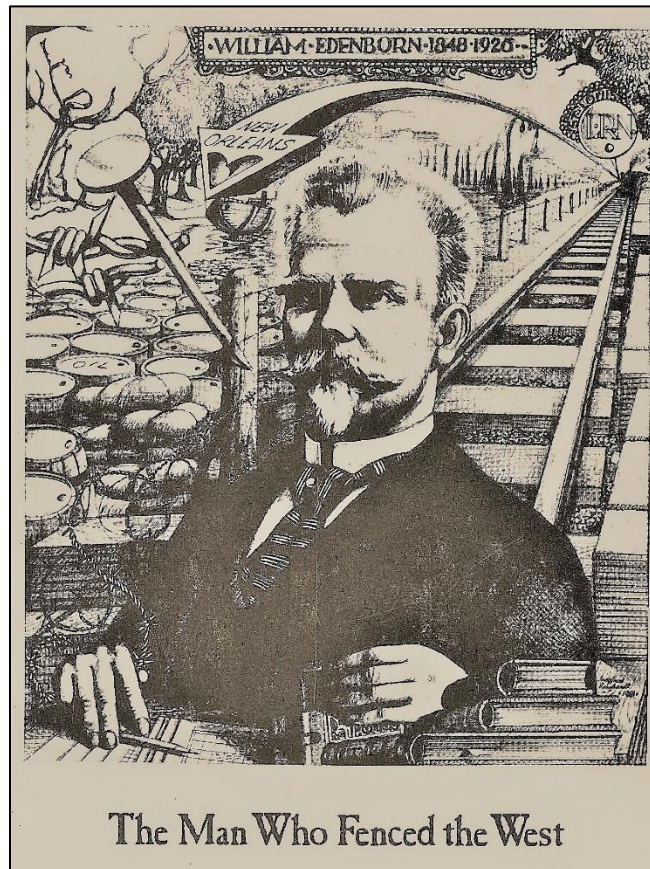




SFHM RESEARCH PAPER-2

WILLIAM EDENBORN: INVENTOR, STEEL TYCOON, AND LOUISIANA TIMBERLAND OWNER AND RAILROAD BUILDER



The Man Who Fenced the West

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Abstract:

William Edenborn was borne in Prussia in 1848 and emigrated to the United States when he was 19 years old. Having served as an apprentice in a nail manufacturing shop, he continued to develop this interest and invented new technology to improve the production of barbed wire and nails. His inventions revolutionized the industry, and his businesses supplied most of the wire and nail needs for the country, in particular the development of the West. In 1901, Edenborn sold his companies and the ownership of his patents to J.P. Morgan for \$100 million and became one of the wealthiest men in America. He moved to Louisiana to build a railroad from Shreveport to New Orleans with his own money—what is now the Kansas City Southern. To provide for railway rights of way, he purchased a million acres of timberland. He also invested in Henry Hardtner’s sawmill business at Urania. Edenborn established an experimental farm at Emden, where he invented and patented technology to extract turpentine and other chemicals from resinous pine stumps. Edenborn died following a stroke in May 1926 having made enormous contributions to the Nation and to the State of Louisiana.

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WILLIAM EDENBORN: INVENTOR, STEEL TYCOON, AND LOUISIANA TIMBERLAND OWNER AND RAILROAD BUILDER

James P. Barnett

Rarely do you hear or read the name William Edenborn, even in Louisiana where he among other things built a major railroad from Shreveport to New Orleans with his own resources. Before he made his home in Winn Parish, however, he had become a multi-millionaire from his inventions related to the manufacture of barbed wire and nails (Barnett 2121).

William C. Edenborn was born in Prussia in 1848 and emigrated to the United States in 1867 when he was 19 years old. In Prussia, he had served an apprenticeship in a nail manufacturing shop. In 1870 after saving a small amount of capital, he made his way to St. Louis where he and a friend built a wire mill that produced the first coil of wire west of the Mississippi River. As the company's president, he developed it into one of the largest industries of its kind in the United States. In 1876 William married Sarah Drain, who in addition to being his wife for 46 years, became his business confidant. She frequently traveled with William while he was involved with his many businesses.

Sadly, the Edenborn children died at a young age—Antoinette died at age 10 from a horseback riding accident and Lilly, her adopted younger sister, died from diphtheria. As a result of these deaths, the Edenborns left St. Louis and moved to Chicago.

