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ATTORNEYS AT LAW

Thomas M. Rusch
Robert P. Rusch

Post Office Box 339
1111 East Division Street
Medford, Wisconsin 54451
Telephone 715-748-2030

February 19, 1982

Mr. Malcolm Rosholt
Box 104
Rosholt, WI 54473

Dear Malcolm:

I have received and returned the pictures. Your letter, which I am returning, caused me to do some research. The following comments dealing with the tanning industry are contained within "Reminiscences and Anecdotes of Early Taylor County" by Arthur J. Latton. The book was written about 1920.

1. About 1870 John Nystrum built the first tannery on Whelen Avenue, where the O & N Store is now located. (Medford, Wisconsin.) (The Nystrum Tannery was one of two small tanneries located in the City of Medford; the other was operated by Charles Faude. I know nothing about these small tanneries; their historic interest for you may be the fact that there were "mom and pop" tanneries in addition to the large ones built by Shaw and others.)

2. On page 93 the book relates "Fayette, Thaxter, Delos and Fred Shaw, Boston, Mass. came here (Medford) and looked over our wonderful hemlock forests and decided to build a tannery here. By April, 1890, the plant was turning out more than two tons of tanned leather daily. The latter three partners moved here permanently, and built fine homes on the hill east of the plant. The dry hides were shipped here chiefly from South America. In another year a second tannery was built at Perkinstown, and the dry hides were hauled there by wagon and four-horse teams, the finished product being brought back the same way.

(Perkinstown is a ghost town located in the center of Taylor County; I am told that Lester Schwarz has a good collection of photographs of that tannery. This is the only tannery I know of that was built off the railway. It required a twelve-mile, one way trip to get the materials there. I presume the rough Kettle Moraine Territory made it more economical to haul the hides there than the tanned bark out.)

3. Page 99. Shaws built another tannery in Rib Lake, in 1893. E. C. Getchel was manager and John Lee superintendent. Later tanneries were built at Prentice, Phillips and Mellen. Tramps increased rapidly about this time; jails were filled.

4. Page 104. Delos Shaw and Miss Ida Krauth were married, and moved into the fine new residence on "the hill", now the Lueptke home, where the

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resided about twenty years, until the United States Leather Company crowded out the independent Shaw Company, and forced them to sell. The Shaws spent most of the remaining days in the city of Phillips, Wisconsin.

5. Page 111. While hauling bark for the Shaw Company to their tannery at Rib Lake, in the winter of 1895-6, John Nelson, of Little Black, accidentally slipped off his big ten-cord load that he was hauling. It ran over his legs crushing them terribly.

6. Page 131. U. S. Leather Company buys the Shaw Tanneries. (1902 ?)

7. Page 132. U. S. Leather Company offered to furnish water power for fire protection, if city connects with their pipes. (1908 ?) (This reference to city refers to the City of Medford; I take it this reference to water power referred to water under pressure to be supplied to the city water mains; presumably the tannery had a water tower. This reminds me of the Rib Lake situation where at the turn of the century the sawmill of the Rib Lake Lumber Company provided the village with its water source. Starting about 1923, the Rib Lake Lumber Company provided the source for the electric current throughout the village of Rib Lake; company dynamos were powered by burning junk wood. Quite a comment on the interdependence of government and industry!)

8. Page 201. In 1893, Shaws built a tannery on the north side. E. C. Getchel was manager and John Lee was tannery superintendent. Dan Kennedy managed the woods work, and J. B. Landall had charge of the office. Andrew Aitken was the bark-yard foreman. Several thousand cords of hemlock bark were peeled every summer, and hauled to the tannery in the winter. This was used to tan the carloads of hides that were shipped in from South America, by gradually passing them through vats of stronger and stronger liquor made from this bark, after which the tanned hides were then finished up by drying, rolling and polishing under pressure. (The hides were rolled on a table by a workman using a mechanical roller; the roller worked from above and could be swung in several directions. A number of Rib Lake old timers still recall how the brass rollers shown from their regular use.) The new methods of tanning by use of chemicals were discovered by the U. S. Leather Company, it forced the Shaws to sell, as they could not compete with these cheaper methods.

This completes the comments within Latton's book.

