

Industry Played A Vital Role

Once-Booming Factories Now Only Memory

Although Birmingham was once the industrial center of middle Oakland County, most of the industries have disappeared from the city.

In fact, the name Birmingham was selected because one of the town's early residents, Hugh Irving, was reminded by the flourishing industries of his old home in Birmingham, England.

The first factory was a tannery built by Elijah Willets in 1837. It was joined in 1838 by John Hunter's blacksmith shop and foundry.

Later the Hunter foundry began manufacturing threshing machines and other farm implements.

ALMOST AS suddenly as Birmingham became a manufacturing and industrial center, it was transformed into a community of residential homes.

Although the town never had a fire that wiped out everything in site, most of the foundries and factories were destroyed and never rebuilt.

An industry which did survive for nearly a century was the famous grist mill on the banks of the Rouge River.

Although the records are not clear, indications are that Roswell T. Merrill rearranged a dam on the Rouge and built a flour mill in about 1835.

In 1858 the mill was destroyed by fire, but two years later it was rebuilt by R. E. Trowbridge. He ran it for a short period and then exchanged it for the farm of Robert R. Opydke.

FOR THE NEXT 50 years the mill was owned by a number of persons. In 1910 it was purchased by Niles Hansen and his wife, Sarah.

The Hansens ran the mill for about five years and then sold it to a Quarton Lake Estates group, and the building was torn down to make way for a new subdivision.

Most of Birmingham's industry today is located in a small section of the southeastern portion of the city.

Generally, the industrial developed land runs along the Grand Trunk railroad tracks and is situated at the foot of Lincoln, Holland, Webster and Cole streets.

THE TOWN now boasts three plastic firms, a builder of new home trusts, an auto conversion company that converts cars into ambulances and other emergency vehicles, several small tool shops and a manufacturer of garage doors.

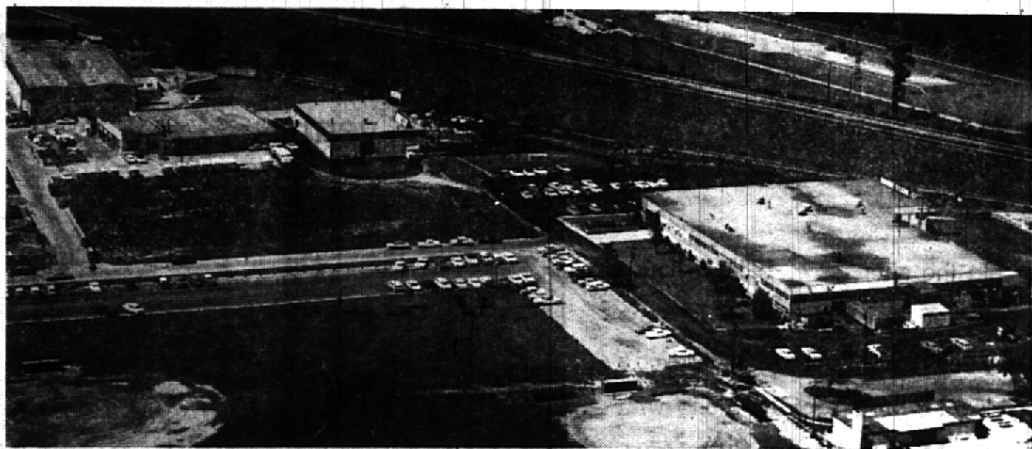
The door firm, Berry Industries Inc., is the largest producer of residential garage doors in the United States and Canada.

Berry is the biggest of Birmingham's industries. The main plant, at the foot of Lincoln, has an 83,000-square foot manufacturing area.

Employing about 200 people in Birmingham, the firm has an annual payroll of over \$1 million. All of the company's major officers, including President Glenn Berry, live in the Birmingham-Bloomfield area.

IN ADDITION to the three local facilities the firm has branches in California, Washington, Illinois, Ann Arbor, Toronto and Wingham, Ont.

Indications are that industry will not grow much in Birmingham. At the present time all but one small piece of property zoned industrial are developed.



BERRY INDUSTRIES, INC., (LOWER RIGHT) IS LARGEST LOCAL FACTORY
Firm is the largest producer of residential garage doors in U.S., Canada.

RAN BY BUSINESSMAN WHO NAMED B'HAM

Grist Mill Operating in 1877

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Research in early documents and books pertaining to the history of Birmingham establishes a number of facts about the old grist mill which was located for many years on the River Rouge just north of Maple and west of Baldwin.

