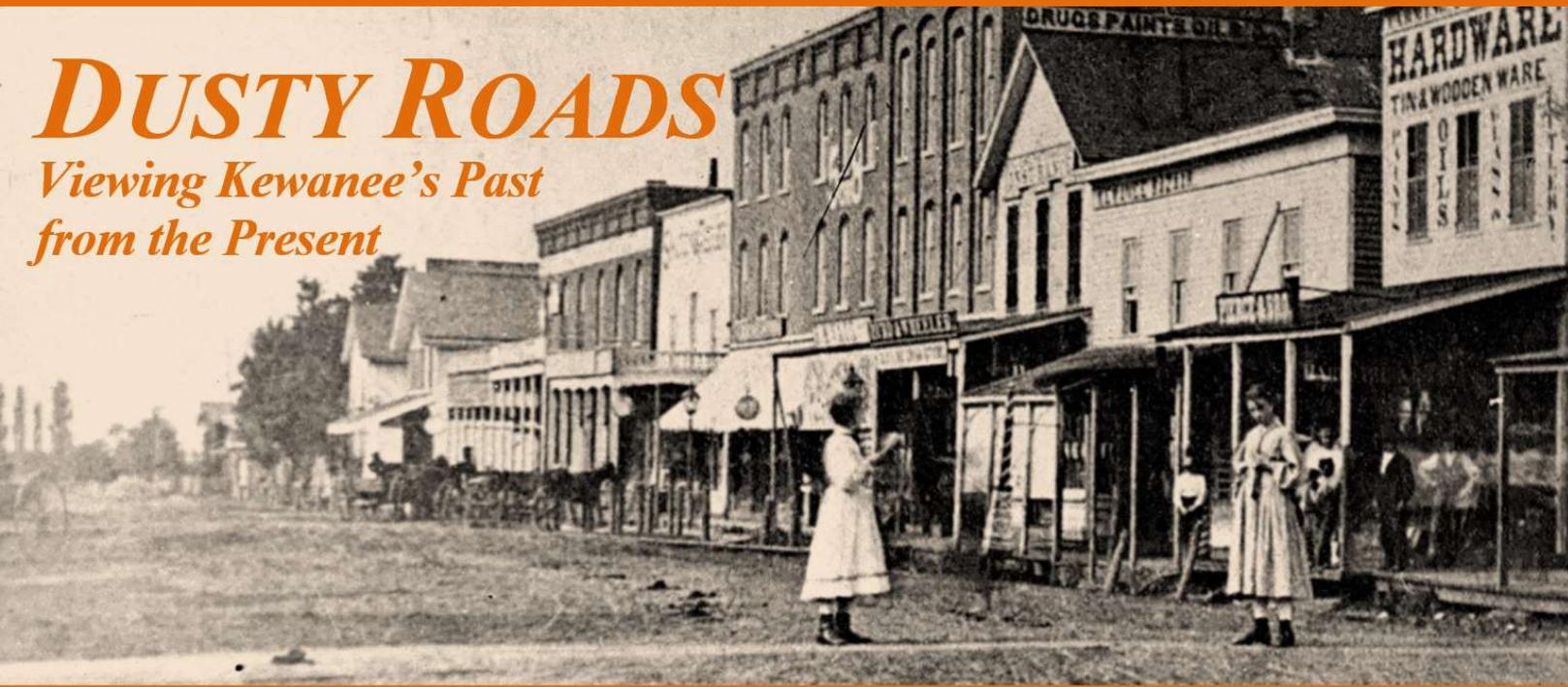


# DUSTY ROADS

Viewing Kewanee's Past  
from the Present



by Dean Karau

September 2020

## William E. Haxtun

The Walworth and Kewanee Boiler Companies Were His Monuments to Kewanee

I've written before about the Anderson Feed Steamer Co., the small business established near the end of the Civil War and which grew into the Walworth and Kewanee Boiler companies. Valerius D. Anderson had invented a steam cooker for warm and nutritious cattle food, and sales took off.



