

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – EAU CLAIRE

REDEFINING THE NATURE OF LOGGING TOWNS:  
THE FIRST AND SECOND PHASES IN THE EVOLUTION OF  
TOMAHAWK, WISCONSIN, 1886-1940

FOR PRESENTATION TO HISTORY 489

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the early history of the city of Tomahawk, Wisconsin, a settlement in the north-central part of the state that was originally founded as a logging town. The typical life cycle of a logging town in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries involved a miniature population boom as the mills came followed by up to a couple decades of furious logging and prosperity (depending on the size of the forested areas nearby). Usually, though, after the logging industry would leave as abruptly as it came once the trees thinned out, leaving these towns devoid of an economic function; there was little the towns could do to survive and they often vanished. The analysis in this paper focuses primarily on the economic (side industries such as a tannery, metal works, and shoe company) and social developments (largely through city planning efforts) that took place in the city of Tomahawk between 1886 and the end of the Second World War, proposing that the evolution that occurred during this time period enabled the city to survive and prosper long after the bulk of the saw and paper mills had left the area.

## Prologue: Tomahawk's Prehistory to Conception

Sources claim that the Tomahawk River received its name following a large battle between the Chippewa and the Sioux tribes at some point during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Legend has it that when the battle ended, the two sides met and a hatchet was buried on the bank of the newly-christened Tomahawk River as a way of ending the hostilities.<sup>1</sup>

While there is some doubt as to whether or not the two sides actually made this gesture of peace, archeological evidence confirmed that a substantial battle did occur at present-day Heafford Junction, where the Tomahawk, Somo, and Wisconsin rivers all converge in the middle of a vast, dense forest at a point known as "The Forks."<sup>2</sup> Several sites containing burial mounds are also scattered around the vicinity, the largest of which was located adjacent to the battle site.<sup>3</sup> Following the battle the area remained home to a substantial Chippewa population through at least the 1850s; various treaties with the United States led to Native populations gradually leaving the area until August 1886 when the last remaining Chippewa were removed to the reservations at Lac Du Flambeau and Odanah.<sup>4</sup>

People familiar with the area had long speculated that a settlement would one day spring up at "The Forks," as such a location naturally lent itself to development by the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Heim, *Exploring America's Highways: Wisconsin Trip Trivia* (Wabasha, MN: T.O.N.E. Publishing, 2004), 117.

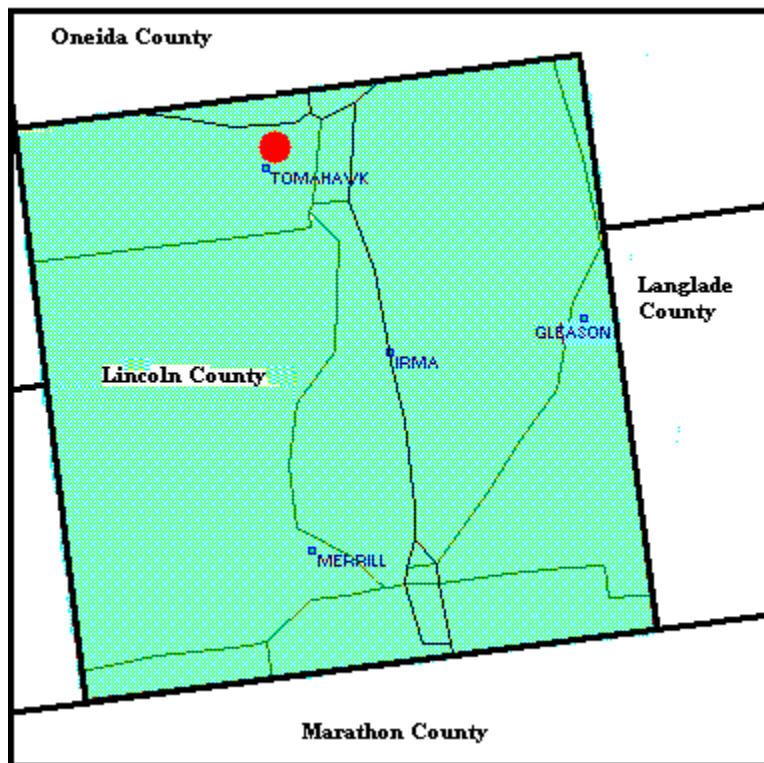
<sup>2</sup> "Indian Relics," *Merrill Herald*, 26 May 1922.

<sup>3</sup> "Makes Rich Indian Finds in Northern Wis.," *Merrill News*, 23 January 1914; "Indians Were Plentiful Here," *Merrill Herald*, 22 January 1921. Despite the fact that research was being conducted at several of these sites by 1914, several were still destroyed by city development by the time the second article was written. The largest of these sites was inundated when the Bradley Dam was completed, but recently efforts have been started to reclaim the sites for study.

<sup>4</sup> George O. Jones, Norman S. McVean and others, *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties, Wisconsin* (Minneapolis: H. C. Cooper Jr., and Co., 1924), 68.

logging industry that was establishing camps all over northern Wisconsin.<sup>5</sup> The location also had the benefit of falling almost directly in the path of a developing railway that would soon run between the cities of Merrill and Minocqua, which made gaining access to markets much easier. Once the last remaining Chippewa were relocated the land was purchased by the Tomahawk Land and Boom Company, the final pieces were in place and Tomahawk was born.

