



William B. Mershon Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Conservation, preservation, and restoration of Michigan's cold-water resources

The Story of William B. Mershon

William B. Mershon was the last of the real Saginaw timber titans when he died in 1943 at the age of 87 after an eventful and productive life.

A sportsman who ranged the country on his frequent hunting and fishing expeditions, he had his own private railroad coach which became headquarters for him and his companions.

He was one of Michigan's early conservationists, having watched first-hand the indiscriminate plunder of Michigan's wild-life and, in his earlier years, having participated in some of it himself. But he realized before most of his contemporaries the need for conservation.

He wrote two books. One was on the history of the passenger pigeon in Michigan, considered a conservation textbook of its kind. The other, widely read by outdoorsmen, was titled "Recollections of My 50 Years of Hunting and Fishing."

He took an active part in Saginaw civic affairs. He served two years as an alderman and was mayor of the consolidated Saginaws in 1894-95. He was a member of the city parks and cemeteries commission five years and also of the citizen's water committee, one of the groups which fought for pure water in Saginaw. He also served on the state forestry commission and the state tax commission.

He was one of the founders of the Saginaw Welfare League, forerunner of the Community Chest and for many years was an honorary director.

He was a founder of the Saginaw Country Club, the former Saginaw Canoe Club and the Saginaw Club.

Although he favored no particular organization, he gave liberally to charity.

One of the favorite projects of his later years was the impressive Lumbermen's Memorial which graces a high bank on a bend in the Au Sable River in the Tawas area. The idea was his. He spent many hours in handling the details and accomplishing his plan for a monument typical of the lumbering industry in Michigan.

Scion of one of early Saginaw's most prominent and influential families, Mershon was born in 1856, eldest son of Augustus Hull Mershon. His grandfather, E. J. Mershon, came to Saginaw from Rochester, N.Y. In company with Jesse Hoyt, E. J. Mershon built the first planing mill in the Saginaw Valley. It was in East Saginaw on what now is S. Franklin Street.

William B. Mershon graduated from Saginaw High School, then went into the family lumber business at 17. After the business was transferred to the west side of the Saginaw River, near Carrollton, young Mershon added a salt block to the mill, which became the nation's largest manufacturer of knock-down wooden boxes.

In 1900, when the lumber industry was gasping its last in the Saginaw region, he became interested in lumbering elsewhere. He operated in timber in the Upper Peninsula, Arizona and Idaho.

While in business in Arizona, he became associated with the copper mining industry and became a director of Calumet & Arizona Copper Co., which later merged with Phelps Dodge Corp. For years he was a director of the profitable Phelps Dodge concern.

For more than half a century, Mershon's stately mansion on the northwest corner of Houghton and Michigan was a Saginaw showplace typifying the grace and grandeur of its era. Mershon built it in 1889. The property took in eight square blocks. The home was razed several years ago to provide more parking for St. Luke's Hospital, which also occupies what used to be part of the Mershon grounds.

The three-story Mershon home had 15 rooms and five fire-places. It was built of the finest lumber and other materials available. Its beautiful oak, maple and cork pine came from Saginaw County woodlands. Mershon personally selected it.

The mansion had a commanding front staircase of red oak with ornately carved stair railings and newel posts. The spacious dining room was adorned with white oak walls and beams. Upstairs rooms featured the use of bird's eye maple or sycamore.

A main feature of the home was its refrigerator locker room. Originally this was built in the basement in a time when ice to preserve and keep foods cold was cut in the winter from the frozen Saginaw River. This room later was moved to quarters near the kitchen.

It had many large food locker compartments as well as a walk-in refrigerator. The food lockers teemed with table delicacies. They might include a side or two of beef and Mershon's copious trophies of field and stream—venison, pheasant, partridge, grouse, duck, geese or wild turkey and, among fish, salmon and trout especially.

Mershon considered himself something of an authority on the preparation of food and its cooking. He personally supervised the aging of his beef. He was said to be able to tell to a day how long a piece of beef was aged. He was pleased to serve his gourmet meals with bottles of wine wine from his cellar. He liked to entertain and invitations to his parties and dinners were coveted and sometimes boasted about.

During his earlier life he was a Saginaw social leader. He liked gracious living and fine foods but was known by his friends as a temperate man. For many years one of his great enjoyments was his annual birthday party, with its haunch of venison and delectable accompaniments in the presence of good friends.

He and his wife, the former Catherine Calista Johnson, had three sons.

It was for his wife that he built the picturesque home which was one of the most splendid on the bygone Saginaw scene.

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