DeWitt

Captain David Scott with his wife Eunice, sons David and Charles, and a hired man arrived at the site of the present city of DeWitt on October 4, 1833. At first, they lived in an Obijwe elm bark long house until a 25 foot by 25 foot log house was built on the north side of the Looking Glass River. The next year David and Eunice's son, Sylvester, and his family arrived.

At that time most early settlers passed through Scott's Settlement as it was on the main trail crossing the county. It was renamed DeWitt for DeWitt Clinton, the New York governor who helped build the Erie Canal.

On the south side of the river was the community of New Albany. It was developed by Milo H. Turner. New Albany had a hotel and general store on the top of the hill. The hotel was built around 1839 and was a horse changing station for the stagecoach that ran between St. Johns and Lansing.



Old New Albany Hotel - Now a Residence

The first grist mill was built on the south side of the river at Prairie Creek in 1844. It operated until it was destroyed by fire in 1901.



Until 1857 DeWitt was the county seat for Clinton County. As the center of government, it was a busy place. The courthouse was on the northside of East Main Street. DeWitt also had a jail and sheriff's residence. Built in 1837, the cells were in the basement.

First Clinton County Jail on East Washington Street

Captain Scott, hoping to profit on travelers, built the Clinton House hotel in 1841 (now site of the new Reed's Insurance building). While much of the wood came from the local sawmill, some was brought in as far away as Flint. When it opened it was considered one of the finest hotels in central Michigan.



Once the county seat moved to St. Johns, DeWitt lost population and settled into being a small town with a few stores serving local residents.

After the Civil War many German families settled here to farm.



Interurban on Bridge over the Looking Glass River

In 1901 the Interurban arrived connecting St. Johns and Lansing. For the train to get over the Looking Glass River a grade and bridges had to be built. One bridge went over Dill Street and the other over the river. The Interurban stopped running in 1929 and the tracks and bridges were removed.

Here are two views of DeWitt in the early 1900's.



East Side of Bridge Street, 1909



North side of West Main Street early 1900's (The building on the left is now the Family Barbershop.)

With the arrival of the Interurban, the town began to grow. The first Ford dealership was started in 1914 in what is now the Family Tree restaurant. Later there was also a Chevrolet dealership. The first gas station was located on the southwest corner of Old-27 and Round Lake Road in 1923.



Griswald Ford

The DeWitt fire department was started in 1915 as a bucket brigade with firefighters providing their own buckets. The first fire truck was purchased in 1927.

On October 21, 1930, Dewitt was the scene of a destructive fire. Ralph Woodruff, a local banker, was returning from Lansing when he saw smoke coming from the Clinton House. Mr. Woodruff stopped at the burning site and rescued one man before ringing the fire alarm at the town hall. He then drove up and down the streets honking his horn to get help. The fire quickly spread to several neighboring buildings. Along with the Clinton House, several other downtown stores were destroyed.

An important early business was the Rosevale Packing Plant. It was started in 1916 when Arthur “Del” Rose began operating a small slaughter house. He soon took on a partner in Fred Vail and the business grew. By 1929 Rosevale had a packing plant just east of DeWitt and 17 retail stores. A fire destroyed the original building on April 30, 1931. With a loan from the Woodruff Bank the plant was rebuilt. The plant closed in the 1950’s.

The first Ox Roast was held in 1946 to help raise money to build the DeWitt Memorial Building. The building was used by many community groups including the library until 1998. The Memorial Association ran the Ox Roast through 2023 when they sold the Memorial Building.

For a few years DeWitt had a movie theater which opened in 1948. The building is now Relli’s Sports Bar.

Beginning in the 1960’s a series of subdivisions were created around DeWitt. The first in 1961 was Lake Geneva. The builders dug out a marsh and pumped in water from the river to make a lake. Millbrook Meadows, Country Meadows, Springbrook, and others soon followed.

The first school was the Goodrich started in 1836 on the north bank of the Looking Glass River near the intersection of Schavey and Howe Roads.

The DeWitt Village school started in 1840 in a small building near where the Fuerstenau Early Childhood Center is today. This building was soon replaced with a wood frame school and in the 1870's with a two-story brick building. Shortly after an addition was added in 1936 the older portion of the building was destroyed in a fire. That part was replaced, renamed Fuerstenau School for a former superintendent, and used until 2002.



DeWitt School early 1900's



Fuerstenau School

As the town grew, additional buildings were added. Scott Elementary, named for Captain David Scott, was the first in 1957. It was followed by a new high school building in 1966 (now the middle school). Herbison Woods was built in 1970 and Schavey Elementary in 1988. All have had additions. The latest building is the new high school which opened in 1999.

DeWitt's fire-breathing panther was designed and built in 1989 by Ray Unger who taught industrial arts at DeWitt.

DeWitt Forever, DeWitt's fight song, was composed by Loretta Sharp in the 1940. She was a teacher at the time.

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