Figure 1: Map of Lincoln County's Major Settlements



Tomahawk's Location within Lincoln County. The location of "The Forks" is indicated by the large dot, and lines within indicate major roadways. Source: Made by the author based off template found at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wilincol/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Short History of Lincoln County," *Merrill Herald*, 21 July 1907.

From the outset community leaders had a vision for Tomahawk that differed from that of the typical logging town in northern Wisconsin: they hoped to build a thriving settlement that would remain lively well after the logging industry had cleared the nearby forests.<sup>6</sup> As the majority owner of the Tomahawk Land and Boom Company, William H. Bradley became especially important. Bradley moved to Wisconsin in 1862, where he became involved with lumbering operations near Oshkosh for fifteen years before beginning extensive and highly successful operations in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. After amassing a substantial fortune Bradley came back to northern Wisconsin to continue his efforts and pursue his dream of developing a region within lumber territory that would outlast the logging industry and become a self-sustaining economic power in its own right.<sup>7</sup> It was this vision for the future that was adopted by those who came to work and settle permanently, coupled with Bradley's financial resources that turned the dream of this new sort of logging town into a reality.

### **In Others' Words: A Few Thoughts on Sources**

At first glance it would appear that the early development of the city of Tomahawk is fairly well documented by secondary sources, at least through the year 1924. After this point the sources become much more scattered and fragmented, and it is hard to locate sources focusing on anything other than a specific institution. It seemed suspicious that all the sources concerning the early period ended at exactly the same time,

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<sup>6</sup> "Talks with Old Timers," *Tomahawk*, 15 February 1908; "City of Promise is Tomahawk, at Gateway to Lakes," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 10 October 1920.

<sup>7</sup> "King of Tomahawk' Put Boat Train on Wisconsin; Told Tales by Telegraph," *Milwaukee Journal*, 14 November 1932; Tomahawk Regional Chamber of Commerce, "History of Tomahawk," (2008): <http://www.gototomahawk.com/history.php> (accessed 2 April 2008).

and upon further investigation it appears that they are all derived directly from the same source: *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties, Wisconsin* by George S. McVean and others. The resemblances are quite uncanny, ranging from very liberal usage of direct quotes with a spattering of intermingled details to the undocumented use of very extensive passages copied verbatim from the original text. In short, most of the secondhand research available outside of this specific text is quite superficial.

That said, I myself have already cited McVean and will continue to do so with regularity, as it is an exceptional resource. I found the title to be somewhat misleading in the present day, however, as the authors spend as much time examining the 1920s state of affairs throughout the region as they do the historical ones; at times it seems every bit as much a primary source as a secondary one. I have attempted to treat it accordingly, using its analysis of the past and present (meaning the early 1920s) situations as a framework through which to demonstrate the planning and foresight the original founders of the city of Tomahawk used to ensure that it would not die when the lumber industry moved on to greener pastures. I have tried to splice this with various institution-specific histories I found to be available in hopes of providing a few new insights that up until now have evaded detection. However, with so many companies coming, changing names, changing ownership, merging, splitting, and going during the furious first years of the logging rush it seems quite a few have gotten lost through the course of time, leaving behind only the legacies captured in the seventeen pages McVean devotes to the city of Tomahawk.

My original intention was to lean heavily on census data in conducting my research, though it did not take long before it was clear that this would not get me to where I wanted to go. Once the original boom took place between 1886 and 1900, the

growth rate slowed down immensely, with an average growth of only twelve people per year after 1920; even in the three decades prior to this date the net growth of the population was just over thirty people a year (see figure 2 below). However, despite the lack of population change, the city displayed a dynamic economic situation, leading me to instead focus on this aspect.

**Figure 2: Tomahawk’s Population, 1887-1930, 2000**

Year	Population	Net Gain	Percentage Gain per Decade
1887	700 <sup>8</sup>	700	--
1890	1816	1116	159.43%
1900	2754	938	51.65%
1910	2784	30	1.09%
1920	2801	17	0.61%
1930	3352 <sup>9</sup>	--	--
2000	3770	969 <sup>10</sup>	34.59%

This chart tracks the population growth of Tomahawk from 1887 to 1930, and includes the total from the 2000 census for comparison. Data obtained from Jones et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties; Merrill Herald*; and Robin L. Comeau, *Boom Town: Early History of Tomahawk, Wisconsin, 1886-1924*.

In lieu of census data I ended up making use of archived newspaper articles concerning various topics of the day; however, most of these did not come from the

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<sup>8</sup> Rough estimate obtained from “First Copy of Tomahawk Blade,” *Merrill Herald*, 12 April 1924.

<sup>9</sup> Includes data for the Township of Tomahawk, an entity independent of the incorporated city itself. Based on previous figures for the township, roughly 450 people from the total shown would have lived there. Consequently, net gain and percentage gain figures are misrepresentative, and thus excluded.

<sup>10</sup> Net gain and percentage gain figures for the year 2000 are based on the 1920 numbers, as the 1930 figures are skewed as described in footnote 9.

Tomahawk papers themselves. Instead newspapers from Merrill and Milwaukee provided the most information.<sup>11</sup> Merrill, as the only other sizeable settlement in the county even to this day, took a special interest in the development of a sort of sister city and covered developments in Tomahawk regularly. Milwaukee also provided more coverage than I had initially expected. I suspect this was partially due to the fact that Milwaukee claimed Bradley as one of its own, but there were certainly other forms of interaction between the cities that would have contributed as well. I also hope that by using these outside resources an element of neutrality was gained, as there could potentially have been incentive for certain figures to be exaggerated or downplayed by the city in their efforts to draw people and companies to the area.

