

## A 21st Century Historical Society Acquires A 19th Century Sawmill

The Sawyer-Goodman Company sawmill cut its last log on July 31, 1931, ending one phase of Marinette's history. [1] Since then, woodlands and forests have partly reclaimed what were once abandoned, tax-delinquent, cut-over county lands. What has not returned are whining saw-blades, driven by a wheezing steam engine cutting logs from the nearby forest. To paraphrase the 15th century French poet, Francois Villon, "If the forests return, can a sawmill be far behind?"

One day in early fall, 2000, Marinette resident and steam engine buff, Gary Kmiecik, while searching on the internet, learned that sawmill machinery and a steam engine were available for sale. Kmiecik told Marinette Mayor Douglas Oltzinger of his discovery, who in turn passed the information on to society president, Frank Lauerman. Lauerman decided to inquire further about the steam engine and sawmill. A four member party drove over to Lincoln County to look at the mill. The group included, David Lane, at that time, society vice president, Kmiecik, who was knowledgeable about steam engines, Robert Wiedemeier, who owns sawmill in Porterfield, and John Bartkowski. The four men recommended to the board that the society buy the sawmill machinery and steam engine. At a subsequent meeting the society board voted to buy the equipment. The sawmill and its



Brian and Ron Polak next to line shaft, in front of crane.

machinery had belonged to the Polak Brothers Hardwood Lumber Company, in rural Lincoln County. The family had been in the lumber business for four generations.

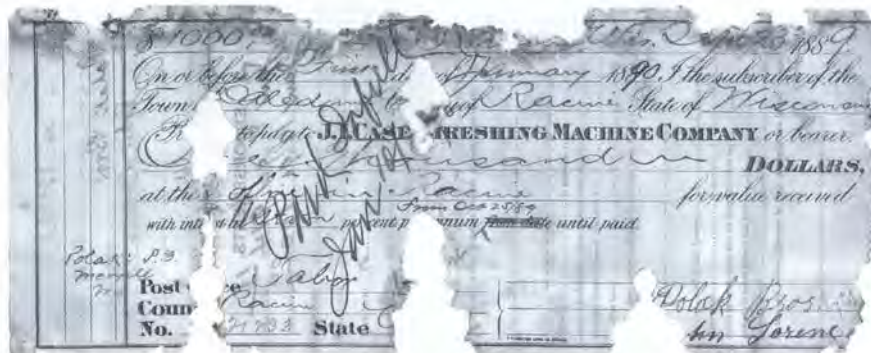
After an initial survey and inventory of the sawmill equipment was made in April 2003, a number of trips were made to bring the sawmill machinery to Marinette-Menominee. Trips were made: on August 2, 2003, September 13, 2003, September 27, 2003 and on November 1, 2003 to move the equipment the 100 miles. Gary Kmiecik arranged for moving the steam engine to Marinette. Dedicated and hard working volunteers, with the help of a crane brought down from Tomahawk and the Wiedemeier truck finished moving the heavy 19th century sawmill machinery to Marinette in early November.

The machinery's move to Marinette was difficult enough. The sawmill equipment's first move was even more difficult. The sawmill machinery, built by the J.I. Case Threshing Machine Company in Racine, Wisconsin, was moved to the

Polak mill during January, 1890. [2] After what had been soft muddy ground was frozen hard, the machinery was shipped north from Racine to Merrill by railroad. The machinery was then unloaded and pulled by horses across the frozen roads to the Polak mill [around 14 miles from Merrill.] [3]. Although it still runs, the steam engine was replaced by a stationary diesel engine to power the saws during the 1950s. The sawmill continued to operate until 1975.

The first small steps have been taken to move 19th century sawmill machinery back to the historic lumbering towns of Marinette-Menominee. At present, much of the equipment is being stored at a Wisconsin Public Service warehouse. Raising the funds needed to provide a permanent site for the sawmill machinery, where it can be displayed as both a community attraction and a monument to the twin cities' origins, is a large second step which will take time and perseverance. For the moment, an industrial dinosaur, one

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What appears to be a cashiers check found by Gary Kmiecik in the sawmill building.

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of the very few 19th century steam powered sawmills left in the world, has been preserved from extinction.

[Footnotes]

The first Marinette sawmills, driven by steam engines, were both built in 1858. The Menominee River Lumber Company mill was in Menekaunce near Odgen St. and the Nelson Ludington Company mill was near the present site of the Nestegg Marina. A road, (now Main St.) linking the two mills and their settlements, was constructed the following year by the Corry brothers. Up to that time, according to one of the community's first historians, Dr. John Sherman, there were few wheeled vehicles in the settlement. Even coffins were hand carried to the community's cemetery, (the site of the present Middle School). The settlement's lifeline was water; logs came down on the river and went out on the bay as lumber. The wheel and the steam engine arrived in Marinette at about the same time - a few years before the Civil War.

The J. I. Case Company of Racine was best known as a manufacturer of agricultural implements, although during World War I, the firm manufactured heavy artillery for the U.S. Army, known as "Hun Threshers." (3)

In our world of cement sidewalks and asphalt streets, it is practically impossible to imagine a world of muddy city streets and soft largely impassable country roads during part of the year. In 19th century Marinette, women, in long full skirts which reached to the ground, tried to avoid the mud and water by walking on narrow plank wooden sidewalks. After 1890, they sometimes had the misfortune of meeting bicyclists on the same narrow wooden planks who were also trying to avoid the soft muddy ground. In the autumn of 1889, workmen began placing six-inch cedar blocks on both Hall Avenue and Main Streets in downtown Marinette, giving the recently incorporated city a few blocks of hard surface streets. Up to that time, the only hard surface road was the Dunlap Square Bridge. In



*Some movers: Steven Bradford, Robert Wiedemeier & Gary Kmiecik.*

fact, the wooden bridge had to be largely rebuilt in 1873, only a few years after the first Menominee River bridge was built, because young men illegally raced their horses across the hard surface wooden bridge at night weakening the structure.

*Carl Krog*