

## THE LEO HEIKKINEN STORY *Written by Bill Ostling*



Early 1940s  
**Heikkinen Bros Logging Operation near Brantwood, WI—Early 1940s**

Leo Heikkinen was born and raised on a dairy farm in Brantwood, Wisconsin. He graduated from Tripoli, Wisconsin, high school, married his wife Norma, and moved to Milwaukee to work in a machine shop prior to 1945.

In 1945, through the encouragement of his brothers (Heikkinen Brothers Construction & Logging) he returned to northern Wisconsin and started the "Heikkinen Machine Shop" just southwest of Prentice with his wife who did the bookkeeping. For several years the shop operated in the repair and welding of heavy equipment, in steel fabrication, in the sales and repair of chain saws, and in the manufacturing of mechanical jammers. He then proceeded and patented a special tear drop log lifting winch for jammers.

The time came when individuals wanted special innovations on their jammers and during the first year of operation an idea for a "custom" job was put into construction. Through improvement and modification of the mechanical jammer the evolution took place, which resulted in the Prentice hydraulic loader.

The Prentice loader rapidly gained acceptance by the logging industry. As demand continued for more machines, more men were employed. Little did Leo realize that the Heikkinen Machine Shop would grow to be a multi-million dollar worldwide leader, with 51 % of the market share marketing the hydraulic loader worldwide.

In July of 1959, employment of Prentice Hydraulics Incorporated had reached 35. By 1963 employment was at 100 and a broad and versatile line of hydraulic loading and unloading equipment had been added to make Prentice one of the leaders in the material handling field. Growth was rapid and in 1966, 295 employees were on payroll.

Notified that a hunter was lost in the wilds of Price County, Heikkinen "closed shop" and, with full pay sent his employees to join other searchers. The lost was found. Heikkinen received recognition from the Price County Sheriff's Department.

In 1967, with annual sales of \$9 million and 340 employees, Leo entered into an agreement with Omark Industries of Portland, Oregon (manufacturers of Oregon Saw Chain), to sell the entire operation in order to maintain the rapid growth structure that is so necessary to remain a leader in the competitive hydraulic loader field. Omark constructed a new R & D facility called Prentice Research & Development Corporation, which Leo Heikkinen was president for five years working on new technology for logging operations and the forest products industry.



**One of the earlier jammers and truck beds built under the name Heikkinen Machine Shop—Late 1940s**

"People say I'm gifted," Leo says with a shrug. "I don't know if that is true, I'm just always working to make something better. With an inventive mind, you're never satisfied 'til you see your idea become a reality."

Leo was elected village president in 1967, serving for 10 years. This gave him opportunity to put his aspirations for Prentice to work. He spent little time, if any, behind a polished desk, but rather in some section of the village that needed overhauling. There were many such. Heikkinen found them. Under his jurisdiction, trees and shrubbery were planted. An unsightly, drainage ditch was converted into a large pond to be used by children for summer swimming, fishing and winter skating.

So in 1970, Leo started a small repair and research shop with his sons. Leo believed that burning wood would become more popular as a supplemental form of heating and create a fertile market among commercial firewood suppliers for his splitters. He

later patented several more products.

Prentice acquired a "new look" which won for it first place in the 1979 "Small Town Beautification" contest. In the years he was Village President he only kept two checks, the rest were turned into the Golf Course Funds.

Under Leo's jurisdiction, the first air strip came into being, a 2,000 ft. strip that was later consolidated into a golf course. The 9 hole golf course required about 2000 ft. of main water lines for watering the greens. Each green required 165 yards of material which was hauled from about 5 miles away. Overlooking the greens is a large community center, donated to the village by Heikkinen and his wife.

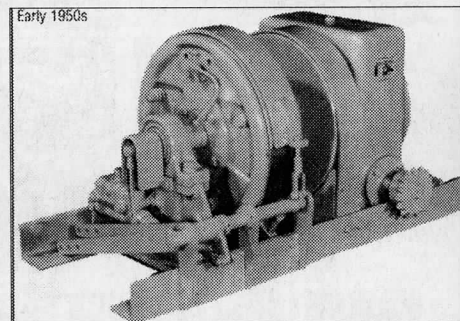
Enthusiastic about securing a medical doctor for the village, Heikkinen bought a large house for the medic and his family to move into. He used his personal twin engine airplane to fly the new doctor to Prentice. In 1980 or so, he purchased a lot in "downtown" Prentice and donated it to the village as a site for a dental office building.

