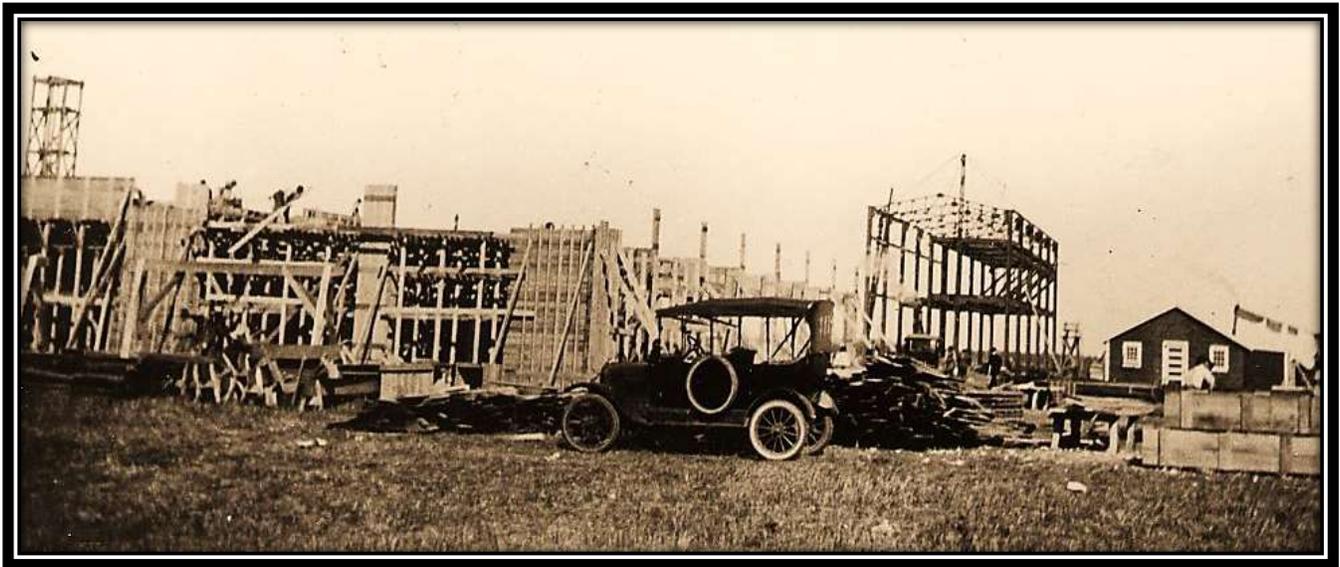


# MENOMINEE RANGE MEMORIES 24: THE ROARING TWENTIES – FORD MOTOR COMPANY’S ARRIVAL IMPACTS DICKINSON COUNTY – BUILDING THE PLANT

By William J. Cummings, Menominee Range Historical Foundation Historian



On July 16, 1920, the Ford Motor Company announced it would build its sawmill and body parts plant south of the Iron Mountain city limits on what was the Joseph Mongrain farm. Eight days later a carload of machinery for mixing concrete for the construction arrived, followed by seven railroad carloads of cement and two carloads of portable houses to be used for temporary housing for the construction crew. Construction began on July 29. On August 3, work began on the foundations of the sawmill, pictured here in late summer or early fall of 1920. By August 19 the foundation of the sawmill, measuring 200 feet long and 125 feet wide, was almost finished and structural work was about to begin. The exterior of the \$250,000 sawmill was completed around December 4. The tall steel framework of the power house is visible at the right near one of the portable housing units. The first carload of logs for the sawmill arrived November 30, with an anticipated ten million feet of logs to be unloaded at the Ford property before the winter was over. The sawmill formally began operation on Tuesday, July 12, 1921, almost a year after construction began. *[William J. Cummings]*

In his iconic book *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's*, published in 1931, author Frederick Lewis Allen, editor of *Harper's Magazine* and a notable American historian of the first half of the twentieth century, wrote:

*The ten years between 1919 and 1929 took Europeans and Americans on a social and economic roller-coaster ride. With the end of World War I in 1918, people abandoned their cautious attitudes caused by the uncertainty of war and embraced the*

*freedom and joyousness of peace. Soldiers returned home to open arms, and businesses shifted gears from supplying military needs to making commercial products.*

*At the end of the war the United States was the strongest economy in the world. The country had supplied European and other nations with manufactured goods and agricultural products throughout the war, becoming a rich trader and source of investment dollars for the world.*

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*Britain, France, and especially Germany were devastated by the war. While Britain and France gradually recovered by mid-decade, Germany missed out on the prosperity enjoyed by other countries during the 1920’s.*

*After a brief recession following the war, the U.S. economy began to prosper as never before. This success created new opportunities for most people, a larger middle class, and a higher standard of living. The economic boom gave more people money and created a strong demand for consumer products such as automobiles, radios, and household items.*

