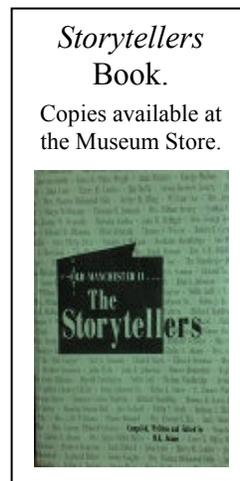


Herbert Bengtson

Webmaster's Note: Herbert Bengtson (8/26/1913-10/25/2010) was born, raised and lived most of his life in Manchester. He served as Town Historian in the 1990s. Herb's story, "as told to the Manchester Historical Society," appears in the Society's Old Manchester II... The Storytellers book on pages 77 to 81. Thank you to Maureen Hevey for transcription.

THE SWEDISH CONNECTION

My father, in Sweden, accumulated enough money to bring his fiancée to this country. He had been engaged in Sweden, and came here in 1900. He raised enough money so that he brought my mother over in 1901. When he came to this country in 1900, he was 20 years old. He had been working on a farm for board and room, after his mother died in 1888, for about 12 years. As a boy of 8, he went to this farm and worked there until he was 20 and then my grandfather sent him passage to come to this country. My father came to Manchester, where my grandfather had eventually moved, after remarrying in Willimantic. My grandfather and his wife came to Manchester and they had a boarding house here on Maple Street.



This is where my dad came when he finally got here in July of 1900. He went to work for a contractor in town by the name of Pat Gorman. He did a lot of digging cellars and stone work. He helped build the stone bridge and the stone work in Highland Park when he was working for Pat Gorman. He was also trying to raise money so he used to go out on Saturday afternoon and chop wood for some of the farmers around the area. He used to get \$1.00 a cord chopping wood. He was anxious to get as much money as he could. When my mother came over in 1901, she came to marry my father. She was 22 at the time and she got a job here in the teacher's hall, here in Manchester, in the kitchen. She stayed there for the few months that she was here before she was married. They were married in November of 1901.

They got a rent on Spruce Street and here my oldest sister was born. There's six of us children in the family, I being the youngest. They lived there for a short time and then they moved to Maple Street for a couple of years. Then they moved to School Street, where I was born. I was only two years old when we moved to Summer Street from School Street.

We were a very close family. Swedish was spoken almost entirely at home and I was four years old before I learned to speak English.

After we left Summer Street, we moved to Hartford Road, on the corner of Fairfield Street, and we lived there for about 10 years. Then we moved to Gardner Street, in Highland Park, and we've been up here since that time.

I lived with my folks for ten years. Then when I was married in 1940, I moved next door. I've been in the same house all my married life. Our home life was very congenial. We were a happy family. We never had much money cause my dad, while he worked all the time, my mother never worked. She raised the family. As the older brothers and sisters became of age, in the neighborhood of 15 or 16, they went out to work. They all lived at home until they were married and then they went off to live on their own.

Neighbors from the World

On Hartford Road, we all lived in a huge development of Cheney houses that the Cheney's had built right around the first world war, 1918-1919. We moved into one of these Cheney houses. As far as the neighborhood was concerned, there were a lot of different ethnic groups. On the other side of us, there was an Irish family, and for a time, an Italian family. Next door to us, we had an English family. In the three-family house was an English family and a Swedish family. Across the street, there was a two-family house where French people lived. Across Fairfield Street from us, there was a German family and a Lithuanian family and next to them, up on Fairfield Street, was a two-family – there was a Swedish family and a Polish family across the street from them. Next to us, on the north side of Fairfield Street, was an English family. Across Hartford Road, there was a four-family house with three Italian families and one Polish family. On West Street, there was a two-family with an Irish family on one side and a German family on the other side. We had quite a group of people, not of one nationality or ethnic group. We were very friendly, everybody was friendly with each other. In those days, there were no family feuds, you might say.

As far as I can recall, I think all the neighbors worked at Cheney Mills including my father. He had started to work for Cheney Bros. back in 1907 and had started in the machine shop. He worked in the machine shop all his working years. He retired in 1950.

Schooling

I went through high school and what they called the trade school at the time. The first trade school was a Cheney school next to the present MCC campus building on Hartford Road. Cheney's had started a trade school – textile school – there probably around 1911-1912. Then the town took it over and moved up to the present Barnard building which is one of the buildings of Bennet Jr. High School. They outgrew that building and a new building was built on School Street. That is where I went to school, at the School Street building. We took what is called a cooperative course – cooperative textiles – which was the one I took. We went half a day to high school and half a day to trade school. We completed a certain number of hours in trade school and certain requirements in high school and received diplomas from both trade school and high school. The number of pupils outgrew that building and then the new Howell Cheney Technical School was built over on West Middle Turnpike. We took standard courses – English, History, Mathematics, Science, etc. – so we had the basic requirements for high school graduation.

