

When tanneries reigned in Morgan County

by Jeanne Mozier

Stroll from the grand Berkeley Springs Hotel through The Grove where people bathed in the famed warm mineral springs and head north during the years after the Civil War and you would soon be struck by a sickening odor.

You would notice Warm Springs Run was a peculiar color from the pollution and dead fish floated by from the toxic tannery drainage. And, if you could fast forward to a glimpse at what the main street of Berkeley Springs is in this 21st century, you would be shocked because in the 1880s it was lined with tannery buildings, bark sheds and two giant smokestacks, one 103' high.

Today there is not a single remnant there of the booming tannery industry of the Victorian Age.

The First National Tannery in Berkeley Springs produced award-winning leathers and employed many local men. The oak bark it bought by the cartloads to tan the hides provided a cash crop for local farmers. Many considered the spring water to be the key to success, *giving to the leather a toughness and durability that cannot be equaled*, according to the local newspaper in 1888. It undertook community tasks and donated generously to various churches and civic causes.

The economic force of the tanneries came into conflict with the economic force of hotels in town. The lawsuits against the tannery started in 1875. The railroad the tannery brought into town ended up working to its disadvantage by encouraging the price of bark to increase as it was shipped elsewhere. The perfect storm finally climaxed in 1897 with the death of owner Benjamin De Ford and a duty placed on hides. The tannery finally closed in 1898, property was sold in '99 and over the next decade or so, the buildings were damaged by fire or razed, opening blocks of downtown for other commercial development, some of which still stands.

The tannery story in Paw Paw was different, possibly because there was no competing hotel industry that had a very different view of what town life should be.

A tannery was established by a New York company in 1868 at-



The northeast end of Paw Paw held a thriving tannery. This photo, courtesy of Barbara Norton, is from 1927.

tracted to the area because of the amount of oak tanning bark being shipped from the railroad station here. Paw Paw had all the other necessary attributes: water, transportation and labor.

In 1887, there were 180 employed at what was one of the largest tanneries in the nation. Paw Paw was the largest town in the county with 1000 residents, making up almost 20% of the county population. In 1893, the tannery was owned by the United States Leather Company, one of the original companies in the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

Even more than De Ford, the tannery in Paw Paw was very civic minded. They built a school house on the tannery property and houses for their workers. In 1902, they brought a ferry boat down from Cumberland to be used at Paw Paw. In 1912, the tannery provided electricity lighting the grounds and buildings as well as powering the operation. The town did not have electric until 1928. Attractive and solid double houses were built facing the railroad and remain as one of the most desirable places in town to live – Louie's Lane.

During the 1930s, the tannery was the largest in the world making belt leather. A World War I ship cargo of this leather sank and was salvaged 17 years later in perfect condition. This episode was the subject of a Lowell Thomas radio broadcast entitled: *17 Years Under the Sea*.

In 1939 The Union Tanning Company expanded moving from New Jersey a stamping plant that cut shoe

soles. More houses were built on Moser Ave. in town for the new arrivals.

World War II introduced women to the "cut sole" plant. About 450 were employed. At one time they operated a double shift. The plant closed in December 1951 after workers voted to unionize.

By then, genuine leather was being replaced by a man made synthetic called neolite and tanning became a thing of the past.

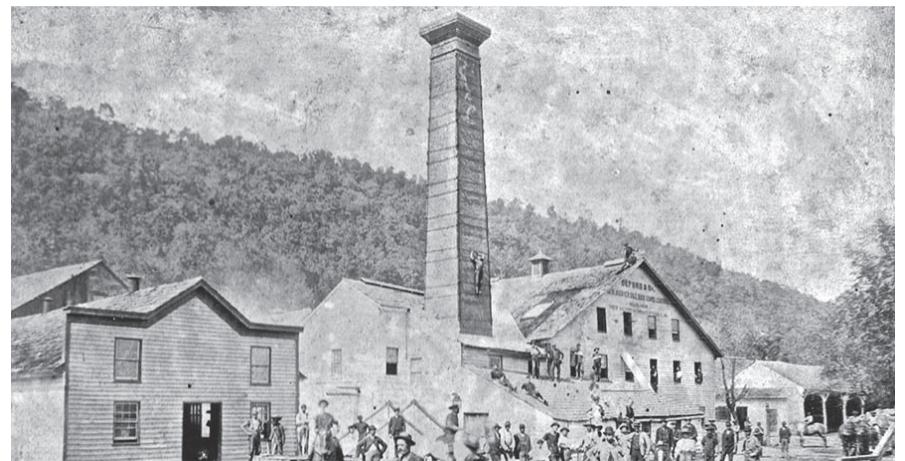
Although the tannery buildings in Paw Paw served other manufacturers over the years, they have since been torn down. The property is now used by the owner as pastureland. A water tower was built in 1933 and remained as a landmark until October 1, 2011 when it was removed.

Unlike Berkeley Springs, where hotels revived and other industries emerged returning the town to prosperity, that hasn't happened yet in Paw Paw.

The tannery kept Paw Paw booming during the Depression and World War II but once it ended, Paw Paw declined in both population and economic health. Never again would Morgan County be on the world stage for its leather and only the future can tell whether Paw Paw will ever again be the largest and most prosperous town in the county.

NOTE: A Bicentennial lecture on tanneries is available on video. The link can be found on the website of the Museum of the Berkeley Springs and here <https://youtube/UKGq1Nq6EZ4>.

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North Washington Street covered by tannery buildings from today's Tari's Cafe to the RAG Shop.