

Gary Keene, Plum Creek: Hardwood Products Presentation

It all began as the Minto Toothpick Company back in 1919 in Saginaw, Michigan, where Lloyd Cartwright began a small family business selling mint flavored toothpicks. Lloyd got his supply of toothpicks from Forster Manufacturing in Maine. His business flourished and mint toothpicks became very popular. In fact, they became so popular that his mint toothpick began to eat into Forster's market share and they abruptly shut off supply to Lloyd. That did not deter Lloyd and he made the decision to relocate to Maine, closer to the supply of white birch, and manufacture his own toothpicks so in the early 1920's he moved to Guilford and began operations as Hardwood Products. He quickly diversified and began making other things besides toothpicks. He sold his products under the brand names of Gold Bond and Trophy, which are the same brands that they use today. The company began making all sorts of wooden stick and skewers, all from an abundant supply of white birch, which is still the species of choice today. The products that they made back then were many, including ice cream sticks and spoons, candy sticks, steak markers, mustard paddles, cocktail forks and hi-ball spoons, swizzlers, tongue blades and manicure sticks. They continue to make many of these products today and they look exactly as they did in the early 1920's.

Tragedy struck in 1958 when the main mill burned to the ground. Although it was a crushing blow, it did not deter them. Their own employees and other townspeople banded together and in two years rebuilt the mill and got it up and running. The company continued to grow after the rebuild and in the mid 1960's the decision was made to diversify once again into medical and health products under the brand name of Puritan, which is also the same brand used today. The medical and health side of the business grew rapidly as a result of their excellent quality which has separated them from their competition. Their other brands also grew and business was good throughout the 70's, 80's and early 90's. By the mid 90's, products from China began to appear in the marketplace. At first there was enough market share to go around but by the early 2000's, the Chinese began to overtake the market place as a result of their cheap labor. The Chinese began to undercut their competition despite their poor quality. Price became king and by 2010, many of the North American stick manufacturers disappeared. Again, Hardwood Products was not deterred. They made the conscious decision to maintain a presence in the stick business despite barley being able to break even.

They maintained a relationship with Wells Dairy who manufactures products under the Blue Bunny brand. Although this relationship was less than profitable, they believed that their time would come when customers would seek out a higher quality product and they chose to wait it out. What they did not anticipate was that the Chinese economy would grow and their standard of living would rise to the point where they could afford to purchase an ice cream. 2 billion Chinese certainly have a greater market potential than 350 million Americans so by 2012, the Chinese no longer exported their sticks and used them themselves. This left the North American ice cream manufacturers with the task of replacing the Chinese supply but when they turned back to their North American suppliers, they were all out of business....except lowly old Hardwood Products and one other in Le Tuc Quebec. Since then the phone has not stopped ringing and they not only have gotten back their market share, it has grown beyond their expectations. Hardwood Products is the only stick manufacturer left in the United States and is the only corn dog stick manufacturer in North America.

They continue to be run by the same family who started the business and with 410 employees they are the largest private employer in Piscataquis County and rank in the top 100 employers in the State of Maine. In 1950 their wood usage averaged 60 cords per week and today it averages 325 cords per week. That is only 41 cords of wood usage per person per year. Compare that to one of our large paper mills where they use over 1200 cords per person per year. This is an indicator of how specialized they are and the labor intensiveness of the work that goes into their high quality product. It is with great pleasure that I am able to award Hardwood Products with the distinction of being the Outstanding Manufacturer of the Year.