

CASS & BERRIEN COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

## JOHN N. HAWKS (Jr.)

John N. Hawks (1849-1925) was a pioneer and resident of Newberg Township, Cass County, Michigan. He was part of the early timber industry that logged Newberg, Penn, Porter, Marcellus, Mason, and Volinia Townships for the hardwoods that New York's furniture manufacturers were so eager to obtain. He was raised in New York, Niles, Berrien County, Michigan, and Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. Marrying into the the Bedford family of Silver Creek Township, his descendents still exist in the Cass and Berrien County, Michigan. John used the newly built railroad going through the villages of Wakelee, Penn and Marcellus to ship lumber to Detroit, where it was placed on barges bound for New York over Lake Erie. Associated with Streater's Mill and Wakelee during their early years, he saw the area briefly flourish and then decline when the forests were gone. His life was filled with bold undertakings, adventure, challenge, and a scandal so great it resulted in him leaving the state.

Of English descent, John was born on May 12, 1849 in Springfield, Otsego County, New York to, parents, John Weston Hawks and Lucy Ann Sponberg. He is recorded on the 1850 Federal Census living in said vicinity with his parents, brother (4 year old) George W., and relative/helper Daniel D. Clark. The family resided next door to his uncle, Foster Topliff Hawks, and wife, Ann Lovejoy. John's father owned a tinsman business, was a lumber broker, and a company representative for a Michigan hardwood logging concern. The family traveled biannually to Michigan, staying months at a time, due to the nature of his father's occupation, until he was a teenager, when they returned to Michigan permanently.

On the 1860 U.S. Federal Census, John was identified as eleven years old. He was educated, throughout his young years in the local Otsego County schools, then at age 16 was sent to two years of college, as was the tradition in those times. He was, also, apprenticed to his father, as was the custom. Learning both the tin business and the dealings of the timber industry, he was immersed in both enterprises, "learning from the ground up."

Because he had an aptitude for math and geometry, John was employed by his father in areas where he had to adapt easily to changing environments while using those skills. Acting as an assistant, and "jack of all trades," he was kept busy in New York as a "comptroller," examining and verifying accounts. He served as a tin shop book-keeper, inventory accountant and purchasing agent. When traveling with his father to Michigan, he learned to "figure linear feet of lumber in his head, and estimate the value of cut and uncut timber on site." He was taught the skills of a surveyor, and the use of geometry "to quickly figure out where a 60 tall tree would fall."

John's father insisted that he act as a lumberjack, manage a logging camp," and develop a "tough facade for dealing with rugged employees, who could be challenging to authority unless respect was established immediately." His father felt the timber business required mental and physical stamina, so young John was pushed to the limits of his endurance. By the time the family sold the New York tin business, and his apprenticeship was complete, John was ready to assume a full time career in Michigan's lumber industry.

In circa 1867, the Hawks family returned to Cass and Berrien County, Michigan to set up full time residency, rather than continue their bi-annual sojourns. Young John and his brother, George W. were well versed in the logging industry. They were installed as managers in the Niles logging company in which their father held part ownership and an executive position. Working for their patriarch, in the ever active Hawks-Lambert Lumber Company held certain advantages and disadvantages. This business was going through a series of changes, with certain partners selling out. Reorganizations and a redefinition of the divisions of labor, left the Hawks handling local hardwood logging concerns. When the company was split up, its name was changed several time. Various factions of the company left the local area, and made their way up state to northern white pine virgin forests, never to return to Cass County. Travel was always part of this industry, and it was a long and tedious affair by our standards.

John's father reorganized his share of the lucrative business, purchased a series of expansive woodlot rights, created two separate logging organizations, and divided the timberland rights into equal halves. The west division was turned over to eldest son, George W. to operate. The western part of Cass County and its adjoining areas had been logged more than the eastern townships, but was reaching out to more distant areas. The east division was given to second son, John N. to run. The eastern part of Cass County County, and parts of St. Joseph County (bordering it) held more forests in a smaller region. Despite local competition, New York furniture manufacturer's demand for Michigan's lumber was still so high that a series of small companies in the area joined the ranks, competing with the Hawks, providing timber to wholesalers, and local residents.

