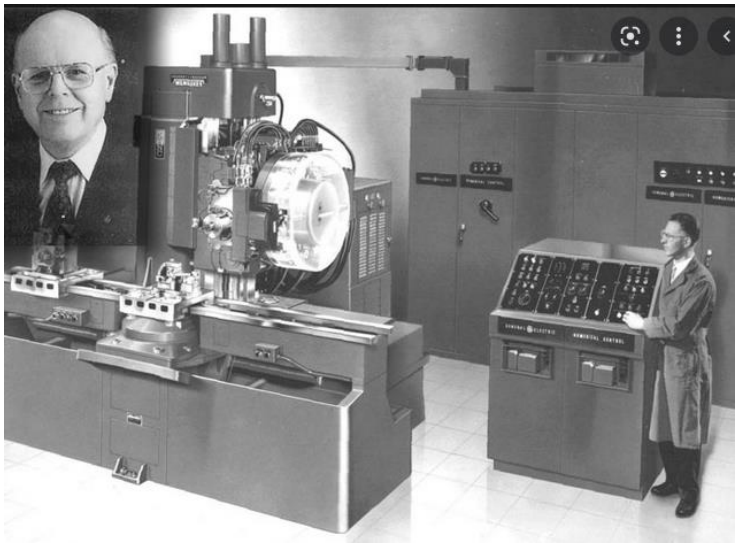
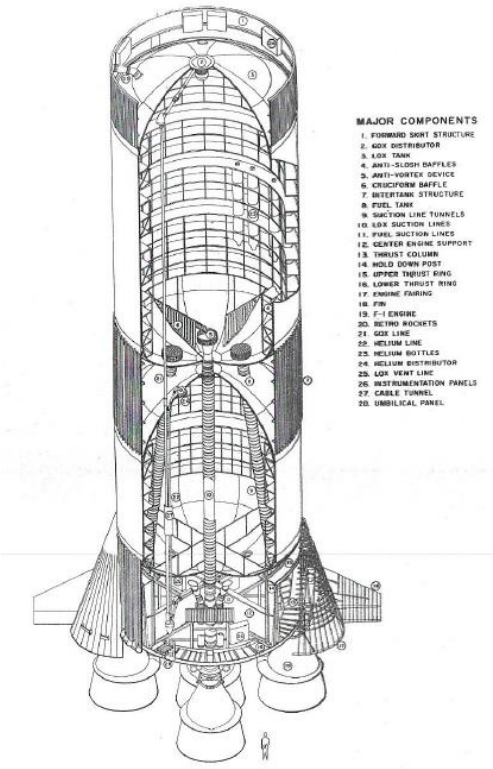
Traverse City Industrial History – John T. Parsons Archival Project

The Traverse City is well known as a great place to vacation with its beautiful beaches, lakes, fruit trees, and the annual Cherry Festival. The downtown district is home to many fine and diverse restaurants. Sun-bathing, fishing, fine dining, and wine take over the narrative when Traverse City is discussed.



However, Traverse City is also historically rich in manufacturing and in the Aerospace Industry. One example includes the famous inventors John T. Parsons and Frank Stulen who are memorialized at a Northwestern Michigan College building on Aero Park Drive. The short story is that John T. Parsons pioneered numerical control for machine tools in the 1945. Originally this was in support of making helicopter rotor blades. The calculations they made and the control of the machines to make the complex structures, gave birth to Computer Numerical Controlled (CNC) Machining. Parsons and his employee, Frank Stulen, together were the first to use computer methods to solve machining problems. Parsons is considered to be the father of "numerical control" and thus began the 2nd Industrial Revolution. In all, Parsons was awarded approximately 50 patents.

Parsons was President and owner of the Parsons Corporation of Traverse City which produced and overhauled helicopter rotor blades. Parsons also pioneered adhesive bonding in metal aircraft structure, then built the first all-composite airplane. Parsons produced the 44 ft long stainless steel fuel lines for the Saturn booster that started the U.S. astronauts toward the moon and he brought computers to aircraft design, manufacturing, and real-time management reporting. The Parsons legacy even includes manufacturing boats in the late 1950's and early 1960's.



This story needs to be told and published so that our community can take advantage of the legacy that Parsons created in Traverse City. The proposal at hand is to review the myriad of stored information regarding John T. Parsons and create a short book that tells this story in an accurate and informative way. Most of the information (300 boxes) is stored in the Virginia Tech Library in Blacksburg, VA. Artifacts are stored in and around Traverse City. Relatives, business associates, and friends of Parsons reside here in Traverse City and through "oral histories" could add much needed content to tell the story.

Michigan Tech's Social Science Department has a Professor of History, Steven Walton, who is trained in doing this type of research (https://www.mtu.edu/social-sciences/department/faculty/walton/) . An example of this department's work was a short book commissioned by Jay Meldrum, Michigan Tech's liaison to the Grand Traverse Area, currently working out of the Traverse Connect Building. This book entitled "Ice Station Keweenaw" outlines the history of the Keweenaw Research Center, one of largest Centers at Michigan Tech which started in 1953. The book was a huge success informing the locals of how this center came to be and how it continues to contribute to the local economy.

Contact has been established with Grant Parsons and he has agreed to cooperate with the project. Mr. Parsons indicated that he has a storage unit with various items from his father's company.

Once the research is complete, the story will be prepared for use by the community in various ways.

1. A short hard cover book (less than 100 pages) will be written by Dr. Walton
2. The creation of a digital archive to provide content for local community organizations including the GT Area Manufacturing Council, Traverse Connect, Newton's Road, Northwest Ed, TC New Tech, etc.
3. A portable display of pictures and text for the Library.
4. Based on an inventory of physical properties such as product samples or tooling, the potential for a museum will be discussed.

The Ask

Michigan Tech is seeking donor funding of $10,000 to research the Parsons Archives at Virginia Tech and to begin the population of a digital archive of the Parsons legacy.

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