### **Building a Beachhead: Preparing for the Logging Invasion**

Though logging operations officially began immediately following the final removal order in August of 1886, the town was still essentially nonexistent in December. The only signs of modern development in the area that would become the city itself was a primitive construction camp that had been set up on the southern edge. Here about 150 laborers had begun to construct a dam on the Wisconsin River that was to become associated with the first saw mill set up by the Tomahawk Land and Boom Company, and later the Tomahawk Pulp and Paper mill.<sup>12</sup> As there was nothing else in the immediate area, life in the camp was rather dull for the workers. Supplies had to be shipped in, and

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<sup>11</sup> Accessibility to the articles played a large role in this. As the focus of this paper shifted several times research had to constantly be reworked; much of my research was done from Eau Claire, however, so access to the archives of the Tomahawk papers became an issue. Fortunately the larger newspapers in Merrill and Milwaukee provide better accessibility from afar, and were used accordingly.

<sup>12</sup> "Hatchet City Born in 1186," *Merrill Herald*, 26 December 1925.

the cost of doing so limited these shipments to only the necessary foodstuffs, clothing, and equipment; tobacco could be acquired at a lower cost than alcohol, so on special occasions such as Christmas it made an appearance at the camp. As Dr. John D. Cutter, the camp's physician, recalled in a 1925 interview:

The crew didn't even celebrate by getting drunk, in the traditional north woods style of earlier days, because there was no liquor available [...] and the nearest saloon was at the Gilberts station five miles down the river. And there were no men in the camp who would walk five miles for a drink. It seems that they weren't that kind of boys. They preferred, on this [1886] Christmas day, to sit around the camp, chewing "tobaccy [*sic*]," and talking about the high cost of living, which amounted to \$3.50 a week for board and lodging.<sup>13</sup>

Considering the lack of material luxuries and amenities, the complaints about the high cost of living were probably justified; the figure presented in the quote is equivalent to \$77.37 per week in present day dollars, or roughly \$320 per month.<sup>14</sup>

This dam, which would later become known as the Pride Dam, was significant not only because it powered the first sawmill, but also because the flowage it created became Lake Mohawksin, which at the time was one of the largest in the state.<sup>15</sup> A contract was given out to clear the area that would be covered by the flowage in 1887, and flooding began the following year, essentially forming the southwest boundary of the city proper.<sup>16</sup> Besides increasing the property value of neighboring lands, the flowage evolved into an excellent fishery over time, and served as one of the primary draws for tourists seeking quality fishing and businesses seeking tourists for decades to come.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Present value calculations for monetary values based on Lawrence H. Officer, "Six Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present," *MeasuringWorth.Com* (2008): <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/> (accessed 5 April 2008).

<sup>15</sup> "City of Promise," *Milwaukee Sentinel*.

<sup>16</sup> "Talks with Old Timers," *Tomahawk*, 22 February 1908.

The Tomahawk Land and Boom Company had the area officially surveyed and platted out for development on June 1, 1887. Just over three weeks later most of the lots were put up for auction in Milwaukee in hopes of attracting entrepreneurs with capital as well as pioneers for settlement and labor; selling them in this manner would also bring more people to the area sooner than simply placing advertisements for land in smaller, more local cities like Wausau and Merrill. Some roads were put in before people began to arrive, but the lots were sold completely undeveloped. As one buyer described it:

I came to Tomahawk from Wausau in the spring of 1886 [*sic*] to look over the town site. There was practically no road from Merrill to Tomahawk and the drive was a tedious one. The dam on the Wisconsin River was being built then. The men informed me that Tomahawk was about two miles farther north. I made my way through the woods to where Tomahawk now stands. Surveyors were at work with their instruments and I asked them where Tomahawk was. ‘This is Tomahawk’ replied one of them. At that time the town site was literally covered with jack pine and other trees. One of the surveyors had a blue print of the new town and he told me where the depot would stand and which would be the principal streets. I picked out a number of lots which I thought would be desirable and later purchased them at the sale in Milwaukee.<sup>17</sup>

While the source of this quote is not named, the ability to travel so freely and buy several lots at once suggests that this man was of a wealthy background and in search of new business opportunities. Furthermore, as he was buying lots that were within the city limits, it is unlikely that his ambitions centered directly on the logging industry, but rather on serving the more general population. In essence this was the sort of individual that the city’s founder hoped would come.

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<sup>17</sup> “Talks with Old Timers,” *Tomahawk*, 22 February 1908. While the quote cites spring of 1886 as the time period, this is highly unlikely as prior to August 1886 the land was owned by the Chippewa, not the Tomahawk Land and Boom Company. Undoubtedly the visit actually took place in early June of 1887.

