

RECOLLECTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON KINGSFORD'S FORD PLANT

By Edd V. Wales, 1998

Wales Family in Bay City, Michigan

My father, **Tracy P. Wales**, was born in Bay City, Michigan, in 1886. He had two brothers, **Fred A.** and **Edd V.** His father, **Tracy**, owned a drug store on the west side of Bay City called **West Branch Drug Store**. At that time the drug store was very active, as they sold both domestic and medical drugs, including special medicinal whiskey ordered by a person's doctor. He often mentioned helping his father compound the medication into pills and tablets.

Wales Family in Minneapolis, Minnesota

His father became ill and was forced to sell his store, and the family moved to Minneapolis. His father died soon after from tuberculosis, and my dad, **Tracy**, decided to leave home and make money to support the family.

Wales Family in Searchmont, Canada

He moved to a town on the Algoma Railway called Searchmont, 30 miles north of Sault Ste. Marie, Canada. Tracy worked with the men cutting logs and floating them to the sawmill. Tracy traveled in a birch bark canoe purchased from an Indian for \$5.00. He often mentioned going through the Soo Locks in his canoe alongside a large freighter.

Wales Family in Goodman, Wisconsin

He later moved to Goodman, Wisconsin, where he worked as a lumber scaler and grader. He met and married **Vidas Harkins**. They had two sons, **Tracy B.**, born in 1912, and **Edd V.**, born in 1914. Three years later the family moved to

Antigo, Wisconsin, where they had another son, **William**, born in 1918.

Tracy Wales Employed by Ford

When the **Ford Motor Company** became active in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Tracy moved to Iron Mountain in 1922, working as a professional lumber grader and scaler. He worked in that job for a number of years, and when Ford moved the office into the plant area, he joined the office staff as an accountant and comptroller along with **Ray Steinke**. **Henry Ford** believed in paying his workers in cash. The cash was sent by rail from Dearborn. My dad and Ray Steinke were authorized to carry a gun when they met the train to get the payroll.

Tracy bought a house in the **Ford Addition** on Hamilton Avenue. He later moved to 744 Cass in the Ford Addition. His wife, **Vidas**, passed away in 1974, and **Tracy** died in 1982 at the age of 96.

Tracy often traveled for the Ford Motor Company to several other Ford operations that were connected with the Kingsford plant, and he was able to tell many stories regarding Ford when the plant was growing larger.

In Dearborn with Henry Ford

Tracy often made business trips to Dearborn. One time he took his sons, and they stayed at the **Dearborn Inn**. During breakfast, our dad said that Mr. Ford's office and dining area were on the second floor, and that he was coming to take us through **Greenfield Village**, the **Ford Museum** and the **Dearborn Ford Plant**. I was very excited, as I was under 18, and no children under the age of 18 were allowed to enter the Kingsford plant. We went through Greenfield Village by horse and

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buggy. I was thrilled when Mr. Ford let me sit in the Henry Ford #1 steam engine and blow the whistle. At that time it was an air whistle, and not steam.

We went through the Dearborn plant at which time Henry Ford said, "Boys, stay with me in the aisle, as I am bending my rule about teenagers being in the plant." I remember that on the very south end of the plant was the salvage operation. Ford would buy automobiles not usable and remove the engines, glass and seats. A large press would compress the car into a three-foot cube and it would be salvaged steel for a new car. Mr. Ford thought this was a great idea to reuse the steel.

Henry Ford complained about the detailed accounting process and wondered why it couldn't be as simple as **Thomas Edison's** system. Thomas Edison had two spindles on his desk: "one for bills I owe, and the other for bills owed me."

Henry Ford in Mud at Kingsford Plant

Henry Ford often came to the Kingsford plant from the **Huron Mountains** in the Upper Peninsula, sometimes driving alone. One time he decided not to use the main gate, but tried another gate on Breitung Avenue – Gate #3. He opened the lock with his master key and drove through the gate. He didn't know it was only soft dirt and not a road, and soon found himself mired in the mud up to the hubs. He had to walk through the mud to the administration building, and then demanded, "Don't we have any money?" After several questions and much confusion, it was soon known to everyone that he wanted a road built from Gate #3 to the office building in two days. He was coming back to the plant then, and said the road had better be there when he returned.

