

Eugene Meurer

Founder & President of Central Paper Co.

By Frances Harrington

Have you ever been in Lakeside and seen a small area of land that is bound by Meurer Court on two sides and Miner Avenue and Harding Avenue on the others? It is less than a block wide but two blocks long. There are no homes on this small piece of land. It was owned by the Central Paper Company (commonly known as the "Paper Mill"). It was donated by the Central Paper Company, to the City of Muskegon to be used as a park. It was called Meurer Park and was maintained by the mill for some time. It was named in honor of the founder and president of the mill, Eugene Meurer. Central Paper Co. was later known as S.D. Warren Co., and finally as SAPPI Fine Paper Co.

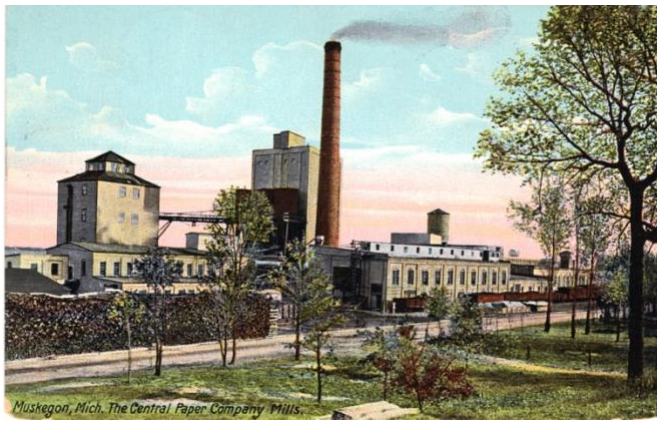


Eugene Meurer was born Henrich Ernst Eugen Meurer to Johann and Maria (Horn) Meurer on January 20, 1861 in Wurtttemberg, Germany. He was the only son with four other sisters. Their father was a Judge and lawyer so he could afford to give his children the best education available. Eugene was able to go to one of the leading polytechnic universities where he specialized in chemistry and mechanical engineering. He gained practical experience with papermaking machinery and the manufacturing at Groditz, and Ritschen, Germany. In 1889, at the age of 28, Eugene came to the United States, making his primary residence in Corinth, Saratoga, New York. He started working for the Hudson River Pulp and Paper

Company and became well acquainted with Albrecht Pagenstecher, Sr., one of the most influential businessmen of the 19th century. Mr. Pagenstecher had Eugene build the first successful sulphite pulp mill in the United States at Palmer Falls, New York. Up to this point, paper in the United States was made from rags and not from wood pulp. Mr. Pagenstecher introduced the process of using ground wood chips and acid to make pulp, a process they were already using in Europe. This pulp, with further treatment, ended up making paper with superior strength as compared to that of rag-made paper. Eugene went on to build other sulphite pulp mills throughout New York, and in Quebec, Canada. He partnered with Albrecht Pagenstecher, Jr., to organized the Non Antem Sulphite Digester Company in Corinth, New York, that manufactured, sold, constructed, and repaired pulp digesters built with his patented parts. His digesters were in high demand throughout the papermaking industry for the making of wood pulp. Because he held those patents, if you wanted his digester, you had to go through his company which proved very profitable for him. A digester is a huge apparatus that uses high heat, pressure, and chemicals to cook the wood chips into pulp for the paper making process. Almost like a big pressure cooker.

On January 31, 1891, Eugene married Margerathe Rietz (also a German immigrant) at Lake Luzerne, New York. The couple had two daughters, Elsa born in 1891, and Thea born in 1893.

After years of building and managing paper mills for other companies, Eugene, along with the backing of Mr. Pagenstecher, Sr., decided to build his own paper making company. Because there were already plenty of pulp mills out east, Michigan seemed like a logical place with the Great Lakes for transporting lumber from the Upper Peninsula, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. He went to Grand Rapids to look for a suitable place but thought it made no sense to be that far from the water. He next went to Muskegon and decided this was the place for his new mill. Not only did it have access to all the waterways for transporting lumber, but enough rail lines for transporting parts and other materials, and then the finished paper goods could be transported to Chicago to be distributed from there. Muskegon was also offering “incentives” for new businesses who would locate here. One of the stipulations for these incentives was that the new business would receive \$10,000 if it provided steady employment to at least 85 men and 15 women for a period of 5 years. The name of his company was to be “Central Paper Co”. The site for the mill was to be where the old Rodger’s and LeBoeuf lumber mills once stood. In 1899, that property was owned by one of the heirs of the Rodger’s estate and had about 12 houses on it. Instead of just tearing down the houses, Eugene purchased land in the Chas Brothers Plat in Lakeside, and had the houses moved there to provide living quarters for some of his employees.



