

Chapter 2: COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Introduction

A description of community character is important to document. There must be an understanding of what makes a community unique, in order to obtain a sense of a community's character and to direct future land use patterns and/or land use regulation, if any. Factors to explore include community description, regional setting, and historical/cultural resources.

Community Description

Edwards Township is rural and rich in natural beauty, with extensive natural resources including: productive farmland; hundreds of miles of inland lake, river and stream frontage; extensive upland hardwood and coniferous forests; diverse wildlife habitat; rolling hills and meadows; and wetlands. These natural resources contribute to a beautiful, mostly rural setting for people to live, work, and recreate within Edwards Township.

The Township's population for the year 2017 was 1,368, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau. Out of the fourteen townships in Ogemaw County, Edwards Township had the fifth highest population that year. U.S. Census data also show that Edwards Township experienced a 0.5% population growth over the past decade. Seasonal residents, visitors to private homes and rental cottages, and day tourists importantly add to the Township's population and economic base during summer months.

There is no incorporated village or city within the jurisdictional boundaries of Edwards Township. The corner of M-30 Highway and Lehman Road, may be the busiest four corners within Edwards Township. Although historically a larger settlement, land uses now at the four corners include: a bar/restaurant; an American Legion Hall; agricultural and vacant land.

West Branch and Ogemaw Townships to the north surround the City of West Branch. Vehicle traffic is carried north and south through the Township mainly by M-30 Highway, and I-75 Interstate Highway exists just to the northeast of Edwards Township northern boundary. Notably there is no state, federal, or county-owned land within Edwards Township.

Geographic Setting

Edwards Township is located within the extreme southwestern corner of Ogemaw County. Ogemaw County exists at the northeastern entrance to the northern portion of the lower peninsula of Michigan. Page 2-1a contains a map showing the geographic location of Edwards Township. Page 2-1b contains the Ogemaw County Political Subdivisions

Map, depicting Edwards Township's position within Ogemaw County. Townships directly adjacent to Edwards are Ogemaw Township to the north; West Branch Township to the northeast; Horton Township to the east; Roscommon County's Nester Township to the west; and Gladwin County's Bourett and Clement Townships to the south. The northern boundary of Edwards Township is approximately two miles south of the City of West Branch, Michigan.

A Brief History of Edwards Township

Every township has historic and cultural resources that usually contribute to a sense of pride and place, as well as providing definition and direction for the future. Edwards Township's history is intertwined with the rich cultural heritage of neighboring townships.

Prior to European settlement in the current State of Michigan, the Anishnabeg people, commonly referred to as the Ojibwa or the Chippewa Indians, inhabited the western half of the Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The Anishnabeg Indians did not originally inhabit the Great Lakes region. Historic accounts indicate the Anishnabeg people migrated from the "Great Salt Sea" to the east, followed the northern and eastern shore of Lake Huron to Sault Saint Marie, and then traveled the western shore of Lake Huron.

The Federal Land Ordinance of 1785 instituted the geographic and political system of surveyed counties, townships, and sections. Between 1816 and 1856, Michigan was systematically surveyed by the federal General Land Office. Surveyed townships and section lines established the political boundaries of counties and townships throughout the state. Surveyors took detailed notes on the location, species and diameter of each tree used to mark section lines and corners. They also noted the locations of rivers, lakes, wetlands, agricultural potential of soils, and general quality of timber along each section line being measured. In addition they noted natural disturbances, and trails and settlements of North American Indians and early Europeans. Ogemaw County was established by the State of Michigan by the Public Acts of 1875.

The earliest European pioneers of southern Ogemaw County migrated up its rivers, particularly the Tittabawassee River, and ultimately settled near its headwaters. Most notable of these people is W.H. Edwards who, along with George Sanborn, purchased 1,480 acres of land within Township 21 North, Range 1 East, in September 1866. W.C. Edwards built a log cabin on the Tittabawassee River at the junction of Edwards School and Beardslee Roads. Edwards' cabin, called "the old Darling place," was thought to be the first permanent European immigrant inhabitation in Ogemaw County. Ogemaw County was originally organized with 16 townships. Edwards and Ogemaw Townships were the first to be organized in 1873. A. E. Pinney was the first Township supervisor of Edwards Township, when the first Ogemaw County Board of Supervisors met at that

time.

Between 1867 and 1909 there were 30 “places” established in Ogemaw County. Four of these “places” were found in Edwards Township and included Edwards organized in 1867 and likely existing at the junction of Highway M-30 and Lehman Road; Wright’s Corners, organized in 1880; Chapman Lake, organized in 1884 and located near Chapman Lake; and Walker’s Corners, organized in 1884 and located near the intersection of Highway M-30 and Greenwood Road. According to historical records, all these “places” had branch post offices.