*Cities swelled with skyscrapers housing new businesses, high-rise apartment buildings filled cities with prosperous people, and suburbs, or residential areas outside of cities, popped up around urban areas. These changes marked the 1920’s as a time of optimism for most people. The decade came to be referred to as the Roaring Twenties to describe the newfound freedoms and sense of rebellion that people, who were often dressing in flashy and extravagant fashions, were experiencing.*

A rather bleak economic picture had prevailed during the two decades prior to the arrival of the Ford Motor Company on the Menominee Iron Range. The gradual decline of mining in the early twentieth century, with few new industries to take its place, stood at the heart of this economic decline which is also reflected in population statistics.

In 1900 Iron Mountain’s population stood at 9,242. Although this was 1,600

more than in 1894, when the national economic downturn coupled with the flooding of key mines led to high unemployment and removals from the area, it was only a few hundred more than in 1890.

Though the population fluctuated over the following two decades, the 1904, 1910, and 1920 censuses all showed the population below the 1900 figure. The 1920 federal census listed Iron Mountain’s population at 8,251.

On March 14, 1918, General Manager Elwin Fayette Brown announced that the Pewabic Mine, Iron Mountain’s second largest iron mine, would suspend all operations and by April 18 the mine was closed. By May 30 the work of removing the pumps and machinery was nearing completion.

During the 1920’s, however, Iron Mountain experienced boom times. Contributing to the city’s growth and development was its central location in the Upper Peninsula, at the intersection of key highways in the region.

Central to Iron Mountain’s 1920’s boom times was the “Ford Boom.” In early 1920 the news broke that the Ford Motor Company was planning to build a sawmill and factory to make wooden automobile components somewhere in the western Upper Peninsula.

Ford had recently purchased 430,000 acres of timberlands in the area of Lake Michigamme in Iron, Baraga and Marquette

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counties to provide the company with its own source of wood for manufacturing parts.

At the time lumber from the northern woodlands was shipped to the company’s plants in Detroit, made into parts and then re-shipped to branch assembly plants. Ford’s plan was to establish a sawmill and body parts factory near the sources of the raw materials and ship the parts directly to the assembly plants.

Henry Ford, together with son Edsel and company general manager C. W. Avery, visited Iron Mountain as a prospective site for a factory on July 7, 1920. Other prospective sites mentioned at the time included Menominee, Marquette and Republic.

By July 16 Ford had decided on Iron Mountain as the location for his sawmill and body parts factory, and the following day Ford engineers arrived in the city and began laying out the site. Work at the site began before the end of July and connection was made to the Chicago & North Western Railway. The company eventually purchased 3,000 acres.

In mid-August the Michigan Iron, Land & Lumber Company was organized by the Ford Motor Company interests for the purpose of conducting the Iron Mountain sawmill and body plant, as well as the

extensive Ford logging operations in the Upper Peninsula. Organized with a capital stock of \$2,000,000, the officers were Henry Ford, president; Edward G. Kingsford, vice-president and assistant treasurer; Edsel Ford, treasurer; and C.B. Longley, secretary.

On March 9, 1923, Kingsford announced that the name of the company had been changed from the Michigan Iron, Land & Lumber Company to that of the Ford Motor Company, the subsidiary having been absorbed as a part of the parent plant at Detroit.

The local plant was always referred to as the Iron Mountain plant, even after the Village of Kingsford in which it was located was chartered on December 29, 1923.

The first part of the plant to be built was the sawmill. Planned to be three times the size of the Iron Mountain’s Von Platen-Fox sawmill, it went into full operation during December 1921, and was doubled in capacity in 1924.

The first “body plant” was built in 1921 and went into operation in March 1922. Later in 1922 this first body plant building was enlarged and a second plant added. A third body plant was built in 1923. By March 1924 the three body plants were making sixty-nine different body parts and producing an estimated 350,000 wooden parts per day.

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Postmarked Iron Mountain, Mich., November 13, 1926, this Interior of Ford Sawmill, Iron Mountain, postcard was taken by Iron Mountain photographer Albert Quade in 1921, possibly shortly after the sawmill opened in July.

