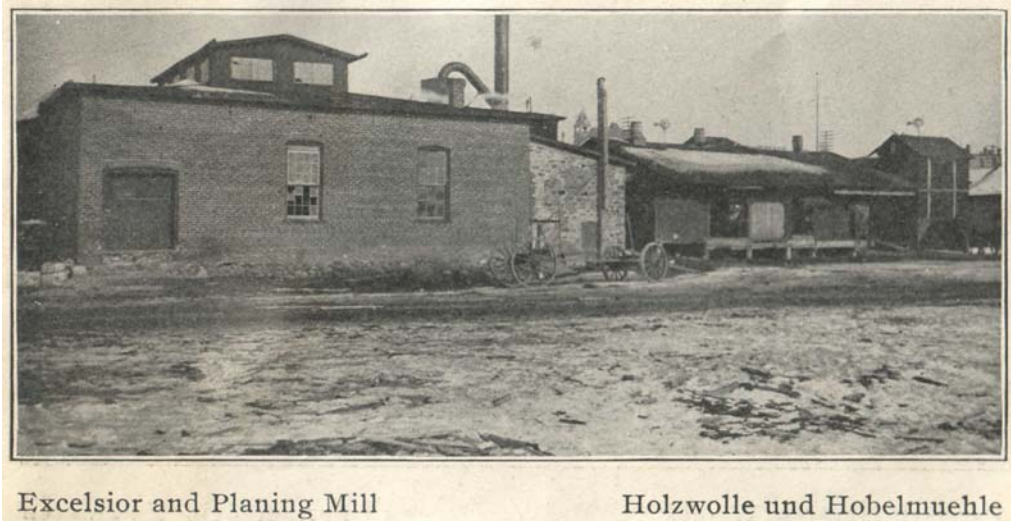


Excelsior Factory



(Photo from Souvenir of the City of Medford, Wisconsin book.)

Excelsior or “wood wool” was an important wood product in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Before the days of plastic packing materials, there was a need for soft materials to cushion objects being shipped. Excelsior was used to make soft upholstered furniture. Toys needed to be stuffed with soft materials.



Excelsior



Bear Stuffed with Excelsior.

Pack and Gill described the making of such material from wood.

“It is made from soft, straight-grained, light-colored woods, such as poplar, soft pine, cottonwood, **basswood**, or willow. The logs are cut into long, thin, and narrow strips by machines containing numerous little knives. Each machine can be set to make the strips coarse or fine according to the use to which the **excelsior** is to be put. Most of the **excelsior** made is used for packing material, although some of it is used as cheap filling for cushions and mattresses.” Pack and Gill, 251-252

In 1888, plans were made for an excelsior factory in Medford.

"Last week a party of gentlemen from Milwaukee were in town taking preliminary steps toward starting a factory here. They made overtures to the owners of the planning mill site for land upon which to build their factory. They had not decided whether they would take the old planning mill site, or the land where Fred. Hartwick's planning mill now stands, but will return later and close a bargain for one or the other. Should they decide on the latter, the **excelsior** factory will be moved to the former site. It is understood that they will manufacture furniture." (Taylor County Star and News. June 9, 1888.)

Apparently there was a high demand for the product because later in that month this article appeared in the paper.

"It is said that Medford is to have **another excelsior factory**. That the one now running night and day can not supply the demand, and that another is a necessity." (Taylor County Star and News June 30, 1888)

Contracts were made with farmers asking them to provide basswood bolts for the excelsior factory. This allowed farmers to earn extra money and to harvest basswood trees that could not have been sold for lumber as they cleared their land. (Taylor County Star and News, August 11, 1888).

In October 1888, the Medford Manufacturing Company completed a new factory in which to manufacture excelsior.

"The Medford Mnf'g Co. now have their new brick factory completed, the machinery in place, and everything ready for business. Steam was raised for the first time last Tuesday, and the whistle sounded to let citizens know of that fact. The machinery consists of **eight double excelsior machines**, and a planning machine." (Taylor County Star and News, October 6, 1888).

The manufacturers worked quickly and very soon an addition was built onto the factory. (Taylor County Star and News, October 20, 1888).

People continued to bring in bolts of wood for the factory but by December of 1892 farmers were not bringing in as much wood as needed. The newspaper stated the following:

"The stock of dry bolts at the **Medford excelsior factory** is getting very small, as the farmers in this neck of woods have been somewhat backward in going into the business of making bolts. As the result Mr. Hartman is arranging to ship in bolts from towns along the line south of this city, and expects to get about 2,500 cords of seasoned bolts to last until the stock of green bolts now arriving is dry enough to work, which will not be until spring. The factory will run all winter on the stock shipped in by rail." (Taylor County Star and News. December 3, 1892.)

As time went by business declined. In 1895 a cyclone hit and destroyed the factory. (Taylor County Star and News. May 11, 1895).

In 1895 people at the Medford Manufacturing Company wanted to continue the manufacturing of excelsior as well as other products. There was little profit in the manufacturing of excelsior. (Taylor County Star and News. November 9, 1895.) In 1896 the mill was in operation again and the newspaper had the following article. "The first revolutions of the wheels in the **excelsior mill** under the new management were made last Wednesday. Steam was raised in the boilers and a trial was made of the machinery, preparatory to the grand start on Monday next, when the grateful sound of the whistles at both **excelsior** and saw mills are expected to be heard." (Taylor County Star and News. February 1, 1896.)

In 1897 Theo. O. Hartman who had been the manager of the Medford Excelsior company was on trial because of his part in the failure of a Medford bank. (Taylor County Star and News. May 15, 1897)

The manufacture of excelsior continued as a record of shipments from Medford in 1901 indicated that there were 23 carloads of excelsior valued at \$2,775 were shipped out. (Taylor County Star and News July 20, 1901).

Farmers continued to bring in basswood bolts. Then tragedy struck in 1908 when the excelsior mill burned.

"EXCELSIOR MILL BURNED.

At noon today the **excelsior mill** caught fire and the whole interior was burned before the fire was extinguished. It was first noticed from the outside over the boiler. The blaze quickly ran through the whole building. The brick walls were left standing." (Taylor County Star-News. Friday, March 6, 1908.)

"The damage by last Friday's fire at the **excelsior mill** owned by the Medford Lumber Co. is estimated at \$2500. Only \$600 of this is covered by insurance. Carpenters are at work enclosing the engine and boiler rooms, but the rest of the building will not be rebuilt. The fire department and the mill employees were able, fortunately, to keep the fire from spreading." (Taylor County Star-News. Friday, February 28, 1908.)

Today even the word excelsior is not known by many people. Plastic and other materials have replaced the use of the product and a once important industry has passed from the scene.

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