Enclosed please also find a photocopy of page 77 from the Phillips, Wisconsin, Centennial book. You will note that in the second to last paragraph Ms. Bodenburg comments as to the causes for the closing of the Shaw Tannery. I do not know whether the tannery was closed or sold to the U. S. Leather Company. Since the closing or transference occurred at the same time the other Shaw tanneries were sold to the U. S. Leather Company, I doubt the accuracy of the explanation provided by Ms. Bodenburg.

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Mr. Malcolm Rosholt
February 16, 1982
Page 3

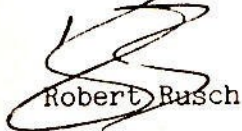
Enclosed please find a photocopy of pages 97 and 129 of the Prentice Centennial album. My uncorroborated recollection is that the Prentice Tannery survived the fire described therein but burned out and was never replaced sometime thereafter.

- According to Gus Hill, an old timer from the town of Westboro, Taylor County, Wisconsin, a small independent tannery was built in the village of Westboro by a Mr. Duncan. I am somewhat skeptical of that claim since * I have heard no one else mention it and have seen no photographs. Duncan did have a sawmill there. None of the Shaws ever lived in Rib Lake.

Now a couple of comments concerning your proposed text. I do not know whether tanneries stood in Spencer and Rice Lake. I suspect tanneries dotted the north including Mellen and Ashland.

I look forward to seeing your newest book and once again want to congratulate you on your splendid efforts to publicize north Wisconsin history.

Cordially yours,



Robert Busch

P. S. Is your first book with the couple of chapters on logging still available? If yes, please send with your statement. I would love to get it.

* WILLIAM DUNCAN DID HAVE A
TANNERY IN WESTBORO 1880 - 02

It is possible to get them if I need to change a nutting. Malcom

THE "TAN BARK" PROCESS

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*not well
4/2/07
1/21/07*

Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, was forced to drink the juice of the hemlock tree and died, but in our time the juice of the hemlock has been used to cure hides for the tanning industry. Peeling the bark of the hemlock was a business that began in the New England states in colonial times, and in the 19th Century moved west with the flow of immigration. One of the most important tanning centers in Wisconsin was located at Rib Lake in the east of the Chippewa Valley where the soil favored hemlock trees equally as much as pine trees.

*200/07
1/21/07*

Learning of the great concentration of hemlock growth in Taylor County, Fayette Shaw, a "State O'Mainer," moved to Rib Lake township and in 1891 founded the Rib Lake Tannery. Tanneries were built by other companies at Bedford, Spencer, Phillips, and Rice Lake.

Hemlock bark, more commonly abbreviated to "tan bark" (tannery bark) was harvested both by the big lumber companies and by independent farmers. Peeling hemlock trees began in early spring and continued until about the first week in July at which time all the juice in the tree had oozed out and it was no longer feasible to ~~max~~ debark the tree.

