

# WHITE CITY & CONEY ISLAND

## of Muskegon County

By Frances Harrington

In case you've never heard of White City or Coney Island, here is a short overview. White City was the nickname given to the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition (Chicago World's Fair). It covered about 690 acres and featured about 200 temporary buildings that were white-washed (hence, the name White City). The exposition lasted about 6 months before the structures were removed. Then in 1905, Chicago built a large recreational area (amusement park) that covered 14 acres. The buildings were all lined with white lights and they gave it the name White City, again. In New York, Coney Island is a peninsula neighborhood and entertainment area, consisting of a seaside resort and amusement parks that were started in the middle to late 1800s in the southern part of Brooklyn. Dozens of other parks, throughout the country, have since been called by these names.

What does any of this have to do with Muskegon, you ask? Around 1900 – 1913, there were a couple of “White Cities” in Muskegon County. One was on the shores of Lake Harbor and the other on White Lake. These were “tent communities” made up of wealthy vacationers, many of them from Chicago. They would spend part of the summer here, camping in their tents, and return home before the fall. Later, those “tent communities” were replaced by actual cottages and resort areas and no longer referred to as White City. But those are not what this story is about. As for Coney Island, (other than restaurants with that name) I only found one “Coney Island” in Muskegon.

During the lumber era, at the very end of Ottawa Street, is an area of land with Muskegon Lake to the west and the south branch of the Muskegon River to the north and was occupied by the “Muskegon Booming Company” (A corporation organized under the laws of the State for the purpose of driving, rafting, booming, and delivering logs. These logs were sorted in the booms at the east side of Muskegon Lake, according to the lumber owner's mark stamped on the ends, then chained together, and transported to the appropriate sawmill). The land was owned by John Torrent and consisted of buildings to feed and house the thousands of men who carried on the day-to-day operations of the Booming Company. Along with the larger branches of the river, smaller branches or creeks were winding throughout the area, causing what seemed like small islands. The Booming Company eventually closed down and Mr. Torrent had very little use for the land after the decline of the lumbering era. The mess halls, sleeping quarters, and outbuildings were abandoned. The structures that weren't demolished eventually became a refuge for some of the homeless people of Muskegon. Later, people began to build shacks of their own on the property and started these little “shanty towns”. These people had no legal title to the land, didn't pay taxes and were referred to as “squatters”.

There was an old road and bridge that connected Muskegon and North Muskegon before they put in the causeway or US 31. It seems the road had a few different names throughout the years, such as Old Bridge Road, Old State Rd to Whitehall, Old North Muskegon Road, Corduroy Road, etc. The shantytowns used that old road as a point of separation. They jokingly referred to the land west of the road as “Coney Island” and the east side as “White City”. I said jokingly because Muskegon's White City and Coney Island were the furthest thing from resort areas or amusement parks that you could imagine.

In doing my research, I wasn't able to find when these "towns" actually started or ended. I did find out that there were, at times, over 100 of these shacks on the river flats (and not just on the old Booming Company lands). All of my information about White City and Coney Island came from articles out of the Muskegon Chronicle. I didn't find anything in any of the Muskegon History books about these towns. It's as if they wanted to pretend these shanty towns never existed (apparently, they were not a good selling point for the city). None of the articles I found were very flattering about the shacks or the people who lived in them. What I'm going to do is give you a small look into some of the lives of the residents of White City and Coney Island. I'm sure many decent people ended up in these shanty towns for one reason or another. I imagine there were good stories to be told but I didn't find any of them in the Chronicle. It seems, just like today, bad news sells more papers than good news.

Some of the shacks were used as homes not just for individuals but families also. Early on, most were 1 or 2 rooms...not bedrooms...rooms, or maybe "areas" would be a better way to describe them. Many were built flat on the ground, with no running water, dirt or plank floors, and possibly a small window or two and no electricity. They had a wood-burning stove that was used for heat and cooking too. Some of these buildings were used as taverns and/or as rooming houses which were referred to as "clubs". The streets on which these shacks were located were not official streets listed with the city but simply two tracks. Many were covered with planks of wood, sawdust, or old logs to keep the travelers from getting stuck in the mud, especially after periods of rain or if the river rose over its banks. A 1913 article referred to these as huts of the flimsiest type, and that many of these people needed city aid just to get along.

Another problem in this area had to do with truancy. If you lived in the Coney Island side, you were within the City of Muskegon boundaries, and your children could go to the city schools which were only a few blocks away. If you lived on the White City side, that meant you were part of Muskegon Township and your children had to walk at least 3 miles to go to school, so, many parents didn't make their children go, which made truancy a big problem. At the time of this 1915 article, they were trying to make arrangements for the White City children to go to city schools, by way of the township paying a small tuition to the City of Muskegon.

Some men operated "clubs" which could include anything from liquor sales to prostitution to boarding houses. These places were more tolerated by law enforcement in the winter months because they gave many of the homeless men a place to stay during the cold weather.