THE WIRE EMPIRE

Edenborn did not invent barbed wire, but he patented machines that greatly reduced the cost and dramatically simplified the manufacturing process, as well as creating a new type of "duller" barbed wire that was not harmful to cattle. Previous wire with longer barbs resulted in range wars due to the injury to cattle. His inventions drove the price of barbed wire from 17 cents per pound to 3 cents per pound. His more humane wire became popular and at one time his companies supplied 75 percent of the barbed wire in America (McGrath 1984).

He also patented nail wire machines that "rod-pointed" the nails. The patent drove the price of wire nails from 8 cents per pound to 2 cents per pound. His art of producing nails helped him further develop his enterprise. Edenborn had other skills, such as shrewdly buying up other wire makers who could not compete with his reduced pricing resulting from the application of his inventions.

In the latter part of the 19th century, the market for telegraph and telephone wire expanded significantly, and Edenborn established a series of new companies to capitalize on his inventions. In 1898, he merged these companies to form the American Steel and Wire Company. As owner of the company, he took actions beneficial to the relations between labor and management. This included establishing the Employees' Benefit and Insurance Association, providing insurance and a pension at the company's expense (Coleman 1984). This set the standard for other companies to follow.



The modern barbed wire is the result of Edenborn's inventions that reduced the length of the barb and greatly reduced the production cost. (photo from dani 2010)

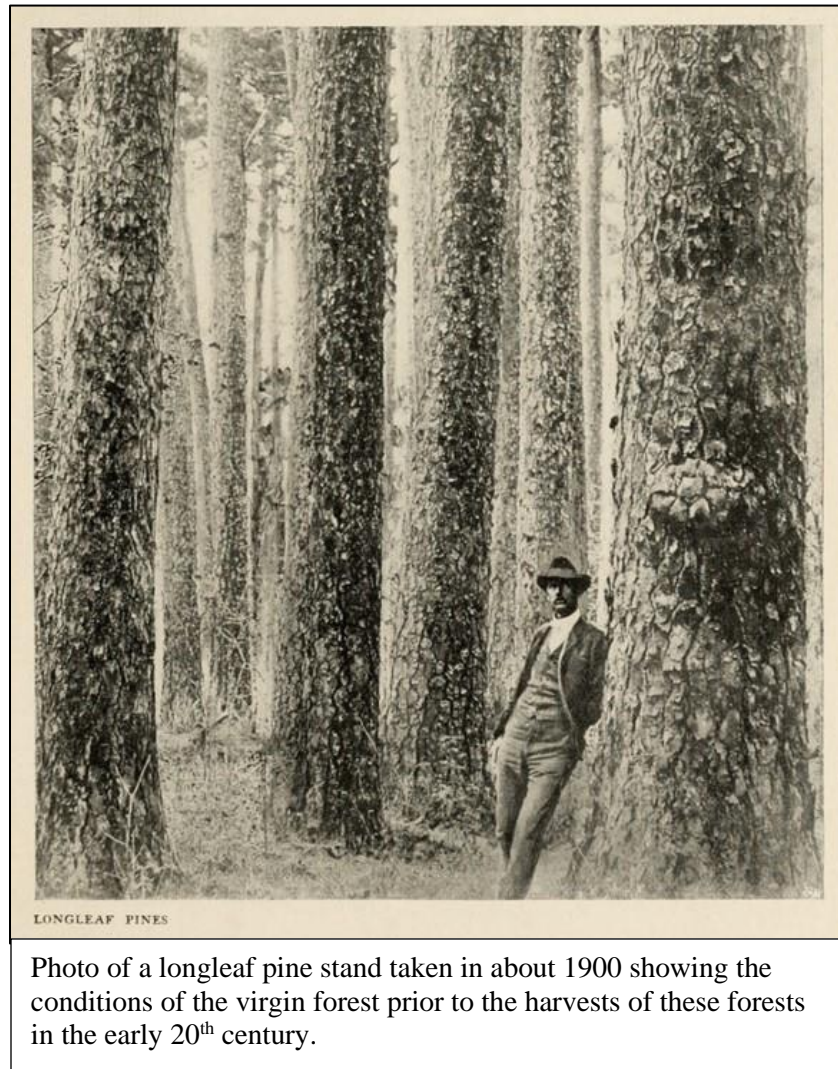
In 1901, Edenborn sold his ownership of the American Steel and Wire Company to J.P. Morgan for \$100 million--\$40 million of that was for the ownership of Edenborn's patents (Coleman 1984). Using Edenborn's company with his other businesses, Morgan formed the U.S. Steel Company. When it was founded, U.S. Steel was the largest business enterprise ever launched. As a result of the sale, Edenborn, who was known as "the man who fenced the west," became one of most wealthy men in America. He continued to serve on the board of directors of U.S. Steel and numerous other companies.

