

## LOLETA IN 1910

*Told by the girl in the office\**

**L**OLETA, once a busy lumber camp, is now a Ghost Town. No longer does the roar of the saw, as it chews its way through the log, shatter the silence of the hills. The scream of the planer, like a wild animal in pain, is silenced; and no longer do the young men gather outside the store in the evening to ogle at the women who come to get the mail, or to make some very important purchase, which couldn't possibly wait until morning.

Search through an old map of Pennsylvania would locate Loleta in Elk County, just over the line from Forest County, six miles south-east from Marienville. She lay in a valley between hills rising abruptly on both sides, with a few houses perched precariously on the slopes from which long flights of steps led down to the road. The road from Marienville wound around a hill, passed the store and mill office, crossed the railroad tracks, dipped sharply down and under the run-ways from the mill, over the bridge, and then climbed up another hill, where it passed the lonely Hefren farm, and led on to Clarington. Clarington was famous for being the home of Doc Brewer, a real horse and buggy doctor, who covered a wild territory, and delivered more babies than anyone would believe.

All the houses in the town faced on this road except a few scattered dwellings that followed the banks of the creek on both sides of the bridge. The houses were of one pattern, unpainted, two-story "company" houses, put together as cheaply as possible, with no lath or plaster or plumbing of any kind. Water was carried in from wells or pumps, and the pail of drinking water with dipper was an established necessity. No home was without one. Also the little house in the rear was accepted without question. Some people living in this community did not know that there was anything different. Bathing facilities consisted of the family wash-tubs, except for a few of the men. Some genius had rigged up a shower with hot and cold running water, piped from the

\*Now Mrs. John F. Kuhns.

mill boiler into a bath house used only by those contributing to the project.

There was a two-room schoolhouse on the road near the Hefren farm. Peter Hefren and his family were the only real natives of Loleta. He had a family of five girls and one lone boy: Clara, Ida, Alice, May, Rachel, and Charles. Ida, Alice, and May all taught school at Loleta; and another teacher, Anna Brewer, is remembered. She was the daughter of Doc Brewer, and married Harley Bently.

The mill was located in the middle of the town beside a small stream that formed the mill pond where the logs were stored. The mill was run by steam power, generated in the boiler room, where sawdust was burned for fuel. The slabs and refuse from the saws were collected on a conveyor, run through a machine called a "hog," which ground everything into sawdust, and then on to the furnace. The fireman, Dan Harmon, had a great deal of free time, since a whistle warned him when the steam was getting low. He spent his free time in the office, playing checkers with anyone who would play with him; or, failing that, he heckled the girl in the office. Dan was a widower, and his standing joke was to propose daily to this hapless girl, especially if he had an audience. The best checker players were Dan Harmon and Harry Shields. Between them, they taught the office girl much about checkers. Checkers, matching pennies, or pitching pennies at a crack were about the only form of amusement these men had.

The logs from the millpond came up into the mill on an endless chain in a chute. They were pushed onto the chain by Perry Britton, a man over seventy years of age, who spent all his working day riding the wet slippery logs. The exhaust from the boiler kept the water around the chain from freezing in the winter. The log was rolled from the chute onto a slanting deck, by the deckman, who had a lever controlling the endless chain.

Ezra Webb, the sawyer, had two levers: one to control the "nigger," and the other the carriage. The "nigger" was a contrivance which kicked the log onto the carriage, anchored it, and turned it. The carriage was on a track and travelled back and forth carrying the log against the saw. The setter and dogger rode on the carriage with the log.

Tom Jefferson, the setter, set the block which controlled the

width of the cut. Charlie Britton, the dogger, controlled the "dog," a mechanism which clamped down onto the log and held it in place.

The saw was a bandsaw, an endless belt of steel with teeth on one side, revolving on pulleys with great speed. The sawyer must be able to know at a glance how to saw the log to the best advantage, and signal to the setter whether to set the block for inch, two inch, or wider lumber.

A slab was first cut from the log, and then boards or planks cut from one side; the log turned and the other side cut; turned again, until the log was squared. Then it was sawn into boards, planks, or cants. The cants went on to the re-saw, where they were cut in half, making two by fours, three by fours, or wider as the case might be.

