

## *History of Van Etten Lake*

Mystery of Van Etten begins to unravel--by Karen Rouse

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OSCODA-One clue was the genesis that led to a probable answer to the question, "Who is Van Etten?"

Van Etten Lake on Oscoda is a popular destination to some and home to many. A resort, where many people sought an up north holiday in the early to mid-1900s carried the name Van Etten Reserve, yet was owned by Frank Cowley. No one with the last name of Van Etten was associated with the venture, according to land deeds.

A series of cabins on the northern shore were thought to be built by Van Etten, but a record search revealed that the property was owned by others.

The lake, originally named Pine Lake, according to land records, was renamed Van Etten Lake prior to 1891. No records have yet been located as to the reason why the name was changed to Van Etten and when.

A Mikado creek is named Van Etten that flows into the Pine River that flows into Van Etten Lake. Why is the Alcona County creek named Van Etten?

The most common question surrounding the mystery is that of, "Is Etten spelled with "an" or "en"?"

The sole clue came from a book published in 1883, *The History of the Lake Huron Shore*. The writer stated that Howard and Van Etten established a water-powered saw mill on Van Etten Lake in 1836 and after the dam was washed out three times, the pair abandoned the enterprise.

An internet search on Van Etten opened pages in a book titled, *Memoirs of a Brilliant Woman* written in 1882 about Ann Van Etten Collins, written by her son and Levi's nephew, Hodridge Ozro Collins.

In 1837 her brother Levi and Wiliam Howard, husband of her sister Asenath, attempted to establish a saw mill near the mouth of the AuSable River, in the northern part of the southern peninsula of Michigan and in a spirit of adventurous curiosity she went to that comparatively unknown wilderness to live with them.

Could Levi, who died as a single man with no descendants, be whom the lake is named for?

Van Etten family descendants claim that a lake in northeastern Michigan is named for their ancestor Levi.

Levi Van Etten was born on Nov 22, 1807 in Owasco, Cayuga, N.Y. to Anthony Van Etten Jr. and Jemima Cuddeback.

Among Levi's eight siblings were his sister Ann, described in the aforementioned book and Asenath, who married William Howard.

Statements from the book place Ann with Levi and William in what is now Oscoda in 1837. The local record states that the year was 1836 when the saw mill construction was attempted and a family ancestry record dates Levi coming to Michigan in 1834.

No legal documents have been found to confirm any of the dates.

Ozro Collins was an agent for a fur trading post located at Sault Ste. Marie in the 1830s. A series of Collins' journal entries from Detroit to Sault Ste. Marie and mention Van Etten.

Collins wrote about falling through honeycombed ice to the north of the "AuSable or Sand River" on March 20, 1838.

After extricating our horse and baggage we started for Mr. Levi Van Etten's about three miles up the river....found a comfortable house, a fine young lady all alone." The young lady and Levi's sister Ann, whom Collins married in 1843.

Collins described Van Etten's property as "up the AuSable River, about three miles from the lake, on a branch of the main stream, at the foot of a small lake about four miles long, where there is a powerful water privilege".

Collins resided with the Van Etten's for a week. Another journal entry stated that Van Etten and Howard built a saw-mill that fell into the river and that the pair was from Owasco, Cayuga, New York.

Local historian, Neil Thornton, in an Oscoda Press article dated May 13, 1981 pointed out that John Hennigar, an Oscoda history buff, and researched field notes from 1840 of surveyors referencing an old dam on Van Etten Lake, that provides weight to the claims of a dam existing prior to 1840.

Furthermore, the book about Ann says that she returned to New York in May of 1838 and that Levi remained at AuSable and established an extensive fishing station, using some of the earnings to help Ann to secure a higher education. Again, nothing has been located about a fishing station in the area prior to 1840, especially connected to Van Etten.

A search of Levi's whereabouts between 1838 and 1852 has so far revealed nothing. Levi's brother Thomas named Levi and William Howard as executors of his will dated Jan. 13, 1852. The legal document stated that Van Etten and Howard were residing in Owasco at the time.

Census records from 1870 and 1880 confirm that Levi farmed at the family homestead in

Owasco until his death on Jan. 2, 1891.

The found information doesn't quiet the unanswered questions of why Van Etten and Howard come to Michigan during the dawn of statehood.

The building of a saw mill is logical given the lumbering boom that came to the area later in the century, but information about land ownership of the time does not indicate that Van Etten or Howard owned any area land parcels.

Van Etten must have been known to travelers of his day during the 19th century, as Collins knew that he would find him up the AuSable River. Perhaps more investigation will help Van Etten be known to people living in the 21st century.