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Built of Pine and People: Adaptability and Stability in the Wisconsin Lumbering Community of Oconto, 1850-1950

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BUILT OF PINE AND PEOPLE: ADAPTABILITY AND STABILITY IN THE WISCONSIN
LUMBERING COMMUNITY OF OCONTO, 1850-1950

by

Amy Fels

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

BUILT OF PINE AND PEOPLE: ADAPTABILITY AND STABILITY IN THE WISCONSIN LUMBERING COMMUNITY OF OCONTO, 1850-1950

by

Amy Fels

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020
Under the Supervision of Professor Amanda Seligman

Near the midpoint of the nineteenth century, logging enterprises began to emerge across the northern half of Wisconsin at an increasing rate. Though the lumber boom dwindled throughout the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century, hundreds of new communities had been established throughout the northwoods region as a result of the industry's growth. Traditionally, historians have examined Wisconsin's logging history from a regional or industry perspective, favoring broader conclusions over detailed microhistories. In order to shift this perspective and enrich the existing body of scholarship by offering a significantly more focused narrative, this thesis examines the growth and development of the lumbering community of Oconto, Wisconsin from 1850 to 1950. This in-depth local history examines how both the lumber industry and the people of Oconto actively shaped the city and adapted to change in order to establish a relatively stable community ultimately capable of surviving the demise of the lumber industry upon which it was largely founded.

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Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Patricia, a fourth-generation Oconto resident. I never could have guessed that genealogical research would have led me to this project, but it did, and I have cherished getting to know the city she called home when Alzheimer's prevented her from telling me herself.

Chapter One: Historical Context

Near the midpoint of the nineteenth century, logging enterprises began to emerge across the northern half of Wisconsin at an increasing rate. By 1890, logging would be the largest industry in the state and would hold that position for three decades.¹ Though the lumber boom dwindled throughout the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century, hundreds of new communities had been established throughout the northwoods region as a result of the industry's growth. Some of these communities, like Eau Claire and Oshkosh, grew into larger cities, some remained relatively the same size, and still others disappeared from existence in all but memory.

The history and legacy of the lumber boom on the state's economy, culture, and environment have been written about extensively. However, historians have traditionally examined Wisconsin's logging history from a regional or industry perspective, favoring broader conclusions over detailed microhistories. These works are undeniably valuable and integral to our understanding of this area of Wisconsin's history, but it must be acknowledged that there exists no singular, definitive narrative of Wisconsin lumber history. Though they often share similar origins and patterns of development, none of the communities primarily founded because of logging enterprises are identical. The nuance of experience and placemaking, the agency of the people who called these communities home, are lost when only studied from a regional perspective.

Therefore, in order to shift this perspective and enrich the existing body of scholarship by offering a significantly more focused narrative, this thesis examines the growth and development of the lumbering community of Oconto, Wisconsin from 1850 to 1950. After an initial spike at

¹ Edward A. Fitzpatrick, *Wisconsin* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1928), accessed December 9, 2019 <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89080526502>, 331-334.

the end of the nineteenth century, the population of this small city, located approximately 30 miles north of Green Bay, remained relatively the same throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This study considers the lack of population change in Oconto as indicative of the city's and its residents' abilities to maintain a stable community throughout a period of American history characterized by rapid and dramatic economic and cultural shifts, rather than as evidence of failure to develop according to a linear sense of civilizing progress. Whereas broader scholarship often portrays logging communities as passive and being acted upon by forces of change beyond their control, this in-depth local history aims to illustrate how the people of Oconto played an active role in shaping their city and adapted to change in order to establish a relatively stable community ultimately capable of surviving the demise of the lumber industry upon which it was largely founded.

Historiography

As a topic of historical study, the city of Oconto is situated at a crossroad of several different areas of historiographic debate. It is therefore necessary to understand the historical discussions regarding community development on the frontier, the Wisconsin lumber industry, and the positioning of and relationships between frontiers and urban centers as they relate to economic growth and perceptions of rural wilderness and urban civilization.

Ideas of the frontier and how they relate to community development have been a topic of American historical debate for over a century. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner first presented his famous frontier thesis, speaking of the frontier as the "meeting point between savagery and

civilization.”² He argued that the frontier is the result of the efforts of rugged, restless individuals and emphasizes the natural, linear process of “winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.”³ Ray Allen Billington similarly notes the transient character of frontier settlers, concluding that the “pioneer was recklessly wasteful not only because of the abundance of resources surrounding him, but also because he sensed that he would soon be moving on.”⁴

However, other historians studying rural communities have contradicted the emphasis given to the importance of individualism on the frontier. In his study of Jacksonville, Illinois, Don Harrison Doyle acknowledges the community possessed a “social order that allowed enormous turnover within the population; yet it maintained continuity through a set of formal institutions and small core of stable residents.” He concludes the people of Jacksonville were able to strike a balance between “the chaos of an expansive capitalist society and the enduring human need for community.”⁵ Likewise, the authors of *Like a Family* found that their interview participants continually used a family metaphor to describe their experiences living in a southern community as it developed from a rural village into a more industrial mill town over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They documented evidence of change and

² Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt and Company, 1921), 3, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22994/22994-h/22994-h.htm#Page_1.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 194.

⁵ Don Harrison Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825-1870* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 15.

conflict, but the stress of the argument remained on a sense of continuity threaded throughout the oral histories they collected.⁶

Further, Merle Curti's detailed study of community development of Trempealeau County, Wisconsin over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century in relation to Turner's assertion that the frontier promoted democracy provides a useful model for this thesis and is an important contribution to community history in Wisconsin. However, Trempealeau County at this time significantly differed from Oconto in a major respect. As Curti notes, Trempealeau County was not considered part of Wisconsin's pineries, whereas Oconto most certainly was.⁷ Even within the state of Wisconsin, drastic environmental differences resulted in multiple types of frontiers and variations among those frontier communities developing during roughly the same time period, and thus leaves open the opportunity for further local studies.

Overall, the historiography of community development leaves unanswered questions regarding nineteenth-century frontier or rural communities. Additionally, few of these studies examined their chosen communities in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; this thesis seeks to bridge the gap between the two time periods. This new research will provide additional diversity to the types of frontier and rural community histories that currently make up the existing body scholarship and further readers' understanding how environmental and economic conditions, as well as the actions of community members, intersect and influence community development.

⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), xvii, xviii.

⁷ Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 4.

Second, while this thesis is not a history of lumbering in Wisconsin, as a lumbering community, the history of Oconto cannot be extracted from that of the industry or the scholarship it has generated. As previously stated, historians have generally studied the Wisconsin lumber industry from a broader regional or industrial perspective, and a historiographical pattern emerges when one examines these works as they were published throughout the twentieth century.

Lumber historians writing prior to 1970 often consider the rise, decline, and aftermath of the Wisconsin lumber industry in a linear fashion. That is, works by a number of the scholars I have read explicitly or implicitly rely on the Turnerian belief that the growth of westernized human settlement on supposedly wild frontiers was a sign of progress and would lead to greater degrees of civilization. In some instances, histories of Wisconsin's lumber industry were published even before lumbering operations had ceased in Oconto. Writing in 1935, William Raney notes the decline of the lumber industry with nostalgia, characterizing it as a "passing phase" that "will never be repeated," replaced instead by "pleasant tillable fields or else the unkempt wilderness of cut-over land."⁸ Raney echoes the two main intellectual trends that existed at the time his work was published in regards to what was to be done with the region of Wisconsin once dominated by lumber companies: one that emphasized the idea of a forward progression from primitive wilderness to increasingly civilized settlements and cities and one that was nostalgic for the notion of a wild frontier that had supposedly disappeared with the advent of the industrial revolution in the United States.

⁸ William F. Raney, "Pine Lumbering in Wisconsin," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 19, no. 1 (1935), 71.

Almost twenty years later, Robert Fries first published *Empire in Pine: The Story of Lumbering in Wisconsin, 1830-1900*, a book that is still considered a foundational text for those interested in Wisconsin lumber history. Further removed from the peak era of the lumber boom than Raney was at the time of his initial writing and subsequent revision in 1989, Fries presents a greater contextual awareness of the continuing complexities associated with the lumber industry. Whereas Raney presents the history of the lumber industry as a finite period of time that had passed, more or less, into oblivion, Fries understands the industry's history in phases. He refers to the seventy years at the focus of his book as the "exploitive stage."⁹ Furthermore, Fries is critical of older historians like Raney, who focused heavily on prominent lumbermen and their successes; he writes that "many of the favorite names and anecdotes of the romanticist and antiquarian are missing" from his work.¹⁰ However, while Fries gives greater attention to the political, environmental, and social contexts that influenced the development of Wisconsin's lumber industry than Raney, Fries nevertheless continues to focus on the lumber industry from a broad perspective that is still tinged with nostalgia. He does not consider the people who settled in Wisconsin's cutover region, the land had been cleared of trees by logging activities, as independent agents in their own right, with their own conceptions regarding their existence and experiences. Rather, Fries portrays them more universally as innocent victims of exploitive actors within an even larger exploitive process.¹¹ Within the context of this book, the struggle to establish successful farms in the cutover region is merely a consequence of poor land use

⁹ Robert F. Fries, *Empire in Pine: The Story of Lumbering in Wisconsin, 1830-1900* (Sister Bay, WI: Wm. Caxton Ltd, 1989), vii.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 26.

policies and evidence of the necessity to restore the region to its supposedly pristine, heavily forested state.

Charles E. Twining also continues to utilize a framework built upon nostalgia, as well as linear notions of progress and the advancement of civilization, in his article “Plunder and Progress: The Lumbering Industry in Perspective.”¹² While he acknowledges his hindsight bias as a historian writing in the twentieth century compared to that of a nineteenth-century lumberman when he criticizes the adverse environmental effects of rapid, widespread deforestation wrought by the lumber industry, Twining implies that these negative consequences would have been more easily forgiven if only the future had turned out differently. Twining writes, had settling the cutover region of Wisconsin been more successful, “the loggers would have performed a service to civilization by clearing the land, thus permitting the easy establishment of farms.”¹³ Instead of profitable farms, Twining writes that “Too often we were left with nothing but the stump, which served only as a reminder of those good old days when majestic pines towered over clear and sparkling streams.”¹⁴ The tension and dichotomy between increasing urbanity and a desire to return to wilderness that began to emerge in Americans’ consciousness near the turn of the century remains. Thus, like the two previous authors also writing about the history of Wisconsin’s lumber industry in the early and mid-twentieth century from a state-wide, industry perspective, Twining continues to perpetuate the mindset that when

¹² Charles E. Twining, “Plunder and Progress: The Lumbering Industry in Perspective,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 47, no. 2 (1963-1964), 116-124.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the supposedly natural forward trajectory of human progress has stalled, a return to the perceived past idyllic state of Wisconsin's northern regions may have been preferable.

Even as more modern authors address the sense of inevitability present in earlier scholarship, scholars have continued to study the history of Wisconsin's lumber industry from a regional perspective. Robert Gough's social history, *Farming the Cutover*, complicates the lumber industry's historical narrative by focusing on the area within this field of history that is frequently referred to in previous works but never deeply discussed: the cutover region and the people who called it home.¹⁵ Gough takes issue with these past scholarly positions that "examined the cutover primarily as a region whose history shows the importance of some process or pattern," arguing that "a different perspective emerges by focusing on people and the meaning they gave to their space that was northern Wisconsin."¹⁶ While Gough's approach of focusing on the people of the cutover, their experiences, and the meaning they created from those experiences is in line with the methodology of this study, he nevertheless retains the broader perspective employed by past historians. Historian Randall Rohe likewise provides a valuable overview and analysis of the development of the lumber industry and its lasting effects on the towns and cities that were once major lumbering centers.¹⁷

In sum, the body of academic scholarship regarding the history of Wisconsin's lumber industry is vast and demonstrative of how historians' methodologies and conclusions regarding the legacy of the industry have changed over the course of the twentieth century. However,

¹⁵ Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

¹⁶ Gough, *Farming the Cutover*, 2.

¹⁷ Randall Rohe, "Lumbering: Wisconsin's Northern Urban Frontier," in *Wisconsin Land and Life*, eds. Robert C. Ostergren and Thomas R. Vale (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 221-240.

beyond general summary, it leaves unanswered the questions of how individual lumbering communities developed and changed over time. This detailed case study of Oconto, one such community, aims to deepen scholars' understanding of the nuanced ways logging enterprises influenced community development and how members of a community negotiated their relationships with the industry during and after the peak era of lumbering.

Finally, it is necessary to understand how the positioning of rural frontiers and urban centers influences readers' perceptions of these two spaces and the relationship they have with each other. As mentioned previously, a strong dichotomy has historically separated notions of the American frontier and urban civilization. Beyond the extraction of natural resources, like timber, from rural spaces that were then transported to and sold in urban markets, they have generally been considered as isolated from one another. In *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, William Cronon attempts to dispel this idea of isolation and focuses on the intimate connections between rural and urban environments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He writes that to ignore how urban and rural spaces affect each other is "to miss our moral responsibility for the ways they shape each other's landscapes and alter the lives of people and organisms within their bounds."¹⁸ In regards to Wisconsin's lumber industry specifically, Cronon also raises the key point that its history was not confined within state lines or limited to the timber extracted from the state's forests and used to build structures across the American plains.

However, Cronon's work carries with it an inherent bias that places cities, like Chicago, at the center of the conversation and restricts rural spaces, like Wisconsin's logging communities,

¹⁸ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 385.

to the edge. Throughout his book, Cronon refers to Chicago as the “metropolis” and the rural spaces of the region surrounding the city as its “hinterlands.”¹⁹ This bird’s-eye perspective is what facilitates Cronon’s important study of the reciprocal relationship and connections between the development of Chicago at the turn of the century and those of its surrounding regional communities. However, as James Feldman notes, the approach “diverts attention from the points of production, the places where the fishing, farming, and logging actually occurred. Broad patterns obscure the smaller details, the locally determined conditions equally important in the production process.”²⁰ Feldman’s focus may be on the economy of Sand Island, a small island located on Lake Superior off Wisconsin’s northern coast, but his criticisms of existing works that examine rural and urban relationships and his call for more studies devoted to the “periphery” align with the goals of this study.

The extraction-based industries upon which many northern Wisconsin communities were founded around the turn of the nineteenth century cannot be removed from the context in which they took place, nor can they be considered as existing in isolation from one another when multiple industries, like fishing and logging, among others, existed within a single community. In order to fully understand the larger patterns of economic, social, and environmental change that took place in the midwestern United States during this time period, it is necessary to place a scholarly spotlight on the local experiences of smaller “hinterland” communities, like Oconto, that contributed to these patterns but have to this point been largely been subverted in favor of studies focused on large cities.

¹⁹ Ibid., xviii-xix.

²⁰ James Feldman, “The View from Sand Island: Reconsidering the Peripheral Economy, 1880-1940,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 3, (Autumn 2004), 288.

Oconto before Lumbering: A Historical Overview

In many respects, the City of Oconto during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an unremarkable lumbering community. However, while much of Oconto's history is inextricably tied to its role as a major lumbering center during that time period, it does not spontaneously begin there. Unlike a number of lumbering communities and company towns that appeared across Wisconsin's northwoods during the latter half of the nineteenth century, Oconto was a site of human settlement and trade based on the extraction of natural resources for nearly two centuries before logging began. While this thesis aims to focus on Oconto as an individual community, rather than as a replaceable component within broader patterns of economic and social changes, it was nevertheless part of larger systems of trade and human settlement. It is important to understand Oconto's early origins within these systems, because they facilitated, in part, its later development into an independent, unified city.

Ecologically, Oconto is part of the Green Bay Till and Lacustrine Plain within the North Central Hardwood Forests Region of Wisconsin. This ecoregion is a transitional one between that of the Northern Lakes and Forest Region and the more agricultural regions in the southern portion of the state. Due to the fact that the North Central Hardwood Forests is a transitional region, it exhibits a fair degree of environmental diversity. Generally, its soil consists of red sand and loam, similar to that of Wisconsin/Michigan Pine Barrens to the north. The City of Oconto's potential natural vegetation (PNV), due to its proximity to the lakeshore, is more predominantly

northern hardwoods and conifer swamps, whereas the PNV of more southern areas of the region often consists of maple, basswood, and oak forests and oak savanna.²¹

Oconto is located on the banks of the Oconto River, close to its mouth, which flows eastward into the Bay of Green Bay and, by extension, Lake Michigan. The city's proximity to water, which would prove so vital to the establishment and growth of the lumber industry in the second half of the nineteenth century, made it a site of human activity well prior to the construction of permanent Euro-American settlements. Like so many places in the state of Wisconsin and throughout the United States more generally, the site on which the City of Oconto is located traces its origins to native North American peoples. Copper Culture State Park is located on the western side of the City of Oconto and marks the site of a burial ground belonging to members of the Old Copper Culture People. Old Copper Culture refers to the copper tools and other items made by early inhabitants in the Great Lakes region, generally beginning during the Middle Archaic Period, or approximately 4,000 years BCE.²² Often referred to as the Oconto Site, the cemetery was discovered by a local boy in 1952 and subsequently excavated by representatives from the Oconto County Historical Society and the Milwaukee Public Museum; the skeletal remains of 45 individuals and a small collection of artifacts were unearthed. The cemetery site that is now the 42-acre Copper Culture State Park is believed to be the oldest

²¹ United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Level III and IV Ecoregions of Wisconsin," US EPA and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, March 9, 2016, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/eco-research/ecoregion-download-files-state-region-5>.

²² Kevin M. Cullen, "Old Copper Culture," Milwaukee Public Museum, 2006, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.mpm.edu/index.php/research-collections/anthropology/online-collections-research/old-copper-culture>.

cemetery in Wisconsin and one of the oldest in the country.²³ Significant in its own archeological and historical right, the existence of the Old Copper Culture site in Oconto is further important because it is believed that these early inhabitants were the ancestors of the Menominee people.²⁴

Prior to European contact and Euro-American settlement, members of the Menominee Tribe occupied large swaths of land across northeastern and north-central Wisconsin and the upper peninsula of Michigan. The Menominee, known as the “wild oats people” to the French, relied heavily on the wild rice that grew in local rivers and the Bay of Green Bay, supplementing their diets by fishing, hunting, and keeping small agricultural plots. With their central village, called Menekaunee, located near present-day Marinette, the Menominee established villages along the Menominee River and throughout the Green Bay region, including one at the site that would become Oconto.²⁵ The city’s name is derived from a native word, though its meaning has been interpreted multiple ways. Most frequently, the meaning has been translated as “red ground,” “place of the pickerel,” or the Menominee word for “black bass.”²⁶ On early some early

²³ “Old Copper Sites Excavated by the Milwaukee Public Museum,” Milwaukee Public Museum, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.mpm.edu/research-collections/anthropology/online-collections-research/old-copper-culture/sites>; National Register of Historic Places, Copper Culture State Park, Oconto, Oconto, Wisconsin, #66000023.

²⁴ Kathleen Tigerman, ed. *Wisconsin Indian Literature: Anthology of Native Voices* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 11.

²⁵ “Menominee Culture,” Milwaukee Public Museum, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.mpm.edu/plan-visit/educators/wirp/nations/menominee>; George E. Hall, *A History of Oconto*, eds. Duane Ebert and Pamela Ann Loberger, 2nd ed. (Oconto, WI: Oconto County Historical Society, 2009), <http://archive.org/details/AHistoryOfOconto>.

²⁶ “Origin of Oconto, Wisconsin,” Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS11298>.

maps, generally those predating 1850, what is now the Oconto River is labeled as the Black Bass River, giving greater credence to the latter of the three translations.²⁷

Though it is not known precisely when the Menominee established their village near the mouth of the Oconto River, the Jesuit missionary Jean Claude Allouez is believed to have visited the village as early as the winter 1669 and 1670. According to Allouez's accounts, he celebrated Catholic mass there on December 2, 1669 with eight French individuals and approximately six hundred Native Americans belonging to tribes other than the Menominee, including members of the Potawatomi, Sauk, Fox, and Winnebago peoples.²⁸ Allouez did not spend an extensive amount of time at this village site, but this celebration of mass is often considered the founding date of the Mission of St. Francis Xavier, thusly named because Allouez arrived at village site that would become Oconto on the feast day of that saint.²⁹ In the following years, this mission would be more permanently established further south at the site of what would become the current community of De Pere, Wisconsin.³⁰ While Allouez left no physical evidence of his visit to the Native American village located on the Oconto River in 1669, the event has nevertheless been accepted as a key date in Oconto's history. A historical booklet published by the Oconto County Historical Society in 1969 is titled the "Oconto Tri-Cent" in commemoration of

²⁷ For example, see Sidney Hall, *United States 1828*, Map, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1828. From American Geographical Society Library, *Digital Map Collection*, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agdm/id/1025/rec/11>.