According to a count taken on September 8, 1887, just over 700 people had arrived in Tomahawk since the lots had been sold in June.<sup>18</sup> While this was a dramatic increase over the original 150 at the construction camp only six months prior, a much larger increase was on the horizon. In arguably the most important moment in the city's history, the Wisconsin Valley Division of the Chicago Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad connected Tomahawk to its lines on September 15, 1887.<sup>19</sup> This was extremely important as it provided trade connections both to and from the Midwest's major industrial centers and facilitated travel to the area. Once the rails were in place construction immediately began on several sawmills, causing a population explosion of businesses, workers, and settlers to follow; these new arrivals brought labor and capital, using both to set to work immediately developing a new settlement. The total population swelled to an official total of 1,816 by the time the census was taken in 1890. This is an impressive increase given that the locale was completely undeveloped only three years prior, and represents a population already half the city's eventual maximum to date.<sup>20</sup>

### **Addition by Subtraction: Spurring Growth by Thinning the Forests**

Sawmills provided for the vast majority of Tomahawk's economic activity for the early period of the city's existence. By 1889 five large-scale, full-time operations were firmly in place, with a myriad of smaller, temporary operations coming and going on a seasonal basis; at a given date as many as eight mills would be operating simultaneously

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<sup>18</sup> "First Copy of Tomahawk Blade," *Merrill Herald*.

<sup>19</sup> "Talks with Old Timers," *Tomahawk*, 15 February 1908.

<sup>20</sup> Robin L. Comeau, *Boom Town: Early History of Tomahawk, Wisconsin, 1886-1924* (Tomahawk, WI: Tomahawk Historical Society, 2007), 2-3.

by the turn of the century. Besides providing a wealth of jobs for residents as loggers and mill workers, these mills initially produced lumber and shingles to feed construction booms throughout the Midwest, producing over 75 million board feet of lumber and roughly 25 million shingles annually in the later half of the 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>21</sup> In 1890 a box and crate factory was built in conjunction with a mill located near Rodgers Island, but burned down less than three years later; the fact that it was never rebuilt suggests that it probably was not as successful as initially intended.<sup>22</sup>

By 1889 William H. Bradley and the Tomahawk Land and Boom Company were operating four logging mills (known by numbers more than names) in the immediate area. The rights to first of these mills, known as Mill No. 1 was purchased from an outfit from Winneconne, Wisconsin in 1888, and was the only mill to not be destroyed by a fire during its lifespan. Mill No. 2 was built in 1889 by the Tomahawk Lumber Company, which was owned by the Land and Boom Company. This particular mill was burned and rebuilt twice prior to 1900. Mill No. 3 was built by a subsidiary of Bradley's operations in Muskegon, Michigan, and merged with the Land and Boom Company shortly after being completed in 1890. Finally, Bradley himself relocated Mill No. 4 (which he owned outright all along) from a position just outside of Muskegon, Michigan in 1889. A fifth mill also briefly operated by Bradley, but after it was destroyed by a fire it was discontinued.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Rosholt, *The Wisconsin Logging Book 1839-1939* (Rosholt, WI: Rosholt House Publishing, 1980), 63.

<sup>22</sup> Don Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk," *American Local History Network – Wisconsin* (1999): <http://www.wlhn.org/counties/histtom3.html> (accessed 2 April 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Jones, et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 69-70; Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk."; and Lt. Brian Morren, "TFD – The First Hundred Years," *Tomahawk Leader*, 28 June 1984. Also it is interesting to note that the chronology with Mills 3 and 4 is reversed, as the date

The only major mill in the area not controlled by the Tomahawk Land and Boom Company and William H. Bradley was the Crane Mill. This operation was owned by the Crane Brothers, and originally operated out of the state of Maine before having been moved to Gagen, Wisconsin, in the early 1880s. This particular mill was located within the city limits and operated until 1904, when the company completed logging on its holdings.<sup>24</sup> Once the mill's operations were officially completed both the mill itself and its land assets were sold to outside interests and relocated as was typical logging custom.

Pulp and paper mills also began to appear in 1890. The first pulp mill was constructed by a man by the name of A. M. Pride next to the subsequently named Pride Dam that was originally constructed in 1886.<sup>25</sup> After nine years of operation, Pride built a second mill on the other bank of the river and combined them under the Tomahawk Pulp and Paper Company. Even after this second mill was completed there was still enough demand for pulp that the Pulp and Paper Company expanded yet again in 1910, incorporating a third mill further up the Wisconsin River and initiating construction on another dam.

In 1914 this second dam was completed, though the mill at that location had begun partial operation in 1910. When the dam was completed it (among other things) formed the expansive Lake Alice. The new lake would become important to the community in its own right, much in the same manner as Lake Mohawksin had before it,

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given for the arrival of Mill No. 3 occurs after that of Mill No. 4. While no direct explanation for this was encountered during the research phase, presumably Mill No. 3 encountered a delay en route to Tomahawk, and thus arrived later than intended. As it appears to have been obtained by Bradley prior to the plans for the relocation of Mill No. 4 were completed, Mill No. 3 kept its original designation.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 79. This was the dam described in the Building a Beachhead section.

but the dam had more immediate implications to the local economy. King Dam, as it was called, was the site of yet another pulp mill owned by the Tomahawk Pulp and Paper Company, and also had some hydro-electric capabilities. The pulp produced at this mill was unique in that it incorporated discarded newspaper scraps into its production instead of using purely virgin wood pulp.<sup>26</sup> The end product was particularly well suited to the mass production of catalogs, and demand increased dramatically. This expanding market prompted the Pride Pulp and Paper Company to commission its own mill specializing in the new catalog paper. This facility was located on the Wisconsin River near Grandmother Falls, but by the time it was completed in 1920 the massive demand had subsided; as such, the many improvements that had been planned for the mill never came to fruition and the mill never met its full potential.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly the logging and paper industries had taken off and turned Tomahawk into a bustling center of activity, bringing substantial amounts of settlers along for the ride. If history was any indicator, though, this success would evaporate quite quickly as the surrounding forests would eventually become too thin to support such intense logging. Action would have to be taken soon if Tomahawk was to avoid the fate so commonly suffered by towns centered solely on these industries.