In 1917, according to the Chronicle, "The tracks of a one-legged man using crutches, two chicken heads lying in front of the accused house, and two chickens broiling on the stove" was the evidence the Sheriff needed to charge Pete Christian, a squatter at White City, with chicken stealing. The crutch marks in the snow made it easy to track Pete and his two accomplices from Mrs. Hutton's home, where the chickens had been stolen, to Pete's house.

"Misery, Degradation and Cruelty Common in Coney Island District" was subtitled in an article written by Fred McCrea, to get people to donate to the programs at the Rescue Mission at Christmas time 1917. The reporter and a representative of the Rescue Mission visited a home in Coney Island where a woman and her husband lived with two small children, and another on the way. He referred to the house as a "tar paper shack" on the ground, approximately 10 feet

by 12 feet and about 7 feet high with only one smudgy-looking window in the back and a broken bed on the dirt floor. The husband was at work at the time of the visit. The woman and children were poorly dressed. She said she hadn't been able to do wash since the river froze over. One child was covered up on the bed and the other standing as close as he could to the stove to keep warm. She said they had some food for now and the only water to drink was from the river. The family came to Muskegon from Cleveland in the spring. After paying the cost of their transportation, they had \$65 in cash. They stayed with her husband's brother and were welcome until the brother had gotten all their money and then kicked them out. The brother had one of these shacks on the river flats which he sold to them for \$75. They are not only making payments on the shack but also paying an extra \$5 a month for rent until the place is paid in full. They had been living in the shack since summer. The husband makes \$18 a week which he says all goes to pay their expenses, rent, and payments. Arrangements were made to take the woman and her children to the Rescue Mission to get some clean, warmer clothing. The article said the Mission representative would be talking to the husband to see why he allowed his family to "live like dogs". The reporter said the whole river flat was lined with these shacks and people in need. Some of these people are living there to try to escape the high rents of the city and to try to get a little ahead. Whether or not this story touched the hearts (and pocketbooks) of the city residents is unknown.

There are other articles about people being stabbed or beaten up or found dead in Coney Island and White City. Mrs. Irvin Morton was shot 12 times in the space of a half-hour by her drunken husband who then shot and killed himself. He was 30 years old and had been drinking all week. Mrs. Morton had to crawl on her hands and knees for over a block, in the snow, to get to a neighbor for help. She, by the grace of God, lived.

During prohibition, the area was known for its moonshine. There were plenty of stills in the river flats and many had been raided by Federal Agents over the years. One man commented that when he came to Muskegon, the only thing that smelled stronger than the dump on the north side of the bridge, was the smell of the stills coming from Coney Island and White City on the south side of the bridge. Coney Island was *the* place to go for bootleg liquor. One woman was arrested for being drunk and fined \$25. "Judge, I only took one drink," said Maggie. "I feel that \$25 is altogether too much for one small drink. I protest!" "The court must take judicial notice that it was Coney Island liquor", said Judge Turner. He added, "Coney Island liquor has the reputation and standing in the court of being powerful. One drink, according to the best information, is sufficient." Maggie agreed that Coney Island liquor is all that has been said for it, and then some, but she still protested against the \$25 fine. She left the court searching for the money to pay the fine because she didn't want to spend 40 days in jail.

FOR SALE—REAL ESTATE  
FOR SALE OR TRADE—A 3-room  
shanty in White City; would take a  
horse or cow as part payment, and  
the rest by the month. Inquire James  
Slone, end of Ottawa.

If you happen to see a lean, hungry rat  
running around loose uptown, do not be-  
come alarmed. It is only one of those Con-  
ey Island rats that has been driven out  
temporarily by the high water. It ought to  
be easy to tell a homeless Coney Island ro-  
dent from one of those Western avenue  
opper rats.

The Chronicle reported that in 1919, and 1922, the river rose suddenly due to heavy rains or river dredging and flooded many of the river residents out of their homes. The river usually receded in a few days so these people had to find friends or relatives to live with until their homes dried out. Some decided to never return. (See the photo of flooded shacks).



In 1922, the Torrent Estate, through its administrator, the Grand Rapids Trust Company, started to evict these people from the land that was said to have been owned by Mr. Torrent. By 1927, oil had been discovered not far from the river flats and it was thought that the surrounding lands might also have value now. The Torrent estate was successful in getting signed lease agreements from most of the residents on the Coney Island side for a minimal fee of \$1 per year. The problem with a lease agreement is that once they signed it, they were giving up their “squatter’s rights” and admitting that the property legally belonged to the Torrent Estate, who would now have clear title to evict them if they chose to do so.

In 1931, the title to the land known as White City was still in question. Notice was served on many of the residents to move. They were asked to sign lease agreements and some did. Others are claiming “squatters rights”. The Chronicle stated, “under the law, a person who has been in adverse possession of property for 15 years is considered to have entered into title to the property”.

