

DeWitt-- Yesterday and Today

By Faye Hanson



On Wednesday night, October 22, 1930 one of the most popular stopping places between Detroit and Grand Rapids burned. The Clinton House, considered an eminent and popular hotel in its day, had been one of the outstanding landmarks in Central Michigan for nearly a century. It stood on the southwest corner of Bridge and Main Streets.

Construction was begun in 1839 by Captain David Scott who with his family was the first permanent white settler to locate in Clinton County. It was completed in 1841 and was 44 by 64 feet, three stories high with 35 rooms, besides hallways, closets and a ballroom on the third floor. The sleeping rooms were unusually large and many of them would accommodate at least three beds. However often travelers were obliged to sleep on the floor of the ballroom due to the shortage of lodging facilities when Circuit Court or the Board of Supervisors was in session, DeWitt was county seat until 1857 when it was moved to St. Johns.

The huge sills, beams, plates and great timbers in the massive roof, with four gables extending from the corners were hewn from the finest oak and black walnut. The work was done by a man named Gerry, a sailor, who worked on the timber in the winter and on the Great Lakes in the summer.

Smaller timbers were sawed in a mill on the outskirts of the village, while the siding and finished lumber was drawn from Flint. The construction of the building was so sound that it was still in a good state of preservation prior to the fire.

The old tavern was considered the finest between Detroit and Grand Rapids and had housed the notables of the state, including Zach Chandler and many Michigan governors. It was in this hotel that government officials, transporting money from land offices at Grand Rapids and Ionia to Detroit, stopped for the night. The money was placed in boxes and stored in the bar room and guarded by soldiers.

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From the time it was completed until the county seat was moved to St. Johns, the Circuit Court was held, and the Board of Supervisors convened, in the ballroom.

It was the social center of the town and the scene of many oyster suppers, this was really a nifty dish in olden days and no supper was complete without oysters. Crackling fires in the hotel's fireplaces made cozy its interior for Lansing merry makers after a sleigh ride to DeWitt. Babies taken along were laid out in rows on the beds on the second floor and slept through all the fiddling and noise.

Following the Civil War the Tavern was very popular and it was considered the proper thing to patronize the parties and social gatherings in the old hotel. The late Josephine Pearce Tucker told me they took a change of clothes and at midnight the ladies changed their costume in the rooms on the second floor. Lively rigs were in demand during the winter months and sleigh loads of Lansing residents made the trip to DeWitt to eat and dance in the hotel. It was an 1½ hour ride in the cold both ways.

The Clinton House lost part of its popularity when Lansing's first hotel was built after the State Capitol was moved there from Detroit. However it continued as a popular lodging house and was DeWitt's community center, until the advent of the automobile. Fast transportation and rapid growth of Lansing and Flint soon left DeWitt off the main highways of travel and the old Clinton House became a losing proposition. In its last years only the first floor was used as a poolroom and barbershop. At the time of the fire negotiations were underway to sell it to Henry Ford because of its historic value.

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Did you know that at one time DeWitt had a railroad? In April, 1900, the Lansing-St. Johns Electric Railway was launched. The estimated cost of building the line was fixed by promoters at \$1,500,000.00, the line was to take in Maple Rapids. A contract was awarded to the Arnold Construction Company of Chicago.

The railroad was called the Lansing and Northern and construction proceeded slowly, steam railroads were inclined to cause the new electric line all trouble possible. Track was laid to St. Johns at the head of Swegles Street. A locomotive was attached to an old passenger coach on March 26, 1901 and the Grand Northern was a reality.

The suburban road was built with heavy rails and was designed to carry freight. The village of DeWitt, which so long was but a shadow of its former greatness in Clinton County history, had taken on new life. The line ran one freight and baggage car daily and had placed several sidings along its route for loading cars with produce, especially sugar beets. There was also a passenger coach.

The line was never built northward from St. Johns as was originally planned. The line went out of existence in the late 1920's.

Taken from THE PAST AND PRESENT OF CLINTON COUNTY, by DABOLL, published 1906.



(Depot in DeWitt on Franklin St. directly across from Rummell's Funeral Home, torn down several years ago)



(Railway bridge across the Looking Glass River in city of DeWitt)

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