LAKELAND

Extra

Old towns now gone

Buswell typifies old northern towns

By Alan G. Barbian
Lakeland Times reporter

Northern Vilas County is a colorful mosaic of former sawmill towns and railroad stops once pieced together by the threads of the Chicago, Minneapolis & St. Paul Railroad. Their cloak covered the burgeoning timber industry at the turn of the century.

America had a ferocious appetite for Northwoods timber following the Civil War. Wisconsin timber fed that appetite into the industrial revolution. Afterwards, when the timber was exhausted, lumber companies discarded their Northwoods mill towns like old silverware. Some of those towns disappeared from the landscape like the forests before them. Others struggled to hang on for a few years before succumbing. A few became resorts to feed the infant tourism industry and some old towns survived.

Weathered and tinted post cards are all that remain of the memories from several small towns in the Lakeland area. One such place was Buswell on Papoose Lake in Vilas County.

Buswell was a sawmill town built in 1895 by the Buswell Lumber & Mfg. Co., when the Chicago, Minneapolis & St. Paul Railroad came through. The company and town prospered for the next 15 years. Besides the mill, the town included a large boarding house, blacksmith shop and horse barn, school and doctor's office and more than 30 homes.

In 1910 a major forest fire burned the mill, along with several other dwellings.

According to an account of the fire in the *July 23, 1910* issue of the *American Lumberman* newspaper, Buswell was practically wiped off the map. The sawmill, planing mill, boarding house, store, blacksmith shop, barn, icehouse, boathouses and 11 million board feet of hardwood, pine and hemlock lumber piled in the mill's lumber yards were destroyed.

"All the residents of the village, between 200 and 300, escaped unharmed," the report stated. "Women and children were sent to safety in boats to an island in Papoose Lake, upon the bank of which the village was built. There they spent the night in fear of death by suffocation. The men remained behind to fight the fire and look after what remained."

The only buildings escaping the ravages of the fire were the school, doctor's office and 30 houses.

The loss to Buswell Lumber & Mfg. Co., was as much as $300,000, according to the newspaper account. "It is understood that the company carried ample insurance," it noted.

The mill had been running day and night, producing 60,000 board feet of timber daily with two shifts. "It is not likely that the plant will be rebuilt, as the company has remaining a cut of only two or three years," the newspaper story stated.

Indeed, a later newspaper article said that F.W. Buswell, company president, moved to Wausau and opened a new office. He used a Wausau mill to fill the remainder of his orders.

According to Boulder Junction historian Paul Brenner, town residents stayed on for a while, but eventually left.

"Some of the stone pillars that supported the mill were still visible on Papoose Lake last year, as well as the log supports for the bridge," Brenner said.

The Buswell Post Office eventually became Papoose Junction, and was consolidated into the Manitowish Waters or Winchester Post Office.

One man who had vivid memories of Buswell was the late John LaFave. The LaFaves owned one of oldest resorts on nearby Island Lake.
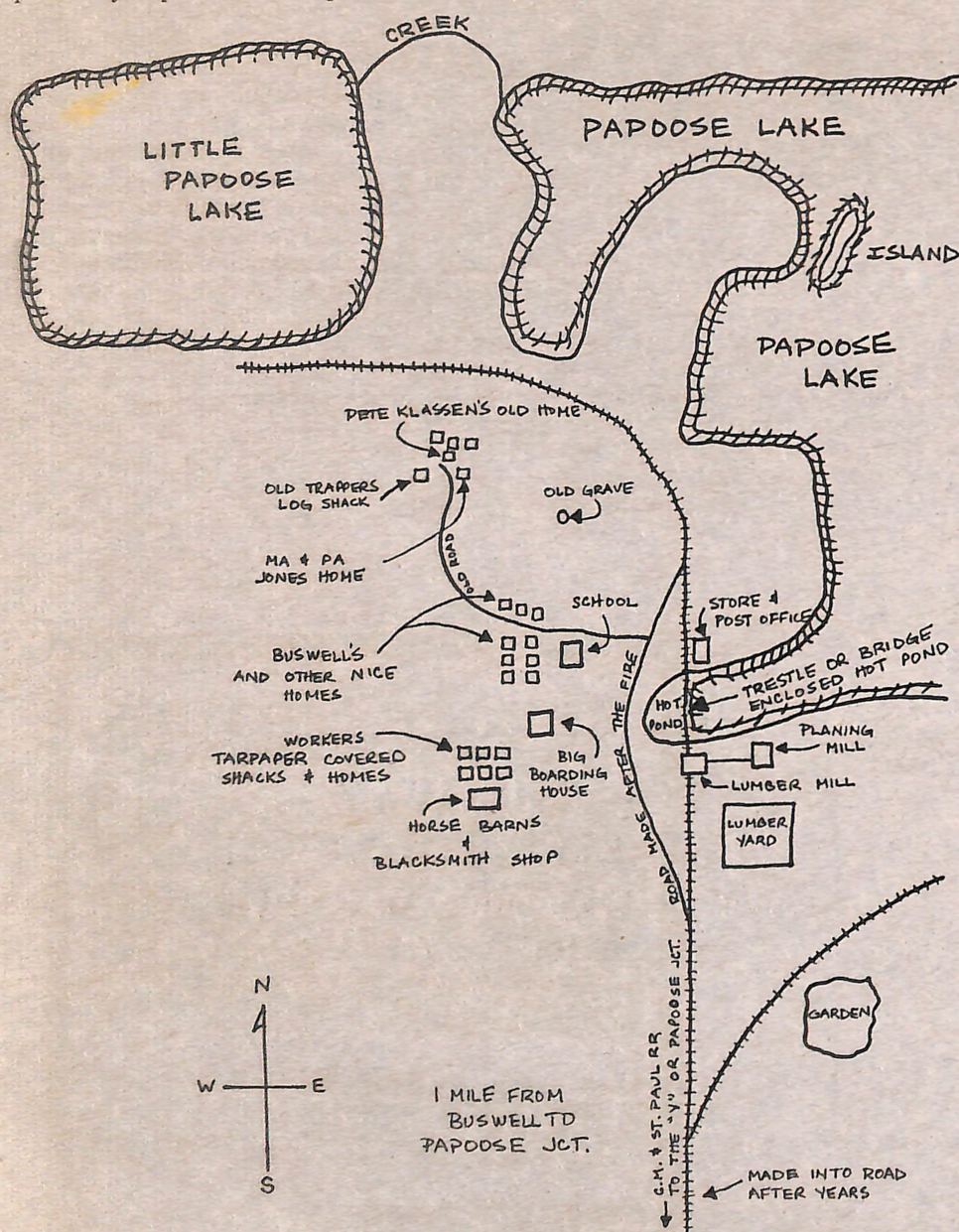
LaFave recalled spending part of his childhood at Buswell. His recollections as a 9-12-year-old boy were mostly of the friendly men of the railroad who traveled its winding tracks through the diminishing Northwoods.

