

History of Ligon Outdoor Center

Beginning in 1819

At the signing of the Treaty of Saginaw by Lewis Cass in 1819, the first written record of what was to become Ligon Outdoor Center was found. At that time, the land was heavily pine forested and sparsely populated by Indians. The nearest camps known were on Butternut Creek.

Lumbering on the Ligon Property

1839 – Shortly after statehood was assured for Michigan in 1836, Section 11, Thetford Township, was purchased from the government by the Baker-Pritchard and Parker-Begole Lumber Companies.

During the next several years standing white pine trees were harvested for lumber and the lumber men moved northward, leaving a stump-filled field behind. Only the coveted pines were taken; the hardwoods and cedars were of no value.

In 1872, an 80-acre parcel of land in Section 11 was bought from the lumber company by Homer and D.I. Johnson. This land was not suitable for farming; it contained the long esker-like formation that rose sharply from its surrounding low ground, marshy in season. Neither area would have supported white pine. The low ground would have supported cedar, however.

Old records show that the Johnsons built a shingle mill “North of town.” The town was called Henpeck, one mile south on Belsay Road. The shingle mill was surely on the 80 acres. The original road to the property was off Belsay Road. A faint depression left by that road can be seen, especially in the winter.

Crops are Planted

In 1876, an adjoining 80-acre parcel of land was bought from the lumber company by the Johnsons. This parcel ran from the lake area to Farrand Road. Shortly after the purchase, Homer Johnson built a house and barn and lived on the property. The tillable land was cleared of stumps left by the lumber company and planted with farm crops.

A new access road was built joining the farm buildings on Farrand Road. Today we call it the West Road. The barn foundation and spring house remain as reminders of the Johnsons and can be found on the Barn Loop Trail. A few of the old stumps remain in fragments of stump fences on the west boundary line of the property. A few more of the old stumps remain in place where the lumberman left them – fragments of history along the Lumberjack Trail.

1882 – While Johnson was developing his farm, Jay Lowell bought the 40-acre adjoining parcel of land on Farrand Road. He built his house near the road and planted a hedge of Osage orange trees to keep his livestock out of the road. He also built a second house for his tenant farmer.

Orange Trees at Ligon?

The Osage orange plantings were kept as a neatly trimmed hedge for many years – a thorny and impenetrable barrier. Today they remain as tall trees in a row running east from the main gate. Both the main house and the tenant house burned in separate fires. Mute evidence remains of the old foundations, now concealed in the overgrowth.

1886 – A new neighbor moved into Section 11 in 1886. Sylvester Kesler bought the 40-acre parcel between Johnson’s property to the north and Lowell’s property to the south. Mr. Kesler built a small house on what had been the original road to Johnson’s shingle mill. He farmed some but worked in town most of the time. Today, a rock-filled depression and a telltale lilac bush mark the spot where his house stood.

1899 – All 160 acres of the Johnson property was bought by Hobart Stewart. The following year Stewart bought the Farrand Road 40 acres and in 1907 he bought the Kesler 40 acres. That made one single parcel of 240 acres.

Stewart was a dairy farmer and raised a prized herd of registered Holsteins. The present East Road was then a lane followed by the cows as they went to graze each day. The Stewarts lived in the house built by Jay Lowell. Most of the 240 acres was tilled. The land was fairly even then. It was a prosperous farm for several years.

Sand and Gravel Mining

When Hobart Stewart died, ownership of the land passed to Clyde MacGregor. The land was not to be farmed again. MacGregor leased the property to D.W. Swartout. Swartout mined sand and gravel from the property and made cement blocks, cemetery urns, etc. The large pit begun by him (today's Stone Quarry) and much of the uneven terrain we see presently was caused by his digging equipment in the operation.

It was during this period that the Farrand Road housed burned. Mr. Swartout used the property from 1934 to 1938. There is much evidence of his endeavors.

Gold Fever Strikes at Ligon

1938-1943 – Clyde MacGregor engaged in a gold mining venture on the property. He was convinced that there was enough flake gold in the glacial till left on the property to be recovered at a profit. MacGregor built a smelter and mined from the gravel pit and other enticing spots on the property. Needless to say, he found much more loss than profit in his enterprise.

In 1942 and 1943, MacGregor leased part of the 240 acres out for sheep pasturage. The rest of the land was allowed to revert to a natural state. He left behind a broken smelter, a fair amount of glassy slag, and an uneven terrain.

James and Mary Ligon Acquire the Property

In 1951, MacGregor sold the 240 acres to James D. and Mary Ligon. The Ligon were from Almont, Michigan, and bought the property for a summer retreat.

Mr. Ligon leveled the top of the esker-like strip for a runway for his small plane. Mrs. Ligon set about planting pine trees – some 20,000 in all. Some of these pines can be seen on the Piney Trail and around the Log Cabin. The family built the present Lodge, the original stairway and boardwalk to the lake, and the original bog garden boardwalk.

The property had not been actively farmed in 20 years by the time the Ligon bought it, and nature reclaimed it. The family enjoyed their privacy behind the protection of the emerging trees and woody growth.

They also enjoyed their own private lake. To ensure their privacy and the entire lake ownership, Mr. Ligon bought the 20 acres of land on Genesee Road that abutted the lakeshore.

The Ligon Deed their Retreat to Genesee ISD

As their family grew up and went their separate ways, the Ligon no longer needed their summer hideaway. They had a deep and abiding love for that piece of land and wanted it to be kept as they knew it to be and enjoyed by other children.

It was in that spirit and with that promise that they deeded the property to Genesee Intermediate School District for use by school children in Genesee and surrounding counties.