### **Diversifying Tomahawk's Portfolio: Economic Entities Beyond the Mills**

For all the success that had come with the mills, it was clear to the leaders of the city that the development of other industries within the city would be necessary for the community to survive when the forests inevitably thinned. By the time Tomahawk had

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Comeau, *Boom Town*, 74.

come into being, it was no secret that small settlements based solely on the logging industry crumbled when the mills left, and yet it was a reality that many could not avoid as there was not yet a solid blueprint describing how to survive. Many railway proprietors of the day felt that a strong agricultural base was the key, as evidenced by this passage:

During the summer of 1887 a party of railroad officials visited Tomahawk. The party was made up of P.D. Armour, John D. Rockefeller, Senator Stanford, Roswell Miller, Alexander Mitchell and several others. Stopping in front of our store to examine the vegetables on sale, one of them remarked: 'If something like this could be grown in this country we would not have to tear up the rails when the timber is all gone.'<sup>28</sup>

This sort of logic would seem to have some merit to it, but the vision William H. Bradley had for Tomahawk went beyond this as he felt agriculture alone would not be enough. He felt the future of the town was to be found in commercial enterprise and industry, and took it upon himself as the wealthiest and most prominent citizen in Tomahawk to bring both to the community. From the beginning Bradley was "engaged in every business generally found in any town, from a 'milk route,' delivering milk to the inhabitants to big department store, bank, hotels, etc."<sup>29</sup> Yet, while he was engaged in all these activities he demonstrated his devotion to the success of the town by personally maintaining even those that were not profitable to himself. Following his death in 1902, "the executors of his estate, instead of branching out and keeping the varied interests involved going whether paying or not, began to close out the various enterprizes [*sic*] as rapidly as possible."<sup>30</sup> The city appeared to be on the brink of both economic and social

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<sup>28</sup> "Talks with Old Timers," *Tomahawk*, 22 February 1908.

<sup>29</sup> "'Pep' and Leadership Promote Hatchet City," *Merrill Herald*, 24 October 1923.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

crisis, but Bradley's efforts had prepared the members of the community for such a time and locals managed to gain control over most of the outfits. As M. C. Hyman, one of the town's first residents, remarked:

Mr. Bradley should be known by everybody as the greatest man who ever inhabited Northern Wisconsin. He was the founder of the town [Tomahawk] and was instrumental in the development of the entire new north... From the start twenty-two years ago, mind you, he saw in his mind's eye every water power on the Wisconsin river harnessed and turning wheels. He saw prosperous towns, happy communities and a country developed into productive farms... At one time he said, 'Charlie we are going to make the best town in the Valley,' and so he did.<sup>31</sup>

One of the very first steps taken to promote economic growth outside of the logging industry was the establishment of the city's first bank by William H. Bradley and his brother James in 1887.<sup>32</sup> The aptly named Bradley Bank provided the usual services to residents and entrepreneurs, but also ensured that there was always capital immediately available to the Bradley brothers for expanding their own enterprises within the city. The bank's resources grew rapidly, yet it could not fully meet the ever-increasing demands placed upon it; this demand led to the establishment of another private bank, the Bank of Tomahawk, in 1895 by Charles E. Macomber.<sup>33</sup> Both institutions continued to thrive, and together they provided the capital for the many enterprises that would eventually make their way to Tomahawk.

It also became apparent early on that a local source for various metal-working products would be of value for the everyday maintenance of mill implements and railway

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<sup>31</sup> "Talks with Old Timers," *Tomahawk*, 29 February 1908.

<sup>32</sup> Jones et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

equipment. While all necessary parts could be obtained from the large industrial centers in Milwaukee and Chicago, it was really only practical to make major orders such as entire saw units from there as the cost of transportation was relatively high and delivery was not always the most expedient. In response to this, the Tomahawk Iron Works was established in 1888, and the thirty-man staff was charged with the production of replacement parts for locomotives and mill machinery. As time progressed it also became responsible for maintaining, repairing, and upgrading city-owned vehicles.<sup>34</sup> In 1911 it was expanded to handle steel projects for the city and surrounding area. The plant was relocated and rebuilt in 1921 after a major fire caused extensive damage to the existing facility. This new facility was considered to be state-of-the-art, and by the mid-1920s rivaled the paper mills as the city's leading economic engine.<sup>35</sup>

In 1903 the Union Tannery Company based in New York purchased the rights to the newly established Tomahawk Tannery. The plant specialized in the production of leather for shoe and harness production, and instantly became a major employer in the city by providing 120 positions.<sup>36</sup> The finished leather was then shipped off via railroad to factories located in Illinois and Missouri. It, like many of the mills that preceded it, was lost to a fire despite the best efforts of firefighters in 1906, but was immediately rebuilt with a much larger and efficient structure. The tannery continued to operate for several decades, becoming a mainstay of the city's economy.

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<sup>34</sup> Morren, *Tomahawk Leader*, 1984.