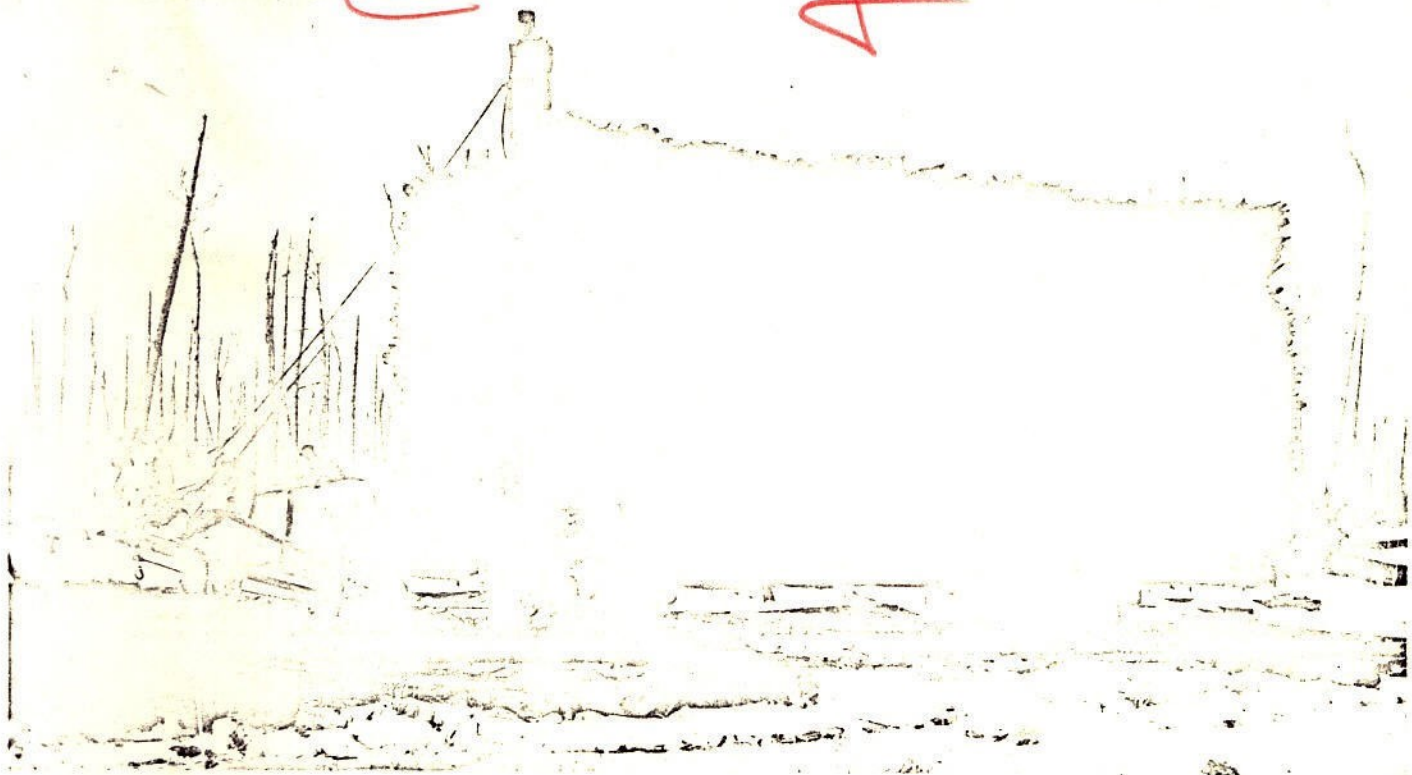
The bark on the tree was cut in four foot lengths, and the first cut was made at the trunk (see photo opposite). After this initial piece had been girdled, the tree was sawed down, the limbs trimmed off, and the rest of the bark removed by men wielding both axes and spuds, the latter a tool with a short handle and a shovel nose which was used to pry off the bark. After the bark was peeled, it was stood up against the fallen tree and allowed to dry, and later hauled to the tannery. In Rib Lake township there was so much tan bark harvested in the early 1900s that a steam hauler was used to bring in the bark from outlying lumber company camps. Farmers hauled in their own bark usually after sleighs could be used.

At the factory, the tan bark was ground into sawdust and thrown into a vat of water and allowed to leach to make tannic acid, the main ingredient necessary in the tanning process.

Tan bark, like fire wood, was sold by the cord. According to Robert Rusch, editor of A Pictorial History of the Rib Lake Area (1981), a cord of tan bark delivered at the factory, circa 1900, brought six dollars which, by the economic barometer of the time, was good money and many farmers could peel many cords in season.

In the 1880s, the peeled hemlock trees around Rib Lake were left to rot, but in the 1890s, a demand ^{ar}ose for hemlock lumber, and one of the biggest buyers was the coffin industry which needed a cheap grade of lumber, yet sturdy, which could be covered with cloth materials.

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A Load of Bark for the Tannery.

THE TANNERY

By Mary Knoblock Bodenburg

Fayette De Los Shaw came from Medford to Phillips in 1885 and constructed a large building in which to start tanning hides. Farmers, hunters and butchers of the area provided some hides. Others were shipped in. Fresh hides, preserved with salt were first soaked in hot borax water to remove the salt and soften the skins ready for fleshing. Hard, dry skins needed more soaking and the addition of sodium sulphide. Sometimes they needed re-soaking two or three times. After that, the hair had to be removed. So, in connection with the Tannery was a potash factory. Potash, a lye made by leaching special wood ashes (Shaw imported this wood) mixed with water loosened fur or hair so that it could be scraped off.

Frank Heindl remembers playing tag around a furiously boiling kettle of the material, slipping and nearly sliding into the fire which kept burning under the kettle. A frightening experience.

