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On the morning of Thursday, January 14, 1926 fire broke out in the company's sanding machine and spread spontaneously through the blowers to different parts of the room.

In the few hours that followed, Onaway's main means of livelihood went up in smoke and although the city still exists, it has never reached the proportion it was on that historical day.

With the presence of the American Wood Rim Co. and its sister company, the Lobdell Emery Manufacturing Co., Onaway experienced tremendous growth in its early year. The big industry, along with the profitable timber business made Onaway the biggest little town in northern Michigan.

According to one report, Onaway had two newspapers, three lawyers, four doctors, three large hotels, 17 saloons, nine churches, two bakeries, a fairgrounds, racetrack and an opera house in the pre-fire days.

The figure varies, but Onaway's population was approximately 4,000 and the two huge industries employed anywhere from 1200 to 1500 persons.

The Lobdell Emery Manufacturing co. was involved in lumbering, sawmill operations and the making of such products as dowels, broom handles, and coat hanger stock.

The American Wood Rim Co., was the world's largest and finest producer of automobile steering wheels and bicycle rims. For a number of years the company made all the steering wheels with either malleable iron or aluminum spiders. The aluminum spiders were all molded and finished in the plant while the malleable iron castings were purchased from outside sources.

During its last few years in Onaway, the American Wood Rim Co. introduced the all-wood steering wheel with only the hub made of steel. Some of the automobile rims were made of maple or beech, but the better ones were of black walnut with a black walnut or mahogany finish. The bicycle rims were made of hard rock maple or beech. All the wood used in manufacturing the wheels and rims was from the surrounding forests owned by Lobdell-Emery.

There was a great interest in the automobile steering wheel business while it was in Onaway. Robert Shaw, in charge of the company's sales office at the time of the fire, estimated that more than 100 companies were making cars and trucks during that period. "The automobile was one of the chief subjects of conversation among all people." Shaw recalled. "The virtues of different cars and new improvements being made were prime subjects of discussion and often arguments."

According to Shaw, the American wood Rim Co. sold steering wheels for the Elmore, the Cartercar, the Scripps-Booth, and the Oakland. They also sold their products to Durant Motors who manufactured the Durant, the Flint, the Star, the Sheridan, the Locomobile, as well as the Sampson tractor.

It was William Durant who followed his dream and founded General Motors. Another automobile company to install Onaway steering wheels was Oldsmobile, the first mass producer of cars in the United States which soon became America's largest producer. Although it's impossible to list all of its customers, the American Wood Rim co., which specialized in making wheels for medium and higher priced vehicles, supplied practically all the wheels for trucks and some tractors. During World War I the company supplied the great four-wheel drive trucks. With this in mind, Marshall Whitshire coined the phrase, "Onaway Steers the World" and received \$5 from the Chamber of Commerce for his suggestion. By today's standards that does not seem like much money, but in those days it represented several work days for the common laborer. Fred Warner, who was working at the time of the fire, says the top wage for the common laborer at the time was \$.40 an hour. "But a dollar in those days was all yours," he adds. Employees of the company worked 10 hours a day, six days a week.

Gladys Warner, Fred's wife, made \$.17 an hour working in the Lobdell store in 1926. The Warners, like hundreds of others, followed Lobdell-Emery to Alma where the company relocated in the former Republic Trucking company buildings.

FOUR PERISH IN FIRE

Fire broke out at 8:30 in the morning when a spark was apparently drawn from a shaft into the blowers of a sanding machine. Several pipes led from the machine which spread the fire to different parts of the room.

The city fire department and company employees battled the blaze but strong southerly winds of blizzard velocity spread the fire through the north wood working sections of the plant.

Production units of the American Wood Rim Co. and the Lobdell-Emery Co. were destroyed but the sawmill, foundry, nickel plating department, and lumber yards were not gutted as they were heavily guarded by firefighters.

A call went out to the Cheboygan Fire Department for additional hose but it arrived too late. The reserve water reservoirs were exhausted and necessitated the shutting off of the city water for four hours while the pumps replenished the supply. Four men lost their lives in the fire. The loss of Fred VanPfoff, Lorenzo D. Smith, John Tate, and Eugene Precour cast a shadow on the whole community. Stephen Hell was believed to have perished but was found later in his boarding place. Mrs. Gordon (Ruth) Stiles was Lorenzo Smith's youngest daughter, Smith 52 at the time of his death had eight children, most of them grown up and married. He worked alone as a saw filer in a small room. It was believed he was trapped in the room because of his distance from other workers.

