



Gwinn

A Model Town "Without Equal"

by Arnold R. Alanen establishing settlements and communities.

Unlike the vast majority of the United States, where towns and cities typically formed in a laissez faire manner, settlements in most of the nation's natural-resource-based regions arose differently. These areas were usually company-sponsored communities intended to enhance the productivity, efficiency and appearance of corporate America. Michigan's Marquette Range, an important district in the Lake Superior mining region, was an obvious locale for the development of corporate communities.

Northern Michigan was a wilderness in the truest sense of the word when mining began there during the 1840s. Situated hundreds of miles from the nation's population centers, northern Michigan's early mining companies were forced to import all their workers, equipment and supplies to the mining frontier. This required considerable planning by the companies, especially those

the Lake Superior mining region were called "locations," a nineteenth-century term used throughout much of the United States to identify land areas included within the boundaries of mining properties. In the Lake Superior region, however, location came to define the residences and buildings associated with an individual mine site. Since each mine required a readily available labor force, the locations—there were three types: unplatted, company and model locations—were situated within walking distance of the extraction sites.

While hundreds of locations were established throughout the Lake Superior region, the mining companies established few company towns, even though their planning features and housing were widely touted by company officials for their displays of corporate welfare (paternalism). Company towns differed from locations in that they

Boston landscape architect Warren H. Manning designed Gwinn so that residents would be "within ten minutes of extensive wild wood and river observations," such as the setting for this road along the edge of the town (above, circa 1912). Photo courtesy of author.

were larger and allowed commercial enterprise. One form of a company town, the model village, was used by the mining industry to demonstrate its corporate benevolence. Only three model villages were built in the Lake Superior mining region—Coleraine and Morgan Park, Minnesota, and Gwinn, Michigan.

Gwinn's roots reach back to 1905, when proposals were made to expand mining activities in the Swanzy District. Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company (CCI) officials determined such actions could not "proceed without the employment of more men and these cannot be secured unless provision is made for their accommodation." It was decided that improved housing and living conditions would help attract a dependable labor force to the district. Warren H. Manning, one of



This 1909 view of Gwinn, taken from atop the clubhouse, shows the community's new hospital (above) and the variety of housing styles CCI offered the residents.

America's preeminent landscape architects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was commissioned to prepare the plan for the model village.

The site selected for the new town of Gwinn was flanked by the Escanaba River and its East Branch. Manning employed a grid plan to lay out the town, thereby providing the framework for a compact development pattern. The plat was placed at a forty-five degree angle to the prevailing north-south, east-west directions of the section and range lines, distinguishing it from nearby townsites and locations.

To reduce the visual monotony typically evident in company towns, Manning's designs incorporated a variety of housing types, sizes and colors. Most important, however, were his open-space proposals, which included a recommendation that over 8 percent of all initial land development expenditures be targeted for the planting of new trees or the preservation of existing ones. Manning also suggested that the landscape

features surrounding the incipient town be left intact so residents would be "within ten minutes of extensive wild wood and river observations," which resulted in the preservation of a greenbelt around the community. Manning also introduced to Gwinn a New England element by including a commons (land used by the entire community)—an unusual feature for the region.

Why was so much effort put into laying out a small mining town? The answer lies in the development of a new philosophy that began to emerge across corporate America during the 1890s. Known as welfare capitalism—a concept termed by Stuart Brandes as "any service provided for the comfort or improvement of employees which was neither a necessity of the industry nor required by law"—it was a more benign form of corporate largesse than the heavy-handed paternalism practiced during most of the nineteenth century. The Marquette Range mining companies were among those American corporations switching to the practice of welfare capitalism in the management of their workers and communities. Those corporate executives who touted the new philosophy saw it as a countermeasure to labor strikes and violence and a way to delay a number of reform measures—factory inspections, safety regulations, limits on working hours, women and children in the work force—that were becoming increasingly evident during the Progressive Era.

William Gwinn Mather, president of CCI, helped pioneer the concept of welfare capitalism in America. During the early 1890s Mather and other CCI representatives inspected a number of industries and model company towns in England, Germany and Sweden. After considering these observations, Mather decreed that the design of European housing and factories was "far ahead" of any in the United States. Soon he was at the forefront of those American executives who were calling for changes in managing their workers' working and living conditions.

In 1898 Mather made a report to his fellow mining executives of the Lake Superior region, calling for the introduction of measures to promote the "good health, intelligence, contentment and industry" of workers, while discouraging "sickness, accidents, ignorance and restlessness." To do so, Mather claimed, would require the adoption of housing-relief, medical, educational and recreational programs practiced in the European corporate communities. Almost simultaneously, Mather organized a welfare department within CCI that included a pension system, a safety

program, medical offerings and clubhouses. In 1899 he commissioned Manning to implement housing and community beautification programs for CCI properties, a project that included a company nursery and landscape designs for CCI shaft houses, office buildings, executives' homes, schools and churches.

During its early years, Gwinn's population included a number of immigrant ethnic groups, although CCI reportedly endeavored "to split up the various nationalities in order to make congenial living conditions." Supervisory personnel usually resided in Gwinn's largest, most elaborate dwellings; most of the laborers lived in duplexes. Unlike most company towns, it was possible for residents to own an individual lot and dwelling unit in Gwinn. CCI also constructed a well-equipped hospital, a twenty-five-room hotel, a sixty-person dining hall and the Gwinn Savings Bank.

