

Washburn During The Roaring Twenties—Part 2

Soon after the November 11th armistice, which ended the Great War, Washburn's war boom collapsed, its people rudely awakened to peacetime realities, their dream of a large, prosperous city shattered. Operations at the Du Pont explosives plant, which provided the foundation for the boom, were reduced as the company returned to producing explosives for its traditional peacetime markets. How far employment at the plant was reduced is not known, but the size of the work force was only a fraction of what it had been during the war. With the collapse of wartime production at the Du Pont plant, Washburn's economy depended on peacetime operations at the plant, two small sawmills, shipping, a box factory, and a few struggling businesses. Even if they all had been prosperous undertakings, which they were not, they could not provide the level of prosperity of the war boom.

A new industry, the Anchor Shipbuilding Company, was a promising addition to Washburn's economic base. The company was organized in September 1918 by several Washburn men and a few outside investors to take advantage of what they believed—mistakenly as it turned out—would be a post-war boom in ship construction. The ship-

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yard was located on a tract of land between Eighth and Tenth Avenues West. The Times declared that "A four berth yard will employ upwards of 500 men when in operation and this would mean that the city would experience a growth that would make it out distance other cities on Chequamegon bay and become one of the most active industrial centers in northern Wisconsin." Movement toward the "four birth yard" was, however, slow with surveys, soundings, and numerous promises to begin construction in April 1919. A two year contract for the entire output of shipyard was reportedly offered by "a syndicate representing foreign and private capital," but nothing came of this alleged offer. Enthusiasm remained high for the project, however. People were encouraged when, at a "big meeting" held at the Commercial Club, a representative of the company said that "it was their

intention to begin work at once on the erection of the yard and that the company would begin building boats within thirty days from the middle of April of this year." Despite the company's repeated assurances, no ships were constructed in the spring or summer of 1919. In September and again in October, company representatives assured the stockholders and the public that big contracts for ships were pending, but none of the alleged contracts resulted in the construction of a ship in 1919.

Finally, in October 1920 the company received a contract to build a ferry boat for use on the Hudson River. Work on preparing the site and constructing the shops and shipway continued for the remainder of the year, seventy men, all stockholders in the company, being employed. In mid-January the keel blocks were laid, although the machinery and equipment to build the ferry boat were still arriving. In mid-March a dance was held in the huge ship loft (132 feet long, where the patterns for the hull plates were drawn) to dedicate it, described by the Times as "one of the biggest events since the time of Adam." Construction of the ferry boat proceeded rapidly and by June it was ready for launching. Named the "Hudson-

Athens," for the two ports on the Hudson River it was to serve, the ferry was 102 feet long, 33 feet wide, double-ended, with a propeller at each end. The launching, on Saturday June 25 1922, was to be a big event with a traditional christening ceremony. But fortune did not smile on Washburn that day, for to the disappointment of "thousands of people" from Washburn and the surrounding region, the launching was a failure. After the customary bottle of champagne had been smashed against the bow, the boat slid part way down the ways and then stopped, stuck fast because the ways had settled under the weight of the boat. Efforts to move it were to no avail, and it was over a week before the boat was finally pulled into the water by a tug boat. It was then taken to Buffalo and through the Erie Canal to the Hudson River, where the superstructure was added. There were no further reports of ship construction after the Hudson-Athens ferry debacle, the yard being a victim of the collapse of the war-fueled shipping boom in 1922, when the tonnage of merchant ships constructed was only 638 thousand tons, down from 2.2 million tons in the previous year.