

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Volume 41, Number 4

“A Great Experience”
Villaume Builds Gliders in
World War II
Page 22

“If It Can Be Manufactured from Wood, We Can Make It”
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Company They Built — Page 4



Eugene Villaume. Portrait by Nicholas Brewer (1857–1949), one of America’s finest portrait artists. Minnesota-born, Brewer trained in New York and later moved back to St. Paul. He painted presidents and official portraits of governors from Minnesota and ten other states. Brewer also painted portraits of a number of prominent Minnesotans, including Theodore Hamm, Ignatius Donnelly, George Dayton, and Archbishop John Ireland. Photo courtesy of Nick Linsmayer and Villaume Industries.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of Ramsey County History showcases the significant history of Villaume Industries, formerly the Villaume Box and Lumber Company, which is celebrating 125 years as a continuously operated family owned business. Steve Trimble tells the fascinating story of this company, which Eugene Villaume, a French immigrant, started in 1882. The firm initially specialized in making commercial boxes and installing fine interior woodwork, such as can still be seen in the art deco interior furnishing of the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. During World War II, as John Lindley explores in a separate article, the Villaume Company helped defeat the Axis enemy by building glider floors and wings for the Army Air Forces. After the war, Villaume diversified into manufacturing roof trusses and custom wood packaging. The Winter issue concludes with a short article by Leo J. Harris about a little-known meeting in 1839 at Kaposia (now South St. Paul) between Bishop Mathias Loras and Dakota leader Big Thunder.

The Society is grateful to Villaume Industries and its president, Nick Linsmayer, for giving authors Steve Trimble and John Lindley access to the company archives, providing photos, and arranging for interviews with individuals who could tell the Villaume story based on their own experiences with the company. We hope that other local businesses will follow the example of Villaume and share their story with us.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

“If It Can Be Manufactured from Wood, We Can Make It”

A History of the Villaume Family and the Company They Built

Steven C. Trimble

Toting a collection of dry goods, seeds and other items, Joseph Villaume boarded a steamboat in 1847 and ventured up the Mississippi from New Orleans to the northwest frontier. Branching out from St. Paul, he sold the merchandise in the small communities in the Minnesota River valley and also participated in what was called “the Indian trade.” Joseph was born near the Vosges Mountains in the Province of Lorraine, in France in 1812 and had been a government employee and a police officer. It is unclear why he left for the United States, but after living for two years in New Orleans, he decided to settle down in St. Paul in 1849. Although the city was small, it was a growing community and the center of Minnesota’s urban frontier. And the times were exciting, for on March 3, 1849, Minnesota became a territory. When the news arrived, the effect on the new capital city was immediate. Within three weeks, the village doubled in size and in a few months, tripled.

St. Paul was a stopping off point for immigrants on their way to other parts of the state, and people were constantly looking for lodging. Joseph decided to cater to their needs and opened a combination hotel and stable. In a few years it would house three of his nephews. The first was Victor Villaume, who came from France in 1866. He moved around a bit, worked for a time with steam engines in Cottage Grove and operated a sawmill. Later Victor got a job working in the Minneapolis mills and lived with Uncle Joseph. In all likelihood, he sent letters back to the family in France, encouraging them to come to Minnesota.

Two Brothers Looking for Opportunities

In 1872 Eugene and his brother Joseph decided to leave St. Michel, France and join their relatives in the United States. It was not a pleasant journey, as they encountered several storms during the eighteen-day trip. The ship ran low on fuel and had to put in at Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada for coal. They reached New York harbor the day before Christmas. Eugene and Joseph boarded a train

the same day and reached St. Paul just in time to greet the start of 1873. They were supposed to meet Victor at the foot of Jackson Street, but he wasn’t there. Tromping through the snow, they found their way up Robert Street. When the two got to the corner of Seventh, they were somewhat disappointed when they found a small frame structure that displayed a simple sign: *Joseph Villaume—Hotel and Stabling*.

The three brothers had a joyous reunion, but the two new arrivals may have questioned their decision to emigrate when, a week later, a vicious blizzard hit Minnesota. One probably exaggerated account said it was “unequalled in severity and destruction by any which had ever occurred in the memory of man.” The outlook for jobs, however, was excellent and the booming city needed workers. Houses and businesses were constantly being constructed, the first streetcars had appeared, and an expanding network of railroads was slowly connecting the city with the East and with its own growing economic hinterland. Boarding with their uncle, the brothers got jobs at a Minneapolis sawmill. They stayed with these

positions until the next spring when Joseph, a trained cobbler, found work in St. Paul as a shoemaker and Eugene, who had apprenticed as a cabinetmaker in France, landed a job with the woodworking firm Osgood and Blodgett.



The Villaume family in St. Paul, sometime after 1873. Left to right, Victor, Joseph, and Eugene. Photo by Illingworth. All photographs are courtesy of Nick Linsmayer and Villaume Industries unless otherwise indicated.

By all reports, Eugene was an energetic and skilled worker and he learned a lot about production and finances. In 1876, however, his adventurous spirit almost led him to join George Custer’s ill-fated band that was headed west to deal with the Lakota (Sioux) Indians. Fortunately, his employers valued his craftsmanship and strong work ethic and persuaded their employee to remain behind.

Eugene Villaume married Christine



This converted building served as the Villaume brothers' first plant on St. Paul's West Side between 1882 and 1886.

Moosbrugger, a territorial pioneer, in July 1877. She was a young woman of mixed French-Austrian parentage who was born on a farm in the northern part of Ramsey County in January 1855. The Moosbruggers had come to Minnesota in 1854 and settled on a 160-acre farm in Little Canada.

Hard Work Pays Off

After seven years at Osgood and Blodgett, Eugene moved on to Crippen Trunk Company where, as a foreman, he made nearly double his previous salary. He stayed there for two years, always retaining the goal of one day starting his own business. The dream soon became a reality. On October 1, 1882, Eugene and Victor opened a box-making business of their own on St. Paul's West Side. Villaume Brothers, as it was called, started operations with a loan and some used machinery from the trunk company located on the second floor. Not everyone was supportive. Father Augustin Ravoux warned them that the West Side area was prone to flooding. Eugene's former employer was not pleased to see the competition. Osgood supposedly said, "We'll have you out of business in six months." Eugene is said to have retorted, "I'll be making boxes after you're dead."

The thirty- by thirty-foot floor space that the Villaume Brothers used for their factory contained a small engine and all of

their equipment. Because the city had several flourishing breweries, they decided to concentrate on making beer boxes and got their first order from Theodore Hamm's brewery, which was located on the East Side along Phalen Creek. The brothers did everything themselves, with occasional help.

Victor decided to retire in 1885 and sold his interest to his brother. Eugene's brother-in-law, Albert Moosbrugger, took over many of the duties, becoming the

company buyer and salesman. Eugene remained the jack-of-all-trades, repairing machinery, keeping books and doing odd jobs. He designed crates and sawed the lumber and often would put the crate together while a customer waited.

A long-time associate of Eugene described the early days of the factory in a 1932 letter to the *St. Paul Dispatch*:

I can give you a little private information about the beginning of a plant, which the man himself might not give. . . . Eugene Villaume converted an old residence at the corner of Fairfield Ave. and Walter Street into a little box factory. . . . He had a small five-horsepower engine and boiler, a small circular cut off saw and a very small rip saw.

Eugene Villaume constituted the entire force of the concern. He fired up, raised steam, then started his saws, cut through his boards to size, then shut down his saws and nailed up his boxes, then loaded them on a little one horse platform wagon and delivered them himself. Delivering the boxes he secured new orders and came back and repeated the performance.

The family lived on the West Side river flats. As was common at the time, their residences were near their place of employment. Eugene's first home was a half a block from the mill. "My father



When business increased, the Villaume Company moved to this larger building, where it was located from 1895 to 1905.

was working all the time,” his son Julius remembered. “Every time a meal was ready, we had to go get him.” According to the 1887 city directory, the Villaume Brothers factory was then located at 76 West Fairfield and Eugene and his family lived at 68 West Indiana.

The June 30, 1892, issue of *The Broadaxe*, a local newspaper, carried a front-page article headlined “West Side Box Factory.” The reporter wrote a glowing report on the factory that now took up two city blocks with several buildings. There was “a work shop or factory, engine house, drying house and warehouse. In the factory every conceivable piece of machinery used for the manufacture of boxes is employed and can be seen in operation every day.” A new “two-story brick engine house was recently completed and a new 150 horsepower engine is about to take the place of the old one.”