The boards and planks were taken to the edgerman, Tom Ewing, where the sides were squared, cutting away the wain; then lifted by the tail-edger over to the trimmer, operated by Jess Neal, where the ends were squared. The tail-edger was Jack Kuhns, who married the girl in the office. Each man must know at a glance how to handle the lumber, so as to get the most out of it. Lumber must conform to size, inches in width, and multiples of two feet in length.

The lumber as it came from the saw was classified as "rough." The boards went through a planer, and there was a lath mill where much waste lumber was salvaged. Earl Jefferson tallied the lumber as it came from the mill, piece by piece. Standard sizes were printed on cards, and the lumber was counted by fives, thus: ~~||||~~ || At the end of the day, these cards were turned in at the office, and were used to figure the day's "cut."

The saws were kept in perfect shape at all times, and the head filer was one of the best paid men in the mill. Thad Vantassel worked here for a time, later replaced by Joe Hayes.

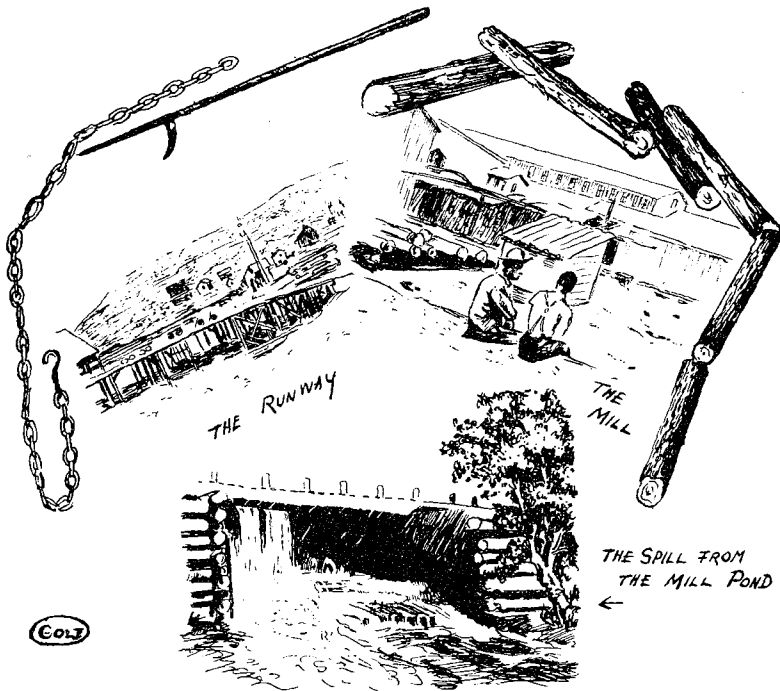
Much of the hard work in a sawmill is done today by electric power, such as the lifting from one machine to another, but at Loleta it was all brute force and awkwardness. Everyone worked at great speed. Once during the morning and again in the afternoon everything shut down for a few minutes, and the men had a brief rest, or a lunch.

The Superintendent of the mill was A. W. Vantassel, of Sheffield, who was also head of the Sheffield Mill. Dudley Brush was

the foreman at Loleta, and was later made Superintendent. At this time, the office in Williamsport appointed a Division Superintendent to oversee a number of their mills. At Loleta, this man was greatly resented, since he was looked upon as a spy. There was a certain community spirit among the men, a tendency to cover-up for each other, and to resent interference from the outside. The Division Superintendent's visits were upsetting to everyone. He came unannounced, and, since no one ever saw his reports, the results of his visits were unknown. Unknown, at least, until an order came from the head office regarding some deflection from duty. He had a habit of standing in the mill, leaning against a supporting post, observing the operation of the mill. Strangely enough, this post became smeared with axle grease, making this practice, after one ruined suit, unadvisable. This was only one of a number of minor accidents that happened to the man. He finally got the idea that it was better for him not to go through the mill, unless accompanied by Dudley Brush.

The bookkeeper in the office was Joe Eiswerth, who had one helper, a girl, whose status in the whole outfit was very low. In the first place, she was an outsider; and, in the second place, no one approved of girls around sawmills; in fact, at that time, there were very few girls employed in offices anywhere. The idea was new, and strictly from necessity. Girls came cheaper. The girl in the office was forbidden to go into the mill, but each day calls came that necessitated her going out onto the runway to search for the Superintendent or the foreman, and she would stand just outside until she caught the eye of the person sought. There was no use shouting, since the noise made by the saws would drown out even the most stentorian voice.

