

Forgotten History

By Leon Hanson



Mike Wilson reprises the Red Wing Motor Company

Red Wing is well known for its pottery and shoe industries. At one period in the past, an additional business had a world-wide reputation for excellence, although many might be unaware of its existence.

In 1902, in order to build his first boat, a twenty-six year old Winona, Minnesota-born man, John R Trautner, borrowed fifty dollars from an uncle. With partner Charles Gardner, Trautner & Gardner manufactured gasoline engines in Winona until late November of that year, when Gardner sold his half interest in the company to a Red Wing man and the operation moved to that city at the urging of a group of local businessmen who paid for the relocation.

The Red Wing Boat Manufacturing Company began production in 1903, with Trautner and three partners—R. H. Boxrud, C. F. Hjermstad and J.M. Hjermstad.

Located under the old high bridge, on the bank of the Mississippi River at 114 Main Street, the company's first products consisted of sixteen-foot fishing boats powered by single-cylinder, two-cycle engines of one horsepower and greater. The boats quickly gained popularity in Red Wing and the surrounding area. Within a couple years, purchases came from as far as New Orleans. A larger plant, located at 1000 Levee Street, was constructed in 1906. A local business promotional brochure stated: "It is now one of the best equipped boat, launch, and engine factories in the Northwest, and its gasoline launches are shipped to all parts of the United States and Canada, to Australia, New Zealand and Japan."

In 1910, the name of the business became the Red Wing Motor Company. Boats began to be phased out in 1913 and manufacturing switched to four-

Mike Wilson restored the Red Wing Water Works building to display the collection of marine engines he purchased from Harry Munson. All the engines had been restored to perfect running condition.



cycle marine engines called “Red Wing Thorobreds.” The company remained in business, in several incarnations, until 1979.

In more recent years, the company had become all but forgotten, except by a few marine enthusiasts. Mike Wilson, a lifelong Red Wing resident, wanted this important part of the town’s history to be preserved. To do so, he spearheaded the development of The Red Wing Marine Museum.

“Boats were part of the early manufacturing process, but the company’s fame came from the marine engines produced after the name changed to Red Wing Motor Company,” Wilson said. “Engines—from three to four horsepower, up to sixty and eighty horsepower—were built for launches. The motors weren’t made for speed, but for durability, dependability and power.”

According to Wilson, there are Red Wing engines in maritime museums all around the country. The motors were in use worldwide. “The biggest order ever placed came from Russia in the 1940s,” Wilson said. “They used them in the oil industry, for pumping water.”

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, a great deal of river activity centered in Red Wing. “In the early 1900s, many boat races took place on the Mississippi. Thousands of people lined up on the levee to see the event. The call of the water remains to this day. For many people, life revolves around the river.” As a youngster, Wilson was no different. “I had the same passion as everyone else”

Town resident Harry Munson had a large collection of Red Wing engines and reached a point in his life where he wanted to sell them. “I told Harry there was no way I wanted the collection be sold and dispersed to who-knows-where,” Wilson said. The two men came to an agreement. After arranging a financing package, the collection belonged to Wilson. Mike recalls the conversation around the dinner table that evening. “Okay, now what do we do with it?”

Red Wing marine engines were vital to river and seagoing vessels in the U.S. and around the world. “The motors were so popular, they were shipped everywhere. In the Bahamas, I met Charles A. Pinder. He told me about an entire fleet of boats in the Bahamas that were all powered by Red Wing motors. Fishing vessels went to sea for a month at a time. When they came to shore, maintenance was performed on the engines and the boats were sent off again. Everyone used Red Wing engines

Harry Munson is happy that his collection is now on display, to be enjoyed for generations to come.



A nameplate on one of the internationally famous Red Wing Thorobred marine engines.



Engines on display are accompanied by a description that includes the date of shipment and destination of each.