One such man was a brakeman called "Big Scottie," he told Brenner. LaFave also remembered that George Gozline was the first section foreman and lived in two box cars at the "Y" in the tracks called Papoose Junction. "The Livenash family was the second, and last, family to live there," he said.

LaFave also remembered that his uncle, George Noonan, was killed by locomotive "Peggy" of the Buswell train about

See TOWNS . . .

The planing mill at Buswell on Papoose Lake in Vilas County was producing 60,000 board feet of lumber in double shifts in 1910 when it was destroyed by a forest fire. The fully-stocked lumber yards were filled with 11 million board feet of lumber. All were lost in the fire.
--Courtesy of the Brenner Collection

This map of the former town of Buswell near Manitowish Waters is not drawn to scale, but is from the childhood memory of the late John LaFave. Most of the town was destroyed by fire in 1910. Some wooden pilings from the Buswell railroad trestle and mill are still visible on Papoose Lake.

--Drawing courtesy of Paul Brenner

America had a big appetite for Northwoods timber after the Civil War and many small towns sprang up next to sawmills and railroad stops.
--Courtesy of the Brenner Collection

TOWNS: Stops reflected passengers' names

two years after the town burned, he told Brunner.

Junk replaced timber heading south on the train out of Buswell after the fire.

"I recall that some junk dealer from Wausau or Merrill filled several train cars with metal that was shipped south from Buswell after the fire," he said.

Some people weren't as lucky -- they did not receive a free ride out of town.

"Buswell and many other company towns had their own money, or 'chits' and you just about had to buy from the local store," he said. "Remember the old song about being in debt to the company store? After the town burned, some people didn't have enough money to get out of town."

The tracks leading from Buswell to Minocqua were eventually pulled up several years after the fire, leaving behind a list of stops such as the Big Lake Warehouses, Wolf Spur, Rice Creek Bridge and Pikes Peak before hitting Boulder Junction, Trout Lake and eventually Minocqua.

Other towns nearby

The railroad continued connecting the dots on the map to form a line of railroad junctions, passenger stops, or in most cases, lumber camps and sawmill towns.

Lumberman George Foster who worked for Buswell eventually founded Fosterville. It was renamed Wineger by lumberman William Wineger and is called Presque Isle today.

Just down the road is Winchester, which was first called Divide because of the nearby continental divide. In 1905 Walter Winchester's Turtle Lake Lumber Company built a small sawmill between North and South Turtle lakes. A small cluster of tarpaper houses sprouted around it.

This mill cut the material to build a bigger mill down the shoreline a bit. Little Tar Town remained, but on a more pleasant hilltop overlooking the lake, the company built a complete town of more than 50 houses precisely spaced in orderly rows behind boardwalks and white fencing. This was Winchester. It also had two inns, two community buildings and a big store.

Passenger stops

Passenger stops sometimes lead to the naming of towns. Conover in Vilas County is one such place. Plymouth cheeseman Seth Conover had a favorite spot to get off or on the train during his fishing expeditions to the Twin Lakes. His routine led to references to Conover's Stop and then formalized simply as Conover.

