

The Polish Heritage in Vicksburg

Featured by the Historical Society

By Sue Moore

The Polish families who lived in Vicksburg, by and large, came to work at Lee Paper Company in the early 1900s. They were recruited by Norman Bardeen, Sr. from as far away as Chicago and South Bend with the promise that the mill would build them a Catholic Church to worship in. The mill also built homes to live in, thus the area on the south side of the mill, came to be known as Polish town.

Descendents of the first families to come here will be part of the panel as the Vicksburg Historical Society presents its Tuesday, September 15 program at 7:00 p.m. at the Vicksburg Community Center. They each have their own stories to tell about what life was like working in the mill and later on, going to school in the old "Red Brick".

Members of the panel include Genevieve Skrzypek Pinkerton whose parents worked at the mill as did she for over forty years. She will be joined by her cousin Frank Penar whose parents worked at the mill along with his brother and brother-in-law for many years. Frank stayed for a short time, earning \$21 a week, and soon left for better pay and shorter hours at the Upjohn Company. Veronica Hargot Thompson's parents were Polish. Her dad made whiskey and got caught during Prohibition so they moved to Kalamazoo. Joe Zonyk and his wife Wanda complete the team. Joe will be remembered for his many years as postmaster in Vicksburg.

First generation Polish women often ended up with the hot, dusty work of sorting rags. The men worked on the machines and in other specialty areas of the mill. Second generation kids remember taking lunch to their parents in the mill and then being allowed to play in the paper bins.

"The depression shaped all of us," acknowledged Penar. The mill made it possible to keep working two or three days a week. "We had a farm in town with cows and chickens to help make ends meet. We would walk to school, rain or shine and home for lunch which was often a can of pork and beans. During the war you went to the president of the mill to get a job. In many cases women took over the men's jobs as they were so short-handed, even working on the paper machines."

Recently the children of immigrants all got together at Zonyk's house to reminisce. This group and others attending the program will be able to do it again as they enlighten the audience with stories of their acclimation to living in the small town environment of Vicksburg, Michigan. You won't want to miss the fun stories about a much simpler life.



Cut lines

Polish ladies and other immigrants found work in the rag room during the early 1900s at Lee Paper Company.



From left to right: Veronica Hargot Thompson, Genevieve Skrzypek Pinkerton, Wanda Zonyk, Joe Zonyk and Frank Penar look over photos at the Depot Museum prior to the program they will present on Tuesday, Sept. 15.