

Those sod houses prairie settlers built seem quaint from a distance. But I assure you, everybody, except the most hardened hermit, needed something cleaner and warmer. Families wanted better.

In the southwest, we were luckier than most prairie folks. We had a small mountain, covered in a big forest. Demand met supply up there.

Mr George Morton got things going. He grabbed the opportunity and established a lumber mill on Turtle Mountain, on the shore of Lake Max.



The sawmill in 1881.

He was determined to bring settlers from Ontario to start a cheese factory on Whitewater Lake. Crazy idea maybe, but he thought they'd need a lot of lumber. Over the years, the sawmill had a few different owners. The work is hard and depends on the weather. Not really full-time work. And, in 1896 a fire scorched a large area of Turtle Mountain. Lumber became precious. The timber reserve was closed to logging for a time, killing the sawmill business.

Understandably, Bill Harvey, the owner in 1910, was looking to sell. And I, Fred McKinney, was looking to buy. A fire sale so to speak.

We moved the mill to Lake Adam where the forest was more promising. But it wasn't until 1930 that the timber reserve was opened again. Our sons Doug, Bill and Elson joined the business. And Bill Eaket came in as well, lending the use of his gas-powered tractor to run the mill. That sure made things quicker!

We mill workers only did the actual sawing of the lumber. The customer felled trees by hand, trimmed them, then hauled the saw logs by horse to our mill. We did manage to get a bit of farming in too. But the mill brought in much needed cash.

The mill was a noisy affair. Motor, belts, conveyors, and the circular saw itself. We had to keep our wits about us. There were dangers in every direction. When the blade was keen and sharp and all the parts worked tickety-boo, it was a rugged dance of sorts between humans, machines and the weather.

In the 30s, even sawdust was used. And we had a lot of it. Municipalities mixed sawdust with arsenic and molasses; spread it in ditches to kill grasshoppers.

We ran that mill for 33 years. Folks built a lot of stores, houses and barns with wood from the mountain. Eventually our sons took over the business and ran the mill for another 25 years. But they couldn't find enough workers, so the mill went to the Conroy farm near Mountainside where it buzzed for many years, keeping the neighborhood in lumber.

I should add, that the only piece of that mill we ever replaced was the blade. Back in the day, business folks served their community and machines were built to last.

Betty Sawatzky and David Neufeld adapted "Mountain Mill" from a story written for Vantage Points 3.