a New York syndicate changing their name to the Union Tanning Company. In the

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[105] Grand Rapids Press, August 8, 1935, p. 1.

[106] "Fair Grounds Bid Ordered Accepted," Grand Rapids Press, November 17, 1936, p. 5.

[107] Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (New York: Random House, 1919), p. 295.

post-war period, tanning activity slowed down considerably because of the loss of government contracts. The Old Mill Creek tannery was closed in 1924 and was dismantled during the early 1930's. With the advent of the depression the Michigan Tannery soon followed. In 1934 the Michigan Tannery was closed, and when the insurance expired on the buildings in January, 1936, Capital Lumber and Wrecking Company started demolishing the buildings. Demolition was completed in 1938 and all of the machinery had been shipped to a Union Tanning Company plant in Ridgeway, Pennsylvania. In the fall of 1938 demolition commenced on the houses on old tannery row.[108] Thus, the industry that produced rapid growth in Comstock Park at the turn of the century pulled up its roots and fled. The village that depended heavily on the tanneries for employment, a tax base and a market for main street businesses was left to adjust to a new set of economic relationships. With the closing of the tanneries, Comstock Park ceased to be an industrial community.

Like most small communities during the depression, Comstock Park also lost its bank. The Comstock Park State Bank was established in 1917 by D.S. Power as one of a chain of banks he operated in small towns in northern Michigan. The directors of the bank, D.H. Power, Thomas A. Hice, Dwight Lydell, George P. Lamoreaux, Van A. Wallin, N.B. Creveling, Martin D. Buth, G.S. Whitmore and H.C. Hachmuth, included the community's most prominent businessmen. The bank was located on the corner of West River Road and Mill Creek Street in the most attractive building in the village. The bank was supported by a large portion of the local com-

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[108]Clarence Wier, personal interview at the Clarence Wier home, Comstock Park, Mich., November 26, 1971.

munity.[109] However, when the depression arrived, the bank could not collect on its loans or pay its debts. Therefore, it was forced to declare bankruptcy. Local residents lost their savings as the building was razed and the material salvaged in an effort to pay off as many debts as possible. With the loss of the bank the business community was forced to make its financial transactions outside the community, forfeiting another institution that had contributed to an air of independence.

The depression forced the community to look to the State and Federal government for assistance. Lingeman observed this dilemma in many small communities and he concluded, "Public works . . . boomed, and thanks to New Deal programs, many small towns acquired schools and libraries and museums and roads they had long put off out of traditional parsimony. These new acquisitions, beneficial to all, shored up sagging community moral, but they were also an irrevocable admission of the federal presence and linked the small towns in new ways to the faroff urban power centers."[110] Comstock Park also received its W.P.A. programs. Local men were put to work with wheelborrows and shovels moving the hill behind the high school to construct an athletic complex. Prior to the depression, the school used the fairground as an athletic facility, but W.P.A. workers built a fine football, baseball and track complex on school property. W.P.A. workers also paved School Street and built an athletic storage building south of the football field.[111] The workers

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[109] Comstock Park News, December 21, 1917, p. 1.

[110] Lingeman, op. cit., p. 434.

[111] Clarence Wier, personal interview at the Clarence Wier home, Comstock Park, Michigan, November 26, 1971.

were issued checks that were quickly converted into sacks of groceries. With the tanneries closed and out of town employment non-existent, families supplemented W.P.A. incomes with subsistence farming.

Comstock Park received another set back on July 3, 1935, when a flash flood raised the level of York and Mill Creeks and sent their waters through the business district. The flood did considerable damage to the main street stores and washed out both railroads. Merchants used sandbags to protect their merchandise, but few of them escaped damages. The water receded on July 4, but the damage contributed to the economic difficulties of the depression. The Comstock Park Fuel and Ice Company bore the brunt of the flood as the current washed away $1,500 worth of slab wood, coal and coke.[112]

When World War II broke, out Comstock Park was a village in rapid decline. The blue collar workers went to Grand Rapids to find employment in the war industries. Women began to leave the household and join their husbands working in the factories. A new economic relationship was established which linked Comstock Park to the metropolitan environment. The village was forced to compete with outside merchandising forces at a great disadvantage. The school became increasingly dependent on State assistance as the community lost its industrial tax base. With the closing of the tanneries and the fairground Comstock Park lost most of its independence as a village. It soon became salmost totally dependent on Grand Rapids industries and the state and national governments for financial support.

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[112]"Tiny Creek Causes Flood," Grand Rapids Press, July 3, 1935, p.2.