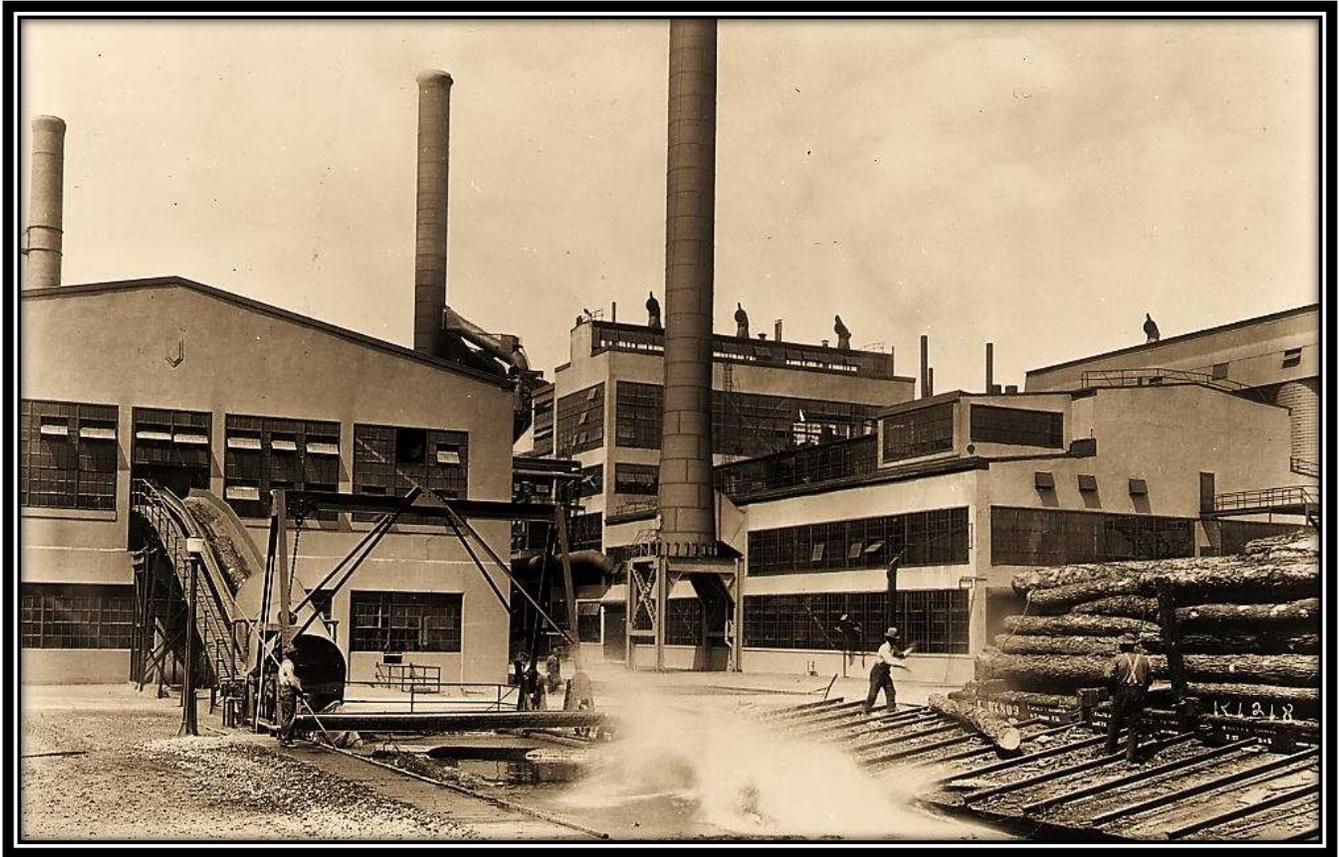
On July 12, 1921, the *Iron Mountain Daily News* reported the official opening of the sawmill as follows:

*In the presence of C.W. Avery, general manager of the Ford Motor Company, E.G. Kingsford, vice president of the Michigan Iron, Land & Lumber Company, and about 100 members of the Commercial and Rotary clubs, the first logs were put through the new Ford sawmill this afternoon. At 1:30, a long blast of the mill whistle announced the start of the huge band mill. A few minutes later, the spectators gathered on the platform to see the first log come up the chute from the hot pond. As it entered the mill building, it was "christened" by M.J. Fox with a cup of water. Then it was rolled down the slanting rack ready to be placed on the saw carriages by the steam "nigger."*

*Robert Jenks, Sawyer, and Joe Bernette, setter, took their places at the controls. The log was thrown upon the carriages and locked. Sawyer Jenks moved a lever, and the carriage rolled slowly up to the rapidly moving band mill. Almost before the spectators realized it, the first slab was off, and the carriage was back ready for the next cut. [William J. Cummings]*

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Logs from a flatcar were being rolled into the hot pond at the sawmill of Kingsford's Ford Plant when this photograph was taken in about 1924.

Construction of the sawmill, the first building erected in the Ford Plant complex, began on July 26, 1920, and the sawmill formally opened July 12, 1921. Three times as large as Iron Mountain's Von Platen-Fox Sawmill, the Ford sawmill required more electricity than the local power company could provide.

The Ford Motor Company built a hydroelectric plant on the nearby Menominee River to provide sufficient electricity for its overall operation.

