**THE ORIGINS OF ONAWAY**

In the 1920s, the American Wood Rim Company in Onaway, Michigan, was the largest manufacturer of wooden steering wheels and bicycle rims in the world. Its sister firm, the Lobdell-Emery Manufacturing Company, operated two sawmills that made broom handles, lath, coat hangers, and wood flooring. That joint operation employed between 1,200 and 1,500 workers, depending on the season and demand.

In 1926, Onaway supported “two newspapers, three law offices, four doctors, three hotels, nine churches, two bakeries, a race track, opera house, fairgrounds, and 17 saloons.” Owning more than 20,000 acres of pine cutover, the American Wood Rim and Lobdell-Emery Manufacturing Companies harvested thousands of board feet of virgin hard-rock maple and walnut—and as long as the hardwood trees remained, Onaway’s halcyon days held promise for years to come.

Several Quaker entrepreneurs originally settled Onaway in the early 1880s. Merritt Chandler, a lumberman from Cass County, moved his operation to Cheboygan in 1875, attracted by the area’s pine and hardwood timber. In 1879, he took advantage of a state law enacted 20 years earlier that was intended to improve transportation in Northern Michigan by contracting with the state government to build a 77-mile road from Presque Isle Harbor to Petoskey. As payment, the state granted Chandler 40,000 acres of cutover land.

Chandler was well aware that the hardwoods there offered some of the finest hard-rock maple and walnut wood in the country. Hard-rock maple, commonly known as sugar maple, is harder, heavier, lighter in color, and more tightly grained than other wood such as silver maple.

The land where Onaway was eventually located was at the midpoint of the road between Presque Isle Harbor and Petoskey. Anticipating population growth, Chandler moved his lumber business there in 1884. He platted out the town of “Onaway,” a name derived from a Native-American term meaning “awaken” and found in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “Song of Hiawatha.” Chandler soon built a general store, a large courthouse, an opera house, and the Chandler House Hotel.

By Jeremy W. Kilar
In order to protect his investments in the community and ensure its continued growth, Chandler restricted the sale of his hardwood holdings—which eventually amounted to 150,000 acres—to lumbermen who would move to Onaway and hire local settlers. But, until the turn of the century, no enterprise could be persuaded to move into the perceived “desolate” Presque Isle County.

**Founding the American Wood Rim Company**

One of the lumbermen who eventually took advantage of Chandler’s offer was Edward J. Lobdell of Marietta, Ohio. The E.J. Lobdell Company made wooden tire rims, handlebars, and chain guards for bicycles during the “bicycle craze” of the 1890s. When the bicycle’s popularity began to wane around 1900, Lobdell consolidated three leading Midwestern rim manufacturers into the American Wood Rim Company. However, in 1900, the American Wood Rim Company in Marietta joined “the dozens of bicycle factories destroyed by suspicious fires.”

Following the fire, Lobdell began looking to replace his depleted hardwood timber supplies. He soon purchased a large area of standing hard-rock maple in Northern Michigan from Chandler and others and moved the American Wood Rim Company to Onaway in 1901. That same year, he organized another business in Onaway, the Lobdell-Emery Manufacturing Company, after buying the sawmill operations of the Huron Handle Company, which had owned the Onaway & North Michigan Railway and thousands of hardwood acres in the region.

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With an additional 28,000 acres of timber and a sawmill that supplied the American Wood Rim Company with finished lumber, Lobdell was soon cutting 20 million feet of straight-grained, hard-rock maple strips to be made into bicycle rims. According to a company catalog, wooden rims were considered “resilient and springy.” They “enhanced the life of the bicycle tire when made from properly selected straight-grain maple and [were] proven more serviceable than all steel rims.”

When demand for bicycles in the United States slowed, the American Wood Rim Company opened a factory in France and began to ship maple rim materials to Germany.

Automobiles, however, soon began replacing bicycles as a means of transportation. As a result, Lobdell quickly adapted his rim manufacturing business to produce maple steering wheels for medium- and high-end cars. He patented a method of using steam to bend wooden dowels into half-moon shapes, gluing two dowels together and securing the rim with an aluminum “spider” in the middle. The American Wood Rim Company soon began supplying steering wheels for Ransom E. Olds’ Oldsmobile, the first mass-produced car in the country.

In time, wooden steering wheel sales became the focal point of the American Wood Rim Company’s business—in 1911 alone, the business manufactured more than 200,000 of them. While the company also made steering wheels for airplanes, boats, and some bicycles, it focused chiefly on automobiles.

Most of the steering wheels were made of maple or beech and supplied lower-priced automobiles, such as those of the Hupp Motor Car, Flint, Locomobile, and Maxwell companies. Local black walnut and
imported mahogany wheels were often made for higher-priced autos, including those of the Duesenberg, Packard, Pierce Arrow, and Cadillac brands. The business also supplied William C. Durant’s automobiles—the Buick, Durant, Flint, Star, and Sheridan—with steering wheels. One of the only auto manufacturers that made its own steering wheels, and therefore did not do business with the American Wood Rim Company, was Ford Motor Company.