From its inception, Central Paper Company became Eugene’s life’s work. It took an investment of approximately \$500,000 for the buildings and machinery to build the mill. Over the years, improvements were made, and machinery was added, such as a sulphate digester and new paper machines. This enabled the production to increase, and Central Paper became a major player in the papermaking industry.

The mill started operations in 1900. One of its first customers was the Muskegon Chronicle, who used this paper to print their August 18, 1900 edition. The paper produced in Muskegon ended up being in such high demand, that more machinery had to be added from time to time. Eugene often went to Germany to learn the latest techniques and purchase some of the finest equipment. In 1900, the mill had 120 employees, and by 1905, that grew to 500 – well over the 100 the city had wanted. Muskegon-made-paper was being shipped all over the US and Europe. Eugene also became a valued member of Muskegon’s Chamber of Commerce, helping to bring even more industries to Muskegon.

While the mill was being built, Eugene bought a home at 68 Harrison in Lakeside (current address 1989 Harrison). It was a very large home that had been owned by the John Moon family. He had repairs and improvements made and the family moved in in September 1899.

In 1902, Eugene traveled with his family to Germany for 3 months on vacation to visit family and friends and tour parts of Europe. In 1907, they again took their vacation in Germany, only this

time, Mrs. Meurer and their daughters didn't return to Muskegon with Eugene. They had decided to spend the winter there because of Mrs. Meurer's health. Almost a year later, Eugene brought his family back to Muskegon. In 1910, after their daughter Elsa graduates from Muskegon High School, Mrs. Meurer and the girls move to Germany, again "for her health". While there, both girls marry brothers, Walter and Hans Voith (both involved with J.M. Voith & Co., European paper machinery manufacturers). Both men became officers in the German military. By 1914, Eugene persuaded his wife to come home, but when the war broke out, she was unable to leave.

World War I: Eugene was the president of a group of Muskegon residents of German descent, who had formed a German athletic club that raised money to send back to Germany – not to support the war there, but to help the widows and orphans affected by the war. In 1917, there was a real push across the country for citizens to buy "Liberty Bonds" to help support the US War effort. In Muskegon, Eugene purchased \$50,000 worth of bonds (making him the largest personal subscriber for these bonds in Muskegon), with the employees of the Central Paper Company, including company, office, and factory workers, purchasing \$47,400 worth of these bonds, that's almost \$100,000 worth (in April 2023, that would be worth \$2,512,720.00). During the war, the price of coal had risen and it became harder and harder to get. The mill had to curtail their operations at times because of the shortages. In January, 1918, Eugene managed to purchase 6 rail cars full of coal for the mill, but when he found out that there were people in Muskegon who had no heat, he donated it all to be distributed to the needy here.

In 1920, Eugene became a US citizen. By 1922, Mrs. Meurer still hadn't returned to Muskegon. Eugene had made visits to his family in Germany but with both daughters married to German businessmen and making their homes in Germany, he couldn't persuade his wife to return back to Muskegon with him. Eugene's letters to his wife became less frequent. Finally, he told his wife he wanted a divorce. The daughters still had friends back in Muskegon and rumors reached them back in Germany of a possible relationship between Eugene and his cook, Miss Margaretha Wasserman, (almost the same given name as his wife).



Miss Wasserman was 20 years younger than Eugene and an immigrant from Germany since 1911. In 1915, she answered Eugene's ad in a Chicago newspaper for a cook who could prepare authentic German meals. It seems Eugene had been having stomach problems and American dishes were not helping the situation. There were ads in the Chronicle for a German cook, from not long after the Meurer's had moved into their new home, but it wasn't until he hired Miss Wasserman, that it seemed his meal preparation problems were over. Eugene's daughter Thea, along with her husband Walter Voith, came for a "visit". She was trying to force a reconciliation between Eugene and her mother. While here, Thea insisted that Miss Wasserman be sent back to Germany. She even went so far as to seek help from the German Consulate in Chicago, saying that Miss Wasserman held undue influence over her father, was here for immoral purposes, and was speaking against the United States, so she should be deported. They told her they couldn't help and suggested she hire a lawyer. Eugene finally agreed to let his cook go. No sooner was Miss