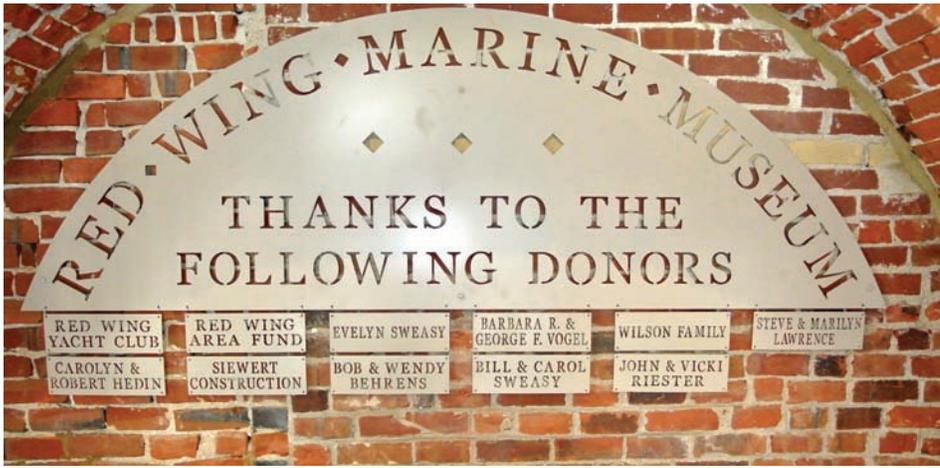


because they were so dependable. Diesel engines didn’t come into play until the 1950s.”

After acquiring Munson’s collection, Mike needed to figure out how he would display them. “All my life, the old dog pound building near the boat harbor intrigued me,”

Wilson recalled. “It’s such a neat building and I thought it had great potential.” Built in 1884 as the Red Wing Water Works, the building served many purposes over the decades. Wilson obtained a three-year lease on the property from the city.

“I had a passion for these motors and



One wall of the Red Wing Marine Museum is dedicated to individuals and businesses that have contributed to the museum's formation.

thought displaying them in the former pound would be small potatoes—until I got into it. I formed a non-profit corporation. A contractor began work on the building and I began knocking on doors, with the Red Wing Area Fund as my first stop. They immediately jumped on board and gave me seed money to get off the ground.” Finding people to serve on a board of directors turned out to be relatively easy.

“I view the museum as something to preserve a piece of Red Wing history that is relatively unknown. Back in its day, this factory employed two hundred and fifty

people and shipped around the world.” Some boats still run on Red Wing engines. Wilson knows of one in Winona. Local resident, KC Flueger also has a Red Wing motor in his boat. Many of the motors were used on farms to pump water.

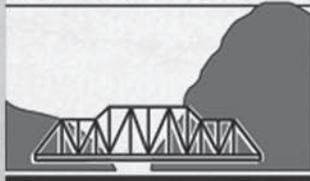
Fortunately, Harry Munson sold the engines to Wilson. If that had not happened, a part of Red Wing history may have been gone forever. “I don’t think anyone would have been none the wiser,” Wilson said. “That would have been so sad. We can’t let any little bit of our history disappear, no matter what it takes.”

The history of the Red Wing Marine Museum is tied to the city in which it is located. “It is important to preserve this one section of the town’s history—to tell the story. Fifty to a hundred years down the road, it will all be worthwhile.”

A mosaic of the Mississippi River flowing through Red Wing is on the floor of the building. The limestone walls, originally taken from area bluffs, have been tuck-pointed and restored. When describing the museum, Wilson sounds like a proud father. “The place is such an impressive gem. I’m not sure if people realized just what a gem it really is. It is a cool place that will become even more cool as improvements are made. This is all Red Wing,” Wilson concluded.

Because so much work went into the building, Wilson asked the city for a longer lease. It agreed to fifty years. Plans call for the museum to open at the beginning of June. Summer hours will be 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, and by appointment for group tours. 

**RED WING
CREDIT
UNION**



redwingcu.com

**Red Wing Credit Union
3303 North Service Dr.
Red Wing, MN 55066**

**Whether you are looking for a new car
or need a little something extra
for whatever life has thrown your way,
we specialize in auto and home equity loans.**



Schedule Your Appointment Today!

Contact Traci or Leah at 651-388-7133 - Option 4

**Proud to be Red Wing's Home Town Credit Union Since 1954.
Local Decisions made by People You Know - People Just Like You**



Federally insured by NCUA