Another such town named after a railroad stop, but no longer exists, is Oxley on Hwy. K just west of Boulder Junction at the corner of Wool Lake Road. It's the site of the former Wish River Company.

Oxley had its own post office at one time. It was named for the Oxleys of Woodruff. "It was their grandfather who had part of what is now Dairymen's Resort," Brenner said. "It was on Wolf Lake."

Oxley was really a land office for the Minneapolis-based Bluegrass Land Co. It bought up lots of old lumber company land to sell as farm land.

"They advertised in Minneapolis papers and then brought prospective land buyers over by train to show them around in one weekend. If they didn't ask too many questions, they bought land and got suckered into it. Many of the old time families from Boulder (Junction) came here because of this land company."

Oxley was there until 1931 when the building burned. "Mr. Wolfly was the last agent and he bought the rest of their (Bluegrass) land and sold it for a number of years. Mrs. Wolfly died within the last few years. The building that is there now was built after the first one burned and was their home."
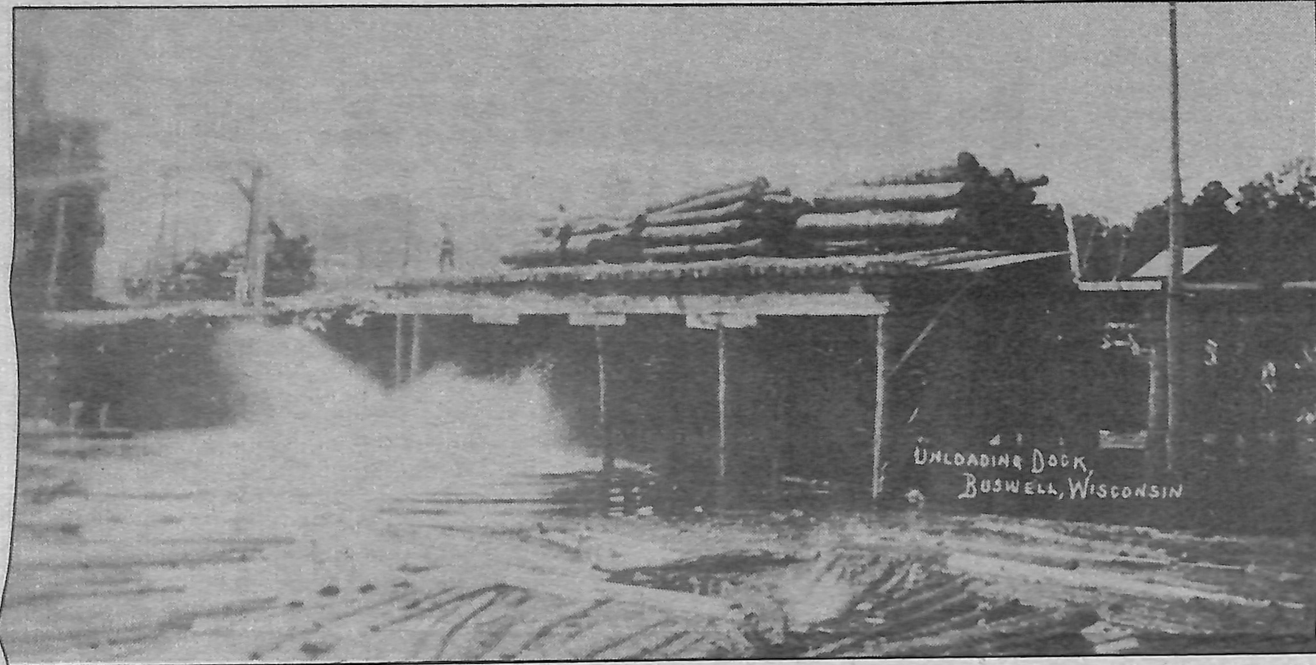
There were many other railroad stops along the route, but they never became towns.

A portion of their story can be seen in pictures on display now at the Boulder Junction Community Center. The display was created by Brenner and centers around Rice Creek and Trout Lake. It can be viewed when either the library or town office is open.

The library is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Thursday night from 7-9 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The town office is open Monday from 8:30 a.m to 4:30 p.m, and Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

There are virtually dozens of Buswell and Oxley-type towns that have disappeared from Vilas and Oneida county maps since cartographers first started to ply their craft in the area. If you have fond memories of such places as Powell or Garth, or any of the other gone-but-not-forgotten towns in Vilas and Oneida, and would like to share old photographs, childhood memories or old stories from grandparents or relatives, contact the *Lakeland Times*.

The former town of Buswell near Manitowish Waters was built near the Buswell sawmill on Papoose Lake. Most of the town was destroyed by fire in 1910. Some wooden pilings from the Buswell railroad trestle, shown here, are still visible on Papoose Lake.
--Photo courtesy of the Brenner Collection