

Sand Lake: Daughter of the 20th Century

By Diane DeBlois & Robert Dalton Harris

Our title for this talk was going to be Sand Lake at the Dawn of the 20th Century – as in the title of this new book at our town library (highly recommended) and making us think of the Dawn of Civilization, as in this cartoon. But I left the title on Mary French's answering machine and we decided to stick with her interpretation: Sand Lake, Daughter of the 20th Century.

Daughter, not son, for the cliché is that the son tends to leave home for good, but the daughter stays with you. The changes that happened to Sand Lake around 1900 – or to put it another way, what was born here – we still find characterize this area. And we find that, even though we local historians are intrigued by local events long past (like the Glass Factory and the Anti-Rent Wars, both of which were completely gone by 1852) we are more attached to things that some people still alive can remember, and to buildings that still exist even in changed use.

We want to look at two changes to Sand Lake that came from innovations that were quintessentially 20th century: the electric trolley and the industrial combine. In our town, the trolley accelerated its development as a recreation destination. And in our town, Faith Mills – a knitting industry combine – strengthened the residential base. In Sand Lake, as in few other American towns, these two daughters of the 20th century – the trolley and the factory combine – were twinned.

We have to start with James Knox Averill, even though he died in 1900. He was a local boy but also a New York City lawyer who began to buy up local land as early as the 1870s. It's clear that he envisioned the town as a recreation mecca. Many of you know the map in Beers' 1876 atlas which shows Averill's tiny cottage lots around Marcy Pond that he named Interlachen Park, but never built. It's interesting that the name of this development was the same as the Aken knitting mill across the street – both men thought that this rather romantic name was appropriate.

Averill was sensitive to names – he successfully changed the name of this hamlet and the lake we look over, from Sand Lake to Averill and Crystal Lake in 1880. And then the hamlet to Averill Park in 1882 when he projected his amusement park. In 1890 he applied to the Troy Common Council to run a railway from Troy to Averill Park. The idea was blocked by Troy residents who didn't want the tracks near their houses, so Averill struck a compromise planning a line from the Albia terminus of the Troy trolleys.

These plans for an electric trolley were similar to ones being implemented all over the country. With this difference. Most of the trolley lines headed away from city centers into undeveloped farm lands, to promote the idea that workingmen and women could live in the suburbs and commute electrically. The trolley owners had a stake in selling the land for commercial interests, and often first built lowrise shops out in the boonies before any housing lots were sold – called "taxpayer strips." And they often built amusement parks with carousels at the end of the line to lure people into the country. But Sand Lake already had its village centers, both commercial and residential. Averill would prosper not so much from creating a residential but a recreational destination. And he'd already established his amusement park. What working people from Troy discovered when the Troy and New England Railway opened in 1895 was that they could enjoy the country as a day trip.

And so recreational businesses flourished here – the ice cream parlors, the fishing shacks, the restaurants and, yes, even boarding houses for those who didn't want to take the trolley back to the city the same day. Last week I interviewed Bill Green, a 90 year old farmer from Second Burden Lake. He talked passionately about how busy and festive Sand Lake used to be in summers. Just on Burden Lake Road there was the tavern in Hoffman the butcher's ^{casement} ~~house~~; the Maple Grove Inn with a public beach; Haynor's ice cream store with a nickelodeon; George Bruegel's Fisherman's Rest, which became the Burden Lake Casino; Calkins Hotel, whose barn became Minko's Inn, now Kay's Famous Pizza; Hogarty's Hotel; Totem Lodge – and any number of boats and cottages for rent. After the Great War, there were still day trippers but many more cottages were built and Bill Green delivered ice to their ice boxes each morning.

Sand Lake, of course, had always had hotels – built to service the stagecoach lines between Albany and Troy, and Boston, and attracting Albany vacationers – but Averill's efforts at promoting Averill Park and Crystal Lake helped increase its popularity. Before 1885, Sand Lake got its mail on contract #6272 from Troy on the way to Stephentown, once a day, 6 days a week. But in 1885, this was increased to twice a day – 12 trips a week from Troy – between July 1 and September 30. We had become a summer destination primarily for people from Troy.

But the Troy and New England Railway was built not merely for vacation traffic. In 1891, Averill put up \$4,000 for its construction. But so did his neighbor Pierce D. Kane who had bought the Interlachen Knitting Mill. And other Sand Lake mill owners put up money as well: John and Robert McClaren of the knitting mill in West Sand Lake contributed \$1,000; as did Andrew B. Knowlson of the Beverwyck Hosiery Mill in Averill Park. Many other investors, locally and Troy, saw the electric trolley as a boon to industry.

However, the very year that the money was raised, a huge flood heavily damaged or wiped out the local mills. Kane was finished; the McClarens and Knowlson hurting. The Arnold warp mill was destroyed as was the Smart paper mill. So, when the Troy & New England Railway opened in 1895, men from Troy could ride the trolley to work at McClarens in West Sand Lake, but only the Beverwyck mill was running in Averill Park, and it closed down the next year.