Patriarch John Weston Hawks kept his eldest son, George W., head-quartered in Silver Creek Township, and sent second son, John N. to Newberg Township to set up a timber operation there, where timber right contracts demanded immediate action. If big projects surfaced, the two separate entities were supposed to come together to complete the job. With their father assuming his lumber broker/company representative responsibilities, and purchasing tree stands, his two sons were expected to produce the timber and manage the lumber camps. The family would come together on extended weekends in Silver Creek Township, with son John N. doing most of the traveling back and forth between Wakelee, Newberg Township, and Silver Creek Township, which took many hours by horse back, and even longer by horse and wagon. The train was often a better travel alternative. The telegraph, mails, and message couriers were the only means of communication across the county in the era.

Unlike the farming mentality of Cass and Berrien County, which was "land ownership based," the local logging industry, in this era, was (and still is) "woodlot rights ownership" based, even though they, on occasion, actually bought land and then sold it once it was logged. In the timber industry, wealth was measured by the number of "timber stands and forests you owned," not land acreage (which required paying taxes and thus reduced profits). The greatest advantage was to hold contracts that gave you ownership of the trees (woodlot rights) on a farmer's land. It took several decades for a woodlot to regrow trees and renew itself, after it is logged, and in the timber industry, in order to flourish, one had to harvest the trees and then move on to the next forests. Therefore, owning large tracks of local land was not part of the timber man's mind set. As a result, old plat maps mostly identify farmers who actually owned the land, and not the lumber company timber-right owners who were, also, so very much a part of Southwestern Michigan's early landscape, and just as successful in their own right.

John N. Hawks, and his brother George W., were both described as tall, muscular from their work in the woodlands, broad of shoulder, intelligent, well-educated, and exceptionally physically

strong. They were raised to have a "commanding presence," and take control of any situations, as it was the only way to survive as leaders in the lumber camps. John Weston Hawks could not allow his sons to lose respect in those camps, so John N. and George W. were trained to be tough and assertive.

The logging camp lumberjacks were mostly young males, always willing to challenge authority, and cause problems. If your lumberjacks did not respect you as a competent and strong leader, they would "posture," rebel, or at least disrupt your finely tuned camps. The original environments were primitive (before consequences for disruptive behavior was written into contracts) and the working men lived up to that definition. Sometimes the only way to gain mastery of them was masculine prowess, and a fist fight. If you won, you had their respect and they followed your orders, if you lost you had more problems.

At the same time, Southwestern Michigan logging industry owners and leaders existed within the realm of the "civilized society," the local elite, with other business leaders, and their social equals of the farming community. In that realm John N. Hawks flourished. He was, after all, well educated, raised in New York's "furniture society" as an "heir apparent," well-read, charismatic and a charming fellow who put people at ease. Due to his mother's efforts, his manners, chivalry, and etiquette were impeccable.

To his mother's dismay, John N. was quite popular with the ladies. The family favored a more serious approach to life, but John's natural exuberance and joy of life kept him active in social affairs. The Victorian Era phrase describing this approach to life, was that "he enjoyed wine, women and song." As a member of the second and third generation pioneer youth culture of the time, his life, and those of his peers, were much more comfortable than the original family founders who struggled to survive and flourish in Michigan.

The Hawks were close friends with the respected George Bedford family of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. George Bedford had 6 daughters, and 2 sons. The children of both families formed a social group with the few other young people of the community. Courting options were limited by the sparse population, and a shortage of young unwed females. When "love bloomed" between two Hawks sons and two Bedford daughters, both sets of parents were delighted. On March 3, 1869 George W. Hawks (brother of our subject) married Martha Bedford. Five months later, on October 5, 1869, John N. Hawks (age 21) married "Jennie" Jane Elizabeth Bedford. (age 18) in Niles, Michigan. (That same "two brothers wed two sisters phenomena," also, occurred when two Conklin brothers married two of George Bedford's other daughters).

John N. Hawks and new wife Jane Bedford settled in a home on the banks of Streater's Mill Pond, Section 3, Newberg Township, Cass County, Michigan, just east of the Village of Waklee.

Newberg Township is in the northwestern area of Cass County, Michigan, and was officially created in 1838, when it was "carved out of Penn Township." John Bair was the first settler, buying land in Section 32 in October of 1832, where only Indians and trappers lived at the time. James Aldrich was the first township supervisor in 1838. The area had a number of deep marshes, some prairie land, heavy hardwood timber stands, and extremely dense forests. Newberg was named after Newberg, Ohio, by Surveyor John C. Saxton, because he had fond memories of the Ohio namesake.

The busy little town of Wakelee flourished when when the loggers were present, and the town grew. Associated business brought more revenue into the area. Wood shingles, structural

lumber, latticework and laths for siding were made. The freight trains stopped there regularly to load logs to deliver to Detroit and Chicago.

