

Now You're Loggin'



NORTH OF SAGINAW BAY

Neil Thornton



This iron-banded wooden water main was manufactured at East Tawas using the finest white pine available. A section of the pipe is on display at the Iosco County Museum.

Chapter 11

Wooden Waterworks

One of the lesser known auxiliary industries of the white pine era in the Tawas area was that of the American Pipe Company, organized in May 1880 with a capital of \$20,000.

This firm had only a brief existence here, but its product was of a long lasting quality — in fact, it was still being used at East Tawas nearly 60 years later and some of it is still around and viewed as a curiosity!

Organized at Detroit, the firm operated its plant at East Tawas from the spring of 1880 until the winter of 1882. Original incorporators included W.C. Andrews, N. Edson, H.P. and George P. Smith, the latter being one of the original founders of East Tawas and associated with practically every worthwhile public enterprise during the community's early history.

When considering the manufacture of water and steam pipe in the 1880s, one would naturally envision a foundry for casting iron pipe — complete with huge furnaces to smelt iron ore, black smoke belching from tall chimneys and sweating men ladling molten metal.

There may have been sweating men and black smoke, but there was no foundry involved as the American Pipe Company at East Tawas utilized the area's principal resource of



Henry P. Smith

H. P. Smith

that era — white pine logs, the finest and straightest obtainable from this region's vast forests.

The East Tawas firm manufactured wooden water, steam and gas pipes using the "celebrated" Wyckhoff patent, utilizing the mill and equipment of the East Tawas Salt and Lumber Company, located in the general area of the east end of today's city park. Specialized equipment was purchased and installed in one section of the mill.

The first process in making a wooden pipe was to cut out of a log a solid cylinder of wood. This was accomplished through use of a tubular auger, consisting of a bit utilizing a series of planes in a circular frame. Out of this cylinder, another was taken and so on down, the result being that each outside section had a smooth surface and each succeeding hollow wooden cylinder was of reduced size.

After cutting, the pipe was pitched inside and out with coal tar asphalt and then banded with hoop iron.

Joints were fitted through use of special lathes and tests were conducted for strength and soundness, based on the use intended for the pipe — water, gas or steam, each with different specifications.

About 50 men were required for the business here and the demand for wooden pipe greatly exceeded the capacity of the plant.

Part of the firm's output is believed to have been utilized in East Tawas' original water system and for the pipeline constructed in 1881 between East Tawas and Oscoda, which conveyed salt brine to mills along the AuSable River for the manufacture of salt.

The salt brine pipeline between those two points had a nine-inch bore, was laid underground at a depth of three feet and the cost of that undertaking was in the neighborhood of \$80,000. Enough brine was pumped from East Tawas to manufacture 1,000 barrels of salt daily at AuSable-Oscoda for a period of nearly 10 years.

George P. Smith, one of the principal owners of the East

Tawas Salt and Lumber Company, was also associated with the Michigan Pipe Company at Bay City. In the winter of 1883, the American Pipe Company of East Tawas was consolidated with the Michigan Pipe Company and the business was transferred to Bay City.

In the late 1890s, lumber mills at AuSable-Oscoda began to fade from the lumbering picture with the depletion of the local stock of white pine and the more than 12-mile pipeline connecting East Tawas with AuSable River mills was no longer needed. A portion of the wooden pipeline was removed and reused for an expansion of the East Tawas water system.

A note in the Iosco County Gazette for 1882 stated that "all of the remaining machinery of the American Pipe Company used at this point last season in the manufacture of the Wyckhoff patent water, gas and steam pipe casing was shipped on the barge, Essex, to Bay City last Saturday, at which place the manufacture of these celebrated pipes will continue.

The Bay City firm, originally known as the Northwestern Gas and Water Pipe Company in 1871, continued in business at Bay City for many more years. This item appeared in the February 26, 1909, issue of The Tawas Herald:

"The Michigan Pipe Company of Bay City last week landed the largest order for piping ever given in the world. The order is for 72 miles of wooden pipe and it will require 2,500,000 feet of white pine timber, 1,000 tons of steel bands and 1,000 tons of asphalt pitch to manufacture. It will keep the factory running night and day for four months and require 250 of the largest railroad cars to transport the finished product."

Wooden water mains continued in service at East Tawas well into the second quarter of the twentieth century.

Finally, on November 25, 1938, this headline appeared in The Tawas Herald: "East Tawas Water Works Project Starts Monday; Will Replace Wood Mains With Iron."

Stated the article: "All wood mains in the East Tawas water system will be replaced with cast iron mains when work which starts in that city next Monday is completed. Replacing the mains will begin on Sawyer and Bay Streets. The estimated cost of the improvement is \$49,000 under the WPA project.

"In replacing the old mains, more than 27,000 feet of new cast iron pipe will be laid. This will consist of 800 feet of eight-inch pipe, 6,100 feet of six-inch, 10,000 feet of four-inch and 2,700 feet of two-inch mains."

Thus it was that wooden water mains manufactured from the raw material provided by Michigan forests finally were replaced by cast iron mains.

Some sections of the abandoned wooden water mains were left in the ground during the 1938 replacement project. A major construction project in 1978 saw many of the old wooden mains still in the ground being removed. Most were as sound as the day when originally installed.

A section of wooden water main has been preserved for incorporation into the collection of the Iosco County Historical Museum at East Tawas, as an example of the product of local industry nearly 100 years ago.



George P. Smith