In the rest of industrial America, the turn of the century seemed the age of consolidation. In 1901 the steel industry combined the different companies owned by Carnegie, Morgan and Rockefeller into U.S. Steel. And we in the Wynants Kill watershed had a relationship with U.S. Steel: one of their subsidiaries, American Steel and Wire Company, bought out the Bessemer Steel Works and the Troy Steel Company at the mouth of the Wynants Kill in Troy in 1902. The acquisition connected them to the upstream mill sites including those in Averill Park via the Wynants Kill Improvement Association. But Morgan and his partners probably thought that the situation in Troy – with the mills there so interconnected with industries in the hinterland – was not the scale they were looking for. At any rate, in 1906 they established the company town of Gary, Indiana, and by 1911 they were gone from Troy.

Other American industries formed trusts or combines in the first 5 years of the 20th century: Agricultural machinery under International Harvester, commercial baking under Nabisco, explosives under Du Pont. And, on a different scale more appropriate to our watershed, Peter McCarthy and William Mahony combined the textile mills in Sand Lake, and eventually Albia and West Sand Lake, under Faith Mills.

McCarthy had built his summer house on Burden Lake Road opposite the mills sites. Where others might have seen a demoralized unemployed local work force and damaged empty mill buildings, he saw opportunity. Moreover, there was that electric trolley from Troy. McCarthy's main house was in Troy, he had mill interests in Cohoes, and a business in Troy selling raw cotton and wool to mills. Mahony lived in Troy and was involved with three mill sites in Albia. The trolley meant the two men could commute. And they could move managers, technicians, and materials from Troy and between their Albia and Averill Park mills. In 1897, the two men pooled their resources, took over all the mill sites in Averill Park (including the old Cary Mill where Timm & Company for a time made the Troy shirt), so they could control the damming of the Wynants Kill along the Burden Lake Road stretch. When they obtained the huge government underwear contracts in World War II they acquired the Thermo Knitting, former McClaren, Mill in West Sand Lake.

As a combine, Faith Mills used the resources of the mills to execute all the processes in making clothing: to spin cotton and wool fibres, to machine knit thread into fabric, and to sew the garments. And, crucially, they used the local labor resource. To make sure there were enough hands for the mill, they invested in what we might call the cultural infrastructure of Averill Park. They made sure there were boarding houses for bachelor workers, and they imported entertainments exciting enough to keep those bachelors in the hamlet and not wandering off to the bright lights of Troy. They built a Club House that offered family entertainment of movies and bowling, and an inexpensive cafeteria. They counted on workers putting down roots – as they did. Mill hands might have been able to make more money in the city, but they couldn't live as well as in Sand Lake. In the summers, they didn't even need to ride the trolley to the lakes ... they were right here.

One of the indications that Averill Park became the most vibrant hamlet in the area was the fact that the Odd Fellows Hall, down Burden Lake Road on the left, was operational longer than anywhere else in rural Rensselaer County. The Albia Odd Fellows Hall also persisted longer than most others, though its records also ended up in Averill Park.

Recreation and industry were woven together. The Troy and New England Railway served them both. Faith Mills brought raw materials (mostly cotton and wool waste, or shoddy) from Troy in open boxcars (there were 3 box cars and 6 flat-bed freight cars) and shipped finished clothing to Troy by covered trolley (there were 3 open summer cars and 4 closed winter cars).

And the Wynants Kill Improvement Association served both recreation and industry. Averill bought the water privilege at the outlet of Crystal Lake (once a saw mill but no longer used) so that he could join the group who managed the water power of the stream and its maintenance. In 1898, he was in a position to argue that recreation had as much right to the dammed up water as did industry. (On his letterhead for the Averill Park Land Improvement Company he wrote the

Association in June of that year to complain about Mr. Gabler, the manager of the dam gates at Glass, Crystal, and Burden Lakes who wasn't doing a good enough job: "It seems to me unfair that the pleasure grounds should be robbed of the attraction the lake affords and the mills compelled to remain idle in the Summer months, or be operated by steam power, simply because there is no one to oversee or govern Gabler's actions. My pecuniary interests warrant my giving the matter personal attention.")

Faith Mills didn't survive the 20th century, nor did the trolley, nor did the amusement park. But many of you remember them. And there are lots of physical reminders of them.

But, today in the 21st century, we are again concerned about the same "daughters." Even if we work elsewhere we want our town centers to be lively enough that we don't have to commute to Troy or Albany for all our commercial and entertainment business. And we know people are drawn to live here for the recreational opportunities: we want our natural recreation areas safeguarded, improved, and enlarged. So we celebrate the new public features of the village - here we are across the street from a newly opened historic general store, down the street from an arts center in a historic church, around the lakeshore from a lovely event spot where Averill's carousel spun.

There is much to be hopeful about.