

RIB FALLS ONE HUNDRED YEARS OLD

BY HELEN D. VENNE

June 15, 1866 was a great day, John Baesemann finally arrived at Rib Falls, Wisconsin, after six weeks of laborious travel over logging roads, often impassable until repairs were made. The trip was made from Milwaukee with covered wagons and oxen, bringing family, household goods, cattle, and the necessary provisions.

His family consisted of his wife, Ernestina, and seven children: August, Frank, Henry, Gustave, Maria, Alvina and Albertina.

John and several of his sons had made the trip up from Milwaukee earlier that same year to look for a favorable place to settle. Approaching from the east, they reached the crest of the hill and stopped. Ahead of them was a broad valley covered with virgin timber as far as the eye could see, through which flowed a workable river for logging operations. The necessary transactions were made, and they returned to Milwaukee to get the family.

There was a small frame house already built on a ridge just north of the river. It had been built by an English bachelor named Meade before the Civil War, the first dwelling in the area to be built of finished lumber. He also had cleared about five acres of land, and from holes he dug there, it appeared that he was contemplating building a mill. With the outbreak of the war he disappeared, and nothing more was ever heard of him.

The land came into the ownership of B. G. Plumer, who sold it to John Baesemann. Additional purchases gave the Baesemann family over two hundred acres, including lands bordering both sides of the Big Rib River for miles.

When the family arrived at their new home, there was a Chippewa Indian village on the north bank of the river. The Indians were friendly, and taught them to spear and troll for large fish Indian style. The Indian children were the only playmates the Baesemann children had in the wilderness. After a while the Indians moved their village farther up the river. For many years they returned in the summer and camped along the river to sell medicine and baskets. At night they would sing and dance

around their campfires, much to the enjoyment of the white families who came to watch them.

During the first winter John and his sons studied and made preparations for building a dam over the falls and a saw mill. The dam was completed in 1867. This was not too difficult, because the river was narrow at the falls, and there was rock bottom from one side to the other.

Digging a channel for the mill was more difficult. The entire channel had to be blasted out of the rock, and was slow, tedious work. The channel was dug and the mill operating in 1869. Water power was harnessed by a big waterwheel. A square tank would trap the water, and when the tank was full the water would be released to give more power. The mill was kept busy all year sawing lumber and shingles for farmers' buildings and fences.

With each spring thaw the floods were high, and repairs had to be made to the dam. In 1872 they began construction of a grist mill, but before it was finished, the spring flood swept away the dam, saw mill, grist mill and the bridge they had built.

John became discouraged and could not be persuaded to build again. Then one day he saw his wife and oldest daughter off in the field piling stones into a wheelbarrow and carting them toward the dam. This gave him courage to try again.

A new dam was built, and the saw mill and grist mill were running by 1876. The same water was utilized to run both mills, first the sawmill and then the grist mill or "roller mill". The roller mill was four stories high and had seventeen rollers driven by three big waterwheels. Every kernel of grain went through all seventeen rollers. Farmers came from miles around to have their wheat ground into flour. The mill became noted for the exceptionally fine quality of rye flour ground there. The sawmill was driven by two water wheels. All the machinery, including the huge waterwheels, was hauled from Stevens Point on wagons.

Additional wings were added to the house. North of the roller mill John built a blacksmith shop and a tiny one room office. He built a general store and several small homes for rental. The operations were successful, and employment was given to many people. The general

store became a community meeting place, evenings for the men, daytimes for the women. The floors became pockmarked from the log drivers' spiked boots.

The logging camp consisted of several log cabins, one for the kitchen, the others for sleeping quarters for the lumberjacks. The loggers hauled the cut logs to the river bank in winter. In the spring the logs were rolled into the water and floated down to the mill. This was a great event. Pike poles, cant-hooks and red flannel shirts bobbing among the logs caused great excitement, climaxed by their arrival at the mill. Then the buzzing of the sawmill started, six a.m. to six p.m. and often night shifts.

In winter the workmen cut deep ice-blocks from the river and hauled them into the ice-house, where they were covered with sawdust, layer upon layer, for summer use.