CHAPTER IV

UNINCORPORATED VILLAGE AND MASS SOCIETY, 1940 TO 1980

After the depression, Comstock Park's institutional framework was drastically altered through the pressure of outside forces, while local citizens clung to their unincorporated political status and failed to develop the machinery necessary to assist them in adapting to change and solving their problems. The community was forced to deal with new relationships, established during the process of greater urbanization and industrialization, which produced new patterns for marketing goods, greater variation in population, state and national political dependence and bureaucratization, increased social and religious fractionalization, heavy demand for educational opportunity and new orientations in the family and home. During this period, the unincorportated village of Comstock Park, stripped of its economic base during the depression, lost control of its own destiny, as stimuli from the larger mass society elicited responses from local institutions that forced them to adapt or perish. Thus, Comstock Park evolved into a bedroom suburb of Grand Rapids as it adjusted to forces beyond its control. Edgar Lee Masters found his own town passing with the influence of industrialization and urbanization, and he lamented:

> Go into any community of the kind I am speaking of and you'll find this process going on. The town is being made into a ganglion of the city. Telephone and telegraph wires make it part of the metropolis, the radio, the automobile, the airplane, the city newspaper, the magazines carrying Paris fashions, the standard cigar

> stores, the standard grocery stores, the standard drug stores, machine gas stations, everything that the city can boast of, the small town of today can boast of. The privately owned canning companies, lumber mills, are taken over by large corporations who run them more cheaply and more efficiently. Industrialism is in the saddle; it is America. This is a country of monopolies and small towns, long preserved from the influence, are being drawn into the net.[1]

The impact of industrialization and urbanization on Comstock Park was apparent in the changes brought about in the economic community. The small stores that operated on main street became early casualities of modern merchandizing techniques, such as mail order sales, super markets and shopping malls. Comstock Park was flanked by commercial corridors that developed along Alpine and Plainfield Avenues where local folk purchased goods more conveniently, at a lower cost and in a more attractive environment. The K-Mart, Meijers Thrifty Acres, Family Foods and the North Kent Mall provided too much competition for village enterprises like Lamoreaux's general store, Hice's meat market, Campbell's lumber company, Bielawski's bakery, VanderJagt's dime store and Dodge's dry goods store. The commercial enterprises still operating, such as the drug store, the hardware store and the food store, do so at a great disadvantage. They delay plant improvements, employ family members, oppose tax increases, or support any measure that will control costs and enable them to compete with the enterprises of mass society. In 1974 the school made an analysis of the community that reflected the bind of the local businessman. Morrissey Lawn and Garden Center responded, "No expansion planned--too costly, find it hard to earn enough 'net'

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[1]Lingeman, op. cit., p. 390.

profit to pay for continually rising labor and taxes," while Claude Host of the hardware replied, "Any more taxes and we will have to shut the doors."[2] Vidich and Bensman found a similar situation in their study of Springdale, New York. They discovered, "As these large centers of retail distribution become more elaborate and efficient, the local merchant loses a greater share of the trade of the mobile segments of the population. His trade becomes more limited to the aged, the loyal, the infirm and those who must buy on credit."[3] Thus, the automobile made it convenient for the village inhabitant to visit the plethora of merchandizing establishments in the greater Grand Rapids area and the small village store was abandoned or forced to struggle at a commercial disadvantage.

Mainstreet Comstock Park still operates from buildings that were constructed at the turn of the century, thus most buildings are wood frame. The building that housed the North Star Hotel is now occupied by Louie's Bar; the building George Metz built for a general store now serves the State Bank of Michigan; Frank Thiel's meat market has been taken over by Betty's Restaurant; an optometrist is set up in Plumb's old general store. DeVries Realty occupies the old drug store; Lawson Studio is in VanderJagt's old dime store; Comstock Park Foods operates from the building erected for Comstock Park Lumber Company; the structure that housed Echternach's Saloon is undergoing a face lift by a home improvement company; Fink's Bar still operates from the old Riversite

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[2]Comstock Park Public Schools, School Facility Report (Lansing: Manson, Jackson, Kane, Inc., 1974), p. 22-23.

[3]Vidich and Bensman, op. cit. p. 54.