²⁸ Claude Jean Allouez, "Father Allouez's Journey into Wisconsin, 1669-1670," in *Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634-1699*, ed. Louise P. Kellogg (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 145-146.

²⁹ Louise Phelps Kellogg, *The French Regime in Wisconsin and the Northwest* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1925), 158-160.

³⁰ J.D. Beck, comp., *The Blue Book of the State of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Democratic Printing Co., 1909), 849.

Allouez's landing, despite the fact that Oconto was not incorporated as a city until 1869.³¹ Therefore, while historical discussions regarding Oconto are often limited to the era during which it became a significant lumbering center, this booklet stands as evidence that the members of the local community consider Allouez's landing in 1669 as the de facto originating date of Oconto.

If we too accept Jean Claude Allouez's interaction with the Native Americans living near the mouth of the Oconto River as the beginnings of what would become the City of Oconto, then its history prior to the arrival of permanent Anglo-American settlers and the nineteenth century lumber boom is largely characterized by its position within the fur trade. Allouez's notation that there were eight French individuals present at the Native American village when he arrived suggests that Europeans had already begun to engage in fur trading in the larger region near Oconto and had at least temporarily established themselves among the Native Americans living on the Oconto River during the seventeenth century. The evidence of fur trading activities and the presence of Europeans at the site of Oconto increased during the nineteenth century. Oconto was never a major area of white settlement during the era of fur trading but rather served as an outpost or station for the larger trading operations that occurred at Green Bay. The French had established a fort at Green Bay in 1717, commonly referred to as Fort La Baye, which was burned in 1728 and subsequently rebuilt in 1730.³²

When the French lost control of Fort La Baye and the greater region around it to the British in 1761 as a result of the French and Indian War, the fur trade nevertheless continued.

³¹ George E. Hall, *Oconto Tri-Cent, '69* (Oconto, WI: Oconto County Historical Society, 1969).

³² Alice E. Smith, *The History of Wisconsin, Vol. 1: From Exploration to Statehood* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973), 42-44.

British fur traders employed French trappers to engage with the local Native American populations situated up and down the western coast of the Bay of Green Bay and along its tributary rivers to secure pelts. While sources are scarce regarding the existence of any constructed trading posts occupied by Europeans at the modern site of Oconto, the continued knowledge of and likely interaction with the Menominee village located there is illustrated by the map produced following British Captain Jonathan Carver's travels throughout the newly acquired region in 1766 and 1767. A "Menomonie Town" is clearly marked on the map, located at the mouth of an unnamed river on the western shore of the Bay of Green Bay approximately halfway between Fort La Baye to the south and the Bay of Noquet to the north.³³ Given the river's location, it is highly probable that this town is the same one Jean Claude Allouez mentioned in his travel accounts written nearly a century prior.

Despite losing American Revolutionary War in 1783, British troops remained garrisoned at their posts in the Wisconsin region during the late eighteenth century. Even after the signing of Jay's Treaty in 1794, which ceded British rights to the territory south of the Great Lakes, including what would become Wisconsin, fur trading enterprises operated by the British continued in the Green Bay area with little interference from the fledgling United States government into the first decade of the nineteenth century. The fur trade south of the Canadian border and in the Green Bay region was dominated by small, brief partnerships rather than any lasting company organization. A number of traders, including Charles De Langlade, members of the extensive Grignon family, and John Lawe, who would later have dealings at Oconto, settled

³³ Jonathan Carver, *Plan of Captain Carver's Travels in the Interior Parts of North America* 3rd ed., Map, C. Dilly, 1781. From the David Rumsey Map Collection, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/s/7g9ifg>.

near Green Bay in the 1790s.³⁴ Stanislaus Chappeau also operated a trading post on the Menominee River, and a family by the name of Rankin appears to have established themselves in the area of the Peshtigo River, both to the north of Oconto along the Bay of Green Bay.³⁵ Similar to Oconto, these early semi-permanent settlements would later develop into lumbering communities during the nineteenth century.

It was not until Fort Howard was constructed at the former site of Fort La Baye in 1816 that Americans were able to take control of the region's fur trade. Initial American fur trade operations in the region were controlled by the federal government but soon switched to private hands. John Jacob Astor and his American Fur Company entered the Great Lakes trade market in the early 1820s and retained almost complete control over the region for nearly two decades.³⁶ By 1825, evidence of a trading post existing at the site of Oconto finally emerges. H.B. McGulpin, a fur trader, wrote to Judge John Lawe in Green Bay on May 18, 1825 from Cantone in regards to a recent interaction with an ex-American Fur Company employee turned independent trader named William Farnsworth and a group of Native Americans. Cantone, alternatively spelled Caunton, is now recognized as an early linguistic predecessor of the word "Oconto."³⁷ Given that, by this time, John Lawe was employed by Astor, it is likely that the Oconto site from which McGulpin wrote his letter was one of the several outposts established

³⁴ Smith, *The History of Wisconsin, Vol. 1*, 75-76.

³⁵ Carl Edward Krog, "Marinette: Biography of a Nineteenth Century Lumbering Town, 1850-1910," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1971), 17, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/302553605/citation/5A676BA69816438BPQ/1>; Augustin Grignon, *Seventy-two Years' Recollections of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1904).

³⁶ Smith, *The History of Wisconsin, Vol. 1*, 95; Krog, *Marinette*, 17.

³⁷ H.B. McGulpin to Judge John Lawe, 18 May 1825, *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Vol. 20* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1911), 376, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/whc/id/14285>.

along the western coast of the bay to facilitate Astor's enterprise. Local sources refer to it as a "jack-knife post," meaning that its existence was dependent upon the larger headquarters at Green Bay. Therefore, the post at Oconto was likely small and only inhabited by one or two white traders and perhaps their families.³⁸ Nevertheless, the letter indicates that Oconto was part of the expansive fur trade system that extended throughout the region and was a site of European settlement prior to the emergence of the lumber industry.

Well before the dawn of the logging era, the location of Oconto had been identified and used as a convenient place for both human settlement and trade. Still, its transition from a substantial, diverse Native American village to a lumbering community dominated by Europeans and Americans of European descent by the second half of the nineteenth century was dependent upon the forcible removal of those Native Americans who originally inhabited the site. Even after a fur trading post was established at Oconto in the 1820s, whites remained the minority there. The Wisconsin fur trade began to decline significantly by 1830, and the industry did not spur widespread white immigration or settlement.³⁹ However, the following decade did result in land cessions that facilitated the subsequent large-scale white settlement in the region that would vastly alter both its natural and human landscape.

Prior to 1831, the Menominee Tribe claimed vast tracts of land throughout northern and northeastern Wisconsin, then part of the Michigan Territory. Then, on February 8, 1831, the Menominee were forced to cede their territory on the eastern side of Green Bay, extending southward towards Milwaukee, and a section of land to the southeast of Green Bay and

³⁸ Hall, *Oconto Tri-Cent*, 15.

³⁹ "The Fur Trade Era: 1650s to 1850s," Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS3585>.

extending northwest towards Shawano, to the United States Government. In 1836, after Wisconsin had been declared its own United States territory, the federal government again appropriated more land from the Menominee people. Effectively eliminating any Menominee land holdings in the northeastern section of Wisconsin, the United States took control of a large tract of land on the west side of the Bay of Green Bay that extended from today's state northern border with the upper peninsula of Michigan, south to Green Bay and the Fox River, as well as an additional section of land on the northwestern edge of Lake Winnebago. This second large cession in 1836 included the site of the future city of Oconto as well as the greater surrounding Oconto County. All told, the Menominee people were stripped of over six million acres in the course of six years.⁴⁰ In 1848, any remaining Menominee lands in the state of Wisconsin had been sold to the United States, with the understanding that the Menominee would relocate to a reservation in Minnesota within two years. In 1850, under the leadership of Chief Oshkosh, the Menominee Tribe refused to leave Wisconsin, and, in 1854, signed a formal treaty that established the boundaries of a 250,000-acre permanent reservation along the Wolf River. This site is located approximately 45 miles west of Oconto and remains the site of the Menominee Reservation today.⁴¹

For thousands of years prior to European contact, Oconto was home to generations of Native Americans. Its forests and waterways remained relatively unaltered by humans even as French and British explorers came to the region, at least in comparison to the dramatic changes

⁴⁰ *Indian Land Cessions in the United States, 1784-1894*, H.R. Doc No. 4015, 56th Congress, 1st Sess. (1899), 722-732, 726-727. accessed January 6, 2020, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwss-ilc.html>.

⁴¹ George E. Fay, comp., *Treaties between the Menominee Indians and the United States of America, 1817-1856*, part of the Museum of Anthropology *Miscellaneous Series*, no. 12 (University of Northern Colorado-Greely, 1970), 28-35; For a brief discussion of logging and forestry on the Menominee Reservation, see Samuel P. Hays, *Wars in the Woods: The Rise of Ecological Forestry in America* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 2007), 80-81.

that would accompany the arrival of thousands American settlers and Europeans immigrants throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the interactions between the Native Americans living on the banks of the Oconto River and Jesuit missionaries, as well as French, British, and American fur traders beginning at the end of the seventeenth century and continuing into the first few decades of the nineteenth century are vital to fully understanding the subsequent development of Oconto as a lumbering community. They may not have resulted in any immediate, lasting European or American settlement, but they importantly contributed to the knowledge of place. While the following three chapters focus on the rapid development of Oconto as a lumbering city and the subsequent ability of its citizens to maintain a relatively stable community following its primary industry's decline over the course of a century, it must duly be remembered that the history of Oconto begins with its position as a site of established human community and place within a larger trade system well prior to the establishment of the first saw mill.

Chapter Two: Built of Pine

Due to over-trapping, Wisconsin's fur trade industry was in significant decline by the 1830s and virtually non-existent by the early 1850s. Traders moved north into Canada and westward across the growing territory of the United States in search of fur-bearing animals.¹ At the same time, other Americans were moving westward as well, expanding across the fertile plains to establish farms and homesteads. However, the plains were conspicuously devoid of the trees necessary for the construction of houses and any other number of buildings associated with American westward expansion. Northern Wisconsin, on the other hand, was heavily forested. In particular, it contained more than an estimated 100 billion board feet of light, durable, and soon valuable white pine timber.² White pine floated in water, a necessary advantage for early lumber communities in northern Wisconsin that lacked railroads but had access to numerous streams and rivers.³

The city of Oconto, it will be remembered, is located on the banks of the Oconto River, near its mouth, that flows into the Bay of Green Bay and Lake Michigan. This close proximity to large, navigable bodies of water not only meant that white pine lumber could be readily transported from Oconto to growing urban markets in Milwaukee and Chicago and the plains beyond, but that it could be reached by suppliers and new settlers as well. Thus, with the arrival of Oconto's first permanent American settlers in 1846 and the construction of its first sawmill shortly thereafter, white pine replaced fur as the material of choice in this frontier economy based

¹ "The Fur Trade Era: 1650s to 1850s."

² Rohe, "Lumbering: Wisconsin's Northern Urban Frontier," 221.

³ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 152-153.

on natural resource extraction and catalyzed the rapid development of Oconto as a significant lumbering community, an identity it would retain for nearly a century.

The Growth of the Mills

Unlike many nineteenth century lumbering communities in Wisconsin, Oconto was never a company town. No single logging company was responsible for or in control of the community's growth into an incorporated city. Rather, Oconto's identity as an organized municipality known for lumbering originated with the independent establishment of a number of smaller sawmill enterprises in close proximity to each other on the Oconto River. Some of these early mills changed hands and names frequently, making it difficult to ascertain exactly how many were in operation at one time. Nevertheless, the absence of a monopoly in Oconto's lumber industry would continue throughout the city's development and mitigated some of the control lumber barons often exercised over the places where their enterprises existed, which would prove vital in regards to the city's later stability.

The first decade of lumbering at Oconto is characterized by the rapid construction of a number of different mills on both sides of the river, several of which would later become the sites of much larger, more prosperous lumber companies. David Jones, a native of Virginia, and his sons Tarleton and Huff are credited with constructing the first mills at Oconto just before 1850, one operated by a water wheel and the other by steam.⁴ Huff Jones managed this second mill for

⁴ George E. Hall, ed. *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections of Oconto County* (Oconto, WI: R.L. Hall Abstract Co., 1976), 42.

the next fifteen years, “keeping it in operation day and night.”⁵ The relationship between the growing lumber industry and the growth of Oconto is apparent in these early years of logging. Oconto County, though much larger then than as it exists today, was formally organized in 1851, and its county seat was temporarily set at “Jones’ Mill, on the Oconto River.” Oconto did not legally exist yet, but, by denoting Jones’ Mill as the “seat of justice,”⁶ even temporarily, the state recognized and granted a sense of permanence to this infant lumber community’s location. Following this event, the number of mills at Oconto only grew throughout the remainder of the decade.

Within the next few years, a third mill known as the Hubbell Mill was built across the river from the Jones properties, followed by the construction of the Morrow Mill in 1854-55, and one built by Norton & Son of Racine in 1855-56. A steam mill built by George Smith & Co., which would later fall into the hands of Ansel Eldred and his son, and an additional unnamed sawmill subsequently emerged along the river banks.⁷ By the end of the 1850s, enough further development had occurred at Oconto resulting from the establishment of these various milling operations and settlements collected along the river that its inhabitants were granted a charter by

⁵ “What a Woman Did. Recollections of the Past,” *Oconto County Reporter* (Oconto, WI), April 28, 1894, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20161009/00000014&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

⁶ State of Wisconsin, “An Act to Set apart and Incorporate the County of Oconto,” in *Acts and Resolves Passed by the Legislature of Wisconsin* (Kenosha, WI: 1851), 31-32. accessed via Google Books, January 6, 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?id=T-IqAAAAIAAJ&lpg=RA2-PA3&ots=2w4oyCViTe&dq=laws%20of%20wisconsin%201851&pg=RA2-PA32#v=onepage&q=oconto&f=false>

⁷ “History of Our Mills,” *Oconto County Reporter* (Oconto, WI), April 21, 1894, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20161009/00000013&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=jones%20mill&query1_field=ALL.

the state, and the Village of Oconto was formally incorporated in April 1859.⁸ That same year, lumber shipped out of Oconto accounted for ten percent of Chicago's lumber supply.⁹ While the early mills may have been relatively small operations, they importantly spurred the initial growth and settlement that resulted in the community's legal existence within the eyes of the state. Furthermore, they laid the foundation for the establishment of the two lumber companies that would sustain much of Oconto's economy for the remainder of the nineteenth and the first few decades of the twentieth centuries.

Of the many logging and milling enterprises established at Oconto during Wisconsin's lumber boom, none were as long-lasting or as impactful as the Holt Lumber Company and the Oconto Lumber Company. The Holt Lumber Company was the older of the two organizations, and its early history is somewhat obscure. Its immediate predecessor, the Holt & Balcom Company, was founded in 1862 by Uri Balcom, who had moved to Oconto in 1856, and Devillo Holt, a former American Fur Company employee who subsequently established himself as a businessman selling wholesale lumber in Chicago.¹⁰ Rather than building a new sawmill, the Holt & Balcom Company operated the mill built by Norton in 1856 and would continue to do so for the entirety of the company's history.¹¹ Milling operations grew as the century continued; in

⁸ State of Wisconsin, "Chapter 193: An Act to Incorporate the Village of Oconto," (March 17, 1859), 325-347. accessed via Wisconsin Department of Administration, Division of Intergovernmental Relations Municipal Data System, January 6, 2020, <https://mds.wi.gov/Home>.

⁹ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 173.

¹⁰ George Woodward Hotchkiss, *History of the Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest*, (Chicago: George Hotchkiss and Co., 1898), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015007512042>, 421.

¹¹ Della Rucker, *From the McCauslin to Jab Switch: A History of Logging in Oconto County*, ed. Diane Nichols, (Oconto, Wis.: Oconto Co. Economic Development Corp., 1999), 66.

1880, the mill produced twenty million feet of lumber.¹² Holt and Balcom would remain business partners until 1888, after which Holt became the sole owner of the company and its name was changed to the Holt Lumber Company. From this point forward, the firm would continuously remain in the hands of the Holt family until the mill closed in 1938.¹³

The longevity of the Holt Lumber Company, which stood as a prominent figure in Oconto's economy for over seventy-five years, is noteworthy. Unlike many lumber companies, the Holt Lumber Company continued logging after Wisconsin's supply of white pines had largely been exhausted, turning instead to hemlock and other hardwoods. Its operations and cutting capacity continued to grow under the ownership of the Holt family. In 1896, the Holt Lumber Company produced over 21 million board feet of lumber, and in 1912, when the lumber industry was in decline in much of the state, the mill turned out an estimated 50 million feet.¹⁴ Though not without its share of downturns and difficulties, the sustained operation of the Holt Lumber Company provided employment to hundreds of Oconto residents for decades and significantly contributed to the community's comparative stability throughout the course of the dramatic rise and decline of Wisconsin's lumber boom that otherwise left dozens of ghost towns in its wake.

Much of the company's overall success and stability can be attributed to the business practices of William Arthur Holt, who was first appointed as company treasurer in 1888, then as vice-president of the company from 1899 to 1922, and finally as president from 1922 until the

¹² Hotchkiss, *History of the Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest*, 421.

¹³ "Founder's Ideals Are Continued for 91 Years," in *A Wisconsin Lumberman Looks Backward* (Chicago: American Lumberman, 1938), 66.

¹⁴ Genivera Edmunds Loft, "The Evolution of the Wood-Working Industries of Wisconsin" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1916), 43. accessed January 13, 2020, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89086881158&view=1up&seq=101>.

mill's closure in 1938. Unlike his elder brother George, who preceded him as both vice-president and president, W.A. Holt took an active role in the management of the company after the dissolution of the Holts' partnership with Balcom was formalized in 1888. Furthermore, Holt adhered to his father Devillo's philosophy of cutting timber more slowly and strategically, a concept that proved distasteful to many lumber barons who preferred to harvest timber as quickly as possible in order to avoid paying taxes on the vast tracts of forests they purchased. Before it was required by state law in 1927, Holt began experimenting with selective logging practices, a harvesting method in which larger trees are cut but smaller ones are left to continue growing, as opposed to clearing entire swaths of land at once.¹⁵ This progressive mindset proved profitable for the company, as Holt noted in a 1935 interview that he continued to log on land owned by his father 53 years ago, whereas the Kirby-Carpenter Company's mill, located to the north in Menominee, Michigan, had closed at least two decades prior.¹⁶

Like the Holt Lumber Company, the Oconto Lumber Company survived the transition from pine to hardwood logging and surpassed expectations in regards to its longevity. While the Holt Lumber Company is generally the most well-remembered of the lumber companies in Oconto, the Oconto Lumber Company was also a vital mainstay; the two companies frequently traded places as the first and second largest enterprises in the community. The Oconto Lumber Company, though it was not formally incorporated until 1867, had operated under the ownership of George Farnsworth since approximately 1858; he too purchased one of the early Oconto mills rather than constructing a new one. In this case, Farnsworth was a partner in buying out the 1855

¹⁵ "Founder's Ideals Are Continued for 91 Years," 74.

¹⁶ "Big Pine Long since Gone but Lumbering Continues," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 10, 1935, accessed January 13, 2020, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA9035>.

Morrow Mill in 1857 after the Morrrows were foreclosed upon.¹⁷ Farnsworth's company remained fixed at this site and expanded throughout the late nineteenth century, growing to "colossal proportions."¹⁸ An employment ledger from September 1873 indicates that there were nearly 500 men on the Oconto Lumber Company payroll.¹⁹ While it is likely that this list includes men employed at the mills in the city of Oconto as well as those lumberjacks employed at logging camps in the surrounding forests, the ledger nevertheless indicates that the company was a significant area employer. The mill produced 22 million board feet of lumber in 1896, exceeding the Holt Lumber Company's total that year by approximately 700,000 feet.²⁰

The Oconto Lumber Company was also something of a family affair. After establishing the firm, Farnsworth retained the office of president until 1886. His son-in-law, Oakman Ellis, was employed as the company superintendent for sixty-one years, from 1869 until his death in 1930.²¹ Furthermore, presidential responsibilities eventually passed to Farnsworth's son, George James. G.J. Farnsworth managed the company from his Chicago office from 1908 until his death in 1941, while Ellis handled the daily affairs in Oconto.²² While the Oconto Lumber Company became more invested in the real estate business in the 1930s as lumbering declined and the

¹⁷ Hotchkiss, *History of the Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest*, 421. There seems to be some debate in regards to the name of this 1855 mill. It is "Morrow" in *Oconto County Reporter*; whereas Hotchkiss calls it "Morrill." The date of the mill's construction is, however, the same.