For several years one room of the blacksmith shop was used for church services. People in the community were invited to attend. John taught their children on Sundays, and often conducted the entire services himself from Luther's German Sermon Book when no pastor was available. After the services the congregation was invited to the Baesemann home, where huge tables of coffee and cakes were served. While the people visited, their oxen and horses rested in the mill stables.

St. John's Lutheran congregation was formally organized on January 27, 1878. Charter members were: John Baesemann, David Fuchs, Carl Krahn, Albert Hoffmann, Daniel Heise, John Henke, Ferdinand Pickruhn, M. Pankonin, Gottlieb Rux, Frank Baesemann, Carl Fleischmann, Gottlieb Tessmer, August Klemm, August Seehafer, William Drews, William Seehafer, William Luedtke, Gustave Baesemann, John Werner, Julius Musolf, Wm. Nagel, August Schultz III, Frank Krahn, Herman Paul, Ludwig Koester, Martin Koenig, Gottlieb Luedtke, Henry Baesemann, F. W. Kielsmeier, E. M. Ludwig, Carl Huehnerfuss, John Musolf, Edward Rux, Ferdinand Eisner, and August Wolf.

In 1889 the following names were added: Ludwig Steidinger, Julius Heise, Ernst Ringle, Robert Ringle, August Salzman, Mrs. Lochmann,

Mrs, Hannenkrat, Mrs. Fuelken, August Schultz I, Wm. Hahn, Wm. Eisner, Gottlieb Zunker and Robert Haasch.

Within three years of organization John built the first church, St. John's Lutheran Church, on his land east of the road. It was a small wood frame building that boasted a balcony and a foot-pedal organ. Rev. A. F. H. Gebhard, pastor of the Trinity Lutheran Church in the town of Stettin and missionary-at-large, served as missionary pastor to the Rib Falls congregation until 1887. Succeeding him was Rev. C. Pitzler from 1887 to 1889.

The Baesemann church was used until 1918. It was then used as a garage until 1946, when it was torn down.

The present St. John's Lutheran Church in Rib Falls was built in 1918 and dedicated in 1919. The land had been donated by John Baesemann, and most of the lumber was donated by the Wausau Lumber Company. The church was modernized in 1940, and a parsonage built in 1948. Serving as pastor of the church since 1961 is the Rev. G. E. Schmeling.

The first several winters school was conducted in one of John's small houses opposite the mill grounds, with Miss Priest as teacher. School District No. 5 was organized in 1878. School taxes levied that year was \$400.00, and the school census showed eighty children between the ages of four and twenty.

In 1887 the first "little red schoolhouse" was built. It was painted red when built, but later painted white. This building served until 1961, when the district was consolidated with Marathon School District. Rib Falls children are now transported to Marathon by bus, and the school has been converted into a town hall.

Just north of the Baesemann homestead an acre of land was set aside as a private cemetery "for any Baesemann descendant who wished to rest there". One day in 1877 Gustave and Maria, then twenty-two and twenty years of age, were sitting on a fence under a shade tree. Maria pointed down and said, "This is where I would like to be buried". A short time later she died of typhoid fever, and that is where she was laid to rest. Being the first person to be buried in Rib Falls, this established the location of the cemetery.

Below the bridge, north of the river was "Vater's Paradise Garten",

(Father's Paradise Garden). It contained every variety of wild flower known in that vicinity, including wild fruits as grapes, gooseberries, plums, hops, thornapples, raspberries, and strawberries, acres of them, bordered by oak trees along the river bank. A small portion of the garden was swampland, which was utilized for growing blueberries and cranberries. A deer park was also located near the gardens.

The river was the greatest source of diversion. In winter it was ice skating and easy conveyance of vehicles to the falls. In summer it was swimming, fishing, boating in dug-out canoes or flat boats, and picking wild rice. Pike, bass, pickeral and muskies abounded in its waters. On occasions boatloads of people would ride up the river to attend a house party for families who purchased cutover virgin lands for farming. Return trips were usually made by moonlight.

The forests abounded with deer, bear, wolves, beaver, otter, martin, and mink. Wild pigeons sat so thickly on the branches of trees in the early 70's that the branches bent down to the ground with their weight. Hunting parties were often hosted by John for friends from Milwaukee and Chicago.