The growth was the result of the business being “alert to avail itself of every method and invention which can in any way tend to improve the quality or field of usefulness for their products,” which ranged “from the tiniest pocket box to the mammoth Saratoga trunk.” It employed “seventy men, Mr. Villaume personally overseeing every department.” From its small beginnings, it had grown into one of the largest manufacturing concerns in St. Paul. “The keynote of the success of the West Side Box factory, Mr. Villaume told the writer, has been their determination to manufacture first-class goods and let no other pass through their hands of the business.”

Persistence, Innovation, and Resourcefulness

On July 3, 1897, Eugene incorporated the company. He decided to diversify into additional lumber-related services, such as panel work, interior trim for commercial buildings and elaborate residences. At the same time the company’s name was changed to the Villaume Box and Lumber Company, which reflected some of the new directions.

The incorporation papers stated that “the general nature of [the company’s] business shall be the manufacturing of boxes, lumber, moldings, interior finish, sash, doors and blinds.” It would also

engage in the selling of a variety of unnamed products and in holding real and personal property. Under Minnesota law, the initial incorporation would last for thirty years, but it could be extended into the future. The company was authorized to issue up to 1,000 privately held shares. The officers listed were Eugene Villaume, president; Frank X. Moosbrugger, vice president; and Albert Moosbrugger, who served as secretary.

As the population of St. Paul and the surrounding area increased, the need for beer boxes continued to grow and over the years the company made hundreds of thousands of them for the Hamm’s, Yoerg, Schell, Schmidt, Grain Belt, Glueck and other breweries. In addition, it solicited business from commission firms in the city and soon had a profitable business making boxes for bananas and onions and other vegetables.

An increase in production naturally led to the need to find additional sources of raw material. For a short time Villaume had a company in Ellsworth, Wisconsin, that cut hardwood for use in making their boxes, but the supply was soon exhausted. Most of the factory’s wood came from the local region, and the company negotiated

individual contracts with small landowners in the area. On February 20, 1893, for instance, Villaume signed an agreement with C.W. Youngman of St. Paul for the sale of “saw logs” in Pierce County, Wisconsin. The arrangement included “all basswood in saw logs not already contracted for with said Villaume Bros. and all rock and water elm over seven inches in diameter, twelve feet from the stump.” They were given a year to cut the trees. The contract further stated that “in the cutting and removing of said timber,” the purchaser would “cut the stumps low as directed by the foreman of the said party of the first part, and will pile all brush and waste in heaps as directed by said foreman in a neat and businesslike manner.”

Just before the turn of the century, there was a major breakthrough leading to large-scale production. A Colorado melon grower was in town and was very impressed by the Villaume Company’s quality and speed in manufacturing its boxes. This grower ordered sixteen rail carloads of crates. The contract included very exact specifications for the size of the crates, their manner of manufacture, kind of wood used for making them, and how they would be bundled.



This 1889 photo shows some of the Villaume workers and their specialty wood products. Eugene Villaume is in the front row, center, with his son Frank on the bicycle on the left, Louis peaking at the camera from behind Frank’s shoulder, and Charles holding a hammer with both hands and standing in the front row just to his father’s right.



Eugene Villaume and his wife, the former Christine Mooseburger, about the time of their marriage in July 1887. Photo by Palmquist.

The lumber was “to be good merchantable basswood, free from knots and defects affecting the strength of the lumber.” The completed products were to be delivered to Rocky Ford, Colorado. There were a few contingencies. If the melon crop was destroyed by hail or other unexpected cause the order, “with the exception of cars already in process of manufacture, or in transit,” could be canceled.

There was a similar clause in the contract for the Villaume Company. In case of “any unforeseen accident causing the closing down of our factory, or the destruction of our stock by fire or otherwise,” the contract would not be enforced. The work was “to commence at once, and delivery to be made as quickly as possible, at least three cars per week, commencing August 1, 1898.”

St. Paul’s French Colony

Eugene Villaume became a respected member of several citywide groups and was also active in the local commercial club. He considered himself a Republican but never ran for public office. He did serve a term on the St. Paul library

board. His most active participation was with the small but active ethnic community, sometimes referred to as “St. Paul’s French Colony.”

Around 1900, there were several thousand people of French descent in St. Paul, but most of them were from Canada. Five or six hundred came directly from Europe. Some of those were members of Eugene’s family whom he had brought from his old home. The two groups worked together to form the French-language Church of St. Louis (founded 1866 and located at 10th Street and Cedar Avenue) and a weekly local newspaper called *Le Canadien*. The natives of France did have their own organization. “A small society is L’Alliance Francaise,” a 1902 issue of the *Pioneer Press* said, “but it boasts an honorable distinction. For among its twenty-five members are included most of the leading Frenchmen of St. Paul that were born in the mother country.” The Alliance was established in the 1890s “for fraternal and beneficent purposes” and met on the first Monday each month. By 1902 Eugene Villaume was its president. He was also involved in the Church of St. Louis and when the group decided to construct a new building in 1909, Eugene Villaume headed the fundraising committee.

When the volume of work at the Villaume Company got to the point that he could leave the firm’s day-to-day management in the hands of others, Eugene liked to return to France for visits that lasted from weeks to months. A letter dated March 12, 1912, written to his brother-in-law in St. Paul, shows his sense of humor, but it also refers to Eugene’s struggle with asthma and his recurring health problems that later led to the removal of half of his stomach at the Mayo Clinic:

We are all well and no one is complaining. . . . I must say we have all taken on some stoutness. I myself suffer always from my old complaint. I have consulted a doctor here and have been photographed for X rays. They think that another operation is necessary but one that I think will be no worse for waiting for our return to St. Paul.

Eugene had planned to return to St. Paul shortly, but a cousin persuaded him to stay longer than he had intended. It turned out to be a lucky decision, and for the second time he was talked out of an ill-fated venture. He and his family canceled reservations on the luxury liner they had planned to take in April 1912, and missed going on the maiden voyage of the doomed *Titanic*.



The saws and lathes that these men operated at the Villaume plant around 1900 were driven by a steam engine that transferred its power to each piece of equipment by a system of belts and pulleys. As the hanging light bulbs indicate, the plant also had electrical power for lighting.

Villaume's Cuban Connection

Every so often, the members of St. Paul's exclusive Minnesota Club were recipients of a unique winter treat—fresh pineapples compliments of Eugene Villaume. He sent them up via steamboat and railroad from the Isle of Pines. He loved to remind his friends that he was wintering in the balmy climate of the large island just south of Cuba.

The Isle of Pines, as it was then called, was not included in Cuba's boundaries when the United States negotiated a treaty (1904) with the Cubans after the Spanish-American War. This led to competing claims to the island by the United States and the newly independent Cuba. American land companies started promoting the small island, and by 1903 several hundred American had settled there or bought land. Just after the turn of the century, the Villaume Company bought around 100,000 acres of lumber land at the south end of the Isle of Pines and set up the International Lumber and Supply Company to deal with what was hoped to be a very profitable foreign investment.

The Villaumes were popular members of the social life of the town of Santa Fe, which boasted that it was filled with American stores, and had an American doctor, a library and more than one ladies' club. The island was also an answer to Eugene Villaume's quest for a warmer climate that could ease his constant asthma. He began wintering with family and friends in a home with a grove of trees, and it was clear that he enjoyed the area. In May 1916 Eugene sent a letter from St. Paul to the *Isle of Pines Appeal*, an English-language newspaper:

Since we arrived last month we have not had two days of nice weather. Cold rains nearly every day . . . I think the Isle of Pines is the only place to live. I had a return of my asthma the first day we arrived here, and have to stay by the radiator all day, while on the Island was not troubled with it at all, did not miss an hour's sleep, neither a meal.

Other family members were less enthusiastic. His wife and daughter hated the trip there and were always seasick on the boats. In a letter back home, Eugénie wrote that, "Mother says to tell you she thinks it all right here." However, "she prefers the cold weather" and had "never felt so very far away from home and all I love . . . as I do here," she lamented. "But wait till we get acclimated and when we start putting up some curtains."

The company did its best to make a profit on the Isle of Pine holdings and then tried to sell the land. It turned out to be harder than expected. In 1918 a real estate firm said it was "making diligent efforts to sell your lumber

tract," but it had been unsuccessful. "You must remember that these war times are very unusual and concessions must be made accordingly."