RAILROADS AND LAND

As the 19th century ended, Edenborn's business interests in wire and cable diminished, and he began to pursue other business interests: cotton, forestry products, and railroads. He and Sarah visited Shreveport where some of her family lived. He perceived that the town's businesses were under-served by railroads, and he began investing in land and railroads in Louisiana. In 1898, he created the Louisiana Central Construction Company to begin construction, using his own funds, of a railroad that would extend from Shreveport to New Orleans (Coleman 1984). To obtain right-of-way land for his track, Edenborn acquired more than a million acres of land—mostly timberland—in Louisiana.

By 1903 the line, named the Louisiana Railway and Navigation Company, reached Aloha, and a branch line to Winnfield was completed. The line to Winnfield was important because he had purchased the Coochie Cypress Brake— a cypress swamp of more than 700 acres between Verda and Atlanta. It was there that he built a sawmill to produce cypress ties needed for developing his

railroad. As he constructed the railroad, he would build sawmills and extend branches that would both meet his needs and help development of the areas. For example, at Colfax he purchased the cut over land of the Big Pine Lumber Company and formed the Colfax Lumber and Creosote Company to produce and creosote railroad ties. At Pineville and Alexandria, he completed a rail and wagon bridge across the Red River in 1902—known as the “Edenborn Bridge”. A plaque placed in Pineville attributed the city’s growth to the Edenborn Line.



Farther south at Simmesport, he built a similar bridge across the Atchafalaya River. At Angola, he developed a rail car ferry system to cross the Mississippi River. In the development of his railroad, he invested in and helped develop two other lines, the Louisiana and Arkansas Railroad and the Kansas City Southern Railroad. He became the chairman of the board of them as well. In 1906, Edenborn’s railroad system reached New Orleans. Eventually, his railroad became known as the Kansas City Southern (Fair 1997).



The steamship Sarah Edenborn being used to ferry railroad cars across the Mississippi River at Angola. The Edenborns frequently lived on this and other steamships they owned for extended periods.

