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The Hutchins Bobbin Mill, Lincoln, VT

by Franklin Cobb (March 2005)
with additional notes by Rhonda Hutchins, 2018

Many thanks to Franklin and Joan Cobb for sharing their memories of the Hutchins Bobbin Mill. (Noted by Beverly Brown 2005). Franklin worked for Marshall Hutchins about 25 years. At first, he worked in the woods logging. About 1952 at the age of 16, he went to work in the bobbin mill. He wasn't old enough to run the machinery, so he "tailed the nip saw" with Marlin Butterfield.

The Mill yard had many logs piled in it. They came to the edge of the road, piled parallel with the road. The logs were brought into the mill, two or three at a time on carts, which were on railroad tracks. Some of the logs could be rolled down into the carts; some were brought to the track by one horse. When the cart was loaded with logs, it was pushed into the mill. Franklin remembers jumping off the tracks and hurting his ankle.

Once in the mill, the logs were cut into lengths according to the intended use. Bobbins, speeders, which were larger, or firewood - if it couldn't be used otherwise. The saw that did this was known as the Balder Saw. One man piled the blocks up. One length went to the "splitters" where it was split into slabs and quartered into the size of bobbins. These square pieces went onto a conveyer belt and into the "hoppers" or bins. They were taken out of the hopper and turned into round bobbins by a lathe. Each man had a barrel to fill. When the barrel was full the bobbins were counted! Albert Sylvester, an excellent "turner" would turn 5000-6000 bobbins per day. Franklin remembers one day when Buster Cram sawed and Franklin "turned" over 8000 bobbins!

After the bobbins were counted, they were put onto a carriage belt which took them upstairs. They dropped into a cart and the cart dumped them into different bins to dry. These bins were located so that a truck could back in under them. A door in the floor would be opened and the bobbins would fall into the truck to be delivered.* (Joan, Franklin's wife was in one of those bins one night when the bin doors unexpectedly opened, and she fell quite a distance to the ground.) Some bobbins were taken to New Haven Junction, to be loaded into the train boxcars. Franklin recalled taking a load of bobbins to Richmond. The boxcar had to be moved, so Franklin started to move the truck

out of the way forgetting that the dumping mechanism was in gear. All the bobbins went onto the ground and had to be picked up by hand!

The blocks that weren't cut for bobbins went to make "speeders." They were a lot larger than the plain bobbins and of better quality. The "Ricker Saw" rounded the square bobbins in one direction, then the "Rip Saw" rounded them in the other way. Franklin "tailed" the rip saw. He took the blocks and put them in a bin. Holes were drilled into the ends of those blocks; some were drilled the whole length; others were not depending on how the company ordered them. After being drilled, they were put in a bin and then turned into speeders. They were counted and the ends were dipped into hot wax to prevent splitting.

Franklin's wife, Joan remembers dipping her hands into the hot wax then into cold water, making wax "gloves" and placing them in a row – just for fun. She did not work at the mill, but stopped by to visit him when he was working the night watch.

The machinery at the mill ran by steam. Apparently when the steam engine was brought into town, it wouldn't come through between the rocks on "split rock bend." (Located on the river road to Lincoln just up river from route 116). So it had to be brought by an alternative route. (Route unknown to Franklin).

When the bobbins were cut, the shavings went to a conveyer belt that went to the boiler room and to the burner. The raging fire was under a cement floor that had an opening about 2 feet by 2 feet. The shavings, chips, and scrap wood were fed into the fire through this opening; sometime being shoveled by hand, especially at night. It was referred to as the "Dutch oven", and was used by game wardens for disposal of road kill.

The whole mill ran on one long shaft that ran the length of the mill. This involved several belts and pulleys. Accidents did happen. One time, a pulley fell off the shaft and missed Franklins head by inches. Another time, a replaced tooth came off the "Ricker Saw" and cut Franklin under his chin. More than one person lost fingers to the saws. (Saws needed periodic sharpening – they would be removed and if possible sharpened, or teeth replaced.)

Changes were made at the mill. A pond was built where the logs were washed/soaked. The railroad tracks and carts were removed. Franklin recalls his father, John Cobb, told that there was a "steamer" for the logs at one time; probably when it was owned by Parker. While Franklin worked there an automatic turner was installed. "It would turn anything" and there seemed to be resulting waste.

Several people were mentioned. Calvin Darling counted bobbins, Donald Burt worked the splitter, LeRoy Clark, Charlie Phillips cut bobbins to length. Keith Brown would climb into the bobbin bins and startle Leon Lafayette as he made his rounds as night watchman. Earl Phillips and Frankie Morrill worked there. One workman nailed another's coat to the wall, the coat tore when the owner tried to get it. Apparently, the prankster paid for the coat – it was deducted from his paycheck! Mary Eubar's friend who had only one arm was known to fire the boiler better than some men with two arms.

(Some additional notes added by Rhonda Hutchins 2018. Rhonda is the daughter of Martyn and Vivian Hutchins. Martyn owned the bobbin mill after his brother, Marshall, retired.)

With the steam furnace at the mill, there was a whistle which was blown regularly on mill work days at noon and at four pm for quitting time. Since many of the mill workers were also voluntary firemen, and because the mill had a night watchman and weekend coverage, the mill was the place to call first in case of fire. The mill whistle was for years the alarm for fires in town. In later years a fire alarm was installed at the mill and the fire house and the watchman would start a "call tree" to rouse the firemen.

I remember the boiler room and that raging fire. To cross through the boiler room, you had to step o-v-e-r the cover of the feed hole. The cover consisted of a piece of metal with a handle (probably an old shovel handle) attached. I also remember a "chop saw." It was a blade that dropped to chop chunks of wood along the grain. It fell at a regular pace. The person operating it needed to get the chunk of wood into place while the blade was raised and get their fingers out of the way when the blade dropped.

Sawdust from the saws would be picked up by local farmers to use as bedding for the cows in their barns. Wood that could not be used in the mill was sold to local people for heating homes. It could be delivered by the mill dump truck (frequently driven by Harold Purinton) or picked up in your own pick-up truck, or the trunk of your car. On occasion the local minister would call asking for wood for a family in need. Almost all waste or by-product was used.

If you were injured on or off the job, every effort was made to find a job you could do, so to continue your income. You might get a job you didn't like much, but you would have work and your family could be fed.

The night watchman job was frequently a part time job used to supplement another income sometimes a retiree, a farmer, or someone partially disabled permanently or temporarily.

One of the trailer truck drivers, who came from Georgia, would bring my mother, Vivian Hutchins, pecans for pecan pie when he came to get a load of bobbins. In exchange Vivian fed him home cooked meals while he was in town.

Most of the mill workers were local. A number of them, my dad included, lived in the village and walked to work every day. This sometimes freed up the family car for wives to get to their work or just aided in the physical fitness of the men and saved wear and tear on the car and reduced parking space needed.

Loggers – those who brought the raw materials into the mill, were not employees, they were self-employed, simply paid by the size and kind of wood they brought into the mill. Both the logging trucks coming in and the loads going out needed to be carefully loaded to prevent dangerous shifting of the loads on our mountain roads.

Some men would find their paycheck “short” on Friday night. Wives occasionally made an appearance at the office during the week to get the weekly grocery money in advance.