

Why is it called *Bills* Lake?

- John A. Brooks cut and floated the first logs down the Big Muskegon River to Muskegon Lake in 1839. His pine cutting operation took place about 10 miles up the river from Crere Waoton (Hardy Dam?) He became a state legislator who secured money for a dam to power a saw mill. Hence, we have *Brooks* Lake.
- Martin Ryerson was a poor Dutch kid from New Jersey who worked his way to Michigan through the unbroken wilderness between the Grand and Muskegon rivers. By age 27, he had acquired his first sawmill and was on his way to become the first millionaire lumber baron in the Muskegon River Valley. Hence, we have *Ryerson* Lake.
- Henry Penoyer reached the banks of the Muskegon River in 1836, the same year as Ryerson. He, his brother Augustus, and business partner Jack McBride settled 35 miles upstream of Muskegon. They opened the first Muskegon River sawmill at the mouth of what is now known as *Penoyer* Creek.
- In 1866, a shingle mill was built by George Hess in Brooks Township. As with many of them, it burned in 1869. Nevertheless the body of water where it was situated is *Hess* Lake.
- In 1887. Henry Pettit of Ensley was working for Ryerson, Hills, and Co., the group that started cutting the last pine forest in Bridgeton. He is also listed in the 1870 census along with Isaac Pettit. He had substantial farmland near Bills Lake but just to the north, our neighbor is *Pettit* Lake.

In my research thus far, I have found very few references to the Bills family. To be sure, Abel and his son James were farmers who had property near the lake, but not on the shorelines (that I know of). I have found no information about him being in the logging business or in a leadership position in local government.

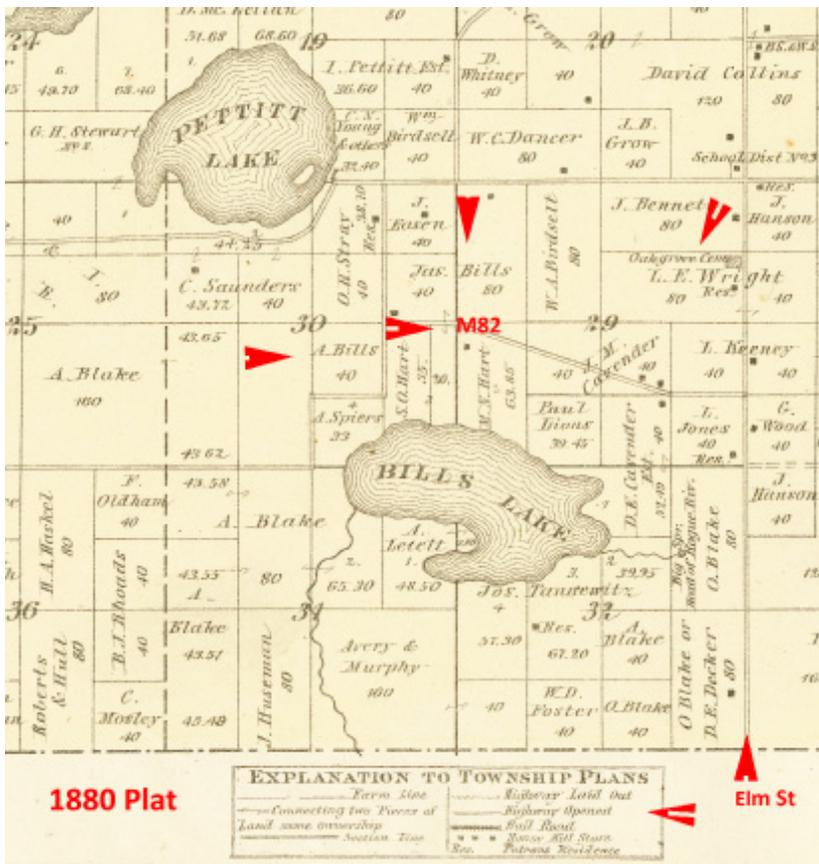
But Abel and wife Almira must have been two of the early pioneers in the area. The Treaty of Washington opened the area up for settlement in 1836. Abel Bills resided in Owego Tioga NY at that time and the census shows that his son, Charles W., was born in New York in 1834 and his daughter, Mary Elizabeth, was born there in 1840. Son James was born in 1844 but where: New York or Croton? The answer to that question would help establish when the Bills family lived near our lake.