¹⁸ Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 34.

¹⁹ Diane Nichols, comp., "Oconto Company Employment Ledger," Oconto County WebGen Project (Oconto, WI: 1873), accessed January 13, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150922053345/http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wioconto/OcontoComLedger.htm>.

²⁰ Hotchkiss, *History of the Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest*, 422.

²¹ Rucker, *From the McCauslin to Jab Switch*, 63.

²² "George Farnsworth - Men of Early Oconto County," Oconto County WebGen Project (Oconto, WI), accessed January 13, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101005060815/http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wioconto/GeorgeFarnsworth1.htm>.

Great Depression contributed additional challenges, the mill did not permanently close until 1943.²³ The Oconto Lumber Company ensured its longevity by following practices similar to those utilized by the Holt Lumber Company. As other prominent Wisconsin lumbermen were forced to move their operations to the south and west in search of new timber supplies, generally prior to the advent of World War I, these two companies each remained firmly established in Oconto for the greater part of a century.²⁴

While entire theses could certainly be written about Oconto's lumber companies themselves, they are not the primary focus of this study. Rather, the effect of the lumber industry on the development of Oconto is of the greatest interest. The rapid expansion of white pine logging, later supplemented by the milling of hemlock and hardwoods, influenced not only the economic development of the community, but its form, infrastructure, and population growth as well. Virtually every aspect of life in Oconto was affected by the city's sustained reliance on the lumber industry, to both the benefit and detriment of the community.

A City Takes Its Form

As was common in many mill communities, the lumber industry significantly influenced the general form and layout of Oconto. However, because the village (and later city) of Oconto was organized by incorporating a number of settlements that developed along the river independently into one municipality, it lacks a singular point of central development from which the rest of the city expanded. Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of the city are labeled with the

²³ Rucker, *From the McCauslin to Jab Switch*, 64.

²⁴ "Big Pine Long since Gone but Lumbering Continues," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 10, 1935.

various additions that form the city proper, named for the early settlers who owned the sections of land.²⁵ As a result, the street pattern, which does not markedly change over time, and the paths of the railroads, added in the 1870s, through the city reflect both the position of the numerous milling operations and the river on which they were situated. Streets curve and cut at sharp angles to accommodate the path of the Oconto River, which, at the site of Oconto, features two large bends; both Main Street on the north side of the river and McDonald Street on the south side run roughly parallel to the river. Furthermore, the four points at which streets cross the Oconto River all occur adjacent to the location of lumber mills.²⁶ The overall resulting layout of the city is one that lacks a neatly coordinated gridded street system but conveniently serves the lumber industry's need for access to river and railway transportation.

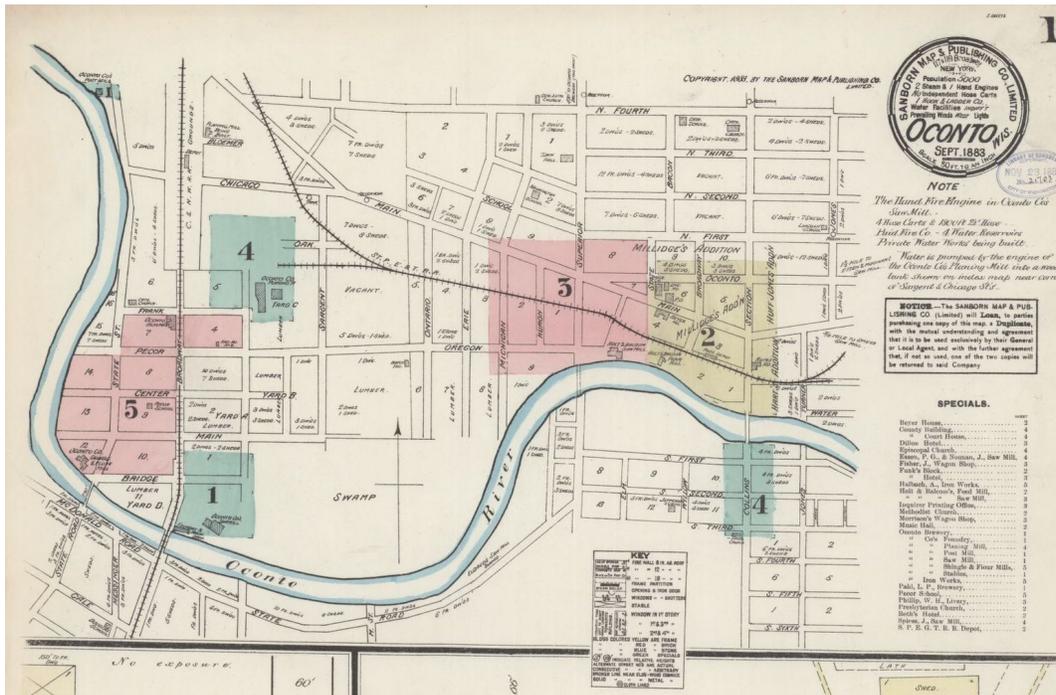


Figure One. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Oconto, September 1883. Library of Congress.

²⁵ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin, Sanborn Map Company, Feb. 1893, Map, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn09646_003/.

²⁶ Milwaukee Lith. & Engr. Co. Oconto, Wis. [Milwaukee? print. by the Milwaukee Lith. & Engr. Co, 1871] Map, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121104050459/http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wioconto/1871CityOconto2.jpg>.

The somewhat disjointed development of early Oconto and its identity as a lumbering community are illustrated not only by the physical layout of its streets, but by the names of those streets as well. Main Street, which traverses the length of the city from east to west, connected the early mills and settlements and was first known as Mill Road.²⁷ The transition from Mill Road to Main Street must have occurred early on in the city's history; there is no Mill Road on an 1871 map of the city. Thus, both the initial name and the long-term location of Oconto's primary thoroughfare were determined by the presence of the lumber mills.

However, because of this change, Oconto contained two roadways known as Main Street into the twentieth century. In addition to the Main Street that extends throughout the entire city, a second Main Street existed in an area of the city colloquially known as Frenchtown and is denoted as "Pecor's Addition" on maps.²⁸ This section of the city, tucked against a wide, meandering bend in the Oconto River, was founded by French-Canadian immigrant Peter Pecor, who arrived in Oconto around 1850.²⁹ Main Street in Frenchtown was short, extending for a few blocks from east to west between a swampy lot that would eventually be owned by the Oconto Lumber Company and the Oconto Lumber Company's shingle mill on the river. The street was later renamed Baldwin Street, but this switch took time to be fully accepted. In 1904, it remains Main Street; in 1911, it is denoted as "Baldwin Street (Main)." Only on the 1919 Sanborn map is

²⁷ Hall, *Oconto Tri-Cent*, 28.

²⁸ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto*, Feb. 1893.

²⁹ Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 43.

the street listed as Baldwin Street alone.³⁰ The various settlements of Oconto may have been connected at an early date, but the remnants of Frenchtown's original existence as a smaller community with a separate nucleus persisted for fifty years after the city's incorporation.

In addition to influencing the placement and direction of the city's streets, the lumber industry in Oconto also played a role in the materials used to construct and improve them. The swampy nature of the land on the north side of the Oconto River meant the streets were generally muddy and required frequent maintenance. For example, early Mill Road was initially widened and periodically made level with sawdust and wood slabs leftover as waste from the sawmills.³¹ Early newspapers also frequently published ordinances requiring the construction of plank sidewalks in various areas of the community. An 1859 issue of the *Oconto Pioneer* features an order by village president Thomas Milledge for the construction of an eight-foot wide sidewalk built of "good two inch plank, to be laid upon good sleepers" along the east side of Section Street in the portion of the city known as Huff Jones's Addition.³²

A similar ordinance issued by the village street commissioners appears again in 1864 in the *Oconto Lumberman* wherein various property owners are required to build sidewalks "seven feet wide, of plank two inches thick and not more than eight or less than six inches wide" in front

³⁰ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*. Sanborn Map Company, Oct. 1904, Map, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn09646_005/; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*. Sanborn Map Company, Sept. 1911, Map, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn09646_006/; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*. Sanborn Map Company, Aug. 1919, Map, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn09646_007/.

³¹ Hall, *Oconto Tri-Cent*, 28.

³² "An Ordinance," *Oconto Pioneer*, July 30, 1859, accessed January 16, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=e7a98d0b-47e8-4e89-8db2-ddabd75063b3/wiotdoc0/20160519/00000001&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=plank&query1_field=ALL.

of their buildings.³³ The results of these and like ordinances for relatively uniform sidewalks are featured in lumberman John Emmett Nelligan's recollections of Oconto. After arriving in the city in 1871, which he calls "rather large for a city so far north," Nelligan notes that "plank sidewalks [...] lined the muddy streets, and behind the sidewalks stood the mercantile establishments of the booming little city."³⁴ While perhaps unimpressive in comparison to the paved streets and sidewalks that would later replace their early iterations constructed of dirt, sawdust, and wooden planks, the establishment of numerous lumber enterprises in Oconto was, nevertheless, a catalyst for the construction and improvement of the roads that connected the once-separate mill settlements and encouraged their establishment into a unified city.

Furthermore, though the central role the lumber industry played in the form and function of Oconto did not exclusively determine where the city's different industrial, commercial, and residential districts developed, it certainly had significant influence over their locations, much in the same way the city's street pattern was platted in a manner convenient to the needs of the mills. While a general pattern of district development can often be found across lumber towns as a whole, historian Randall Rohe notes that this pattern is complicated by a number of factors, including the size, terrain, age, and function of the community.³⁵ In the case of Oconto, the city developed from multiple centers of settlement along the Oconto River and expanded outward over the course of the lumbering era. This expansion was relatively limited; the city's total area

³³ "Notice to Build Sidewalk," *Oconto Lumberman*, August 18, 1864, accessed January 16, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=556c1824-d181-4652-b42c-e19c7901a65c/wiotdoc0/20150215/00000001&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

³⁴ John Emmett Nelligan, *A White Pine Empire: The Life of a Lumberman*, 2nd edition (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 1969), 37.

³⁵ Rohe, "Lumbering: Wisconsin's Northern Urban Frontier," 232.

amounts to just over seven square miles.³⁶ Nevertheless, because the city lacked a singular point of origin and grew to include industrial and manufacturing facilities unrelated to the lumber industry, combined with the city's small physical footprint, it similarly lacked starkly segregated districts. Certain areas of the city were predominantly more industrial, commercial, or residential than others, but none belonged exclusively to one category.

Main Street, initially constructed to connect Oconto's early logging settlements, was located within convenient walking distance to the mills on the river and became both Oconto's primary commercial district and the location of the stately homes of the city's wealthiest citizens during the height of the lumber boom. These 21 homes were built primarily between 1860 and 1905 and now form the majority of the West Main Street Historic District in Oconto. Aligning with Rohe's conclusion that wealthy lumbermen typically lived in the "most desirable locations," the houses are clustered together on the western end of Main Street, the end furthest removed from, though still within walking distance of, the lumber mills.³⁷ However, while the district is characterized as a "three block residential neighborhood," its National Register of Historic Places nomination file also describes it as located "on both sides of Main Street of the business district," revealing the lack of distinct separation between the two areas.³⁸

Based on a 1919 map, the middle stretch of the street, which runs closest to the mills, is more commercial, mostly containing a mixture of stores, saloons, and hotels or boarding houses

³⁶ "2017 U.S. Gazetteer Files." United States Census Bureau. accessed January 20, 2020, https://www2.census.gov/geo/docs/maps-data/data/gazetteer/2017_Gazetteer/2017_gaz_place_55.txt.

³⁷ Rohe, "Lumbering: Wisconsin's Northern Urban Frontier," 232.

³⁸ National Register of Historic Places, West Main Street Historic District, Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin, National Register #79000101, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail?assetID=2f45c415-8df2-4573-a05b-7066d47d0e61>.

frequented by mill workers. Yet, even this portion of Main Street is punctuated by private dwellings and buildings oriented towards community or religious life. The Farnsworth Public Library, a Presbyterian Church, and the local Elks' Lodge also fall within this primary business district. Like the western end, the eastern end of Main Street transitions back to predominantly residential homes but also contains an electric light plant that was not in service at the time the map was created.³⁹ With its mills located a few blocks to the south along the river's edge, Oconto's Main Street, running through the center of the city, became an anchor for many facets of life in this lumbering community and illustrates the influence the earliest mills and the decisions made by those who owned them had on the city's subsequent development.

The legacy of the lumber industry on the form and function of Oconto is illustrated by the location of some of the industrial sites that developed after the city's many mills claimed much of the land along the river. Given that the Holt Lumber Company and the Oconto Lumber Company remained in business through most of the first half of the twentieth century and occupied the same sites throughout their existence, newer industries had fewer options in regards to where they could be located within city limits. Therefore, in much the same way that Main Street featured a mixture of residential, commercial, and community spaces, other areas of Oconto lacked distinctly segregated spaces as well. In one instance, the Oconto Knitting Works was situated on the corner of Superior Avenue and Adams Street. The facility was relatively large, employing approximately two hundred people in 1921.⁴⁰ However, the knitting works is surrounded primarily by residential buildings rather than similar manufacturing plants. The other

³⁹ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*. Aug. 1919.

⁴⁰ *Polk's Wisconsin State Gazetteer and Business Directory* (Detroit, MI: R.L. Polk & Company, 1921), accessed February 24, 2020, 1011.

largest buildings in its vicinity are the city high school and a repair shop. The dichotomy between the Oconto Knitting Works and the family dwellings that surround it can be attributed, in part, to the fact that it occupied a structure that had previously housed a community-oriented recreational space; as of 1911, the building was the site of the local Turner Hall.⁴¹ At the same time, the knitting works' location in what would otherwise be a residential neighborhood suggests a lack of space for it in proximity to the city's other industrial facilities, mainly lumber mills, near the river.

Beyond industrial or manufacturing facilities, other clusters of commercial blocks and centers of community life existed outside of Main Street during the lumbering era as well, particularly in Frenchtown where the Oconto Lumber Company's enterprises were located. Frenchtown was both slightly farther away from Main Street than the Holt Lumber Company enterprises and a more developed early community nucleus, as evidenced by the fact that it was given a specific name that remained in use throughout the twentieth century. In 1872, three years after Oconto's incorporation as a city, the *Oconto County Reporter* declared that "Frenchtown has more buildings in process of erection than any other part of the city" including, at that time, a new hotel.⁴² Much like the primary commercial district of Main Street, Brazeau Avenue in Frenchtown, denoted as State Street until 1911, contained most of the area's retailers, which included two general stores, a milliner, a meat seller, and a feed and flour store in 1887. The

⁴¹ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, September 1911; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, August 1919.

⁴² *Oconto County Reporter*, August 8, 1872, accessed January 20, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170421/00000030&pg_seq=3&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=frenchtown&query1_filed=ALL.

Hotel de Paris, the Montreal House, and an unnamed boarding house also stood on this same stretch of road, which extended from the Oconto River to the north.⁴³

In addition to the retailers and hotels along Brazeau Avenue, Frenchtown consisted of a combination of industrial facilities, family residences, and community-oriented buildings all within close proximity to one another. A large portion of Frenchtown was devoted to the various operations of the Oconto Lumber Company, including its lumber yards. In addition to the natural boundaries of the Oconto River, the yards further limited the amount of space available and the ability to segregate specific districts within the neighborhood. St. Peter's Catholic Church, located on the corner of Brazeau Avenue and Frank Street, stood as an early community landmark; for many years, the Oconto Iron Works was located just on the opposite side of Frank Street before it later became a hay warehouse and finally a residential lot. A saloon stood across Broadway from the iron works, within clear sight of St. Peter's.⁴⁴ Pecor School was located on Center Street between Brazeau Avenue and Broadway, just steps away from the hotels on Brazeau that housed primarily mill workers and the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad line that ran down the center of Broadway to provide convenient railway access for the Oconto Lumber Company.⁴⁵ The influence of the lumber industry was pervasive in the Frenchtown section of Oconto, as it was throughout the rest of the city. In a city built on the pine logging and lumbering industry, where Oconto's mills provided the earliest points around which the remainder of the

⁴³ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, Sanborn Map Company, July 1887, Map, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn09646_002/.

⁴⁴ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, July 1887; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, Oct. 1904; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, Aug. 1919.

⁴⁵ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, July 1887.

community developed, it became virtually impossible to separate everyday life from the activities and interests of that industry.

Secondary Industries and Economic Diversification

While Oconto remained heavily reliant on the continued success of its lumber industry for its economic and overall stability throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century, the lumber industry's presence also spurred the establishment of numerous other industries in the city. Many of these industries supported the needs of the lumber industry, but not all of them did. None of the secondary industries or those that developed outside of the realm of logging and lumbering were large or powerful enough to match the status of the lumber industry in Oconto. However, their presence was nevertheless vital to the diversification of the city's economy and its ability to maintain its stability through the decline of logging in comparison to communities in northern Wisconsin that were dependent upon the lumber industry alone.

The city's proximity to the Oconto River and the Bay of Green Bay, which proved so vital to the transportation of people, supplies, raw timber, and finished lumber, was also the site of another key natural resource: fish. Therefore, as more people arrived at Oconto during the 1850s and 1860s in response to its emerging lumber industry, commercial fishing grew in tandem and soon became the city's second leading industry.⁴⁶ The importance of fishing alongside logging in Oconto is symbolized on the Oconto County Courthouse, built on Washington Street in 1891. The courthouse features a plaque above the main door inscribed with the image of both

⁴⁶ Robert C. Willging, *History Afield: Stories from the Golden Age of Wisconsin Sporting Life* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011), 16.

a fish and a log.⁴⁷ Much like the lumber generated by the sawmills, these fishermen shipped their products to southern markets at Milwaukee or Chicago. W.A. Holt, near the beginning of his long career as one of Oconto's most prominent lumber barons, recalled seeing "professional" fishermen who "caught fish in nets and killed many fish by shooting off dynamite, then gathered up the dead fish as they came to the surface."⁴⁸

Louis Reed was an early settler in Oconto; he arrived in 1856 and worked in the sawmills before establishing himself as a commercial fisherman along the shores of the bay, just south of the Oconto River.⁴⁹ The Reed family remained on the homestead Louis Reed established for generations, continuing in the fishing industry. By 1880, Louis Reed was one of many fishermen in Oconto. The census page containing Reed and his family also contains four other families with at least one male member of the household who list their occupation as "fisherman."⁵⁰ According to Donald Reed, a great-grandson of Louis and fourth-generation Oconto resident, whitefish and herring were among the earliest types of fish caught, later transitioning to primarily herring, and eventually to yellow perch in the 1940s as commercial fishing declined in the area. Thousands of pounds of fish could be caught per day, after which the men would "salt the fish in barrels at the

⁴⁷ National Register of Historic Places, Oconto County Courthouse, Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin, National Register #82000690, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail?assetID=ea20cf16-bc35-40c4-9786-bf88348ed9a0>.

⁴⁸ William Arthur Holt, *A Wisconsin Lumberman Looks Backward: An Intimate Glance Into 100 Years of North Woods Lumbering by the Holt Family* (Oconto, WI: 1948), 21.

⁴⁹ *Commemorative Biographical Record of the West Shore of Green Bay, Wisconsin: Including the Counties of Brown, Oconto, Marinette, and Florence* (Chicago, IL: J.H. Beers & Co, 1896), 712.

⁵⁰ "United States Census, 1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9YBP-P9K?cc=1417683&wc=XH3H-168%3A1589394822%2C1589416071%2C1589416070%2C1589395980> : 24 December 2015), Wisconsin > Oconto > Oconto > ED 106 > image 12 of 19; citing NARA microfilm publication T9 (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., n.d.)

fish houses to be shipped by the railroads, going to Chicago and other places.”⁵¹ Initially sparked by the emergence of sawmill settlements on the Oconto River, the existence and longevity of the commercial fishing industry in Oconto runs parallel to that of the lumber industry; the prominence of both can be roughly bounded within the years between 1850 and 1950. While done on a smaller scale than lumbering, families engaged in commercial fishing, like the Reeds, importantly illustrate how Oconto residents could support themselves outside of the lumber industry and serves as one example of economic diversification in the community.

