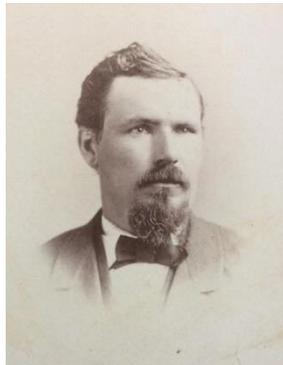


Montague Iron Works

By Barbara Bedau Brow



The original Montague Iron Works was a wooden structure built in 1865 by E.C. Dicey and his partner Lyttle. The pair had purchased the property from Nathan Sargent. The Montague Iron Works burned in 1868, was rebuilt, burned in 1869, was rebuilt and burned yet again in 1870.



Malcom Hendrie

In 1871, Malcom Hendrie and James Wilson attempted to buy a machine shop in Whitehall but were unsuccessful. However, with the backing of the Ferry-Dowling Company, they purchased the Montague Iron Works from Dicey and Lyttle, and erected a 30' by 170' structure on the property. They used brick from the Ruggles Brick Works in Whitehall, thus ending the fire problems. In 1881 the original building was enlarged.

In 1889, George H. Mason, well-known early resident of this area, joined the firm, and under the partnership of Wilson-Mason the company continued its growth. At that time the business was valued at \$100,000 and the gross business averaged \$75,000 a year. The 1990 Muskegon County Atlas Patrons Directory lists the following officers: Montague Iron Works Co., Jas. D. Wilson, Pres., Thos. J. McKinstry,

V. Pres., G. H. Mason, Sec'y, A. L. Baker, Treas., Montague. The death of Mr. George H. Mason in 1908 was a blow to the company, which four years later was forced into bankruptcy.

In 1891 it was reported in a local newspaper that there were 60 men employed at the Iron Works: 27 Americans, 14 Germans, 8 Hollanders, 5 Canadians, 3 Scotchmen and 3 Swedes. These men earned an average annual income of \$628.31. Twenty-six of the men owned their own homes, and the average value of the houses was \$828.

Early articles about the Iron Works indicated that they primarily produced saw mill machinery, boilers and small engines, usually on a custom basis. In 1901 it was announced that they were branching out into the boat building business. The boats built by the Iron Works were designed by Duncan Robertson of Detroit, one of the most successful designers of fast boats in the country.

Even though the company continued to produce quality products, economically things did not always go well. In 1913 the foundry found itself in bankruptcy proceedings. The death of Mr. Wilson in 1915 brought the closing of the factory for a time. The suit was finally settled in 1917 when a Chicago group, consisting of Luther V. Rice, E.A. Burrows and C.C. Whittler purchased the business for \$16,000. The new owners had electric lights installed and a cement floor poured in the pattern shop and tool room. The modernized Montague Iron Works Corporation began turning out material for the war effort. Because of the shortage of raw materials caused by the war, a railroad load of coal destined for the Iron Works was confiscated in 1918 by the county fuel marshal and distributed to needy families in the village. Projects had to be suspended, causing large layoffs.

In 1922 the Montague Iron Works was once again in bankruptcy and was placed on the auction block. The building was sold for \$800 and the machinery for \$4,000. The appraised value at the time was \$60,000.

In 1924 John Reed acquired the business and the shop was once again on a paying basis, doing work for the Bennett Pump Works of Muskegon. The 1928-29 business showed a \$120,000 volume for the year and employed 90 men.

In 1932 Mr. Reed passed away, and the shop continued under the management of the Reed Estate. In January, 1935 it looked like the end for the firm, but it was rescued when Ernest Hagelin, Axel Johnson, John Kalk and Dee M. Webster acquired the controlling interest, and kept the business going.

In 1936, George H. Holmes of Ann Arbor, and uncle of Al Pack, purchased what was then known as Montague Casting Company. By 1938, there were 144 men employed.

In June 1942 Paul Wiener of Muskegon purchased the foundry from the Al Pack Estate and there speculation that he would close the plant here and move the operations.

In November 1942, Ira J. Lyons of Whitehall purchased the Montague Casting Company building and land from Mr. Wiener. His plans were to locate several industries in the 50,000 square foot building. A couple of those businesses that located there were the Whitehall Metal Studio, White Lake Foundry, Arrow Foundry, and L.C.K Machine Company.

Other owners through the years included: Erwin Knoth and Wesley Gross; Howard Elmore and Walter Klaus; William Buller and Gerald Garvelink; John L. Orzechowski (Northland Casting) and the Benfur Engineering Company of Indiana.

The Montague Iron Works was a very important part of the City of Montague for over 133 years.



Additional comments –

In 1900 the Montague Iron Works closed a contract to build a 25" by 30" stationary engine for the Albion Lumber Company of San Francisco, California.

In 1907 Montague Iron Works completed a contract for Great Lake Towing for an engine that would weigh 6 ton.

The Maritime Museum in Duluth has a wonderful example of an engine produced at the Montague Iron Works as one of their main displays. It is two stories high and proudly bears the Montague Iron Works plate on its side. It was taken from the tug "ESSAYON" which was built in 1909 by the Racine Boat Works in Muskegon for government service.

Montague Iron Works built the 19 and 36 by 30 stroke fore and aft compound marine engine for the steamer "Edward Buckley".

They also built a 15 and 28 by 20 steeple compound marine engine for the steamer "Hunter" of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, owned by the A. Booth Packing Company of Chicago.

And the 18 and 36 by 30 fore and aft compound marine engine for Capt. Charles Gnewuch and Edward Buckley of Manistee, Michigan.