Tons of hemlock bark hauled in by farmers reached great heights beside the railroad tracks at a point directly across from where the present Northland Furniture Mart stands. Mrs. Matt Cork's father, Leonard Link, hauled bark for the tannery for seven years.

In the process of tanning hides, the bark was washed in a metal machine called a "hog" then put in tanks similar to those used in watering large herds of cattle. Hot water was added to the tanks together with acids and other ingredients, as needed, and strained. The pre-soaked and softened hair-free skins went into this mixture.

Mr. Gust Knoblock, an experienced German tanner and engineer had charge of this operation and because of his special skills received a salary of \$2.00 a day.

Some skins had an oil added to this bath to keep them soft and pliable. Leather tanned with oak bark became a light fawn color while hemlock produced a reddish color and was used only on thick hides. Some calf and young deer hides were bleached with ash lye, sparingly.

From ten to thirty-five men worked at the tannery ten hours a day earning \$1.25 a day. Tony Nebish says that his father worked there for fourteen years. His job was scraping off hair.

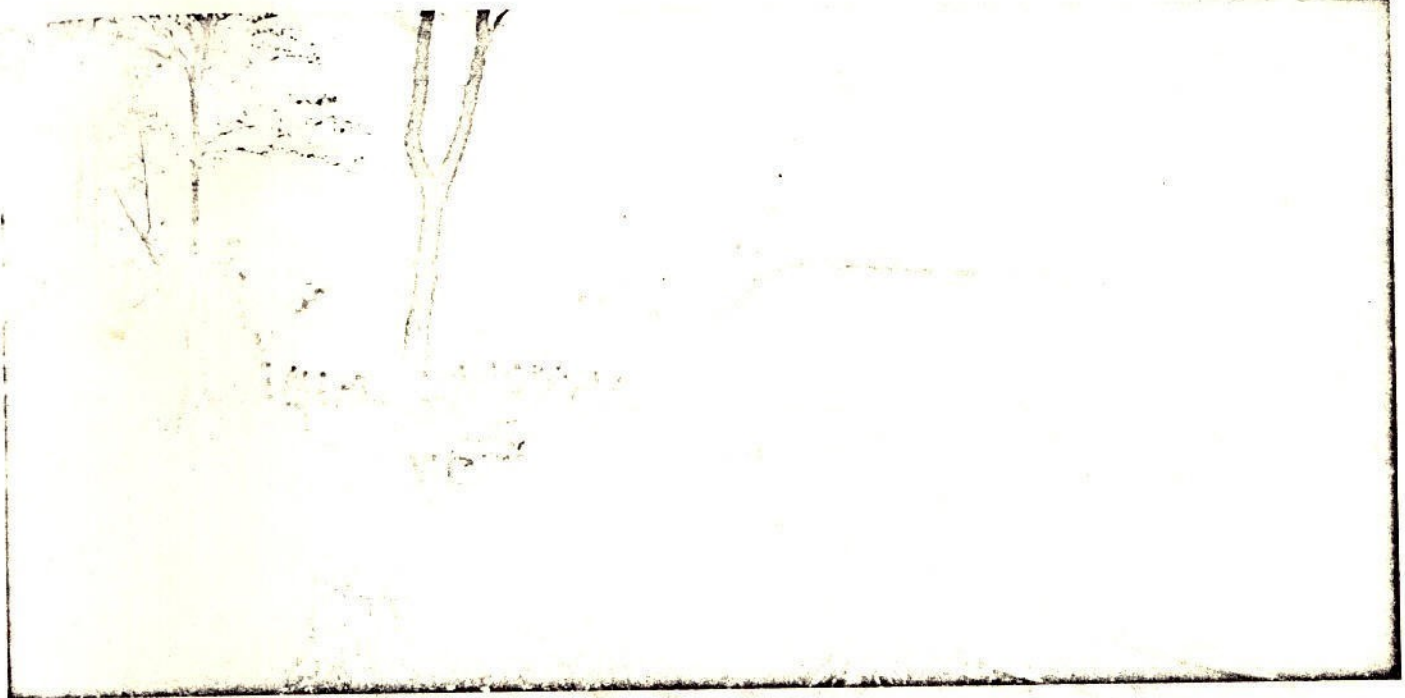
The building now housing the Northern Furniture Mart was a WANAGAN store started by a Mr. Loeb. The present site of the Phillips Sports Center nearby was an old fashioned boarding house where meals were served; 25c for breakfast, 50c for noon dinner and 35c for supper.

