

THE SOPHER FAMILY



By Valera M. Bickelhaupt from article by Alice M. Smith

Mr. William S. Soper learned about lumber and feed mills from his father in Theresa. Orange Soper had owned and operated a sawmill near Chapels Corners and Bill had helped in the winters. In the summer he had worked on boats around Alexandria Bay. Bill Soper first opened his saw mill in Hammond on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 22, 1887, with grist being ground after bringing it from the firm of Snell and Makepeace of Theresa.

This first mill was operated by a steam engine, a gas engine later being installed in 1909. In 1902 Mr. Soper became interested in electricity for lighting and installed a small engine and dynamo in his mill for light, later running a light line to his office and then to his home. These were the first electric lights in the town of Hammond. Soon others wished to have this new convenience and lines were run for lights to the railroad depot, the old John T. Rodger store and to several other homes. In

1915 he formed the Hammond Light and Power Company with his son Milton and Fred Bertrand.

The mill was established on what was then known as Mechanic Street in Hammond. It wasn't long before it was known as Mill Street. Mr. Soper purchased the land of the Helen Morse estate on the north side of Mill Street and built the first house on that side of the street. He later built all the houses on that side of the street.

When Norris and Fred were old enough to help in the electric plant they would operate it from five until midnight and five in the morning until sunup. On Mondays they ran it in the forenoon so the local housewives could do their wash and on Tuesdays the same hours so they could iron. They collected for their father at the flat rate of 1 1/2 cents a light a night for the number of lights one had burning. Sometimes a resident would hear a knock at the door and was requested to turn out unnecessary lights. In 1923 he sold this business to the St. Lawrence Utilities, a predecessor of Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation. The power house was later used for storage

Milton also used to handle the feed business which Norris handles today. (as of Dec. 1962) Fred sells lumber and is a very fine cabinet maker specializing in working with cherry wood. The boys sister, Sarah, (later Mrs. E. J. Ferguson) did the office work for her father.

Soper had the first Diesel engine in Hammond and he owned the first automobile in the town. It was a 1905 Franklin which the boys kept in perfect condition.

In 1912 William Soper became interested in airplanes and made it a point to visit all places where planes could be seen. He purchased a plane minus a motor but never flew it. This plane was stolen at the State Fair in Syracuse in 1950 and was never heard from since.

During the existence of the Mill the world has not stood still. When the mill was built there was no electricity, no paved roads, no automobiles, no super markets, no central schools, no men had orbited the earth. The mill was started by an individual to serve certain needs of the farming community and that is what it did. Many a barn in the Hammond area is made from lumber which was sawed in this mill.

Milton was with his father in the first venture, the grist mill. Milton bought a team of oxen which he broke and used to haul logs to the mill. Later he became a

farmer. Norris and Fred, known as the boys stayed with the business. It is said that Norris never drove a car and that Fred never talked on the telephone.

The Soper Brother Mill on Mill Street is a monument to a man who wanted to serve his community and its environs. His two sons have seen to it that through the years the ideals for which their father stood have been carried on. They served the Hammond area well.

Following the death of Fred Soper the business was sold to Pluta and Davis of Alexandria Bay. The saw mill was sold to Lon Hollister and he moved same to his lot on Soper Avenue. After Pluta and Davis lost the property to St. Lawrence County due to tax arrears, the county then sold the mill to the Hammond Fire Department for the sum of \$1.00. On April 8th, 1989 the department burned the mill and the property will be used for whatever purpose deemed necessary.