Between 1871 and the 1910s Edwards Township was extensively logged for lumber. White pine, eastern hemlock and northern white cedar were the principle timber harvested at that time. Since there were very few fast-moving and navigable waterways, most of the timber was hauled and transported by railway. The Jackson, Lansing and Saginaw Railroad Company was completed as far north as Ogemaw Springs. This railway was used to haul timber from portions of Edwards Township to Chicago after the fire in 1871, and even to southern states for rebuilding communities following the Civil War. Charles Woods and C. H. Plummer were well-known lumbermen during this period. Charles Woods worked for the firms of C. K. Eddy and the Eddy Brothers and Thomas Merrill. Charles Woods was a farmer and lumberman who was known to never lose a contract, and often employed up to 100 men in many different lumber camps in and around Edwards Township.



First construction on Diebold Ranch Road near drive of Dan Winters, circa 1925.

Once forest lands were largely cleared, Edwards Township was considered to possess the “best soil” in Ogemaw County. Hay and potatoes were principle crops, and lumber camps were the primary market for the crops. Other important crops in the early 1900s included wheat, barley, peas, and rye. Historically, the loamy soils found within Edwards Township were so well suited for growing wheat that, according to records, Edwards Township farms would produce a wheat crop each year - almost unheard of for wheat.

Nearly every Edwards Township farm in the early part of the 1900s had chicken, pigs, sheep, cows, and grew the feed for its animals. According to locals, these farms were fully self-sustaining. Dairy was also a significant farm product in Edwards Township. The Lehman family owned and operated a Class A milk bottling plant, transporting milk to people throughout Ogemaw County and as far away as Houghton Lake. The plant closed in the 1960s, following several decades of milk production.

An industrious, hard working German population moved to the area from Bruce County on the Bruce Peninsula, Ontario, Canada, and settled in the north end of the Township. Starting farms in the area proved very prosperous for these people, as the soils in Edwards Township were similar to the soils in their Canadian homeland. Some of these farming families still live and farm in the area today, and include such family names as Walter, Rau, Ehlinger, Illig, Mesbitt, Zettel, Finerty, Stillwagon, and Buhlman. Other farmers that came to the area in the early 1900s and still live in the area include the Winters, Kartes, and Sheltroun.

Edwards Township was home to four country schools, more than any other township in Ogemaw County. All four were built around the turn of the 20th century, and the last one closed its doors in the 1960s. The Rau School, located at Highway M-30 and Rau Road and named after the Rau family, has since become a duplex residential housing unit. The Edwards School, located near Highway M-30 and Greenwood Road closed in 1964, and also is currently used as a private residence. The Stillwagon School located at Greenwood and Stillwagon Roads, and the Erb School, located at the junction of Lehman and Stillwagon Roads, burned sometime in the mid-1900s. The Erb School was built in 1903 by Charles Erb.

The first industry in Edwards Township was the Marl Plant at Edwards Lake. The Hecla and Portland Cement Company first came to the area in the early 1900s, with the idea of using the marl beds of the lake area for processing into fertilizer. Employing nearly 100 workers, the marl plant consisted of eight dwellings, a series of service buildings, a boarding house, and a water tower. The marl plant was powered with coal hauled in by railroad from Loranger, south of West Branch, and in turn hauled processed fertilizer to Loranger. The marl was dug from the lake bottom, heated, dried and elevated into the large bin to ultimately be dropped into the railcars underneath. It was speculated that the plant was less than profitable due to the excess amount of coal required to dry the marl. It was in operation only 1-3 years, closing in 1903. Other historic industries in Edwards

Township include West Branch Concrete Products, Inc., started in 1937, Knight's Mill, and the Winter Pallet Mill. West Branch Concrete Products, Inc. is still in operation and produces concrete blocks shipped throughout the Midwest. Knight's Mill, located on Highway M-30 between Rau and Lehman Roads, originally made wood pallets until about 1960. Currently the plant pressure treats lumber for railroad ties and other outdoor uses.

Edwards Township possesses several lakes, rivers and streams, including the Middle Branch of the Tittabawassee River flowing out of Edwards Lake in the central part of the Township. While no industry or other venture utilized the river as a water source, a plan in the early 1960s was introduced to the Board of Supervisors of Ogemaw County to construct a \$780,000 water reservoir along the Tittabawassee River, potentially causing seasonal flooding of about 2,000 acres and leaving swampy areas of dead trees and stumps in other seasons. After many years of study, Township Supervisor Edward Sheltroun and the County Board of Supervisors withdrew from the project. It was decided that this project would not benefit the citizens or Ogemaw County's land base, and at the same time would remove tax monies from the county's tax base.

Summary of Findings

When considering the community description, the regional setting, and the cultural/historical heritage of Edwards Township, certain land use patterns begin to emerge. The early European settler history of the Township is directly linked to the Township's abundant natural resources including fertile lands, fish/game, and timber resources. Development pressures have continually increased along inland lake shorelines and along major road thoroughfares through time within Edwards Township.

Efforts to preserve historic areas and structures deserve special recognition and support. A list of historic potential preservation sites and structures includes the: 1) Edwards marl plant; 2) Edwards Township and a small Amish cemeteries; 3) two former schoolhouses; 4) Edwards Church, an old Indian church; and 5) settler farmsteads. History is important because it engenders a sense of identity, and fosters and informs a commitment to the community. Although history includes structures, it also encourages us to explore personal histories, former settlement centers, patterns of land use, and economic ways of life.