It was difficult to manage investments in a foreign country. One person wrote that people were logging illegally on their property, but a contact in Cuba said that "as to this saw mill, they are not on your land." The second party was willing to investigate further, but only if they were sent "expense money."

Then the tract was hit by a natural disaster. In 1926, the International Lumber and Supply Co. of St. Paul received a terse telegram: "Hurricane devastated Isle Pines. Recommend inspection be made." One man wrote of rumors that the mahogany and other large trees were still standing. He offered to go see, but wanted money to hire a boat and for expenses.

On August 27, 1927, the directors of the International Lumber and



Eugene Villaume, center, with two unidentified men at the Isle of Pines near Cuba.

Supply Company authorized representatives “to sell and dispose of our timber tract in the Isle of Pines” or at least “to let contracts for the cutting of said timber,” or even “to let contracts for the making of charcoal.” Two board members were then dispatched to Cuba.

In the 1930s there was a group burning charcoal on the Isle of Pines land, but there was only a small demand for the product in Cuba. The company hoped “to find a market for the products, so as to increase our income for our property,” they said in a letter to a possible buyer. They did not have any luck.

Seventeen years later, there was a special meeting of the stockholders of International Lumber and Supply Company on February 5, 1944. It was “for the purpose of considering the sale of its property in the Isle of Pines, Cuba.” They passed the resolution, but there is no record of whether or not they were able to find a buyer.

No one seems to know for sure whatever happened to the Isle of Pines property. There are no known company records that give a final accounting of the family vacation house or the large lumber acreage. In the late 1920s the government built a large prison there, which from 1953 to 1955 contained rebel leader Fidel Castro. Most assume that after the 1959 Revolution, the Castro government appropriated the land in the Isle of Pines, which has now been renamed “Isla de la Juventud” or “The Island of Youth.”

Source: The Villaume Company papers, “Isle of Pines” box.

EUGENE VILLAUME, Pres't & Mgr. A. H. VILLAUME, V. Pres't. F. E. VILLAUME, Treas. ALBERT G. MOOSBRUGGER, Sec'y.

The Villaume Box and Lumber Co.,

Cor. West Chicago Ave. and Walter St.

PACKING BOXES. EGG CASES. BOX SHOOKS.

LUMBER,

Lath, Shingles, Sash, Doors, Mouldings, Etc., Office Fixtures,
Interior Hardwood Finish, Saloon Fixtures.

Manufacturers and Dealers in all kinds of

HARDWOOD LUMBER.

OFFICE and FACTORY, Cor. WEST CHICAGO AVE. and WALTER ST., WEST SIDE.

Shortly after it was incorporated, the Villaume Company advertised its new name in the 1902 St. Paul City Directory. “Box Shooks” are the unassembled wood components of a box that can be conveniently shipped, stored, and assembled later.

Real Estate Opportunities

In addition to making containers, Villaume Box and Lumber was involved in real estate. The financial records of the company have preserved a few examples of its leases and sales. One is a 1910 agreement for a dwelling house located at 161 West Indiana. The monthly rent was set at \$1.50. The following year another agreement allowed the Theodore Hamm Brewing Company to occupy a two-story brick building at 146 South Wabasha.

Villaume’s real estate business was not limited to traditional structures. On June 18, 1910, G.W. Kibby and Company agreed to rent “one cave known as cave six, located about three hundred feet west of the corner of Chicago Avenue and Hyde Street, in block 60, Robertson’s Addition to West St. Paul.” They would pay ten dollars a month for one month. The cave business must have been good, since a man was hired in December 1910, “to make by blasting and digging two caves,” that had already been “started by the box company.” They were to be expanded to two hundred feet long, sixteen feet wide, and ten feet high “with an arched ceiling.” The sand was to be “hailed out and dumped at the mouth

of said caves” and would be removed by the Villaume Box and Lumber. “The floors are to be left level. The walls to be straight, and the walls and the ceiling are to be left smooth.”

Sometimes Eugene partnered with others in business ventures. In 1916 he, Louis Yoerg of the Yoerg Brewery, and John A. Seeger of the Seeger Refrigerator Company formed the Riverside Development Corporation, headquartered in South St. Paul. Its bylaws allowed the organization “to hold, manage, lease, sell, convey, exchange, mortgage or otherwise deal with and dispense of lands . . . leasehold and other real property.”

In some cases, the Villaume Company would invest in existing businesses and occasionally take them over. One such acquisition was especially interesting. In April 1917 Eugene was installed as the new president of Osgood and Blodgett, three decades after its owners had vowed to drive him out of business.

The Second Generation Emerges

Even after Eugene Villaume became prosperous, he decided to stay on the



West Side rather than move to a more fashionable area of the city. In 1895, he and his wife built a new Queen Anne-style home. The two-story frame structure, complete with towers and turrets, was at 123 West Isabel. As might be expected, the interior was filled with beautiful wood. It was fortunate that this home had five bedrooms because the Villaume children, even when adults, lived there for a time. The *1905 Polk Directory* for St. Paul listed them all as boarders. They and their jobs at Villaume were identified in this way: Alfred, vice president; Charles, city salesman; Frank, treasurer; Julius, clerk; and Louis, clerk.

The Villaume house was technically only two blocks away from the plant, but it was located high on the ninety-foot bluff that overlooked the flats. A telephone was installed to keep in touch with Eugene. It was one of the few in the neighborhood at the time and many families used it. Eugene also purchased almost a block of land between his house and the bluff line so that his children and other family members could build homes nearby. There he planted gardens and, for a time, cows grazed so that everyone could have fresh milk.

Continuing the Family Tradition of Service

Starting before World War I and continuing through the 1920s, Eugene and Christine's children began to start their own families. They decided to stay close together and most built houses near the home on Isabel or on the bluff-line lots that had been parceled out to them. Julius figured out how to run electricity from the factory up to the houses, an arrangement that lasted for decades.

The Villaume children took their places in St. Paul society. They joined a variety of groups, were members of the St. Paul Athletic Club and several golf courses. Charles was one of the most gregarious and became well known around town. He was a founder of the local Rotary club and in 1915 a short spoof appeared in the group's newsletter. "True Stories About Big Rotarians" jokingly claimed to be "the portrait of the biggest Rotarian in captivity. . . . He is thirty-three years of age, is over six feet tall and . . . has the biggest feet of any man in St. Paul."

The women in the extended Villaume family were also active in their own ventures. Louis's wife Julia, for instance, was very active in civic and charity work. She often volunteered with the Red Cross and was on the boards of the Red Cross, United Charities, Catholic Charities, Goodwill Industries, and the College Club. At the outset of World War I, Julia supervised a group of twenty women in a sewing project for the French Red Cross. Later, she was in charge of a group of fifty women for the American organization. Her work continued during the Great Depression. When the national government

sent 90,000 yards of cotton material to St. Paul in 1932 "to be made into garments for underprivileged persons," she supervised "the cutting of some 30,000 pieces of wearing apparel."

Family members would often spend their summers in a spacious house in Forest Lake. According to his granddaughter Christine Linsmayer, Eugene had a green thumb and one of the best gardens in the village. "He had every kind of vegetable you could imagine." He also had a grape arbor. "People came from all around to see the garden. There would be baskets of beans and grandmother would sort them into bags and I would go up and down the block and give them to people as gifts from the Villaume garden."

Christine remarked on Eugene's sense of humor and sweetness toward children. She remembered that every summer he would spend time at the lathe in his workshop and make sabots-French wooden shoes-for all of the kids. One time at the funeral parlor that was housed in a Forest Lake department store, Christine saw "a darling little all floral dress" meant for girls who had died. It was for sale for five dollars. "Mother did not think it an appropriate garment for her four year old" and would not buy it. "But Grandfather heard about it and said, 'You know, let's go look in the strawberry patch.' I looked down and there was a five dollar bill under the leaves."

Eugene imported food and other items from abroad. He sent for French truffles and annually ordered barrels of wine shipped to him from Bordeaux. "When the neighbors heard that the Villaume boys were filling bottles with the wine,



The Villaume Company letterhead on the top of this page is from 1898; the one on the bottom dates from at least 1918. They illustrate how the Villaume Company plant was growing in size, adding senior managers, while continuing to show all the signs of a prosperous firm.



