CHAPTER VI.

THE TANNING INDUSTRY.

It was in the Winter of 1851 that Cyrus Whitcomb came to Two Rivers to begin the erection of the tannery to become known as the Wisconsin Leather Co., the members of the firm being Cyrus Whitcomb, Rufus Allen, Sr., and Geo. W. Allen. Mr. Whitcomb was the only member of the firm who made his home here and in the years that followed became well known and liked by the many men in his employ.

The building of the tannery was begun at once on a site 1½ miles north of Two Rivers settlement, the timber for the frames being hewn right in the forest at hand. The lumber was brought by boat up the rivers, there being no road until a year later. The brick was brought by vessel from Milwaukee and many of the men were brought from the East, where some of the members of the firm had been operating a tannery at Cazenovia, Madison Co., N. Y. The first tannery built was located on the east bank of the Mishicott River, just east of the present tannery bridge and its location was marked for years by a tall square brick chimney, a monument to a departed industry long after the old tannery had been discontinued.

About 100 men were employed. The Company bought about 1,200 acres of Government land which was covered with a growth of hemlock for 50c. per acre and the bark was peeled from the trees within a stone's throw of the tannery. The hides were brought from Chicago and Milwaukee by boat. Mixed grades of leather were made, including harness leather, sole leather, etc. The machinery for the original plant came from Milwaukee, the engine being of 80 H. P.
CYRUS WHITCOMB.
As soon as operations began at the tannery it became necessary to provide quarters for some of the help although a good proportion of them always lived down the river at the settlement or village of Two Rivers. Still it was advisable to build houses and provide for those wishing to live near the plant, and accordingly seven large homes were built and also a boarding house for 40 hands. A provision store was also started as well as a blacksmith shop and stables for the horses were built. A school was started here in the wing of a shanty attached to a boarding house in the Winter of 1851-1852.

During the Summer months the leather was shipped out by boat which stopped at the piers twice every week, but during the Winter months the leather was hauled by team to Milwaukee. It took exactly a week to make the round trip and just so many miles had to be made each day or the trip could not be made on time. Usually the trip was begun here at 6 o'clock on Monday morning. The first day took the leather a little distance beyond Sheboygan where a stopping place was arranged for. The second day, Tuesday, brought them to Port Washington, then a small settlement and on the third day, Wednesday afternoon, at about 4 o'clock, if there had been no mishap, the teams arrived at the Company's warehouse in Milwaukee and immediately loaded with hides and provisions, for the return trip, leaving early Thursday morning and arriving at the tannery on Saturday afternoon. In 1861 a second tannery was built south of the first one and for a time both were operated. Later on the first plant was torn down and the second one operated alone until 1887 when the supply of bark being exhausted, it was deemed advisable to close the plant. In 1891 it accidentally caught fire and was burned down. All that now marks the sight of this early industry is the large quantity of spent bark covering acres of ground on which little or no vegetation grows. The neighborhood also still goes by the name of "The Tannery."
The Wisconsin Leather Co. was also the fore-runner of two other tanneries, that later came here. The first of the newcomers being Carl Winkelmiller who started a small tannery to the east of the northern approach to Washington Street bridge in 1856 and continued it up to 1888. In 1870 the firm of H. Lohman & Co. was formed and the firm built a tannery on the site of David Smoke's saw mill and continued operations up to 1887. The discontinuance of the tanning industry in all of these cases here being due to the fact that the supply of bark for tanning purposes was about exhausted in this section and the expense of getting it by water or rail being greater here than at points where boat or rail facilities were such that the raw material could be delivered right at the plants without hauling by teams.