Three generations of Baesemanns served as postmasters of Rib Falls. John became the first postmaster, and maintained the post office in a little building east of the road across from the mill grounds. After his death, his son Gustave had the post office in the general store on the south shore. In 1906 his daughter, Laurinda, became postmistress, with office moved back to the first building. In the early years the mail route covered a stretch from Wausau to Poniatowski, three times a week. Later it was daily from Wausau to Rib Falls, transporting not only mail, but also merchandise, food and passengers.

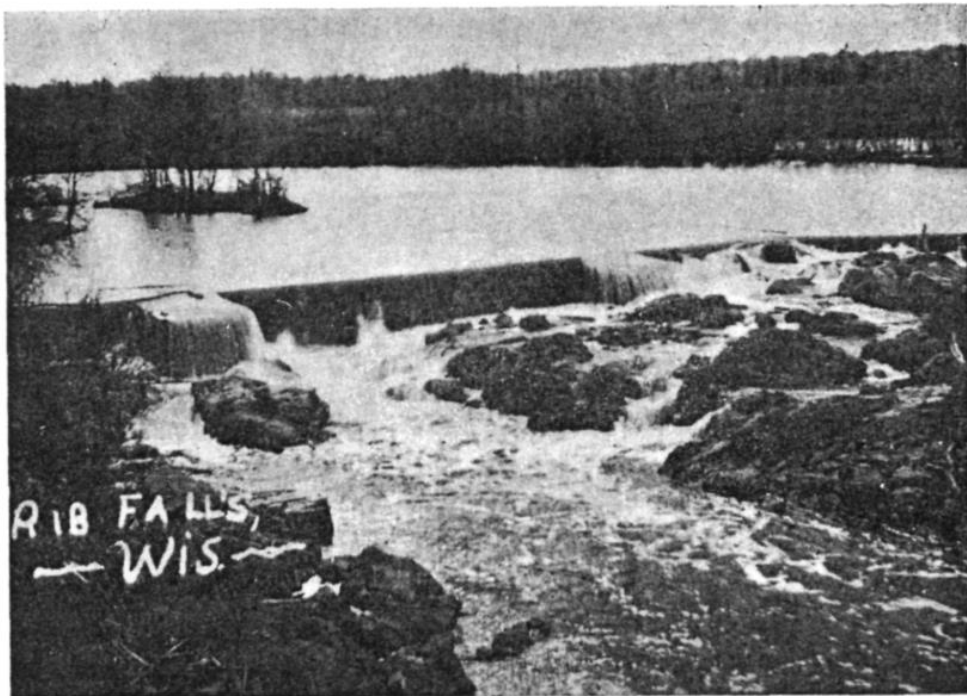
As the need for a more modern conveyance became apparent, John purchased a surrey, blue felt-lined, with lamps on each side, and driven by a span of gray horses. The sides could be closed when driving on dusty roads.

Paisley shawls were status symbols of the day, and John provided one for each daughter and daughter-in-law before 1882.