Hotel; Cook's Dance Hall is now a pizza parlor; and the two saloons on Mill Creek Street are still doing business but with new owners. The old wooden buildings give the business district a well worn look as few new enterprises have been erected among them. In 1961, Fern Miles, the editor of a local newspaper called the Suburban Echo, wounded community pride in an editorial entitled "Village of Neglect" in which she described the business district as:

> The Town's main street of business is housed in rotten wooden buildings; shoddyheeled outwardly, and decadent inwardly. Many of these business places should be razed and re-raised. Some of these houses of gloom beckon the derelict, and after dark main street becomes not too unlike Bridge Street's skid row prior to the Grand Rapids urban renewal program and the freeway constructions. A local businessman recently jested, "My next project will be for free beer and wider sidewalks." After a walk along main street that statement becomes an overture of truth. The weary and the unkempt and the drunk reel along the streets gloomy paths. It is a come-on welcome to all riff-raff.[4]

Miles may have been a little hard on the village, but conditions were ripe to elicit these comments. She focused on the village old timers and placed the blame on them for resisting change. However, the editor's frustrations were shared by the businessmen who were forced to compete at a great disadvantage with the mass society.

The post-war years also witnessed the community resident looking to the outside for employment. With the passing of the tannery, the decline of the fish hatchery and the struggling local stores, very little employment opportunity was available in the community. Men traveled to the industrial and commercial areas of Grand Rapids to seek their livelihood.

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[4]"Village of Neglect," Suburban Echo, November 12, 1961, p. 1.

In 1969, a community survey revealed:

> Comstock Park is a typical suburban type community. There is practically no farming and very little industry. Residents are employed in the metropolitan area of Grand Rapids as factory workers, in the professions, and in the various service industries.[5]

A small industrial corridor along West River Road began to attract several light industries, but their specialized skills have required employees from outside the local community. The community still lacks an industrial base that would provide a measure of autonomy. The village economy struggles as pay checks are earned and spent beyond its own boundaries. The inhabitants of Comstock Park are predominately industrial workers "who consist mainly of individuals and their families who have migrated to the community in an effort to escape the city life and to seek cheaper housing as well as land for home gardens."[6] But, being located so close to the metropolitan community, these former city residents seek the advantages of both worlds, the small village and the large city.

Today the village of Comstock Park gets most of its identity from the school system. The community schools are located within the vicinity of the village, and most of the daily activity revolves around these buildings. A 1974 school facility report stated, "The community receives its strength from a strong sense of unity and spirit from the educational

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[5]Western Michigan University, Report of the School of Education, A Survey of Comstock Park Public Schools (Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, 1969) p. 1.

[6]Vidich and Bensman, op. cit., p. 94.

experiences offered to its citizens."[7] The school district provides the community with boundaries and gives the local folk a geographic identity that is loosely defined within the unincorporated village. Those who live within the school district have consistently rallied around the endeavors of the school making it one of the few unifying forces in the community. When the school band strikes up, "We'll Be Loyal to You Comstock Park," on a fall Friday night, factory workers, businessmen, Legionnaires, churchmen, Rotarians, housewives and local youth proudly don their green and gold caps and rout for a victory. It is through the school that "Comstock Park clings dearly to its own identity as a community."[8]

The school system grew rapidly in the 1950's when open land was purchased by residential developers. In 1950 an elementary school was constructed behind the high school, and in 1957 it received two additions. The Westgate area began in the late 1950's convincing the citizens of the need to add a gymnasium, cafeteria, industrial arts section and band and choral rooms to the old high school. With rapid residential growth the 1960's became a busy time of school construction. Stoney Creek Elementary School was built in 1962 with additions made in 1963 and 1968. Greenridge Elementary School was constructed in 1963 receiving an addition in 1967. In 1968 still another addition was made on the high school to provide rooms for science, home economics, business and language arts.[9] Residential growth was restoring some of the optimism that had been tempered

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[7]Comstock Park Public Schools, op. cit., p. 94.

[8]Western Michigan University, op. cit., p. 1.

[9]Comstock Park Public Schools, op. cit., p. 6.

during the depression as residents consistently supported school millage requests. However, the 1970's brought recession and another period of gloom. In the spring of 1974 the voters rejected the construction of a $6,419,400 high school by a margin of one vote.[10] The issue was defeated by a larger margin on the second vote as the economy seemed to take a drastic turn for the worse. Thus, students at Comstock Park High School are still using the facilities that were erected in 1925 as part of the general high school site. The school board does hold title to an eighty acre tract of pleasant woodland if future development appears desirable.