As the lumbering operations in Oconto grew throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, so did their subsidiary and secondary industries. At first, the lumber companies owned and operated relatively simple sawmills along the river; the rough timber was then shipped to their facilities in Chicago or Milwaukee where it could be turned into a uniform, finished product and then sold in retail lumber yards. However, the railway system running through Oconto, first established in 1871, had developed to such a degree by the 1880s that the companies could readily ship materials directly to retailers instead.⁵² As a result, many lumbermen scaled back their operations in Chicago and established and operated a variety of other mills in Oconto. In the case of the Holt Lumber Company, its Oconto office served primarily as a subordinate branch of the company’s headquarters in Chicago until the 1890s. Under the de facto and later formal management of W.A. Holt, however, this relationship gradually switched, and Oconto became the primary base of operations from the 1890s until the company’s closure.⁵³

⁵¹ Donald Reed, Interview with Robert C. Willging, In *History Afield: Stories from the Golden Age of Wisconsin Sporting Life* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011), 16-17.

⁵² Rucker, *From the McCauslin to Jab Switch*, 73.

⁵³ “Holt Lumber Company Records, 1839-1969,” Green Bay Mss 1, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Archives and Area Research Center, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

The most common facilities to join the sawmills in Oconto after the establishment of its railroad connections were planing mills and shingle mills. Whereas sawmills cut the rough, felled timber into boards, planing mills further cut these boards into uniform length lumber suitable for construction; shingle mills cut tapered wooden shingles typically used as roofing or siding material. The Oconto Lumber Company took advantage of the newly established Chicago and Northwestern railroad line before most of its local competitors. Per W.A. Holt, the Oconto Lumber Company began to ship its lumber by rail “as soon as the C. & N.W. Railroad was built through Oconto.”⁵⁴ By 1872, the Oconto Lumber Company had constructed planing and shingle mills in the vicinity of its sawmill.⁵⁵ However, the Oconto Lumber Company did not end its lumber manufacturing operations expansion there. In addition to the two new mills, the company eventually grew within the next three years to include a box factory attached to the planing mill and later began manufacturing posts and ties at a fourth facility along the river as well.⁵⁶

Many of Oconto’s other lumber barons soon joined Farnsworth and the Oconto Lumber Company in its expanded manufacturing endeavors. Jacob Spies, who arrived in Oconto in 1859 and opened a meat market, purchased an existing mill on the east side of the city and entered the lumber business in 1870.⁵⁷ By 1873, he was selling not only manufactured lumber, but shingles

⁵⁴ Holt, *A Wisconsin Lumberman Looks Backward*, 12.

⁵⁵ Western Historical Company, *History of Northern Wisconsin, Containing an Account of Its Settlement, Growth, Development, and Resources; An Extensive Sketch of Its Counties, Cities, Towns and Villages, Their Improvements, Industries, Manufactories; Biographical Sketches, Portraits of Prominent Men and Early Settlers; Views of County Seats, etc.*, (Chicago, IL: 1881), 658.

⁵⁶ “Our City, Its Business in Detail: Oconto Company,” *Oconto County Reporter*, December 25, 1875, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170428/00000072&pg_seq=3&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=box%20factory&query1_field=ALL; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, July 1887.

⁵⁷ Western Historical Company, *History of Northern Wisconsin*, 664.

as well.⁵⁸ However, Spies' career as an Oconto lumberman was not as long-lived as the Oconto and Holt Lumber Companies. Though his facilities had grown by the early twentieth century to include a separate sawmill and planing mill, Spies leased them out to the partnership of Pendelton and Gilkey rather than operating them himself; by 1911, the mills disappear from city maps altogether and a pickle factory appears in the area instead.⁵⁹ Though the length of time Spies was engaged in lumbering and the manufacture of finished lumber materials is more typical than that of the Oconto or Holt Companies, his operations nevertheless further illustrate how the city's lumber industry increased in size and complexity over the course of the lumber boom and the absence of an industry monopoly in Oconto in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given the city's heavy reliance on the production of lumber and associated products, this lack of monopoly is a key stabilizing factor in Oconto's history. Spies' mill may have closed early in the twentieth century, but other companies continued their successful operations for decades after and provided continued employment for community members.

The Holt Lumber Company appears to have been slower to join its competitors in constructing additional manufacturing mills in Oconto. In 1880, then still incorporated under the partnership between D.R. Holt and Uri Balcom, the company's operations in the city were limited to a single sawmill.⁶⁰ However, as previously mentioned, the company's Chicago operations were gradually phased out under the leadership of W.A. Holt, and its number of

⁵⁸ *The Oconto Lumberman*, December 5, 1873, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=556c1824-d181-4652-b42c-e19c7901a65c/wiotdoc0/20150215/00000006&pg_seq=2&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=jacob%20spies&query1_field=ALL.

⁵⁹ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, October 1904; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, September 1911.

⁶⁰ Western Historical Company, *History of Northern Wisconsin*, 658.

facilities in Oconto increased as those in Chicago closed. Within the next fifteen years, the Holt Lumber Company's operations in Oconto expanded to include a planing and cedar post mill, as well as a shingle mill established in 1892 that produced seven million shingles in its first year.⁶¹

Further adding to his extensive enterprises, W.A. Holt also incorporated a hardwood manufacturing company in Oconto in 1918. The Holt Hardwood Company traced its roots to Michigan, where it was founded in part by W.E. Williams in 1893, who then moved the company to Oconto in 1916. Holt purchased the business from Williams two years later. Though closely connected to the Holt Lumber Company, both in regards to its ownership and operating facilities, it was not affected by the eventual closure of the Holt Company mills in 1938. In a plant designed by Holt's son-in-law and company superintendent Donald DeWitt, the Holt Hardwood Company was capable of producing 40,000 feet of finished hardwood flooring per day. Material not used for flooring was manufactured into broom handles, reducing the amount of waste the company generated.⁶² The Holt Hardwood Company operated continuously for nearly fifty years before it transitioned to producing precision electronic instruments during the second half of the twentieth century under the name Holt Instruments Laboratories and the continued leadership of the DeWitt family.⁶³ In this regard, the establishment of the Holt Hardwood Company as a subsidiary of Holt's original lumbering operations and its later transition into electronic

⁶¹ *Sixth Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Labor, Census, and Industrial Statistics of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Democratic Printing Company, 1894), 123a, accessed January 26, 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?id=qY03AQAAMAAJ&lpg=RA1-PA123&ots=QnNIB-qwrs&dq=holt%20lumber%20company%20post%20mill&pg=RA1-PA123#v=onepage&q=holt%20lumber%20&f=false>.

⁶² "Founder's Ideals Are Continued for 91 Years," 77.

⁶³ "Holt Lumber Company Records, 1839-1969."

equipment illustrates how the lumber industry served as a foundational aspect of Oconto's economy and continued to have an impact on the city after the lumbering era came to a close.

The establishment of lumber product manufacturing facilities in Oconto is important not only because it provides evidence that the industry continued to grow in both size and sophistication. Even with this in mind, the city's economy remained largely dependent upon natural resource extraction in the form of pine or hardwood lumber prior to World War II. However, the expansion does suggest a greater sense of commitment and permanence on the part of the lumber companies that owned the facilities; Oconto's relationship to the lumber industry as a whole had shifted by the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in the case of the Holt Lumber Company. Rather than serving as a remote branch office for companies based primarily in Chicago, Oconto had become the primary base of operations for the wide variety of activities associated with the production and sale of lumber and wood-based products. In comparison to company towns that often folded their sawmills in one location as soon as timber supplies ran out and moved on to the next, or communities with fewer or smaller lumbering operations, the shift provided a greater long-term stability to the industry in Oconto. If only because it was more costly, the larger companies operating in Oconto could not simply dismantle their array of facilities and rapidly establish them elsewhere. As much as Oconto had become entrenched in the lumber industry, the lumber company owners had become entrenched in Oconto too.

Secondary to lumbering, the growth of the lumber industry in Oconto also spurred the growth of the commercial and service sectors of the city's economy as Oconto developed from a frontier settlement into a bustling city. Within a relatively short period of time after lumbering began, Oconto became home to a number of different newspapers, two of the earliest being the

Oconto Pioneer and the *Oconto Lumberman*. The *Oconto Pioneer* was founded in 1859 by George C. Ginty, a young printer from Canada; at the time of the 1860 United States census, he was only 22 years old and living in a boarding house.⁶⁴ In its inaugural three-page issue, released on June 25, 1859, Ginty declared the paper to be Republican in politics but ultimately “devoted to the growing interests of the county,” with the principal purpose of making the paper “a home institution for the advancement and prosperity of Oconto.”⁶⁵ *The Oconto Pioneer* was printed out of an office located above the early Oconto Lumber Company’s store.⁶⁶ No other address was given, suggesting that the store itself was a landmark recognizable to both those living in the village of Oconto and the other communities emerging in the greater county area. The location of Ginty’s publishing office in the village once again illustrates the connection between the growth of Oconto as a community and the lumber industry upon which it was founded.

The *Pioneer* was joined by the *Oconto Lumberman*, owned and edited by Joseph W. Hall, in 1864. The paper proclaimed itself “Devoted to Lumbering Interests, Local News, and General Intelligence” and provided coverage of local Civil War concerns, national and international news, and advertisements and humor columns.⁶⁷ Under the continued leadership of Joseph Hall, the

⁶⁴ “United States Census, 1860,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GBSC-9D3C?cc=1473181&wc=7QK5-TPF%3A1589422311%2C1589437339%2C1589437377> : 24 March 2017), Wisconsin > Oconto > Oconto Village East Ward > image 17 of 24; from “1860 U.S. Federal Census - Population,” database, *Fold3.com* (<http://www.fold3.com> : n.d.); citing NARA microfilm publication M653 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

⁶⁵ “Salutatory,” *Oconto Pioneer*, June 25, 1859, p. 2, accessed January 27, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=e7a98d0b-47e8-4e89-8db2-ddabd75063b3/wiotdoc0/20160317/00000001&pg_seq=2&search_doc=.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁷ *Oconto Lumberman*, August 8, 1864, accessed January 27, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=556c1824-d181-4652-b42c-e19c7901a65c/wiotdoc0/20150215/00000001&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

Lumberman remained in print until about 1920 and, during that time, grew “from a small five columned sheet to a good sized county weekly.”⁶⁸ Suggestive of the paper’s success and the importance of the lumber industry in Oconto, the *Lumberman* includes the tagline “Official Paper of the County” beginning in 1869.⁶⁹ The coexistence of these first two local newspapers and the difference in their titles further illustrates how the lumber industry catalyzed the early development of Oconto. The *Oconto Pioneer* was established the same year Oconto incorporated as a village, and its title carries with it connotations of existing on a frontier, of being the first to embark on a new endeavor. Five years later, not only had the readership increased enough in the village to be able to support two papers, but the title and coverage of the *Oconto Lumberman* suggests that Oconto’s identity had become firmly attached to the lumber industry.

Between 1870 and 1890, six other newspapers of both Republican and Democratic bent were established and published in the city of Oconto. The *Oconto County Reporter*, which was founded in 1871 and eventually absorbed *The Enquirer* and the *Oconto County Enterprise* in the 1920s, is still in existence at the time of this writing.⁷⁰ When analyzed from a broader perspective, the establishment of so many newspapers in one northern lumbering community towards the end of the nineteenth century lends itself to the interpretation that Oconto’s populace

⁶⁸ “Lumberman First Newspaper to Be Published in Oconto County,” *Oconto County Reporter*, May 28, 1931, accessed January 27, 2020, Wisconsin Historical Society, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA9638>.

⁶⁹ *Oconto Lumberman*, November 27, 1869, accessed January 27, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=556c1824-d181-4652-b42c-e19c7901a65c/wiotdoc0/20150215/00000003&pg_seq=2&search_doc=.

⁷⁰ “US Newspaper Directory Search Results,” *Chronicling America*, Library of Congress, accessed January 27, 2020, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/results/?state=Wisconsin&county=&city=Oconto&year1=1690&year2=2020&terms=&frequency=&language=ðnicity=&labor=&material_type=&lcn=&rows=20.

had become diverse enough in its interests and opinions to warrant multiple news outlets and was in possession of enough disposable income to be able to regularly purchase newspapers.

In addition to its multiple local newspapers, those living in Oconto by 1870 also appeared to have some degree of choice in regards to where and from whom they purchased their everyday goods and services as lumbering increased and the community grew. The author of an anonymous letter sent from Oconto to the editor of the *Green Bay Advocate* names “Milledge, Royce, Newton, and others” among the city’s grocers and notes that “each seem to use every effort to secure for their patrons general satisfaction.” Hardware could be purchased from two different individuals, while three shops represented the boot and shoe business. Oconto, furthermore, was “blessed with two drug stores” at the time. The author goes on to describe local lawyers, doctors, and the three most prominent hotels in the city.⁷¹ Twenty years after the first sawmills rose up on the banks of the Oconto River and marked a new era of human activity and the beginning of white settlement, Oconto had grown into a city significantly more metropolitan in its appearance and function.

Despite the availability of goods and services provided by independently owned enterprises in early Oconto, the influence of the lumber companies cannot be underestimated. The same letter to the editor that so positively represents the business done by a variety of local merchants also bemoans the restrictions faced by area consumers. According to the author, “There are many other places of business, but they are controlled chiefly by the mill owners.” As a result, the mill owners had “their own everything, thereby withholding from the general

⁷¹ “Letter to the Editor,” *Green Bay Advocate*, February 2, 1870. Reprinted in the *Oconto County Reporter*, June 19, 1969, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20190518/00000038&pg_seq=12&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=there%20are%20many%20other%20places%20of%20business&query1_field=ALL.

business a large share of patronage.”⁷² Thus, while the early development of the lumber industry in Oconto acted as a catalyst that drew more entrepreneurs and tradesmen to the city, thereby increasing the diversity of its emerging local consumer and service economy, the lumber companies also acted as a limiting factor that ensured the city’s and its citizens’ continued dependence on the companies themselves and the lumber industry as a whole.

As a subsidiary enterprise of the Holt Lumber Company, the Oconto Electric Company is a prime example of how the lumber industry in Oconto brought about development while exerting a controlling influence over the city. Organized around 1902 by the Holt family, the Oconto Electric Company used waste material from the various Holt Company mills as fuel to generate electric power, power that was then used to operate the company’s mills and sold to the public.⁷³ This was not the first company to provide electric power to Oconto; the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company had been established five years prior in 1897.⁷⁴ Given its relatively small size and far proximity to the north, the fact that Oconto had two electric companies around the turn of the century is notable. Wisconsin had no electric power at all until its first plant opened in Appleton in 1882, and the vast majority of rural areas did not begin to get access to electricity until the 1930s.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Founder’s Ideals Are Continued for 91 Years,” 72.

⁷⁴ “In Re Investigation on Motion of the Commission of the Rates, Rules, and Regulations of the Oconto Electric Company and the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company,” in *Opinions and Decisions of the Railroad Commission State of Wisconsin*, vol. 12 (Madison, WI: 1913), 584, accessed February 7, 2020, https://books.google.com/books?id=85QbAQAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbg_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=oconto&f=false.

⁷⁵ “The Introduction of Electrical Power - Turning Points in Wisconsin History,” Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed February 7, 2020, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS427>.

The relationship between the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company and the Holt enterprises was fraught with conflict. After organization, the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company was responsible for providing power to city street lights and any other steam-powered electric properties. However, the company's station burned down in 1899 and drew power from the Holt Lumber Company while the station was rebuilt. Oconto was without lights during this period, and the city subsequently entered into a three-year contract with W.A. Holt in September to get its electricity from the plant that had previously only powered his lumber mill. By the end of this first contract period in 1902, the city renewed its contract with Holt's company for another three years while Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company sold power to private customers in Oconto.⁷⁶ Though Holt retained ownership of the power plant, the Oconto Electric Company was formally incorporated in January 1906 by W.H. Young, T.H. Phelps, and Albert Fulton and continued to provide electricity to the city until 1909.⁷⁷ Conveniently, and to the outrage of Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company, Holt also served as city mayor from 1903-1907.⁷⁸ When the company failed to secure a city contract in 1906, it filed suit against Holt alleging corruption on the grounds that he received personal benefit, whether directly or indirectly, from the contract being awarded to the Oconto Electric Company. The case reached the state supreme court in 1907 but was decided against Peoples.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ "In Re Investigation on Motion of the Commission of the Rates, Rules, and Regulations of the Oconto Electric Company and the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company," 585-586

⁷⁷ "Incorporated," *Oconto County Reporter*, January 18, 1906, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170104/00000002; "In Re Investigation on Motion of the Commission of the Rates, Rules, and Regulations of the Oconto Electric Company and the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company," 586.

⁷⁸ Hall, *A History of Oconto*, 264.

⁷⁹ "State ex rel. People's Land & Manufacturing Co. v. Holt," 132 Wis. 131 (1907), accessed February 7, 2020, <https://cite.case.law/wis/132/131/>.

Tensions continued to build between the two companies. Though Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company was finally awarded a city contract in 1909, the Oconto Electric Company had broken its informal agreement with Peoples and began selling power commercially before its municipal contract ended. Over the next few years, the Oconto Electric Company continually lowered its rates to such a point that Peoples could not continue to match it and both companies operated at or near a loss by 1913. While the Oconto Electric Company was essentially supported by Holt's successful milling operations, the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company was not and, faced with being driven out of business for lack of profit, filed another complaint against the Oconto Electric Company. The state railroad commission investigated the issue and subsequently ordered both companies to abandon their commercial rates schedule in favor of one instituted by the commission wherein both companies charged its customers equally.⁸⁰

Early public and private access to electricity was a vital infrastructural development in Oconto in regards to improving citizens' everyday life and making the city attractive to incoming residents and entrepreneurs or industrialists, especially in a region of Wisconsin distantly removed from larger, more metropolitan midwestern cities like Milwaukee or Chicago. In part, this advancement can be attributed to the city's large lumber industry; Oconto had sufficiently urbanized by the turn of the century as a result of the industry's expansion to be able to warrant and maintain the systems needed to support electrical power. However, because the city was so dependent on lumbering, power and influence in the community was often concentrated in the hands of a select few people. In the case of providing electricity to Oconto, state intervention and

⁸⁰ "In Re Investigation on Motion of the Commission of the Rates, Rules, and Regulations of the Oconto Electric Company and the Peoples Land and Manufacturing Company," 600.

regulation was needed to prevent the Oconto Electric Company from forcing its competition out of business. The Oconto Electric Company was eventually sold to the Wisconsin Public Service Company, but it very much remained a subsidiary enterprise within the larger operations of the Holt Lumber Company. As of 1938, the year the Holt sawmills closed, the Holt family was continuing to sell the power generated from their mills and steam turbines to the Wisconsin Public Service Company.⁸¹ The longevity of the lumber companies in Oconto may have provided some stability in the face of an otherwise turbulent industry, but the control the city's lumber barons attempted to exert for their own benefit also resulted in corruption and conflict.

Population Growth

Like most lumbering communities, Oconto experienced rapid population growth after its mills were established. In 1855, five years after the initial construction of the two mills owned by the Jones brothers but four years before it achieved village status, the population in Oconto stood at 793 people. At this point, its residents were largely male, comprising 68 percent of the total population. Due to the nature of work required, both in the sawmills and in the surrounding woodlands, the populations in lumber towns across northern Wisconsin were typically young, male, and single. The 1855 state census only provides the names of each head of household, along with the number of male and female residents in those households, so it is impossible to know the age and marital status of each man living in Oconto at this point. Despite this, it is nevertheless likely that Oconto was inhabited primarily by single males. Seven households report

⁸¹ "Founder's Ideals are Continued for 91 Years," 72.

having more than ten males present, with the two highest having forty-five and fifty respectively, suggesting they served more as hotels or boarding houses rather than single family residences.⁸²

Five years later, Oconto's population had risen slightly to 887 residents, 521 of whom were men. Since the 1860 United States census provides occupational information, it is possible to see the dominance of the lumber industry in Oconto. Eighty-one men list occupations that are readily connected to the business of lumbering and logging; these titles include those of millwright, lumberman, lumber agent or dealer, and lumber manufacturer. In some instances, the census taker assigned "laborers in and about the saw mills" to entire swaths of men rather than writing it on each individual line. The men to whom this bulk occupational description was given appear on the records as living together in boarding houses or hotels and are predominantly between the ages of 16 and 35, supporting the general conclusion that early lumber towns frequently attracted single men without a permanent, single-family residence.