Valerius D. Anderson

In 1868, Anderson moved his small plant from Janesville, Wisconsin, to Kewanee. He first set up shop about a block north of the intersection of today's N. Burr Blvd. and E. Third St. He then relocated northward to be closer to the railroad. In 1871, Anderson built a foundry (40 by 60 feet with a two-story cupola house and "baking room,") and a machine shop (30 by 80 feet, two stories high).

Anderson also expanded into other types of steam heaters for multiple uses. The business grew into what the Kewanee Independent newspaper characterized as the largest factory in Henry County.

Then, William E. Haxtun entered the picture in 1871.

Born in 1832 in the Hudson River valley of New York, Haxtun grew up working and playing on the family's land. As a 14 year-old, he discovered substantial iron deposits on the property. When he turned 18, his father rewarded his discovery by transferring that piece of land to him.



Anderson's Factory near Railroad

Haxtun learned civil engineering, but he also established a farm on his land, built a Greek Revival house (later listed on the National Register of Historic Places), and, in 1858, married Sarah Annis Brundige.

By 1860, Haxtun had developed his 200+ acre property into a substantial dairy farm. But Haxtun remained mindful of the iron deposits.

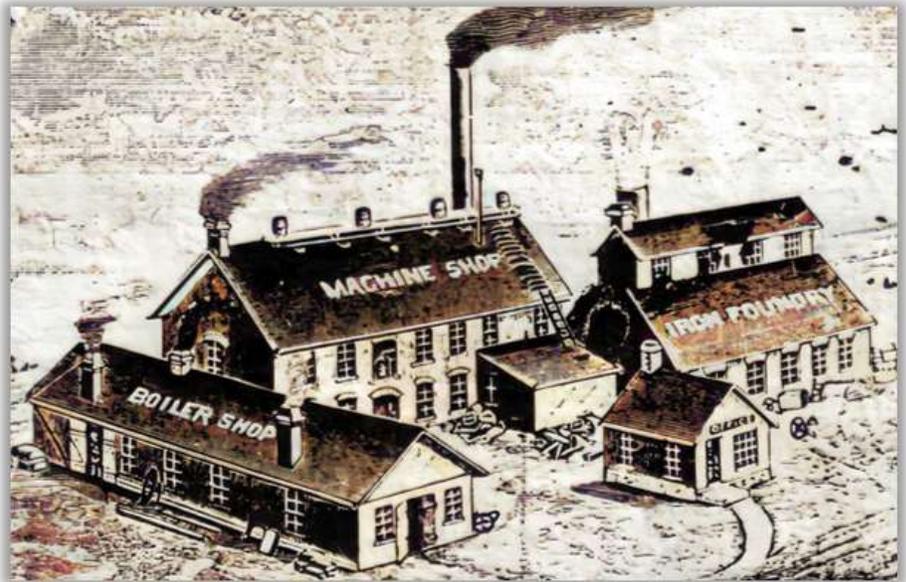
In 1867, he sold the portion of his land containing the deposits while still maintaining a significant farmstead.

In 1871, due to his delicate health and a limp resulting from an accident, Haxtun auctioned his farm and moved with his wife and four children out West to Kewanee, where he initially traded in land and investments. Soon a another child was born in Kewanee.