John Tate was also the father of eight. He was 42 years old with his youngest being a three year old daughter. Tate, whose wife Mary worked for the company as a sander, was a gluer and worked the presses. He made good wages for his piece work- about \$5 or \$6 a day. The family received \$14 a week in compensation for a short period of time following the tragedy. "It ain't like today where they run to welfare." Says John Tate, Jr., who was 13 at the time of his father's death. The Tates moved to Alma with the company where Mary continued working until the depression hit. Then they returned to Onaway.

Eugene Precour died while trying to save the rest of the men. The 47 year old father of four worked in the sawmill. His eldest daughter was Mrs. Joe Schell who was 15 at the time of her father's death. Within days, thousands of persons picked up their personal belongings and set out in search of new employment. The company announced that they would not rebuild in Onaway because it would take too much time and instead relocated in the vacant buildings in Alma. Everyone who worked in the Onaway plant was offered a job if he or she followed the company in its move.

Two weeks after the blaze. Hal Whiteley summed up the tragedy in the January 28, 1926 issue of the Advance. The reduction in the number of homes and number of men employed here are consequent loss in volume of business, means of a certainly losses to the individual retail merchants and to the public services such as the Bank, Power Company, newspaper, ect., adjustment of all lines to meet the new conditions and problems." Whiteley, on an optimistic note, said that the city would certainly recover its losses but it would take hard work and togetherness to repair the damage. He pointed out that Onaway still had a plant, growing tourist trade, and above all, agriculture and stock raising.

"Old Dame Rumor" was meanwhile trying to picture a sad state of affairs in the school district. The school board in response to the rumors, reported that there was no need for alarm, that everyone would remain on the payroll until the end of the current session. The board reported that the district owed only \$9,000 from bonded indebtedness on the buildings. The school board also said that the situation would be re-evaluated in July 1926, because there was sure to be a decrease in overall enrollment for the following year.

Many Onaway merchants were left holding the bag following the fire and exodus from the city. Hal Whiteley, in his "Round and About" column of September 11, 1925, recalled the aftermath of the fire. "with that loss went individual losses of considerable magnitude. The payroll stopped. Men lost jobs, jobs that seemed so secure and offered in many cases improvements and better standards of living. Merchants stood to lose many of the accounts they were carrying on their books, not that anyone was dishonest, but that with no job, and no payroll, such accounts can seldom be paid when so few save for a rainy day. Along with other values went land values, home and business values." Whiteley, who owned the Outlook in much the same manner it is today, incorporated the Onaway area news with the Advance several years following the fire because the city could not support a newspaper. As short time later the whole adventure went down the drain..a \$10,000 investment.

The Onaway State Bank closed its doors in 1933 which could indirectly be tied to the disaster. The City Fathers found themselves in debt when the valuation of \$1,500,000 dropped to \$200,000. And, during the depression which followed, Onaway and its empty houses was the natural target of squatters.

The steering wheel company merged and took the name of Lobdell-Emery Manufacturing co. Forest Inks, retired vice president of the company, after 46 years, can still recall working for and with many Onaway persons in Alma. Inks, who went to work for Lobdell-Emery in April of 1926 for \$.30 an hour, said the company stopped manufacturing steering wheels sometime between 1935 and 1940. Bicycle rims ere still made as was nursery furniture, aluminum cooking dishes and other odds and ends.

Today Lobdell-Emery is largest employer in Alma with a work force of 600 to 700 persons. Despite all the hardships and ups and downs, Onaway still exists. In the words of Robert Shaw, "Too much praise cannot be given to those who remained, for it was their spirit that made it possible to rebuild Onaway to the fine community which exists today."

Ray Young, a summer resident like Shaw, recalls working at the Hudson Motor Car Co. in Detroit at the time of the big Onaway fire. "There I learned first hand just what a crippling, crushing blow this fire caused the automobile industry." Young writes. "After their 10 day stock of steering wheels was exhausted they had to drive the otherwise finished cars and trucks off the assembly line with monkey wrenches."

The people of Onaway can certainly be proud of its past history because at one time Onaway did steer the world.