

James Gow
Owner of Muskegon's Last Sawmill
By Frances Harrington

In the early days, Michigan's forests were filled with hard and soft woods. Hardwoods, typically found in the southern part of the state, had been used for building forts, merchant and war ships, and bracing in the mines etc., but was not easy to work with. Softwoods, like pine, were found more in the forest to the north and in the upper peninsula.

In the 1800's, when the forests on the east coast started to be depleted, the lumbering industry moved to Michigan after receiving a shipment of our white pine. It compared so favorably with their white pine (the standard for quality at the time) that Michigan became the place to be for timber. Pine was most desirable because of its beauty and how easy it was to work with using the hand tools of that time; and Michigan's forest were packed with them. These trees were hundreds of feet tall and some over 5 feet in diameter. It was thought that those forests would provide timber for at least 100 years but with improvements in transportation, the large number of lumbering mills, and improvements in cutting equipment, those huge timberlands were vanishing. By 1870, there were over 400 sawmills and more than 800 logging camps in the lower peninsula alone. Two of the longest rivers in the state, used for transporting lumber, were the Muskegon River and the Grand River. The Muskegon River starts at Houghton Lake and flows southwesterly to its mouth, Muskegon Lake, which then empties into Lake Michigan. This made Muskegon Lake the perfect place to operate lumber mills and ship the cut wood products to Milwaukee and Chicago be shipped throughout the country.

Muskegon started as a settlement in 1837. In 1859, Muskegon separated from Ottawa County to become Muskegon County. By 1880, there were 47 lumber mills on Muskegon Lake and 16 on White Lake. Muskegon's growth was due mainly to the lumbering industry. We were called the "lumber queen of the world". We produced more millionaires than any other town in America. If you've read any Muskegon history, you no doubt have seen the names, C. T. Hills, John Ruddiman, Martin Ryerson, John Torrent, and of course, Thomas Hume, and Charles Hackley, just to name a few who made their fortunes from Muskegon's lumber industry. By the 1890's, the writing was on the wall. The massive timberlands were being depleted, many of the lumber barons had died or were leaving Muskegon, and the lumbering and sawmills were closing. The last lumber mill operating on Muskegon Lake started in 1881 when James Gow and Albert Majo formed a partnership and purchased a small lath mill, that at the time, was owned by Bassett & Bryne (but originally owned by Lewis Torrent). The mill was set up to cut mainly hardwoods. A lath mill is a sawmill that cuts lumber into thin flat strips of wood, used to form a foundation for the plaster of a wall, or tiles/shingles on a roof, or made into a trellis or fences. Mr. Majo was the owner/operator of a tug and ferryboat that operated on Muskegon Lake. They called the new mill "Gow & Majo". It not only was a lath mill but also a sawdust mill cutting both hard and soft woods. The sawdust was sold to brick making companies who used it as an additive in their brick making process. One of the owners, James Gow, is the subject of this article.

James was born in Canada in 1847, to John and Margaret (Paterson) Gow. After his early education in Canada, he worked on a farm and then in the sawmills. After a couple years, he left Canada and went to school in Chicago, graduating from the Bryand & Stratton Commercial College in 1866. After graduation, at the age of 20, he moved to Muskegon and started working in the sawmills. He started as a laborer and learned as much as he could about the lumber business, eventually, becoming the manager of a lath mill. In 1874, he married Julia S. Burch, daughter of Samuel Burch. (She was born in England, spent her childhood in Muskegon, but was living with her father in Manistee at the time of their marriage). James and Julia had 2 daughters, Edna and Evelyn.

In 1880, James became a member of the Muskegon Mason's Commandery No. 22. By 1881, after working for other lumberman for 15 years, James had gained enough knowledge and capital to invest in a sawmill. Things were looking up for James. That was the same year he had his first house built on the northwest corner of Peck and Houston. It was also the year he became a Knights Templar. In 1882, John Campbell was a sawyer at the Gow & Majo mill. His wife won \$18,000.00 in the Louisiana lottery (over \$500,000 in today's money) and John used some of the winnings to buy into the partnership which became known as "Gow, Majo, & Company." Over the years, more land was added to the mill and improvements made. Mr. Majo left the partnership and the mill became known as "Gow & Campbell" – a partnership that lasted for many years. Over time, James became one of the organizers of the "Muskegon Rifles" (a military unit), and was appointed as a non-commissioned officer. (The "Rifles" would later be known as Company C, 34th Michigan Volunteers.) He served as Alderman of the 2nd Ward, City Treasurer, Mayor of Muskegon in 1892, President of the Board of Public Works, President of the Board of Trade, President of the Log Owner's Booming Co., was Vestryman at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and one of the Directors of the Chamber of Commerce. He was Chairman of the Muskegon Traction & Lighting Co., Director of the Union National Bank, and he was a past Eminent Commander of Muskegon Masonry, and a trustee of the Mason Temple. He was a member of the Century Club, a stockholder in both the Muskegon Milling Co., and The Muskegon River Navigation Improvement Co., and dealt in real estate and life insurance. So, all and all, a very busy, prominent, and civic minded lumberman in Muskegon.