Henry and Mrs. Ford were very active in the building of the Village of Kingsford. Mrs. Ford was busy with planning the construction of homes block by block in the Ford Addition. No two same-style or color homes were allowed in the same block.

Early Kingsford Schools

When we moved to our house on Hamilton Avenue, we had only **army barracks placed together to make school class rooms**. The **Woodward Avenue School** and the **junior high school on Hamilton Avenue** were under construction. During the construction and after the buildings were done, Mr. and Mrs. Ford would make periodic visits to determine how things were going, as they wanted the children of their employees to have a good education. When the junior high school was completed, it was decided the school would be both junior high and high school. **Frank Sweeney** was the superintendent and **F.D. Davidson** was the principal.

Ford Dam and Cowboy Lake

The Ford Dam was built in 1921. It was a beautiful place with lovely flowers, trees and landscaping. There were several benches for people to sit on and enjoy the scenery. People could walk close to the dam and watch the water flow out of the slews [*sluices*]. Cowboy Lake, north of the dam, was a very wild area at the time. Later a swimming beach was added to the area.

Ford Airport and Ford Barn

North of Cowboy Lake was the Ford Airport. There were no hangers or other buildings. That came later. Just south of the airport on Woodward Avenue was the famous **red Ford barn**. Henry Ford kept

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his tractor, farm machinery and other landscape equipment there, as he had a huge farm operation in the Upper Peninsula. Across the street from the barn was the Ford log yard, where millions of board feet of logs, both hard and softwood, were stored. The log yard had a major fire and burned for two days. People from both communities were saddened at the loss of the timber.

There were many operations at the Ford Plant, among them were three body plants, a sawmill, a power plant, many dry kilns, a chemical plant, an administration building, a large machine shop and a complete fire department. The plant was sold in the 1950's.

Henry Ford Replacing Window Panes

In 1935, the Ford Plant was undergoing improvements, and Ford had a policy to hire sons of his employees to complete extra painting and clean up jobs. Three young fellows were assigned a special project on the high bridge to the power house which had steel window frames. They were to take a hammer and chisel and remove the marked window panes from the steel window frames.

The young men began working, and heard the words, "What are you doing?" Looking up, there stood Henry Ford on his way to the power house. After the assignment was explained to him, he asked if any of them had ever done that before. He received a "no" from each of the boys and he said he would show them how to do it. He took the hammer and chisel and after a number of hammer blows the glass cracked. Mr. Ford didn't say anything and moved to the next marked window pane. The same thing happened, but this time a piece of glass came out. He said, "That's not so good." The boys didn't dare say

anything as Mr. Ford moved to the next window and the same thing happened – a broken window. He then put down his chisel, kept the hammer in his hand and walked the final distance of the bridge, breaking each marked window with his hammer. He then came back with the hammer, gave it to the boys, and said, "Boys, take out the putty and glass, clean up the area, and tell your foreman Henry Ford broke the glass because it is better to put in new panes in less time."

Tom Holmes was the foreman, and the young fellow told him they had removed the putty and cleaned up the broken glass in the area. Mr. Holmes was surprised and said, "So soon? And what do you mean, broken glass? Did you break some?" He was then told that Henry Ford broke each window with the hammer. Mr. Holmes replies, "What? Henry Ford broke the windows? Where is he now?" He was then told that Mr. Ford was on his way to the power house.

The project was completed and ropes were then used in the open windows for painters' scaffolds and the bridge was painted outside. I, **Edd Wales**, was one of the young men.

Station-Wagon Sub-Assemblies

In 1935 the Kingsford plant was making station wagon sub-assemblies only. Every wood piece was to be bird's-eye maple. The body was built by hand, selecting each piece and assembled after forming and shaping. The body had white pigskin seats and the only parts not bird's-eye maple were the inner roof slats. The body was shipped to Dearborn. I do not know where it is now.

Early Days of the Village of Kingsford

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When we moved to Kingsford in 1923, there was one policeman, as we had very little trouble, if any. Everyone remembers the Ford steam whistle blowing at 9 p.m. which meant all kids and teenagers under 16 should be home in their yard.

The first winter Kingsford had only one truck with a small "V" plow. The first street plowed was Carpenter Avenue, south to the Ford Plant road, then west to the Ford Plant. From there, the plow went to Hamilton Avenue, Cass Avenue and then throughout the village. Later a large, rotary plow would come and remove the large snow banks on the roadside.