Eugene and Christine Villaume's Queen Anne-style home at 123 West Isabel Street was built in 1895. This photograph is undated, but appears to have been taken in the early 1900s. Situated atop the West Side bluffs, the house was more than ninety feet above the family business on the river flats below.

apparently it was a great sensation.” As a rule, “any French family that came was welcome. He often ended up hiring them and arranging for them and building them a house,” Christine said. “He was faithful to his old village.” Because the fighting during the war had greatly damaged the local church in the village and needed to be rebuilt, Eugene helped them out financially. As a way of expressing their gratitude, the congregation saw to it that his face appeared as one of the figures in a new stained glass window.

When she was eighty-one, Eugénie wrote a short impression of those years. Looking back was “as looking through a kaleidoscope . . . is it a dream or reality?”

The happy days, the sad days, the uneventful days:

The French way of life—dear, quiet, loving mother, wonderful father deeply engrossed in making a career in a world far different than his native France . . . Our home always

[an] open-house to all the relations and newcomers from France made welcome . . .

The yearly trips to escape Minnesota’s severe winters—California, Caribbean cruises, Havana, the Isle of Pines with its interesting people . . . seeking the warmth and sun. The years of World War One when travel was restricted we stayed in New Orleans.”

New Opportunities and Growth

Over the years, the size of the Villaume plant grew as its production increased. The Omaha Railroad put in a rail siding to accommodate the company’s growing shipping volume and its need for more lumber. Because of government contracts during World War One, a big addition was made to the factory. Eventually the company’s facilities covered around sixteen acres on the Mississippi River flats. The West Side neighborhood was also spreading across the bluff and new

homes were being built, many of them for Villaume workers. To make the trip to the plant easier, a tall wooden staircase was built from the top of the bluff to the company property below. Many of the men may have used the wooden steps to get to the Villaume home on New Year’s Day. According to his granddaughter, that was when he handed out a holiday gift. “He sat in the library and each worker would come in and would be given his reward.”

Because the company was able to adapt to changing conditions, business stayed profitable in the 1920s, even when Villaume’s biggest clients saw their sales slide because of national prohibition. When the Volstead Act went into effect in 1920 and ended the legal manufacture of liquor and strong beer, many of the St. Paul breweries turned to the production of soft drinks or the legal “near beer.” Consequently the box business remained a most important part of the Villaume line.

The skill that Villaume employees demonstrated in turning out special millwork fixtures helped make Villaume products stand out from those manufactured by the rest of the wood-working businesses in St. Paul. The Villaume Company was well known for its manufacturing of paneling and cabinets and for the custom wood fixtures that it produced for churches, hospitals, and schools. Some of the work that Villaume did for local churches included pews that the company made for Hamline University Church. The firm also completed panel and trim work for St. Luke’s and St. Steven’s churches in St. Paul, Nazareth Hall in Lake Johanna, and St. Mary’s of the Lake in White Bear.

Some of the company’s most outstanding work was done for St. Paul businesses and the owners of several elegant houses in the area. One of their signature homes was Louis Hill’s Swiss Chalet in North Oaks, which was built with specially selected redwood. On more than one occasion the high-quality millwork that Villaume manufactured was shipped to Chicago and installed in a bar. In downtown St. Paul, Van Duyhne-Moran Fixture Company, a Villaume subsidiary, milled and installed mahogany doors and trim on the top twenty-five floors of the First National Bank. They also made the fixtures and



A Villaume family portrait dating from about 1908 that was taken on the lawn of their home on West Isabel Street. Christine and Eugene Villaume are seated in the center of the front row. Also seated are their daughters Eugénie (left) and Antoinette. Standing left to right are their sons Charles, Alfred, Julius, Louis, and Frank.

interior trim for the Northern States Power Company's downtown St. Paul office building, the Lowry Medical Arts Annex, and the Field-Schlick department store.

Surviving the Great Depression

The 1930s brought hard times to most companies, but Villaume Box and Lumber managed to stay afloat and support several families. One of their most memorable undertakings during the era was being the contractor for all the interior wood finishing for the new St. Paul City and County Courthouse. Because the Depression had substantially reduced the cost of materials and labor below those that the architects had anticipated when they were initially planning this government building, they revised some of their plans to include more elegant building materials and fixtures. The reactions when the eighteen-story Art Deco building opened to the public on December 1932 were almost universally positive.

Villaume had been the logical firm to provide the expertise that was needed. The St. Paul *Dispatch* commented on the company's work. "The largest collection of rare woods in the world has been used

in finishing the interior of St. Paul's new City Hall and Courthouse," the newspaper stated:

Europe, Africa and the orient, India, Mexico and the South Sea Islands as well as the for-

ests of America all have contributed some logs to the making of the veneer used generally in finishing many of the rooms and corridors. . . . For some rooms in the building, it was necessary to cut seven or eight logs before one could be found to furnish the properly matched veneer for the entire room.

For over six months 150 to 175 skilled woodworkers and cabinetmakers were kept busy fabricating and installing 200,000 square feet of material. More than half of the wood was American black walnut, but a wide variety of other kinds of lumber was also used in the building's interior. "Sawed in different ways" were "white oak, butt walnut, bird's eye maple, red birch, butternut and California walnut, all from the United States." There was primo vera from Mexico and mahogany from South and Central America and several equatorial islands. Europe provided English oak, French walnut and Austrian oak. There was African mahogany, avodire and framire, as well as Indian teak, rosewood and laurel. Australia provided Tasmanian oak and koa came from the Hawaiian Islands.

Shortly after the opening, one of the building custodians wrote a short guide that was published in his union's national yearbook. He detailed the twenty-six



Eugene Villaume stands in the midst of his renowned strawberry patch at the family's summer home in Forest Lake. The wooden cat in the foreground served as a kind of scarecrow.



Eugene Villaume relaxes in the library of his home while doing two of his favorite pastimes: reading and smoking a good cigar.

different woods and where to find them, including the fact that there was a cigar shop furnished in American butt walnut. A good deal of space was given to the two rooms that he felt were the most impressive. "The City Council chamber is the largest and most beautiful room in the building and perhaps the finest of any room in the country for similar purposes," he stated. "The walls and benches are of English brown oak. The horseshoe shaped council table is of golden Padouk wood from Czecho Slovakia. The inlays are of peanut figured Hungarian ebony and European pear wood."

According to the guide, "the Mayor's private office is one of the beauty spots of the building." The walls are finished in Peroba wood from Brazil, which was "considered the most beautiful wood in the building. The large cabinet toward Wabasha St. is inlaid with practically all of the woods used in the building. It shows a picture of the old City Hall and the new and is a wonderful piece of workmanship."

The Villaume Company celebrated its fiftieth anniversary the same year the City and County Courthouse was completed. To celebrate, they printed and distributed an elegant booklet, which surveyed the history and accomplishments of their organization. It also featured each of Eugene's five sons. The brothers started working in their father's plant at an early age, the text read, "learning the business from the ground up." After "years of training and hard labor in the plant, each of the brothers, upon reaching maturity, was able to discover the place in business for which he was best fitted." In the fiftieth anniversary

booklet, there were studio portraits of each son and short comments on each of them:

"Alfred H. Villaume. Vice President." From an early stage he "showed a natural aptitude for things mechanical." His knowledge of machinery, "even in the early days of the firm's existence, proved to be of great value to his father." He supervised the operation of all machinery and the manufacturing of the products.

"Frank E. Villaume. Treasurer." He was in charge of the finances of the business. He also looked after the "several hundred resi-



This 1932 photo shows the extensive woodwork that Villaume supplied for the interior of Louis W. Hill's residence in North Oaks. Much of the wood in Hill's "Swiss Chalet" was specially selected and sawed California redwood. Photo courtesy of the Louis W. Hill Papers, James J. Hill Reference Library.

dences and lots in the business and residential districts of St. Paul and South St. Paul" that were owned by the business.

"Charles E. Villaume. Sales Manager." Of the five brothers, the sketch said, "perhaps the most widely known is Charles." He was manager for all city sales "and is constantly in contact with the firm's customers and friends. Twin City business men know him for his geniality and good fellowship."