In 1891, he decided to build a large Victorian house. He wanted it built on his current location at Peck and Houston. He didn't just tear down the house he'd built in 1881, he had it moved to the back of his property and had intended to use some of its lumber in his new home. Then came the great Pine St. fire of 1891. Mr. E. D. Magoon purchased the house and had it moved to Diana St. between Pine and Terrace, possibly to replace one of the homes that was destroyed by the fire. The house is still there and is being restored and so far, is looking pretty good. As for Mr. Gow's new house, it was one of the finest show pieces in Muskegon. Sadly, it is no longer standing. Once used as the Davis Funeral Home (1924-1926), it was torn down to build a "Super Service Station" (gas station) in 1928.

A little lumbering background – in the early lumbering days, the majority of the timber cutting was done in the winter for a couple of reasons. 1) the tree sap would be frozen which made it easier to get the axes and saw blades through the wood, and 2) when the ground or make-shift

roads were frozen it made it easier to move the heavy loads by sleds pulled by teams of horses or donkeys, otherwise, the animals and/or the load would get stuck in the soft sand or mud. (This was before the railroads came). The logs were sometimes cut into smaller lengths (usually not less than 16 ft) and marked with the owner's specific, registered owner's mark (it was illegal to change or remove an owner's mark from the logs). These marks were made with a tool made of cast iron, much like a branding iron, called a marking hammer. The mark was not burned into the log, it was hammered onto the ends, leaving a debossed impression which would identify the owner/mill they were being cut for. These logs were hauled and strategically stacked along the river in huge piles. With the spring thaw, certain logs (which had been used to restrain the pile) were moved causing the pile of logs to collapse into the river to be floated to the booms. There were so many logs in the river that they didn't just fill the surface, but filled the river all the way to the bottom. A log boom, sometimes called a log fence or log bag, is a barrier placed in a lake or river, designed to collect floating logs cut from timber lands. Some of these booms were huge and there could be several of them set up along the river or lake. At the booms, the logs were sorted, according to the log marks, bound together to be rafted down river to the appropriate mill. It took hundreds of men, at different stages of the process, to get these thousands of logs down river to their destination. At times, log jams could occur, sometimes by accident and sometimes on purpose. These jams produced a back-up of water pressure, that when released, would propel the logs along their route. Allowing too many logs and too much water pressure to build up at one time, could be disastrous. Log jams could go for miles and miles if not dealt with in a timely matter. Sometimes, the jams caused the logs to pile up on one another, causing many of the logs to get "water-logged", sending those logs to the bottom of the river/stream/or lake. Other logs, during a jam, might be pushed to the water's edge, only to be lodged in the muck and sand when the water level went back down. Others still, might become water-logged while waiting in the mills staging areas or booms. Thousands of these "lost or dead" logs accumulated over 50+ years on the bottom and sides of the water ways. They didn't bother trying to recover these logs because of the effort, time, and cost it would take to retrieve them.

With many of the lumber mills leaving in the early 90s, old time lumberman, John Torrent, once suggested to James that he buy up some of the old lumber marks from the mill owners who were leaving. Mr. Torrent, in fact, had done this himself. That way, any logs in the muck around the lake or river banks that were left behind, with the marks owned by James, would be his property. Over the years, James bought more and more of these log marks from their owners or heirs, eventually, owning 934 of them. In the coming years, these logs along the shore, and even some that were left behind in the woods, helped to keep the mill running, but just barely. In 1911, they weren't sure they'd have enough timber to operate the mill for another year. In 1912, James bought out John's interest in the mill. It would now be called "James Gow Lumber Company".