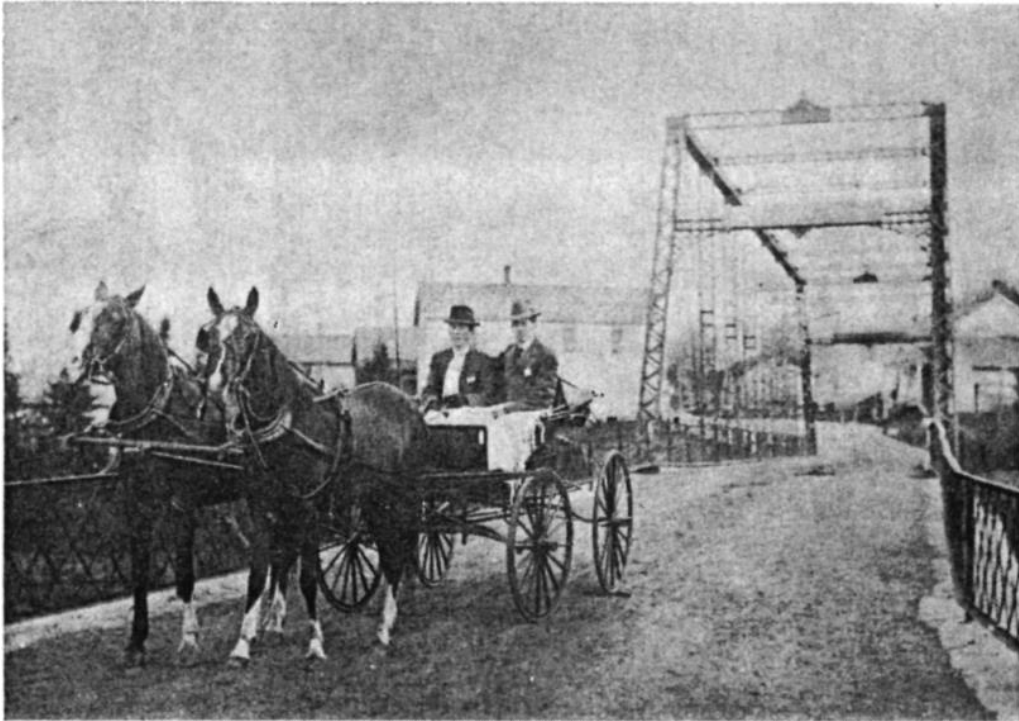
Early in the 1870's the town, then the town of Stettin, decided a bridge was needed at the falls. These specifications were approved: "It



John Baesemann, founder of Rib Falls.



View of the Baesemann dam built in 1876.



Walter and Emil Ludwig, employees of the Wausau Lumber Company, out for a Sunday drive. Bridge no. 3 in background.



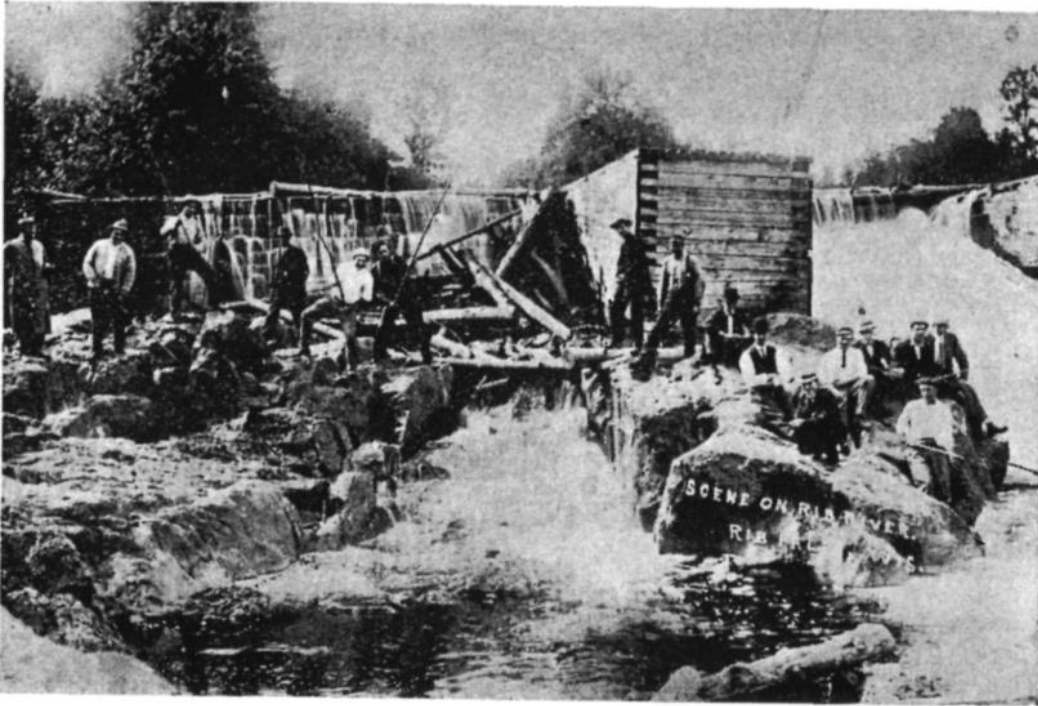
Wausau Lumber Company sawmill along the south bank of the river.