In 1903 or so, butchers who had been taking hides to the tannery started getting meats from suppliers south of Price county. Farm settlers kept their cows and calves to develop dairy herds, so fewer hides were sold to the tannery. Because of this change, Mr. Shaw discontinued operation of the tannery and opened a store in Phillips.

The north end of the city still carries the name of TANNERY TOWN and two streets, SHAW and FAYETTE, together with the still visible cement footings along the railroad tracks remind us that, long ago, a potash factory and a tannery thrived in Phillips.

Disasters...

12111-E



The Big 1894 Tannery Bark Fire

After a hard battle fire-fighters finally brought the fire under control. As was usual in early days, a fire brought most of the town people to the scene. Many dressed in their best.

The Prentice News Account Of The 1906 Tannery Fire

"Fire early Tuesday (Feb. 20) morning destroyed the dry loft and hide house at the tannery, entailing a loss on the United States Leather Co., conservatively estimated at \$75,000. That the fire did not do greater damage was principally due to the energetic work of the fire department, although a light fall of rain during the night wet down the roofs of buildings and was of incalculable benefit in making them slow to take fire from the burning brands that fell upon them.

The fire started about four o'clock in the south end of the dry loft and was caused, it is thought, by an overheated box on the dynamo engine. The fire whistle was blown about ten minutes after four, and the members of the fire department and other citizens were soon on the scene.

At first it was thought that the tannery office, the rear part and upper stories of which are occupied by L. E. Miller and family, was doomed, while scarcely a hope was entertained of saving S. W. Pierson's store and residence, which were separated by barely 50 feet from the burning building. Flames had already got a fair start on the rear and in several places on the roof of the tannery office by the time the first stream of water could be brought to bear on the building. The danger at this point was soon averted as was the danger to Supt. Zeigler's residence, which was threatened for a time.

Another stream of water was brought to bear on

Pierson's store and residence. Here the fight was almost desperate, the intense heat making near approach to the buildings difficult; the firemen being forced to face the wind that bore with it a blinding torrent of blazing brand. After a hard and persistent fight, the buildings were saved.

The attention of the fire-fighters was then directed to the tannery barn, which was already on fire in several places, and here again they succeeded in defeating the greedy element. The Lutheran church and parsonage and several other residences on the same street were in grave peril for some time from the burning pieces of wood carried by the wind. The roof of the church was fairly covered at times with sparks and brands.

In the meantime, a desperate battle was being waged on the opposite side of the flame-swept loft to save the beam house and other tannery buildings from destruction. Two streams of water were used here and the blackened east wall of the beam house, burned through in places, gives evidence that only the most determined efforts saved the building.

When it was considered that the dry loft was five stories high and of pine construction throughout, it is indeed marvelous that of all the buildings in close proximity to it, but one should have been burned, the hide-house, a one-story building very close to the north end of the large building. The dimensions of the dry loft were 40 x 300 feet.

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state Laws, and the following officers named: James D. Burt, president, F. A. Gale, vice-president, J. R. Plum, secretary and treasurer, all from New York.

Charles I. Gale, a young man from Brooklyn, accompanied his father and the other officers to Prentice to serve as bookkeeper. He was later promoted to manager. In 1892 he married Floy Van Dusen, the youngest daughter of Oscar Derrick Van Dusen. Eight children were born to this family and attended school in Prentice.

