



FANCHER CHAIR
COMPANY:
ROOTS TO CHAIRS

by Christina Erickson
December 2000

Forward

“A company is not just a building or a business – a company is made of people. Don’t ever forget that!” – Pete Sheira, November, 1999

Hauling out garbage. Scrubbing walls. New carpet. New lights. Photographs. Old office equipment. That’s where this project began. The entryway to the office of Fancher Chair was a mess, and it was my project to give it a facelift. Yet I wasn’t completely satisfied. As much as I deny it, there is sawdust in my blood. But, it’s not so much the furniture that interests me. It’s the uneven floors of 150+ year old buildings, the wooden wheels on the carts that my brother used to push me on, and the old cars and other ‘treasures’ in the basement. It’s the fact that these structures have been the source of employment for nearly 200 years for the townspeople of Falconer. It’s the history of my family, and their connection to these buildings. And so my glimpse into the past began...

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Fancher Chair Company: Roots to Chairs

Edward Work (1774-1857)

In August of 1807, Edward Work, an attorney from Meadville, Pennsylvania, and a partner, Dr. Kennedy, purchased 1260 acres from the Holland Land Company in the town then known as Worksburg. In the fall of that year, Work erected a hewed log house on the north side of the outlet of the Chadakoin River. In 1808, sawmills were constructed and they were put into operation shortly afterwards (Young, 1875). The mill was built with great pine trees found nearby the site. Many of the timbers in the structure were 60 feet long and 13 inches square. The building being 40x60 feet in size, other timbers were 40 feet in length (Mills, 1944).

Two-inch planks were the first products of the mill, which were then made into flat-bottom scows used in transporting salt from Mayville, NY to Pittsburgh, PA (*Jamestown: Past & Present*, 1913). Keelboats later carried provisions, whiskey, iron castings, nails, glass, dried fruits, and other pioneer necessities. Work manufactured boards at \$.75/100 feet, which were shipped south to New Orleans, LA (Wilbur, 1935). A gristmill was built in 1809 with one run of common rock stones, on the south side of the sawmill. In 1814, a road was built between Work's mills to Kennedy's mills, with a bridge over the Cassadaga. Besides his sawmill venture, Work was also the postmaster, deputy prothonotary, and the prosecuting attorney of Worksburg (Young, 1875). Edward Work's original mill was finally razed in 1944, 136 years after it was constructed (Mills, 1944).

One hundred thirty-six years is a long time and the passing of the Work mill was an event which might well have been observed with fitting ceremonies. Looking out into the future one wonders what changes another 136 years will bring to this community. But that is for posterity to learn (Mills, 1944).

The Falconer Family

In 1936, Work sold his property to Robert Falconer, a Scottish immigrant who settled in Sugar Grove, PA (Mills, 1944 & Jones, 1935). In 1840, Patrick Falconer bought his father's interests at Dexterville and Worksburg, but in 1844, selling the Dexterville property, he became the owner of extensive lands in and about Worksburg. By the late 1860's Falconer began manufacturing beekeeper's supplies (Jones, 1935). Patrick Falconer, who was on the Board of Directors of the Alleghany and Pittsburgh Railroad, donated a generous amount of land through Worksburg, which ensured the railroad's passage directly through the town (Jones, 1935; Lyon 1991). Following in tradition, in 1874, the name of the town of Worksburg changed to Falconer (McMahon, 1958).

The next in the line of Falconers was William T. Falconer, who was born in Worksburg in 1850. In January 1880, William bought his father's sawmill and beehive business, and later added sash door and trim work to the business. William Falconer operated the business individually until he became associated with D. E. Merrill, whom he then began a co-partnership under the name American Manufacturing Concern (AMC). The AMC made rulers, thermometers, washing machines, toys, and other small wooden items, and involved the W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company, which retained its original trade name. In 1910, the AMC was incorporated, with W. T. Falconer elected as President. William Falconer passed away in June of 1915 (Jones, 1935). See Appendix A for photographs and maps from this period.

American Manufacturing Concern (1910-1978)

Although the original products (rulers, thermometers, etc.) continued to be manufactured, the AMC added several goods to its lines. Living room tables were manufactured from 1930 to 1977; bedroom furniture was made from 1949 to 1960; and toys were continued in the line until 1968. In 1977, the American Manufacturing Concern began producing chairs, largely Queen Anne and Chippendale styles.