To go back to the very beginning, the United States Congress in 1812 passed "An Act providing for the sale of lands in the United States, in the Territory N.W. of the Ohio, and above the mouth of the Kentucky River."

It was seven years before any land was purchased in what is now the Birmingham area.

ONE REASON WAS that an early surveyor reported, adversely and often inaccurately, that this was a swampy land and not fit for settlement.

On Jan. 28, 1819, Benjamin K. Pierce purchased 320 acres for \$1.25 per acre, or a total of \$400.

The northern boundary of this land is now Maple Ave.; the eastern boundary is what is now Pierce St. It appears to have extended as far south as what is now Lin-

coln and to the west as far as what is now the spot where Chesterfield meets Maple.

PIERCE WAS A brother of Franklin Pierce who later became President of the United States. There is no record indicating that Benjamin Pierce ever lived on his land.

If early maps can be trusted, it is likely that the grist mill was first built in the northwest corner of Pierce's land.

On the other hand, in a history of Oakland County, published by L. H. Everts & Co., Philadelphia, in 1877, the original site is located in the southeast corner of land originally sold to Henry Whiting (also identified as Whitney but shown as "Whiting" on the deed) on July 27, 1821.

Its southern boundary abuts the northern boundary of the Pierce land at what is now Maple Ave. The greater portion of the Whiting land is now the Quarton Lake Estate subdivision.

IN THE 1877 history it is reported that in 1833 two brothers, Josephus and John J. Young, purchased a tract of the Whiting land and built a saw mill.

In 1835 the brothers sold the land and mill to Roswell T. Merrill. He was a prominent local businessman at the time and owned a foundry, worked by "horsepower," that did millwork and made agricultural implements and stove castings.

He also owned a business that made threshing machines and is credited as the man who first suggested the name "Birmingham" for the community.

Merrill, according to the 1877 history, rearranged the dam and head-race on the River Rouge and built a "flouring" mill "a short distance below the Young saw mill." (This suggests that there was more than one mill along the same stretch of the stream.)

MERRILL APPARENTLY over-extended himself in business interests and the mill "fell into the hands of eastern creditors."

It was then sold to T. A. Flower and William Brown who, in turn, sold it to a David Wilcox from Battle Creek. He sold it, date unknown, to Robert F. Opydke and Henry Gardiner.

In 1858, while owned by Opydke and Gardiner, the mill was destroyed by fire. The site was then purchased by R. E. Trowbridge who rebuilt the mill in 1860. He ran it for several years and then exchanged it for the farm of Robert R. Opydke, thus leaving Opydke as the sole owner.

At the time the history was written in 1877, the mill was operated by G. K. Opydke, the son of the earlier proprietor.

IT IS NOT YET known when



OLD MILL WAS ON ROUGE RIVER
Merrill also owned nearby saw mill.

Smith, Sons Headed Up 1st Foundry

"The Novelty Works," a foundry owned and operated by Aaron Smith in the 1840's, gave Birmingham its first reputation as a booming industrial village.

In the foundry, located east of the present Briggs building on East Maple, Smith and his sons manufactured large numbers of various kinds of agricultural implements, among which was a sub-sole plow which Smith had invented.

As the years passed, and the business was continued by Smith's sons, The Novelty Works ceased to be a novelty and the property was known by the townspeople as "the old foundry."

With the sale of the foundry in 1879 to John Stanley, The Eccentric declared that the new owner was going to put into operation "just what the town needed for so long—a first-class foundry and machine shop."

WITH COPARTNER Walter North, Stanley and the company was engaged in the manufacturing

of field rollers.

Even after an exhibition of their product at the 1881 State Fair in Jackson, the venture was not successful and the foundry was out of business by 1887.

In 1888, the old foundry became The Birmingham Tack Co., when the Edminston Brothers went into the business of making carpet tacks and other products.

Thousands of curtain poles, curtain rings and baseball bats were turned out by the factory. When the well went dry on the property, the tack company was forced to move and relocate down by the River Rouge where there was a plentiful supply of water.

WALTER NICHOLS came to Birmingham in 1895, purchased the old foundry and operated a wood-working shop for the next 20 years.

Nichols sold the property to Seely Peck in 1915 for \$1,500. Peck in turn sold it to S. O. Wylie Bell, who sold the property a few years later for \$1,000 a foot.