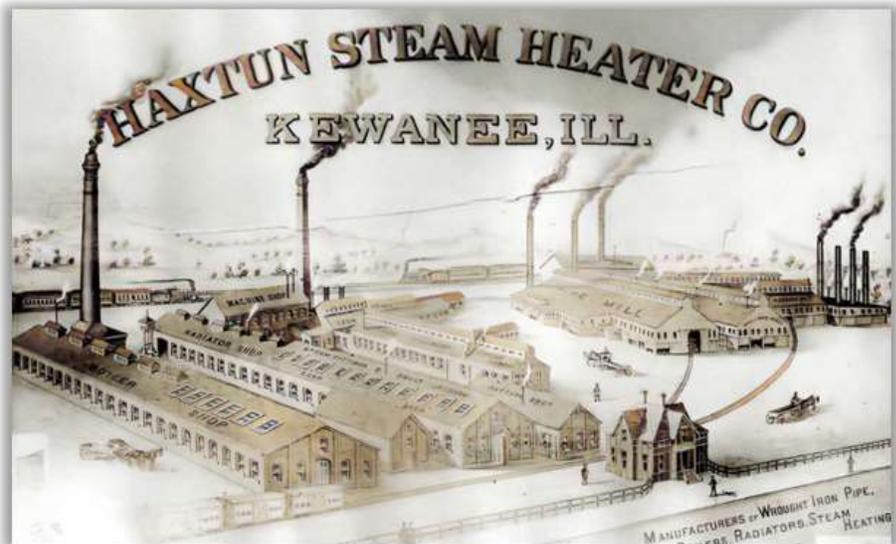
But Haxtun then found a new interest after moving his family.

Haxtun had an Anderson steam radiator system installed in his new home at the end of Main Street just inside Wethersfield. Having a taste for machinery and mechanical work and an aptitude for labor-saving devices, he became impressed with Anderson's technology. Haxtun soon joined the company and, in 1873, he became vice-president.

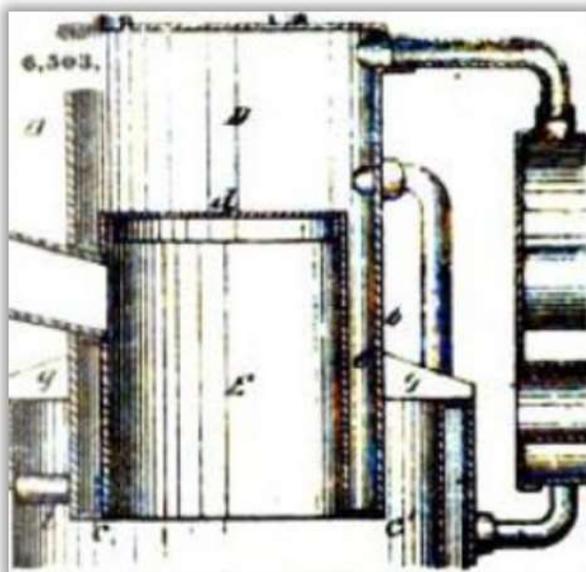
In 1875, after Anderson ran into corporate and management problems, Haxtun purchased the company, and it was renamed the Haxtun Steam Heater Co. (it had gone through a number of legal forms and name changes prior to that – Anderson Steamer and Heater Co., Anderson Universal Steam Boiler Mfg. Co., and the Anderson Universal Steamer Co.).



*1880 drawing of Haxtun Steam Heater Co.*



*1888 drawing of Haxtun Steam Heater Co.*



*Drawing from Pat. No. 159,178, issued to William E. Haxtun, Kewanee, Ill.*

Shortly after his acquisition, Haxtun obtained a U.S. patent for a new type of boiler, and the company grew. In 1876, the city directory listed over 30 employees. The company's growth and its future led the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad to grant Haxtun its first side track for its exclusive use.

By 1881, Haxtun had built a larger factory, expanded the foundry, and employed 200 men. The company soon began making valves, fittings, pipes and radiators, producing all the main components of its steam heating systems.

In 1883, the boiler shop covered about 27,000 square feet, or six times that of Anderson's entire 1871 footprint. That year, Haxtun announced that work would begin on a major expansion with the building of a rolling mill and pipe mill plant. Village

leaders formed the Citizens Rolling Mill Committee to raise funds to acquire and donate to the company for its