Wasserman on her way back to Germany when he changed his mind. He immediately worked to get her back. About a month after Miss Wasserman's return, Mrs. Meurer returned to the US long enough to make a settlement arrangement with her husband. Mrs. Meurer was to receive \$250,000 to be paid in installments over time. The divorce was granted in December of 1922. Since her return from Germany, Miss Wasserman had been staying in one of the Meurer's vacation homes (they had two in Spring Lake, and one in Traverse City). After the divorce was final, she returned to the Muskegon home in Lakeside. Soon after that, she was arrested by immigrations officers. Apparently, the complaint his daughter filed with the Consulate months earlier had finally reached someone at Immigrations. Eugene paid her bond so she wouldn't have to go to jail, and he fought to have the charges against her dropped so she would not be deported. Finally, when immigrations got all the facts, they dropped the deportation order. Eugene married Margaretha Wasserman in June of 1923, and boy did the newspapers have a field day with that! The story was picked up by the Associated Press, and newspapers all over the United States contained headlines like – "Millionaire Weds His Cook, Her Dishes Saved His Life", "Millionaire Paper Manufacturer Weds \$40,000 Cook After Divorcing Wife", "Cooks Dishes Meant Life Itself, So He Weds Her", and "This \$40,000 Cook Becomes Bride". The story was that upon her first departure, Eugene had given her \$40,000 as a severance for her faithful service. Margaretha denied ever having received any Liberty Bonds or any large sums of money from Eugene.

In September 1925, financial control of Central Paper was transferred from Eugene Meurer to the Manufacturer's Paper Co, (an organization started by Albretch Pagenstecher Sr. in 1884, and continued by his family). At that time, Rudolph Pagenstecher, second son of A. Pagenstecher, Sr., was voted in as President of the Central Paper Co. replacing Eugene. In April of 1927, while in California, Eugene was involved in a car accident where he received some internal injuries. After being treated there, he returned to Muskegon. He was 66 years old and realized he was not recovering like he thought he should. He decided he and Margaretha should make one last trip back to Germany. Before they left, he set up a trust to make sure Margaretha would be taken care of if anything should happen to him. He stipulated that the Trust could not be revoked, unless he did so himself. While in Germany, he managed to make amends with his daughters and his ex-wife. He decided to revoke his trust (which would have left his current wife with the bulk of his estate). He does this in writing and has his German attorney send a copy to Hackley Bank, the administer of the trust. He had a new Will written up that left only 1/3 of his estate to his wife, he made stipulations for his ex-wife to receive the balance due to her from their divorce settlement, and leaves some of his estate to his daughters, their children, and other relatives. He had the Will filed with his lawyer in Germany and copies sent back to Muskegon. Not long after that, Eugene died on October 24, 1927 in Stuttgart, Germany. He is buried at the Prag Cemetery there with other members of his family.

There was three years of litigations between Eugene's estate and Hackley Bank over whether they should abide by the Trust, or the Will. The bank said the trust was not revoked because they never received notification of it until after Eugene's death. Most people would think that Margaretha would be on the side of the Trust, because that would entitle her to a bigger settlement, but she wasn't. In 1929, she filed an "amended bill of particulars" in the Circuit

Court stating that she was supporting the conditions of the Will and not the Trust. She wanted her husband's last wishes to be followed so that his family in Germany was also taken care of. She also gave testimony that Eugene had indeed revoked the trust and his lawyer filed it in Germany and sent copies to Hackley Bank before making the new Will. The fact that Hackley Bank didn't receive that notice until after his death, should not prevent his last wishes from being honored. In January of 1931, the Michigan State Supreme Court sided in favor of the Will.

Margaretha continued to live in Muskegon, staying with a friend, Marie Hentschel, during the winter months, and during the summer, she lived at the Meurer summer home on Glen Lake. She died March 7th, 1945. Her final resting place is in the Evergreen Mausoleum in Muskegon.

Sources: Ancestry.com, Genealogybank.com (Muskegon Chronicle), Pulp & Paper Magazine of Canada 12/22/1927, Paper Industry Vol 9. No.1 1927, Cornwall-On-The-Hudson.com, Muskegon Heritage Museum (Muskegon's Industries), Invented in Saratoga County by Timothy Starr, An Account of Muskegon edited by James L. Smith, Celebrating 100 Years of Papermaking in Muskegon by Peggy J. Parks., bls.gov (CPI Inflation Calculator), Newspapers.com (Los Angeles Times), A Pictorial History of Central Mill 1899-2009 by David Szurley