The old advice from Mr. Torrent was about to pay off again. Hundreds of logs were found at the wharfs on Muskegon Lake that had gotten buried in the water and covered with saw dust. Surprisingly, once dried out, these logs were in very good condition. All those years in the water kept the logs from rotting or being damaged by bugs or man. Guess who owned the log marks associated with those logs....James Gow. In 1913, the dam at Big Rapids washed out and it revealed the entire floor of the river was packed with sunken logs. If James didn't already own the marks for those logs, he quickly bought the rights to them. The logs were raised by a machine known as a log lifter and moved to the river banks for a time to dry out enough to be loaded on trains or once again, floated down river to his mill. James continued to do this up and down the river and was able to keep the mill in operation for years. Although the actual sawmill only operated a few months out of the year, it did keep running. Because of the scarcity of lumber, prices kept going up, which was a good thing for the company. There were legal battles along the way from land owners who thought that the logs on the river banks adjacent to their property belonged to them because

they considered them abandoned. James won one of these battles in Michigan Supreme Court in 1908, and another one went all the way to the US Supreme Court in 1914. The Justices decided that no one has the right to retain or saw logs branded with marks purchased by James because they were not abandoned but were in the process of being retrieved. It was estimated, in 1914, that there were close to 1,000,000,000 feet of logs still in the river, not to mention what might be in Muskegon Lake, so the future was looking pretty good for the Gow Lumber Co. In 1916, James incorporated his company with it being capitalized at \$100,000 (\$2,784,877.82 in today's money) with \$66,000 stock paid in.

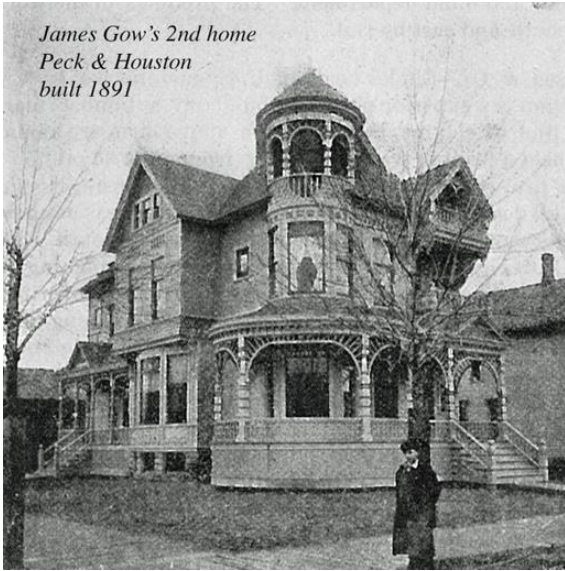
On May 16, 1917, the Gow Lumber Company started up for the season, making it the last sawmill in operation on Muskegon Lake. On September 5, 1917, James fell at his home and died. At first it was thought he died from the fall but later it turned out to be endocarditis (inflammation of the lining of the heart, usually caused by a bacterial infection). He was 71. His funeral was conducted by the Muskegon Masonry, of which he was the only 33rd degree member at the time. James and Julia, daughter Edna and her husband Lee Trott, are buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Muskegon. Their daughter, Evelyn and her husband James Hoyt are buried in Linwood Cemetery in Dubuque, Iowa.

Whether the sawmill ever operated again, I wasn't able to find out. A Muskegon Chronicle article by C. H. Yates said that the sawmill burned down in 1920. At some point, a company from Grand Rapids was hired to clean up the site. In 1945, the property was acquired by the Muskegon Conservation Club who continue to own it today.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a resurgence in mining sunken logs from waterways, not only in Michigan, but all over the U. S. because of the beauty of the wood (depending on where the logs are found and the type of wood it is). It has become a very lucrative business. Some states, including Michigan, have started to regulate this activity by law.

Sources: Hackley Public Library, Lakeshore Museum Center, Genealogybank.com (Muskegon Chronicle), Logging A River Bottom (Edward F Bigelow), The Heyday of the Lumber Industry (thefreelibrary.com), Ancestry.com, project.geo.msu.edu/geomich/loggingbackgrd.html, Wikipedia, Sunken Treasure (Danielle Castle), History of Muskegon County Michigan with Illustrations (H R Page & Co), History of Michigan Vol 3 (Charles Moore), photo of stacked logs (northcountryatwork.org), photo of log boom (Detroit Public Library), photos of Gow & Campbell Mill, log marks, & logging (Lakeshore Museum Center), photo of 1891 home (The Advantages and Surroundings of Muskegon – Muskegon Board of Trade).





*James Gow's 2nd home
Peck & Houston
built 1891*



*James Gow's first home
being renovated 7/2022*



Log Marks



Logging



Logs stacked for spring drive



log boom