For the last twenty years moves for school consolidation have been hotly discussed in Comstock Park. When Kenowa Hills formed their district in the early 1960's, local residents rejected consolidation in favor of maintaining their own schools. B.T. Hachmuth, a former superintendent and acting school board president, was one of the more active in supporting the local school concept. Hachmuth, and many older residents like him, were afraid Comstock Park would lose its identity if the local school system was abolished. They responded by passing a series of bond issues that provided for a somewhat piecemeal but adequate series of additions. In 1969 outside expertise was hired and consolidation was again recommended in their report.

> Any report of educational needs and conditions must be of necessity include a serious look at the existing political organization in terms of future demands. Even a cursory reading of this report should indicate to the reader that the Comstock Park School District has limited human and financial resources. It will be difficult

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[10] Ibid.

> and expensive to provide the facilities and the programs suggested in this report.
> It is recommended that the Board of Education consider the possibility of reorganizing the district with neighboring units.[11]

The Western Michigan University study made little impact on the board as they responded four years later by asking the voters to approve a six and one-half million dollar bond issue for a new high school. Manson, Jackson and Kane Incorporated, the architects who planned the proposed school, issued the following assumptions in their 1974 survey:

> 1. From previous studies it is apparent that merger with another district is not desired by the people of Comstock Park Public School District.
> 2. The people of the Comstock Park Public School District desire to maintain local control over their schools.[12]

Local control has proven difficult to keep with spiraling educational costs. Because of low valuations in the school district, by 1969 local tax receipts only accounted for thirty-one per cent of the local operating costs of the schools. The district was forced to relinquish some autonomy as it became dependent on state aid formulas and federal funding programs to satisfy its need for money. The Western Michigan University study concluded "that residents from Comstock Park School District will have to continue to levy high taxes for operation and at the same time depend upon a state aid formula that allocates funds at an increasing rate for low valuation districts. The future is not bright."[13] In spite of gloomy reports the community refuses to let go of nearly 150 years of

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[11]Western Michigan University, op. cit., p. 64.

[12]Comstock Park Public Schools, op. cit., p. 45.

[13]Western Michigan University, op. cit., p. 56.

tradition. They have controlled their own school since the Withey School was established in the 1840's, and through their schools Comstock Park derives its meaning and right to exist today.

Vidich and Bensman found school board politics dominated the town of Springdale, New York, and their conclusions are applicable to the village of Comstock Park. They stated:

> Due to the high visibility of the consequences of decisions, to the necessity of making decisions in order to keep a large institution going and to efforts to conceal the locus of decisions from a highly interested public, the school board and school policies become the focal point of public crisis. Almost every major decision of the board carries within it the seed of crisis.[14]

The school district provides Comstock Park with its only vehicle of local control as township governments are located outside its boundaries and deal with issues that are less related to village concerns. Thus, the school board has evolved as the center for potential conflict. Local residents have recently gathered at the school to voice their opinions on a variety of issues including Mr. Goei's Bible studies in the school building, the selection of books like The Godfather in the English department, the dismissal of Cleo Anders as elementary principal, the continued employment of John Fehsenfeld as superintendent, the 1973 recall of school board members, the six and one-half million dollar high school bonding program in 1974 and the 1980 teachers' strike. The community becomes volatile over key issues, and frequently political factions like the Parents Action League (PAL) or Concerned Adults for Responsible Education (CARE) surface to carry out their educational crusades. During

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[14]Vidich and Bensman, op. cit., p. 178.

periods of political intensity, school board seats may be hotly contested; but when things cool down, candidates are hard to get and board politics sink to the level of benign neglect. The board used to be dominated by village tradesmen who relied on the school as a market for their goods. The board has more recently been dominated by wage earners and housewives who are less sensitive to the needs of the local business community and make most of their expenditures with outside firms. Even so, local loyalty does exist with the board especially in regard to hiring practices as a large number of local graduates have been brought back into the institution to teach. The locally raised teachers contribute to community tradition and become somewhat threatened by policies advocating major change like school consolidation. So we find community spirit, loyalty and pride is transmitted through the classroom from teacher to student making the school the vehicle of conservative political socialization.