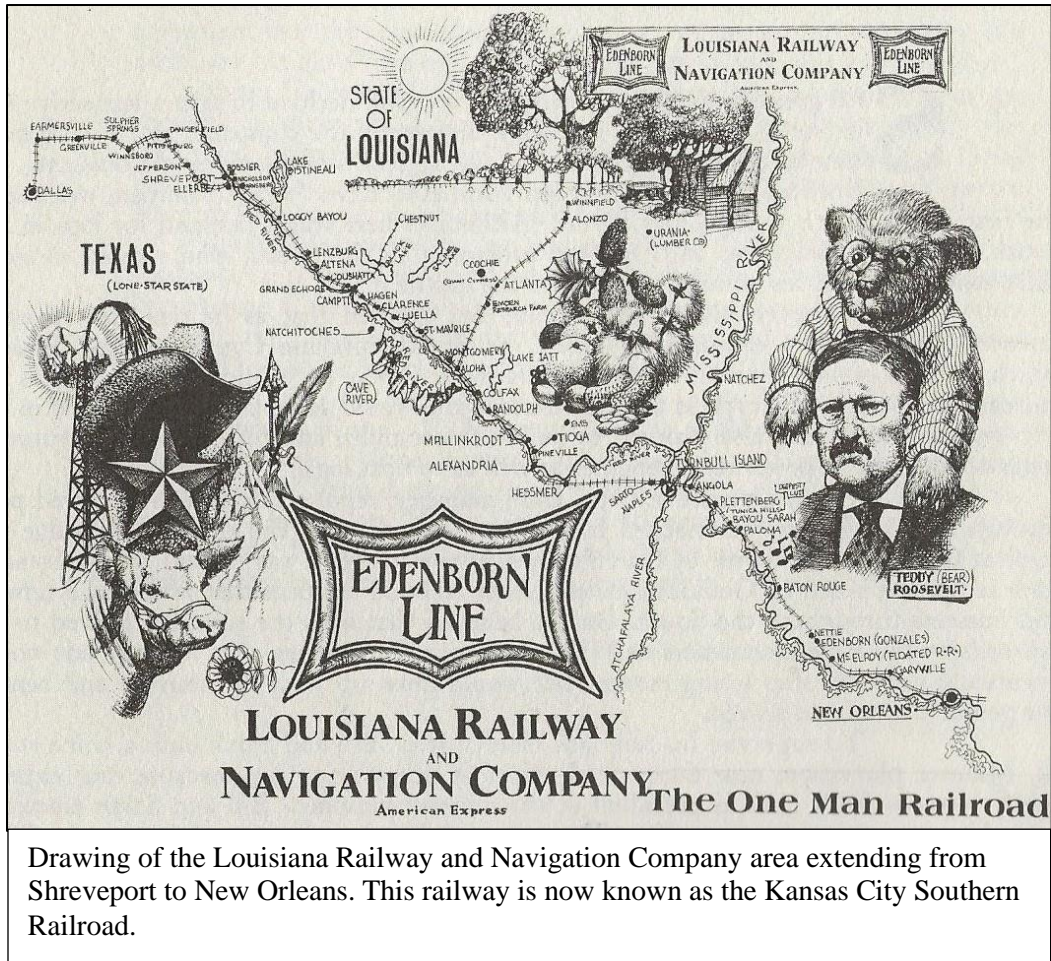
To manage his Louisiana railroads, he relocated his home from New York City to near his terminal station in New Orleans. By this time, his railroad was approximately 306 miles long, with ferry service to cross the Mississippi River to enter the city of New Orleans. The railroad carried various types of freight, especially timber, cotton, sugar, and oil, but also provided passenger service. Edenborn completed the great railroad at a cost of about \$20 million dollars. Before his death, though payrolls, taxes, and other costs, he had pumped another \$50 million into the state's economy.

CONSERVATION

While it is difficult to say that Edenborn was a conservationist, he certainly was engaged in conservation efforts. He was a personal friend of President Teddy Roosevelt—it was Edenborn who took Roosevelt bear hunting on Turnbull Island in Tensas Parish where Roosevelt believed it unsportsmanlike to kill a large bear with cubs and began the “teddy bear” phenomenon.

Henry Hardtner and Edenborn meet on a train enroute to New Orleans and became friends. In 1898, Hardtner convinced Edenborn to invest \$5,000 in his sawmill, logging railroad, and timberland company at Urania (Coleman 1984). Hardtner was visiting with the Edenborns at their home and there met his future wife. It was likely Edenborn who was responsible for Hardtner's invitation to attend President Roosevelt's Governor's Conference on Conservation of National Resources in 1908 that improved his stature as a conservationist. Edenborn also sponsored Hardtner's successful run for State Senate. Under Hardtner's influence, Louisiana was the first state to establish a commission on the conservation of natural resources.

Realizing their significance when selling the Coochie Cypress Brake, Edenborn made provision for protecting some of the exceptional old growth cypress trees.