The only telephones in Loleta were located in a booth in the office. There were two, the Bell telephone, the only link to the outside world; and a local phone, mainly used to summon Doc Brewer at Clarrington. It was also used a great deal by a certain Mr. A. E. Daniels, who remains a mystery man to the girl in the office. He did not live at Loleta, nor was he connected with any of the operations of the mill, so far as she could learn. Yet almost every afternoon, he came quietly into the office, and, without a word to her, slipped into the phone booth, called a number, and said, "This is A. E. Daniels."



The telephones were housed in the booth because of the horrible noise from the mill, which never ceased as long as the saws were running. By shutting the doors of the booth and shouting, you might hear your own voice. Everyone shouted: it was the only way to be heard. After a time, one no longer heard the mill until it shut down, and the terrible silence struck. If this came at an unscheduled time, the office and store were emptied in less time than it takes to tell. "The mill has shut down," someone would shout, and that might mean anything.

Every morning, the office was a place of mad activity. The "cut" of the day before had to be itemized, board measure feet estimated, figures added, letters written, and all reports finished before noon, as they must be ready to go out in the mail to the head office at Williamsport.

After the Tionesta Valley passenger train left at one o'clock, with the morning's work safely in the mail bag, peace and quiet settled down on the office. There was nothing more to do, except answer the phone, until the next morning; and Joe went out to

tinker with his car. Joe Eiswerth owned the first automobile that was ever seen in Loleta, a secondhand car, over which he labored much of his free time. Sometimes it even ran.

The Company Store, owned by the C. H. Smith Co., of Sheffield, was run by Jack Driscoll, with Harry Miller and Harry Hetrick as clerks. This was an important store, as it served not only the people of the camp, but also the farmers of the surrounding country. Here could be bought almost anything, from dress goods, household supplies, groceries, kerosene, to farm implements. All the things one imagines in the old country store were here, even to the open cracker barrel, the potbellied stove, and the post office.

The men in the mill were paid once a month by check, and the checks cashed by Jack Driscoll, who had a good set-up, as anyone can see. The family bills for goods charged during the month were paid before any cash was handed out. If a man had enough left for a plug of tobacco, he was lucky. Jack Driscoll was married to Clara Hefren, oldest daughter of Pete Hefren who lived on the farm outside Loleta. At this time, they had one child, a son named Leo. After the mill closed, Jack moved to Warren, Pa., and established the Driscoll Coal Company.

One of the high spots in the office girl's memory was the day Harry Miller tried to crank Joe's car, and the handle flew back and hit him in the head, raising a great bump. As he ran into the store, holding his aching head, Jack Driscoll said, "Well, if you had been minding your own business, this wouldn't have happened." Not ten minutes later, Jack tried to crank the car and the handle flew back and hit him in the head, raising a similar welt. Jack walked rapidly through the store, into his office, and was seen no more that day. It is only fair to Joe, to add that he soon tired of his secondhand car and bought himself a beautiful bright red Oldsmobile! Joe also married a Loleta girl, Hilder Johnson. He too became interested in a coal company, at Lucinda, Pa.

There were a few people in Loleta who did not owe their living to the company. There was O'Dette's livery stable; Bill Ramsdell, and his brother-in-law, Harry Shields, owned a butcher shop; and Port Hoover was the barber. Mr. Lehantaylor had a hardwood mill, where he employed a few men and manufactured handles for mops, hoes, brooms, etc.

Life in Loleta was dull: there were no movies, no dances, no

radios. There was no policeman, nor was one needed. There was no saloon, no night life whatever. Once a week a minister from Marienville held services in the room over the store: a Methodist minister one week, and a Presbyterian minister the next. The congregation seemed to be always the same.

Loleta was one of a series of mills owned and operated by the Central Pennsylvania Lumber Company, with main offices at Williamsport, Pa. At one time this company was part of a great monopoly, known as the United States Leather Company, which owned tanneries, stores, railroads, and sawmills.

The Central Pennsylvania Lumber Company had its origin in the firm of Horton, Crary and Company, of Sheffield, Pennsylvania, formed in 1867, when the first tannery was built in that town. The Hortons were descendants of David and Webb Horton, early settlers. Other men in the tannery business in this locality were J. F. Schoellkopf, John McNair, Horace H. Crary, Jerry Crary, Charles Sigel, C. W. R. Radeker, and George Dickinson. The three original tanneries at Sheffield were combined in a company called the Penn Tanning Company. This was sold to the United States Leather Company.