As for the leadership of the AMC, from 1915 until 1946, W. T. Falconer's son-in-law Alfred C. Davis was President, with Falconer's grandson Falconer

Jones following from 1946 until 1973. This equaled 137 uninterrupted years of management by the same family. From 1973 to 1975, James Tilliotson III was President, followed by C. Leonard Erickson from 1975 to 1983. See Appendix B for photographs and maps from this period.

Fancher Chair Company (1978-present)

In 1978 the name of the company changed to the present day Fancher Chair Company, under the leadership of C. Leonard Erickson, who was also the president and owner of Fancher Furniture in Salamanca, NY since 1944. Brian F. Erickson, son of C. L. Erickson took the reins for one year in 1983, and was succeeded in 1984 by his brother, L. Bruce Erickson, who continues today as president.

Fancher Chair produces an average of 312 chairs per day over 245 working days a year, for a grand total of 76,440 chairs of various styles per year. Chairs are specially tailored for the customer's needs and are manufactured for Stickley, Agati, Knoll, Claflin, Colonial, Vermont Furniture, Hitchcock, Ethan Allen, Crawford, and Canal Dover. Fancher is pro-active in the industry in regards to technology and quality, and is notably service oriented towards its customers.

Fancher employs 140 people, who seem very loyal to their place of employment. Employee moral is heightened by a strong relationship between management and manufacturers, as well as internal sources, such as holiday decorating contests. Employees have the ability to move upwards within the company, with the current Vice President as the greatest example. Pete Sheira began working at the American Manufacturing Concern in July of 1968 as an apprentice sample maker, and was in the role of V. P. by 1996.

In terms of their commitment to the local community, Fancher donates many chairs to local organizations for auctions, raffles, and the like. In 1999, Fancher's land along the Chadakoin River was cleaned up and donated to Chautauqua County towards the creation of a park, a helping both the local environment and community.

From the roots of a small sawmill to the chairs of today, the labor and production completed on Work St. has greatly influenced the town and townspeople of Falconer, New York. The company has been a mainstay of the local community for 193, and will continue to do so for a number of years to come.

Appendix A

Photographs & Maps from the W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company time period.

1. Map of Falconer, New York. From Historical Atlas of Chautauqua County 1881.
2. Map of Falconer, New York. From Historical Atlas of Chautauqua County 1881.
3. Employees W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company, (Hatch, 1900).
4. W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company & D.A.V. & P. Station.
5. Sketch of W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company, 1880.
6. Sketch of W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company, 1900.
7. W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company Bee-Keepers Supply Catalog, 1905.
8. W. T. Falconer Manufacturing Company, 1907.

Appendix B

Photographs and Maps from the American Manufacturing Concern time period.

1. Horse drawn carriage with AMC products.
2. Original part of the present American Manufacturing Concern.
3. *American Manufactuirng Concern Completes 150th Year in Business, December, 1957.*
4. *Old Photo Stirs Nostalgia For Falconer of 70 Years Ago, 1962?*
5. Map of Falconer, New York.
6. D.A.V.P. depot, Everett St. next to then American Manufacturing Concern.

Appendix C

Artifacts found at the Fenton Museum, Jamestown, New York.

Folder MD 164

- Order form for “Falcon” Queens bees from the W.T. Falconer Manufacturing Company,
- Bee-keepers supplies 1905 catalog
- Letter dated September 6, 1917 to Daniel Steward

Folder MD 55

- 10 letters to/from the Falconer Family, 1785-1841

Photograph collection

- #89.178.1 – American Manufacturing Concern, 1947

Appendix D

History of Fancher Chair Company, by C. Leonard Erickson, 1982.

Probably the oldest woodworking plant in the United States – operating continuously for 175 years.

Not many firms can trace their history back to the very early days of the 19th century, but among them, one of the oldest of all manufacturing firms in the United States, is the Fancher Chair Co., formerly American Mfg. Concern, of Falconer, N. Y. This firm, begun 175 years ago, proudly looks back to its beginnings, 14 years after George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the United States and two years before the birth of Abraham Lincoln.