In addition to the CCI-associated commercial facilities, several private enterprises emerged in Gwinn. However, before a business could be established in the model village, the entrepreneur's background and credentials were closely reviewed by CCI officials. Each successful applicant had to agree to abide by a number of rather onerous controls and ordinances—especially those regulating vice. In 1908, just one year after Gwinn welcomed its first residents, several disgruntled commercial operators established the townsite of New Swanzy directly east of Gwinn. New Swanzy's first commercial business was a saloon, followed by additional saloons and other enterprises. Compared to the strict controls guiding Gwinn's development, New Swanzy was Gwinn's alter ego.

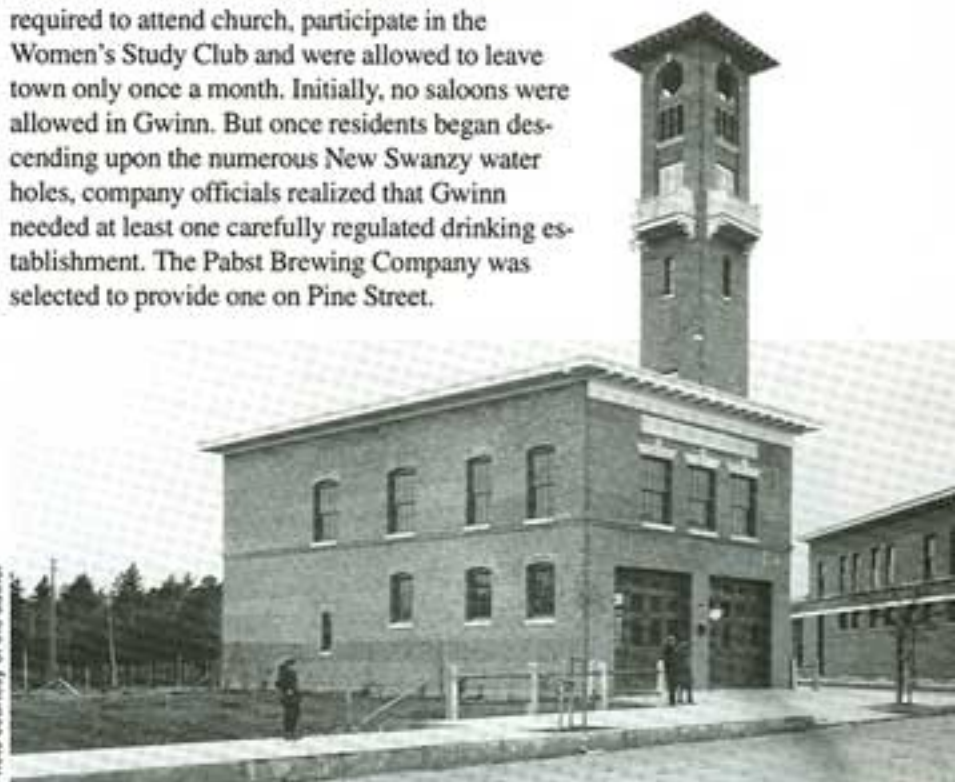
In 1928 the *Detroit News* printed a rave review of Gwinn, calling the community "a story of vision." The article claimed Gwinn displayed many features seldom replicated elsewhere:

To those who have a sense of natural beauty, Gwinn is a great community park where children romp and revel in the natural surroundings of pure water, clean air and virgin forests; where older folks take pride in cleanliness, civic progress and good schools; where community life is centered in a structure of brick and stone that has no equal in any other town of its size in the States.

To some residents, however, conditions were not quite so idyllic, especially for those who chafed under social constraints that sought to limit their behavior to "proper" forms of activity. Local

historian Steven Syrja noted that "in order to survive in Gwinn, one had to make sure you did not displease the company officials." If a lawn or house required repair, the superintendent or captain told the owners to fix it. If one's children misbehaved at home or school, the parents were told. Unions were not allowed. Marie Sauer, who taught in Gwinn from 1931 to 1968, recalled that most of Gwinn's social life centered around the clubhouse and the churches and that teachers were required to attend church, participate in the Women's Study Club and were allowed to leave town only once a month. Initially, no saloons were allowed in Gwinn. But once residents began descending upon the numerous New Swanzy water holes, company officials realized that Gwinn needed at least one carefully regulated drinking establishment. The Pabst Brewing Company was selected to provide one on Pine Street.

Photo courtesy of the author



Gwinn's days as a model village, and its practice of paternalism, were numbered as the Depression and unionization caused the companies of the Lake Superior's mining region to cut benefits. By the early 1930s CCI had disposed of most of its residential property on Marquette Range. By the early 1940s in Gwinn, only the superintendent's residence, the bank and the hospital remained under company control but just for a short period of time; soon they, too, were sold. The development of the nearby Sawyer Air Force Base after World War II led to the construction of several new subdivisions within Gwinn. Subdivisions, curvilinear roads and the one-story ranch houses on individual lots today contrast vividly with the original village's compact grid pattern and two-story residences. Gwinn, once a product of change, has evolved with the times. ■

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Gwinn residents were protected from fires by a volunteer crew headquartered in this building. The tower, shown above in 1910, was removed in the early 1990s.