The motive for placing tanneries at Sheffield was the dense growth of hemlock in the forests of this locality. Hemlock bark was used in the tanning of leather. At first the trees were cut, the bark peeled, and the logs left to rot on the ground, since long hauls made the salvaging of the lumber costly. After the building of the railroad, sawmills were built at points near the source of the lumber. These sawmills were eventually taken over by the Central Pennsylvania Lumber Company. Two of the men connected with the Penn Tanning Company who moved from Sheffield to Williamsport were Mr. E. E. Brownell, President of the CPL, and Mr. Simmons.

The Tionesta Valley Railroad was built by Horton, Crary and Company in 1881. This railroad, called locally the TV, extended from Sheffield to a lumber camp called Windlack. It was a narrow-gauge road, operating a freight train, a log-train, and a passenger train.

Sam Ahl had a contract with the CPL for cutting the logs, stripping the bark, and piling the logs on skids at the railroad's siding. The logs were snaked out of the woods by teams of horses.

The skids were placed at points where the ground sloped towards the tracks, so that the logs would roll onto the skids, and later on to the flat cars of the log train. The skids were platforms of small logs, and the logs were rolled from the skid to the cars with cant hooks. Jimmie Woods was the scaler for Sam Ahl. A log scaler measures the logs with a rule which measures the diameter of the log. Knowing the length, board measure feet are figured. The log train came into Loleta in the late afternoon, and the logs were rolled from the cars into the mill pond.

John Ab was the conductor of the freight train. He was one of those wonderfully calm men of Swedish nationality. His right name was Abrahamson, but everyone called him John Ab. When the mill closed, he moved to Sheffield. Harry Gibson was Superintendent of Transportation and usually came in on the log train in the late afternoon. In 1913 he became Superintendent of the Tionesta Valley Railroad, and moved to Sheffield. His son, Allen, who married Marjorie Lehantaylor, later became a member of the Pennsylvania State Legislature.

The passenger train consisted of a toy-engine, a baggage car, and a coach. At an earlier period passenger service had continued past Loleta to Windlack, but the mill there had been abandoned before 1910, and at this time the passenger service covered only the thirty-five miles from Sheffield to Loleta. This was a sparsely settled country, and most of the towns along the way were camps of only a few houses. The largest was Brookston, where there was a tannery.

The passenger train left Loleta at six in the morning, arriving at Sheffield shortly before nine. On this trip it served as a commuter's train, bringing men to work and children to school. At Sheffield, the TV waited for the Philadelphia and Erie passenger train; also for the Sheffield and Tionesta train, another local line called Teddy Collins' train. With the mail, baggage, and passengers collected, the TV returned to Loleta, arriving at noon. At one o'clock it started back, reaching Sheffield at four, where it picked up the school children and returned them to their homes. It puffed into Loleta at seven in the evening, having finished a long, hard day. The conductor and brakeman were Gus Nelson and John Reynolds, two remarkable men, who coped with weather conditions, school children, and drunken bark-peelers, with the same good natured affability.



The bark-peelers were men who worked in the woods, stripping bark from trees felled by the woodsman's ax. The bark was piled in the woods, dried, and, when a sufficient quantity had been collected, taken by teams of horses to the nearest TV siding, where it was transported to the tanneries. These woodsmen often did not get into town for months at a time, and, when they did, it often meant trouble. The men returning to the woods, after a week-end in town, were often in very bad humor. Perhaps they were nursing a grand hangover, or, if their spree had been too boisterous, they might have spent the night in the Sheffield jail. Once back in the woods, they returned to their monotonous life, where there was great competition as to who could do the greatest amount of work. It was a life for strong men only. The day started at dawn, and ended at dusk. Long hours were the common practice in tanneries, mills, and woods.

In 1910, the timber was running out. Only one of the Company's three boarding houses was in use, and gradually the men were moved from Loleta to other mill towns. Finally the whole project was abandoned, and Loleta became a ghost town. There is now a park where Joe Eiswerth's house stood, and once a year a Loleta Reunion is held. The roadbed of the TV track has become a fire watcher's road, and trees and brush have covered the site. There is nothing to show that there ever was a mill at Loleta.