The draw of the mills as a source of employment for men becomes stronger when one includes the statistics for the 155 men whose occupation is individually listed as "laborer." The lack of specificity of the term makes it impossible to unequivocally conclude that all these men were employed by lumbering operations, but they also predominantly fell between the ages of 16 and 35 and are more frequently single residents in a hotel, boarding house, or other household rather than the head of their own. The similarities between the men whose type of employment can more readily be tied to the lumber industry and those whose occupation is more ambiguous is, at the very least, suggestive of the fact that these men were also tied to the lumber industry in some manner. To neatly quantify these numbers, 236 of the 521 total male citizens living in the

⁸² "Wisconsin State Census, 1855," Database with images, *FamilySearch*. <http://FamilySearch.org>: 30 January 2020, Citing Department of State, State Historical Society, Madison.

village of Oconto in 1860, including male children too young to work, were definitely or probably gainfully employed in positions related to the lumber industry, amounting to 46 percent. When the 134 male residents under the age of 18 listed as living as a member of a family, with no occupation provided, are removed from the equation, that percentage rises to nearly 61 percent.⁸³

The years between 1860 and 1870 resulted in a much more dramatic population increase than during the five years between 1855 and 1860. Within this ten-year span, the number of people living in Oconto jumped from 887 to 2,655, representing an increase of nearly 200 percent. During the decade, Oconto expanded from two wards, East and West, to three, East, West, and North, and had been incorporated as a city.⁸⁴ It is also worth remembering that the city's two largest and longest-operating mills came into existence during the decade as well; the Holt and Balcom Lumber Company was founded in 1862, and the Oconto Lumber Company was formally incorporated in 1867.

The city's population would continue to increase every decade for the rest of the nineteenth century, reflecting both the growth of the lumber industry and the emergence of those subsidiary and secondary industries that supported the needs of an increasingly complex industry and more established populace. Between 1870 and 1880, the decade in which railroads were extended through the city and provided an alternative to water transportation as a means of arriving in Oconto, the total population jumped significantly again, increasing by 57 percent to

⁸³ U.S. Census Bureau, "State of Wisconsin: Population of Cities, Towns, &c," *1860 Census: Population of the United States*, 539, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1860/population/1860a-37.pdf?#>, accessed January 31, 2020.

⁸⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "State of Wisconsin: Population of Civil Divisions Less than Counties," *1870 Census: Volume 1 The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, 292, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1870/population/1870a-27.pdf?#>, accessed January 31, 2020.

4,171. By comparison, the total population growth for the state of Wisconsin within the same decade was only 24 percent.⁸⁵ The rapidity with which the lumber industry expanded, aided by improved transportation facilities that opened the northern regions of the state to more people, meant that lumber towns grew at a significantly higher rate than communities elsewhere in Wisconsin during the same period. 5,219 people lived in Oconto by 1890, and the city reached its peak population of 5,646 by 1900.⁸⁶ Over the course of the first fifty years of Oconto's existence as a lumbering community, the city's population increased by a staggering 612 percent.

The waves of settlers who arrived in Oconto to establish mills and fill the positions created by the city's lumber industry between 1850 and 1900 and accounted for this dramatic population growth came from an overwhelmingly white, but nevertheless diverse, range of ethnic backgrounds. Anecdotally, W.A. Holt recalls in his memoir that the "men who came to Oconto in the early days were largely French Canadians, Irish, Germans, Scandinavians, and [men] from Nova Scotia." This ethnic diversity is reflected in the various religious and cultural institutions established in the city, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Holt further notes that while immigrants of many nationalities worked for each of the lumber companies, the Holt Lumber Company's crews were largely composed of German and Scandinavian immigrants, and the Oconto Lumber Company had higher numbers of French and Irish employees.⁸⁷ In 1870, 46

⁸⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "State of Wisconsin: Population of Civil Divisions Less than Counties," *1880 Census: Volume 1 The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, 370, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1880/vol-01-population/1880_v1-12.pdf?#, accessed February 25, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, "Population by States and Territories," *1880 Census Volume 1 The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, 4, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1880/vol-01-population/1880_v1-07.pdf?#, accessed February 25, 2020.

⁸⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "State of Wisconsin: Population of States and Territories by Minor Civil Divisions 1890 and 1900," *1900 Census: Volume 1 The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, 419, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p8.pdf>, accessed February 25, 2020.

⁸⁷ Holt, *A Lumberman Looks Backward*, 35.

percent of the city's population was foreign-born; in 1880, this percentage had declined slightly to 41 percent. By the end of the century, nearly three quarters of people living in Oconto were native-born, but the number of those with foreign-born parents was nearly two and a half times higher than those with native-born parents.⁸⁸

However, even though Oconto's large lumber companies were able to sustain high levels of production for decades after the lumbering fell from its position as Wisconsin's largest industry shortly after 1910, the exponential rate of growth the city's population experienced in the second half of the nineteenth century did not continue during the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, supported in part by the longevity of its lumber industry, Oconto never experienced a mass exodus of residents either. Instead, the city's population remained relatively stable. In 1910, its total population was nearly the same as in 1900, standing at 5,629 residents. The greatest decline in population occurred between 1910 and 1920, when it slipped to 4,920 people. This decline does coincide with the United States' entrance into World War I, but it is also the decade in which logging and lumbering dropped from its position as the state's largest industry, a title it had held for thirty years.

While Oconto would recover some of the population loss it experienced between 1910 and 1920, rising again to just over 5,300 residents by 1940, population levels would never be higher than they were in 1900.⁸⁹ As evidenced by the coinciding rapid expansion of Oconto's

⁸⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population, as Native and Foreign-Born, of Cities, etc.: 1880 and 1870," *1880 Census Volume 1 The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, 456, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1880/vol-01-population/1880_v1-13.pdf?#, accessed February 25, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, "Native and Foreign Born and White and Colored Population, Classified by Sex, for Places Having 2,500 Inhabitants or More: 1900," *1900 Census Volume 1 The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, 684, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p11.pdf>, accessed February 25, 2020.

⁸⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of Counties by Minor Civil Divisions: 1920 to 1940," *1940 Census of Population Volume 1*, 1169, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1940/population-volume-1/33973538v1ch10.pdf>, accessed February 25, 2020.

lumber mills and population that occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the lumber industry was largely responsible for drawing people to the city, whether it was to work directly for the lumber companies or to fill the positions in the supporting industries and commercial and service sectors that also accompanied the growth of the lumber industry. Similarly, when the industry's growth peaked and began to decline, so did Oconto's population. The influence of the lumber industry on the status of the city's populus is undeniable. At the same time, as in regards to the city's physical form and economic development, it was not omnipotent. The people who populated Oconto were not wholly at the whim of the larger forces of the lumber industry; Oconto was not a company town but an industry town. To fail to acknowledge and examine the roles they played in shaping the City of Oconto is to fall into past patterns of studying Wisconsin lumber history wherein the individuality of the places where lumbering took place and the people who populated those communities are glossed over in order to provide a more general understanding of the state's lumber industry overall.

Chapter Three: Built of People

Oconto, in more ways than one, was built of pine. The lumber industry catalyzed white settlement and population growth, influenced street patterns, and often provided the materials for the construction of those streets, sidewalks, and buildings. It sparked new areas of economic growth while simultaneously controlling wages and restricting where and how people could spend their money. However, for all the influence the lumber companies exerted over the development of Oconto, whether directly or indirectly, with positive benefits or challenging consequences, it is important to acknowledge that industry alone does not build a city. People do too. All too often, the nuances of people's experiences in histories of Wisconsin lumbering are overlooked in favor of broader perspectives of analysis; local context and individual agency fall victim to larger patterns of development and change.

Therefore, this chapter will examine how the citizens of Oconto actively engaged in placemaking and shaped their community. Generations of families called Oconto home, bonded by the religious, cultural, and social institutions they established and maintained throughout the rise and decline of the lumber industry. Of course, they were not immune to the influence of the lumber industry's dominating presence. Economic, infrastructural, and social development do not occur in vacuums independent of one another; it is impossible to entirely separate them. Nevertheless, the social and community aspects of life in Oconto are as integral to the city's history and identity as the lumber enterprises for which it is largely remembered.

Women, Families, and Generational Stability

The nature of jobs within the lumber industry was such that they were almost exclusively considered appropriate for men. As a result, the populations of Wisconsin logging communities were often overwhelmingly male. In this regard, early Oconto certainly fits such a characterization. As noted previously, of the 793 people living in Oconto in 1855, 68 percent of them were male.¹ However, even though the lumbering remained the dominant industry in the city for decades, the imbalance between male and female residents steadily declined over the next forty-five years. In 1860, 60 percent of people living in Oconto were male.² By 1900, the distribution was nearly equal; 51 percent of residents were male and 49 percent were female.³

The prevailing mythos of lumberjacks characterized them as rude, unsophisticated, and even violent; young, unmarried men were more likely to be transient rather than fixed members of a community. However, per W.A. Holt's recollections, this mythology was an exaggeration and did not accurately represent his employees in and around the city of Oconto. Rather, he found that most men he knew "married, built nice homes for themselves in the towns and on farms, and became good citizens."⁴ The gradual balancing that occurred between the sexes in Oconto quantitatively suggests that the city grew from a collection of simple, remote logging settlements into a more established, diverse community over time. Further, Holt's recollection

¹ "Wisconsin State Census, 1855."

² U.S. Census Bureau, "State of Wisconsin: Population of Cities, Towns, &c," *1860 Census: Population of the United States*.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, "Table 5 - Populations of States and Territories By Minor Civil Divisions: 1890 and 1900 - Continued," *1900 Census: Volume 1. Population, Part 1*, 419, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p8.pdf>, accessed February 1, 2020.

⁴ Holt, *A Lumberman Looks Backward*, 36.

suggests that this diversification did not come about only because married men with families arrived in the area later and replaced the initial wave of single men seeking employment in the lumber industry. Instead, many of these single men who came to Oconto when it was considered to be a frontier village in the middle of a forest remained to establish partnerships and households of their own.

Oconto did experience a large influx of immigrants during the second half of the nineteenth century that greatly contributed to its rapid population growth, but some of the city's growth and population stability came from the fact that a number of core families remained in Oconto over the course of multiple generations, as suggested by Holt's memory. Not all of them arrived at the same time, nor were all of them directly engaged with the lumber industry. But many family names that first appeared in Oconto during the early part of the lumber boom remained present in the community over the course of the first half of the twentieth century through both memorial legacy and living descendants; in some cases, these family lines still continue in Oconto today. In the case of Oconto's wealthier families, their continued residence over multiple generations and memorial legacy is often more readily apparent. However, owing to the city's small size, it is possible to trace the lineage of other families as well, either directly or more cursorily by noting the proliferation of common surnames.

As one example of the continued presence of families in Oconto over several generations, the Pecor family name, alternatively spelled Picard, which had been present in Oconto from its earliest days as a lumbering community with the arrival of Peter Pecor and several of his siblings, continually appears in the city throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through descendants and memorial namesakes. One 1924 marriage announcement on the front

page of the *Oconto County Reporter* illustrates the legacy and continued presence of Pecor family members; one Marie Antoinette Pecor, daughter of Mrs. David Pecor who lived on Pecor Street, was married in St. Peter's Catholic Church.⁵ Per census records, David Pecor was the son of French-Canadian immigrants Felix Pecor and Philomene Grenier and worked as a barber in Oconto. At the time of the 1905 census, David Pecor was one of 52 residents in Oconto with the same last name.⁶ Following their marriage, Marie Antoinette and her husband, William O'Connor, would also make their home in Oconto and raise six children there.⁷

In addition to the Pecors, a number of other families with French or French-Canadian origins became fixtures in the Oconto community. In the context of this study, becoming a community fixture does not necessarily denote an ascent to prominence or wealth. Rather, it means that the families lived in Oconto for multiple generations, thereby contributing to the stability of the city's population, particularly in the early twentieth century when its overall growth rate was dramatically less than that of the nineteenth century. The Belongia name first appears on Oconto census rolls in 1860 with Moses, a general laborer, his wife Joesetta, and their

⁵ "Pecor - O'Connor Nuptials at St. Peter's Tuesday," *Oconto County Reporter Enterprise*, May 1, 1924, accessed March 9, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=55b3276a-6141-48fd-8bf0-7f85e855983a/wiotdoc0/20150710/00000074&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=tourist%20camp&query1_field=ALL.

⁶ "Wisconsin State Census, 1905," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3SHT-63V9-CMT?cc=1443899&wc=M6P7-K68%3A37222501%2C37353501> : 1 April 2016), Oconto > Oconto city, west ward > image 6 of 11; State Historical Society, Madison.

⁷ "United States Census, 1940," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-89M1-DX27?cc=2000219&wc=QZXB-2Y5%3A795536601%2C802161101%2C802184701%2C802184702> : accessed 9 March 2020), Wisconsin > Oconto > Oconto City, Oconto, Ward 3 > 42-20 Oconto City Ward 3 bounded by (N) city limits; (E) ward line, Farnsworth Av; (S) Oconto River; (W) city limits > image 9 of 24; citing Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, NARA digital publication T627. Records of the Bureau of the Census, 1790 - 2007, RG 29. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2012. The eldest O'Connor child, Michael, was grown and had left the household by 1940.

six children. By the 1910 census, the number of people in Oconto with that same last name had increased to over 100 people.⁸ Two Brazeau households, Samuel and his brother Francis Xavier, appear in Oconto on the 1875 state census; these two men were responsible for establishing the Brazeau Brothers general store in 1870, which was still a family operation under the name Brazeau & Son Co. in 1950. Brazeau Avenue, located in the Frenchtown section of Oconto, was named in honor of these early settlers and, like the various branches of the Pecor family, illustrates the longevity of specific families in Oconto.⁹ In the case of the Brazeaus, their family business became a staple of the community's commercial sector for decades both during and after the premiere lumbering era.

Families of French-Canadian descent were not the only families who arrived throughout the lumbering era and remained in Oconto over multiple generations. Native-born Edwin Hart was among Oconto's earliest wealthy white settlers. One of his sons, Cyrus Hart, a 16-year-old printer at the time of the 1860 United States census, would become the editor of the *Oconto County Reporter* and spend the remainder of his life in the city. Oconto's Evergreen Cemetery marks the generations of Hart family members known throughout the city over time; Edwin and his wife Eliza are buried there, as are Cyrus, his wife Katherine, and their daughter Mabel.¹⁰ The

⁸ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch*, <http://FamilySearch.org>, Citing NARA microfilm publication T624. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, accessed March 5, 2020.

⁹ "To All Others: Oldest Retail Business Carries on Founder's Name," *Oconto County Reporter*, July 15, 1969, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20190518/00000042&pg_seq=4&search_doc=, accessed March 9, 2020.

¹⁰ *Find A Grave*, database and images (<https://www.findagrave.com> : accessed 9 March 2020), memorial page for Edwin Hart (5 May 1807–24 Nov 1897), Find A Grave Memorial no. 110459519, citing Evergreen Cemetery, Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin, USA; *Find A Grave*, database and images (<https://www.findagrave.com> : accessed 9 March 2020), memorial page for Cyrus R. Hart (31 Aug 1844–3 Mar 1920), Find A Grave Memorial no. 70618946, citing Evergreen Cemetery, Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin, USA.

Bond brothers, responsible for founding the Bond Pickle Company that would prove a key fixture in Oconto's twentieth century economy, appear as children in the 1905 state census for the city of Oconto.¹¹ Furthermore, even though the Holts were relative newcomers to the city in comparison to some of Oconto's original white settlers, W.A. Holt continued to reside in the city in 1940, as did three of his four adult children, two of whom had married and started their own families.¹²

While these families represent a small fraction of those who called Oconto home for multiple generations, the relatively stable continuation of family lines in the community contrasts with the transient, boom and bust characterization often given to lumber towns and their residents. Furthermore, early twentieth-century histories of Wisconsin lumbering are often written in such a way that northern lumbering communities seem to cease to exist once the lumber boom ended, even though some of these histories were written while lumber operations continued in certain cities, Oconto being one of them. It is important, therefore, to examine individual lumber communities in depth, because, with Oconto standing as an example, the people in these communities established their own deep roots that existed both outside of and beyond the lumber industry.

In the day-to-day lives of Oconto residents, the presence of women and families, especially those who lived in Oconto for multiple generations, was a key stabilizing factor in

¹¹ "Wisconsin State Census, 1905," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-63V9-4DQ?cc=1443899&wc=M6P7-JPJ%3A37222501%2C37323201> : 1 April 2016), Oconto > Oconto city, east ward > image 2 of 17; State Historical Society, Madison.

¹² "United States Census, 1940," database with images, *FamilySearch*, <http://FamilySearch.org>, Citing NARA microfilm publication T624. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, accessed March 5, 2020.

Oconto during its lumbering era. Women were not only important contributors to the service economy, but they were also often responsible for organizing gatherings and events where men, women, and children could meet and mingle. The establishment of a community culture was vital to the city's development and stability, because it tied the people of Oconto to something in the city other than the lumber industry. It represented an emotional investment in both Oconto as a place and the people who lived there. While facilitated by the availability of employment opportunities, the act of placemaking and establishing roots in a community likely made the people drawn to Oconto by the lumber boom more inclined to stay there even as the industry began to decline. When viewed as a supposedly peripheral community from which natural resources were extracted and shipped to larger metropolitan centers like Milwaukee or Chicago, Oconto was simply one of many places in Wisconsin where lumber came from, but, from within, the city's identity differed. To the people who lived there, it was the place not only they, but their families were from as well.

Another way to illustrate the presence and long-term settlement of families in Oconto, outside of census or genealogical data, is through its school systems. It was not uncommon for nineteenth-century lumber towns to have a school; even smaller company towns, communities established for the purpose of logging in which all the land was owned by one lumber company, usually contained one.¹³ Peshtigo Harbor, a company town located north of Oconto on the bay of Green Bay, maintained a one-room schoolhouse run by a single teacher.¹⁴ Oconto, by

¹³ Rohe, "Lumbering: Wisconsin's Northern Urban Frontier," 236.

¹⁴ Randall Rohe, *Ghosts of the Forest: Vanished Lumber Towns of Wisconsin*, Vol. One (Marinette: Forest History Association of Wisconsin, 2002), 163.

comparison, boasted five public schools by the end of the nineteenth century, one of which was a large, all-city high school.¹⁵ In addition to its public schools, three churches in the city also maintained parochial schools; when St. Peter's Catholic Church opened its school in 1887, it did so with an enrollment of 102 male and 104 female students.¹⁶

The city's schools were located throughout the community, often centered within each of the more residential neighborhoods that had developed on both sides of the Oconto River. Pecor School was located in Frenchtown, while Lincoln and Washington Schools were in the northeastern section of the city. Douglas School and Jefferson School were located in the two areas of the city that had been settled along the southern bank of the river.¹⁷ In 1883, a total of 735 students were enrolled at these five public schools, which amounts to nearly 17 percent of the city's total population when compared to the census data gathered in 1880.¹⁸ The rapid growth of the city's school system mirrors the exponential expansion that occurred in the city as a whole, and it often left administrators struggling to provide the facilities necessary to accommodate Oconto's school-aged children and meet state requirements. In 1907, the city school superintendent reported that, "Owing to a lack of room, it has been impossible to

¹⁵ Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 34.

¹⁶ *Centennial Jubilee 1857-1957: St Peter's Congregation Oconto, Wisconsin* (Oconto, WI: St. Peter's Catholic Church, 1957), unpagged.

¹⁷ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin*, July 1887.

