

Thursday, 15 May 1997

Today, Lake Ann, and indeed the entire township of Almira, took a most important step in its history. This morning I got a call from Vera Carmien that they were moving the Kimmin house onto the site where they plan to develop a museum of local history. As we later drove through the village we saw the house on the site but not as yet set on its permanent location; we drove around the block to see the operation more closely. We gave those in their vehicles by the side of the road the victory sign. Yes, this is an important day for Lake Ann.

This evening, before the sun went down, we drove around the lake from Harris Point to see the event again. To our surprise, we found that not only the Kimmin house but also the Habbler shack had been moved into location. We circled the properties. Some may be amused that such abused structures could have any value. Yet they are a part of our history and have now been recognized as such. This day marks an important moment in the history of our local area: it says that we value our history and the people who came before us.

As we circled the Kimmin house Cliff asked, "Why save this house? What's so special about it?" I answered that it was representative of the good simple people who made Almira their home, who struggled through hard times, shared what they had with their neighbors. This was the little house that Mrs. Kimmin had, after the family had gone and the farm had been sold. I remember my mother going to the Kimmins' farm, half a mile to the north of where this house stood, for, perhaps, sweet corn (I can't recall what exactly), but I can never forget Mrs. Kimmin's gesture of taking us into her lush vegetable and flower garden and cutting us a big bouquet of cosmos. Now every summer, cosmos grows in front of our house in Ypsilanti and is a delight to many passersby. I often tell them about Mrs. Kimmin, her cheerfulness and generosity, and how easy cosmos is to grow—an essential characteristic for a woman living on a farm.

Habbler's shack? Well, to me it represents a tangible fragment in memory of the last local member of the Habbler dynasty. Look on any land map of this area in its early history and "Habbler" will be written all over it. When I was a child, old Will Habbler could be seen daily heading down to his shack, with his pipe and perhaps a few bottles of beer. This was his get-away from his wife, Ellie, full of nervous (almost electric) energy, who for some was known as the town gossip but to me was the most marvelous local character. She had an astonishing liveliness and an interest in everything you were doing. She never stopped asking questions: she just couldn't get enough information about the life that went on around her. Would that we had her here now! She was a character—and I loved her enthusiasm for life. I remember her telling the story of her first journey from Ohio through the wilderness: how the trees were so enormous that you could see for miles ahead under the pines.

I didn't know Will that well: he was quiet, almost reclusive, it seemed to me. He is, however, associated strongly with Harris Point, as he worked for Hans and Eisa

Yeager in the very earliest years of the twentieth century. Will and Ellie's daughter, Chum, who with her husband, a nephew of the Yeagers, had a boat house and later a cottage on the west side of the lake, told me that Will had planted the great spruce windbreak that still towers over the lake along the western edge of Harris Point. Will's handiwork is also to be seen on the outer walls of the board and batten house at Harris Point: the small pieces of metal that he used to cover knot holes in the 12 inch upright boards came originally from his tobacco cans. He would simply cut out a piece of metal from a can and hammer it over a hole. I cherish every one of them. You see these as well in the shack roof, peppered with similar pieces of metal. Cherish them: they, along with the shack, represent the last visible traces of the great Habbler dynasty and the long gone Habbler Lumber Mill. While Habbler's Store still stands, it is so altered from its appearance during those early years as to be almost a different building.

Laugh if you will at these two initial structures on site at the Almira Museum, but they represent a beginning of our public declaration that we cherish the history of the good people who lived here. As we daily see the landscape around us devoured by amorphous sprawl, we need to take seriously the idea of community before all sense of community is gone. We all need to look back and remember, and we need to look forward and ask ourselves what we want our community to be. As an important part of that sense of community, we all need to tell the story of the people we remember—and hurry, hurry, hurry—to capture, before it's too late, the history of our community.

Sincerely,

Jack Harris,
Lake Ann, MI, Harris Point