

## ***Made in Lake County - The Early Titans***

With apologies to the ***Men Who Built America***, these Lake County titans from Ohio's smallest county deserve some accolades. As you may recall, nearly two-thirds of the county land



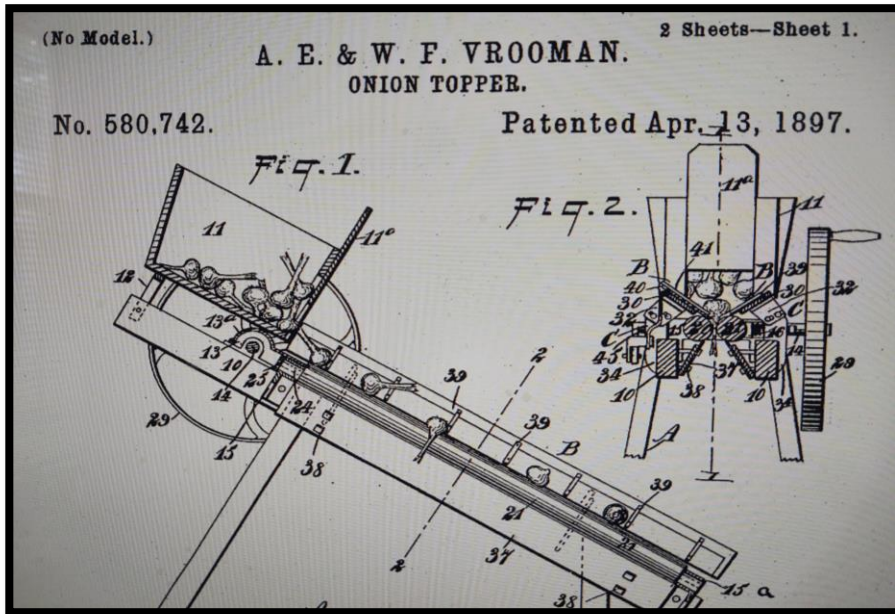
*Arba Vrooman with his brother Harry*

surface is under Lake Erie. The early decades after the Civil War spurred many rapid changes in American life. The Industrial Revolution was in its infancy, but Lake County's primarily agricultural focus, lack of overgrown cities, and almost hidden working life of the farmer, soon led to progress that affected and altered everyday life forevermore. Lake County innovators had ingenuity and tenacity. They applied for patents that changed early commerce and had benefits that can be felt to this very day.

Historical records of the Lake Erie basin mention seine fishing, circa 1815, in Maumee, Ohio. (*This is a method that employs a fishing net, called a seine, that hangs vertically in the water with its bottom edge held down by weights and its top edge buoyed by floats. Seine nets can be deployed from the shore as a beach seine, or from a boat.*) In Lake County, on the shore of Lake Erie's far eastern basin, another breed of farmers trolled the waters. Here is a look at a handful of these men at work.

### ***Arba E. Vrooman (1864-1951)***

During the second half of the 19th century, farm equipment changed dramatically. Cast iron plows, sowing by hand and market delivery enhancements witnessed change. Corn planters, wheat drills and threshers were invented. Arba Vrooman, raised on Dock Road in Madison, was an early Titan of Industry. He developed an



onion topper which he and his father Warren F. Vrooman manufactured in nearby Painesville. The first of three significant inventions he patented; the onion topper was registered in 1897. It was among the first practical labor-saving devices. Lake County became the first area in the state to produce onions for shipment and consequently made our onion crops a staple in American meals. Vrooman followed up this invention with a patented Vegetable Topper device in 1906. His third great

contribution, the Rotary Weeder and Cultivator, appeared in *Scientific America's Index of Inventions* for the week of November 9, 1907. That patent was granted in 1915.

### **Commercial Fishing & Grand River, Ohio**

Thomas Richmond's failed gamble on railroad transportation from the west banks of the Grand River was dashed in the mid-1800s. As Richmond, Ohio, faded away into the annals of history and industrial docks rose from the east banks of the Grand River



at Fairport, the newly renamed village of Grand River made commercial fishing on Lake Erie its major harvest. Herring, pike, carp, yellow perch, sturgeon, lake white fish and walleye became central to another Lake County contribution to American life. Pound nets, drag

seines, gill nets and power boats became the norm. As fish became a staple in



everyday life, demand grew. Companies and buildings became necessary to discharge larger catches, enable cleaning processes and store product for shipping delivery. Washing, scaling, filleting and above and below zero freezing structures made Grand River harbor a natural location. Dock Road and Fairport boat building made the choice even more desirable as both



ports were major players in early Lake Erie maritime history. The fishing companies were ordering tugs from them through the early 1930s, when steel hulled large-engine vessels replaced the old way of doing business. By 1910, several major companies were established and experienced a four-decade run of prosperity. Company names familiar to locals were Grow Brothers, Kishman Fish Company, Buckeye Fisheries and Diminish Brothers. The best-

known plant was Buechlers thru the early 1940s. WWII and rising costs ended their reign and large commercial fishing all but disappeared. However, in 1945, Douglas and McLeod Company purchased the plant, and Thistle and Highlander class sailboat building became profitable until recent decades. These buildings remain as testament to a by-gone era and some local dedication markers still share their glory days of fishing on Lake Erie. Despite the fact that commercial fishing is three-quarters of its original size, the county trade remains. Several small commercial fishing businesses stay on to this day. You may watch their return from Lake Erie around 2:30 p.m. each afternoon, Monday through Friday. Yellow perch and walleye remain the catch of the day.

Sources: *This is Lake County* by Jack Daniels, 1964 and *The Good Years: A History of Commercial Fishing Industry on Lake Erie* by Frank Prothero.

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