The decline of the fish hatchery and the development of Lydell Park produced more problems for the unincorporated village of Comstock Park. The fish hatchery was a source of community pride as it was one of the most attractive enterprises in the area. The Nineteenth Report of State Fisheries boasted "The Mill Creek bass station is the acknowledged leader in domestic fisheries and resourceful methods that make for success in its special experimental work, evinced by the fact that for a number of years it has outdistanced all competitors in the country in the production of both small and large mouth bass."[15] During its zenith, the hatchery covered seventy acres of land in Comstock Park and Belmont and

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[15]State of Michigan, Nineteenth Biannual Report of the State Board of Fish Commissioners for the Calendar Years 1909 and 1910 (Lansing: State Printing Office, 1911), p. 10.

operated twenty-three holding ponds. An official from the United States Bureau of Fisheries claimed, "The Mill Creek Hatchery, under the able direction of Dwight Lydell from its inception, is, without question, the finest equipped and most productive fish hatchery in the United States."[16] The hatchery consistently out produced other facilities raising warm water fish, including perch, walleyed pike, small and large mouth bass and bluegills and transported them by rail to the lakes and streams of Michigan. Gradually, with the development of fish management research at Michigan State University and the death of Dwight Lydell in February, 1927, the facility started to decline.

In 1946 the State decided to abandon the fish hatchery and pull its operation out of Comstock Park. They cited new research as the first reason for abandonment claiming "enough or more than enough breeders are found even in heavily-fished lakes and streams and these fish spawn successfully wherever conditions are favorable. In such waters these breeders invariably produce more young than the streams and lakes can provide with homes and food."[17] The Fish Division of the Conservation Department decided the production of warm water fish was not essential and orders for Comstock Park ceased to arrive; the demand for the product of the local facility was gone. The condition of the facility was cited as the second reason for abandonment. The old wooden pipe lines had rotted away; the dams were in urgent need of repair; and the retaining walls required

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[16]State of Michigan, Department of Conservation, Division of Fish Culture Operations, Report for Fiscal Years 1925 and 1926 (Lansing: State Printing Office, 1927), p. 86.

[17]"Comstock Park Concerned Over Fate of State Fish Hatchery," Grand Rapids Press, Undated article in author's local history files, Comstock Park, Michigan.

renovation. Claude Lydell, nephew to Dwight and manager at the hatchery after his uncle's death, estimated the repairs at $50,000.[18] Now, the State decided to dispose of its local property.

The hatchery was liquidated in 1948, and the State donated thiry-nine acres of the property to Kent County to be used a park. The hatchery equipment was sent to other facilities around the State, and employees were transferred. At the request of the Conservation Department, the park was to bear the name of Dwight Lydell in honor of the founder of the fish hatchery. Several local residents were involved in the land transfer. Neil Lamoreaux, president of the Comstock Park Community Council remarked, "If the State could convey it to the county park system, which might maintain it, that would be a swell arrangement" and B. Taylor Hachmuth, superintendent of Comstock Park Schools replied, "the community needs a spot for a playground, pool and picnic facilities. The hatchery would be fine. The main building could be used as a shelter. We hate to see a beauty spot for years disappear or give way entirely to commercial sites."[19] William P. Joyce, chairman of the County Road Commission, accepted the deed to the property at a brief ceremony at the park and stated, "This is one of the finest and most unselfish things the conservation department ever has done. This 39-acre tract of land makes a beautiful addition to the county park system."[20] Linus Palmer, county park superintendent,

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[18]Ray Voss, "After 34 Years, He'll Shift to Trout," Grand Rapids Herald, December 26, 1948, p. 12.

[19]"C.P. Concerned Over Fish Hatchery," Grand Rapids Press, Undated article in author's local history files, Comstock Park, Michigan.

[20]"County Lauds State for Gift of 39-Acre Dwight Lydell Park," Grand Rapids Press, Undated article in author's local history file, Comstock Park, Michigan.

suggested some of the twenty-two ponds be filled in while others be kept "for possible use as swimming areas in the summer and skating rinks in the winter."[21] The county approached their acquistion with optimism expecting the facility to develop into a pleasant park.

However, the park development was hampered because of the peculiar political nature of Comstock Park. The county considered the park a neighborhood facility and refused to finance significant development, while the community remained unincorporated and was unable to finance development on its own. Community groups like the Rotary, the Dwight Lydell Park Committee, the Comstock Park Businessmen's Association and the hard working Jaycees attempted to aid development of the facility, but their efforts were unable to go beyond single project items, like building tennis courts, contributing to building construction or funding a master plan. Alpine and Plainfield Townships have offered token support for the park as it reaches out into each of them, but township governments have been controlled by the rural element who have little interest in developing a village park. So, the community is stuck with a site the State abandoned, the county refused to fund and the townships ignored while the village and local organizations have proved powerless to develop it. For the past thirty years the park has decayed; retaining walls have crumbled; ponds have filled in with plant life and sludge; while the buildings have deteriorated for want of supervision and maintenance. Little of the beauty of the fish hatchery is present in the site today as it suffers from political fragmentation and years of neglect.