The company's goal at the sawmill was to cut 250,000 feet per day. On February 17, 1922, the sawmill crew cut 205,000 feet in sixteen hours. Over the weekend of March 18-19, 1922, the day and night shifts combined cut 273,000 feet in sixteen hours.

The building to the right of the sawmill was the carbonization building, a portion of the chemical plant. *[Menominee Range Historical Museum]*

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The saw mill housed five large saws – two band mills, a gang saw and two re-saws. The logs, hauled up to the receiving deck from the log or mill pond, were first shaped – or squared – by the band mills. Chain conveyors then carried the timber to the gang saw, where it was sawed, and, finally the slabs were run through the re-saws, where the usable timber was separated from the waste.

The waste materials were utilized for shingles, box boards and laths, and whatever remained from the latter process was salvaged for fuel.

Workers were maneuvering logs in the hot pond with pikes to ascend the chain haulage system into the sawmill. Note the railroad tracks and rollways at the right used to facilitate getting the logs into the hot pond.

The company’s main logging camp was at Sidnaw, 60 miles northwest of Iron Mountain. During the first year only about a million board feet of logs were taken to Iron Mountain from Sidnaw. *[Guy Forstrom]*

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An article in the June 5, 1924 edition of the *Iron Mountain News* announced that plans and specifications for a new sawmill at Ford Plant had been prepared and submitted to contractors for bids. Ray V. Dudley, a Ford Motor Company executive, said the mill would be located between the sawmill built in 1920-1921 and the lumber transfer.

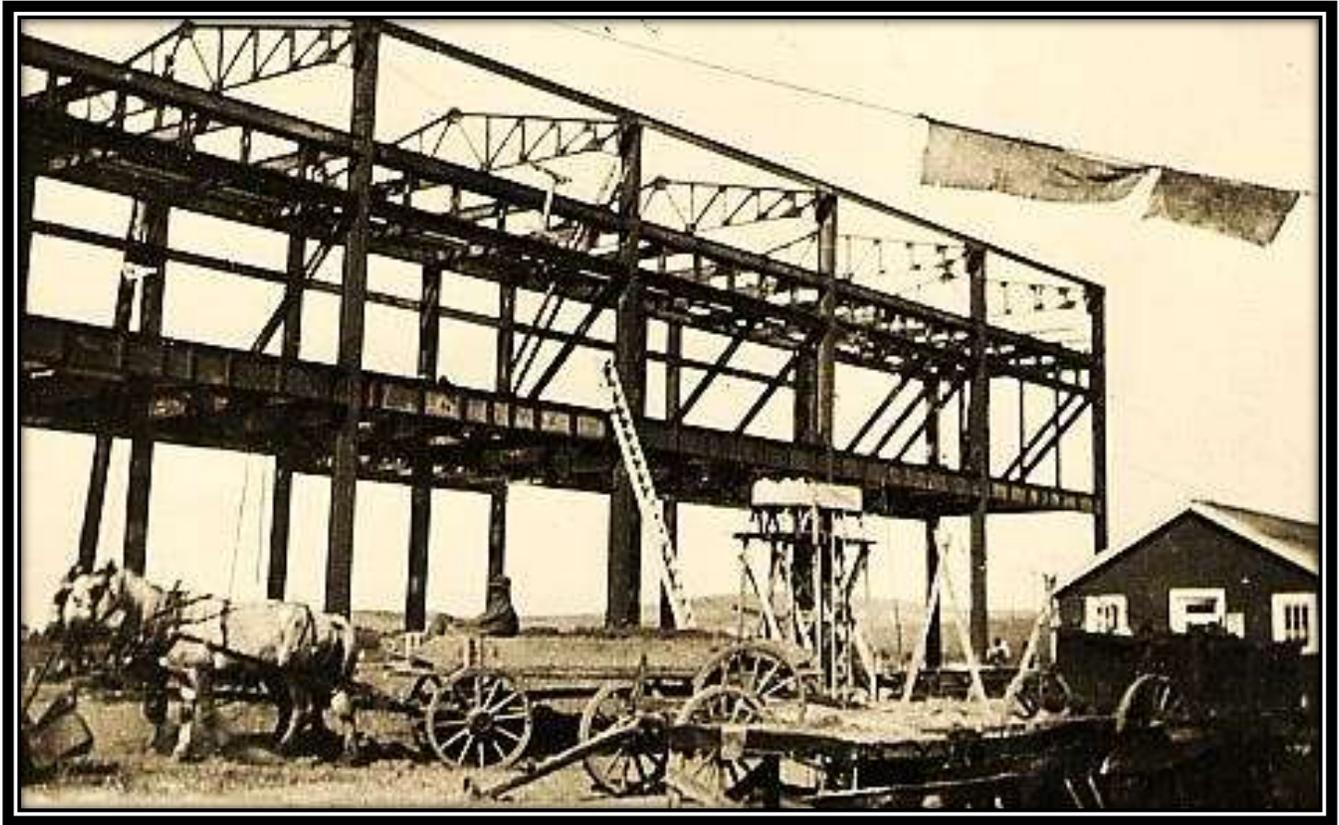
The new sawmill would measure 76 feet by 260 feet. The existing mill measured 120 by 240 feet. The new structure eliminated re-handling of lumber necessary under the new Ford system of cutting the lumber green and drying the parts in the kilns.

