

Henry's Hobbies

By Daryl A. Bailey

"One foot in the factory and one foot on the ground of nature." – Henry Ford

Henry Ford, the founder of Ford Motor Company, had an idea. He would dot America's rivers with water-driven factories that would offer employment to farmers during the winter months, thus slowing the migration of families from the farms to the cities. Referred to as village industries, many of these factories were 19th century gristmills.

In 1918, Ford put this plan into action. He retired as President of Ford Motor Company and purchased Nankin Mills, located along the middle Rouge River.

He continued to buy sites along the Rouge and River Raisin, in southeastern Lower Michigan, along the Miami River in Ohio and the Hudson River in New York State. The first village industry to go into operation was a converted mill in Northville, 12 miles up the River Rouge from Ford's home in Dearborn. The Northville site began making valves for the Model T.

Ford hoped that his experiment would usher in sweeping changes in society. Without the stress of managing the entire Ford Motor Company he could devote his energy to his village industry project. They became known as "Henry's Hobbies." He walked up and down streams looking for suitable locations. It is thought that some of these walks were publicity stunts to promote his "hobbies."

In 1920, Nankin Mills began operations as one of Ford's Village Industries. It began producing screws, but was soon converted to produce stencils for marking Ford auto parts. The machinery to produce the stencils was brought to Nankin Mills from the Rouge Plant.

Between 1919 and 1944, Ford opened 20 Village Industries. This allowed Ford to fulfill two of his heartfelt beliefs, to support rural farming and to use waterpower.

During World War II, Henry Ford once again became the President of Ford Motor Company. As Henry Ford's health declined, so did the financial condition of the company he founded. In 1945, at the age of 82, he retired again. His grandson, Henry Ford II, became the new President of the company.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. Ford II wanted to cut any unprofitable operations. In 1946 a list of them was compiled. A Ford Motor Company press release stated: "There were several (Village Industries) whose output was frankly of no commercial value and whose existence traced only to Mr. Ford's commonly known characteristic of extending a helping hand."

In 1946 four village industries were closed. On April 1, 1947, it was decided to close five more, including Nankin Mills. Henry Ford died six days later. In 1948 Nankin Mills ceased operations.