

# THE TOWNSHIP OF BIRNAMWOOD

By G. L. Emmel

The Township of Birnamwood was originally a part of a double township with the Township of Wittenberg. At a special meeting held February 17, 1883 the electors of the Township of Wittenberg voted in favor of a division of said township. At the March 19, 1883 meeting of the Shawano County Board, a petition was presented which was signed by thirty-two residents of the future Township of Birnamwood asking that in case a township is organized, to have it named "Rideout". Presumably a goodly share of these signers came from the area near Eland Junction where a sizeable lumbering operation called the Eland Traffic Company was owned by the Rideout family. The County Board did not agree with the petitioners however, and at their March 20, 1883 meeting it was ordered that a new township be formed and named Birnamwood. The County Board further ordered the town boards of Wittenberg and Birnamwood to meet on the first Monday of May 1883 to adjust the debts and credits of the two towns. On May 8, 1883, a meeting of the two town boards was held to divide assets. The Township of Birnamwood's share of the assets was \$24.22, which is the amount the new township started with in its treasury.

Until the Village of Birnamwood was incorporated in 1895 and the Village of Eland did the same in 1905, these villages were a part of the Township of Birnamwood for governmental purposes. Prior to these villages forming their own government upon incorporation, it was logical for many of the early township officers to be from the villages, as they held the largest concentration of people.

The first township officers elected April 3, 1883, were: F. E. Porter, chairman; H. A. Sprague and J. H. Long, supervisors; J. F. Franklin, clerk; W. J. Hagen, treasurer; and C. A. Porter, assessor. The first town board meeting was held May 3, 1883. In April 1885, the town board voted to levy a poll tax of \$1.50 on each male inhabitant of the town between the ages of 21 and 50 who were not otherwise exempt. After the villages of Eland and Birnamwood incorporated, the township was left with three schools within its borders. There was the Stipp School in Section 10, the Helgeson School in Section 35, both of which



Photo Courtesy: Gary L. Emmel

Pleasant View School

were built in the early 1880s, and later, the Pleasant View School in Section 28. The Stipp School became the Town Hall when the new District #8 school called Balsam Grove was built on the same grounds in 1912. The Balsam Grove School has in turn served as the Town Hall since the school was closed through consolidation in the mid 1950s.

Historically, the farming profession has provided the livelihood for most of the inhabitants of the town of Birnamwood. However, from the early days there have been residents who have engaged themselves in other ventures. In July of 1900, Carl Behn purchased a new J. I. Case steam engine threshing machine and water tank. He threshed in the area for many years and was followed in that profession by his descendants.

John Madson moved his steam sawmill from the Waupaca County Township of Union to his property in Section 2 of the town in December 1904. This mill was operated into the early 1920s, the later years operated by John Madson's son Edward.

In January 1905 a brickyard was started on the John Carlson farm in Section 5. The business, under the name of Birnamwood Brick Company, began operations on May 18, 1905. The officers were: John Carlson, president; William Schmidt, manager and L. W. Boettcher, secretary and treasurer. The operation appears to have been substantial, because, along with the main plant and boiler room, it included 12 drying sheds, each being 125 feet in length and a railroad with clay cars to convey the raw



material to the processing plant. The kilns were fired the first time in July, and the first batch of 140,000 bricks was finished July 27, 1905. The advertised price for the product was \$7.00 per thousand for kiln run bricks and \$8.00 per thousand for select bricks. In December 1905 after one season as manager of the Birnamwood Brick Company, William Schmidt left the operation with the intent of starting his own brickyard. His one-third share in the business was then purchased by John Madson. Madson eventually bought out partners L. W. Boettcher in September 1908 and John Carlson in April 1909. The business operated until about 1915 before folding.

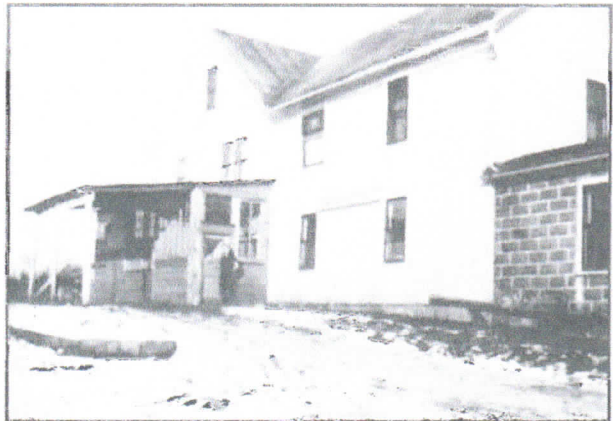
The site William Schmidt chose for the purpose of establishing a brickyard was one mile north of the Village of Eland in Section 30, Township of Birnamwood. The new business was called The Eland Brick Company and began operating in 1906. After 3 or 4 years the business was purchased by Peter Ullenbrauck. Because of frozen soil conditions, the bricks could not be manufactured during the winter months. In February 1911, Ullenbrauck purchased the Smerling Brothers Sawmill located one-half mile south, and moved it to his brickyard.

The addition of the sawmill provided diversification and extended the length of the operating season. The business continued to operate into the later teens.

In 1905, Nels Madson invented a mechanical stone picker which, according to newspaper accounts, worked quite well. The machine had been in the planning and experimental stages for two years. The local newspaper editor was ecstatic about the prospects of establishing a manufacturing plant to produce the machine in Birnamwood. None of these plans seemed to have materialized, as Nels left for greener pastures in North Dakota in December of 1906 and engaged in the cattle business.

There were two cheese factories in the township of Birnamwood. The Townline Cheese Factory was built in Section 2 by Oscar Knoke in 1902. Some of the operators were Arno Knoke, A. R. Hills, Edward Zahn, Ernest Julius, Alex Kriewaldt and Richard Vogt. This

factory closed in 1943 and was moved away in 1946. The other factory was the Hillside Cheese Factory in Section 35. It was operated by Art Umland.



*Photo Courtesy: Gary L. Emmel*

#### **Townline Cheese Factory**

A part of the tiny hamlet of Shepley lies in Section 36 and straddles the line between the Townships of Birnamwood and Almon. Shepley was one of several new communities that sprang up along the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad in 1906, when the line was built between Green Bay and Eland Junction. It never did have sufficient population to incorporate, but at one time it had a depot, hotel and post office, two sawmills, saloons, a dance hall, a cheese factory, and several stores and residences.

The township is traversed from top to bottom by the Middle Branch of the Embarrass River. Besides being a recreational asset, the river was used extensively for floating logs to the sawmills in the lumbering era. To this day evidence can be found of sluice dams, that were constructed to impound a head of water which, along with an accumulation of logs, was released to carry the logs downstream to the next dam and eventually to a designated sawmill. The logs were "stamped" with an imprint on the end to apprise sawmills along the river to either keep the logs at their facility or pass them downstream to another mill. The last log drive on the Middle Branch took place in 1916.





Photo(s) Courtesy: Gary L. Emmel

Town of Birnamwood Krull & Schmidt Threshing Crew.

Shepley's  
Senate Bar  
1913



Shepley  
Plummer Shoe Store





**Balsam Grove School, District 8, 1912**