An article in the September 17, 1924 edition of the *Iron Mountain News* noted production was well under way in the Ford Motor Company’s newly-erected sawmill. The new sawmill was operating three shifts, employing about one hundred men per shift, and was rapidly attaining high production levels.

The chain haulage brought in the logs from the hot pond at the extreme left at the end of the building, indicating this view probably shows the new sawmill in operation, dating this postcard between 1924 and 1930. Logs entered in the center at the end of the original sawmill. [William J. Cummings]

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Work on the power house foundations, measuring 250 feet long and 40 feet wide, began August 3, 1920. Note the use of a team of horses and wagon, still prevalent at that time. The walls above ground of both the power house and the saw mill were constructed of stucco on steel frames with steel reinforced concrete supporting columns. The power house was to furnish power for the saw mill and body plant.

By June 8, 1921, two of the four Wickes boilers were in place and nearly bricked in, and work on the other two was started. The plans called for eight boilers with a total capacity of 2,400 horsepower – 300 from each unit. There was considerable delay in receiving a newly-designed Ford turbo-generator which would best supply the needed power.

The turbine was first tested on site on December 5. A second and finally a third turbo-generator were installed, the last one arriving in early February, 1922. The three units would give the power plant a capacity of about 3,000 horsepower.

A second power plant, centrally located with respect to the sawmill, wood drying kilns and the two buildings of the wood distillation plant, was constructed in 1923 and 1924, with two 190-foot high smokestacks with large letters spelling out “FORD” between them. *[William J. Cummings]*

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The sprinkler water tank, bearing the famous Ford logo, had a capacity of 100,000 gallons and stood next to the original power house building. Behind the power house was the sawmill, and behind the sawmill was the new power house with its pair of huge smokestacks, visible behind the lower portion of the scaffolding holding the water tank.

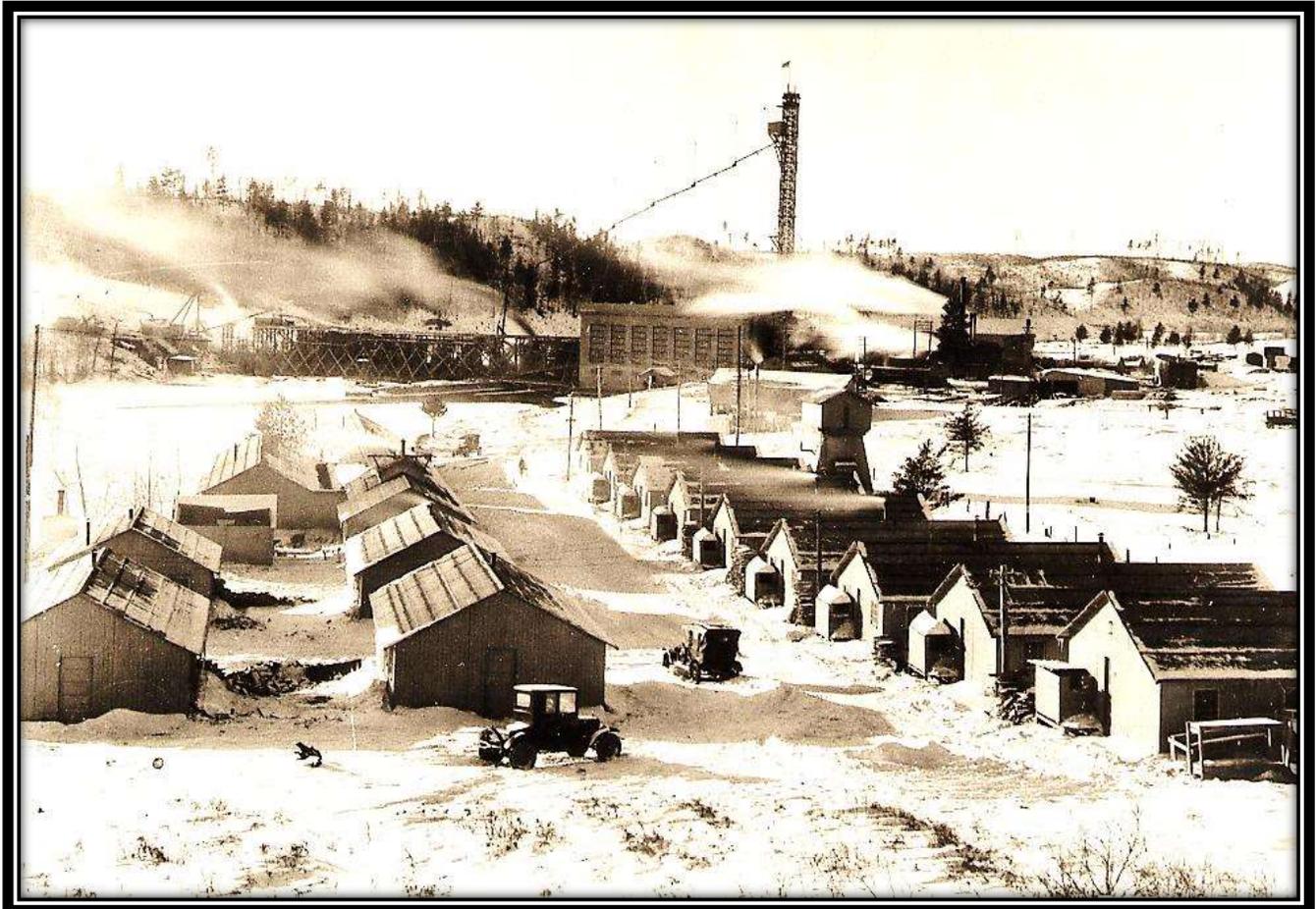
The carbonization building can be seen between the original power house and the seven huge charcoal briquette storage silos which were under construction by mid-February, 1925. Each silo, built of concrete and steel, measured 22 feet in diameter, was 71 feet high and had a capacity of 150 tons. *[Menominee Range Historical Museum]*

