

Tannery
(A Business at the South End of Medford's Main Street)



The Hemlock Tree

Chemicals protect plants against destructive insects. Oak, hemlock, and chestnut trees have tannin, a bitter chemical that protects the trees. Since ancient times, people have extracted the tannin from trees and used it to preserve animal hides to make leather.

The Tanning Industry in Early Days

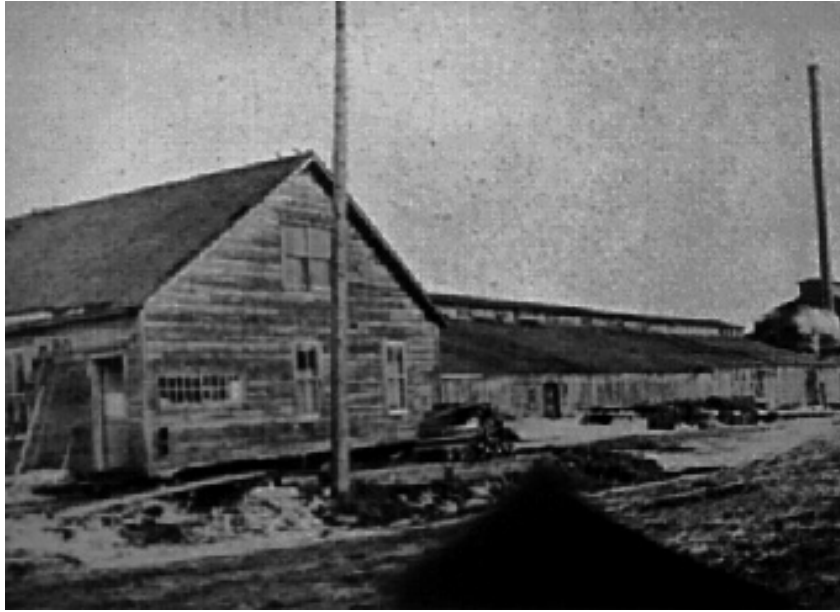
People of China used such tannin over three thousand years ago. Leather objects have been found in Egyptian tombs. People built places called tanneries to which they brought hides and materials containing tannin. There, workers processed the hides and made leather.

In early America, leather was a very important product. People needed it for boots and shoes and also for the harnesses for their horses and oxen. The first tannery in America was built in 1630 in Virginia. Most of the leather was manufactured along the east coast where there were hemlock trees whose bark could be used for tannin.

Early Wisconsin

At first, lumbermen of northern Wisconsin were interested mainly in the fine wood they could obtain from the white pine tree. Later, because the bark of the hemlock tree was a very good source of tannin, others were eager to cut as many of these abundant, 60 to 100 foot trees as possible in order to make money. In northern Wisconsin in 1907, there was more hemlock cut than pine.

Taylor County Tanneries



The Medford Tanning Company

People began to want nearby tanneries so that they could buy leather products close to where they lived. A Medford man, John Nystrum, started a tannery here in 1883. He operated it for nearly ten years and had a good business.

The Shaw Family and Their Tanneries



Delos Shaw

Then in 1890, members of the Shaw family, who had owned some of the world's largest tanneries in Maine, Massachusetts, and Canada for many years, came to look at hemlock forests in Wisconsin. Many of the hemlock forests in the east had been cut down and they needed a source of bark to keep on making leather. It was cheaper to build tanneries near to the source of hemlock bark and ship the hides there than it was to send the bark to their tanneries.

Brothers Fayette and Thaxter Shaw, and their sons Delos, and Fred Shaw came from near Boston, Massachusetts. They looked at the fine stands of hemlock trees and decided to build a tannery in Medford. By April, 1890, the tannery was producing more than two tons of tanned leather each day. Thaxter, Delos, and Fred Shaw moved to Medford and built beautiful homes on the hill east of the factory. Eldest brother Fayette started other tanneries in the area.



Yard Crew of the Shaw Tannery in Medford, Wisconsin in 1895



Beam and yard crew in Shaw Tannery

Another tannery was built by the Shaws in Perkinstown in 1892.

In 1893, Shaws built a tannery on the north side of Rib Lake. Later they built other tanneries in Prentice, Phillips, and Mellen.



Hauling Hemlock Bark

Men peeled bark from the hemlock trees in summer. In winter, the bark was hauled to the tannery. On January 20, 1894, a load of hemlock bark, weighing 21,720 pounds net, was hauled six miles to Perkinstown by a two horse team, and at Rib Lake, a four horse team pulled in one weighing 23,300 pounds net. (Latton, p. 105)

Hides

Dry hides were shipped here from South America. Some were brought in from the Chicago stockyards by train. The dry hides were hauled to the tanneries by wagon and four horse teams. The finished product was brought back the same way and shipped out by rail.