Leo donated lights for the Prentice school athletic field. He also supplied lights for the baseball field of his boyhood school in Brantwood and was instrumental as Village President in obtaining the new waste water treatment plant.

Heikkinen had tentatively planned to leave the state following the sale of his Prentice Hydraulics to Omark Industries. Instead, he remained so that Prentice would receive the tax benefits from the sale. This sum proved adequate for the blacktopping and curbing of Prentice streets.

Because of these listed reasons and others; because of his generosity in sharing with his hometown, we believe that Leo Heikkinen well deserves the honor of being

*(Continued on page 32)*



**One of the winches built by Prentice Hydraulics used in the earlier loaders—Early 1950s**

## LOOKING BACK...

Early 1950s



The first hydraulic loader built in Leo Heikkinen's shop, undergoing field trials. Leo (on truck cab) is working the controls and Al Swan (on load bed) is getting the load lined up to be lowered in place—Early 1950s

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classified as one of the "Ten Most Admired Senior Citizens".

Leo Heikkinen of Prentice was awarded the Suomi College distinguished Finnish-American Award. The award was presented October 13, 1987, at the Elk's Club in Wausau to honor Leo Heikkinen's contribution in the preservation of Finnish-American heritage, culture, and entrepreneurship. By Leo Heikkinen's example, he prompts others to appreciate the rich traditions, ideals and values in Finnish and American society. With this award Leo Heikkinen's name will be added to the roll of distinguished Finnish Americans.

Leo and Norma have always had the highest respect for their family, employees, dealers, customers, and the people of Prentice for the support they have given them over the years no matter what obstacles and projects they encountered. They are both truly people of great character.

Tommy G. Thompson, Governor of this State of Wisconsin, awarded a commendation to Leo L. Heikkinen on August 31, 1996. The closing line stated, "I ask that all citizens smile extra big when they greet Leo today, for he is truly a great man."

## A HISTORY OF THE HEIKKINEN MACHINE CO. AND OMARK-PRENTICE HYDRAULICS

Written by Bill Ostling

The origin of the Prentice Loader dates back to 1945 when Leo and Norma Heikkinen left Milwaukee, Wisconsin where he was employed by a leading machinery manufacturer to return to the Prentice area. With Leo's desire to go into business for himself, he opened a one man repair shop known as the Heikkinen Machine Co. in the vacant Walter Englund Palace Dairy building on Highway 13 southwest of Prentice.



Leo Heikkinen working on the first airport which later evolved into a nine hole golf course in the Village of Prentice—Early 1960s

Unknown to Leo at the time, repairing farm and construction machinery as well as logging tools would eventually lead to a whole new forest industry timber loading concept and the Prentice Hydraulic Loader. His ideas became reality as improvements were made to winches and various logging tools. A chain saw dealership and a mechanical "jammer" came on the scene

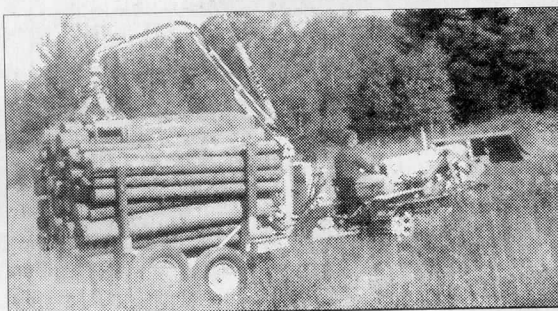
which would reduce manual labor in processing timber, resulting in increased production and profit for his customers.

The business continued to grow and more manufacturing space was needed. The old Creamery building and later the Prentice Wood Products building next to Jump River in Prentice was the first expansion for the Heikkinen Machine Company. This happened eleven years later in 1956. Leo's products improved. Mechanical functions for the "jammer" had evolved to a combination of hydraulics. More Prentice loader models were introduced for installation on trucks, tractors and trailers. The market for loaders began to expand beyond the Lake States and were being sold throughout the United States and Canada. Prentice Loaders were not only being used for timber handling but found their way into construction, marine, building material, mushroom, fruit and sugar cane handling applications. Leo's philosophy, "build it stronger than it needs to be" played an important role in the success of his product.

In July 1959 the Heikkinen Machine Company incorporated as Prentice Hydraulics, Inc. The Flambeau Valley Farms property which had been an excelsior mill, canning factory and creamery was acquired and the business grew. A number of additions were made to this property during the next several years. Larger models of Prentice Loaders were introduced to meet the requirement to handle tree length wood and load the large West Coast timber.