Actually, research shows a conflict in terms of the birthplaces of the first three children. One document shows all of them born in Croton (which is doubtful). But one item is clear: daughter Sylvia was born in Croton in 1850. That puts the Bills family in the area between at least prior to 1850.

In the 1864 Enumeration of Croton Twp residents, the name of Abel Bills, farmer, is there. He had a wife and four kids, two boys (one being James K. and the other Charles W) and two girls, Mary Elizabeth and Sylvia.

The A. Bills farm is found in the 1880 plat below. His son James had more land at that time but that may be because Abel was approaching the end of his life (he would die in 1885) and was handing over his holdings. As you can tell, father and son owned farmland to the north of the lake, the area across from M82. The opened road might be the early M82. See bottom of plat.

As reported by Betty Miller, Carrie Tannewitz, who later on lived in the 1970s on the property where the Hilltop General Store is located, says that the Bills family raised sheep on their farm and watered them at Bills Lake.



You may need to enlarge the print of this 1880 plat

Conclusion

In an article which appeared in a publication entitled *Grant Area -- 1979*, Pauline Morrison Bull (a significant maiden name to be explored later) writes: "A few individuals were granted patents for land in 1854, most of them engaged in the lumber business though some came to live on their property and became citizens of this or other neighboring townships....."

"The Bills were of the family which gave its name to Bills Lake in Croton Township," she continues. "James K. was a minor at the time of issue of the land patent. He was the son of Abel Bills and lived his entire life on a farm on the north side of Bills Lake."

Pauline mentions Charles Bills, another son, as well. But Charles is not buried in Croton. Instead, he is most likely in a grave in Alexandria Virginia That's because he died in the Civil War on Feb. 7, 1863 and is presumably interred there.

I spend my winters in Bartow FL, named for Francis S. Bartow, the first Brigade Commander of the Confederate Army to die in combat at the beginning of the Civil War. He was killed at the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) on July 21st, 1861. Fort

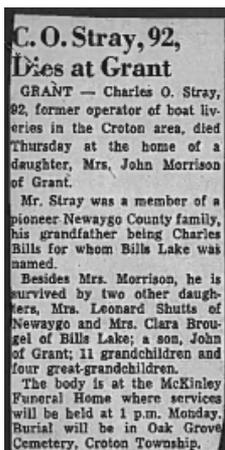
Blount FL was renamed Bartow FL in his honor even though this man was actually from Georgia.

For a time, it was my guess that Bills Lake was similarly named in honor of one of its first settlers who perished in the war. However, for obvious reasons, I can't display the gravestone of Charles Bills. For the purposes of this document, that honor goes to the patriarch.

However, as it turns out, my guess is right. In an obituary regarding early Bills Lake pioneer Charles Orson Stray (see next few pages), it states: "He was a member of a pioneering Newaygo County family, his grandfather being Charles Bills for whom Bills Lake was named."

Although Charles Bills was *not* Charles Stray's grandfather (he would have been Mr. Stray's uncle had he survived the Civil War), this reference confirms my conclusion.

As you will learn in the next few pages, Charles Stray's father married Mary Elizabeth Bills, Abel's daughter and Charles Bills' sister. Mary Elizabeth and her husband owned land that reached the shores of the lake on the west side.



“He was a member of a pioneering Newaygo County family, his grandfather being Charles Bills for whom Bills Lake was named.”

---Newaygo Republican

Charles W. Bills



An item in the *Newaygo Republican* states that Bills Lake was named after Charles W. Bills, who died in the Civil War on Feb. 7, 1863. He was the first son of Abel and Almira Bills who arrived in the Croton area from Owego, Tioga New York sometime prior to 1838.

In those days, it was common practice to name or rename towns and apparently lakes after soldiers who died in the war.

Although the above states that Charles' birth is unknown, he was actually born in Croton Twp. in 1838. This was followed by the