

**Henry Ford and the Nankin Mills Area**

**By**

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Henry Ford's influence in the Nankin Mills area sprang from a personal involvement dating back to his boyhood as well as a deep conviction in the values of rural life.

As a boy in 1870 Ford visited the quiet country area along the Rouge River and watched the giant water wheels of the mills. This inspired him to build a homemade wheel to which he attached a coffee grinder. It was the first moving device that he made.

“He dreamed of other wheels that would one day be turned by greater power to lighten the burdens of farm and industries and change the transportation habits of the nation. Down through the years from water wheels to watches, to steam engines, to gasoline engines, Henry Ford's interest in wheels progressed, but he never forgot the song of the water wheel – the grinding of the mill stones, the strength of water, the efficient simplicity of those mills along the Rouge.”<sup>1</sup>

By 1918 Ford's career as an automotive giant had been launched. He had “put the nation on wheels”, but with this triumph came the ill effects of industrialization- crowded cities, high living costs, seasonal unemployment, and an alienation between man and his natural environment. Ford saw the problems clearly and sought to improve the situation.

It is not the advantages of cities that are doomed, but the disadvantages- the congestion, the inequality which reigns even in the matter of air and sunlight and ground space. And yet, the world has known for many centuries that air and sunlight and ground space were not of themselves the infallible sources of happiness and success, for without certain improvements even country life becomes an insupportable drudgery and an unrelieved loneliness. The advantages of the country are natural; and the advantages of the city are human; when both are fused, as they are being fused, the cities lose in large degree their justification for existence. When they bring their best to the country, their work is done.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that Industry and Agriculture are natural partners. Agriculture suffers from lack of a market for its product. Industry suffers from lack of employment for its surplus men. Bringing them together heals the ailments of both. I see the time of coming when the farmer not only will raise raw materials for industry, but will do the initial processing on the farm. He will stand on both feet – one foot on the soil for his livelihood; the other in industry for the cash he needs. Thus he will have a double security.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the Ford “village industries” were launched. They were the result of Ford's social conscience and imagination, an extension of the personal values of an American nurtured by old-fashioned rural values.

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<sup>1</sup> Folder on “Village Industries” from Ford Archives at the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan

<sup>2</sup> Henry Ford, from folder on “Village Industries” from Ford Archives at Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Ford, from folder on “Village Industries” from Ford Archives at Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn.

The Nankin Mills, perhaps because it was still in operation, became Ford's very first village industry.<sup>4</sup> He brought it from Floyd Bassett in 1918, at which time the wheel was still turned by the stream, and converted it into a small factory for the manufacture of small auto parts.

Certainly, it was a picturesque and pleasantly located factory, its site being the kind inductive to a picnic or Sunday family outing. The workers were local farmers, and the new factory made it possible for them to continue their country life with the benefit of a steady source of income.

Working conditions were equally attractive. "Rule 1 at all small plants is that any man may leave at any time to work on the farm, may have his job back- barring shutdowns- when he gets through farming. Some few of these requests come at times of heavy factory schedules in early spring."<sup>5</sup>

Ford's interest extended to the two story frame house adjacent to the mill, for many years used as the miller's house. He updated it and put in various improvements, the fireplace probably being one of them, according to Solan Weeks, Curator of the Detroit Historical Museum. Today, the old "miller's house" is the site designated as the future Westland Historical Museum.

Ford's interest in the community continued, and in 1937 he provided it with a brand new schoolhouse. The Nankin Mills School, as it was then named, was patterned in style after the one room schoolhouse on Warren and Cowan. Today, Ford's schoolhouse is used as the kindergarten room in the Perrinville Elementary School.

In many ways the school was like a gift wrapped package that Ford gave to the sparsely population Nankin area. Local citizens had no need to worry about school taxes; Ford paid them all himself, along with the teacher's salary and the students' medical and dental bills. <sup>6</sup> A note, now in the Nankin Mills School folder at the Henry Ford Archives, reveals that in 1937 plans were made for \$561 to be allotted to the Nankin Mills School Board for the education of 39 children.

Although small and rural, the school had many modern features and advantages. In fact, it was considered so desirable that several pupils had to be turned away due to lack of openings. Letters from concerned parents (in the Nankin Mills School folder at Ford Archives) reveal that they wished to transfer their children from other local schools because of Nankin Mills' program in music and art as well as its full day schedule.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Van Vlissingen, Arthur, Ed., "The Big Idea Behind those Small Plants of Ford's," *Factory Management and Maintenance*, No. 4 (April 1936).

<sup>6</sup> Report on Perrinville School by Cynthia David, distributed through the Perrinville School.

Writing for the second time one Garden City parent pleaded his daughter's case for enrollment by saying, "She is in the eighth grade and I'm afraid she won't be prepared for high school as she only gets a half day owing to the over crowded school." (The plea was rejected).