A Cheney Weaver

I graduated in 1931, the class of '31, Manchester High School, and I went to work at Cheney Bros. as a weaver for a short time. The depression had started but Cheney Bros. tried to find work for all the students, particularly in the mill somewhere. We were all placed in jobs at the mills. I was weaving for what they called broadgoods at the time. Then I was working in the ribbon mill which is now the coat factory (Manchester Modes). I worked there for six or eight months and then the orders petered out and I was laid off. I couldn't get back into Cheney's until 1935 when I went to work at the Velvet Mills in the shipping department. I worked there for several months and then I had the opportunity to go into the scheduling and planning office. There we laid out the work for the velvet department, ordering the material for the velvet cloth to be woven in the department. We had to arrange for dyeing and finishing the goods. I stayed there until 1940.

I left Cheney Bros. in 1940 and I went to work for the State of Connecticut at the Veterans Home and Hospital in Rocky Hill. I was there until December 1944. At that time, my former boss in the office at Cheney had passed and they were looking for somebody to take over his job. I inquired about it, and got the job. I came back as the manager of the scheduling and planning office in December 1944 and I was with them until early 1956 after Cheney Bros. sold out to Stevens Co. Then I went to work for Pratt & Whitney for a short period of time. I left Pratt & Whitney to go to work for the U.S. Air Force in the contracting office that they had in Hartford. I worked there until 1965 until all the services combined their contracting requirements together. Then they became the Defense Contract Administration Services. I stayed with them until I retired in July, 1977.

The Silk Story

Cheney Bros., when they started in 1838, just made silk thread. They tried to raise the cocoon, raise their own silk here. That was not feasible. The mulberry trees didn't take to this climate. Cheney Bros. started importing cocoons from China, Japan, India, Italy. Most of them were from Japan but other countries did supply Cheney Bros. with these cocoons. They came in huge bags and they were brought into the back of the cloth mill – the spinning mill as we called it – and then it went through various operations there to get the gum and dirt out of it. A cocoon looks like a spider web. There's a secretion on there that glues it together. I guess this is what held the thread together and this glue had to be softened and washed out so the threads could be unraveled. On the pierced cocoon, this is before the moth had a chance to develop and get out of it, they were able to find the loose end and just line it in a continuous filament from the cocoon. This was all done in the spinning mill. When the moth had broken through the cocoon, then the silk threads were broken and there was not a long, continuous filament from it, then they took this and carded it and they spun velvet very much like you'd take a hunk of cotton or a hunk of wool and card it and make it into a thread, spin it into a thread. This type of yarn they called spun silk instead of raw silk which was the original filament that came from the cocoon. This went through various operations until it was made into continuous lengths of yarn and woven and became a piece of finished cloth. At one time, Cheney Bros. was the largest in the world that handled silk directly from the cocoon to the finished product and shipped it out as a piece of cloth. Right after the first World War, in 1919 through the early '20s, Cheney Bros. had in the neighborhood of 5,500 employees. Practically all my experience – 60 years of it – was in the velvet department.

The Difference was "The Homes"

If you've been to some of the textile towns throughout New England and compare them with Cheney Bros. in Manchester, Cheneys were a very good family to work for. They built a lot of homes for people and they were not the row-type homes that you find in other towns around the area. The homes built by Cheney Bros. were individual homes, for the most part. In the little area that they called Cheneyville – around Cooper Hill Street, West Street, Fairfield Street – in that area, they did build a mixture of single homes and multiple-family homes, two-, three-, and even four-family residences for the employees. You didn't find this in a lot of the other textile communities around the area. This is one reason why the Cheney historic district was established and accepted by the government – because of the uniqueness of the Cheney complex: the mills, where the Cheney owners had their homes right next to the mill property; the small, individual homes for the workers; more elaborate homes for the superintendents of various mills. They were all intermingled in a reasonable walking distance of the mills. I think that was one of the reasons why some people came to Manchester to work rather than going elsewhere.