Julius L. Villaume. Vice President." Jules, as he was known, handled all of the lumber



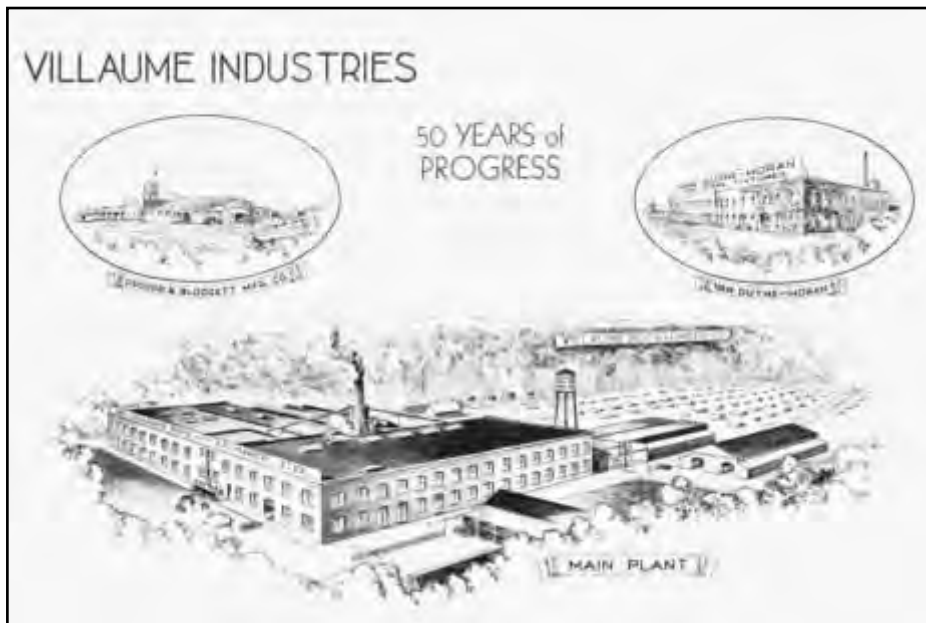
The handsome Villaume millwork that was used in the mayor's office in the St. Paul-Ramsey County Courthouse is evident in this 1937 photo. The custom-designed cabinet on the far wall of the office featured wood inlays of the old and new government buildings. Photo by Hedrich-Blessing Studio. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

and millwork sales. "His share of directing the activities of the firm also includes seeing that customers receive the satisfactory service for which Villaume Industries are so well known."

"Louis A. Villaume. Assistant Secretary of Villaume Box & Lumber Co. and Manager of Osgood and Blodgett." His working day "was divided between managing the firm's interest in Osgood and Blodgett . . . and taking care of the company's legal matters. From time to time, he also represents the firm in its out-of-town dealings."

Albert G. Moosbrugger was also given a prominent spot in the publication. He was secretary for all three of the company's businesses and during his forty-two years with the firm had "seen more years of active service . . . than any other individual with the exception of its founder. He has always interested himself in all of the company's various activities, has done its buying and a large amount of sales work."

Although Eugénie was not directly involved in the everyday operations of the Villaume plant and she was not mentioned in the anniversary booklet, she



When the Villaume Company published its *Villaume 50 Years 1882–1932* celebrating the company's history, this illustration ran across the two center pages. Osgood & Blodgett and the Van-Duyne–Moran companies were owned by the Villaume Company.

was an important member of the family team that owned and managed the company. She was always aware of what was going on at the plant, especially if there were new developments. In addition she was active as a stockholder and served on the Villaume board of directors. At the same time Eugénie was closely involved in the activities at the bluff homes of the Villaume family. She spent time with various relatives, cooked meals occasionally when someone was sick, and made sure that maintenance of the houses was taken care of, often by factory employees.

The Next Generation Carries on the Tradition

In February 1933, “following my policy of gradually having my wealth pass into the hands of my heirs,” Eugene Villaume transferred some of his shares of company stock to all six of his surviving children (Antoinette had died in 1909). “This will induce my sons to get acquainted in assuming complete responsibility for the management of the business. At the same time I do not wish to slight my daughter.” He made these stock transfers when he was eighty. By the end of the year, the company founder was dead. Eugene Villaume had been at the helm for five

decades until his fatal illness in October 1933. At a special board meeting on November 13, 1933, his son Frank was elected president of the company.

Laurence C. Hodgson—known as “Larry Ho”—a long-time mayor of St. Paul, wrote an epitaph for Eugene that was included in a memorial book published by the Riverview Commercial Club. “Few men live a life of Eugene Villaume,” the tribute began:

From his early days to the end he had one destiny in mind, achieved it and was satisfied with it. He saw his first ambition realized, and he turned it into a unified and satisfying pattern of life. . . . His business success was no more marked than his triumph in personal living. A fine citizen, a noble man, a loyal friend, he earned the high esteem of all who place character and steadfastness above the more flashy qualities of life.

According to the *Pioneer Press*, Eugene left a substantial estate about two thirds of which was in company stock. He also had a considerable number of outstanding World War I Liberty Bonds. The newspaper also suggested that the Depression might have had some adverse affect on the business because one of his major assets was an unpaid loan to the company.

Then Christine, Eugene’s wife, died in 1934. By the end of the decade, two of their sons had also passed away. Charles had no children and his wife had died sixteen years earlier. So his estate was distributed to his siblings, nieces and nephews, and Anna Kodelka, the family’s long-time domestic helper. Charles also followed the family’s tradition of charitable giving with bequests to the Little Sisters of the Poor, St. Louis Church, and Neighborhood House. Alfred Villaume had been in bad health for several years. He had been spending winters in California to try to find relief. When he died in 1939, the Villaume board voted to give his widow Josephine continued support, “including such electrical power and auto services as is furnished any member of the Villaume family.”

The hard economic times may have prompted the company to get into a new venture—a comprehensive line of unpainted furniture. It was “most modestly priced despite the fact that in both materials and workmanship, every piece represents a high level of quality.” A specific pitch toward women was included in the 1940 product brochure for retailers. “Show the average housewife a way to make her home more attractive at small expense, and you’re sure of a ready response,” it stated. “Most women have the urge to paint and Villaume’s unfinished furniture offers them the ideal opportunity to satisfy that urge.”

In the late 1930s one of the most ingenious activities on Villaume property was the use of the caves in the West Side bluffs for an unusual product. When a University of Minnesota professor who had been buying mushrooms in one of these caves determined that the temperature and humidity inside the caves was similar to the those found in the caves that the French used to make Roquefort cheese, he thought that a similar enterprise in Minnesota could be successful. In 1934 this professor finally received enough funding to try out the idea in “a small, experimental cave” rented from the Villaume Company. It was a success. The next year he rented a larger cave that was over two hundred feet deep. “Approximately an inch of sand was scraped from all surfaces of the cave in order to

present clean surfaces, and more ‘Minnesota Blue’ was produced.”

The sales of “Minnesota Blue” cheese waned, however, and the project was mostly forgotten. But in the spring of 1940, Germany invaded France and imports of Roquefort were cut off. That fall the Kraft Cheese Company rented a cave from Villaume and a *Pioneer Press* headline announced “City’s Million-Dollar Cheese Industry Gets Off With a Bang.”

Serving on the Home Front

Like many other Minnesota companies, World War II greatly influenced operations at Villaume. Nevertheless the company did its part to help win the war. Initially the company contributed by manufacturing thousands of K-ration cartons for the armed services. Another major war contract that the company received was for producing ammunition crates for Federal Cartridge, which operated the Twin Cities Ordnance Plant that was located in New Brighton.

When in December 1943 a potential customer asked Villaume to bid on a contract for over 200,000 wooden packing boxes, their response was that they were “now devoting practically our entire plant in the manufacture of Gliders so that we would not have the space nor the help to take on additional business.” Because gliders were cheaper to make and their pilots easier to train than the pilots of powered aircraft, the U.S. War Department let out a number of contracts for the building of wood and canvas gliders that could be used to carry troops and their equipment into combat. Consequently Villaume received a large contract as a subcontractor to produce the wooden wings, control surfaces, and floors for the gliders that would be manufactured in the Twin Cities area. The company also received a separate contract to produce the shipping crates that would be used for the delivery of glider components overseas.

