

PIERS AND STUFF

As the Singapore based business and the Kalamazoo up-river traffic increased, more commercial shipping developed on Lake Michigan. The Kalamazoo River mouth area was the scene of most economic development in the early years, but by 1850 activity around Pier Cove began to grow – cordwood, sawed lumber, tannery products, and farms sprang up. The story of the resulting shipping business and the piers necessary for the areas success is an interesting one.

The lack of a good harbor on the Lake Michigan shoreline presented an impediment to the growth of business enterprise in the area. Though the Kalamazoo River provided refuge from the open water of the lake, the shifting sand bars and lack of piers presented problems for loading and unloading vessels.

Unlikely as it now seems, open water piers solved the much of the problem. The forces generated by lake waves and ice movement would seem to make these rather crude structures impractical--and the construction method used to build early piers is hard to imagine. Steam-driven pile drivers were not available until the 1860s so the very early piers were constructed using levers, pulleys and brute manpower. But where there is a will...there is a way and in the 1850s open water piers were constructed at Pier Cove, Plummerville and Glenn. These piers--rebuilt many times--remained in use at Pier Cove until 1917.

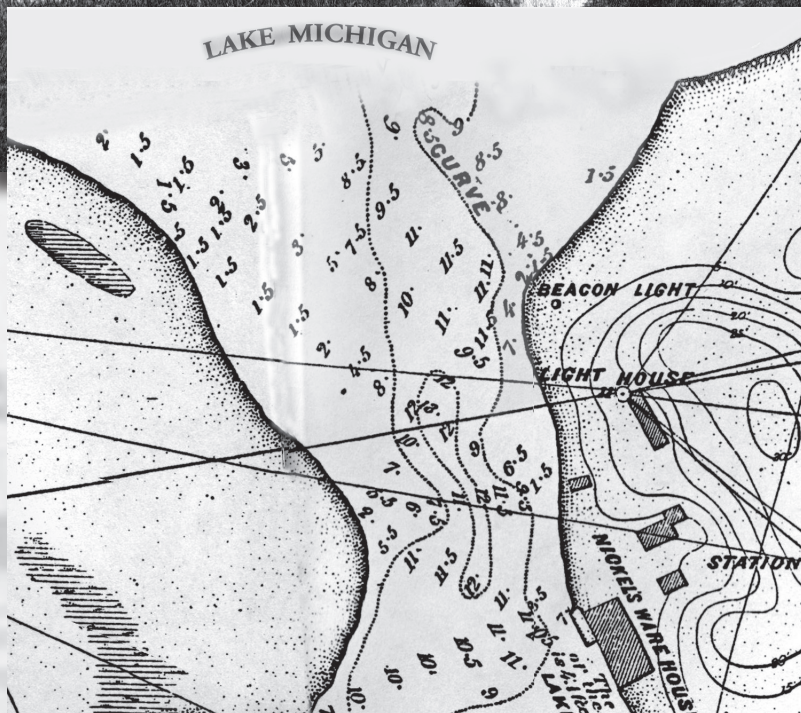
In the early years when vessels were sail powered, if a sea was running, loading at an open water pier was not practical. In calmer water in order to load the schooners at the pier, the captain would drop anchor in deep water and with the use of a long hawser and capstan, haul the vessel up to the pier while at the same time, playing out the anchor line. When loading was complete the process was reversed and the boat was drawn back into deep water with the anchor line. If a weather threat appeared on the horizon, the boat was quickly kedged back into safe water. A sharp eye was necessary since a squall could wreak havoc with the boat and the pier.

There is evidence of an early breakwater-pier built of log cribs and sawmill trimmings at the Kalamazoo River mouth. If the river mouth was blocked by low water or sandbars the anchor line method of loading was used and in addition cargo was transferred to smaller boats that could clear the bar.

In 1873, construction was completed on sturdy north and south piers. The construction consisted of oak pilings, 225' apart, extending about 225' to 310' out from the shoreline. These were ballasted with stone and timbered from the pier head all the way to Shrivvers Bend on the southside and up to the lighthouse on the north. The remnants of these piers are seen today. Eventually, steam powered vessels, especially with the aid of tugboats, made the whole loading process much easier. *By Jack Sheridan*



Above - Piers at Pier Cove 1897.



Left - 1856 Map of the Kalamazoo River mouth area. Note the shallow water and delta effect created by the river coming into the lake where there were no piers to contain the current. The 1839 lighthouse was replaced in 1859.



Below - Picture of the same area ca 1872. The north piers were completed in 1873.

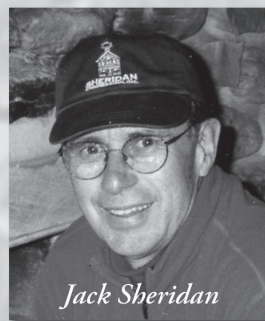
The Remembering When feature is the creation of Jack Sheridan and Jim Schmiecchen of the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society. We remind our readers that this year's SDHS Pumphouse Museum exhibit titled "Lincoln's Ready-Made Soldiers: Saugatuck Area Men in the Civil War" is now open. The historic museum is located on the west side of the Kalamazoo River at the foot of Mt. Baldhead. It is open daily, noon to 4 p.m. until Labor Day, and then on fall weekends. There is no admission charge.

In addition, special presentations featuring various historical topics will be presented at the museum on

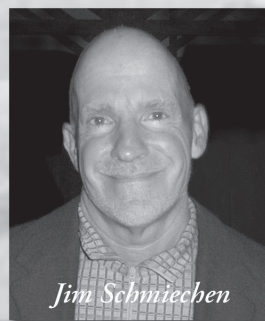
Tuesdays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to noon, beginning June 21.

We welcome your comments on Remembering When. Call 269 857-7901, email us at sdhistory@accn.org or write to Box 617 Douglas, Mi 49406. SDHS historical images can be seen on the SDHS web site at www.sdhistory.com and all historical photos are available for purchase in print sizes up to 12x17.

Our historical image database is growing through your contributions. We scan your old photos—you keep the originals—and we then provide you with a CD of your digitized images.



Jack Sheridan



Jim Schmiecchen