¹⁸ *Oconto County Reporter*, September 15, 1883, accessed February 9, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170507/00000063&pg_seq=5&search_doc=.

accommodate pupils between the ages of four and six as the law requires, thus depriving of school privileges from two hundred and fifty to three hundred pupils.”¹⁹

However, for all the difficulties the city school system faced, a sufficient number of families could afford to continue to keep their children in school after they obtained a basic level of schooling, as opposed to having them enter the workforce, to warrant the establishment of the high school. By comparison, nationwide high school attendance was extremely limited before the turn of the twentieth century; less than ten percent of the population graduated from high school 1890. Secondary education enrollment rates did not begin to significantly increase in the United States until after 1910.²⁰ Furthermore, the existence of so many schools in Oconto suggests that not only did a large number of families with children come to settle in the city, but the fact that the schools ranged from elementary to secondary levels of education means that these families lived in one place long enough for the children to grow up and graduate. Thus, the generational life cycle in Oconto was not necessarily stagnant, though it perhaps felt that way to some of the city’s young people. Published in Oconto High School’s 1922 yearbook, the closing lines of the senior class prophecy ends cheekily with the lines “What’s that! People moving? What have I been doing — dreaming?”²¹ Nevertheless, children living in Oconto obtained levels of education beyond that of their parents and were therefore qualified for a wider variety of occupations,

¹⁹ “Report of Superintendent,” *Oconto County Reporter*, July 11, 1907, accessed February 9, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20161010/00000038&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

²⁰ Claudia Goldin, “America’s Graduation from High School: The Evolution and Spread of Secondary Schooling in the Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of Economic History* 58, no. 2 (1998): 345-74. accessed March 18, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/2566738.

²¹ “Class Prophecy,” *The Bay Mist* (Oconto, WI: Oconto High School, 1922), 30, accessed via the State of Wisconsin Collection, accessed March 7, 2020, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/WI/WI-idx?type=turn&entity=WI.BayMist1922.p0036&id=WI.BayMist1922&isize=M>.

which meant that those who remained a part of the city's workforce could be better suited to adapt as necessary to the economic changes that Oconto would face, both as the lumber industry grew more complex and when it began to fade from the forefront of the city's economy. Furthermore, despite the sarcastic and perhaps frustrated tone of the yearbook, it provides additional evidence to support the notion that children who grew up in Oconto frequently remained part of the community and constituted the next generation of adult residents.

The gradual balancing between the sexes and the proliferation of multi-generational families illustrates how Oconto's population grew in complexity and also maintained the sense of a relatively stable, close-knit community of the course of its existence as a lumbering center. This stability, in part, can be attributed to the comparative longevity of Oconto's lumber companies as well as the establishment of other industrial and commercial enterprises that provided employment within the city. While the city's young people may have felt constrained by the apparent unlikelihood that they would ever leave their hometown, it is worth noting that they were not necessarily forced to leave in large numbers because of a lack of employment that provided a livable wage, residential space, or marriage prospects. The lack of significant population growth after the start of the twentieth century suggests that the city's economy and infrastructure was only capable of supporting a finite number of people, but, by the same stroke, the absence of a dramatic population decrease during the first half of the twentieth century also speaks to its ability to maintain that limited population over an extended period of time. To the outside world, Oconto was primarily known as a major lumbering center for decades. Concurrently, the city had been shaped by its residents in such a way that its local identity was significantly more nuanced than that. The following two sections of this chapter, therefore, will

examine some of the ways Oconto residents, like the lumber industry, left their mark on their community.

Religious Communities

For a community with a footprint of approximately seven square miles and a population that never climbed above 5,700 residents, the religious communities established in Oconto during the lumbering era were rather numerous and diverse. Much as the sawmills built along the Oconto River acted as influential nuclei of development, particularly in regards to the city's physical layout, the city's churches also served as important points of community connection and gathering. Furthermore, their locations symbolically mark the class and ethnic differences that existed within Oconto during the lumbering era. Many of these parishes or congregations were founded following the initial large influx of residents who arrived in Oconto between 1860 and the early 1870s, illustrating one way in which the people of early Oconto went about establishing institutions that fostered life and identity beyond lumbering.

St. Peter's Catholic Church was the first congregation organized in Oconto, dating back to the mid-1850s. According to church histories, there is some prior semblance of a regular congregation of Catholics gathering for Mass in Oconto, but St. Peter's marks its anniversary according to the completion of its first dedicated church structure, built in 1857.²² In many ways, St. Peter's origins and early history reflects the initial predominance of French and French-Canadian immigrants in Oconto's Catholic community. The land upon which the first church was built had been donated by Peter Pecor, a French-Canadian immigrant who lived just outside

²² *Centennial Jubilee 1857-1957: St Peter's Congregation.*

village or city limits but owned the section within Oconto known as Frenchtown and was considered an important community leader.²³ The parish chose Saint Peter, one the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ, as its namesake to honor Pecor's generosity.

However, as Oconto's growing lumber industry prompted an overall population increase, the ethnic diversity within the city's population increased as well. St. Peter's remained the only Catholic church in the city until the end of the 1860s, serving not only those of French or French-Canadian descent, but those of German, Irish, and Dutch origin as well. In 1869, Father Mathias Schewback found the size and diversity within St. Peter's congregation to be too much for one priest to manage. In an effort to alleviate this problem, he sought and was subsequently granted permission to establish a second Catholic parish on the east side of the city.²⁴ The new church was named St. Joseph's Parish, and its first building was completed in 1870.²⁵ Whereas St. Peter's retained its French culture and continued to present Mass in the French language, St. Joseph's made a conscious effort to offer services in the languages of all its parishioners in order to avoid falling into the same conflict that, in part, motivated their split from St. Peter's.²⁶ In

²³ "United States Census, 1860," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9BSC-9ZQJ?cc=1473181&wc=7QK5-TP7%3A1589422311%2C1589437339%2C1589437358> : 24 March 2017), Wisconsin > Oconto > Oconto > image 8 of 13; from "1860 U.S. Federal Census - Population," database, *Fold3.com* (<http://www.fold3.com> : n.d.); citing NARA microfilm publication M653 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 43.

²⁴ *Centennial Jubilee 1857-1957: St Peter's Congregation*.

²⁵ National Register of Historic Places, St. Peter's and St. Joseph's Catholic Churches, Oconto, Oconto, Wisconsin, National Register #80000172.

²⁶ *Homecoming: 80th Anniversary of St. Joseph's* (Oconto, WI: St. Joseph's Catholic Church, 1950).

some instances, the churches are denoted in city newspapers not by their name, but as “Irish and German Catholic” and “French Catholic.”²⁷

The split between St. Peter’s, which remained the primary place of worship for Oconto’s French Catholics, and St. Joseph’s, which was more diverse but largely German, was significant not only because it marked a significant change in the city’s social and religious structure; it also influenced the settlement of one of the city’s more residential areas. While St. Peter’s Church was built in Frenchtown, the southwest portion of the city on the north side of the Oconto River, St. Joseph’s was built in the northeast section. In reality, the churches are less than a mile and a half apart, but they are nevertheless on opposite corners of the city from one another.²⁸

Therefore, the separation of the two parishes was not only spiritual and ethnic in character, but obviously physical as well. The dominance of the lumber industry as a source of employment among all city residents and the relatively small size of Oconto meant that the different ethnic groups could not isolate themselves from each other as thoroughly as in larger cities like Milwaukee, which had distinctly segregated ethnic communities, but some separation did occur.

Following the split of Oconto’s two Catholic communities, a subsequent effect of this ethnic separation is illustrated by the establishment of the city’s first Lutheran congregation. In 1873, Rev. Charles Christian Lieb arrived in Oconto looking for German immigrants who were Lutheran. There were German Lutherans in Oconto at the time, but, due to the lack of a place of

²⁷ “Churches,” *Oconto Lumberman*, November 21, 1874, 3, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=556c1824-d181-4652-b42c-e19c7901a65c/wiotdoc0/20150215/00000053&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&collection1=ed950d16-710e-44bb-9c81-073695344e84&collection2=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0&collection3=556c1824-d181-4652-b42c-e19c7901a65c&collection4=e7a98d0b-47e8-4e89-8db2-ddabd75063b3&query1_modifier=AND&query1=lutheran&query1_field=ALL, accessed February 3, 2020.

²⁸ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto*, September 1883.

worship and pastor, many of them had resorted to attending services at the local Methodist church. Lieb therefore invited the city's German Lutherans to two services held inside Washington School, after which the community asked Lieb to stay and formally organize their own congregation.²⁹ Washington School, notably, was located in the same area of the city as St. Joseph's Church, and the new Evangelical Lutheran Immanuel Church that resulted from Lieb's missionary efforts was also built nearby. Denoted on the 1883 Sanborn map as the "Ger. Luth. Church," the structure is on the same street as St. Joseph's church and school, one block to the west.³⁰ This grouping of places of worship that share a common ethnic identity suggests that many of Oconto's German residents had clustered together on the northeast side of the city. The hall of the local Turnverein group was also located just to the south of the Evangelical Lutheran Immanuel Church, further supporting this conclusion. By choosing to establish religious as well as cultural institutions grounded in their ethnic heritage, Oconto's German residents not only took active steps to build familiar, community-oriented spaces in a new place to which they could attach themselves, but they also settled closely together and created a relatively cohesive neighborhood within the limited confines of a small area.

Like the French and French-Canadians of St. Peter's Catholic Church, the predominance of Germans in Oconto's first Lutheran congregation played a key role in the identity of church members and the ethnic identity of Oconto as a whole. While the wealthier and more elite families in the city were often English-speaking Protestants, the other ethnic groups did not

²⁹ *First American Lutheran Church, Oconto, Wisconsin: 1874-1974* (Oconto, WI: First American Lutheran Church, 1974), 2-3.

³⁰ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto, September 1883.*

necessarily assimilate to this culture and melt into a more homogenous society. The Evangelical Lutheran Immanuel Church retained a distinctly German identity for decades after its initial organization. Services were conducted exclusively in German until 1913, when the congregation voted to hold services in English once a month to reflect the needs of “the children of the immigrant founders” who had begun “to lose their mother tongue.” Even after World War I, which was the cause of much vilification and erasure of German culture in Wisconsin, the congregation continued to hold the majority of its services in German.³¹

Though the church changed its name to First American Lutheran in 1935, it did not discontinue holding services in German until after 1937.³² Much like the continued use of the French language in St. Peter’s Catholic Church, the importance of maintaining tradition and ethnic heritage evidently ran deeply within this largely German Lutheran community, but it also proved willing to adapt to the changing needs of its members. These consciously-made decisions reflect the existence of community agency and sense of control vital in Oconto. The city’s immigrant population was largely employed by the Holt and Oconto Lumber Companies, which were owned and operated by two wealthy, American-born Protestants who exerted considerable influence over the city in ways that extended well beyond its economic state.

The addition of Evangelical Lutheran Immanuel Church in Oconto in 1874 brought the city’s total number of places of worship to five, serving a population of 2,655 people.³³ A Presbyterian congregation had been previously organized in 1858 and worshipped in a frame

³¹ *First American Lutheran Church, Oconto, Wisconsin*, 4.

³² *First American Lutheran Church, Oconto, Wisconsin*, 6.

³³ U.S. Census Bureau, “State of Wisconsin: Population of Civil Divisions Less Than Counties,” *1870 Census*.

church built in 1863.³⁴ The Methodist church utilized by the city's Lutheran congregants was established in 1866.³⁵ As the second-oldest religious congregation in the city, the First Presbyterian Church of Oconto, like St. Peter's Catholic Church, served as an early gathering space and provided a sense of community to Oconto's early settlers as the area developed from a string of disparate logging settlements into a singular municipality. Furthermore, like Oconto's Catholic and Lutheran communities, First Presbyterian was predominantly attended by a particular ethnic group. However, in this case, the church's organizers and attendees were not immigrants having newly arrived in a foreign country. Rather, they were among Oconto's more elite citizens, many of whom were native-born Americans from the northeastern and mid-Atlantic part of the country or were immigrants of British descent.

In short, the early congregation of First Presbyterian represented Oconto's contingent of Yankee-Yorkers who generally arrived in Wisconsin before the large influx of European immigrants, many of whom possessed considerably more wealth than other early groups of settlers.³⁶ The congregation first organized in the home of S.A. Turner, a 49-year-old engineer from New York state, and his wife, Susan. Richard L. Hall, a New York-born land agent in possession of \$1,000 in real estate and \$400 of personal estate joined them, as did Dianatha Farnsworth. Dianatha was also born in New York and married to Vermont-native George

³⁴ "Oconto's First Presbyterian Church," *Oconto Enterprise*, June 27, 1919, Wisconsin Historical Society, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA9643>, accessed February 5, 2020.

³⁵ National Register of Historic Places, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Guild Hall and Vicarage, Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin, National Register #85001684.

³⁶ Joseph Schafer, "The Yankee and the Teuton in Wisconsin," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 6, no. 2 (December 1922): 125-145; William I. Tchakirides, "Yankee-Yorkers," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/yankee-yorkers/>, accessed March 4, 2020.

Farnsworth, who of course founded the Oconto Lumber Company. Edward Hart, a Connecticut native employed as a forwarding and commissioning agent, and his wife Eliza, born in Ohio, were next to join, as did their daughter Eliza. Between the two of them, Edward and Eliza owned \$10,000 in real estate and \$1,000 worth of personal estate.³⁷

The concentration of wealth among members of First Presbyterian continued throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries. When the congregation lost its first wood-frame church to a fire in 1874, members replaced it with a brick-veneered structure on the same lot within the year. After this second church also burned to the ground in 1890, the congregation was able to afford a new building made entirely of brick and stone that was also completed in a short amount of time; the \$19,500 edifice was dedicated on the one-year anniversary of the 1890 fire.³⁸ O.A. Ellis, George Farnsworth's son-in-law and Oconto Company superintendent, served as the building chairman during this construction process; George Beyer, a German immigrant who arrived in Oconto as a boy and rose to become a wealthy land agent and president of the Oconto National Bank, among a myriad of other roles, served as the congregation's treasurer.³⁹ Furthermore, the Farnsworths were not the only elite lumbering family who belonged to the First Presbyterian Church of Oconto. Not only were W.A. Holt and his family members of the church,

³⁷ "Oconto's First Presbyterian Church,"; "United States Census, 1860," database with images, *FamilySearch*; Edward Hart also alternatively appears in records with the first name of Edwin.

³⁸ "Oconto's First Presbyterian Church," "The Dedication with Appropriate and Imposing Services, of the First Presbyterian Church of Oconto," *Oconto County Reporter*, December 25, 1891, accessed February 11, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150906/00000039&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=first%20presbyterian&query1_field=ALL.

³⁹ "Oconto's First Presbyterian Church," David Inman Nelke, *The Columbian Biographical Dictionary and Portrait Gallery of the Representative Men of the United States* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1895), 658-652, accessed February 11, 2020, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t9668r67d&view=1up&seq=697>.

but Holt was superintendent of the congregation's Sunday school program for 20 years and, as of 1938, was serving his 45th year as a church elder.⁴⁰ The Holts also purchased a lot near the church in 1912 and subsequently donated it to the congregation for the purpose of constructing a church house and gymnasium. The church house, constructed at a cost of \$12,000, opened in 1913.⁴¹

In much the same way that Oconto's French and German residents clustered together in relatively close proximity to their associated places of worship, the location of the First Presbyterian Church of Oconto reflects where many of its attendees lived. Its place within the city provides further evidence to support the argument that the people of Oconto played a role in shaping their community in conjunction with the larger forces of the lumber industry. Simultaneously, it illustrates the intimate interconnection between the city's economic and social development. In Oconto, class separation can be seen through the city's churches. St. Peter's, St. Joseph's, and Evangelical Lutheran Immanuels were each built in slightly more peripheral areas of Oconto, away from Main Street; First Presbyterian, on the other hand, was located much more centrally. The church's location in the city remained the same for the entirety of its existence within the bounds of this study. It stood on an angled lot bounded by Main Street to the south, State Street to the west, and Oconto Street to the north, with the two latter streets respectively renamed as Ellis Avenue and Congress Street sometime between 1904 and 1911.⁴²

⁴⁰ "Founder's Ideals Are Continued for 91 Years," 70.

⁴¹ "Oconto's First Presbyterian Church."

⁴² *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto*, Oct. 1904; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto*, Sept. 1911.

Main Street, it will be remembered, was the first major thoroughfare constructed to connect the sawmills and early settlements built along the Oconto River in the 1850s; First Presbyterian's location, set in 1863, is adjacent to the portion of the city considered to be "Hart's Addition" and only one block north of the sawmill that would eventually become the center of the Holt Lumber Company's operations.⁴³ Thus, while St. Peter's was built on land owned by Peter Pecor, a leader in Oconto's French and French-Canadian community, and the early German churches were constructed near each other in an area of the city not yet dominated by the French-speaking population or sawmills and the native-born Yankee-Yorkers who primarily owned them, First Presbyterian was built near the location of many of the earliest Yankee-Yorker residences and business enterprises. Even after the city's elite constructed their elegant homes on the western end of Main Street, First Presbyterian remained only a short walk east on the same road. While the space and locations needed for successful mill operations played a large part in determining where the different areas of the city developed, the locations of these early religious institutions is symbolic of Oconto's overall community structure as well. The English-speaking, wealthier citizens often in control of the city's lumbering operations and government affairs worshipped in the center of Oconto, while the places of worship attended by early immigrant populations largely employed in the mills were situated on the periphery.

As Oconto continued to grow, its religious landscape became increasingly more diverse, at least in regards to the variations of Christianity represented. The city is home to the oldest Christian Science edifice in the world, which was built in 1886, eight years before the religion's

⁴³ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oconto*, Sept. 1911.

Mother Church was completed in Boston, Massachusetts.⁴⁴ The Church of Christ, Scientist is a metaphysical faith in which adherents believe that physical ailments are best treated through prayer alone rather than medical treatment and was founded by Mary Baker Eddy in 1875. Following the publication of Eddy's most noted work, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Christian Science grew in popularity nationwide.⁴⁵ The religion came to Oconto by way of Chicago after several Oconto and Green Bay women attended a class taught there by Mary Baker Eddy in 1884. Upon their return, Lovina Millidge began hosting worship services in her Oconto home until the congregation grew large enough to warrant its own structure. Some of the church's earliest benefactors, like Edwin and Eliza Hart, were leading community members who believed that the establishment of an additional religious congregation would positively benefit the city.⁴⁶

Though it was never the city's largest religious community, Oconto's Christian Scientists have nevertheless maintained a continuously active congregation since their church's establishment.⁴⁷ As a comparatively new religion, the organization of the First Church of Christ, Scientist in Oconto illustrates how the city's residents actively shaped their larger community by establishing a faith-based community that was new and unfamiliar alongside those steeped in

⁴⁴ National Register of Historic Places, First Church of Christ, Scientist, Oconto, Oconto County, Wisconsin, National Register #74000111, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail?assetID=0882a9af-2445-4eb4-b7e0-547a7f835f54>.

⁴⁵ Jenna Jacobs, "Christian Scientists," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/christian-scientists/>, accessed February 25, 2020.

⁴⁶ "Picture of Local Church to Be Center of Fair Exhibit," *Oconto County Reporter*, May 23, 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA9027>, accessed February 25, 2020

⁴⁷ "First Church of Christ, Scientist," Oconto County Historical Society, <http://www.ocontocyhistsoc.org/first-church-of-christ-scientist>, accessed February 25, 2020.

heritage and tradition. It also complicates the popular notion that lumber towns in northern Wisconsin were isolated from, and therefore backward in comparison to, larger, more urbanized cities. Oconto residents travelled outside their immediate community, engaged with broader cultural changes occurring in the United States, and in turn brought those cultural changes home, transforming Oconto in a way that had nothing to do with the city's identity as a major lumbering center. Even though the lumber industry may have been an undeniably integral aspect of the daily activities in Oconto, life existed outside of lumbering and was, as seen in the case of the city's Christian Science congregation, actively constructed by the people who lived there.

By 1948, there were thirteen different places of worship in the city, serving a population of approximately 5,000 people.⁴⁸ Included in these thirteen were those older congregations established by early settlers, like Oconto Methodist, First Presbyterian, and St. Peter's Catholic. However, some of these religious communities were significantly younger. The Oconto Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, for example, was organized in 1930 to serve the city's small community of Missouri Synod Lutherans. Oconto's lumber industry was in decline by 1930, apart from the added difficulties brought about by the Great Depression, so the organization of a new congregation and construction of a new church is notable. It suggests a sense of commitment on the part of the Zion congregants to both their faith and the Oconto community. On multiple occasions throughout the church's early history, outside council leaders urged the Oconto worshippers to merge with other parishes in nearby towns, like Our Savior Lutheran

⁴⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of Counties by Minor Civil Divisions: 1920 to 1940," *1940 Census of Population Volume 1*, 1169.

