

The "wagon works that Gruber built" worth a \$million

BY SHEILA MILLER

READING — It was a major undertaking for the Army Corps of Engineers back in the bicentennial year of 1976, as government engineers dissected the nearly 100-year-old Gruber Wagon Works timber-framed factory and moved it 5 miles to its new home at the Berks County Heritage Center

This mammoth task of preserving part of the county's and nation's history cost the U.S. taxpayers nearly \$1 million, but expense was worth every penny. Today, young and old alike can marvel at the most complete "museum" of its kind—the Gruber family's workshop which turned out nearly 100 horsedrawn wagons a year in its heyday.

What prompted the relocation of the wagon works was the construction of Blue Marsh Lake, a flood control and water supply dam located on the Tulpehocken Creek in Berks County. The project, which flooded acres and acres of land in a region from Bernville to State Hill, inundated the original site where the wagon works stood near the small town of Mt. Pleasant.

One person who remembers almost every detail of the wagon work's move which began in December 1976 and was completed by the following spring is 80-year-old John Gruber, grandson of the original founder Franklin H. Gruber.

John recalls how the Corps cut the wagon works into four parts in order to prepare it for transit, and boxed 19,000 tools and machinery parts that date back to the 1890s with great care. As his family's landmark and trademark began its slow over-the-road journey to its new home, which caused Rt. 183 to Reading to be closed to traffic for two half-days, John witnessed an end to an area that probably only he knows best.

As the last surviving male in the Gruber family tree, John's memories of the old wagon works are filled with remarkable detail. Although half his life was spent away from the factory, John's vivid recollection of every aspect of the wagon works is based on summers spent helping out since he was two years old.

"I grew up in the wagon works

and over the years I learned to run every machine in the shop," reminisces the retired school teacher. Although he wasn't born when grandfather Franklin started the business, John learned the wagon work's history from his father Jacob H. Gruber, who was the wheelright in the wagon-making assembly line.

The first Gruber wagon was made by Franklin Gruber in 1870. It took shape, not in the historic wagon works, but on a farm about 1 1/4 miles away. The two-story shed that sheltered the original creation was eventually incorporated into the later Gruber wagon works factory which was built from scratch along Lacking Creek near Mt. Pleasant between 1882 and 1883. By 1910, the wagon works was complete, and looked just like it does today.

When asked just what made a Gruber wagon special, John replies with deep family pride — "workmanship."

"Gruber wagons were built of the best materials — better than the other competitors," he boasts. Adding credence to his claim, John points out that back at the turn of the century, there were lots of wagon works throughout the area, but Gruber's was the last "survivor" and actually stayed in business until 1970 under the management of John's cousin Frank Gruber.

The Gruber wagons were sturdy, and yet beautiful in their own rugged way. Made for hard work on the farm, Gruber wagons were designed for one to six-horse hitch and could haul 1 1/4 to 6-ton loads. Dark green bodies and red wheels were ornately decorated with white striping, all applied by a painter's steady hand. And each wagon was numbered and coded, and bore its creator's "signature."

During its prime years between 1919 and 1920, the wagon works employed 18 to 20 men, including Franklin's four sons. Adam, the oldest, was a painter, John W. was the business manager, Jacob H., John's father, was the wheelright, and George P. was the blacksmith. The fifth and youngest son, Franklin L., left Berks County to become a minister at the Lutheran seminary in Chicago.



This is the Gruber Wagon Works as it looked from 1910-1976 at its original location near Mt. Pleasant, Berks County. The 100-year-old structure was purchased by the Army Corps of

Engineers in 1975 and moved 5 miles to the county's Heritage Center in order to preserve the most complete wagon works of its kind from inundation by Blue Marsh Lake.

The Gruber wagons, which could be thought of as the predecessor of today's trucks, were inexpensive by today's standards but a pretty penny by 1900 standards. Back then, one of the average sized wagons cost about \$100. And that was just for the standard model — a plain box. Any extras, like a hay flat, cost extra — between \$40 and \$80 more. These were the "Cadillac" of farm wagons and were priced accordingly.