<sup>35</sup> Jones et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 81.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

With the leather-making facilities already present in the city, it was just a matter of time before a shoe company appeared on the scene. In 1913 a small factory was set up to produce shoes for women and children, but it immediately had financial problems and was on the verge of bankrupting within a year. However, bank officials felt that the city was so well served by its presence that they forgave all debts, and allowed J. W. McHenry to take over the operation for only the cost of the property taxes assessed to the land.<sup>37</sup> McHenry had a wealth of experience in the business through an outfit in St. Louis (which happened to be a customer for the Tomahawk Tannery), and by 1916 the factory was doing quite well, having secured major buyers in Milwaukee and Chicago. In 1918, at the start of a labor shortage caused by the First World War, a second plant was opened in Merrill, allowing the company to expand its combined workforce to 140 full-time laborers and boost its production to over 900 pairs per day.<sup>38</sup> Following the war, production remained high and the employees at both plants enjoyed some of the highest wages in the area.

Yet, for all the efforts intentionally made to attract major industries to the area, perhaps the most important one of the present day came about by accident. After the Second World War, a man by the name of Franklin Winters returned home and made his hobby into a business when he established the Tomahawk Boat Company. Initially the firm was quite small and focused on the production of small wooden pleasure-crafts, but in the 1950s he decided to switch over to production based in the new civilian fiberglass

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<sup>37</sup> "Tomahawk Shoe Company Plans to Double Output," *Merrill Herald*, 18 November 1922.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*; Jones, et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 80.

market.<sup>39</sup> At first this appeared to be a mistake as the market for fiberglass boats was quite small initially, but instead of reverting to wood production Winters decided the company would pursue other uses for the new material. This proved to be wildly successful as there was suddenly no shortage of alternative uses for fiberglass, and their success was even further bolstered when the fiberglass boat market exploded a few years later.<sup>40</sup> By the end of the decade the company had single-handedly put Tomahawk on the map as one of the world's leading producers of fiberglass items. Then, in 1962, Winters and the Tomahawk Boat Company struck gold when the Harley-Davidson Motor Company purchased majority ownership in the company and established it as the first factory in the Tomahawk Division the following year.<sup>41</sup> Initially the plant was used to produce boats and golf carts for the company, but these projects were soon abandoned in favor of manufacturing motorcycle parts and accessories.<sup>42</sup> The success that followed has remained with the company to the present day and led to the construction of a second plant within the city in 2001. Harley remains one of the largest employers for people in Tomahawk and the surrounding communities.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Dan Walters, "Fiberglass Classics: Tomahawk – History," (1998): <http://www.fiberglassclassics.com/tomahawk/> (accessed 18 April 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Harley-Davidson USA, "History Timeline: 1960s," (2008): <http://www.harley-davidson.com> (accessed 18 April 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Walters, "Fiberglass Classics: Tomahawk – History."

<sup>43</sup> While the events leading up to Harley-Davidson's arrival in Tomahawk occurred well after the city had been thoroughly established, and thus ordinarily beyond the scope of the rest of this paper, the extent to which Tomahawk's present economy relies on its presence (both in the form of it as a direct employer and as the massive tourist draw it becomes during the annual Fall Ride) makes it a necessary inclusion.

## **Money Isn't Everything: Establishing Functional Institutions**

Not all activities within Tomahawk were focused exclusively on attracting companies to the area, however. The first arrivals in 1887 wasted no time setting up other institutions that they felt signified a growing and thriving community, and as the town continued to grow even more were established. Some of these entities, such as a consistent newspaper, fostered a sense of civic pride; the establishment of utility services also improved quality of life and attracted commercial interests; and still others served to provide a sense of security against the perils facing small, rural communities.

Two weekly newspapers were already being printed by the time the railroad had reached Tomahawk: the *Tomahawk* and the *Blade*.<sup>44</sup> The *Blade* was the smaller of the two and began to struggle in 1896, at which point it was sold and renamed the *Leader*. New ownership meant the paper was to be completely overhauled, and the subsequent changes proved to be pivotal. The *Tomahawk* and the *Leader* competed for readership over the next decade and a half, with the *Leader* clearly establishing itself as the more popular.<sup>45</sup> Finally, in 1913, the two papers merged operations under new ownership, but maintained the *Leader*'s name and publication schedule. Though the ownership changed several times over the subsequent decades, little else has, as the *Leader* remains Tomahawk's weekly newspaper to this day.

A permanent post office was also established in 1887. While this alone was not all that unusual for a newly established settlement, the fact that the Tomahawk Post Office took over several other routes in the area was. Prior to 1887 the Merrill Post

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<sup>44</sup> Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk."

<sup>45</sup> Kerry W. Tobin, "Our History: Covering Area News Since 1887," *Tomahawk Leader* (2008): <http://www.tomahawkleader.com/history.php> (Accessed 18 April 2008).

Office had handled and distributed all parcels for the county, but when the new office was established it absorbed the routes to Spirit Falls, Harrison, and Bradley, once again demonstrating Tomahawk's desire to firmly establish itself as a permanent fixture.<sup>46</sup> Mail arrived daily via stagecoach or train depending on the point of origin, at which point attempts were made to have it sorted and sent out that same day; early shipments were not always reliable so mail was not always distributed daily, but by the end of 1888 the system was functioning reliably.<sup>47</sup>

By the end of March 1890 Tomahawk had access to a power grid operated by hydropower dams owned by the Wisconsin Valley Electric Company out of Wausau. This grid provided electricity to all businesses and residents within the town, as well as to the mills. Not only was this access attractive to residents and businesses in the area, but it was also one of the first signs that Tomahawk was being built for the future.<sup>48</sup> The city had not yet been officially incorporated, yet it was securing the resources required for extensive development. Then, in 1896 William H. Bradley took over operation of the utilities and expanded them to provide telephone service as well. Under Bradley, power was obtained from three separate dams on the Wisconsin River, though this was slightly less efficient than bringing it in from Wausau. The company changed hands several times after 1912, and by 1927 the Wisconsin Valley Electric Company once again

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<sup>46</sup> Jones et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 71.

