

Ron Murray – Rowe Manufacturing Disassembly
Interviewer: Luanne Murray Nelson
Date: 24Apr2014

Luanne – I am Ron's daughter. He is going to tell us about Rowe Manufacturing and how it was set up inside and what he got to do at the end.

Ron – To begin with, there was a water wheel out back to the north. It wasn't like a normal wheel where the wheel stood up and water went over it, or under it. There's two different ways there. This one laid flat and the water went around it and that turned it. I don't know why they did that but apparently where the area was, that it made the most sense for getting the power down to the building.

The power come from the water wheel into the building and they had long, heavy line shafts that went lengthwise through the building. They went east and west. They had one on the bottom floor and they had one on the upper floor and the top floor. They had belts that went from the water wheel to the first shaft, called line shafts. There were pulleys all along that they could run different machinery off of, like the pulley I gave you. They had some huge ones, 3-4' in diameter, and they had smaller ones, depending on what kind of speed they wanted for the machine.

Somewhere on the line the power would go from one line shaft up to the next one above with a belt. Then that shaft would be running, and I didn't notice when we were in there tearing stuff out; I imagine they had various clutches on them so they could run just one line shaft and they could run the next one and the next one above. But with different size pulleys they could get the speeds they wanted and they could get the power from one floor to the next and they made a lot of parts for the furniture industry in Grand Rapids. They made chair spindles, oh, just a lot of things, and lamp bases for wooden lamps. They made little beads, wooden beads maybe 1" in diameter or smaller. They had a process where they painted them. They put them in a tumbler they had made, it was an 8-sided box, with a shaft through it, and a door on it, and they put, I presumed they used shavings and paint, the pieces in there and tumbled them. It was quite interesting. We worked in there, I don't know how long, probably 2-3 weeks taking out stuff.

L - When was that?

It probably had to been the mid-60s. What they did, the people that owned the building, they turned it over to a man, he would find a buyer and for so much money he would sell that man everything; you go in and take what you wanted, and when he was done, he'd find another buyer and sell it again and again. We didn't pay very much for it. We took about six truckloads of a lot of real nice edgings. They made dowels there too and that's what these edgings were saved for, to turn into dowels. They made smooth dowels and they also made gluing dowels and they had a thread on them when you put them in a hole with glue on it, the excess glue could come out, otherwise, if you put two pieces together with a dowel in between with no place for the glue to come out, you'd blow the wood part - the hydraulic pressure - it would split the wood.

In the basement they had a lot of, some beautiful hard maple 2x4's, and we had quite a nice pile of them pulled out and when we went back the next day they were gone, somebody come and got them, all 8' long, they were just beautiful hard maple. There was no electric in the building when we were working in it. So we took car headlights and put them on a pole and had a battery attached to them, and we had lights down in there and we could work regardless of what the weather was.

It was interesting, we enjoyed it. There was a lot of old dowel stock left and various kinds of wood, some exotic wood like from Africa, some mahogany and stuff like that, there was some beautiful walnut and cherry pieces they had left over.

They had sold it to a kiln dry outfit in Grand Rapids, ahead of us, I don't know how far; they took a tremendous amount of stuff out. They took out everything they wanted. So that's about the end of my story.

L - Why did they stop using it as a manufacturing plant when their power was free?

Well, the power wasn't free because you got maintenance on it. I don't know, I don't know. It probably went out for the same reason they took the dam out, why did they take the generating dam out of Newaygo? They pulled that out too. Boy, you'd think with all that water back there all you gotta do is keep the generators maintained and you got power, free power, but they tore them out and I don't know why.

L - I always wondered that stuff.