Beneficial as these contracts were to the bottom line at Villaume, they also brought many changes to the plant. The company’s old drill presses, for example, presented some problems in meeting the air force’s demanding specifications. But thanks to one man’s ingenuity, a way was found to adapt the drills and



The Villaume sons in 1912 at Forest Lake. Left to right, they are Louis, Frank, Charles, Julius, and Alfred. According to family lore, Eugene traded a small house for an Apperson Jackrabbit automobile, possibly this car. Photo by T.J. Wheeler.

achieve the required precision. Soon, around 1,500 people—many of them women—were working on three different shifts at Villaume. The increase in people employed at the plant forced the company to hire a paymaster. Between 1942 and 1945, Villaume eventually produced wood parts for over 1,500 gliders that were used in the landings at Normandy, the air assault on some key bridges in Holland, the crossing of the Rhine, and in several battles in the Pacific theater.

Evolving in the Postwar World

There was a major readjustment of national and local economies after World War II. Because of the pent-up demand for housing that had developed during the war, a building boom soon developed in the Twin Cities area. St. Paul still had empty land at the edges of the city in the late 1940s. These places, including Highland Park, Battle Creek, and the Phalen area, were platted out and filled with new single-family bungalows, ramblers, and ranch-style homes. Bordering suburbs such as Falcon Heights, Roseville, and Maplewood followed suit. Villaume was dynamic enough to change with the times and, in many instances, the new

homes in these areas were constructed with their products.

There were also personnel changes at Villaume. When the war contracts disappeared, the work force had to shrink. Then, in 1946, company president Frank Villaume died. Julius, who was then the board chairman, succeeded Frank. Julius would be the last member of the second



These women are doing some of the extensive handwork that was required for making the wings of a CG-4A glider at the Villaume plant.

generation of the Villaume family to head the organization. In that same year, long-time director Albert Moosbrugger tried to tender his resignation. He “wished to retire from active business and take a vacation.” The board said, however, his advice was “necessary to the effective conduct and operation of the corporation’s business,” and refused to accept it. They suggested instead that he could reduce his workload and “may absent himself from business at such times as he deems advisable.” He took them up on the approach and the board meeting minutes three months later said, “Mr. Albert J. Moosbrugger reported on his trip out west.”

Two other 1946 events illustrate some of the postwar problems the company faced. The first was a huge fire in one of the buildings in the Villaume yards. Hundreds of people lined Kellogg Boulevard to watch flames destroy thousands of dollars worth of lumber. There also was a Twin Cities-wide strike of millwrights that lasted for several weeks and partially shut down local home construction. Three years later a more costly labor disturbance affected production at the Villaume plant. The minutes of June 12, 1949, “reported on negotiations with representatives of the millwork operators union, and indicated that it appears as though the present strike would continue.” The strike was finally settled, but then, in late August, “the plant was shut down by virtue of the truck strike . . . and the factory workers refusal to go through the picket lines established . . . in front of the offices and plant property.”

Rising Above the Big Flood

Julius Villaume had kept a journal for years, jotting down weather and other information in it. On the fourteenth of April 1952, he made an unusual entry. It read: “temperature 38, skies overcast, plant flooded, came to work by rowboat.”

There had been floods on the Mississippi before, but the 1952 deluge was much more severe. On the ninth of April, water began to back up into the basement of the Villaume factory. Workers built wood and sand dikes around the main building, but the adjacent lumberyard was soon swamped by several feet of water. On Easter Sunday, April 13, the swollen

Mississippi broke through the makeshift dikes and flooded the basement and some of the first floor. At nine that night the fire department showed up. There was no blaze, but the flood had set off the automatic fire sprinkler system. Investigators determined that the system’s shut-off valve was located under nine feet of water and a professional diver had to be brought in to turn it off.

The company decided to open on Monday. For several days, employees were met by truck at the nearest dry street and driven through low water toward the plant. They then transferred to a rowboat and were taken to an outside stairway leading to the second floor. Special power lines were sent into the plant’s upper floors and the millwork department continued to function. Other lumber firms actually came to the aid of the Villaume Company. One of them offered space and a special phone line was installed between their switchboard and the West Side. They even allowed deliveries to be made from their own stocks in loaned trucks. The clean up began on April 21st, after the flood had receded. Scores of saws, joiners, sanders, and motors were out of commission. Lumber had to be cleaned up and restacked. Business had been lost, there were major stock and property damages to address, and 125 workers had been laid off for a week.

By the mid 1950s the box division at Villaume had become the largest consumer of native-grown lumber in Minnesota other than the lumber that was used in home construction. Millwrights at Villaume had developed some new types of custom-designed wooden containers for clients’ specialized requirements for packaging everything from South St. Paul meats to delicate electronic assemblies for 3M. Consequently production had nearly quadrupled. The building boom of the 1950s and ‘60s, spurred by the rapid development of the suburbs, helped the company’s lumber business. Dealing with real estate developers and various contractors in this era was a way to help with sales of lumber and other wood products.

The board minutes for July 1952, for example, referred to the “acquisition of parcels of real estate . . . for the purpose of increasing the sale of the companies products to contractors and other builders of said real estate.” The future development that appeared to be coming in Falcon Heights and the area around St. Paul’s Phalen Lake was discussed at another board meeting. A parcel of property that Villaume owned was sold to the Cardinal Realty Company “upon the understanding that said company would buy, from the Villaume Company, all of the lumber, building material and millwork used in the erection of homes.”



After Mississippi River water from the 1952 flood had started to recede, a photographer was able to show how completely the river had overrun the West Side flats and isolated the Villaume plant.

There were other kinds of cooperative ventures, but not all of them turned out to be profitable. To ensure a wood supply that could be quickly delivered, the company sometimes invested in northern Minnesota lumbering operations, but over time Villaume's management found it often had to write off debt when these small enterprises became insolvent.

The architectural millwork division of Villaume continued to be the largest producer in St. Paul. Some of their work in the 1950s included the Minnesota Mutual building in St. Paul, the Farmers Union Central Exchange, and the new State Highway building in the Capitol approach. Schools, such as Archbishop Murray High School, Edgewood Junior High, and Highland Park Junior High contracted with the Villaume Company for architectural millwork for their building projects. In a letter in the *Pioneer Press* at the time, a company spokesman proudly explained that one of their mottos was "If it can be manufactured from wood, we can make it."

The Company Faces a Turning Point

Starting as early as 1954, there were occasional suggestions at Villaume board meetings that if the financial condition of the company didn't improve, they might consider liquidation. Some family members were ready to sell; others were dead set against it. The late 1940s and early 1950s were a difficult period for Villaume's bottom line. A report in the mid-fifties admitted that "on a number of occasions during the past six years the stockholders . . . have been confronted with circumstances which have raised the question of what to do with their business." In two of the last six years there had been net losses, the document recounted. The one in 1946 "was largely discounted as being caused by post-war reorganization. That judgment was correct since 1947 and 1948 were profit years." Then there was the 1949 strike, "which held up operations for a period sufficient to produce a very considerable loss." More recently, special millwork sales had picked up and "in the profitable years of 1950 and 1951, the earlier difficulties were largely forgotten."



Following the groundbreaking, Robert Linsmayer, far right, Gerry Rauenhorst, second from left, and two other unidentified men examine the plans for the new home of Villaume Industries in Eagandale Township in about 1970.

But the problems did not go away. Board members knew that the articles of incorporation were going to expire on July 3, 1957. The articles needed to be extended or the company would go out of existence. Some family members asserted that a liquidation of the assets rather than continuing the company's operations was the better choice.

Others, particularly Eugene's daughter Eugénie Meyerding, did not want to see what her father had built over so many years "sold down the river." She thought the solution was new management. After failing to convince others of her view and suspecting that "something funny was going on at the factory," she began to initiate legal proceedings. In 1955 attorneys were hired and they sent a communication to board officers. "For some time past . . . our clients have felt there should be a more aggressive and efficient management," the letter said. There were acceptable alternatives, but "to make no change and to continue as at present . . . is wholly unacceptable."

The matter dragged on for months. Then a St. Paul newspaper printed an ar-

ticle under the headline "Airing of Will Action Sought." The threatened litigation revolved around trusts of company stock and their management. The newspaper article suggested that some stocks might have been improperly sold to affect control of the business. In the end, the Villaume Company was saved without going to court. Julius Villaume announced his retirement and according to the papers, he and his niece had "sold their stock interests to the company, leaving ownership entirely to Mrs. Eugénie Villaume Meyerding and her family. This represents a family arrangement in transferring the business to a new generation of the Villaume heirs."