L. P. Haight, who claimed to be the owner of portions of the White City lands overlooking the river, had tried to close the road that led to the dozens of homes that nestle in the tall marsh grasses, (utilizing a large fence) to make them move. These roads had been in use since the lumbering days. Mr. Haight was hoping to find oil on some of his lands and use the revenue from the oil companies, to build a “history-themed” amusement park. One local attorney said that since the road was not a designated road on any map, but had served as an access road for decades, he doubted that anyone had the right to close the road. The fence was quickly torn down by unknown persons. Some of the residents said they had permission from the Torrent Estate to live on the land but Mr. Haight claimed to have purchased this land from the Torrent Estate some years earlier.

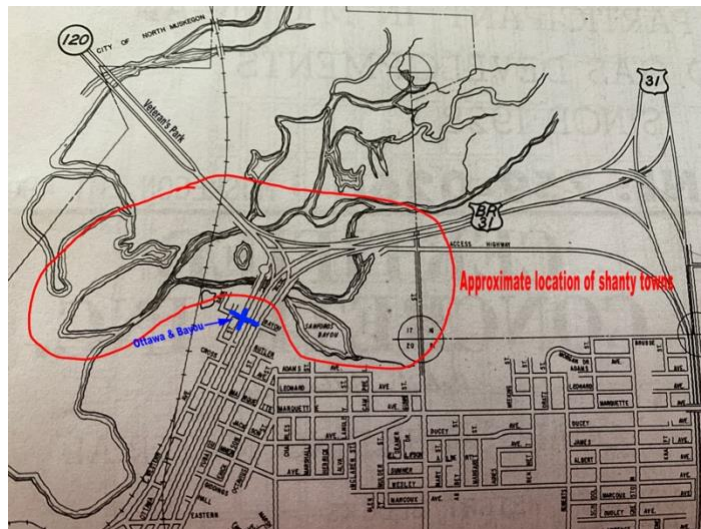
The leader of the group of hold-outs from White City was a colorful character named Mrs. Hattie M. Adkins. (Mrs. Adkins can be seen in the attached 1931 photo, smoking a corncob pipe, with her home in the background.) She said she had lived there about ten years after purchasing her home from Henry Gravengood for \$125. She said she had since made additions to the property in the amount of \$250 and had no intentions of being forced off her land. She did have several letters from officials on the State and National level with regards to her residency but none of them said anything definitively as to her legal right to live there. Her son, Frank Adkins, also owns one of the homes and expressed his willingness to lease or purchase

his property *if* someone could show him legal paperwork that stated who actually owns the land. One of the residents, Mrs. Victoria Heldrop, said she had a letter from the Torrent Estate giving her permission to live there as long as she wanted. Another resident, Mrs. Anna Penney, had one of the nicer homes in question. She and her husband, Martin, built a two-story home with a garage and some outbuildings. She had also cultivated several acres of land and was growing river crops on them. They moved there about 1913 and also claimed to have been given permission from John Torrent to live there.



Whether or not Mr. Haight took these people to court, or just gave up the fight (because he never found oil on his land) is a question I couldn't find the answer to. The people, named in this 1931 article, were not the only "squatters" at White City at that time but they were the ones I was able to track over the years. I found Hattie Adkins listed in the 1930 Federal Census at White City and in 1940 at Rural Rt 3 which was also listed, at times, as River Rd in various City Directories. On the 1874 map it is called the Booming Company River Rd. (Note: according to the Directories, this "River Rd" was from Ottawa St going east and west, one north of Bayou St. This was not the River Rd in North Muskegon.) Hattie was still living in her shack in 1949. She died in 1951. I found the same Census and Directory listings for Frank Adkins and Mrs. Heldrop, as I did for Hattie. Mr. & Mrs. Penney were listed in the 1930 Census at the River Flats and in 1940 at Rural Rt 3 along with the others. Anna (now a widow) was the only one of that group that I found listed on the 1949 Plat map (which would have been drawn up in 1948, the year Anna died). The 1955 City Directory list 5 houses with the address of 381 River Rd (the common mailing address for the residences of the White City section of River Rd). Those living there were: Mrs. Nellie Conklin (daughter of Hattie Atkins, who died in 1978), Claude Westcomb (who moves to Pine St in 1956), Frank Adkins (son of Hattie Adkins who died in 1957), and Mrs. Katherine "Kitty" Mason (also a daughter of Hattie Mason who died in 1978). By 1964, River Rd in Muskegon is no longer listed.

Notice the name, Claude Westcomb, above? Claude is the grandfather of our Society's President, Dawn Westcomb Kelley. He lived at White City from 1946 to 1955. Dawn gave me the inspiration for this story by telling me about visiting her grandfather, who lived in a shack, at White City. Before talking to Dawn, I never knew Muskegon had shantytowns, or that they were called White City and Coney Island...did you?



(Sources: Genealogybank.com, Hackley Library Local History & Genealogy Dept., Lakeshore Museum Center, Ancestry.com, Portraits & Biographical Record of Muskegon & Ottawa Co. (Biographical Publishing Co), Encyclopedia Britannica).