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[21] Grand Rapids Press, Article in author's local history file, Comstock Park, Michigan.

The Comstock Park Jaycees recently funded a study of the park which calls for a $1,201,929 improvement package. This master plan calls for new tennis courts, shuffle board courts, a ball diamond, basketball courts, racquetball courts, bridges, foot trails, benches and a multitude of other improvements. The plan does not include a new community center, remodeling of the hatchery building or a new hydraulic system and pond clean-up program.[22] On October 16, 1980, the Board of Park Trustees approved $46,000 of local matching funds for a federal grant to start park development under the guidelines of the new master plan.[23] The $92,000 provided by county and federal money will make a modest start in park development with much remaining to be done. There appears to be no other readily available money to develop the site so change will probably come slowly with a tight economy. However, the master plan and the $92,000 matching grant have provided some hope for the future.

The people in Comstock Park have taken an ambivalent attitude toward township government. The township offices and the centers of political power are located outside the boundaries of the village and school district so that most local residents view them as being remote and insensitive to local problems. Furthermore, township boundaries split the community in half and complicate efforts for unified programs. The Comstock Park area depends on the townships for modern government services like police and fire protection, water and sewage service, street lighting and road

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[22]Kent County Park Commission, Dwight Lydell Park--Master Plan, (Grand Rapids: M.C. Smith & Associates, 1979), p. 24.

[23]Kent County Board of Park Trustees, Lydell Park Funding Resolution, Grand Rapids, Michigan, October 16, 1980.

improvements, and library and recreational programs. Moreover, the location of facilities like parks and tennis courts have elicited strong resentment in the community as they have been placed near the township offices and away from the local center of population. The local community has provided leadership in Plainfield Township; Don Lamoreaux has been the Supervisor and Harold Helsel a Trustee, but Alpine Township has been dominated by the rural element. Alpine farmers look to the township for road improvement and fire protection and have been involved in local politics. The people in the Comstock Park area have accepted the government of the Alpine farmers and avoided political involvement. The conservative nature of the people of Comstock Park has prevented efforts toward incorporation as a town, probably because of the fear of increased taxes, so the village and school district remains politically frationalized. Thus, the political machinery does not exist to deal with a specific village or community problem. Dr. William Viall of Western Michigan University made a study of the community in the summer of 1974 when he concluded:

> The Comstock Park School District is not reflective of the growth rate of the rest of the area.
>
> Is it because it is already over-populated? Hardly!
>
> Is it because no one is taking serious action to making the district attractive to new development--commercial, industrial, housing? Is it because schools are not inviting new families? These last two questions must be answered by those who already work and dwell here.
>
> With no visable organized effort of the community to improve, that is, an effort such as made by a Chamber of Commerce or another civic or service group, it is still probable that the district will grow.[24]

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[24]William P. Viall, Survey of Comstock Park Public Schools 1974, Report to the Comstock Park Board of Education, Comstock Park, Michigan, August 6, 1974 (Kalamazoo, R.E.D.E. Center, Western Michigan University, 1974), p. 2.

Dr. Viall indicated that the community has some problems to solve, but it is still waiting for an efficaciius individual or group to address these problems.

During the last thirty years, Comstock Park has grown into a bedroom suburb of Grand Rapids, and developers have purchased land and constructed homes. The older developments, Stowell's Terrace, Child's Addition and Clark's Addition have become centers of low income housing and are inhabited predominently by the young and the elderly. The largest development, Westgate, dominates the community and houses the middle-aged and the middle-classed. Westgate was started in the late 1950's and now contains around 700 homes.[25] A Westgate house is currently selling for around $50,000. During the 1960's, there was conflict between the newcomers in Westgate and the older residents of the village that was often expressed in contests for seats on the school board. Then, during the 1970's the development dwarfed the rest of the community and the issue now appears to be at rest. Another housing development, Westhill Acres, a federally subsidized low income development, has sprung up on Pine Island Drive providing housing for the rising middle class. Multiple unit housing has experienced growth in the community with the Westgate Townhouses and Alpine Slopes developing during the 1970's. The community contains one large mobile home park, Northern Estates, and a small one on West River Road. The mobile home parks and apartments house single and older residents providing few students for the community schools. Recent studies have indicated that "there is still available land north and west of the

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[25]Westgate Association, Westgate Telephone Directory 1971, Comstock Park, Michigan, pp. 14-15.

village suitable for housing development," but they suggest that "birth control practices plus 'tight' money for home mortgages may further reduce the increase in population."[26] However, E.L. Ladd Company has submitted plans for the development of 542 units of housing to be erected on the site they acquired on Samrick Road, north of the village but within the school district.[27] If the Ladd development is completed, it will have a marked impact on the community and its school system.

