

THE BOWL MILL

A PHOTO ESSAY

The year 2008 will mark the end of an era for a 151-year-old forest products company in central Vermont: the Granville Manufacturing Company, known locally as “the bowl mill,” is closing its hardwood bowl manufacturing business.

Granville began operating during a time of ecological transition in Vermont. Almost the entire state was forested when white settlers first penetrated the area in the 1600s. By 1880, nearly 80 percent of Vermont had been cleared for farming. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, land abandoned by farmers migrating west began to revert to hardwood forest. Cherry, poplar, beech, and maple replaced the spruce and pine cleared by the lumber industry and helped foster the post-Civil War growth of the region’s wood products industry by ensuring a local supply of quality hardwoods.

Butter tubs were the original product of the Granville Manufacturing Company when it opened in 1857. Three years later, the founders designed and built two bowl lathes to produce consumer-grade wood bowls. Operations moved twice before settling in 1879 on 55 acres along the main branch of the White River on land that borders what is now part of the Green Mountain National Forest. The company has been owned by four families during its century and a half of operation: the Hemenway family, who designed and built the bowl lathes; the Rice family, from 1913 to 1972; the Howlett family, from 1972 to 1980; and the Fuller family, from 1980 to the present.

Granville’s bowls were made virtually the same way for nearly 150 years. Logs harvested in Vermont and surrounding states were first cut with a bar saw into sections between 18 and 22 inches long. These sections were then cut vertically using a cir-

cular saw, creating one flat side opposite the rounded exterior. This flat side of the wood block was mounted onto the bowl lathe, where it was spun and cut. The first bowl would be the largest, and then smaller and smaller bowls would be cut from the remaining block. A single block produced as many as six bowls, ranging in diameter from approximately 20 inches down to 8 inches. Scraps and the outside shells were sold as firewood, and sawdust was sold to local farmers for animal bedding.¹

The changes in the production process were few but notable. A devastating flood in 1927 washed away the Granville Dam, which fed water to the mill’s turbine, and forced the mill owners to switch to electricity.² Beginning in the 1980s, the drying and stacking of the green bowls was moved inside from the outdoor, open-air sheds. Reaching the desired 12% moisture content for the bowls in the outside sheds took six weeks in the summer and four months in the winter, but in controlled temperature and humidity, the bowls dried in less than two weeks.³ To create smoother surfaces and give them a better finish, large belt sanders were brought in sometime in the 1930s. In the last step before shipping, the bowls were sealed with mineral oil rather than lard, as was used a century ago.

In recent years the company was manufacturing around 30,000 bowls annually for sale online (at www.bowlmill.com), at its factory store, to catalog retailers, and to large chain stores like Williams-Sonoma and Pottery Barn. In April 2008, Granville announced that it was closing its bowl manufacturing business

BY EBEN LEHMAN

because of increased competition from overseas and rising operating costs, including higher fuel, insurance, and raw material costs. Managers also cited market pressures from retailers to become certified and prove chain of custody, a process that they say the company cannot afford nor was necessary because they buy lumber locally and operate on a “green” basis already by using all parts of the log.⁴ Several other sectors of the wood products industry in New England are similarly struggling, with paper mills, sawmills, and furniture manufacturers also closing; Granville’s building materials division will continue, however, on a limited basis. Companies producing higher-end wood products, such as decorative bowls and custom furniture, appear to be weathering the economic downturn as of press time.

Granville’s bowl manufacturing process was documented in photographs taken in 1941, 1961, and 1965 by the U.S. Forest Service, some of which follow. These photos—part of the U.S. Forest Service Eastern Region (Region 9) historic photograph collection—are now available through the Forest History Society’s online searchable image database. Containing more than 11,000 historic photographs, the database holds the largest

number of searchable historic Forest Service images on the Internet. You may search the database at <http://www.foresthistory.org/Research/index.html>. □

Eben Lehman is the Forest History Society’s technical archivist/librarian. He works with the digitization and cataloging of the historical photograph collection, manages the FHS Environmental History Bibliography, and produces EAD finding aids for archival collections.

NOTES

1. Martha Slater, “Granville Bowl Mill Celebrates: 150 Years Old and Counting,” *Randolph (Vt.) Herald*, July 19, 2007, http://www.rherald.com/News/2007/0719/Community_News/com01.html.
2. The flood of 1927 led to the creation of the Green Mountain National Forest in 1932, which is adjacent to the bowl mill.
3. Richard Ewald, “The Granville Mill: Turning Out Bowls by the Bunch,” *Fine Woodworking* (January 1990): 55.
4. Martha Slater, “150-Year-Old Bowl Mill Closes Its Doors,” *Randolph (Vt.) Herald*, April 3, 2008, http://www.rherald.com/news/2008/0403/Front_Page/f01.html.



A truckload of spruce logs are unloaded at Granville Manufacturing in 1961. In the background can be seen the Green Mountain National Forest which abutts the property.

U.S. FOREST SERVICE, EASTERN REGION, FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY PHOTO COLLECTION, R9_498676



After logs are cut into bolts 18 to 22 inches in length on a bar saw, the bolts are then cut vertically into bowl blanks using a circular saw, creating one flat side opposite the rounded original exterior side. Photo dated February 1965.



The accompanying photo information simply declared, "After first turning." This is when the largest bowl is cut from a bolt. Photo dated February 1965.



“Turning, outside already smoothed.” The flat bottoms on bowls were originally cut on the lathe and later sanded smooth.



Shaping wooden bowls at the mill, June 1961. Given the size of the bowl, this is probably one of the last turnings for this bolt.



A Granville employee sands and smooths maple bowls, June 1941. After sanding, the bowls still needed to be dried and then sealed.



Ranger Robert L. Phillips of the Rochester Ranger District on the Green Mountain National Forest looks over wooden bowls in the outdoor storage shed in 1961. At that time, the majority of Granville's sugar maple supply came from the adjacent Green Mountain National Forest. Over the last decade, however, the mill has received virtually no wood from the national forest.