This week's community profile: Little Rapids

Farm folks: Rodney Huth, left, and Denis Martin, right, check on recently born calves at the Huth farm. The 300-head dairy operation is the only farm in the community.

This place meant to survive

By Karil Van Boxel
Press-Gazette

LITTLE RAPIDS — Little Rapids survives and in many ways thrives.

Its people are a good example of its resilience.

Take Elizabeth Miller. She has lived in this community on Lost Dauphin Road, about 6 miles south of De Pere on the Fox River, for 80 years.

Press-Gazette photos by Joan Gutheridge

A widow for 17 years, she looks forward to her 88th birthday in November. She knits and crochets for the St. Vincent Hospital Auxiliary.

"Grandma," as she is known to longtime residents, freezes vegetables, bakes pies and makes jam — all this with her history of gall bladder and ulcer surgery and major dental work.

The community has had its share of upsets, too, but like Miller, it seems to forge ahead with a positive attitude.

Gone are the general store, the school, depot, and most important, the pulp mill.

Miller's late husband, James, worked his way up from sweeper to superintendent of the mill. Built in about 1915, the plant was owned by Procter & Gamble Paper Products Co. when it closed about 27 years ago.

The operation used water power from a government-built dam. A dynamo supplied electricity for the plant and workers' homes.

Among them was a hotel operated by Miller's parents, where some employees boarded. Miller recalled one resident saying it cost $1 a day for room and board and "we eat that for breakfast." The hotel now is an apartment house.

"We made our own bread, doughnuts and everything," she said.

Miller's son-in-law, Bill Watruba, a mill worker, was the first fire chief when the fire truck was stationed there. "That's because there was always someone working to take the call and press the siren button (to call volunteers)," Miller's daughter, Jean Watruba said.

Jean Watruba, 65, 3171 Wisconsin St., often baby-sits for her grandchildren. Like her mother, she crochets.

"I'll bet I made 50 orange stocking caps for hunters one year," she said. She also plays bingo when she can.

She was a student at Little Rapids School for eight years — the same school her mother attended when one teacher had 51 students in first through eighth grade and Protestant services were held there on Sunday afternoons.

Neighbor Randy Mann, 30, 1966 River St., moved to De Pere when he was 20 but returned to Little Rapids when his parents became ill. He and wife, Louise, 27, recently bought the house next door.

With four children from Louise's previous marriage, the Manns' yard resembles a playground.

"You can leave the dogs run and the kids play outside," said Mann, who works in De Pere. "It's quiet out here. You can sit out here at night and hear the crickets."

Most of Mann's Little League buddies have moved from the community. The Manns' old house was a cheese factory, church and boarding house.

The community has one farm, a 300-head dairy operation at 3094 Lost Dauphin Road owned by Lloyd Huth and son Rodney. Started by Lloyd's father, Charles, in 1950, it employs two farmhands and grows corn and alfalfa.

"We were the only ones (farm) ever here," said Rodney as he worked on a conveyor in the barn. "Farming is all what you make of it. There are good and bad days."

Wayne Clark's grandfather was a lockmaster at the Little Kaukauna lock here. He raised nine kids in the house by the dam. Clark, 53, 2050 Little Rapids Road, said his father, Gilbert, also tended the lock.

Mary Koerner, 68, 1973 River Drive, has called Little Rapids home for 45 years. She cooks at the St. Norbert friary kitchen in De Pere four days a week, but was an active 4-H leader when her children were young.

"I like to be where I can stretch out," said Koerner, a widow. "Our neighbors were all friends, but they're gone now."

■ **Next week:** Suring in Oconto County

The Little Rapids file

- **Population:** 105
- **It's still little:** The community originally was called Little Kaukauna, the name the lock there still uses. The community became Little Rapids after the dam was built.
- **River ride:** Years ago, tugs towed barges hauling about 400 tons of coal from Green Bay through the Little Kaukauna lock to Kaukauna and Appleton. A new lock was built in about 1937 and a new dam in 1938.

Dog days: Louise Mann takes time out to play with her dogs, Sassy and Blacky, in Little Rapids.

Grandma's helper: Jean Watruba crochets while baby-sitting for her grandson, Dylan, 11 months.