



An aerial view of Nahma, Mich., before the sawmill closed down.

The Town that Didn't Become a Ghost Town

THE PAST TWO YEARS have been busy ones at Nahma, the nationally publicized Upper Peninsula "Town for Sale" which was purchased by the American Playground Device Company, of Anderson, Ind.

Much has happened since the last log was saved at the big red sawmill, then Nahma's only industry, on July 26, 1951, marking finis to 70 years of continuous lumbering operations by the Bay de Noquet Company.

For a while, folks feared Nahma (population 450) would become just another ghost, lumbering town, as had been the case with many other Upper Michigan communities after the timber supply ran out. They felt better, however, in September of that year, when Charles E. Good, president of the Bay de Noquet Company, announced that Nahma had been sold to American.

Long-range Program for Development of Model Community

What cheered them particularly was the news that they would not have to move away from the Nahma they loved. American revealed plans to develop Nahma as a model industrail-recreational community. This would mean jobs, and even a better place in which to live.

Soon after the purchase, American began a long-range development program. Former employees of the Bay de Noquet Company were put to work with hammers, saws, shovels, paint brushes, Jeeps, 10-ton trucks, bulldozers, a Drott Loader, and other equipment to give the entire town a face-lifting.

The planing mill, which had been kept intact, began buzzing again, turning out log-cabin siding for the beach lodges and lumber for building repairs. Hemlock timbers, salvaged from the sawmill tramways, were sawed and used for new foundations for the homes. The dwellings and other buildings were repaired and repainted — all white with harmonious trim. The planing mill finished its work on September 3, 1952, however, and has undergone extensive repairs for use in American's new production set-up.

The Nahma Hotel, long famous for its wonderful home cooking, has undergone extensive improvements. Here, too, like everywhere else in Nahma, the rehabilitation work has been from the ground up. To replace the old foundation timbers, more than a hundred concrete pillars were installed to support the hotel structure.

Rustic lodges on Nahma's scenic, sandy beach have been enlarged and modernized. Finished with knotty pine

paneled interiors, each has a large living room with fireplace, two bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, and porch, all equipped with modern gas and electrical appliances and attractive, comfortable summer-home furniture, flagstone walks surround the cottages. In the center of the group is a rustic pump house with a covered porch, where picnic dinners may be served in case of rain.

Nahma's sporty 9-hole golf course among the towering pines along the shore of Big Bay de Noc has been put into tip-top shape. It is equipped with a water system which keeps the greens and fairways always carpeted with a luxuriant growth of grass.

The Sturgeon River, which meanders its way through the 4,300 acre American Playground Forest tract, is being cleared of deadhead logs and wind-fallen trees to make it safe for canoeing and fishing from its mouth at Nahma to Nahma Junction, on Highway U.S. 2, nearly five miles to the north. Winding its way back and forth many times, the Sturgeon actually flows for nearly 20 miles between the two points.

The Hiawatha National Forest, which surrounds the American Playground tract, is far-famed for its bird and deer hunting. For years Nahma has entertained hunters with its much-publicized Deer Hunters'

Shindig held annually on the eve of the season's opening.

Monument to the Lumber Industry

The big red sawmill has been torn down. But the old wood waste burner, a brick lined steel cylindrically shaped structure, 120 feet high and 30 feet in diameter, is left standing as a monument to Michigan's lumber industry. Visible for many miles in the day time, it will be lighted at night to guide water and air travelers. It will be transformed into an observatory, from which visitors will be able to view the beautiful Garden Peninsula and the surrounding countryside.

Three mill slips, narrow bodies of water which once stored millions of feet of logs, will be converted into park lagoons. They will form a canal-like chain of waterways for boating and other aquatic activities within a landscaped park area, which will be equipped with picnic grilles, tables, and benches. Trees and shrubs already have been planted on this park site.

It is an interesting venture for the American Playground Device Company and the people of Nahma. Of course, the unique enterprise has not been without its diversity of social and economic problems,

large and small. There are bound to be when one buys a whole town and tacitly assumes the responsibility of providing a livelihood for its inhabitants.

An "Act of God" created the first major problem. On September 26, 1951, within a week after the town changed hands, heavy winds and high water wrecked the three steamship docks, which also served as a retaining wall for the made land on which the sawmill and yards are located.

To preserve the docks and to save the land from erosion, tons and tons of limestone were quarried the winter long and hauled to the shoreline. More than 5,000 truckloads – three cubic yards to each trip – were needed to fortify the seawall.

Nahma's steam power plant was another problem and still is. Steam must be kept up in the boilers day and night to pump water and provide fire protection to the homes and other properties. The plant also furnishes central heating and hot water to the hotel, hospital, general store, community center building and company offices.

Did you ever remodel a home? Well, you can visualize the big task tackled in Nahma, for American has more than a hundred houses and other buildings to repair, remodel, and redecorate. These structures include a large general store and the

spacious, attractive community center building, which is knotty-pine paneled throughout and houses the auditorium, gymnasium, ice cream parlor, men's bar, four bowling alleys, community library and men's and women's lounges.

Many Problems Overcome

The men who guide the destinies of the American Playground Device Company have grown accustomed to facing up to problems and overcoming them, however. During World War II, steel shortages and government restrictions plagued them, but never stopped them. Now the largest manufacturer in the playground equipment field, American has increased its annual production volume more than eight times in the past decade.

Nahma was another, much greater challenge. What intrigued these men was the opportunity for getting more space for their increasing manufacturing operations and at the same time save an entire community from oblivion.

Ultimately, American will establish a branch plant in Nahma for the manufacturing of swings, slides, benches, tables, and other park, picnic, playground, swimming-pool and dressing room equipment. Later, it also will develop Nahma as a resort community – the "American Playground". It will be a few years yet, however, before the American Playground will be ready to accommodate a sizable number of vacationers. Meantime, development work goes on.

Recreation and History

Riding and hiking trails will be cleared through the 4,300 acre forest area. A field archery range will be mapped out, and the golf course will be further improved. Nahma's colorful history will be preserved in a public museum, which will display big wheels, peavies, and other relics of the early lumbering days.

American will establish a model school playground, swimming beach, picnic ground, and waysides, where its slides, swings, tables, grilles and other products will be on display and in actual use.



This huge Drott Skid-Loader was used for loading limestone rock in trucks at the American Playground quarry. More than 5,000 truckloads of rock were hauled to the sawmill area shoreline to protect it from water erosion following severe damage to the docks by high water and heavy winds.

