



## Lake County's Forgotten Commerce Part II

Our entrepreneurial trek across Lake County's earliest years continues this month with several more industrial captains of note. As you recall from Part I last month, virgin hardwood forests, a great lake and pristine streams were a smattering of the abundant natural resources available to our pioneer settlers. What follows are some more mini-chapters in our county history.

**J.W. Penfield and Son** - As a young boy, J.W. moved to Willoughby Township around 1834 on the current site of Pine Ridge Golf Course in Wickliffe.

The family farm served as his career catalyst. Addressing drainage issues on the farm led to the invention of the first drain tile machine in 1853. Marketing efforts at various fairs and expositions caused his business to grow and expand by 1870. Modern 'industry' had its start. Tile, clay bricks and machinery all bore the Penfield name. Worldwide operations followed in the form of tube mills and ball-mills for the Portland Cement needs. Sir Robert Hadfield of England bought into the company by 1920 and Hadfield-Penfield was retooled. WWI led to a new focus-armaments. Success was short-lived as government promises and two additional plant expansions proved a bust. The plant and Pelton Road, Willoughby Empire closed its doors forever in 1927.

**Fairport's Nitro-era** - Grandon-Fairport was a major commercial port prior to the mid-1850s. Nearly 3000 vessels and a million dollars of commerce passed thru the second largest port of the era. The arrival of the Lake Shore Railroad diminished Fairport's prosperity. Nonetheless, three men created the next chief industry, one that would last for a decade. J.H. King, C.M. Wheeler and H. Hinkley built storage facilities and a nitroglycerine factory on the west bank of the Grand River. Their explosives were shipped to the mines on Lake Superior and the growing oil fields in Pennsylvania. A major explosion in November 1870 rocked the county and was felt for 160 miles from the blast inception. A new factory was not rebuilt.

**Grand River and Commercial Fishing** - The heyday of Fairport's docks may have ended by the Civil War and the rise of railroads may have impacted the county more, but 'fishing' was always good on the Grand River and totaled 1-2 million pounds annually. The Grow Brothers, Kishman Fish Company, Buckeye Fisheries and Dominish Brothers were giants in the industry. However it was the rise of boat building that added prominence to Lake County lore. The Buechler Brothers Company of Perry moved to Grand River. Builders of pleasure boats made them wealthy but the demand by local companies for 'tugs' rocketed their fame and fortune. The late 1920s and all of the 1930s belonged to them. WWII and the developing steel boat era resulted in the sale of their plant and era in local history.

**The Fruit Industry** - Our county's access to the lake and near perfect soil conditions leads us to our last mini-chapter. Turland Kirtland founded a fine farm. His strawberries and fruit orchards resulted in 2700 barrels of dried fruit being exported to markets in the U.S. In 1847, his farm generated nearly \$33,000 in income. In Perry, cider and vinegar were the exported item. The mill of Nelson House produced 4000 barrels in 1876 alone. Grapes produced by the Shakers (Shaker Heights) were picked from the Worden Road Vineyards in Wickliffe. Peaches, plums, apples and pears were also staples of their efforts.

Dairy and Cheesedom also had a place in 1870s Lake County as did many more stories of early industrialists. Their stories are left for another day.

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