The only building on South Carpenter Avenue to the Ford road was the village hall. The area where **Nelson Paint** is now was once the circus grounds. Many shows came there, one of which I remember was Buffalo Bill's 101 Ranch. The circus area was used for the Kingsford skating rink in the winter. It was one of the best in the Upper Peninsula.

The only fire department was the Ford Motor Company. Their motto was that every house in Kingsford would be serviced within seven minutes. We had no major fires in the village in the early years.

The schools were scheduled around the shifts at the Ford Plant. The fathers would drive their children to school on their way to work. School started at 8 o'clock. We had 20 minutes for lunch at noon. Those who lived in the Ford Addition could make it home and back in time for their next class. All classes ended at 3 o'clock, making it possible for the students to be ready when their fathers came at 3:30.

Henry Ford, Pole Gagnon and Car Wire

One interesting story my father used to tell happened in 1927, when the Ford Motor Company was at its peak. Henry Ford

came to the Kingsford plant from his lodge in the **Huron Mountains**. He drove through the Breitung Avenue gate (He was alone.) into the sawmill area near the hot pond. He stopped there to watch one employee unloading logs from a railroad car. There was only one employee working when there should have been two.

At that time the logs were hauled by log railroad cars. The car had four vertical poles with logs stacked to the height of the poles, and then chained. On top of the chain was placed what is called "key logs," wired together to hold the logs in place during transit. The employee cut the car wire and rolled out the two key logs. He then removed the chains and by means of a cant hook rolled the other logs from the log car into the hot pond.

When Mr. Ford saw the employee coiling the car wire, he asked what was done with the wire. The employee didn't know Mr. Ford from Adam and thought he was someone kidding him about the wire. The employee told him that when they got a big pile, they would haul it by truck and dump it in the Menominee River.

Mr. Ford said nothing else and drove to the office. He asked my dad, **Tracy Wales**, why they were throwing wire in the river. My dad was shocked and asked for the question again. He then showed a ledger to Mr. Ford with all the scrap shipments sent to Dearborn and asked Mr. Ford who told him that. Mr. Ford told him an employee told him that. My dad then asked him if the employee knew who he was, and Mr. Ford said he didn't think so. My dad told him that if the employee knew who he was, he would have given him a straight answer.

My dad explained that the employee was a good worker named **Pole Gagnon**, who had been working there for almost three years. Mr. Gagnon came from

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Canada, was married, had three children and lived in Kingsford Heights.

Mr. Ford turned around, walked to his car and drove to the hot pond. He then noticed that two employees were working which was how it should have been. He walked over to the men and said, "I am Henry Ford and I own this plant." He then asked the employees how they liked their job and wages. They told Mr. Ford that they were happy with their employment. Mr. Ford then asked them if they were married. Pole told him he was married, had three children and lived in Kingsford Heights.

Mr. Ford then asked Pole why he told him that the wire was dumped in the river. Pole told him that he didn't know it was Henry Ford, but thought it was a smart aleck, so he gave him a smart-aleck answer. He then told Mr. Ford that when they have a large pile of wire, they hauled it to the salvage area where it was shipped to Dearborn.

Mr. Ford asked him what he did if he fell in the pond. Pole told him that if it was summer, they just dried off, but in the winter they changed their clothes. The men went back to work and Mr. Ford drove back to the office. He went to my dad and said, "Trace, (by then he called him "Trace"), I talked to the men about the wire and everything you told me about them was true, so now I believe the wire is shipped to Dearborn."

Mr. Ford then told my dad that he noticed both men cutting tomatoes and asked if we furnished tomatoes for our employees. My dad said that tomatoes weren't furnished, but Pole probably had a lot of tomatoes at home and brought some to share with his partner. My dad also told him that Pole was known all over the village for his good tomatoes. Mr. Ford asked if he had one of the Ford garden plots. My dad

told him that he didn't request a plot, as his space at home was enough.

Mr. Ford had a policy to move his employees to various work stations to see how the employee worked and where the employee was happiest. The log unloading station was one of these and another was a station that supplied the plant with the right amount of both hard and softwood logs.