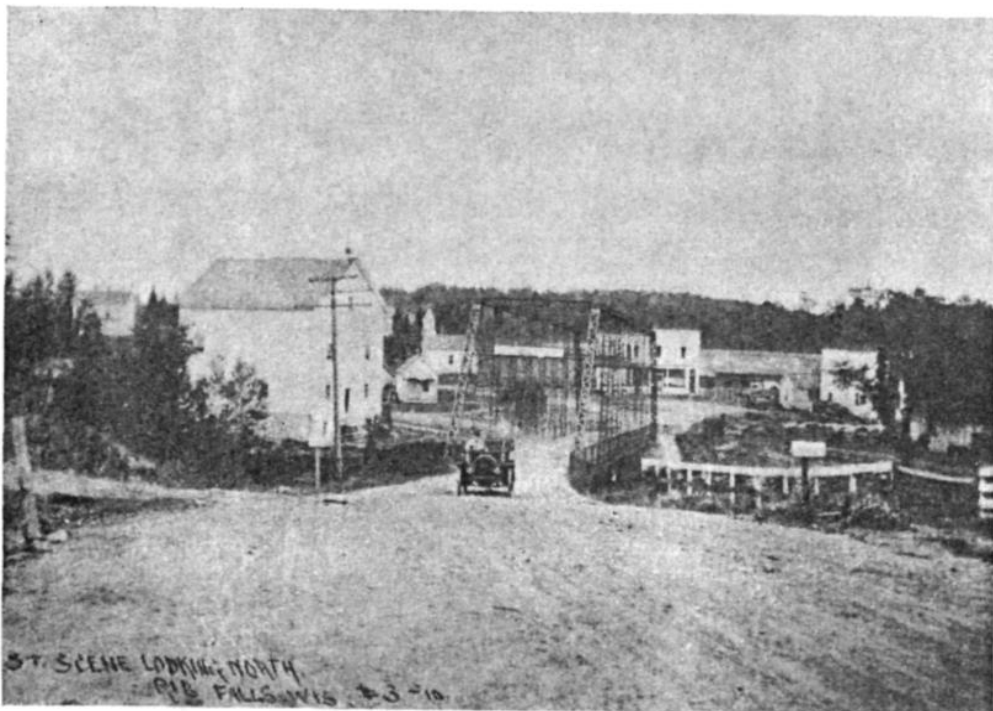
Wausau Lumber Company. Left to right, blacksmith shop, with the mill pond in rear, saw mill and conveyor going up to slab burner.



Wausau Lumber Company holdings. From left to right, hoarding house, with ice house in rear; harness and buggy shed and horse barn. Lumber wagon standing in foreground.



Sunday crew making merry on the rocks below the dam.



View showing some of the Baesemann holdings. From left to right, the home, roller mill, office, church, general store, lumber sheds, and tavern. Looking north.

shall be 227 feet long, with two piers and two abutments. Elevation of bridge on south end 22 feet above the bed of the river, and 19 feet on the north end. The foundation for piers and abutments shall be laid on solid rocks. Timber for piers and abutments to be 12 x 12, hewn on three sides. The bridge to be eleven feet wide in the clear, with a railing four feet high, to be built of good sound material and in a good substantial and workmanlike manner, and according to plan. The floor to be covered with three-inch planks."

John Baesemann received the contract to build the foundation on July 1, 1873, to be completed in four months. "For the sum of \$2,000.00 to set up and finish two piers and two abutments for the understructure of a bridge to be built thereon."

On February 2, 1874, a contract was signed between Marathon County and the town of Stettin with August Lindermann and John Linder to build the bridge for a sum of \$1300.00.

On January 25, 1875, the town granted Henry Baesemann a license to keep a saloon, for the sum of f 10.00, at Big Rib Falls "for intoxicating liquors to be drunk on the premises in the quantity of less than one gallon." Another son, Frank, had a tavern south of the river, east of Main Street.

Early in 1877 the town of Rib Falls was separated from the town of Stettin, the actual separation agreement being written in German language. The first supervisors of the new township were John Baesemann, chairman, H. Hoffman and Carl Hanke.