The Sale of "The Homes"

In the early 1930s, the Cheney family applied for bankruptcy. The bankers took control of the material and everything – the assets of the company. This went along until 1937 when things got so bad that the Cheney family had to unload a lot of surplus property. Of course, there were all the homes they had acquired around town. They unloaded all of these at a big sale they had in 1937, and people had the opportunity to buy these homes at a very low cost. Some probably paid as low as \$1,000 for a home. Some of these three- and four-family houses probably went for \$5,000 or \$6,000 dollars. It was just unbelievable what people paid for these homes. Most of the people bought their own home and if they didn't, someone else did.

Don't Forget All The Cheney Family Did

Cheney Bros. established their own electric light company and gas company in the early 1900s. They put in a lot of water and sewer systems. They built schools and rented them to the town for \$1.00 per year. They gave land to a number of churches so they would have a piece of land to build on (particularly the churches that were built after 1880). They had their own street lighting system, first it was gaslights in town and afterwards electric lights came in. They had a boarding house for their female employees, and one for men, whose families were not in town. They built Cheney Hall for social activities for the people of the town. They built the teacher's hall which was a boarding house for female employees of the school system. This was another building that they rented to the town for \$1.00 per year. Cheney Bros. did an awful lot for the town.

Cheney Bros. were generous people. I don't know if they were just handing out their money indiscriminately, but regarding anything that seemed to benefit the town and thereby their own workers they seemed to be very generous.

For instance, in 1867 they built Cheney Hall. They used to have plays and recitals down there; they have a huge organ in there; they had dances and movies, and different groups in town – fraternal groups or other groups, I guess – would put on plays. This was one of the few halls in town that was readily accessible. At Cheney Hall, you only walked up a few steps and you were in, so it was especially convenient for older people.

Cheney Family Life

It seems as though Swedish girls were much in demand by the Cheney family for doing cooking and housework. They were always looking for Swedish girls to do the work in the house. If you read any of the novelettes that some of the Cheney women have written, they'll tell you about some Swedish girl that worked for them.

As far as I know, the Cheney family used only cooks and maids. They had gardeners but they were employed by the company. My grandfather was a gardener for many years with Cheney families. He worked a lot on the landscaping for various homes.

The Cheney family also had two farms. There was one farm on the west side of town near Hackmatack Street, Prospect Street, Keeney Street, and that general area. They had a huge farm up there where they raised a lot of cattle and chickens, so they supplied the families with milk and cream and eggs, butter and that sort of thing. Then there was another farm near the East Cemetery in the development that's called Hollywood now. This is the area bounded by East Cemetery, Parker Street, Autumn Street and

Porter Street. That farm, mostly for raising horses, was called the Hackney Farm because the horses were of the Hackney breed. The individual families had little flower gardens that they had people take care of. Mary Cheney had a garden down the back of her house on Hartford Road. That's the building that is now New Hope Manor. She had a tremendous garden that was open to the public, but again, she didn't do the actual work. She just loved flowers and supplied her home with flowers during the season.

The families had chauffeurs to drive their cars and, before that, to drive the horse and wagon teams they had for transportation.

The Cheneys were down-to-earth. They were not afraid to mingle with people. A lot of people who came over around the turn of the century came from foreign countries and landowners and different types of people were looked up to such as clergy, the mayor of the town or city, or mill owners. I think that a lot of people who came over still had this feeling in respect to the Cheneys. They put them on sort of a pedestal. They looked up to them, of course: they were their employers. I don't think that the Cheneys went out of their way to deliberately encourage this. Their kids went to public school. They had private school for lower grades, but when the kids became of age, and were in high school or seventh or eighth grades, they went to public schools. A lot of them did go to prep schools and private schools.

The original Cheney Bros., who founded the industry, were all gone before the turn of the century. The second generation carried on pretty much in the footsteps of their fathers. They were superintendents of the various mills and in the main office as well as sales department and that sort of thing. I recall some of the third generation who worked in the mills. There was Horace and John Learned whose mother was a Cheney. For a short time, Horace was superintendent of the velvet mill and his brother, John, was superintendent of the dye and finishing department. There were a couple of other brothers who had jobs in the mills about the time I was working there. They both passed away.

When Cheney Bros. sold to Stevens Co., that was the beginning of the end. The children had all grown and moved away. As the family died away, the homes were sold. There are no Cheney family members living in the old homes any more.

Most of the Cheney workers were too old to find other work, so they just retired. Others found work wherever they could. Stevens Co. sold off all the properties. They didn't operate any of the businesses of the Cheneys here. They sold the whole velvet department as a going concern. They had about 350 to 400 people who stayed on there. A lot of people went into the aircraft [*Webmaster's note: Pratt & Whitney Aircraft.*]; some went into small shops around the area – wherever they could find jobs.

Times change, memories remain.