A chemical or distillation plant that converted the waste wood into wood alcohol, wood tar, gas, oil and charcoal went into operation during September 1924. As the Ford operation expanded, the

company built the Ford Dam and Hydroelectric Plant on the Menominee River nearby to provide an adequate power supply. The power plant was completed in June, 1924.

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Exploratory work on the Ford Dam site began February 13, 1922. The awarding of the contract was held up for more than a year and a half mainly because the purchase of the lands which would be flooded by the backwater had not been completed. Some of the land owners were demanding a very high price for their lands.

On May 12, 1923, the Stone & Webster Company of Boston, Massachusetts, began construction. Meade & Seastone, of Madison, Wisconsin, was the firm in charge of the engineering work. Great headway was made during the fall and early winter when extremely favorable weather conditions prevailed.

When this photograph was taken on January 30, 1924, work on the dam was progressing very rapidly. Construction workers lived in the bunkhouses in the foreground.

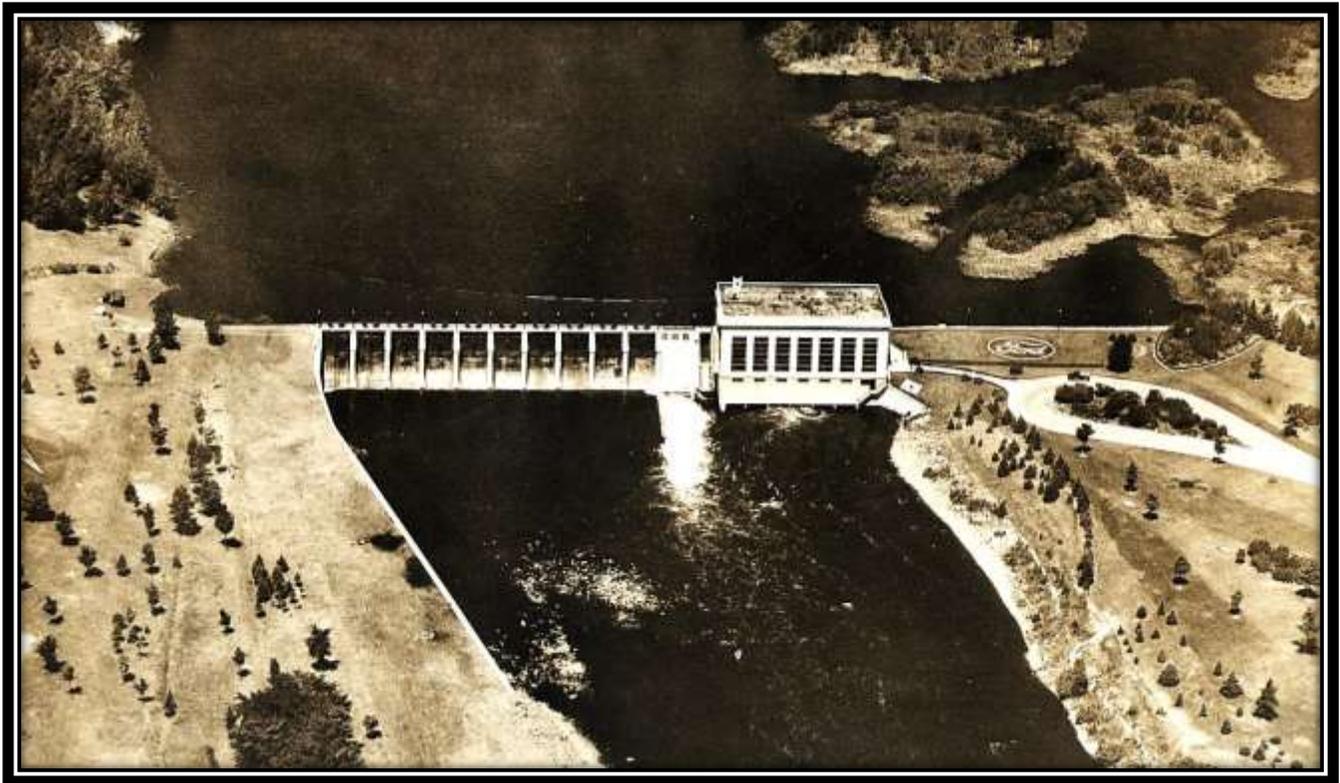
The power house, to the left of the smokestack, measured 119 feet long and was on the eastern end of the dam which extended 240 feet across the Menominee River.