<sup>47</sup> "Talks with Old Timers," *Tomahawk*, 22 February 1908.

<sup>48</sup> "City of Promise," *Milwaukee Sentinel*.

owned the rights of electric and phone service, though the local dams already producing electricity remained in operation.<sup>49</sup>

One of the biggest problems developing towns faced was the threat of fires. Fires in residential and commercial structures were most commonly caused by problems with internal heating and lighting. When a fire started within a city setting it also became an immediate threat to neighboring structures and compounded the potential problems. As such, the city decided very early on to set up a substantial underground waterworks pressured by large boilers at a central pumping station complete with newly introduced fire hydrants to aid in firefighting efforts.<sup>50</sup> This project was completed in 1891 by the Water Department, providing the first line of defense against fires at all points within the city and running water to homes within the city limits. As the town grew and the demand for water increased, the system had problems maintaining consistent water pressure; this problem was also made worse as the original pipes aged and developed leaks. The system managed to remain in service until the late 1930s when a large public works project replaced the existing water mains and pumps, and expanded access to new areas.<sup>51</sup>

For the first several years of Tomahawk's existence the actual firefighting duties fell upon the residents that lived nearest to the location of the fire, despite the fact that efforts to set up a fire department began as soon as the plat for the city was established.

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<sup>49</sup> Jones et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 71; NetIndustries, LLC., "History of Wisconsin Public Service Corporation," (2007): <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/history2/43/Wisconsin-Public-Service-Corporation.html> (accessed 30 March 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Morren, *Tomahawk Leader*, 1984.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

The Water Department set up a volunteer force shortly after the city incorporated in 1891, but was too large a burden financially and dissolved in less than two years.<sup>52</sup> By 1894 the city formed an independent fire department of twenty-three core individuals. The force began as a purely volunteer one funded by the city, though members soon began receiving annual stipends for their efforts; by 1924 this stipend reached ninety dollars per year, which is roughly equivalent to \$5400 by current standards.<sup>53</sup> The fact that the city spent an amount this sizeable to fund a force of “volunteers” is a testament to just how big of a threat fires were to a fledgling settlement.

Despite the fairly extensive measures taken to protect against fires within the city, the burning down of saw and paper mills remained a fairly common occurrence for several decades. Wooden structures housing machinery and very large quantities of dry wood were extremely susceptible to fires even though they were often located very near bodies of water. Common causes of fires in these settings came from within, either in the form of sparks thrown off by mechanized equipment or excessive heat friction caused by the continuous use of saw blades. When either of these came into contact with piles of dry sawdust (of which there was no shortage of in mills) a raging inferno could erupt and engulf and destroy the entire building in a matter of minutes; in essence this meant that only those already on site when the blaze began could save the building, and very rarely was this accomplished.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Jones et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 72; present value calculations based on Officer, “Six Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present.”

<sup>54</sup> Morren, *Tomahawk Leader*, 1984; Paulson, “Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk.”

Interestingly, there are no references to any sort of police force until 1900 when James O'Connell was inaugurated as the city's first police chief.<sup>55</sup> While it is a fairly safe assumption that crime rates in the area were rather low, this would not eliminate the need for policing, especially during a time of rapid growth; city officials would have certainly been aware of this. Presumably assistance was obtained from other establishments, probably from the county sheriff's department based in Merrill.<sup>56</sup> As funding for city projects was almost never an issue during William H. Bradley's lifetime, it would indicate that the outside assistance, regardless of origin, was likely more than sufficient in providing the services the city required.

In 1892 William H. Bradley donated a parcel of land to the congregation of St. Mary's Catholic Church and asked them to construct a substantial hospital facility to serve the city.<sup>57</sup> Up to this point there had been several independent doctors practicing within the community, most notably the previously quoted Dr. J. D. Cutter, but it was clear that the growing city would require medical facilities on a much larger scale in the near future. By the end of 1893 construction on the Sacred Heart Hospital was completed and the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother were placed in charge of its operation.<sup>58</sup> The hospital was of a modest size but was able to provide for the needs of the community

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<sup>55</sup> Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk."

<sup>56</sup> The fire department could have theoretically taken over some policing duties early on, but this seems unlikely in this instance. The Tomahawk Fire Department has probably the most thorough historical documentation of any entity within the city, but there is no mention of the department providing any sort of law and order beyond firefighting activities.

<sup>57</sup> Jones et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 75; Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk."

<sup>58</sup> Ministry Health Care, "Our History: History of St. Mary's Hospital," (2006): <http://www.ministryhealth.org/display/PPF/DocID/15712/router.aspx> (accessed 13 April 2008).

until 1962 at which point expansion became necessary.<sup>59</sup> This same order also operated St. Mary's Hospital in Rhinelander, and while they remained independent from each other until 1981 there was a history of close cooperation between them.