Housing developments produced change in the community beyond the expansion of the school system and increased population. The influx of new people produced an increase in the number of churches and social organizations that serve their needs. The Comstock Park Christian Reformed Church was the first of the post-war arrivals setting up as a mission in the old dime store building in 1946. During the 1950's, 12th Street Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids took over the mission, and it was dedicated as a church on June 10, 1957. The Christian Reformed Church stood on West River Drive until 1966 when it was razed to provide for the I-296 freeway. In June, 1967, construction was started on the present church on Pine Island Drive, and it was dedicated in December of the same year.[28] The next church was started in 1963 as a mission of Calvary Undenominational Church in Grand Rapids with its

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[26]Western Michigan University, op. cit., p. 1 and Manson, Jackson Kane, School Facilities Report 1974, p. 5.

[27]E.L. Ladd, "Proposed Residential P.U.D. Layout," Blueprint prepared by Exxel Engineering Inc., Grand Rapids, Michigan, December 3, 1979.

[28]Comstock Park Christian Reformed Church, "Dedication Program," Comstock Park, Michigan, December 22, 1966.

services held in Stoney Creek School. The mission erected a church building on Lamoreaux Drive, and in July, 1966, the local fellowship organized as Maranatha Bible Church.[29] Maranatha experienced steady growth dedicating a new building on Stoney Creek Street on January 23, 1972.[30] The largest church in the community today, Maranatha runs a successful summer day camp from its present church site. Members of the church have recently purchased the Boy Scout Camp on North Division hoping to use the facility to enrich the camping ministry of the church. On April 30, 1963, the Michigan District of the Missouri synod of the Lutheran Church decided to establish a mission in Comstock Park. On November 3, 1963, the first worship services were held in Stoney Creek School, and on December 15, 1963, the group was chartered as Zion Lutheran Church. The Lutherans built their beautiful church on Lamoreaux Drive dedicating it on March 14, 1965.[31] Maranatha and Zion Lutheran were located on the Westgate fringe; these churches grew by drawing people from the building development. The Catholics in the community attend Holy Trinity Church in Alpine and Assumption Church in Belmont, as the local community does not have a Catholic Church. The Catholic influence in the community is strong, and many families send their children to the Catholic schools. The increased number of local churches has not increased the ecumenical spirit of the community. The churches all operate independently and tend to produce

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[29]Maranatha Bible Church, "Building Brochure," Comstock Park, Michigan, 1970, p. 1.

[30]Maranatha Bible Church, "Dedication Service Bulletin," Comstock Park, Michigan, January 23, 1972, p. 1.

[31]Zion Lutheran Church, "10th Anniversary Booklet," Comstock Park, Michigan, December 15, 1973, p. 1.

their own social life for their members. Churches are still somewhat of a fractionalizing influence on community unity.

The increase in population produced a number of new organizations in the community. The Rotary is the oldest service organization and is composed of local business and professional men holding weekly luncheons for its members and supporting a variety of community enterprises. The Comstock Park Jaycees are another recent arrival. They support civic programs like the Dwight Lydell Park and run public forums where political issues are discussed. The Lions Club is also active, raising money for aid to the blind. A number of organizations, like the Northwest Little League, support youth programs and contribute to worthy community causes. Probably the most active organization in the village is still the American Legion where people gather for fish suppers and social activities.

The post-war years have seen great change in Comstock Park. The freeway was built through the area in 1966 and greatly altered the landscape. The Speedrome, a local race track built on the site of the old fairgrounds and airport, was demolished in 1966 to make room for the freeway, and people stopped coming to Comstock Park for entertainment. The high bluffs behind the high school were razed allowing the extension of Division Avenue to West River Drive. A series of tornados stripped the area of many of its trees, especially the tornado of 1956 that passed through Lydell Park and left local residents with great respect for the power of the elements. Surely, the greatest change was the rapid process of urbanization where open land was bought up and put into housing. The open land around the village is still being sought out and developed into home sites. As long as land is available, it will remain one of

community's most valuable resources offering the possibility of development in the future. Comstock Park will probably continue to grow as a bedroom suburb of Grand Rapids, and as it does, it will become enriched with its most valuable resource, its people. As future citizens exploit the land and alter the environment, they will write the next chapter in the history of Comstock Park. One hopes that in the future Comstock Park will experience as rich a tradition as it has in the past.