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The dam was constructed of a gigantic block of concrete more than 30 feet deep that was studded with ten huge iron gates. About 18,620 cubic yards of concrete weighing 78,204,000 pounds were used in its construction. The wing or core wall on the Michigan side was 175 feet long and on the Wisconsin side the wall measured 125 feet. The water held in check by the Ford Dam flooded land as far up the river as the Peninsular Power Dam at Twin Falls and made miniature Cowboy Lake into a much larger body of water.

Power from the dam was transported to the sawmill and body plant units through a system of underground conduits which carried 2,300 volts of direct current to a substation that converted the electricity to alternating current and stepped down the voltage to 220. *[Michigan State Archives]*



The Ford Dam's three generators began revolving at the rate of 120 turns per minute, supplying 11,000 horsepower to the Ford Plant, on June 20, 1924, culminating two years of planning and construction. The dam was the largest power development on the Menominee River at the time, exceeding the output of the Peninsular Power Company's dam at Twin Falls because the flowage of the Pine River which enters the Menominee River between the two dams provided increased volume. The backwater of the Ford Hydro-Electric Dam resulted in the enlargement of Cowboy Lake.

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An article in the *Iron Mountain News* on May 29, 1925, noted: *The premises surrounding the Ford hydro-electric plant, located west of the Ford factory, have been transformed into a beautiful garden.*

*Although the planting of trees and shrubbery has not yet been completed, the landscape work is practically finished and gives the electrical plant a wonderful setting.*

*The driveway leading to the main door at the plant is marked off with a concrete curb. The road makes a complete circle, with a heart design in the center. Hedges have been planted on each side of the driveway.*

Note the oval Ford logo in flowers on the berm to the right of the power house.

Plans for the work were drawn up by Edward G. Kingsford and Wesley S. Lutey, landscape expert from Ishpeming. Lutey was also supervising beautifying the lawn at the Ford club house on Woodward Avenue, and also had charge of landscape work on the grounds of Ford homes, occupied by employees in the Ford Addition. *[Menominee Range Historical Museum]*



Contractor G.A. Gustafson began excavating the Ford Commissary’s 7-foot high basement on the southeast corner of Carpenter and Woodward Avenues at the end of May, 1922. Just over five months later, on Monday, November 13, at 8:30 a.m., the Ford Commissary opened its doors under the management of Richard E. Boll, formerly a Channing businessman.

The single-story brick building, measuring 115 by 50 feet, had cooling rooms for storing fruits and vegetables in the basement. The store was stocked with staple and fancy groceries, men’s and boys’ working clothing and shoes. The meat market

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occupied one-third of the floor space, featuring a chemical refrigerating plant, a “freezing” showcase and an electric meat sawing machine. A neatly furnished restroom for women and children was also provided.

The business, conducted on a strictly cash basis, was open to the general public as well as the Ford employees. *[From the Collection of Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village]*



By May 21, 1925, interior decoration and furnishing a few rooms on the second floor was all that remained to complete the Ford Club House, a three-story white frame building used as headquarters for visiting Ford Motor Company officials. Passing through the vestibule, the lounging room or living room was located to the right with a large brick fireplace, and the dining room, measuring 28 feet by 18 feet, was to the left. Double French doors connected the lounging room to a sun porch to the west. Access to the kitchen was through the dining room or from the back of the building.