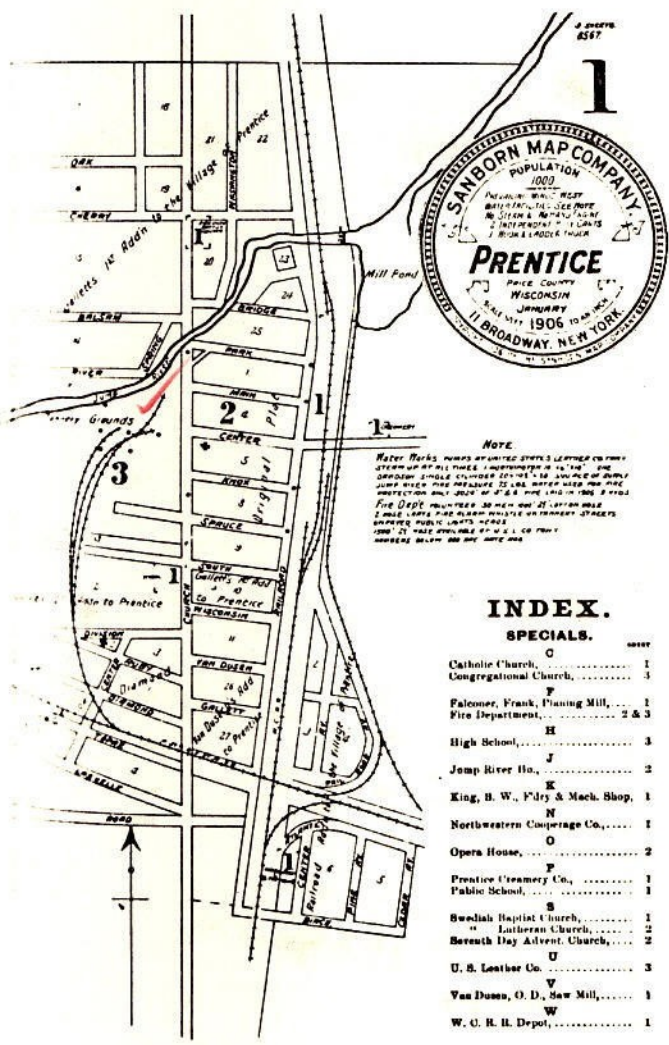
With the coming of the tannery there was an influx of tannery workers from both New York and Pennsylvania, many of Scandinavian ancestry. The population expanded to 1050. In combination with the many mills, there were five whistles that sounded at noon.

The main building of the tanning plant was 308 x 50 feet. The yard was 308 x 86 feet and included a boiler house, bark mills, leach houses and hide buildings. There was also a three story, commodious office building facing Town street. Twenty double tenement houses were built on Spruce Street (Tannery Town) for families of tannery employees.

The Prentice Tannery with its annual output of 200,000 hides of sole leather was the second largest of its kind in the United States, and the pride of Prentice. Then the blow fell. In the early morning of Tuesday, February 20, the tannery was destroyed by fire.

To the relief of the village, the United States Leather Company decided that it would be to their advantage to rebuild. This they did. In four months the tannery was ready for operation. The night before work was to begin, a fire broke out and buildings as well as equipment were demolished.

A delegation was sent to New York to encourage the company to rebuild. However, every inducement offered them was declined. The news of the company's refusal to rebuild came as a shock to Prentice people. Employees were obliged to move or secure other employment. (Many who remained turned to farming for a livelihood). Most of the Tannery Town buildings as well as 30,000 cords of fine bark were moved to Medford. Charles Gale, the manager, was transferred to the tannery in Medford, and his family joined him to make their home there.



The Sanborn Map Company January 1906 maps of Prentice, Price County, Wisconsin, were prepared specifically for fire insurance rating purposes and represent visually the fire insurance risk exposure of each property, whether business and industrial, public, or residential. The maps show building size, type of building construction, type of roof covering, window exposure, types of heat, light and power, and type and number of fire protection facilities and services available.

Map No. 1, only a portion of which is reproduced, outlines the particular properties at-risk which are detailed on each of the three maps that together form a comprehensive overview of Prentice in 1906. Notations regarding certain individual properties not shown here include:

Prentice Creamery: Operated Summers only; no exposure any side. Grade School: Heat: Stove. No lights. Catholic Church: Heat: Stove. Lights: Kerosene. Swedish Baptist Church: Heat: Stove. Lights: Kerosene. Machine Shop and Foundry: No watchman; Heat: Steam; Lights: Electric. Northwestern Cooperaage Co.: Timber exhausted; probably never be operated again. O. D. Van Dusen Saw Mill: Capacity: 40,000' per day. Power: Steam. Fuel: Slabs and saw dust. Water supply: Mill pond. Operates 2 months per year. Frank Falconer, Planing Mill: Power: Steam. Fuel: Sawdust.

It is interesting to note that, in 1906, there were two fire stations and two Center Streets. The Village of Prentice had one fire station at Center and Church Streets, in the "Original Plat" of the Vil-