The tenacity of Eugene's daughter preserved Villaume Company for the future. Christine Linsmayer remembers Eugénie's strong feelings about the family business. "I think that it must have made a big impact on my mother—that they could survive all those years. . . . She believed that this was something that should not be taken apart and sold down the river." Happy that the company would continue, Christine said her mother was,



In 1970 Villaume Industries ran this advertisement in the St. Paul Pioneer Press to emphasize that they had moved their plant to Egan and changed their corporate name.

however, a little disappointed with the cost of the buyout. “The rest of the family got the flesh,” she said, “and we ended up with the bones.”

Rebuilding, Revitalization, and Refocusing

Starting in December 1957, Robert Linsmayer took charge as the new president of Villaume and began a process of rebuilding and refocusing the company. Linsmayer, who was married to Eugene Villaume’s granddaughter Christine, had been brought into the company in 1951 and became its general operations manager three years later. A navy veteran, he was educated as an engineer and metallurgist and had been employed at several corporations, including Chrysler and General Electric, before he joined Villaume.

When Robert Linsmayer began working at Villaume, boxes for shipping bottles of beer were the major product, his son Nick commented years later. “My Dad was an engineer at heart, and he was in the wood business. He was able to put the two together.” Determined to chart a new course for the company, Robert Linsmayer organized a meeting of administrative personnel, supervisors, and foremen at the Riverview Commercial

Club on December 18, 1957. After a complimentary dinner, he started a participatory discussion of the company and how things could be improved. He suggested that the company had “patterns of doing things the hard way. . . . If you sum up old machinery that isn’t changed, old practices that aren’t changed, and management that isn’t interested. . . . you get a hodgepodge of things where there isn’t any reward for putting in any thought or action in it.”

More than one person at that meeting said that in the past top company officials seldom came onto the plant floor and if they did, they rarely even said “good morning.” “We don’t get that from Bob,” one foreman with thirty years seniority said. “We can come down here, we can argue with him, we can tell him our points and he can argue back with us and there’s no hard feelings. . . . You feel . . . you’re not only down there for the two or three dollars an hour you’re getting, you’re down there to help build up a plant.” While Linsmayer knew that the company needed to generate enthusiasm among the workers on the production line, he felt that “morale starts . . . within the management group, and then can be extended to the whole organization. . . . It’s part of having a well run, high-class organization.”

At the same time, people needed to

understand business realities and “the need to survive as an economic entity, to have a job to begin with.” They needed to “satisfy the aesthetic factor that the craftsman wants to have . . . if he’s rewarded for the appearance of his work, and he’s doing it in a short time, he’s satisfying both of these things”

In addition to introducing a new approach to managing the company that promoted worker satisfaction along with increased production, Linsmayer continued the core company function of box making, and added a new line of pallets, skids, and custom-designed wood packaging. Thanks to his engineering background, he was aware of developing technologies for custom manufacturing in housing construction. Modern roof trusses turned out to be the most important addition that he made to the company’s product line. Up until then, trusses were being held together with a plywood mechanism. Villaume started to pioneer the use of metal connector plates called “Gizmo Gussets,” which an old navy friend of Linsmayer’s had invented, in holding trusses together.

The manufacturing of roof trusses began to refocus and revitalize the Villaume Box and Lumber Company, although other improvements were still needed. According to the company’s minutes for July



Nick Linsmayer, left, president of Villaume Industries, examines a computer-aided design of some custom-made trusses that an operator has prepared using a customer’s specifications. This type of design work is routine for Villaume’s Component Division.

16, 1958, sales in general were up 24% over those of a year earlier, even though box sales were down and home construction was slowing. The company's profit margin was being squeezed because of deferred maintenance. The board decided to buy more delivery trucks, a nailing machine, and a modern planer. This at a time when, according to the minutes, there was "tremendous difficulty in providing the additional capital that was needed."

The Villaume Company changed with the times. The lumber business was phased out in the 1960s. They also quit making stock trusses because there were few builders who wanted a standard size. According to long-time employee Chuck McMahon, "if someone wanted a hundred twenty-two footers, we'd crank them out in a couple of hours and send them out. It made more sense that way."

Continuing Core Values in a New Location

The company had undertaken new ventures and was a growing and a profitable entity once more. But a big change was coming, and it was not of their choosing. Villaume Box and Lumber would soon be leaving its historic location. It was a choice that was being forced on them.

Ever since the big flood, St. Paul had wanted to make changes on the river flats. New dikes were planned and old homes were slated for demolition as the city envisioned a new industrial park. The design for a new Plato Avenue would take a large part of the company's property. The likely loss of their land started showing up in the minutes in February 1965. There was an expectation that the city's Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) would "condemn all or part of the company's property at some time in the next two years." Faced with this prospect, Villaume's leaders did get the city to agree that if the project went through, the city would take all their land and not expect them to function on reduced acreage.

Two years later, company officials reported that the HRA "had completed its condemnation proceedings and acquired the manufacturing properties and irremovable fixtures at 76 W. Indiana." In the meantime, negotiations were underway with the Rauenhorst Company "for the

purchase of 16 acres on the Milwaukee tracks in Eagandale Township," as the area was then called. The deal for land in the suburban industrial park went through and the May 1968 minutes revealed that plans for the first building on the site were "in preparation and construction was expected to commence later this year." By the end of the summer of 1970, the new building had been erected and fitted out. The move to Eagan was completed in the fall. After more than eight decades on the river flats, the corporation would now be located at 2926 Lone Oak Circle. Along with a new address, there was also a new company name—Villaume Industries.

When the company went to Eagan, one old piece of equipment found a different home. A mothballed 1904 Corliss steam engine and generator was saved from the scrap heap by members of the Minnesota Steam Threshers Reunion, a group that finds and preserves historic engines. The Steam Threshers had been looking for tall smokestacks that might indicate antique engines and saw those of the soon-to-be-demolished Villaume factory. When they went inside and found the fifty-foot-long piece of equipment, "their eyes were agog." They were overjoyed when later they were asked, "Do you want it?" The engine's flywheel alone weighed nine

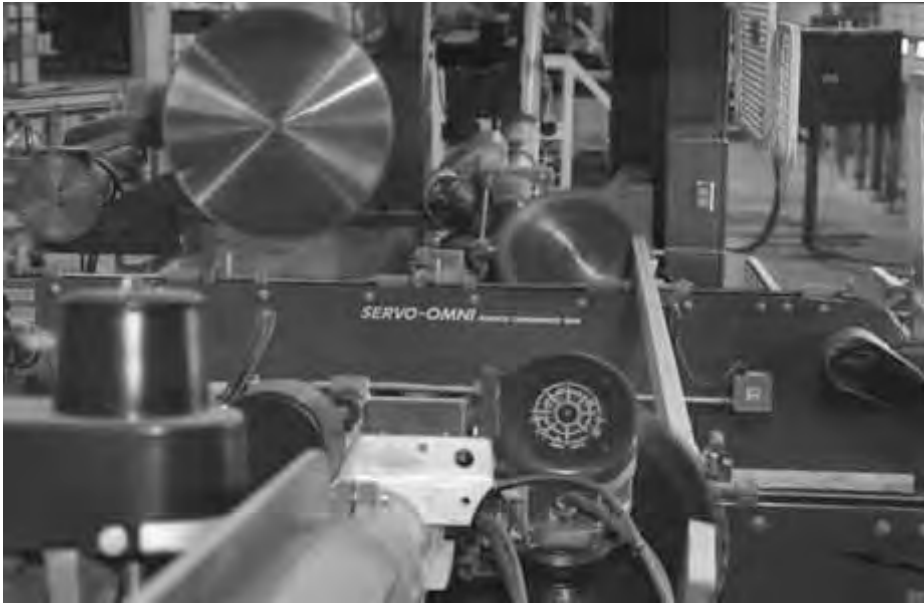
tons and was sixteen feet in diameter. Fortunately, it could be separated in half. It took two semis to move the thirty tons of equipment from St. Paul to a museum in Rollag, Minnesota. The Corliss engine had been so well maintained that even though it hadn't been used for two decades, it ran on the first try.

