

## **News Article for 2011 Opening of the Museum**

Among the many exhibits at the Kewanee Historical Society's Robert and Marcella Richards Museum is one devoted to the name that has brought more recognition to Kewanee over the years than any other—Kewanee Boiler Company.

That exhibit, which continues to grow, will be available for viewing when the museum opens for the 2011 season on Thursday, May 4. Located at 211 N. Chestnut in the historic Butterwick Hardware Store, the museum will have regular visiting hours on Thursday and Saturday afternoons from 1:30 to 4:00. Visits at other times can be arranged by calling 854-9701 or 853-4572.

The focus point of the Boiler display is a large (8 by 4 foot) picture of the Boiler complex as it looked in 1926, when it contained 13 acres of buildings on a site of 33 acres. The beautifully-framed picture hung near the entrance to the Boiler main office building at 101 Franklin St. It was donated by Burnham Industries when they closed Kewanee Boiler in 2002.

The Boiler exhibit includes several hundred pictures of the plant, inside and out, and of employees ranging from President E.E. Baker to riveter boys, and, of course, of boilers of all sizes.

The display includes a variety of artifacts and memorabilia, including miniature boilers and numerous scrapbooks of news articles and publications and documents produced by the company.

Another feature is sales brochures from many years, beginning in the 1890s, some of which were added to the collection last fall when items from the estate of Brule Carleson, long-time Kewanee Boiler employee, were donated to the museum.

Especially interesting is a file of World War II Civil Defense clearance reports on several hundred employees, including identification pictures. Equally interesting are some 1945 company newsletters featuring items on the everyday lives of employees, as well as news about the company.

If you come to the museum to see the Boiler exhibit, and we hope you will, here is some background on Kewanee Boiler Company.

A business with the name “Kewanee Boiler Company” began in 1892, but throughout the 1900s when Kewanee Boiler had an anniversary celebration or commemoration, the company marked its beginning as 1868.

The historical explanation for that begins in 1868 when a man named Valerius Anderson started a company in Kewanee to make steam heating devices to heat animal feed. By 1871 Anderson Steam Heater, as it was called, began making steam boilers for homes and businesses.

In 1875 Anderson moved on but his infant company remained in Kewanee under the ownership of William Haxtun, who had been an employee and would take the company from about 30 employees to over 1,000 in 1891.

The success of Haxtun Steam Heater Company was based on Haxtun’s patent of a new type of boiler in 1875, adding the manufacture of tubes, pipes and valves in the 1880s, and bringing into the company two soon-to-be industrial giants—John Pierce and E. E. Baker.

Haxtun retired in 1891 and sold his share of the business to National Tube Company of McKeesport, Pennsylvania. The company name was changed from Haxtun Steam Heater to Western Tube Company.

The name change to “Tube Company” indicated that the company was going to concentrate on producing tubes, pipes and valves. In fact, Western Tube decided to discontinue the production of boilers.

In stepped E. E. Baker, number 2 in the Tube Company behind John Pierce, who along with a number of associates purchased the boiler portion of the business and in 1892 established Kewanee Boiler Company.

Kewanee Boiler remained in the old boiler shops on the east side of Main Street just south of the railroad tracks. Expecting to remain there for some time, the new company built a two-story brick building on Main Street just south of the boiler shops to house its administrative offices. (See photo)

But business must have been good and the young company made the gamble that paid off for a century as in 1900 they moved to a new facility approximately one mile to the west on the north side of the railroad tracks.

Here Kewanee Boiler would remain and grow until its demise in the late 1900s and finally closing in 2002.

Highlights of Boiler history include the development of a “smokeless” boiler in 1906, a million dollar addition to the plant in 1920 and major contributions to the war effort in both World War I and II.

E.E. Baker would continue to be president of the company until his death on January 1, 1929. Before his death he would become Kewanee’s premier benefactor, contributing a great deal of money and leadership to the formation and development of Kewanee Park District. He was president of the district’s board of commissioners from its inception in 1920 to 1929, during which time the district developed Northeast Park, Chatauqua Park and, of course, Baker Park.

Returning to the 1890s, Western Tube Company would thrive under the leadership of John Pierce. By 1906 production of tubes, pipes and valves was so great that it required over 4,000 employees. However, that was the peak as a recession in 1907-08 led to a dramatic reduction of 2,000 workers.

During the recession the company decided to move tube and pipe production to its main factory in Pennsylvania. The local facility’s name was changed to Kewanee Works of National Tube Company in 1908 and the employment level remained around 2,000.

In 1917 the Tube Company sold its Kewanee plant to its leading competitor in the production of valves and fittings, the Walworth Company of Boston, Massachusetts. Until its closing in 1978 Walworth would share with Kewanee Boiler the distinction of being one of the two major industries in Kewanee.

The museum’s collection of Walworth materials is just as extensive as the Boiler collection, and the same is true of Boss Manufacturing, longtime manufacturer of gloves and still a major distributor of gloves with its headquarters in Kewanee. Although not as extensive, the museum contains materials and information relating to other Kewanee industries.

Once again, the museum will open on May 4 for the 2011 season. Come check out Kewanee Boiler and all the other displays on “everything

Kewanee.” For more information on the museum, visit the society’s website: [kewaneehistory.com](http://kewaneehistory.com).

Caption for Boiler office picture—

A recent addition to the Kewanee Historical Society’s collection, thanks to a donation by the family of the late Brule Carleson, former Kewanee Boiler employee, is this photo of the Kewanee Boiler office building located during the 1890s on Main Street just south of the railroads tracks. The assembled employees were members of the Star of Hope Lodge 195 of the Brotherhood of Boilermakers. The union was formed in 1898 and is possibly shown preparing for a Labor Day parade.