It was only 30 years after the birth of the United States that the first pioneers settled in the virgin pine and hemlock forests that surrounded Chautauqua Lack and the Chadakoin River. Here, along the rapidly flowing river banks, a sawmill was erected in 1807. This small water-powered mill developed into what is known today as the Fancher Chair Co.

In 1836 the original sawmill on the Chadakoin was purchased by Robert Falconer, who owned and operated it until after the Civil War when his son took over the presidency. Patrick Falconer, his son, began the manufacturing of bee hives and the firm has been producing products of wood ever since. In 1880 William Falconer, son of Patrick, purchased his father's holdings in the organization and erected an addition to the building for the purpose of expanding the manufacturing of products made of wood.

Although starting out as a sawmill, the firm soon branched out into the manufacturing of many lines, including bee hives, wooden washing machines, matched inlaid wooden flooring, cemetery markers, kites, thermometers, office file boards, yardsticks and rulers, to mention a few of the items of the very early days.

Buildings

The sawmill which was started in 1807 operated continuously into the 1890's.

Shortly after the Civil War, 1865-1870, the first factory building was erected which was used as a planing mill, and later manufactured beekeeper supplies.

This building was the southern most end of the present east wing. As late as 1880, the plant consisted of the sawmill, planing mill building, various small out buildings, such as the office, the horse barn, storage sheds, dry kilns, etc.

From 1880 until 1908, there was almost continual construction of additional buildings.

By 1889 the east wing had been completed as it now exists. In 1908 the north wing was added thus doubling the size of the plant and bringing it to its present size.

Products

1807-1853	Sawmill
1853-1888	Doors, blinds, planing mill
1881-1910	Beekeepers supplies
1888-1950	Wooden washing machines, rulers, thermometers and an extensive line of toys
1930-1977	Occasional living room tables
1949-1960	Bedroom furniture
1977-present	Long-post dining room chairs in traditional styling, Queen Anne, Chippendale, etc.

Name

1807-1836	Worksburg Mill
1836-1880	Patrick Falconer Mill
1880-1910	William T. Falconer Manufacturing Company
1910	Incorporated as American Manufacturing Concern
1978-present	Fancher Chair Company, Inc.

Chief Executives

1807-1836	Edward Work, an attorney of Meadville, PA, who on August 1, 1807 purchased 1260 acres from the Holland Land Co. – site of present plant – Started construction in 1807 and was in production by 1808.
1836-1843	Robert Falconer, a wealthy Scotsman, a university graduate and a cotton merchant, purchased the mill and real estate from Edward Work.
1843-1880	Robert's son Patrick.
1880-1915	Patrick's son, William T. Falconer.
1915-1946	William T. Falconer's son-in-law, Alfred C. Davis.
1946-1973	William T. Falconer's grandson, Falconer Jones – thus 137 uninterrupted years of management by the same family.
1973-1975	James Tillotson, III.
1975-present	C. L. Erickson

Successions of Land Titles

(Background of Land Titles for land under Fancher Chair Co. – Holland Land Co., Town 2, Range 11)

1. Charles I of England – 1663 grant to the Duke of York, the Province of New York.
2. December 16, 1786 - New York ceded to Massachusetts.
3. March 12, 1791 – Massachusetts conveyed to Samuel Ogden, an agent for Robert Morris.
4. December 24, 1792 – Morris and wife, Mary, convey to individual Dutchman, later to be known as the Holland Land Co. – 1 ½ million acres.

February 27, 1793 – Morris conveys to Holland Land Co. 1 million acres.

July 20, 1793 – Morris conveys to Holland Land Co. 800,000 acres.

July 20, 1793 – Morris conveys to Holland Land Co. 300,000 acres.

5. September 11, 1794 – Indians ceded all rights in Pickering Treaty.
6. September 1797 – Morris conveys to Holland Land Co., the Indian titles he previously purchased from Massachusetts.
7. Holland Land Company to Edward Work.
8. August 1, 1836 – Edward Work to Robert Falconer.
9. August 2, 1840 – Robert Falconer to Patrick Falconer.
10. January 1, 1880 – Patrick Falconer to William T. Falconer.
11. William T. Falconer to American Mfg. Concern, (now Fancher Chair Co.).

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