A report by a student in 1937 revealed that the school featured indirect lighting, modernized lavatories and a bright, pleasant interior.<sup>7</sup>

The Three R's were taught, as well as courses in sewing (sewing machines were provided at the school), machine shop, etiquette and singing. Morning chapel services were held daily. Students were also assigned small patches of ground on which they each grew and cultivated crops. Library books were provided by the Wayne County Library system. A full time janitor helped carry out the school's programs.<sup>8</sup>

I am a pupil at Nankin Mills School. I didn't like school very much when I first started, but now I can't wait from one day until the next to get to school. The reason I like it is because we have more activities here than we had in Farmington, such as dancing and singing. There is a big skating pond behind the school. If we do not have skates we bring our sleighs. We have lots of fun at the pond. I am proud to be a student of the Nankin Mills School.<sup>9</sup>

Orval Lang

...we went on a sleigh ride. James Love drove the horses...First we went down to Joy Rd. Then we came back and went down Farmington...The sled had hay on it so it would be soft. Dogs barked at the horses as they walked on the billowy snow...When we returned we all looked like jumping jacks because we were all jumping around to get warm.<sup>10</sup>

Kenneth Charles Voss

According to student articles in the Herald, the McGuffey Reader was used as a reading text.

Mrs. Mildred Harris of 34207 Michigan Ave., Wayne, Michigan, was the school's first teacher. She taught grades 1 through 8 all in the one room.<sup>11</sup>

The Nankin Mills School, now known as Perrinville, was just one of the many rural schools that was financed and supported by Henry Ford. Administered through the Edison Institute under the direction of Benjamin Lovett, some of Ford's other schools were located

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<sup>7</sup> Herald Newspaper, Nov. 12, 1937, published at Greenfield Village.

<sup>8</sup> Herald Newspapers

<sup>9</sup> Herald, December 24, 1937

<sup>10</sup> Herald, January 20, 1940

<sup>11</sup> Nankin Mills School Folder, Henry Ford Archives, Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan.

in Lenawee County, Pequaming, Massachusetts, and Georgia. Many of them- such as the McGuffey, Town Hall, Scotch Settlement and the Edison Institute High School – were located within Greenfield Village itself.<sup>12</sup>

The existence of his factory in the old Nankin Mill probably encouraged Ford's interest in the school. Believing as he did in the values of rural life it was part of his philosophy to try to maintain the country-side with its traditions of self-reliance, hard work and simple living. The school probably helped the continuation of the factory (workers whose children had quality education would not be tempted to move away), and the factory helped the school by providing it with the children of its workers. Most likely, it was a happy arrangement for everyone.

Dedicated on September 9, 1937, Lovett himself acted as Master of Ceremonies at the opening of the Nankin Mills School. Records at the Henry Ford Archives do not state that Ford attended the dedication ceremony himself, but many people in the community were present as well as Mr. Cody, Superintendent of the Detroit Schools, whose grandmother attended the old Perrinsville School at Warren and Cowan and whose father worked at Nankin Mills when it was still a grist mill.

Also present were John Snyder, of the Perrinsville School Board, and Mrs. F. W. Hoops, mother of the teacher Mildred Harris, who had taught herself in the area forty years ago. "Mr. Lovett asked her to tell us something about school at that time. Then as now school opened each morning by exercises similar to the chapel we hold every morning," state an article appearing in the Herald Newspaper of Nov. 12, 1937.

Judging by student reports in the Herald life continued busily and happily at Nankin Mills for the next few years. In 1946 the school was sold for one dollar to the fledgling Nankin Mills School District.

In 194\_ the Nankin Mills Factory was sold to Wayne County. Indeed, only a handful of the rural plants were kept in operation by the cost-conscious Ford organization after the founder's retirement in 1945.

Despite favorable accounts and enthusiasm from journalism and other spokesmen, the village industries became only a memory and the philosophy behind them was seemingly brushed aside. Today only the Northville Plant still making valves, remains in operation. The others, among them the Nankin Mills, the Saline Mill and the Sharon Hollow Mill are antique shops, providing an effective background for the collection of old trinkets and artifacts on display.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Herald Newspaper, Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, David, "Old Henry Ford's Village Industries: A Tour of Practically Perfect Places to Work", Detroit Free Press Sunday Magazine, (Sept. 24, 1972), p. 12.

And so Henry Ford's experiment of combining industry with the quiet charm of rural life is now only a memory. Still, the problems of industry- pollution, crowding, an estrangement of man from his natural environment-are bearing down upon us now more than ever before.

The factory at Nankin Mills and the one room schoolhouse which Ford built adjacent to it may have been only small specks on a countryside where time passed slowly and which seemed far removed from a turbulent world dull of war, social change and political strife.

Yet they were touched by the power and vision of one of the most important men in American history, a man who bears as much responsibility as anyone for changing the American landscape from a rural one to one colored by industry and technology.

Both Nankin Mills and the present Perrinville School were instruments used in carrying forth a concept that was unique, far-sighted and essentially humane.

That concept lies dormant today, but two of its monuments, the present Nankin Mills Nature Center and the Perrinville School, remain part of our everyday lives.

And who knows? They just might be inhabited by wistful ghosts in need of willing listeners to whom they could whisper secrets that might help solve some of the major problems of our time.