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5/15/2020 7:28:00 AM Rhinelanders Revisited: Shifting industries provided impetus for early investors

Stephanie Kuski River News Feature Writer

In last week's installment of Rhinelanders Revisited, we revisited some of the push and pull factors which led to the establishment of Rhinelanders as a village in 1882.



Rhinelanders exploded as an infant logging community once the Soo Line and Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western Railroad came to town in the 1880s. Submitted photo.

Recall that the Browns needed the railroad to service this area in order for their initial investment to prosper. But the Browns, still with an ace up their sleeve, had just started playing the game.

Let's count the cards so far: the Browns initially invested in 1,500 acres of land, which was cut by a third to compensate for each railroad agreeing to service the area.

"The Browns were involved in everything," Rhinelanders Historical Society President Bill Vancos explained. "They had one of the eight mills around Boom Lake. So you say, 'Why would they create a city and this enterprise if they only had an eighth of the action?'"

"They had the Pelican Boom Co., which controlled all of the logs as they came down the river," Vancos continued. "Booms are like logs chained together to make almost like docks sticking out, so that they would corral each sawmill's logs in front of their operation..."

"A company might own a lumber mill, where they sawed logs into lumber, and that company might also own some logging camps, where they hire lumberjacks to go out into the woods and cut the trees down," noted Pioneer Park Historical Complex Director Kerry Bloedorn.

"That was big business, just the sorting of logs," Bloedorn continued. "(Their) job was to collect the logs that came from all these camps north of the sawmill. Each lumber camp had their own stamp they would put on each end of the log."

For example, the Brown Bros. may have had "BB" stamped on the end of their logs to designate their brand.

"In the springtime, when logging camps along the river would dump all their logs in the river, they would all be jumbled up together," Bloedorn said. "So when the logs got to the mill town, it was (their job) to sort those logs and corral them to their respective sawmill."

But with so much volume of water north of Rhinelanders, when it got to the Pelican Rapids narrows the water would naturally back up into an adjacent lake early Native American settlers named Fish Lake. So when the Browns built the dam, the river's backflow spilled over to create an even larger body of water, then renamed Boom Lake, because it was used to store booms for the Brown's Pelican Boom Co.

"Imagine all these logs coming down the Wisconsin River and they get to the Pelican Rapids narrows," Bloedorn

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continued. "They can move those logs out of the current into what became Boom Lake, then all of those logs would be corralled, or boomed, so all these big logs would be chained together to make like a fence in the water if you will. Then these guys with these giant 20-foot pipe poles would maneuver the logs through these gates towards their respective lumber company."

With Rhinelanders at the top of the river, the strategic location of that dam had a twofold effect: not only did the backflow of the dam create what we now know as Boom Lake, but the dam also created a flowage, which could be used to create a head of water so lumber rafts could more easily float over the top of rapids when the snow melted in the spring.

"They built dams... for the purpose of building up ahead of water," Bloedorn explained. "If you build a dam, you can hold the water back. Then in the springtime when the water's high and you get all these logs floating down the river, you open up the dam and then that huge gush of water allows you to move the logs over the top of rapids that are now flooded over the top."

Due to the difficulty of the rapids south of the confluence, however, the Browns were thinking two steps ahead of the game. Instead of floating the logs downstream to mill towns in the south, they figured they could process the lumber here instead. But in order for that plan to work, they needed the dam and the railroad in order to get their product to market. Once they had control of rail and water resources, there was no stopping what was to come.

"It's been said that no community in Wisconsin was better planned and better suited for what was to come and that was the lumber boom," Bloedorn said. "Next thing you know, huge pieces of equipment are being brought in by train after the train spur was built in 1882... At one time, there were eight full-scale sawmills operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days of the year in Rhinelanders."

Although the Browns had been counting their cards up until this point, the finite supply of old-growth pinery presented challenges early on.

"At its heyday, there were 40 logging camps out in the woods cutting wood to support these eight mills that were around Boom Lake," Vancos commented. "Everyone could see they were chewing through the stuff, it was not going to last a real long time. So that's when the guys got together and said, 'Wait a minute, we're going to end up in a ghost town here.'"

"So the Browns and others got together and said, 'You know we have to find something that can employ these people,'" Vancos continued. "So that's when they turned to the paper (industry) and said, you know the paper mill can use smaller wood... So that could be ongoing, because it could sustain itself from smaller timber, whereas these (saw)mills needed that great big stuff in order to be profitable."

"So that's how it evolved from a sawmill culture to what's the next step that we can do," Vancos said, "and one of them was the paper mill."

By the turn of the century, four of the initial eight sawmills drawn in the original plat of the infant village of Rhinelanders had closed shop. But as those doors closed, others opened in their place.

That shift was the impetus for other well-to-do businessmen to invest in similar industries which utilized the available infrastructure, such as the dam and railroad. Of course, many of those investments were spearheaded by the Brown family.

The Browns were among the leaders of the Rhinelanders Paper Co. when its doors opened in 1903. Anderson served as the first president, followed by his second eldest brother Webster E. Brown and later on the third eldest brother Edward O. Brown.

The fourth Brown brother, Walter D. Brown, was on the mill's board of directors from 1935 until it was sold to the St. Regis Paper Co. in 1957.

At the same time, other companies processing forestry-related products sprang up in Rhinelanders, including a wooden wares company, a box factory and a refrigeration factory that made old-style wooden ice boxes. The 20th century attracted many new industries and young entrepreneurs to Rhinelanders and each left their mark on this fledgling community.

Stay tuned for the next installment of this continuing series on the history of Rhinelanders.

To read the first installment, visit www.rivernewsonline.com.

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