Streater Mill Pond, east of Wakelee in Newberg Township was dammed to raise the water level, and "create an elevation difference, "so a water wheel could be used to power equipment. Steam power was, also, employed. The wood had to be kept wet to cool the saw blades and reduce saw dust. John N. Hawks supplied much of the timber, from his Hawks-Lambert lumber camps, which logged the east side of Cass County, west side of St. Joseph County, and southern Van Buren County, Michigan.

Conflict developed between the local farmers, and the Streater Mill Pond Saw Mill, forcing John N. to side with the mill owners. Water levels, and the water's surface, had been increasing each time the dam was raised. Farmers complained that the saw mill, water dam, and loggers were causing "low lying fields to flood." The farmers complained that the mill pond had been over expanded. That fact was, indeed, proven true when fishermen could row their fishing boats between the trees, whose lower trunks were submerged.

One night John N. was roused from his bed, hearing a dynamite explosion near the mill pond. Several farmers had dynamited the dam, and dug a ditch to drain the water, dynamiting the last blockage. A bitter dispute arose between the two opposing forces, and the mill ended up paying the farmers to allow the replacement of the dam and water level. This resulted in the mill charging higher prices. The loggers were not happy about this turn of events.

After John N. and other loggers exhausted the forests in that region, "Wakelee went into decline." Between the unfriendly farmers who disliked the dam, and nature's unrelenting vegetation, the forests reclaimed the water and land. Today Streater Mill Pond is at its natural level, lilly pads crowd the shallows, weeds choke the shoreline, and what was once a thriving enterprise is gone.

In 1870, John N. Hawks and new bride Jane Bedford had a honeymoon of sorts. There presence on the little sojourn to Florence, Lauderdale, Alabama was caught by 1870 U.S. Federal Census takers before they headed deep into the timberland. John N.'s father, John Weston Hawks had brokered a deal with an Alabama land hardwood timber owner, and the family relocated for the spring, summer and fall to Alabama.

The Hawks-Lambert Company had contracts with eastern buyers who wanted wood for the furniture industry in New York. An Alabama logging camp had to be set up. Personnel were sent ahead to prepare temporary comfortable log cabin shelters for everyone. With the Hawks men managing the operation, and most of their employees on site, they spent the summer and fall months harvesting Oak and Hickory hardwoods. The ladies' enjoyed their leisure time reading, swimming, and with "needle-work." Each couple had their own cabin, upon occasion took long late afternoon walks in the woods, and relished the summer sun. When the logs were harvested and quotas were met, the family returned home to Cass County, well compensated.

The marriage of John N. Hawks and Jane Bedford(1851-10/23/1881) produced two children: Guy Wesley Hawks (12/13/1873-1/24/1949) who wed Bertha Elma Pope, and Earl Bedford Hawks (4/26/1875-7/20/1942) who married Bertha Delle, and then Mabel Flewelling. The young couple and their children lived contented lives for about eight years. Guy and Earl were known as the "double cousins" of the Bedford/Hawks family, because they were related to other children of the family through both of their parents (because two Hawks brothers wed to Bedford sisters).

John N.'s and Jane's marriage ended in divorce. Records show that, John lived with second wife Lydia Conklin in Elkhart and Goshen, Indiana. When problems arose, a second divorce followed. Based on family stories, a scandal developed, and John N. Hawks left the area for Austin, Travis County, Texas, where his mother's Sponberg family was located.

In Texas, John N. met and married Nora Bell Reynolds. Their son, James Walter Hawks (12/11/1885-8/29/1935) is listed as married and divorced from Agnes Hawks (no maiden name available). His occupation was that of a cook. He was buried in Allen, Texas on 9/1/1935. His father John N. Hawks died in 1925 in Austin, Texas. He is buried with his wife and youngest son, James in Austin, Texas.

In conclusion, John N. Hawks was raised in Otsego County, New York, Silver Creek Township and Niles, Michigan. He made his home in the Wakelee, Newberg Township, on the banks of Streater's Mill Pond. John was well educated, a logging company manager, and extremely gifted mathematically. As part of Southwest Michigan's early logging industry he shared in the trials and tribulations that befell that era. He was an extremely charismatic person, and highly sociable. He had three sons, two daughters, and left many descendents; a number of whom are still living in Cass and Berrien County, Michigan today. He was part of Newberg and Silver Creek Township's heritage, and has earned his place in local Southwest Michigan history.

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## RESEARCH

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- John N. Hawks records & photo history
- Barbara Hawks Family Stories
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