

Charles Forster Fathered The Toothpick Industry And Built First Toothpick Mill

by George P. Stanley

My earliest remembrance of the old toothpick mill in Dixfield and the manufacture of toothpicks dates back to about the year 1881 when as a boy of twelve I was allowed to run choppers, as call them now, in the manufacture of toothpicks.

As there are probably few who remember the history and growth of this particular business through the years, I think it perhaps fitting that I record the little history I have gained by experience and learned from others of this industry, which like many others of our seemingly unimportant ones will, in a few years, be lost unless passed along to others of a younger generation.

Up to about 1887 (when the first spool mill was built here) and for several years to follow, Dixfield was in the very heart of the birch belt that begins in the Berkshire hills of Massachusetts and extends north into Canada and west through the northern part of Minnesota, west of which there is very little birch.

In the year 1890 there were two spool mills and one toothpick mill in Dixfield and, it was estimated by men who should have known, that at the rate they were then cutting birch, that it might last or be accessible for use here for ten years or until about 1900, and their estimate was probably fairly accurate considering that the radius for hauling from here with horses and oxen would be limited to about ten miles.

Now, the radius is increased from the use of trucks and the railroad from ten miles to one hundred or more, but unless the present radius is increased by some further improvement in transportation or magic, I fear for the future of Dixfield and her industries which are and have so long been dependent on the timber supply and up to this time especially birch.

But this is not what I started to write about, so back to the original subject, development of the toothpick industry in Maine.

When quite a young man, Charles Forster, a Buckfield native, went to Brazil as captain of a schooner owned by L. L. Tower and others of Boston, remaining for several years, and while there became interested in watching some of the natives whittling toothpicks from Spanish willow. In 1865 he went to Boston where he entered the employ of the B. F. Sturtevant Co., who were then manufacturers of wooden shoe pegs which were made by a process similar to that now used for the manufacture of toothpicks.

Watching the shoe pegs as they came in a stream from the choppers gave him the idea that toothpicks could also be produced in large numbers by the same or similar process and after due time he suggested to Mr. Sturtevant that they make some and put them on the market. Mr. Sturtevant smiled at the idea of trying to sell "slivers of wood" but he allowed Mr. Forster the use of some of his machines and also allowed space in a building owned by Mr. Sturtevant on Sudbury street in Boston, and one of his men (Mr. Freeman) to assist him.

They worked whenever they had an opportunity outside their regular duties until 1869 when they found they had machines with which they could make toothpicks, although we who have seen them

produced in the modern way might call their methods rather crude, although I wish to state that there have been very few changes in the chopper since the original except in a few minor details.

The next problem seem to have been where to get white birch for their manufacture and, finally, Mr. Forster had a car of birch shipped him from Wilton, Maine, which, incidentally, was probably the first ever used in the United States for the manufacture of toothpicks.

Then the question of selling appeared and this where Mr. Forster show his resourcefulness and originality. He hired several men and women, giving them a list of stores in and around Boston which they were to visit and seek to purchase toothpicks, and continued until, finally, Mr. Forster with Levi Tower (who then owned a stationary store in Boston) went around to the same stores and sold a few boxes of toothpicks which soon sold to Mr. Forster's agents, who returned them to Mr. Forster who would again later, sell them to the same or other customers, thus completing the circle.

This continued through 1870 with very little gain until 1876, the year of the Centennial in Philadelphia, when Mr. Forster went there and hired a large wagon with four beautiful white horses and a driver dressed in a scarlet suit and Mr. Forster on the wagon wearing a tall hat and surrounded by boxes of toothpicks which he was throwing into the crowd as they passed through the streets. This made a big hit and pictures of it appeared in the papers soon after. This created a demand for toothpicks, although, of course, nothing sensational.

Up to this time and until his passing in 1900, associated with him was a staunch and loyal friend, Charles Freeman, who attended the mechanical part of the business, and when in 1870 the business was moved to Sumner, Maine, Mr. Freeman was the man in charge of production.

In 1871 the mill at Sumner burned and they moved the little that was left to Canton, Maine, where they operated until 1875, when they moved to Dixfield where they remained for many years.

