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ON THE COVER

Tripp's Sawmill, 1926

MARC GREUTHER

In the fall of 1926 Henry Ford paid a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Willis Tripp of Tipton, Michigan, sixty miles or so southwest of Dearborn by the Detroit-Chicago road. Ford dropped by the farm with a group of friends and associates to look over a steam-driven sawmill built about seventy-five years previously by Mr. Tripp's grandfather, the Reverend Henry Tripp. According to a brief report in the *Adrian Daily Telegraph*, Ford was intrigued by a number of items in the family's possession—a Howe sewing machine, the reverend's hickory cane, a pair of ice skates—but it was the mill, built by a man who had died eleven days before Ford's own birthday, that really interested him.

The accompanying picture is one of several documentary photographs taken after Ford decided to acquire the mill and move it to Greenfield Village. The camera is facing north. To the left is the brick setting for the mill's boiler (the jutting pipe is a boiler drain). Straight ahead is a makeshift bench for the boiler operator (the fire door of the return flue boiler is at the far end of the setting). A narrow stairway giving access to the upper floor of the mill is just visible to the right of the bench. The mill's power source, a 15-horsepower horizontal box-bed steam engine, sits out of sight on the other side of the boiler, as does the muley saw's drive mechanism. Right behind the photographer is a hand pump for a well. The door on the right opens onto farm fields bordered by woodland.

This was a modest yet sophisticated installation. The Tripps did no logging themselves, and the mill operated just four months out of the year—probably during the winter, when farming was less demanding and logs could be sledded or hauled over hard-frozen roads to the mill. The operation was quite self-sufficient: the boiler was fed with waste wood and sawdust, while water came from a well on site, supplemented by rain guttered in from the roof. This economy of means extended to the mill's construc-

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The Tripp sawmill, 1926. (Photo courtesy of the Henry Ford, A10052.)

tion. Part of the boiler setting was built up from field stone, and waste wood—with the bark still on—was used for siding and interior partitions. All in all it was a lean affair, slotted as seamlessly into the Michigan countryside as a steam-powered installation could be.

The mill had last run about ten years before this 1926 photograph was taken. The fraying carpet on the bench seat, the dusty pictures, the littered wood scraps, and the gaps in the mortar between the brick courses in the boiler setting suggest the onset of decay. Its raggedness and deep shadows at first lend the scene a slightly sinister quality, reminiscent perhaps of film noir, but there is a serenity about it, too. The blacksmith's vise and the spade speak to older and maybe more elemental trades. The pictures tacked on

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the wall behind the bench, difficult to make out without a magnifying glass or computer—a portrait of a congressman, a snapshot of two children playing in a field, a rural scene of the driver of a horse and buggy stopping to chat with someone sitting on a fence—simultaneously conjure up the long-departed operator and remind us of our own efforts to personalize our work spaces. The tacked-up carpet, presumably intended to cut down drafts, suggests repose in the midst of physically demanding work. It is, in short, not just a sawmill but a rooted and contemplative space, a naturally occurring museum of rural Michigan.

For those so inclined this image is seductive. The combination of materials and textures, the jagged grace of vise and auger, the shadows barely yielding to the light from the doorway—all conspire to create an evocative and palpable mood. We know better, of course. The harsh realities of such a workplace are not to be yielded up by vintage photographs. But then again, consider these words of George Sturt, from his 1923 memoir *The Wheelwright Shop*, recalling a dusty saw pit of his childhood:

Sometimes a frog was hopping about in this sawdust, sometimes one saw a black beetle there. The sight of this quiet fauna gave me, as a child, a sense of great peace. The aged-looking brickwork—greyish pink and very dusty—helped the impression, and so did the planks stacked on the sill at the side. The daylight seemed to float in a sort of dusty ease amongst the planks and the sawdust, as if nothing noisier than a frog or a black beetle need be thought of there.

The sawyers had less time for lyrical reverie, but Sturt writes that he found “the same settled peace” there once he began to work in that pit.

Sturt’s quiet masterpiece offers a transcendent vision of technology, the sense that the wheels, wagons, and carriages being built in his shop were essentially being harvested, their shapes spotted in the contour of living tree limbs, the various types of wood cut according to their properties and the season, the whole process, including the vehicles’ use and eventual decay, a natural outgrowth of the landscape, aided by only a modicum of human involvement. Tripp’s sawmill embodies a variant of this vision, a mechanized variant (quite literally: the sawyer who worked in the pit described by Sturt gives his name to the muley saw’s main drive rod, the pitman), attuned more to clearing and settling new lands: a machine in the garden, but also, at least in part, of it.

When this photograph was taken the machine was in repose, moldering, offering shelter to a huddle of disused horse-drawn vehicles. Soon thereafter the mill was reassembled in Greenfield Village and made operational, set to work making lumber for other restorations, transformed from a technological memento mori into a living component of Ford’s project to document American history. What did Ford see in the mill that day in

1926? Likely an echo of his own experience, for he too had cleared land with a steam-driven saw in the late 1880s. But did he see then what we can see now? The photograph has transformed an interior into still life and preserved a scene as quiet and delicate in its own way as the fauna in Sturt's saw pit, an assemblage that could not survive the transition from gradual decay to active preservation.

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