Henry Ford and Thomas Edison at KHS

One interesting incident I remember happened in 1928 at Kingsford High School. **Tom Williams** was our science teacher. He assigned a class (all boys) project. Each student was to select something of importance and to display it for the rest of the class. **Edd Wales** selected aluminum for his display. His Uncle **Fred** had just recently invented the process for anodizing aluminum using various colors. (It was not yet known to the public.) Edd had various items of colored aluminum in his hand and on the teacher's desk and was standing in front of the class. The classroom door opened and in walked Henry Ford and Thomas Edison. They walked up to the front of the class. Edd knew Henry Ford, but not Thomas Edison. He stood there very nervous, not knowing what to do. Thomas Edison reached over and took the items from Edd's hand, looked at them, tossed the items in his hand and muttered, "Hum hum, colored aluminum," and then placed the items in Ford's hand. Henry Ford did the same thing, including the "Hum, hum," but said nothing. My father said that night after I told him about it that Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were very intelligent men, and they were very proud, and didn't want to talk about something not known to them.

Thomas Edison then addressed the class and asked how many boys liked

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making things with their fathers. After a number of hands were raised, he told us to ask our fathers to go downtown in Iron Mountain to a radio store and buy a crystal radio kit. With our fathers, we were to assemble it according to the directions. Edison didn't know that Iron Mountain did not have a radio shop, as radios were not sold in Iron Mountain. We had to buy a kit and make our own. We did have a Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalog, where you could send for anything that was made. The order was sent and came three days later, and we assembled our radio. We had to have earphones, an antenna and cold water connection. **The first radio station was the Iron Mountain station broadcast by Aimone Electric on Carpenter Avenue.** We could receive Chicago WLS and WGN only at night, weather permitting.

Triangle Oil Filling Station

Tracy B. Wales, Jr., my brother, attended Kingsford High School. In his senior year he worked part time at the Triangle Oil Station on Cass and Carpenter. The station was built in 1925, and Tracy worked steady after graduation. He is pictured in the photo alongside of the gas pump. **Ittilio Alimenti** is pictured standing beside him. In the bottom picture, Tracy, Ittilio and the Triangle Oil Company are collecting old tires for the War Effort during World War II.

Ittilio worked as the bulk salesman with the truck known all over the area. The bulk tank and building were located on the north side of the Chapin shaft on Stephenson Avenue near the railroad tracks. At that time, the product sold was called **Dixie. (Dixie Gas, The Power to Pass)** Soon another filling station was built right across the street from the bulk tank on

Stephenson, called the **Northside Station**. The station at Carpenter and Cass was then operated by **Tim Hardgrove, Jim Thomas** and **Tracy Wales, Jr.** Soon after the brand of gas sold changed to **DX**. Kingsford and Iron Mountain had DX signs all over the communities. There were also DX filling stations in Kingsford Heights, East Kingsford on Carpenter Avenue, called **Machus**, one station on M-95 in Sagola and at the service docks at Spread Eagle.

Tracy left the station to attend the University of Michigan, and upon his return he again joined the Triangle Oil Company. He married **Eloise Peterson** and they had a son, **Tracy J. Wales**, and a daughter, **Shirley (Wales) Allen**.

The business increased and a two-stall service area was added to the south of the building, making it one of the best full-service stations in the Iron Mountain and Kingsford area.

Tracy ran his business with other skilled operators, including his brothers **Edd** and **Bill**. Edd moved to Milwaukee in 1941. The DX stations were later sold to the Shell Oil Company, and a decision was made to convert the Carpenter Avenue station to a self-service. The building was demolished. Tracy moved his full-service operation to the Kingsford Heights station on Woodward Avenue. He soon decided to retire and the station was closed. Soon after, he moved from the Ford Addition to a one-story house on Stockbridge Avenue in Iron Mountain. He died in 1993.

Tracy Wales was well-known by everyone in the area. He was very active in the community, served on the Water and Sewer Commission and held many positions in the Masonic Lodge.

Early Businesses on Carpenter Avenue

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Soon after the Triangle Oil Station was built, the **Louis Eisele Building and Supply Store** was built across Carpenter Avenue. South of the Eisele building was **Stanley Flowers and Landscaping**, now **Miller's Floral**.

The Ford Store on Carpenter Avenue

The Ford Store was then started and I remember going there to help haul water for the masons, who were mixing cement. When the store opened, it was for the Ford employees only. You had to have an aluminum badge to get into the store. It was a retail store that sold boys' and men's clothing, a complete line of groceries, fresh meats and a complete bakery. Later, it was opened to the public, and many people remember going to the Ford Store for items needed.