It was in July 1967 when Leo sold his Company to Omark Industries of Portland, Oregon, a firm whose other interrelated product divisions manufacture and market on a world-wide basis. Leo's Company, now Omark's Hydraulic Material Handling Division continued its growth. The new

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The first trailer skidder, Bill Ostling on dozer—1959

Early 1960s



Dale Heikkinen testing a new hydraulic model for the construction industry—Early 1960s

## LOOKING BACK...



**A Prentice D-100 loader--1964**

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division's Prentice, Wisconsin, facility has seen considerable expansion. A new plant was built in Zebulon, North Carolina and in 1975 another plant opened in Spencer, Wisconsin.

Other divisions within the Omark structure include the Oregon Saw Chain Division which makes the Oregon brand saw chain, saw bars, sprockets and accessories. A Sporting Equipment Division manufactures C.C.I. and Speer ammunition, primers, bullets, and RCBS reloading equipment. The KSM Fastening Systems Division manufactures stud welding equipment and fasteners. The Construction Fas-

tening Operation makes power-actuated construction tools and fasteners.

Omark's products are manufactured at 15 plants in five countries and are sold through a worldwide marketing network to customers in over 100 countries.

Omark Industries sold the company to Blount Inc., Montgomery, AL, in 1985. Blount continues to carry the "Prentice" name on their products worldwide.

*Loggers know Prentice as the birthplace of the Prentice knuckleboom loader, developed by inventor Leo Heikkinen after World War II and still being manufactured in Prentice.*

*The Heikkinen family is still active as Heikkinen's three sons, Dale, Howard and Norman, run a multiple product manufacturing shop called Multitek, Inc., where 25 people turn out recycling industry products.*

*Then when he sold Prentice he gave up a tax windfall to the village, stipulating that it be used to curb, gutter and pave every village street.*

*Amazingly, Heikkinen says he never had the urge to be rich. He never dreamed, never considered, he says, that he would be rich. "I liked the peaceful life. Money has never been my motive. I like creative thinking. My reward is coming up with something new, different, something that is use-*

*ful for mankind."*

*To this day he's doing research and development for Multitek, where a small shop is reserved for him. Heikkinen told his children, "Nothing happens unless you make it happen."*

Excerpt from  
The Northern Logger &  
Timber Processor,  
May 1980  
by Larry Van Goethem

Heikkinen, whose plant once employed 400 people, is credited with putting Prentice on the map and keeping it there by his protege, William D. (Bill) Ostling, who retired in March 1990 after 32 years at the Prentice factory. Ostling was Prentice general manager and a community leader, preceding Dale as president of the Industrial Development Commission that has spearheaded the village's growth.

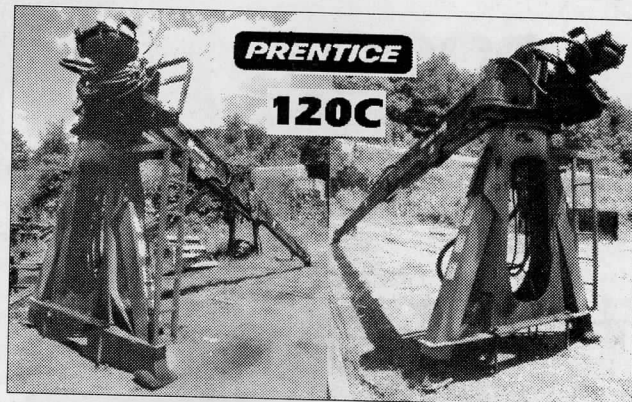
This was how Ostling sees it, Heikkinen didn't just invent a hydraulic loader when he sold his first self-loaders. "He created an industry", Ostling said. "He spent a lot of his time and a lot of his money in this community," Ostling said of Heikkinen.

William D. Ostling  
General Mgr of the Prentice Plant  
May 1990

REFERENCE: This article is published in a brochure entitled "Leo Heikkinen Day, August 31, 1996, Prentice Progress Days, Prentice, WI."



**Two Prentice RT-600s ready for railroad shipment to Canada in 1974. Prentice Loaders are shipped all over the world using rail and SRA containers.**



**Last Issue's MYSTERY PHOTO--Prentice 120 C Logloader  
Hint: Not a journeyman... Answer: an a-PRENTICE!**