

A Sawmill Comes to the Charles Hunter Farm

by Larry Kidder

On June 1, 1904 the Harbourton column of the *Hopewell Herald* noted that, “The woodsmen that have been working in Freeland Titus’ woods have completed their work and have moved their saw mill to Charles Hunter’s woods, nearby.” This saw mill was a portable, 60 horse power, steam-powered circular saw owned by George Guyer of Shippensburg, Pennsylvania whose crew included his two sons, Ira and Frank. They had been working on the Titus farm located between the village of Harbourton and Ackor’s Corner, the corner of today’s Route 579 and Pleasant Valley Road. Now they had loaded up their sawmill apparatus and used their horses to carry it the two miles along Pleasant Valley Road to the Hunter farm, located across from the intersection of Pleasant Valley Road and the road to Harbourton. At the Hunter farm the equipment was unloaded, set up, and then flat, slanted roofs were put up to protect the mill equipment during the eleven months or so that it would be located there. It probably took the crew about four days to set up the mill and they would have to saw a lot of wood to make the move profitable. Proper set up required creating a solid foundation and properly aligning and leveling the saw frame, log carriage, and circular saw blade.

While working on the Hunter farm, the Guyer’s and their crew was housed on the farm and close by. Although stationed at the Hunter farm, George Guyer traveled throughout the neighborhood for several miles around talking with farmers to buy logs or convince them to hire him to do some sawing for them. Farmers with logs either brought them to the Hunter farm themselves or George would use his two horses and skids, or bobs, to haul in the logs for them. When the wood was sawn, the bobs were used to haul the lumber away for use or sale. George sold lumber, bark, sawdust, and slab wood – anything derived from the sawing process that would help the profit line. His main interest was acquiring wood to be sold for use in making baseball bats, railroad ties, cart spokes, and walnut furniture. The primary local customer of course was Charles Hunter, who used some of the boards cut from his trees to replace worn out siding on his barn.

In hiring a sawyer to produce barn siding, Charles Hunter followed a long standing practice in Pleasant Valley. The first hundred and fifty years or so of life in Pleasant Valley was during America’s Wooden Age and wood was used for a wide variety of purposes. The axe, splitting tools, and saws were important tools for every family. Large amounts of wood were processed for fuel, fence rails, and building lumber. Sawmills followed settlement to supply the huge amounts of lumber needed for houses, barns, and other buildings. There was a lot of timber that was cut in clearing fields and the wood could become potash if burned, rails and fuel if split, or lumber if sawn. Farmers could sell potash as a product, supply their own rails and fuel, and either supply their own building lumber or sell lumber for profit. As the population increased during the colonial period the demand for lumber increased. In these early years, even very small streams with intermittent flow had mills, even if they operated only for part of the year when rain was plentiful. Pleasant Valley’s Moore’s Creek was just such a stream and may have supported several sawmills at various times and for various durations.



This photo of George Guyer's portable sawmill and its crew was taken sometime between June 1904 and April 1905 when it was set up on the Charles Hunter farm in Pleasant Valley. George had a crew that consisted of his sons Frank and Ira; Jesse and Dan Rosenburg who drove the horses; John Foster who was the main sawyer; and, Austin Mills who fired the boiler.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and into the 20th, most farms still had some woodland or wood lots on land that was unsuitable for farming. These woodlots were often detached from the main farm and could be some distance away. An example of this is found in an October 27, 1795 petition by Major Henry Phillips to create a road so he could access one of his detached woodlots. In his words, Maj. Henry was “possess’d of a Certain Lot of Woodland lying at some Distance from his farm whereon he now lives which lays him under the Necessity of passing through Lands of other People in his way to and from said Woodlot.” The path he took to use his woodlot created a condition in which “Sundry Disputes have arisen concerning said way in Consequence of which your Petitioner hath found himself obliged to apply to the Court for Relief and doth therefore pray that the Court will grant an appointment of the Surveyors of the highways to lay out a Certain private road or Driftway” for his use. It was from woodlots such as this that the farmers harvested trees to be sawn at local sawmills.

In addition to mills on farms, commercial saw mills were built nearby. The western end of Pleasant Valley is the bank of the Delaware River and a number of sawmills were built on or near the river due to the available water power and the ready availability of logs from rafts that descended the Delaware River each year from New York State. Three prominent examples include the Prime Hope Sawmill below Lambertville, the Urial Titus mill south of Pleasant Valley Road, and the John Fidler sawmill in north Titusville that became the Welling and Titus mill. All of these sawmills were out of

business by the late 1800s. These riverside mills had access to both “country logs” from the nearby farms and also logs from the rafts. The first rafts came in the late 1700s and rafts are known to have passed the Pleasant Valley/Titusville area as late as 1909.

The early water powered mills had vertical saw blades secured in a wooden frame, powered by water flow, and covered to protect them from the weather. Locally made saw blades were available as early as 1734 when Isaac Harrow advertised in a local newspaper that he had set up his business making mill saws, among other products, in Trenton. In 1809 and 1810 saw mill blades could be purchased from John R. Smith & Co. at their Hardware & Medicine Store on the corner of Market and Warrant Streets in Trenton.

Later in the 19th century portable saw mills using circular blades became possible when steam and then gasoline powered engines took the place of water power. Then, the sawmill could come to the woodlot for a time and then move on. Several years after the Guyers operated in the Valley we find another example of a portable sawmill in use. In the *Trenton Times* for March 18, 1909 the Pleasant Valley column notes, “John Olmstead who recently purchased the C.B. Tomlin farm will remove his sawmill to the same site.” The 1910 US Census shows John D. Olmstead and wife Emma living on the farm they owned with their daughter and general farmer son-in-law, Fred Way, on the Harbourton-Pleasant Valley Road. John was 64 years old and gave his occupation as “sawyer – portable.”

Later in the same column we find, “Charles Sloff had the misfortune to mash one of his toes a few days ago while working at the sawmill.” Charles Sloff was a 49 year old farmer living in West Amwell. It isn’t indicated where the sawmill was, but it may have been John Olmstead’s because if there were more than one mill in operation in the Pleasant Valley area it would have been identified.

Participating in the annual Howell Living History Farm Sawmilling program gives visitors the chance to experience many activities from the Wooden Age, including the process of sawing logs from the farm into lumber to be used on the farm for barn repairs and restoration projects, just as Charles Hunter repaired his barn with new siding in 1904. In addition to the lumber, the sawdust can be used as insulation in the ice house and the slabwood can be cut and split into firewood and kindling for the wood stove in the kitchen.

Sources:

Traditions of the Charles Hunter family provided by Clara Hunter and Charles Jepson Hunter
The Hopewell Herald
The Trenton Times
The Trenton Federalist
Hunterdon County Road Returns
US Census 1910