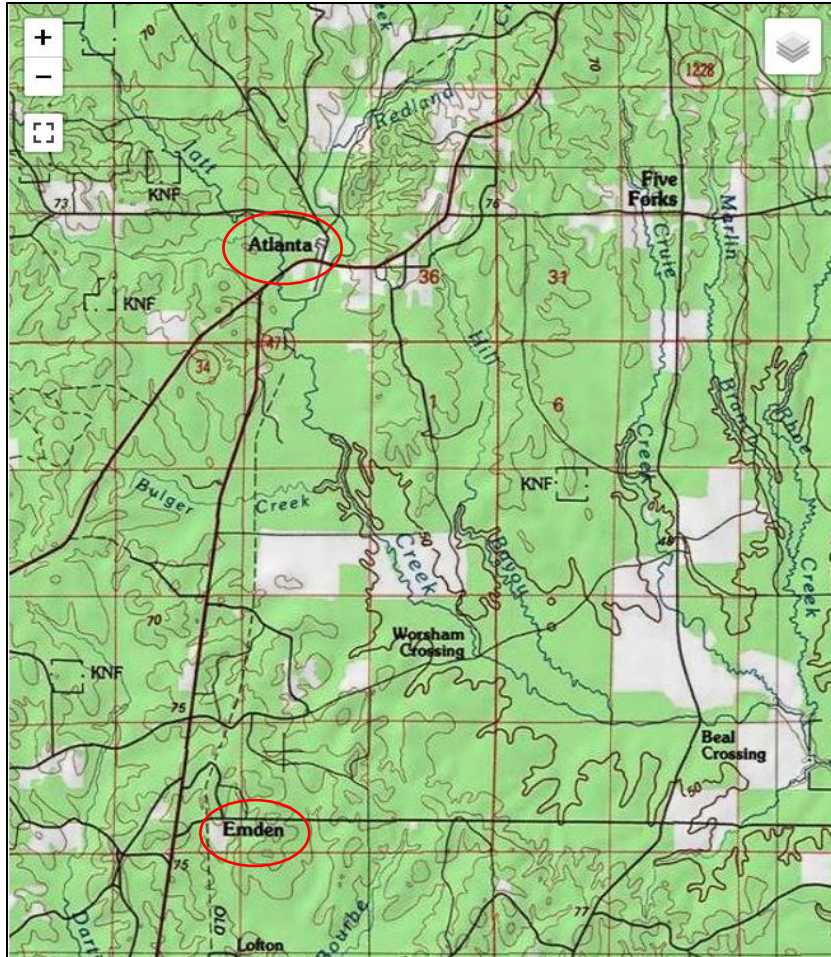


Drawing of the Louisiana Railway and Navigation Company area extending from Shreveport to New Orleans. This railway is now known as the Kansas City Southern Railroad.

EXPERIMENTAL FARM AND PERSONAL LIFE

The Edenborns established their Emden Plantation or Experimental Farm in Winn Parish, about 15 miles south of the town of Atlanta and at a stop on his railroad. Named after Emden, Germany, where his was born, it became their home for much of their later life. Although he employed a farm manager and a number of employees, he personally supervised most of the farm's operation. Several Winn Parish historians have told of the ideas he tried to make the poor hilly farmland produce profitable agriculture crops (Casteel 2021, Davies 2020). Many of his ideas did not make much sense to local natives. He experimented with ways to protect cotton from boll weevils, develop silkworm growth, and enhance peanut production by following recommendations from George Washington Carver. Due to the labor shortage during World War I, one of his more innovative ideas was to experiment with the use of monkeys as cotton pickers.

Interestingly during this time, Edenborn patented technology to extract turpentine and pitch products from pine stumps resulting from the harvest of old growth longleaf pines.



Current map showing the location of Emden about 15 miles south of Atlanta, LA. The experimental farm Edenborn created there has now mostly returned to forestland. (from online Forest Service map)

Although the Edenborns were among the wealthiest families in the nation, they lived simple lives. The list of their friends resembles a “who’s who” of the prominent society. While entertaining guests, frequently they would serve them homemade sandwiches. Not typical for their wealth, they were frugal and lived on just about \$200 per year. Glen Coleman, a grand nephew, who documented their lives in the book, “The Man Who Fenced the West,” said of Edenborn, “he was never involved in scandal, his life, as eventful as it was, passed without publicity.” William and Sarah lived in modest homes and spent much of their time on their private railroad car or on one of their steamships.

Stricken with a stroke, Edenborn was taken from Emden to a Shreveport hospital where he died on May 13, 1926. At his death he was counted among the wealthiest men in the United States by the Wall Street Journal. Mourners sent twelve truckloads of flowers to his funeral at the Forest Park Cemetery in Shreveport (Hémar 2016). Henry Hardtner said of his friend: “He brought millions of dollars to Louisiana, which he used for the development of latent natural resources.

He was honest, temperate, charitable, and above all a just man. He asked only reasonable service of his employees and was never fault-finding” (Coleman 1984)

After his death, his wife Sarah Edenborn became the chief executive of the railroad. She was the first woman to hold such a position at a railroad system in the United States. She sold the railroad shortly before the 1929 stock market crash for \$12 million. Now almost unknown, the Edenborns made major contributions to the Nation’s and Louisiana’s economy.

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