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A stairway in the vestibule provided access to the two upper floors. The second floor consisted of seven bedrooms and two bathrooms, while the third floor contained five bedrooms and two bathrooms. The club house was sold in 1942.

The original guest register of the “Iron Mountain Club House” with entries from June 25, 1925, to February 6, 1933 is in the Ford Archives. People from around the world came to see the Iron Mountain plant and were guests here.

On July 14, 1925, Erwin “Cannon Ball” Baker, a guest on July 14, 1925, was the winner of the first race ever held at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909, riding an Indian motorcycle, and went on to set 143 cross country speed records.

On October 28, 1926, George Herman “Babe” Ruth played an exhibition game with the local Iron Mountain baseball team. The night before, he, too, signed in at the Club House. *[Ford Archives]*



On February 2, 1925, the Ford Motor Company announced the discontinuance of what was known as contract medical practice. Effective immediately, employees were no longer being assessed a certain sum each month for which they received medical attention whenever required for themselves and families.

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Men who became ill or injured while at work were to be treated at company expense in the new Ford Motor Company Industrial Hospital, located at 733 Woodward, just a few houses west of the Ford Club House. The hospital, a modified Ford Addition house, had a capacity of five beds in addition to an operating room and other departments.

According to company officials, the equipment was “of the finest” and the hospital had one of the best X-ray machines in the Upper Peninsula. A dark room for developing X-rays extended to the west from the basement. Dr. William H. Alexander, who came here in 1925 from the Henry Ford Hospital in Dearborn, Michigan, posed on the sidewalk in front of the hospital on February 16, 1926. [*Ford Archives*]



An article in the April 13, 1925 edition of the *Iron Mountain News* noted that the Ford Motor Company inaugurated “what is said to be the first commercial air line in the United States when the ‘Maiden Dearborn,’ an all-metal monoplane, hopped off from Detroit for Hegewisch, Ill., near Chicago.”

The same article noted “plans for the institution of a Detroit-Iron Mountain commercial air plane line” were known locally, but “no definite instructions” had “yet been received. No preparations” had “been made for a landing field nor other arrangements made for the planes.”

Another article appeared two and a half years later in the November 7, 1927 edition of the *Iron Mountain News*, noting “engineers of the Ford Motor Company, under the direction of Victor Perini, manager of the Iron Mountain plant,” were “nearing the completion of their part in a plan which, if approved by Henry Ford,” would “provide one of the most spacious and fully appointed airports to be found throughout the district.”

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**On September 21, 1928, the first Ford airplane to visit Iron Mountain landed at the Ford Airport at 11 a.m. carrying a party of Ford officials and guests.**

**In an article in the December 11, 1928 edition of the *Iron Mountain News*, William F. Centner, airport specialist to the Department of Commerce at Washington, D.C. stated that “the Ford Airport, located near Cowboy Lake and now under lease to Adolph Nelson,” would “make an excellent landing field when work on it is fully completed.”**  
*[William J. Cummings]*

The extensive Iron Mountain Ford Motor Company building plan included the following: fifty houses erected around Crystal Lake (1920); office building for the Michigan Iron, Land & Lumber Company on Brown Street (1920-1921); sawmill (1920-1921); power house (1920-1921); body plant 1 (1921-1922); six dry kilns (1921); body plant 2 and addition to body plant 1 (1922); 14 additional dry kilns (1922); Ford Commissary or Ford Store (1922); filing room and motor repair building (1922); filtration plant (1922-1923); body plant 3 and extensions to body plants 1 and 2 (1923); 32 additional dry kilns (1923); house building program in Lower Ford Addition for 25 to 50 homes (1923); chemical plant (1923-1924); carbonization building (1923-1924); Ford Hydro-Electric Plant on the Menominee River (1923-1924); new sawmill (1924); new power house (1924); 26 additional dry kilns (1924); Upper Ford Addition house building program of 100 homes (1924); Ford Hospital on Woodward Avenue established (1925); seven charcoal briquette storage silos (1925); Ford Clubhouse (1925), Ford Airport (1928).

By early March, 1924, there were a total of 52 dry kilns at Kingsford’s Ford Plant, making this the largest battery of dry kilns on earth at the time.

By February 16, 1924, the total number of local employees reached approximately 3,500 with a payroll of a half million dollars a month.

By September 30, 1924, the payroll contained the names of more than 5,200 persons. By October 9, 1925, the Ford Plant employed more than 7,000 men with a payroll estimated at approximately \$1,000,000 a month. There was an increase of approximately 1,300 men in the previous six weeks which the management felt reflected the public’s positive response to the newly-revamped Model T, sometimes called the “high hood” model.

By November 12, 1925, the Iron Mountain plant was listed as employing 7,271 men – more than any other division of the Ford Company with the exception of the Detroit area.