1885 Sanborn Ins. Co. map

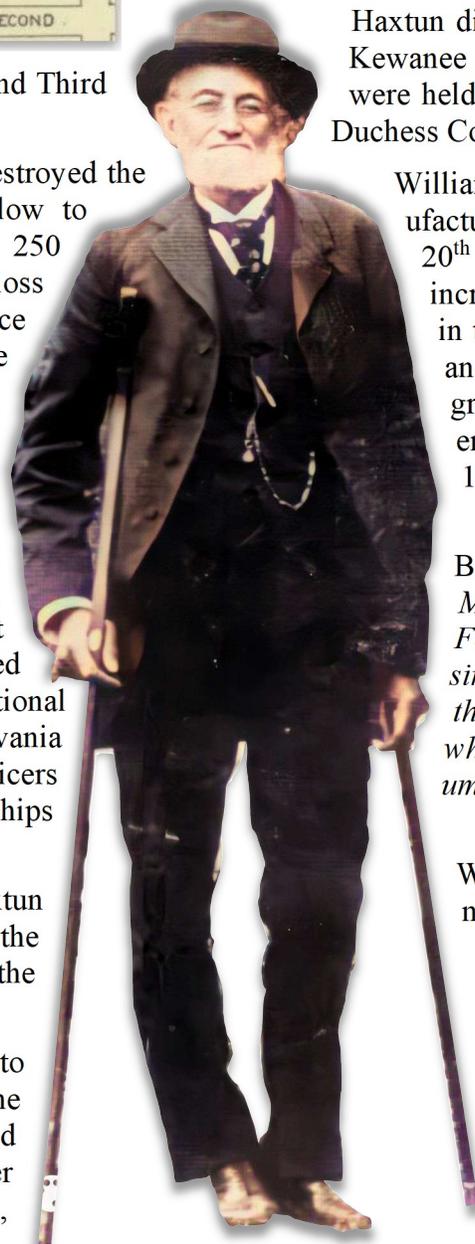
mills the land between the railroad and Third Street.

In 1888, a New Year's day fire destroyed the rolling and pipe mills, a severe blow to Kewanee, the company, and the 250 employees thrown out of work. The loss was an estimated \$50,000 and insurance only covered \$30,000, but the company quickly decided to rebuild the mills. Despite the setback, the company continued to flourish, and in 1890 employment reached 1,000 workers.

Finally, in 1890, with his health deteriorating, Haxtun sold his interest in the company for which he had served as president for 17 years. The National Tube Co. of McKeesport, Pennsylvania acquired Haxtun's interest, and its officers occupied three of the seven directorships on the board.

On March 10, 1891, at the Haxtun Steam Heater Co. annual meeting, the board formally changed the name of the company to the Western Tube Co.

Soon, Western Tube decided to divest its boiler business to focus on the production of pipes (tubes), valves, and fittings. In April 1892, it sold its boiler shop to the Kewanee Boiler Co., incorporated by E. E. Baker, Horton Vail, and J. P. Dugger.



William E. Haxtun

The new company continued to operate out of the existing boiler plant until it moved to the location it would occupy until it closed in 2002.

After he retired, Haxtun traveled extensively in an attempt to find relief for his health. But ultimately, he continued to make his home in Kewanee.

Haxtun was active in the Kewanee community. He served on the board of education for eight years and served on other boards relating to civic activities. In New York, he was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, but he became a founding member of the Presbyterian Church in Kewanee.

Haxtun died on June 14, 1900, at his home in Kewanee at 68 years of age. Funeral services were held in his home, and he was interred in Dutchess County, New York.

William E. Haxtun took a small manufacturing company to the doorstep of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kewanee's population increased from somewhere around 2,500 in the mid-1870s to over 4,500 in 1890, and Haxtun's company fueled the growth, swelling from about 30 employees in 1876 to over 1,000 in 1891.

At his funeral, the Reverend S. C. Black said, "*[i]n the deeds of his life Mr. Haxtun has written his own eulogy. Few men realize that in discharging the simple duties of home and business life they are creating the material out of which posterity will construct their monuments.*"

William E. Haxtun's monuments, Walworth and Kewanee Boiler, were magnificent.

*(In writing this article, I relied on Larry Lock's research and writings on the histories of Kewanee, Walworth, and Kewanee Boiler.)*