Church of Lena, a Wisconsin Synod church.⁴⁹ Additionally, Oconto's religious landscape had also grown to include places of worship such as the Oconto Gospel Chapel, the Memorial Chapel of the Union of Christian Friends, Emmanuel Lutheran, St. Mark's Episcopal, and the St. Paul Evangelical and Reformed Church.⁵⁰

The variety of places of worship in the city near the midpoint of the twentieth century suggests that an aspect of dynamism existed alongside stability in Oconto's religious environment, and by extension, its population, over time. Oconto residents continued to attend the places of worship that had been established before Oconto was incorporated as a city, which acted as the community's first public gathering spaces and a means to maintain a strong sense of ethnic culture and identity, as illustrated by the split between St. Peter's and St. Joseph's Catholic parishes. St. Peter's, St. Josephs, and Evangelical Lutheran Immanuels churches also contributed to the city's educational system by providing parents with the option and opportunity to send their children to parochial schools. Even as the emphasis on maintaining a mother tongue and ethnic identity, like French or German, gradually gave way to worshipping and teaching in the English language and the emergence of an American identity among later generations of attendees, the older parishes grounded in a particular heritage tradition nonetheless remained important community landmarks.

At the same time, Oconto residents not of these ethnic or religious traditions were also able to construct faith-based communities that suited their specific needs rather than settling

⁴⁹ *Dedication Zion Lutheran Church: Oconto, Wisconsin* (Oconto, WI: Zion Lutheran Church, 1967), 9-11.

⁵⁰ "Sunday in the Churches," *Oconto County Reporter*, January 1, 1948, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20180802/00000053&pg_seq=3&search_doc=, accessed March 2, 2020.

within the more established congregations. They may have been among the later immigrant groups to arrive in the city or, in the vein of Christian Science, represented changing religious landscapes originating within the United States. While, from an outsider's or industry-based point of view, Oconto retained its basic identity as a lumbering community located at the distant reaches of urban civilization for nearly a century, the richness of the city's religious landscape speaks to a much more complex society than that broad perspective allows. The older congregations allowed residents to engage with each other on the basis of shared faiths, languages, and cultural traditions and had an influence on the form and function of the city that carried well into the twentieth century. Furthermore, both the older and the comparatively younger religious communities enabled Oconto residents to engage with people of the same faith not only within the context of formal worship but through more social activities like choirs, holiday parties, couples' clubs, and youth groups as well.⁵¹ The places of worship in Oconto were both formal institutions represented by both their physical structures and established belief systems designed to encourage communal interaction and a means through which people could form interpersonal relationships beyond the confines of the worship space. The many religious communities formed in the city during Oconto's lumber era, therefore, stand as testament to the role people played in building their community outside its primary economic identity.

Voluntary Associations and Community Organizations

The people living in Oconto established a variety of non-religious societies and organizations in addition to their many faith-based communities. The popularity of voluntary

⁵¹ *Dedication Zion Lutheran Church: Oconto, Wisconsin*, 14.

associations was not unique to Oconto; they proliferated throughout the United States, in both rural and urban areas. However, some historians have found that the strength and importance of these groups is particularly pronounced in smaller communities, especially those that existed in the perceived hinterland regions of the Midwest.⁵² With this in mind, the organization of these more secular groups were important to Oconto's community development, particularly earlier on in the city's history, because they allowed residents to interact and foster relationships with people outside of their ethnic or religious affiliations. While some of these community organizations represented chapters affiliated with national or international institutions, others were simply local groups established by Oconto residents and again illustrates the richness of community life that existed in Oconto beyond lumbering.

A number of organizations that are frequently given the moniker of being a "secret society" were among some of those voluntary associations established and attended by the people of Oconto. By 1880, Oconto had regular meetings of a variety of fraternal organizations, many, but not all, of which were exclusively for males, including Freemasons, the International Order of Odd Fellows, the Ancient Order of United Workmen, Catholic Knights of America, and the International Organization of Good Templars.⁵³ An Elks Lodge was also organized in 1903, providing an additional source of social camaraderie and entertainment for the city's male

⁵² Gerald Gamm and Robert D. Putnam, "The Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29, no. 4, Patterns of Social Capital: Stability and Change in Comparative Perspective: Part II (Spring 1999): 511-557.

⁵³ "Civic Societies," *Oconto County Reporter*, May 5, 1880, accessed February 15, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150614/00000117&pg_seq=2&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=civic%20societies&query1_field=ALL.

population.⁵⁴ Some of these organizations had specific missions; the Ancient Order of United Workmen provided insurance and support to workers after the Civil War, while the International Organization of Good Templars was born out of the nineteenth-century temperance movement and was open to both men and women in favor of abstinence from alcohol.⁵⁵

Still others, like the city's chapters of organizations like the Ancient Order of the Hibernians, the Turnverein, and the Haabet Society, provided further opportunities for people from specific ethnic communities to engage socially beyond the limits of a particular religious institution; these three associations respectively catered to Oconto's Irish, German, and Danish populations.⁵⁶ Bohemian immigrants built the James Housner Brotherhood Hall that served as a boarding house and "social community center," while the German Brass Band of Oconto was popular throughout the entire city.⁵⁷ In general though, all these associations were similar in their promotion of self-improvement, fraternal connection, and social support. For many of Oconto's male residents, work often meant engaging in some stage of the logging or milling process. By actively forming and seeking out voluntary associations through which men and women could connect with and support one another outside their work environment, they enriched their own

⁵⁴ "Elks Organize," *Oconto County Reporter*, October 2, 1903, accessed February 15, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150525/00000026&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=elks%20lodge&query1_field=ALL.

⁵⁵ "Ancient Order of United Workmen Benefit Certificate," *Smithsonian National Museum of American History*, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1120270; William Watson Turnbull, *The Good Templars: A History of the Rise and Progress of the Independent Order of Good Templars*, (1901).

⁵⁶ Hall, *A History of Oconto*, 233.

⁵⁷ Hall, *Oconto Tri-Cent*, 26.

lives and the function of the city overall. It indicates that the people of Oconto were interested in the social and cultural wellbeing of themselves and their neighbors.

As the men of Oconto had access to male-exclusive social organizations and community groups not connected with any local religious institutions, the city's women also created female-led associations for themselves. Included among these was the Oconto Woman's Club, organized in 1903 and co-founded by Lucy Rumsey Holt, W.A. Holt's wife.⁵⁸ In addition to hosting regular meetings and gatherings where Oconto's women discussed literature, hosted speakers, listened to music, and organized parties, the club's members were deeply invested in the improvement of their city.⁵⁹ Early in the twentieth century, the Woman's Club appeared to have been particularly interested in the beautification of Oconto. In the spring of 1905, the club announced it would award \$35 in prizes to the three "best kept yards" in the city, as well as \$5 to the public school with the prettiest flower beds, operating under the belief that "no child can grow up wholly bad in a town where cleanliness and beauty appeal to the sense at every turn."

Similarly, the Woman's Club spearheaded and orchestrated the installment of a new public water fountain on the small plot of land outside the First Church of Christ, Scientist at the junction of Chicago Street and Main Street. Shortly after the roads in this section of the city were first paved, club members declared that the previous water pump and trough, designed for use by

⁵⁸ Lucy Holt, "During: New Drinking Fountain Project," 1916, Lucy Holt Photo Albums 1895-1936, Photograph, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM143991>,

⁵⁹ "Woman's Club," *Oconto County Reporter*, January 11, 1912, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/ReWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20190114/00000031&pg_seq=1&search_doc=, accessed March 2, 2020; "The Woman's Club," *Oconto County Reporter*, December 7, 1922, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/ReWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=55b3276a-6141-48fd-8bf0-7f85e855983a/wiotdoc0/20150710/00000001&pg_seq=1&search_doc=, accessed March 2, 2020.

horses, had become an eyesore. In 1916, the Woman's Club raised enough funds to construct a new stone drinking fountain in order to match the freshly laid pavement and street curbs.⁶⁰ As an organization which aimed to encourage socialization and improve the health and appearance of Oconto, the fountain installed by the Woman's Club illustrates how the actions by residents involved in voluntary associations had a visible and concrete hand in building their community.

In the instance of the Oconto Library Association, what began as a small membership organization in the nineteenth century laid the foundation for the establishment of a much larger community feature in the twentieth century. The Oconto Library Association was established as a stock organization in March 1878 by a small group of interested men and women.⁶¹ The association met regularly, often in the homes of its members for readings or to conduct administrative business. The collection of books amassed by the Oconto Library Association had no permanent home and was moved throughout the city on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, it was frequented by adults and children alike; in 1880, the association offered local children the ability to check out one book per week for a year at the cost of a one dollar subscription.⁶² Over

⁶⁰ Lucy Holt, "Before: Pump and Drinking Trough for Horses," 1916, Lucy Holt Photo Albums 1895-1936, Photograph, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM143990>, accessed March 2, 2020; Lucy Holt, "During: New Drinking Fountain Project," 1916, Lucy Holt Photo Albums 1895-1936, Photograph, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM143991>, accessed March 2, 2020; Lucy Holt, "After: Drinking Fountain Put in by Oconto Woman's Club," 1916, Lucy Holt Photo Albums 1895-1936, Photograph, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM143992>, accessed March 2, 2020.

⁶¹ "Library Association," *Oconto County Reporter*, March 13, 1878, accessed February 13, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150614/0000011&pg_seq=3&search_doc=&collection1=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0&query1_modifier=AND&query1=library%20association&query1_field=ALL.

⁶² "Young People's Library," *Oconto County Reporter*, May 29, 1880, accessed February 13, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150614/00000120&pg_seq=3&search_doc=&collection1=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0&query1_modifier=AND&query1=library%20association&query1_field=ALL.

the course of the next decade, the association continued to operate as a privately-funded lending library dependent upon member subscriptions and community donations often received through fundraising events.⁶³ However, after twelve years, the association's funds began to dwindle, and its members began the process of closing the organization for want of finances.

Speaking to the philanthropic and community-oriented vision of the group, Oakman Ellis, who had been a member of the association since its inception and had thrice served as treasurer, appeared before the city council in 1890 to offer the Oconto Library Association's collection to the city, provided it would "make it free and make a yearly addition of books."⁶⁴ The city council did not act upon this offer, and, in 1891, the association subsequently asked the community members that its books be returned so they could be packed away or offered to the city once more. Between 1878 and 1891, the group's library had grown to include between two and three thousand volumes.⁶⁵ Following the dismantling of the Oconto Library Association, its books were placed into storage inside the high school; the city had no form of book lending services accessible by members of the public until George Farnsworth offered to donate the necessary funds to the city of Oconto for the construction of a public library building in 1901. While Farnsworth had left Oconto to live in Chicago by this point, his daughter and son-in-law, Ellis,

⁶³ "Library Fair," *The Enquirer*, April 22, 1882, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=ed950d16-710e-44bb-9c81-073695344e84/wiotdoc0/20150619/00000039.

⁶⁴ *Oconto County Reporter*, March 15, 1890, accessed February 13, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150515/00000015&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&collection1=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0&query1_modifier=AND&query1=library%20association&query1_field=ALL.

⁶⁵ "A Public Library," *Oconto County Reporter*, January 1, 1894, accessed February 13, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170804/00000070&pg_seq=5&search_doc=&collection1=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0&query1_modifier=AND&query1=oconto%20library%20association&query1_field=ALL.

remained in Oconto. Ellis is credited by some sources as having persuaded Farnsworth to make the large donation.⁶⁶

Using the \$15,000 gift provided by Farnsworth, the new Farnsworth Public Library opened its doors to the public in 1903, stocked with both new books and some from the collection of the old library association.⁶⁷ By 1912, nearly 2,400 of Oconto's approximately 5,600 residents had a library card, with an annual circulation of 36,488 volumes. In 1928, its annual circulation had risen to nearly 72,000 volumes.⁶⁸ The financing of the library's construction once again illustrates the relationship between the city of Oconto and its lumber industry. At the same time, the library continues to serve the city today, and its origins as an organization founded and funded by private citizens who later wanted the city to continue its mission for the benefit of all residents stands as evidence of the lasting impact the people of Oconto had on their community.

In times of hardship, community organizations stepped forward to provide support for the people of Oconto. The city's local Kiwanis Club, organized in 1923, provided small gardening

⁶⁶ Wisconsin Free Library Association, *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 1, vol. 26, (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Free Library Association, 1930), 343, accessed February 14, 2020, https://books.google.com/books?id=nwNFAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA343&lpg=RA1-PA343&dq=oconto+library+association+1878&source=bl&ots=trlZsWdKq7&sig=ACfU3U3UWoEWecnWM1XVxTdwo7RoTZmCgw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiKmuav6M_nAhUaHM0KHcveBDQQ6AEwBHoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=oconto%20library%20&f=false.

⁶⁷ "Dedication of the Farnsworth Public Library," *Oconto County Reporter*, June 26, 1903, accessed February 13, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150525/00000012&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&collection1=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0&query1_modifier=AND&query1=farnsworth%20public%20library&query1_field=ALL.

⁶⁸ Wisconsin Free Library Association, *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 5, vol. 25, (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Free Library Association, 1929), 155, accessed February 14, 2020, https://books.google.com/books?id=nwNFAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA343&lpg=RA1-PA343&dq=oconto+library+association+1878&source=bl&ots=trlZsWdKq7&sig=ACfU3U3UWoEWecnWM1XVxTdwo7RoTZmCgw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiKmuav6M_nAhUaHM0KHcveBDQQ6AEwBHoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=oconto%20library%20&f=false.

plots for public use during the Great Depression. In 1931, these supervised community gardens were tended by fifty local children, who took a sizable portion of the harvested produce home with them. In 1932, the Kiwanis Club renewed the gardening program but voted to offer the use of the plots to adults rather than children. Participants were required to cover the cost of seed but retained ownership over anything they grew, which could subsequently be sold or kept for their own use. The land on which these gardens were constructed was donated by W.A. Holt, which, like the financing of the Farnsworth Public Library, illustrates the interconnectedness of Oconto's lumber industry and the daily lives of its citizens.⁶⁹ At the same time, the impetus to organize a food supplement program in an effort to alleviate some of the financial hardship brought about by the Great Depression came from within a local community organization composed of members within and outside of the lumber industry. The continued wealth of Holt as a local lumber baron informed the manner in which this particular community program operated, but it did not exclusively determine it. In this instance, Holt's contribution highlights his identity as an involved, integrated member of the Oconto community, active alongside fellow residents in voluntary associations committed to improving the quality of life in the city. As touched on previously, not all lumber company owners resided in the same locality as their operations, illustrating one manner in which local contexts and conditions resulted in different experiences within individual lumbering communities. These nuances are lost when the lumber industry is studied from a broader regional or industrial perspective or the communities in which

⁶⁹ "Kiwanis Garden Is Considered," *Oconto County Reporter*, March 17, 1932, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170924/00000006&pg_seq=1&search_doc=, accessed March 3, 2020; "Club Gardens Planned Again," *Oconto County Reporter*, March 31, 1932, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170924/00000008&pg_seq=1&search_doc=, accessed March 3, 2020.

lumbering took place are considered peripheral to the function of larger urban municipalities, as has often been the case in past scholarship.

Finally, in addition to the various civic projects or campaigns spearheaded by local organizations and the establishment of voluntary associations designed to support particular ethnicities, Oconto's citizens also came together to shape their community through numerous different recreational activities. From an early date, city-wide celebrations were held each year to mark major holidays such as Independence Day, Labor Day, or the end of wars. A group of German settlers established a park space containing both a dance hall and bowling alley utilized by the entire community.⁷⁰ Bowling, a game popularized in the United States with the arrival of waves of German immigrants, appears to have been a pastime enjoyed by many Oconto residents; bowling alleys became common features in the city's saloons and hotels. The local music hall provided space to host entertainers and concerts as well as served as a meeting place for some of the city's clubs. Dances were sponsored by various organizations and acted as both a means of fundraising for local causes and community socialization.⁷¹

Both baseball and softball, referred to in Oconto's local papers as kitten ball, were enormously popular pastimes in Oconto in the early twentieth century, as it was elsewhere in Wisconsin and around the United States. Within the city, teams composed of school children, neighbors, and different companies' employees, faced off regularly, which speaks to both

⁷⁰ Hall, *Oconto Tri-Cent*, 26.

⁷¹ "Social Events," *Hardwood Clippings* (Oconto, WI: Holt Hardwood Company, 1922); "Promenade Concert and Dance," *Oconto County Reporter*, May 1, 1903, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20150525/00000004&pg_seq=1&search_doc=, accessed March 9, 2020; "The Hibernians' Dance," *Oconto County Reporter*, September 30, 1892, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170804/00000006&pg_seq=1&search_doc=, accessed March 9, 2020.

Oconto's comparative economic diversity and its citizens' ability and desire to participate in recreational sports, entertaining players and spectators alike.⁷² Furthermore, this community involvement was not isolated within city limits. Oconto also maintained an all-city baseball team that competed with teams from neighboring communities like Oconto Falls, Peshtigo, Suring, and Gillett.⁷³ The popularity of baseball and softball in Oconto, and their place as an important aspect of community culture, is evidenced by calls to include or improve the diamonds located throughout the city as Oconto's economy shifted towards tourism when the lumber industry began to decline, a transition that will be discussed more fully in the final chapter of this study. In this way, the people of Oconto negotiated a larger pattern of economic and land use change to suit their particular local situation.

While the establishment of the lumber industry was instrumental in fixing the location of Oconto and facilitating many facets of the city's development, the actions of residents were also vital in shaping Oconto's community identity. The earliest white settlers established places of worship that became fixtures in the city's physical and cultural landscape for subsequent generations of Ocontoans, much in the same way that the location of the city's sawmills influenced the form and function of the city. Families who settled and remained in Oconto for multiple generations contributed to a relatively stable population that could build and carry on community traditions, while also keeping the community dynamic and vibrant through the

⁷² "Two Undefeated in Kittenball," and "City Ball Team Trims Stillers," *Oconto County Reporter*, May 26, 1932, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170924/00000016&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

⁷³ "Oconto Beaten," *Oconto County Reporter*, June 20, 1907, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20161010/00000035&pg_seq=8&search_doc=, accessed March 3, 2020.

presence of young people. Voluntary associations provided opportunities for residents to socialize with their neighbors of both similar and differing cultural backgrounds, while still other community organizations worked to improve life in Oconto through library programs, city beautification campaigns, and relief efforts during economic downturns. From a broad perspective, Oconto is frequently referred to as having been a lumber town or major lumbering center, and accurately so. However, it is vital to acknowledge and understand the influence the people living in the city had over shaping their community, because that is what provides Oconto its individual identity in comparison to other lumbering communities. At the same time, it also illustrates the city's connection to the larger social and cultural changes that occurred in the United States as a whole, subverting the often popular narrative that lumber towns were rough, wayward places out of touch with what was perceived to constitute modern civilization.

Chapter Four: Challenges, Changes, and Conclusions

Even though Oconto benefitted from the comparative stability provided by the Holt and Oconto Lumber companies' operation until the 1940s, the lumber industry nevertheless declined throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century. Oconto, therefore, had to adapt to this changing reality in order to survive the gradual end of its primary industry. Some of the industrial and manufacturing enterprises established before the mills closed continued to operate afterward and provided a degree of reprieve from this economic challenge. However, as previously stated, none of these industries could replace the mills. Therefore, like many communities in northern Wisconsin facing the loss of the natural resource and extraction-based industry that largely catalyzed their rapid development in the nineteenth century, Oconto's identity as a major lumbering center began to shift. The city grew quieter, both literally and figuratively, as the mills shut down and Oconto began to turn to tourism and market itself as a recreation destination rather than a booming industrial center.

Even before the Holt Lumber Company and the Oconto Lumber Company finally closed in 1938 and 1943 respectively, and the city's economic identity began to shift, Oconto was home to several different manufacturers that were unaffected by the mills' closure. Among those included were companies such as the Great Lakes Shoe Company, the American Plywood and Veneer Company, the Stanley Toy Company, the Oconto Brewing Company, and the Wisconsin Dried Egg Company.¹ The manufacture of finished hardwood products by the Holt Hardwood Company, as previously mentioned, also continued uninterrupted, producing hardwood flooring

¹ Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 44.

and other small wooden products, like broom handles.² At its peak capacity, the enterprise could employ up to 200 men and had approximately 100 men on its payroll in 1948.³

The existence of these companies helped alleviate some of the job loss that occurred as a result of the end of large-scale lumber operations in the city; residents did not leave en masse. Though marginal in comparison to the exponential growth it experienced in the nineteenth century, the city's population increased by nearly nine percent between 1920 and 1940.⁴ At the same time, the city showed signs of economic difficulty in the early 1920s; when two new factories were built in Oconto in the latter part of 1922, one local paper declared that the additions would "make 1923 a very much better business year in Oconto than the one just passed."⁵ The United States' entrance into World War II in 1941 further complicated Oconto's industrial operations and its transition away from lumber. The Wisconsin Dried Egg Company benefited from government contracts during the war, which it was continuing to fill in August 1945, but its future success was nevertheless uncertain as company officials looked towards the end of wartime production and a return to dependence on civilian product demand. On the other hand, some of the city's other manufacturers that curtailed their output during the war, like the

² "Founder's Ideals Are Continued for 91 Years," 77-78.

