

Woolrich: The rest of the story — Part 1

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WOOLRICH - When John Rich, the founder of Woolrich Woolen Mills, built his first factory by Plum Run in 1830, a blessing of the good life came to that section of Clinton County - a blessing that has lasted 179 years.

A village sprouted out of the heavily wooded, roughly 300-acre tract of land along nearby Chatham's Run where Rich erected a new mill building in 1845. Factoryville, or Richville, later became the Village of Woolrich.

The great success of Rich's venture has been well-documented and much written about through the years. In 2005, a well-publicized 175th anniversary celebration occurred. The outlet store in Woolrich continues regularly to draw both local people and those from faraway towns, other states and even other countries. In truth, Woolrich Woolen Mills is known worldwide.

What isn't known widely - even by locals - is "the rest of the story," as the late Paul Harvey would have said.

To begin with, in 1786 a warrant was obtained by a Felix Christman for the land that later became the site of the mill and village. In 1816 Christman sold the property to a C. D. Hepburn for \$14.47 1/2. Then, in 1834, John Rich purchased it from Hepburn for \$600.

During the 1850s, the development surrounding the mill was called Factoryville, with only four log houses in existence in 1858. The number of employees at the mill reached only about 10. But into the 1860s, as the mill expanded and the community began to grow, the educations of the residents' children and the spiritual needs of all were well met. A public schoolhouse on an eastern hillside took care of the growing number of children, and by 1875 there were about 70 in attendance.

Michael Bond Rich, grandson of John Rich, wrote of his memories of the students and teachers at the school during those days: "Mr. Cormon was very unpopular with the students, as he was brought there from Brush Valley, as we understood, to straighten out the unruly ones. The boys showed their appreciation as follows: One night at a spelling school he came with a lady friend. They took the wheels from the buggy, hoisted them up and tied them in the top of some tall trees near at hand.

"Next followed a Miss McCloskey who, on one occasion, had all the boys up in line, and she began at one end and whipped them until she was tired out, and then resigned as teacher."

In 1868, a Methodist church was built on the same site as the present-day Woolrich Community Church, at the corner of Park Avenue and Main Street, with Rev. A. Duncan Yocum serving as the first pastor. Before 1868, church members met in the schoolhouse.

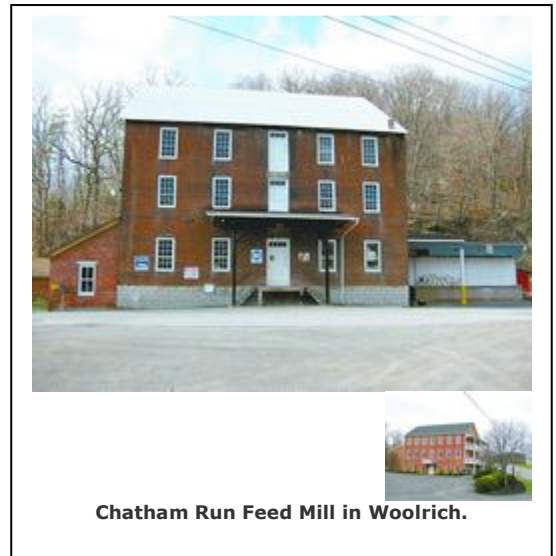
On April 5, 1868, a Sunday School for the church was organized. Then, beginning in 1880 and throughout that decade, an annual summertime "Children's Day" was sponsored by the church, with attendees reaching 800 on one occasion.

In 1907, while Rev. Michael S. Derstine was pastor, a new church edifice was constructed on the site, with the old structure moved to Avis, where it stands today as a bookstore. Under Derstine, the church withdrew from the Great Island Circuit and formed a new one with Avis and the Phelps Chapel along Pine Creek. Revival meetings were common, lasting from four to nine weeks, with from 40 to 75 conversions recorded as being "quite frequent."

Woolrich expanded greatly after the Flood of 1889. Two men, Sheridan Cryder and E. C. Tobias, through the succeeding decades, eventually designed and built more than 80 residences, along with the new church, a community clubhouse, a swimming pool, a "tabernacle" in Woolrich Park and a new school building.

The cement swimming pool, with a bathhouse, opened on July 1, 1929. It was located just on the west side of Chatham's Run. Its dimensions were 50 feet wide, 150 feet long, and 7 1/2-feet at its deepest.

The new elementary school, just across Chatham's Run from the pool, also opened in 1929. It had a 200-pupil capacity. Its doors closed in the mid-1990s.



Perhaps the three most exciting and memorable days in the history of the community of Woolrich were July 25, 26 and 27 in 1930. That's when residents celebrated the centennial of the community's founding.

One of the highlights was ex-Gov. Gifford Pinchot's 8 p.m. address on July 25. With fine summer evening weather and with Japanese lanterns hung all around beautiful 20-acre Woolrich Park, which opened in 1922. Pinchot spoke highly of the community, concluding with the words, "Woolrich contains not only a wool factory, but a factory of the best things of community life."

In that day's earlier 10 a.m. centennial celebration opening speech of Michael Bond Rich, then the president of Woolrich Woolen Mills, Rich mentioned some interesting statistics about Woolrich in the year 1930: Woolrich had "85 families, 476 people, possessing 36 pianos, 31 victrolas, 70 other musical instruments, 58 radios, 91 automobiles, 84 bathtubs, seven hogs, five cows, 23 dogs and 702 chickens."

A parade on Friday, and repeated on Saturday, was in pageant form, telling of the history of the village. It included a replica of an 1831 cabin, an 1830 oxen team with covered wagon, a float with sheep ready for shearing, E. C. Tobias's Japanese pagoda float and a series of woolen mill operations floats.

Music during the three days was provided by the Woolrich Band, the Red Arrow Quartet made up of Pennsylvania Railroad employees, the Jersey Shore High School Band, the New York Central Railroad Band of Avis and the Greenburr Band. In addition, there was an "old time fiddlers' contest," featuring Michael Forman, Hiram Chubb (playing a 220-year-old violin), Anson Green, John McCloskey (playing a song called "Chatham's Run" on his 188-year-old violin) and Jesse Lyon (only 12 years old).

Contests included a baseball game between two Central League teams - Woolrich won, 15-6, over Lock Haven, a watermelon eating contest (won by Shuman Bickel), a cigar smoking contest (won by Ralph Schlesinger), a "men's smoking race" (won by Clifford Lehman) and a greased-pole-climbing contest (not won by anybody).

The Williamsport Sun and the Lock Haven Express papers reported a three-day attendance estimate of 25,000 people. Food consumption by these attendees included 1,900 bottles of soft drinks, 800 meals served by the McElhattan Ladies' Aid, 140 gallons of ice cream and 120 gallons of lemonade.

After the celebration, in an editorial, the Express further extolled the virtues of life in Woolrich at the time: "The village of Woolrich has almost every modern convenience enjoyed by any large city. There is an inexhaustible pure water supply, by test as good as any to be found in the state. It is mountain water, aerated naturally."

NOTE: The historical information in this piece comes from M. B. Rich's 1930 "History of the First 100 Years in Woolrich" and from D. S. Maynard's 1875 "Historical View of Clinton County, Pennsylvania."

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