**A GOOD TIME TO BE IN BUSINESS IN ONAWAY**

During the 1920s, “a car in every garage” became one of the most obvious signs of prosperity in the United States. The automobile was a symbol of freedom, and a buyer could select from more than a hundred different manufacturers’ cars and trucks during that period. In Onaway, Lobdell’s total steering wheel production between 1921 and 1926 reached more than a million wheels per year, and the American Wood Rim Company became the largest wooden steering wheel manufacturer in the world. The firm patented 22 innovations for their steering wheels, including the first tilt-wheel version—or, as it was called, “the fat man’s steering wheel.”

The American Wood Rim Company entered into exclusive agreements with several luxury car manufacturers—including Cadillac, Packard, Rickenbacker, Duesenberg, and Peerless—to supply walnut steering wheels with specially inscribed aluminum or wooden spiders. However, several larger manufacturers eventually violated their contracts and began to produce copies of those wheels. There were several patent violation lawsuits, but the car companies often ignored the favorable outcomes for the American Wood Rim Company. Nevertheless, by the mid-1920s, Lobdell’s factories had expanded to more than 44 acres in Onaway and the company’s main steering wheel plant employed more than 800 people. It was a good time to be in business in Onaway.

Although the American Wood Rim and Lobdell-Emery Manufacturing Companies were prosperous during the early twentieth century, life for common workers in Onaway was often a struggle. The top wage for a laborer in 1926 was 40 cents an hour, which required ten-hour workdays six days a week. Women employees were only paid 17 cents an hour. There were also the inherent dangers of working in a sawmill. According to the Michigan Department of Labor, an average of five “slight” to “severe” accidents were reported each month at Onaway’s wooden steering wheel factories, and deaths on the job were not uncommon.

Onaway had become, as Bruce Catton wrote in *Michigan: A History*, one of the “mechanized islands in the wilderness.” Yet, after 25 years, it had not freed itself from reliance on the abundance of cheap, accessible hardwoods. By the mid-1920s, the logging railroads were reaching farther into the Northern wilderness, and it was only a matter of time before even the hardwoods world be exhausted. While an optimistic local newspaper predicted that “once the timber goes, it clears up the richest farming land in Michigan,” the fortunes of Onaway’s steering wheel businesses and the city itself changed suddenly on a fateful winter day in 1926.

**GOING UP IN FLAMES**

At 8:30 in the morning of January 14, 1926, when a full work crew of men and women were in place at the Onaway sawmills, a spark of static electricity in one of the company’s sanding machines ignited the dust in a blower. Before anyone could react, the blower system exploded, and fire raged through the system of pipes to different parts of the building. According to the editor of the *Onaway Outlook*, “The fire whistle blew and everyone rushed to their doors and windows to find out where the fire was. They saw huge clouds of black smoke rising from the Lobdell mills. Stores, homes, [and]
offices were aband[ed] and every
citizen went to the fire.”

“By nightfall,” the newspaper
continued, “Onaway’s backbone was
broken.” Strong southerly winds
“of blizzard velocity” prevented the
city fire department and company
employees from controlling the
inferno, which spread north through
the production units of the American
Wood Rim and Lobdell-Emery
Manufacturing Companies’ factories.

When the fire was finally brought
under control, it was discovered that
four men had perished: Fred VanPfuff,
John Tate, Lorenzo D. Smith, and
Eugene Procour. Their families were
given $14 a week for several weeks
after the fire in compensation. The loss
of the factories and the deaths of those
men cast a pall over the community,
and the malaise was exacerbated a
few days later when Edward Lobdell
announced that his company would
not rebuild in Onaway.

Lobdell’s decision stemmed from
the fact that the factory fire had
also crippled Michigan’s downstate
automobile industry, since the supply
of wooden steering wheels became
exhausted within days of the tragedy.
An employee at the Hudson Motor
Car Company in Detroit recalled
that “we had to drive the otherwise
finished cars and trucks off the
assembly line with monkey wrenches.”

Lobdell could not afford the time it
would take to rebuild his company
in Onaway. Instead, he bought
an abandoned building owned by
Republic Trucks in Alma and offered
a job to any employee who followed
him there. Within a week, hundreds of
workers left Onaway, either for Alma
or elsewhere, to seek employment.

Onaway was shattered by the loss of
the factories. When so many men and
women lost their jobs, the financial
security that seemed so promising
quickly dissipated. Merchants lost
business, banks closed, newspapers
shuttered their doors, land values
plummeted, and the city went into
debt. During the early years of the
Great Depression, squatters moved
into empty homes. Miraculously,
Onaway did not quite become a
ghost town. It managed a comeback
in the 1940s as a tourist town and, in
time, began attracting several small
manufacturing plants.

The American Wood Rim
Company, renamed Lobdell-Emery
Manufacturing, continued to
produce steering wheels in Alma and
eventually became the city’s largest
employer. In the late 1930s, the
company stopped making steering
wheels but continued to produce
bicycle parts, bentwood furniture,
aluminum cooking dishes, and nursery
furniture. In the 1950s, it shifted
its production to wooden and steel
parts for Ford cars. Unfortunately,
consolidation in the supply business
by larger auto manufacturers
during the 1990s forced further
cuts in production, and in 2005,
the Lobdell-Emery Manufacturing
factory in Alma closed.

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