Embracing New Technology and Developing Innovative Products

When Villaume started their truss venture, they bought a company called Frame-O-Wood. In an issue of the *Mississippi Valley Builder*, Robert Linsmayer praised the new products. "No question about it," he said, "shop-fabricated roof trusses can save a builder both time and money." Three men could completely truss an average house in two hours. The new products sped up construction by eliminating on-site cutting, reducing errors, and minimizing waste. In addition when builders developed housing plans that eliminated the use of interior load-bearing walls, architects and contractors could arrange room layout to meet almost any owner's potential requirements. Consequently Villaume Industries was doing well. Adding the truss to the traditional box line had paid off. The company minutes for August 1974



A recent photo shows a roofer using an air-powered nailer attaching plywood sheets to building trusses manufactured by Villaume. The small silver sheets mounted on various truss joints on the left are the famous "Gizmo Gussets," or metal connector plates, that helped make custom-designed trusses practical, effective, and affordable.



In this close-up photograph of a piece of wood passing through the Servo-Omni machine at Villaume, one end of the stock lumber (foreground) is about to fall away after being cut by one saw while the saw on the other end of the lumber is about to complete a second precision cut.

proudly recorded that “the recent fiscal year ending is the first time the company had profits in excess of ten per cent pre-tax since the WWII period.”

Sometimes Linsmayer’s ideas didn’t pan out. In the early 1970s, he thought that getting into the prefabricated wall panel business would be a profitable venture. It was for a time, but the business was too unpredictable.

In addition to innovation, Linsmayer believed in tradition and decided that it was time for his son to learn the ins and outs of the family business. Chuck McMahon, then the sales manager, remembers when he was told that he had help coming in the next week. “I didn’t know anything about it, but the next Monday Nick comes in and said ‘I’m going to work for you.’” The arrangement lasted



Members of the Industrial Division of Villaume specially designed these wooden crates for a customer who needed to ship a delicate, high-tech piece of equipment overseas. Each crate is built so that the customer’s product rests in the tube that runs the length of the center of the crate.

for several years, after which Nick moved on to another area of the company. “He’s got a good head on him and learned fast. . . . I wasn’t particularly soft on him. Fortunately,” Chuck said with a smile, “he didn’t turn on me when he became the president.”

New Leadership Based on Company Traditions

Robert Linsmayer’s poor health started to slow him down in the late 1980s, but he kept coming to work every day. Finally, he decided it was time to step aside and, in 1990, resigned the presidency in favor of his son, while remaining chairman of the board. J. Nicholas “Nick” Linsmayer, the great-grandson of Eugene Villaume, took charge of an organization that had successfully negotiated many transitions. It was divided into two distinct divisions and, since they had different business cycles, the company generally stayed busy year-round.

The Industrial Division of Villaume manufactured boxes, pallets, and specialty wood products and was part of a global market. The Component Division, the larger of the two in terms of sales revenue, designed and manufactured roof and floor trusses, which were regionally marketed in the Twin Cities and surrounding areas.

But the corporation was facing a major problem. After achieving a growth of fifty-three percent over a five-year period, the company was operating at maximum capacity. “We were running on the edge during 1994, and by the beginning of 1995,” Nick said, “were very concerned about our capability for future growth.” New equipment was needed to sustain the dramatic rate of increase. Consequently the company decided to become a test site for the newly invented Auto-Omni, a computer-controlled saw that had the ability to track functions at a rate of more than 300 setups per shift, with each setup taking only ten to thirty seconds to program.

This timesaving was crucial because it allowed workers to be far more productive. Trusses for modern construction came in hundreds of different designs and sizes and, according to Nick Linsmayer, ninety-nine percent of the 130,000 roof trusses that Villaume turned out each year were made to order. “Roofs are now like

snowflakes—no two alike and Auto-Omni is part of the evolution from conventional roofs to today’s variations.”

The truss manufacturer had taken over “the Swede carpenter’s role,” Linsmayer added. “With the sophistication of computer software and equipment . . . we are able to create even more intricate designs . . . satisfying the customer, building inspectors, contractors and sub-contractors, meeting all codes and giving everyone a certain sense of security.”

A lot of things have changed since the Villaume Company opened in 1882. Boxes are still being made, although now they are usually called designed containers. In the old days, boxes for beer and produce were shipped throughout the Midwest. Today specialty boxes filled with electronics and medical equipment, pumps, film products, and other expensive items are shipped all over the world. Newer products, especially building trusses, have become the most important part of the business. Horse and wagon transportation are a thing of the past as truss-loaded trucks are tracked via satellite. Today there are automated saws and computer stations throughout the plant with lasers positioned overhead. The nearly two hundred employees of today are more highly trained and educated than before. Degrees in computer-aided design and drafting, accounting, business and constructions sciences, such as structural framing, are common.

Under the fourth-generation leadership of Nick Linsmayer, the company

embraces technology and is willing to put money into procuring it, believing that improved systems are just as important as skilled personnel. As a result, there has been record business the last few years, spurred on by improvements in precision and productivity. Nick points out that the company’s founders understood the importance of quality, precision designing, and meeting demanding customer specifications. He believes the longevity that Villaume has had as a company is a consequence of adhering to these core values. “We constantly reinvent our products to meet ever-changing customer demands. . . . We could do it in 1882,” he said, “and we can do it even better today.”

As Villaume Industries enters its 125th year, Nick often thinks about its history as well as its future. “I plan to see this business grow into the next generation of our family,” he remarked, summing up his view of the company and the family behind it:

The computer-controlled saw is just one example of my family’s commitment to innovation, a quality I learned from my great-grandfather. His spirit is my inspiration. Our success is due to the pioneering spirit and the hard work of our current 175 dedicated and experienced employees who follow in the footsteps of the thousands of dedicated Villaume employees who preceded them. . . . Persistence is part of our commitment to doing better. We were here at the beginning of St. Paul and we are still here. We are going to stay the course.

Sources

Almost all of the information and photographs for this article came from the archives of Villaume Industries, which, thanks to the efforts of Nick Linsmayer, have been well-preserved. Christine Linsmayer, Eugene Villaume’s granddaughter, generously gave time, information, and feedback during several interviews. She willingly shared her memories and family materials and made valuable additions and corrections to this article. Interviews with a number of current and former employees of Villaume Industries provided additional insight to more recent operations at Villaume. The Minnesota Historical Society’s newspaper files have sources such as *Le Canadien*, *The Broadaxe*, and other local newspapers that carried articles about Villaume family members or the activities of the Villaume Company. The St. Paul Public Library and the James J. Hill Reference Library have some materials on Villaume that are not available in the company’s archives or elsewhere. The Ramsey County Historical Society has limited information on the Villaume family and the family business, but they do have a copy of *Villaume: The First Fifty Years, 1882–1932*, a history of the company that is one of the few secondary sources available. An annotated version of this article is available at the Ramsey County Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn. Unless noted, all photographs are from the Villaume Industries archives or the personal collection of Nick Linsmayer.

A Novel Look at Eugene Villaume

This is a brief excerpt from an unpublished novel by Julie Villaume that is based on the life of Eugene Villaume, who is called Jean in her account.

Dinner would soon be ready. Jean started around toward the back of the shop to go up the handsome new bright-red steps he and his men had built to the top of the bluff. They were already known as the Red Steps and were beginning to be widely used by people on this side of the river, now known as the Riverview district. It was also still known as the West

Side, and Jean was sure it always would be . . . It was the only section of the city that lay on ground that had once been a part of the Louisiana Purchase . . . That gave Jean a special feeling for his part of the city . . . he actually had his shop and his house on land that had belonged to France!

Enough daydreaming. Dinner would be kept waiting if he didn’t start hurrying home. The steps looked high today though, so new and high and almost endless. It would be nearly as quick to go up the hill, following up

along the streets . . . well, anyhow it would be more comfortable on such a lovely spring day. He hurried along the street toward Wabasha, glad that these first blocks were flat. Soon enough he would be puffing his way up the hill. He wasn’t getting old though, nothing like that; it was only his asthma.

Source: *I Am Jean*, manuscript of a novel by Julie Villaume, Eugene Villaume’s granddaughter, in the possession of Nick Linsmayer.



This late-afternoon photograph taken in the 1960s shows a supply of building trusses with their "Gizmo Gussetts," or metal connector plates, ready for shipping on a Murphy Trucking Company flatbed trailer in the yard at Villaume Box & Lumber Company. In the background is the Villaume sign, complete with hundreds of light bulbs, mounted on the bluffs on the West Side. Various residences are just visible beyond the sign and above the bluffs. Photo courtesy of Nick Linsmayer and Villaume Industries. See Steve Trimble's article on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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