Dangerous Work

Work was dangerous. While hauling bark for the Shaw Company to their tannery at Rib Lake, in the winter of 1895-96, John Nelson of Little Black accidentally slipped off his big ten cord load that he was hauling. It ran over his legs crushing them terribly. Dr. T. M. Miller of Medford attended him. With the help of the doctor and many friends John eventually was able to walk again. (Latton, p. 110)

Joe Kuse, father of Walter Kuse, worked in the Medford tannery. He and others would come home from work with red, stained hands. At an early age, he died of cancer. Friends and relatives often wondered if work with the chemicals had been hazardous to his health.

Hemlock Lumber

Bark was the portion of the tree that tannery operators needed. Peeled hemlock logs remained in the woods and had to be burned by settlers desiring to clear enough land for farming. The moist logs had to be piled high in order to get them dry enough to burn.

Some settlers used hemlock logs to build their cabins. Joachim and Eleonore Kuse used hemlock logs to build their home on Wheelock Street. They chinked the cracks between the logs with mud to keep out the wind.



Chinking Between Hemlock Logs in Home of Joachim and Eleonore Kuse

Latton wrote about the ways the hemlock lumber was used.

“Some people realized that much timber was being wasted. In 1889, Bert Gearhart bought a saw mill in Chelsea. He was the first to specialize in hemlock. At first he sawed only long, heavy stuff for the Wisconsin Central Company, but gradually built up a market for all kinds of hemlock lumber which, at first, builders and carpenters would have nothing to do with, when they could get the pine they wanted; it was less slivery, and not so hard on saws and planes.

Soon after the Shaws started their tanneries here, they and the lumbermen began thinking of some way to increase the use of hemlock lumber. The Shaws had bought considerable cut over land just for the hemlock bark, and thousands of feet of hemlock timber lay in the woods and rotted after the bark had been peeled off. In 1895, a company had been organized to advertise hemlock, and to help to find markets for it.



Picture of Winchester Hotel

The Winchester Hotel was built near the south end of Main Street and finished entirely with hemlock to show what could actually be done with that lumber. Fred Ward an experienced hotel man, was put in charge, and for a dozen years it was quite a success. Mr. and Mrs. Fayette Shaw came from Boston, and took a suite of rooms there, but they found that they missed very much, city life, and stayed only a year.



View from the Winchester Hotel

Then, more and more traveling men began stopping at hotels down town to avoid carrying their luggage up the big hill; by 1912, it had become a losing proposition.

In 1920, it was sold to District Superintendent Kundert who had it razed, the lumber and material being sent to build churches and parsonages all over northern Wisconsin. The local Methodist church was built with lumber from that hotel." (Latton, pp. 108-109)



A Wooden Sidewalk on Medford's Main Street

Most of the sidewalks in early Medford were made of hemlock planks. In later years, single planks would break and the sidewalks became unsafe. Lumber prices went up and people replaced the wooden walks with cement.



The Baseball Team

The Shaws were an important part of the economic and social history of Medford and the surrounding area for more than a decade and their influence went on for many years. Latton wrote, "The Shaws brought their interest in baseball to the community. Delos and Fred Shaw were both good ball players. The former was the first pitcher here who could throw a curved ball. Few of the fans here then would believe that it could be done until they tried to bat his offerings." (Latton, p. 94)



Letitia Shaw and Leila Winchester – Early Medford Young People

Life for the Shaws was good. Delos Shaw and a local girl, Miss Ida Krauth, were married and lived in a fine new home in Medford. Letitia Shaw, daughter of Thaxter Shaw, married Theodore Owen Withee and moved to Clark County.

But not all was easy. In 1896, the tannery in Perkinstown burned and that town became a deserted village for a period of time and never fully recovered. Fires occurred in other tanneries and there were many fires in the cutovers and slashings.



United States Leather Company Tannery Medford, Wisconsin

Then new discoveries in chemistry changed their fortunes. New methods of tanning using synthetic tannic acid instead of hemlock bark were discovered. The Shaws were forced to sell. They could not compete with the cheaper methods. All of their holdings were acquired by the United States Leather Company. Some of the Shaws returned East, some lived in Clark County and some spent most of their remaining days in the city of Phillips, Wisconsin. When the tanneries no longer needed to be near a source of hemlock bark, United States Leather Company also ceased its operations in Medford and the surrounding area. By 1919, the property shown in the photo above was sold to Harry Hurd and converted first to a box factory and then to a sash and door and then a millwork company.

Bibliography

Latton, A. 1947. Reminiscences and anecdotes of early Taylor County. Medford, Wisconsin: Self published.

Photographs by early photographers Zeit and Dake.

Photographs by members of Kuse family.

Taylor County Star and News , December 1, 1883, Star Vol. VIII No. 33 News Vol. 7, No 26.

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