In 1879 Louis Salzman opened a store and lodging in Rib Falls. It was purchased in 1884 by Joe Lochman, who had a store on one side, a saloon on the other side, and a hotel upstairs. Ernst Ludwig opened a blacksmith shop, also, in 1884. Two years later Baesemann brothers, Gustave and Henry, opened a general merchandise store.

The first miller hired to run the Baesemann roller mill was a man named Gottlieb, who arrived from Michigan in 1883. In 1889 Albert Franke became miller, followed in 1896 by Bob Cottingham. Then came Pete Loisen in 1906. During these years a young man named Julius Kraft served as apprentice learning the trade, and he became the miller after Loisen. Kraft stayed with the mill until its closing, and often

hailed the flour to Wausau with horses and wagon.

In 1883 the third bridge was built across the river at the falls. This was a covered bridge built of all iron, used until about 1953, when the fourth bridge of concrete replaced it.

One morning in 1890, as John was walking the rounds on his farm checking fence posts, cane in hand, he was gored by a bull. He was found later, with abdomen ripped open, partly disemboweled. He died a year later. His wife died in 1895.

The business enterprises were carried on by his two sons, Gustave and Henry, until 1903. In 1905 they sold nearly all their timber lands to the Wausau Lumber Company, excluding the water rights. They continued limited sawing of lath and shingles for the farmers until about 1917. The roller mill closed down in 1925.

The Wausau Lumber Company built a steam operated sawmill and planing mill in 1906, on the south bank of the river. Officers of the company were William H. Bissell, president, and W. W. Gamble, Secretary and Treasurer.

A railroad spur was brought into Rib Falls from Marathon, along the south shore of the river. The Wausau Lumber Company also built a large company store, with Walter Ludwig as manager, a boarding house, horse barns, wagon barns, harness shop, and a company office, with Emil Ludwig as bookkeeper. Joe Banie was in charge of the harness shop. They built six company houses, all alike and all painted dark red. These were rented to their employees.

A street was built parallel to the river, just south of their operations, and was named Bissell Street. Pride of the townsfolk was a board sidewalk built along this street from Main Street west to the crossroad, where the boarding house stood. This west section of the city was called "New Town". Two taverns stood opposite the boarding house.

A large creamery was built across the road to the south, where every day horses and wagons were lined up waiting their turns to unload milk.

The Wausau Lumber Company sawmill ran day and night for the first three years, running through fifteen million feet of lumber a year. A fire destroyed the planing mill once, and several other fires burned parts of the mills, but all were quickly rebuilt.

Max Winkert, 86-year-old youngster still living on a farm southwest of Rib Falls, worked for the Wausau Lumber Company for 27 years, first at their mill in Edgar, and then at Rib Falls during their entire operation. He was night engineer.

As boys they used to build rafts to row on a slough made by waste materials from the mills, says Mr. Winkert. He recalls with a chuckle how one day Emit Ludwig fell in and got wet. He was afraid to go home that way, so he lay in the sun until his clothes got dry. Then he went home,

Mr. Winkert recalls, also, how he found when he bought his land for farming, that all the slippery elms had been peeled by the Indians. They used the bark for medicines. "I was happy", he said, "The elms were dead, and I had fine dry trees for firewood".

After the timber was all cut within a twelve mile radius of Rib Falls, the operations of the Wausau Lumber Company were brought to a close in the fall of 1927. For several years the railroad served farmers in the area, but eventually its steel rails were taken up.

Remnants of the bustling pioneer days of Rib Falls are almost extinct. Snatches of the roadbed of the old railroad are still faintly visible. A few foundation stones, scattered here and there, are all that remain of the mills. Part of the dam that was made of concrete still stands, showing the channel that had been dug. The other section of dam, having been built of logs, has long since vanished. The cemetery remains, and one wing of the original Baesemann barn, connected to the larger barn added years later. The Meade house and Baesemann blacksmith shop were torn down within the last few years. Three Wausau Lumber Company houses still stand, remodeled and still being used. Lands on both sides of the river have gone native.

Rib Falls has become a quiet little village, awaiting a new era, with promise of a new, modern dam and a new enterprise.