

Harlan P. Bird Biography

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Most people will agree that no man had more influence on the early development of Wausaukee than Harlan P. Bird. In partnership with John W. Wells, Bird, established and developed the sawmill and lumber company that was the economic mainstay of Wausaukee for over 25 years.

Bird was born August 2, 1838, the son of an East Smithfield, Pennsylvania., farmer. Although the elder, Mr. Bird was known as a pioneer farmer, temperance worker and church leader, his industrious character never resulted in financial success. The family lived in humble circumstances.

While he was still a young boy, the family relocated to a farm in the Sweden Valley area of Pennsylvania. There he received a basic education and spent a term teaching school before he left to seek his fortune in Brooklyn, N.Y.

New York was at that time installing a waterworks system and Bird secured a job with the contractors. He picked up a great deal of knowledge about bookkeeping and surveying in the course of his duties. His diligence attracted the attention of his employers, who owned lumber interests in many Menekaunee (east of Marinette), and they offered him work in Wisconsin.

The step proved to be a decisive one for Bird, for he never returned to the east. Wisconsin wilderness and intrigued him. The trip to Wisconsin was a wild one, and Bird loved to tell of his first impressions of the untamed frontier. In 1860 Chicago was considered the boundary of civilization, and travel into strange sounding places like Oshkosh, Pensaukee and Peshtigo was an unparalleled adventure for the young man.

Bird worked as a cashier and accountant for the New York Co., later known as the Menominee River Lumber Co., until the outbreak of the Civil War when he enlisted in the ranks of the 12th Wisconsin infantry. The regiment trained at Camp Randall then went to the Mississippi via Chicago. Bird took part in the siege of Vicksburg, where he was shot in the leg while on duty in the rifle pits. After a short furlough, he rejoined the regiment and took part in the 300 mile march to Atlanta and another siege, followed by Sherman's famous march to the sea. He attained the rank of brevet Captain, having worked his way up from the ranks, at the close of his military career, July 16, 1865

As a civilian, Bird resumed his duties with the Menominee River Co. However, a calm and orderly life was interrupted by the great fire of a October 8th, 1871, later called the Peshtigo fire. Thousands of square miles of forests, farms and villages were destroyed and nearly 1000 lives were lost in the conflagration that left its mark on Northeastern Wisconsin.

Menekaunee and Marinette were in the direct path of the flames, and Bird worked shoulder to shoulder with others who hope to save their homes and families. At midnight, however, he rushed home and hurried his wife and children out to a scow which he and he few neighbors pushed out from shore just in time to escape with their lives. The Birds, had lost there home and personal property, decided to relocate across the river in Menominee and open a store with Augustus Spies, later married and Mayor and prominent lumber man. Later he and his brother, James Weston Bird, formed a partnership and operated a wholesale and retail business. Under the name of Bird Brothers.

Undaunted by setbacks.

A serious setback to his financial affairs took place when he found he had been swindled by a dishonest partner, with a whom he had invested in a shingle mill in Stevenson, Michigan. The

partner ran the business into debt, but rather than declare bankruptcy when the scandal was uncovered, Bird determined to pay off his creditors in full. He moved to Stevenson and took over the mill himself in order to work his way free of his obligations. Although the transition from accountant to businessman was difficult, he discovered that talents that led him to settle in Wausaukee.

Bird came to Wausaukee in December, 1887, when he and John W. Wells examines a small mill that had been partially constructed the year before on the west side of the railroad track. The mill was leased, and a small track of pine nearby was purchased. Despite a severe winter, camps were established and the first lumber was sawed in Jan., 1888. When the stock was sold off in the spring, the operation showed a profit.

Encouraged by the success of the venture, the pair purchased the mill and 2000 acres of Timberland. Bird assumed the duties of secretary, treasurer and general manager. A logging railroad was laid out, an object of much curiosity for it was the first one in the region.

One of the specialties of the mill that turned out to be highly profitable was the sawing of "bill-stuff, " such as bridge timbers of unusual length. When orders were received, they were directed straight to the lumbering camp where a tree to meet the size specifications was felled and transported by rail to the mill.

In September, 1891, the sawmill, planing mill and six million feet of lumber were burned. Bird immediately arranged to purchase the Beach and Bishop mill, and within a month the firm was again producing lumber. In December, 1893, another fire partially destroyed the plant and the following spring a more modern mill was constructed.

Beloved philanthropist.

Bird was well known for his interest in community affairs, and his philanthropy. He was in the forefront of the many village issues, including campaigns for the establishment of a high school, installation of streetlights, and the organization of the bank. In 1902 he established the Wausaukee Free Library and hoped it would prove "sufficiently popular to draw from places of evil resort." However, after spending a large amount of money on the project, he was forced to abandon the library. It was one of the great disappointments of his life.

In 1902 Bird was elected state senator and served two terms in office. During his eight years of service, he served on the Water Powers, Forestry and Drainage Committee and helped formulate state policies for the placement of dams and reservoirs and the initiation of internal improvements.

Bird also proved to be ahead of his time, introducing an anti-cigarette bills signed into law. Bird was often the target of good-natured jests from his peers on account of this legislation, but he held true to his belief that cigarettes were a menace to the youth.

April 23, 1910, Bird suffered a stroke while teaching Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church. Although the Wausaukee Independent noted "the end is inevitable," Bird recuperated. He declined, however, to run for a third term in the state senate due to his failing health.

In 1869, Bird married his first wife, Sarah J. Fairchild, the daughter of the pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Marinette. She died in 1904. The couple had three children, Harry Lewis, an attorney and newspapermen; Laura, who married William H. Dunham, Detroit; and Clarence, a concert pianist who lived in Florence, Italy, for many years.

H.P. Bird, married his second wife, Laura D. Mott, of Danville, Ill., in 1906.

A second stroke ended his life and, in a sense, ended an era in the history of Wausaukee. The mill that he had helped to create had announced its closing two years earlier. Wausaukee's population was declining, and the community was actively seeking new industries and a wider agricultural base. Surely, at this time of transition, the people of Wausaukee missed the advice and leadership of a great man and respected citizen, Harlan P. Bird.