On a high bluff to the south of the village of Comstock Park, the pioneers are buried in the old Mill Creek Cemetery. The cemetery is maintained by the Mill Creek Cemetery Association, most of whom are now buried at the site, but moss now covers the tombstones, ivy **runs** wild through the brushy ground and grass has intruded upon the concrete walks and steps. The cemetery has been the site of vandalism, and broken tombstones and years of neglect have given it an eerie look. The visitor at the site wonders why the facility is not restored and maintained beyond the occasional tended grave. However, after a glimpse of the old buildings on main street, the condition of Lydell Park and the well worn 1927 portion of the high school, that same visitor might conclude the cemetery suffers from the same blight, community apathy. If Edgar Lee Masters were to visit the site, he probably would pen something like the following lines:

> Where are Henry, Andrew, Daniel, Tom and Neil, the champion glass-blower, the bold pioneer, the gallant soldier, the butcher and the Senator?
> All, all, are sleeping on the hill.[32]

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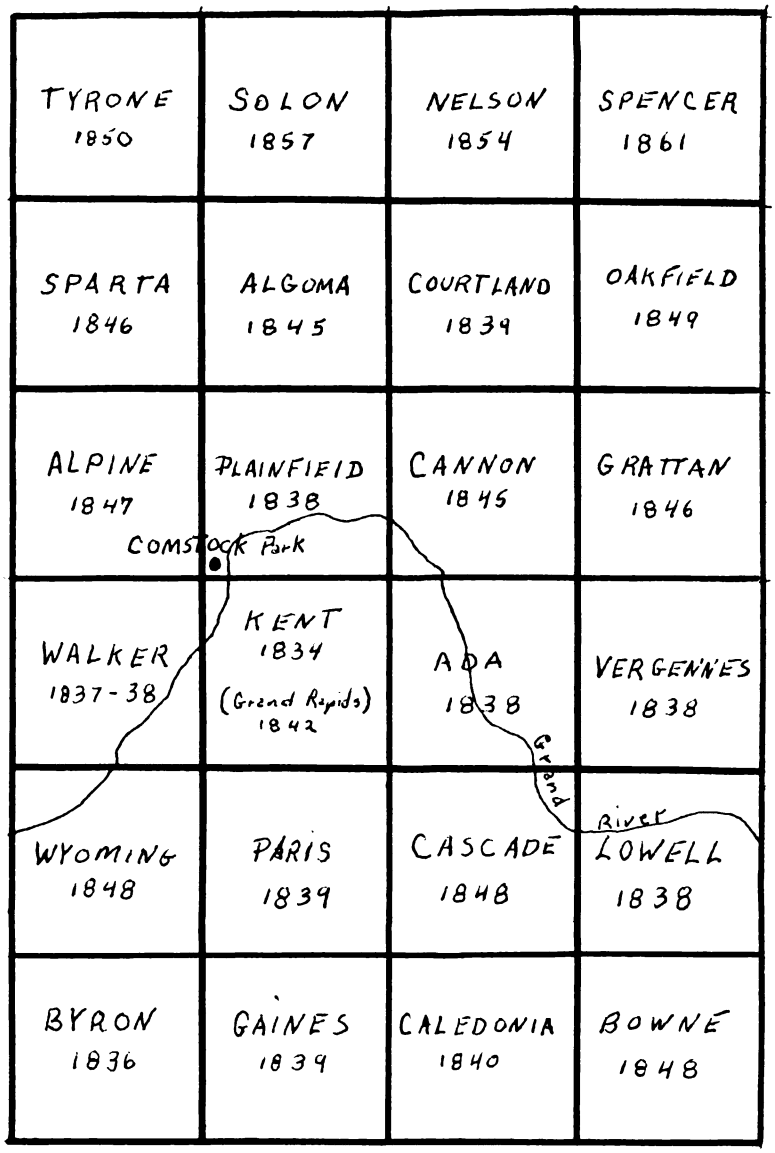
[32]Edgar Lee Masters, Spoon River Anthology (New York: Collier Macmillian Publishers, 1914), p. 23.

A good portion of the history of Comstock Park sleeps on that wood covered hill, and the local citizen can learn much by drawing from their heritage. Indeed, the history of North's Mill, Plumb's Station, Mill Creek and Comstock Park is buried there awaiting all who wish to search and discover.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

KENT COUNTY WITH TOWNSHIP ORGANIZATION DATES



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