³ "Holt Lumber Company Records, 1839-1969."

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of Counties by Minor Civil Divisions: 1920 to 1940," *1940 Census of Population Volume 1*, 1169.

⁵ "Passing of Year Twenty-Two Sees Important Changes in Industrial Life in Oconto," *Oconto County Reporter Enterprise*, December 28, 1922, accessed February 18, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=55b3276a-6141-48fd-8bf0-7f85e855983a/wiotdoc0/20150710/00000004&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

Oconto Brewing Company and Kriewaldt Speciality Company, which produced gloves, seemed cautiously optimistic that operations could begin expanding in the wake of the war's end.⁶

The Bond Pickle Company, which was incorporated in Green Bay in 1915 and moved its headquarters to Oconto in 1921, also provided an additional source of stability for Oconto's residents as they adapted to the looming end of lumbering operations, in addition to weathering both the Great Depression and World War II. Remarkably, the company's operations expanded during the Great Depression; an entirely new packing plant was constructed in Oconto in 1929, and these facilities were expanded and updated in 1931, not only to accommodate the growing cucumber farming business in the region but to include the ability to pack and produce sauerkraut as well as pickles.⁷ Depending on the time of year, the plant could employ between 100 and 350 people.⁸ It is important to note that these employment figures do not include those Oconto-area farmers living beyond city limits who sold the cucumbers they grew to the Bond Pickle Company and also benefited from the company's growing operations. Domestically, the Bond Pickle Company shipped its products around the country, "carrying the name of Oconto

⁶ "More Production, More Jobs in Oconto with Ending of War," *Oconto County Reporter*, August 23, 1945, accessed February 17, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20180714/00000008&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=holt%20shoe%20company&query1_field=ALL.

⁷ "Bond to Head Pickle Group," *Oconto County Reporter*, January 26, 1933, accessed February 17, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170924/00000051&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=bond%20pickle%20company&query1_field=ALL/.

⁸ History on the Bay, "Pickle Town," accessed February 17, 2020, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5rzGYCX2tg>.

into hundreds of communities.”⁹ As a result of the United States’ entrance into World War II, the Bond Pickle Company, like the Wisconsin Dried Egg Company, received government contracts, and its products were shipped around the globe, used by both the United States Army and Navy.¹⁰

However, while these companies helped to support Oconto’s economy as the industry largely responsible for the city’s modern existence declined, the community still struggled. Not only could the scale and economic influence of the lumber industry not be replicated by the manufacturing facilities established in Oconto during the early twentieth century, but the way outsiders perceived the city and northern Wisconsin as a region was changing. During the era of Wisconsin’s lumber boom, Midwestern urbanites in cities like Milwaukee and Chicago, as well as those living in other areas of the country, viewed the northern reaches of the state as a place from which natural resources were extracted. The Wisconsin northwoods were a place from which resources, most frequently timber, came, rather than a place to which a person would go. Its forests were thought of as a wild and uncivilized frontier, even though they were heavily managed and the site of numerous settlements. But as the expansion of the railroads closed the proverbial gap between urban existence and this supposed frontier, as some logging settlements, like Oconto, grew into well-established communities, and as the forests rapidly disappeared under the hand of lumber barons and lumberjacks, this nineteenth-century perception no longer held true.

⁹ “Tour Reveals Pickle Plant Big Industry,” *Oconto County Reporter*, June 16, 1932, accessed February 17, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170924/00000019&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=bond%20pickle%20company&query1_field=ALL.

¹⁰ History on the Bay, *Pickle Town*.

Whereas urban Americans had previously considered large metropolitan communities to be the pinnacle of human achievement and more rural spaces to be their negatively-connoted antithesis, full of danger and uncertainty, twentieth-century urbanites, especially the wealthy, began to see northern Wisconsin as a place of purity and idyllic nostalgia. The northwoods became a region to which they could retreat from the bustling, dirty life of cities and reconnect with that pioneering spirit innate to Americans that had supposedly been softened or lost in the wake of the modern technologies and amenities designed to make daily life easier.¹¹ In northern Wisconsin as a whole, this disillusionment with urban life and desire to reconnect with what residents from cities further south saw as more natural spaces provided an alternative use for the massive swaths of land that had been cleared of first-growth timber. The areas where Wisconsin's great pine forests once stood had been transformed into a region known as the cutover, aptly named because it was precisely that — the land that had been cut over, cleared of its trees so that only stumps remained. Faced with the challenge of what to do with land that was no longer monetarily valuable, lumber barons, railroad companies, and land boosters started selling their real estate to immigrants, and state officials began promoting agriculture as the next logical progression in land use.¹² However, creating a region widely populated by self-sufficient, yeoman-style farms proved less successful than desired; removing tree stumps before fields could be plowed was enormously labor intensive, many crops did not grow well in the sandy,

¹¹ John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s," in *The Origins of Modern Consciousness*, ed. John Weiss (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1965); For further reading, see Aaron Shapiro, *The Lure of the North Woods: Cultivating Tourism in the Upper Midwest* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹² Gough, *Farming the Cutover*; 29-31; for an example of the promotional materials published by the state to encourage farming settlement, see W.A. Henry, *Northern Wisconsin: A Hand-Book for the Homeseeker* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, 1896).

loamy soil on which pine trees thrived, and the harsh climate and long winters of northern Wisconsin meant growing seasons were short.¹³

While some state officials and settlers remained determined to find success through agriculture in Wisconsin's cutover, others began to capitalize on the growing anxiety of upper and middle class urbanites. Some state officials began to advocate for reforestation programs, and passed legislation in the late 1920s that encouraged landowners to regrow timber and allowed counties to obtain land for the purpose of creating county forests.¹⁴ Luxury hotels, resorts, and later individual cabins began to dot the landscape to provide places of rest, respite, and outdoor recreation for travelers arriving from Milwaukee, Chicago, and beyond. In short, the tourism and recreation industry that typically characterizes northern Wisconsin today, the colloquial concept of "going up north" familiar to many Wisconsin and midwestern residents, was largely born out of the decline of the state's lumber industry.

As a lumbering city surrounded by largely rural landscape, including cutover land, Oconto too participated in the campaign to attract settlers seeking to establish their own agriculture homesteads. One local advertisement proclaimed that "No better farms nor thriftier farmers can be found anywhere."¹⁵ The success of the Bond Pickle Company provides evidence that it was possible for some Oconto-area farmers to find success through farming, though the contract-driven relationship between farmers and the company is more indicative of the commercial style of farming that became especially prevalent after World War II than the

¹³ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 203.

¹⁴ Timothy Todd Bawden, "Reinventing the Frontier: Tourism, Nature, and Environmental Change in Northern Wisconsin, 1880–1930" (Ph.D. diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2001), 40-41.

¹⁵ Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 84.

romanticized, self-sufficient farms proponents of transforming the cutover into an agricultural oasis envisioned. However, within the city limits of Oconto, the shift toward tourism and recreation that occurred as its mills closed altered not only how the city marketed itself to outsiders but visibly changed the city's appearance as well.

Calls from citizens for the creation and improvement of campsites and places for tourists traveling through Oconto to stop begin to appear in Oconto papers as early as the mid-1920s. At that point, campers and tourists could and did use City Park, but, ironically, it was located outside Oconto's southern city limits, on the shores of the Bay of Green Bay. One resident, identified as Mrs. R. Beorgeon, felt that "the City Park is out of the question being located too remote from Route 15 and too hard to find." Another resident, Emily M. Kehl, declared, "Once you are there our city park is a very nice place to spend a warm summer day; but it is entirely out of the way for a tourists' camp [...] the advantage derived from having the camp within city limits would amply repay the money expended." E. Milledge suggested opening the county fairgrounds, then located in Oconto, to campers because it was "close to both highways and the town."¹⁶ Two months later, a new campsite within city limits created through a partnership between the Oconto Chamber of Commerce and the local Kiwanis Club was opened. Located on the Oconto River near the east end of Main Street, the new site included stoves, running water, benches, tables, and swings "for the convenience of tourists stopping at Oconto."¹⁷ As the

¹⁶ "Opinions: Interviews with Local Citizens Selected at Random on Problems Pertaining to Oconto and Oconto County," *Oconto County Reporter Enterprise*, May 1, 1924, accessed February 18, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=55b3276a-6141-48fd-8bf0-7f85e855983a/wiotdoc0/20150710/00000074&pg_seq=1&search_doc=&query1_modifier=AND&query1=tourist%20camp&query1_field=ALL.

¹⁷ "New Campsite East End of Main Street," *Oconto County Reporter Enterprise*, July 24, 1924, accessed February 18, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=55b3276a-6141-48fd-8bf0-7f85e855983a/wiotdoc0/20150710/00000086&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

Oconto's lumber industry declined, the land along the river's edge that had previously been prime real estate for milling operations was being transformed into scenic recreational space.

The city's largest park and camping site, one that remains an important part of the city's tourist economy today, was also built along the Oconto River before the last sawmills closed. The park's origins and location once again highlights the legacy of the lumber industry in Oconto. In the early throes of the Great Depression, W.A. Holt announced his intention to transform a 45-acre plot of land he owned in the city, known as McDonald Point, into a large park.¹⁸ The plot of land is surrounded by the Oconto River on three sides, tucked against its southern banks, on the western side of the city. Before Holt decided to transform the land into a public park, it served as his company's large lumber yard; the Holt Hardwood Company plant was located to the north on the other side of the river. Part gift to the city (so long as the city agreed to maintain the park and keep it open to the public), part work relief program, Holt provided the city with one thousand dollars in October of 1932 in order to finance some temporary employment for local men. For each six-hour work day, the hired men would earn one dollar of credit on the city's books for work that included clearing the land, grading roads, and "other such work as may be possible to do this fall, in order to make the park available to the public next year."¹⁹

The park, subsequently named Holtwood Park, did open and did become a well-used community space; recreational events like softball games, outdoor concerts, and fireworks

¹⁸ "City May Have Natural Park," *Oconto County Reporter*, March 17, 1933, accessed February 18, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170924/00000006&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

¹⁹ "Holt to Give \$1000 to Aid Work Relief," *Oconto County Reporter*, October 6, 1932, accessed February 18, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20170924/00000035&pg_seq=1&search_doc=.

displays all took place there. With 4,000 feet of water frontage, it drew in camping and fishing enthusiasts alike.²⁰ The park's creation is indicative of Oconto's shifting economy on multiple fronts. Even though the Holt Lumber Company sawmill would remain operational for five years after the park opened, Holt's decision to turn his lumber yard into a city park indicates that he no longer needed the extensive acreage for his business operations. Furthermore, as illustrated by Holt's desire to provide jobs to local men by offering the city money to employ them, rather than hiring them to work for the lumber company, it was evident that the lumber industry could no longer support the city's workforce at the levels it had during the nineteenth century. The very act of turning the land into open park space also suggests that the 45 acres were not in demand for additional residential, commercial, or industrial development. Like many communities across northern Wisconsin facing the loss of their lumbering enterprises, Oconto turned to tourism in an effort to market itself to a new generation of consumers seeking to escape places like Chicago by retreating to what they saw as quaint, idyllic towns surrounded by natural landscapes unsullied by urbanization.

However, even as city officials and other residents made efforts to make Oconto appealing to visitors, the tourism industry was dependent, of course, upon the whims of travelers and the changing seasons; the city could not support itself on the economic activity generated by urban vacationers alone. Thus, though Oconto's other industrial operations could not match the level of production the city once enjoyed at the height of the lumber boom, it is important not to discount the vital degree of diversity and stability they provided to the city's economy as it transitioned away from lumbering and milling operations and began developing its outdoor

²⁰ Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 92.

recreational facilities. In contrast, other nearby logging communities, such as Stiles, Kelly Brook, Hintz, and Peshtigo Harbor shrank much more considerably than Oconto did, largely because the people there “depended on the mill for a livelihood.” By 1948, not only had “most of all the little log buildings and the old log school [...] long since disappeared in Kelly Brook,” but the brook itself that was the town’s connection to logging appeared “to have become completely dry.”²¹ In this regard, even though the city’s growth had remained largely flat throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Oconto fared slightly better than some of its neighboring communities.

Whereas the *Oconto County Reporter* once optimistically proclaimed, “But ever alive, progressive city!” following the Oconto Lumber Company’s rapid return to operation after losing its mill to a fire in 1899, phrases like “Historic Oconto” began to appear in city advertisements as the lumber industry declined, boasting of a “splendid nine hole golf course within the city limits, tennis courts [...] yachting, boating, and many other diversions.”²² This shift in language plays into the changing perspectives regarding communities and landscapes in northern Wisconsin during the first half of the twentieth century more generally, but it is revealing of the transition process taking place in Oconto as well. Terms like “ever alive” and “progressive” carry with them connotations of vibrancy and change, a hopeful belief in the future. The term “historic,” on the other hand, suggests that the city’s greatest era lay in the past. Oconto’s population was roughly the same at the close of its lumbering operations as it had been at the peak of the lumber

²¹ Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 44, 71.

²² “The Future of Oconto and Some Newspaper Correspondents,” *Oconto County Reporter*, October 6, 1899, accessed February 19, 2020, http://ocnews.co.oconto.wi.us/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=6a53abdd-c4ba-4da3-8089-2ff47aa857c0/wiotdoc0/20161010/00000112&pg_seq=4&search_doc=progressive%20city&query1_modifier=AND&query1=we%20are%20here&query1_field=ALL; Hall, *U.S. Bicentennial Recollections*, 88.

boom, and local residents were involved in many of the same religious and civic communities as those from, in some cases, nearly a century prior, suggesting stability over time. Despite this, Oconto at the midpoint of the twentieth century was in a state of flux as it continued to adapt to its shift from major lumbering center to nostalgic outdoor recreation destination.

Oconto's slow rate of growth throughout the second half of the twentieth century could be seen as evidence of the city's inability to adapt to the decline of the lumber industry, as other historians have concluded about comparable Wisconsin lumber towns. However, this study maintains that it is in fact indicative of its ability to alter its economic makeup in the face of shrinking lumber operations in order to continue to support a relatively stable population.²³ Similar to Don Harrison Doyle's conclusions in his study of Jacksonville, Illinois, Oconto was also able to navigate "the chaos of an expansive capitalist society and the enduring human need for community" with a fair degree of success.²⁴ Though the city was founded primarily as a result of the exponential growth of the lumber industry throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the people who settled and resided in the city of Oconto during the rise, peak, and decline of its lumbering era simultaneously established vital institutions that supported community growth and interaction outside of work related to lumbering and milling. Both the lumber industry, based largely on the consumption of white pine, and the people who made Oconto their home were instrumental in determining the form and function of the city.

The lumber industry in Oconto, operational for nearly one hundred years, had an enormous influence over the city's development. Not only did it fix the city's geographic

²³ Krog, *Marinette*; Rohe, "Lumbering: Wisconsin's Northern Urban Frontier."

²⁴ Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community*, 15.

location, but it also played an important role in where the industrial, commercial, and residential areas were located within the city as well. The initial mills constructed along the Oconto River in the 1850s served as points from which the rest of the city expanded. Roadways and railroad lines were built to best suit the needs of the growing lumber industry and the path of the river on which it depended rather than adhering to any systematic form of gridding. The comparative longevity of Oconto's lumber industry meant that later industrial and manufacturing facilities were often built alongside residential facilities, preventing the establishment of segregated districts within the city. Similarly, Main Street, first constructed to connect the disparate sawmill settlements prior to Oconto's incorporation, displayed a mix of private homes, community-oriented gathering spaces, and commercial storefronts as the city developed, indicating that easy access to the mills sites was a priority among the early settlers and landowners.

The growth of Oconto's lumber industry also acted as a catalyst for the development of other areas of the city's economy and its overall population growth. As lumbering operations grew both in size and complexity, not only in Oconto, but throughout northern Wisconsin more generally, the number of milling facilities in Oconto also increased. The arrival of railroads in 1870 meant Oconto's lumber company owners could ship products directly to wholesalers and customers around the country without first having to send the lumber larger cities like Chicago or Milwaukee; shingle mills, planing mills, and post mills soon joined the basic sawmills along with Oconto River. With more available work and a new means of transportation by which to reach Oconto, the city's population increased exponentially, and boarding houses and hotels were built to house mill workers, typically young, single men. Saloons, theaters, and shops of every sort opened to meet the entertainment and commercial needs of the growing community. While the

fact that Oconto was not a company lumber town meant its residents had some degree of choice in regards to purchase their goods and services from independent merchants, the lumber companies were nevertheless powerful entities and exerted some control over how residents could spend their money by operated company stores that competed with those owned by private citizens. In the case of the Holt Lumber Company, W.A. Holt's role extended into city government and created conflict at the start of the twentieth century in regards to how the city lighted its streets and public spaces.

At the same time, Oconto was never a homogeneously male society, nor were its residents entirely at the whim of the forces of the lumber industry. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of women and families living in the city increased, even as lumbering remained an almost-exclusively male profession; the distribution of men and women in Oconto was virtually equal by 1900. Furthermore, while the city's earliest mills were being built, white settlers also established important institutions that would serve as sources of community interaction and stability throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Many of these earliest institutions were religious communities; places of worship served as nuclei of development in Oconto in much the same way that the lumber mills did. These places of worship, like the French-dominated St. Peter's Catholic Church, First Presbyterian of Oconto established by the community's wealthier contingent of Yankee-Yorkers, or the Germans' Evangelical Lutheran Immanuel's Church, acted not only as places that fostered religious life but also as important places of cultural gathering for the city's many different immigrant communities. Even when the differences between Oconto's ethnic groups faded over time as the descendants of the city's immigrants intermingled, intermarried, and used English as their first

language, the wide variety of places of worship attended throughout the city stand as testament to residents' influence over both the landscape and identity of Oconto.

The same level of influence can be credited to the actions of residents engaged in the many voluntary associations and community organizations that existed alongside the city's religious communities. The Farnsworth Public Library, which continues to serve Oconto today, traces its origins to the Oconto Library Association, first organized and operated by private citizens in 1878. Oconto's Woman's Club fostered a sense of connectedness among the city's women through regular meetings and social events while also spearheading numerous beautification campaigns designed for the benefit of the entire city, the installation of a new water fountain in 1916 being among them. A wide variety of fraternal organizations similarly provided opportunities for socialization and support among the city's male residents, while still others advocated for particular social causes, like temperance. Not only did these organizations result in the construction of physical buildings that marked their presence in Oconto, but they also provided institutions to which the city's residents could attach themselves and enrich their lives outside of the workplace or the home. While Oconto's economy remained largely dependent upon its lumber industry from roughly the midpoint of the nineteenth century to shortly prior to World War II, and was consequently known primarily as a lumber town during that time period, the city's culture and identity from within was significantly richer and more nuanced than Wisconsin lumber histories approached from regional or industrial perspectives allow.

Therefore, it is vital that we study individual communities like Oconto to advance and enrich our understanding of Wisconsin's lumber industry and its legacy, the developmental

process of frontier communities, and how we negotiate our changing cultural perceptions of what constitutes rural wilderness and urban civilization. These concepts cannot be removed from the immediate contexts in which they took place. Though they often share similar origins or patterns of development, each lumber community is unique, shaped not only by larger economic and industrial forces but by environmental factors and the active placemaking efforts initiated and maintained by the people who called these places home. Oconto serves as merely one case study. Oconto was a city with a particularly long-lived lumber industry, supported by a nominal variety of other manufacturing companies established during the twentieth century and a relatively stable population that fostered the growth of a closely-knit community through a number of religious, cultural, and social institutions. All these factors resulted in the development of a lumbering community that was ultimately able to adapt to and survive the loss of the industry upon which it was largely founded.

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