



Historical White Lake

Citizens – I. W. Berd

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White Lake Area Historical Society

Mr. Isaac W. Berd was born at South Sulphur Springs, Va., Feb. 25, 1842, on the plantation of a family named Erskine. His ancestors had lived in Virginia for many generations. When he was an infant, his mother and part of her children were sold to a Louisiana planter named Paxton, so that out of 16 brothers and sisters — he knew only four. He was brought up at Shreveport, La., where Mr. Paxton died. He was such a little fellow that he attracted the attention of a daughter of Mr. Paxton, who gave him the name Isaac Wren Bird, because of his diminutive size. Unlike most southern slaves, he refused to take the name of his masters.

On the death of Mr. Paxton, he was sold to a man by the name of Christian, who, at the outbreak of the Civil War, became an officer in the White Star Invincibles, a regiment in the Confederate army and took Mr. Berd with him to the front. Mr. Christian soon died of the measles and at LaGrange, Tenn., he escaped and joined the northern forces. He came north with Assistant Adjutant General Emory B. Harlan to Tipton, Iowa, where he lived for three years.

Although born a slave, he had the soul of a free man and was determined to qualify himself to become an American citizen in every sense of the word. Realizing that citizenship and ignorance were incompatible, he determined to secure an education. However, his school days lasted for only three weeks, when he attended night school at Oberlin, Ohio. He was continually acquiring knowledge of the rudiments of education by keen observation and constant reading. Later, under the tutelage of his wife, he learned to write.

He eventually made his way to Grand Haven where he met his wife, the former Mrs. Anna Smith,

and where they married Jan. 28, 1870. She was a dressmaker and he worked in the Rice House, an old time Grand Haven hotel. They had a daughter, Eva Bell Frances, in October 1871.

Berd worked on boats on Lake Superior. He also sailed on Lake Michigan for several years on the Snook, R. C. Britton, M. B. Covell and A. D. Haywood, as steward and cook. In 1882, he moved to Montague — sailing between Montague and Chicago on lumber barges.

Finally, Mr. Berd, tired of the lakes, gave up sailing to start a bakery business in Montague in 1891. It was called the Home Bakery. He set up tables in the bakery and served hot tea and coffee with a nice lunch which could be had any time of day or evening. He also made candy, which he sold in the bakery and at area fairs.

In 1892, he went into the hotel business, the first being Berd's Hotel. It is believed to have been in a building on the corner of Water and Bridge streets — later the site of the White Lake Inn. He continued to operate his bakery there, as well as an ice cream parlor. He also catered at public and private gatherings.

Later, Berd was employed at the Franklin House hotel for three years.

Mr. Berd and his family leased the Sylvan Beach hotel from 1898 to 1907. While at the Sylvan Beach hotel, he was appointed postmaster of the summer office at Wabaningo.

As the Sylvan Beach hotel was only seasonal, they wintered in Muskegon, where he had a café for some time. Later they moved to the Bellevue hotel on Mona Lake, where he was for nearly five years before his death July 27, 1912. His wife and daughter continued to operate the hotel for a couple years. His wife, Annie, died Dec. 3, 1916 in Muskegon, as did his daughter, Eva, Jan. 8, 1917. They are all buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Muskegon.