A few years after moving to Dixfield, Mr. Forster operated a mill at Andover, Maine, but perhaps on account of its distance from a railroad, or perhaps some other reason, he moved that plant to Strong, Maine, in 1883, and there is still a plant there known as the "Estate of Charles Forster."

Until about 1902, there had been very little competition in the toothpick business, but about that time Maurice Forster, a son of Charles Forster, in company with John S. Harlow and George Merrill, built a factory in Dixfield for the manufacture of toothpicks and then competition really began.

This company was called the "Forster Manufacturing Co." and by giving about twice as many toothpicks in a box and at a lower price per case, they not only secured a good profit, so that in about 1905 Mr. Forster Jr. bought all the stock of the two other partners, and by so doing advertised to any who might be interested that it might be a good business to engage in.

In 1909 John S. Harlow organized the Dixfield Toothpick Co., a \$50,000 corporation, and built what was probably the best equipped plant in the business for making toothpicks. At the completion of the D. T. Co., plant, there were three plants in Dixfield engaged exclusively in the manufacture of toothpicks with an output of probably two hundred million toothpicks per day, and a market for all.

In about 1912 Maurice Forster built a new plant in Oakland, Maine, and moved all his machinery from Dixfield to Oakland where he remained until he sold, "lock, stock, and barrel," of the Forster Mfg. Co. to John S. Harlow in about 1915.

In the year 1919 the Berst Manufacturing Co. of Cloquet, Minn., the Forster Mfg. Co. of Dixfield, Maine (which was then owned by John S. Harlow), and the Dixfield Toothpick Co. merged into one corporation which was given the name Berst-Forster-Dixfield Co., thus to some degree maintaining the identity of the old companies. This merger was brought about through the efforts of Ned. G. Begle, President of the Berst Manufacturing Co., who at once became President of the Berst-Forster-Dixfield Co.

The Berst-Forster-Dixfield Co. now has factories in Peru, Maine, Phillips, Maine, Oakland, Maine, Plattsburg, N. Y. and Cloquet, Minn.

In the B-F-D Co. plant in Peru they not only make toothpicks and clothes pins, but I believe they are the largest manufacturers of safety matches in North America all of which goes to prove true the old adage, "Giant Oaks From Little Acorns Grow."

I have tried in this brief sketch to give in a few simple lines a history of the toothpick development which would hardly be complete without mention of some of the men responsible for its development.

Charles Forster who, while others smiled at the idea of people paying good money for "slivers of wood," could see the possibility of a good business in their manufacture.

Charles Freeman, who believed in Mr. Forster, stood by him even when the business outlook was dark, and who did much to develop the methods of manufacture.

Maurice Forster at the age of 20 was Manager of his father's factory.

John S. Harlow, as president of the Dixfield Toothpick Co., and Forster Mfg. Co. helped much in the development of the companies.

Ned G. Begle united the organizations and by his ceaseless efforts and splendid management, guided the Berst-Forster-Dixfield Co. to its present position of leadership in the manufacture of toothpicks but safety matches, clothes pins, paper dishes and many other useful and necessary articles.

[From an article in the Rumford Falls Times dated August 26, 1943. George P. Stanley was the son of Henry O. Stanley of Dixfield and was manager of the Dixfield Toothpick Company. He was named for his uncle George Shepard Page who worked with H. O. Stanley and others to popularize the fishing and hunting interests of the Androscoggin Lakes in the 1860s.

Typed from the original newspaper article on September 9, 2006 by Peter R. Stowell.]

Forster Manufacturing Co, operating from 1913 to 1916 on Ayer Street, manufactured toothpicks and clothespins. It was succeeded by the Berst-Forster-Dixfield Co from 1923 to 1946, then by Diamond Match from 1947 to 1958, then by Diamond-Gardner from 1958 to 1960, then by Diamond National, 1960 to 1966; this company in 1962 was managed by W G Hepburn, had 75 employees, and made white birch and hardwood logs and bolts. Finally the company became Diamond International from 1966 to 1983, manufacturing toothpicks and tongue depressors. When Diamond International closed in 1983 the building remained vacant for several years prior to being purchased by Industrial Metal Recycling which now runs a major recycling operation. Many people in town still refer to "The Toothpick" however, indicating the importance of toothpick manufacturing at this site.