

Fire hurts Morris' chances for new industry

By MIKE GROGAN
Staff Writer

MORRIS — One of Morris' few chances of industrial development went up in smoke Monday when fire destroyed the once successful Morris Foundry.

Firefighters from eight area departments fought the blaze Monday at the metal casting factory on Lake Street in the village. Otsego Economic Developer Fred Paris revealed Monday he was hunting for an industry to be located at the site that had been occupied by such industries as Linn Tractor Co., Raymond Corp. of Greene, Corning Glass Co. of Oneonta and Bendix of Sidney since 1917.

After Charles Lay of Morris, the owner of the site since 1975, failed to make a go of it with his Morris Foundry, Wilber Bank of Oneonta recently asked Paris to find a new tenant. The bank holds the mortgage on the site.

Charles Lay Jr., the son of the foundry owner, said the family was planning to move the business to Oneonta next month. After being closed by financial losses in November, the son reopened the foundry in January with a three-man crew.

Paris said the destruction of the site, which is the size of a city street, is a significant loss to Morris, since the village has few industries or available sites for industrial expansion.

"The only one of any other consequence is N.W. Naylor Inc. — they make pharmaceuticals for veterinary use," he said. "It employs about 23 people."

The Morris Furnace Co., the manufacturer of wood-burning furnaces, employs four persons.

Maurice N. Bridges, a former owner of the factory, said its history indicates its potential as a money-maker. He said the first owner H.H. Linn, who Bridges once worked for, made approximately \$1 million in the first 12 years of his tractor-manufacturing company.

The company employed approximately 70 people in 1929 and produced 225 tractors in one peak year, Bridges said.



Smoke billowing from burning foundry darkens blanket of snow covering fields around picture-postcard-pretty village of Morris.

Fiery death of Morris plant saddens man who saw it born

By MARK VOSBURGH
Staff Writer

MORRIS — They documented the end of his story and recalled the beginning. The earlier pictures came to mind, but not to life. The photographs were important.

Maurice Bridges caught the final hours Monday of the 65-year-old foundry here on film, snapping frames with a steady hand as flames devoured dry timbers and memories.

"It will never be rebuilt again," he said.

At 76, Bridges is the alpha and omega of this story — here to witness the birth of the business, here 12 years later for a job, and here to tell about it now after a half century.

"That's the way I got started in life. I was the third office in here. The Linn Tractor Company. I was assistant to the sales manager. I was 24."

Holman Harry Linn of Washburn, Me., came here in 1912, looking for a spot to winter a pony and trained dogs that were his traveling circus — and a shop to tinker with his inventions.

Linn found a spot off the fair grounds. It was here that he gave up show business and in 1917, built a factory to produce tractors. The tractors were his own invention — a practical mix of tank treads and wheels.

When Bridges hired on in 1929, the factory employed as many as 70 and produced 225 tractors a year. "It became very profitable," Bridges said. "He and his partner made a million bucks in about 12 years."

Linn was killed in 1937 in an airplane crash. The factory went up for auction in 1949. Bridges and a partner, the late Harold Mills, were the buyers.

"We operated it for a few years, kept the inventory, and then we 'sold it,'" Bridges said. The first tenant was the Raymond Corporation of Greene. Later Bendix of Sidney and Corning Glass in Oneonta used the plant.

Bridges said he sold the plant in



Maurice Bridges takes photos of burning Morris building he knew so well.

1975 to Charles Lay of Morris, who opened a foundry. The Lay family used the foundry to produce a variety of small metal parts, brass plaques and foot pedals.

But the foundry never encountered the success found by the circus owner. Morris Castings closed in November because of slow business. It reopened last month with a work force of only three.

Then yesterday, fire ripped through the guts of the foundry and swept across the roof for what

was the length of a football field. Workers speculated that a furnace ignited the blaze.

"The wood scaffolding in there, it's been drying out for 65 years," Bridges said, recalling the layout of the interior as he stood across the street. "It was just like kindling."

Bridges left the fire only once. He left for his yard and a look at his tractor. He said he was reconditioning the odd-looking machine. It was, he said, one of the last Linn tractors with the tank treads.

For Otsego County firefighters, Monday was a really busy day

By MIKE GROGAN
Staff Writer

COOPERSTOWN — Roy Althiser spent most of Monday directing traffic without ever leaving his office.

For Althiser, Otsego County Fire Control communications supervisor, traffic is burly fire tankers speeding from all over the county to fires miles away. Althiser spent part of the morning directing three depart-

ments to the aid of Edmeston firefighters battling a house fire.

Before he finished radioing information back and forth from the departments, Althiser received a call on a fire at the Morris Foundry. He quickly dispatched the Morris department. Within the next few hours, he dispatched firefighters from Edmeston, Gilbertsville, West Laurens,

Garrattsville, Mt. Upton, West Edmeston and Pittsfield. During this time, he was too busy to take any calls from the local media on the fires.

When directing mutual aid, the dispatcher tells the departments who owns the burning structure, the road to it and if needed, he gives detailed instructions. Althiser also called Otsego County Fire Coordinator Robert Barnes from the Edmeston fire to the Morris blaze.

"There's one man working and we had two major fires," said Dispatcher Kirk Strope, who relieved Althiser. "It gets pretty hectic around here." But, he noted hectic days come and go in random spurts. "It was quiet for the last week or so," he said. Tomorrow or next week is anybody's guess.

More local news on Page 11 & 20

Fire destroys Morris foundry...

Continued from page 1.

Fred Paris, a county economic developer, revealed that Wilber National Bank now owned the building and spent the last month looking for a new industrial tenant.

Firefighters said they considered the furnace as only a "possible" cause for the fire. But Ray and co-worker Charles Smith said they believed one of the furnaces ignited wooden rafters.

"All I can say is we're still investigating, we're not ruling out anything," Johnston said Monday evening. The chief said a special crew of investigators from his department will return to the scene today.

Firefighters battled the blaze for better than three hours and posted an all-night watch at the scene.

The building, built in 1917 as a factory for the Linn Tractor Company, later served as a plant for Raymond Corporation of Greene, Corning Glass in Oneonta and Bendix of Sidney.

Firefighters claimed the factory has been the scene of at least three other smaller fires in recent memory. One of those fires, in February 1978, destroyed a portion of the main plant's roof. The fire was started by a spark from a grinding tool.

Maurice Bridges, 76, snapped photographs Monday as the flames finally devoured the building where he worked a half century ago. He later owned the foundry for a time.

"It makes you feel bad," he said. "It will never be rebuilt again."



Star photo by Bruce Endries



Graffiti-covered water tower is almost obscured by smoke, left; center, one of foundry employees, Kerry Ray, watches his job burn; right, firemen from eight companies play hoses on the blaze.



Star photos by Bruce Endries, Mark Vosburgh