Working 10-hour days for between 15 and 25 cents an hour, the Gruber employees turned out about 100 wagons a year. But it took years to complete one wagon. Just the oak, hickory, and ash timbers that were used in the construction of each wagon were cured for 10 years before ever seeing a plane. At any one time, there would be enough parts and pieces in the works to build an additional 100 wagons.

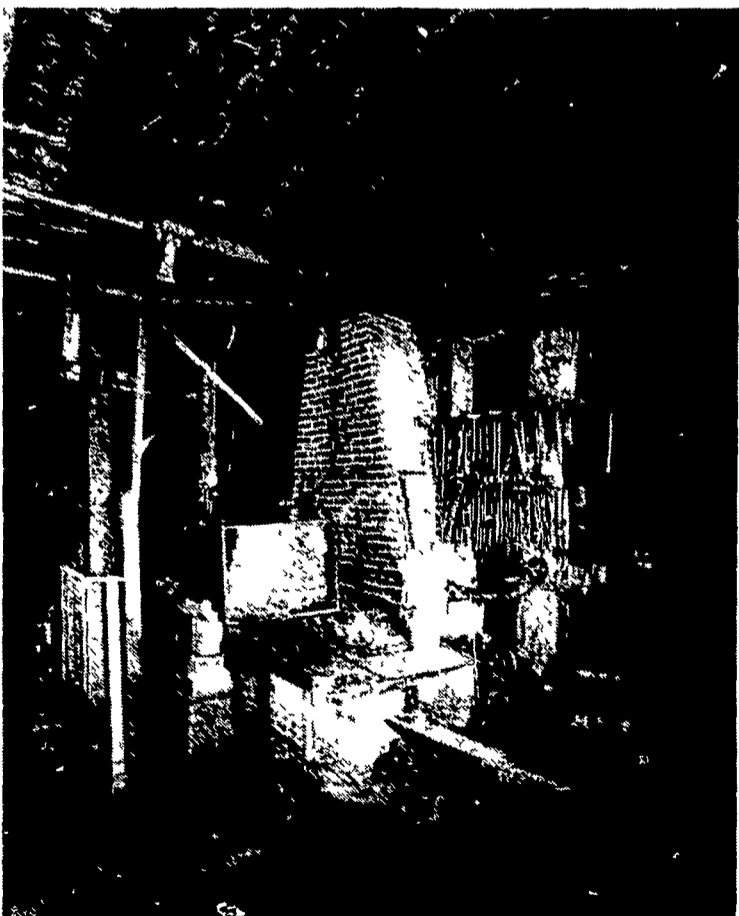
But, with the invention of the automobile, the orders for Gruber wagons and sleds began to slow. The gas engine that powered some of the wagon-making machines, like the "jointer" and "tire shrinker," was on the brink of facing a fate similar to the turbine and stream engine it had replaced.

For a short while, the wagon works shifted over to manufacturing wooden truck bodies, but they too quickly became obsolete as metal bodies took their place on the automotive assembly line.

Luckily, the Grubers continued to create their four-wheeled masterpieces on a limited basis. Today, these wagons and their forebears have become collector's items.



Holding the model of a Gruber wagon that he "made every particle of," John explains that what made the life-size wagons so special was "workmanship." Pictured below, the grandson of the founder Franklin H. Gruber poses next to a heavy-duty Gruber wagon made in 1916 for Wagner and Emmerick of Womelsdorf, Berks County. The wagon which was bought back by Frank Gruber in 1969 bears an identifying serial number on the body and one on the wagon.



John Gruber remembers the frigid temperatures endured by Gruber employees who toiled for 10-hour days, six days each week, during the busy winter season when most of the famous wagons were made. Despite the roaring fires needed to heat and work the iron for the wheels and wagon parts, the blacksmith shop was one of the coldest wings in the wagon works, he says.



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