Combined, the existence of these entities offered the community a sense of direction and purpose, demonstrating that those in charge truly cared about the future. Leaders could do all the planning in the world, but if the people following them did not believe and buy into the same goals it would all be for naught; institutions such as these provided hope and encouraged a sense of resolve among those who called Tomahawk home.

### **Aiming for Achievement: Advances in Education**

As is often the case in developing communities, the need for basic educational institutions was also addressed early on. Most rural communities established elementary schools, but few went beyond this as most children were pulled out of school by the time they became teenagers to supplement agricultural and other workforces requiring manual labor. However, as Tomahawk's leaders were building the community with a different sort of future in mind, a simple grade school was simply not enough.

Tomahawk's first elementary school was established in 1888, setting up a one-room building that focused on the primary grade levels.<sup>60</sup> While it was called The Kindergarten at the time of its creation, students could initially continue on through the fifth grade. It was not long before this was deemed insufficient, though, and within four

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<sup>59</sup> Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk."

<sup>60</sup> Jones, et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 83-4.

years the eighth and ninth grades were being sporadically offered. However, The Kindergarten lacked sufficient space to sustain this activity, so in 1894 the district was expanded by building Whittier High School to absorb the higher grade levels and provide a larger teaching staff.<sup>61</sup> The following year the Longfellow Secondary School was also established, functioning almost like a technical college in that it offered classes in the trades to high school students and adults. The city's schools developed a solid reputation and gained state accreditation in 1896.<sup>62</sup> In response to continued growth within the district Whittier High School was replaced in 1907 by Washington High School, a three-story complex housing grades five through twelve.<sup>63</sup>

St. Mary's Catholic Church also assisted in the efforts to provide access to education for the community's youth when it opened its own private school in 1916. In its first year of existence it offered eight grade levels and had an enrollment of 205 students.<sup>64</sup> At its peak the school saw enrollment climb to over 250 students in the late 1920s and early 1930s, though after this enrollment gradually declined; this, combined with a lack of suitable teachers permanently residing in the city led the school to downsize, sending all classes beyond the fifth grade to the public school system.

In addition to the school system there is also evidence of the existence of a traveling library in Tomahawk as early as 1897. Traveling libraries typically served large geographic areas that had relatively large and permanent settlements as they were financed by private donations and membership fees; as such they were much more

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 84; Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk."

<sup>62</sup> Jones, et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 84.

<sup>63</sup> Paulson, "Historic Dates, Places, & People of Tomahawk."

<sup>64</sup> Jones, et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 75.

common in areas such as the Chippewa Valley and northern mining ports than in rural logging regions.<sup>65</sup> Because there were no existing libraries in the region a new one was founded, an act again spearheaded by William H. Bradley. The operation struggled financially but was deemed important enough to the city that it was maintained for over a decade primarily with the help of civic groups such as the Women’s Literary Club. These organizations began pushing for city funding in order to convert to a free public library, and in 1909 this goal was attained.<sup>66</sup> With the tax money it received the library became quite successful and popular, with over seventy-five percent of the population “registered” members by 1920; circulation figures indicate that during this time period the average member checked out over ten books per year.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly education received plenty of attention during these early days of settlement, and for good reason. Again, like the other institutions in the previous section, the educational system provided a sense of pride and direction for the community. Students acquired knowledge and skills that would help them make a better future for themselves and their children, and, of course, businesses are attracted to populations with high levels of skilled labor. Investing in education benefited the community’s social and economic environment, and provided a means through which the general populace could make any future, unforeseen adaptations that may have become necessary.

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<sup>65</sup> American Library Association, “State Library Associations,” *Library Journal* 22 (January 1897): 39. The word “registered” likely means that these people were what would now be called “cardholders.”

<sup>66</sup> Jones, et. al., *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties*, 72.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Epilogue: The End of the Beginning**

Tomahawk was, and still is, essentially an experiment to see if a town founded on a notoriously unstable foundation in the logging industry could overcome the inevitable economic challenges that would be forced upon it as natural resources were depleted, and so far the endeavor has been a successful one. While it is true that the lumber industry remains on a smaller scale, as many high school students spend summers peeling poplar for pulp or clipping boughs, this activity is nowhere near the economic staple it once was. Almost all of the mills are gone, and those that remain have altered their production, and they too find themselves only a shadow of their former selves. Other institutions that contributed to the city's permanence such as the hospital and school system are scarcely recognizable now when compared to their respective predecessors. Despite all of this, Tomahawk remains intact in a way that was once unimaginable. Strategic planning for the future and carefully orchestrated efforts to incorporate adaptability into the community's character ensured that the usually temporary boom from which it was born endured the tests of time.

Yet, the transition away from an economy depending almost exclusively on the logging industry is only the first such period in the history of Tomahawk; at least one more has occurred since, as many of the very institutions that provided kept the city going when trees no longer could have themselves disappeared. The tannery, shoe company, and the steel and iron works have all but vanished, and even the railroads that once served to bring the lifeblood of the community have been reduced to more of a novelty than anything else. Together these changes forced the city and its economy to

again re-invent itself. That is not to say that Tomahawk, or any other similar community, is in the clear at present, either. Small communities are always the danger of becoming too specialized and too dependent on a single product, as any hardship that befalls that industry can be devastating. Is the present situation essentially repeating history, where Tomahawk's primary source of employment in Harley-Davidson could be analogous to the lumber industry in that founded the community? Could the loss of this industry cause the city to fold as the movement of loggers did a century before? Certainly there is more room for exploration here.

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