

Lake Max Sawmill

1880 ~ 1985



▲ Morton's Mill, pictured here in 1883 at the present-day site of the Lake Max beach.

The sawmill that started out on the shore of Lake Max has a long and interesting history. For nearly 100 years it served the residents of the area, providing lumber so that the region could become populated by homes, barns and businesses. It was by no means the only sawmill on Turtle Mountain, but its duration far exceeds any others.

In 1880 Mr Bolton established a sawmill on the shore of Lake Max. The next year, entrepreneur George Morton bought the sawmill and used it to produce lumber for nearly every building in the then thriving village of Whitewater. The sawmill cut the logs into boards and Morton also built a planer where the rough cut boards were finished into lumber.

The mill sat on the northern end of the lake, just west of a stream that flowed into the lake from a slough a couple hundred metres back from the shore. Cut logs were dumped into this slough. Afterwards, they were sent down a man-made channel to the lake where they were chained together. They were held here until there was room in the mill for them to be cut. The mill's boiler stack was guyed up to a majestic oak tree by a long bolt that went straight through the tree.

Mr Morton was a kind man and helpful to anyone who had ambition. He had an optional work policy that gave some men a much appreciated

boost: any man who needed lumber could work for the mill and get paid in lumber. This was a great help to newly arrived pioneers who hoped to establish themselves on the land but had little cash with which to buy building materials.

The sawmill has gone through several different owners over its lifetime and bounced all over Turtle Mountain. Morton sold it to Hugh McCorquodale who later handed over its operation to Bill Harvey. In 1896 a fire was lit on Turtle Mountain from the American side. The damage it caused to the forest was extensive and wood on Turtle Mountain became a precious commodity. After this event the timber reserve was closed to logging, which reduced the activity at the mill considerably.

In about 1910 Harvey sold the sawmill to Fred McKinney, who moved it from Lake Max two miles north to his property. It later moved to Lake Adam. Fred's sons, Doug, Bill and Elson, joined in the operation of the mill as they grew old enough. They used the mill to do a limited amount of custom sawing until the timber reserve was opened up again in 1930. Bill Eaket soon joined in the operation, lending the use of his gas-powered tractor to run the mill. Everything except for the actual sawing of

the lumber was up to the customer to do. Trees were felled (by hand), trimmed and hauled (by horse) to the mill where they were sawed. The cost of this service was \$10 to \$12 per 1000 board feet.

The sawmill generated copious amounts of sawdust, which was put to use by the Municipality of Morton during the early 1930s. The sawdust was hauled to Boissevain, mixed with arsenic and molasses and churned in a small cement mixer. This mixture was then spread along the road allowances to kill grasshoppers.

In 1938 Bill Eaket dropped out of the operation and Bill and Doug took over the business from their father. They ran the mill for an additional 25 years. During this time they were mostly sawing for local farmers who needed lumber to construct buildings, corrals and hay shelters.

In 1968, operation of the mill ceased because the operators couldn't hire help to keep the sawmill running. Tom Conroy saw an opportunity to purchase the mill and in 1971 moved it to his farm, located near Mountain-side. Conroy had always been infatuated by sawmills and kept the mill as a hobby and side business.

Mostly he cut boards for his own use and did a very limited amount of custom sawing during his spare time. In 1981 the sawmill saw its 100th year of operation.

The sawmill has been out of regular operation for about 25 years now, though it would still operate with a bit of fixing up. The equipment in the mill is over 120 years old, being the very same equipment that Morton used so many years ago to saw lumber for prairie settlers. The blade is the only piece that has been replaced, as the original one was burned in the 1896 fire.

Any man who needed lumber could work for the mill and get paid in lumber

Sources:
Doug McKinney Fonds. MG14/C46. "Sawmill; Piece of Manitoba History." Boissevain Community Archives.
Ritchie, James A.M. *Heritage Stew*. Boissevain Community Archives: Boissevain, 1999.
Tom Conroy Sawmill Fonds. PG1/E44. Boissevain Community Archives.
Tom Conroy. Personal Interview. 26 July 2010.
Photo: Commerce and Industry Building Fonds. PG4/A7. Boissevain Community Archives.