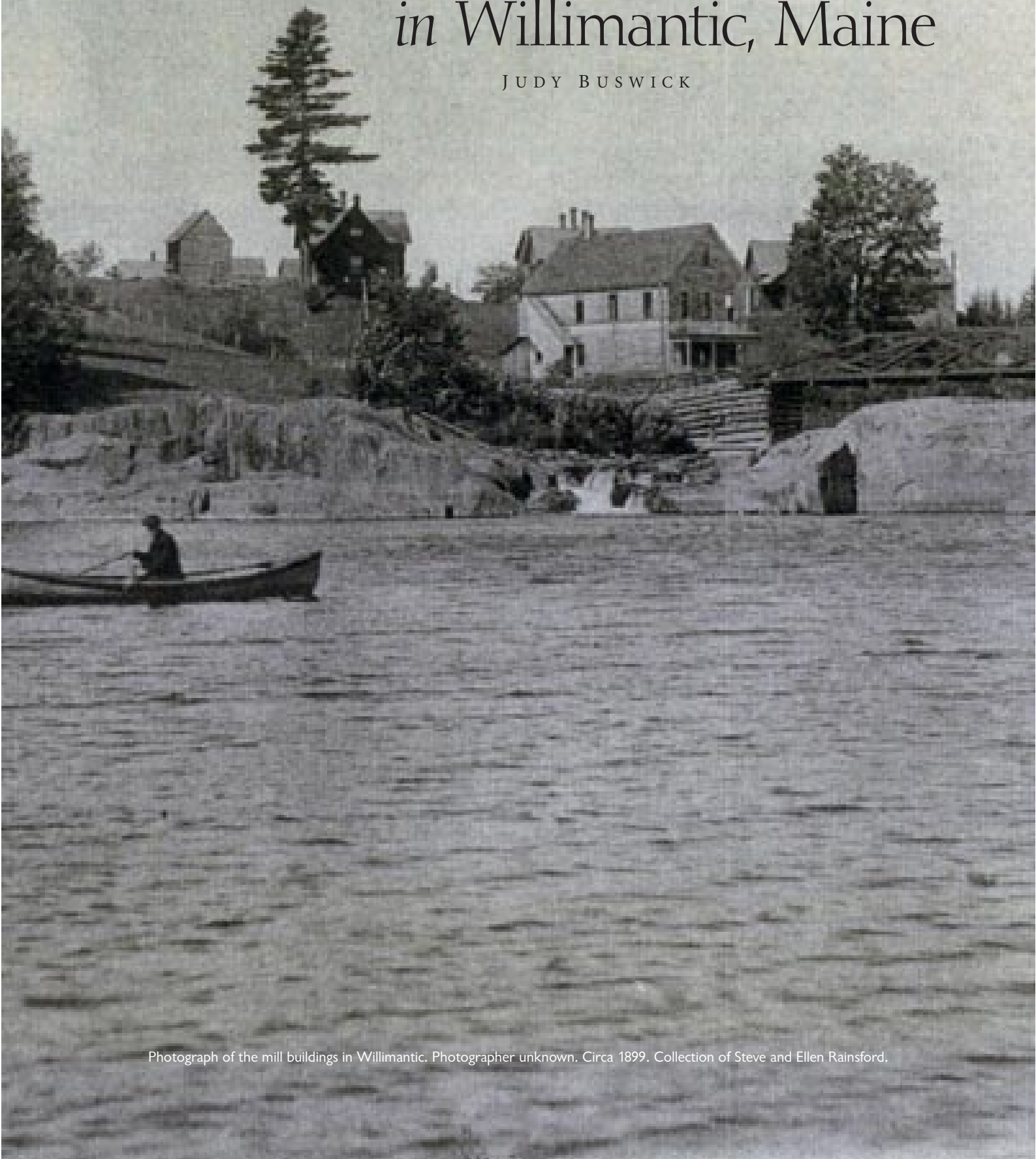


Wooden Spools Proudly Made *in Willimantic, Maine*

JUDY BUSWICK



Photograph of the mill buildings in Willimantic. Photographer unknown. Circa 1899. Collection of Steve and Ellen Rainsford.

AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, lives in Willimantic, Maine, were tightly wound around wooden spools made to hold sewing thread—the little town in Piscataquis County was the spool-manufacturing hub of a major industry in the United States. Today, spools made of wood are rare, encountered primarily in collections and flea markets.

Located on the western shore of Sebec Lake, twelve miles (19.3 km) north of Dover-Foxcroft, Willimantic is crossed by streams, thickly forested, and known today mainly by hunters and fishermen. Hikers drive through it to access the trailhead to Borestone Mountain. There's no sight of an industrial past.

In the 1820s, Willimantic was known as T8R8 (Township 8, Range 8 on survey maps) and was part of the large land tracts (“wildlands”) being sold for lumbering and homesteading in Piscataquis County. The 1870 U.S. Census reported 173 people living there; by 1880, the population had climbed to 267. In 1881, the township incorporated as the town of Howard, named after an early homesteader, Abijah Howard (about 1845–unknown), a Vermont man who probably was among the first to promote the sale of lots to settlers.

Two years later, the town was renamed Willimantic, in tribute to the Willimantic Linen Company of Willimantic, Connecticut, which transformed the rural settlement into a manufacturing center. According to an online history, “The Willimantic Linen Company produced over a thousand different cotton/thread products—everything from the strings on tea bags to the red thread used to stitch baseballs. At the peak of their production in the 1890s, they were the largest employer in Connecticut, employing 3,200 workers, and produced 85,000 miles (136,794.2 km) of thread each day—enough to wrap around the world three times! They were one of the largest producers of cotton thread in the world, and gave Willimantic [Connecticut] its nickname as ‘Thread City,’ a name that is still remembered today.”

Needing spools on which to wind all that thread, the company in 1879 purchased 173 acres (70.0 ha) of Maine land at Greeley’s Falls on Wilson Stream, near the head of Sebec Lake, for a mill for splitting spool timber. The source was to be the tight-grained, splinter-free hardwood from white birches, then in abundant supply in the nearby forests. In addition to building the mill, the company erected drying sheds, a boarding house for loggers, and

One of the two falls on Wilson Stream and, on the banks, a red house similar to those that the Willimantic Linen Company provided for their spool-mill workers in Willimantic, Maine. 2008.

Photograph by the author.





dwellings for mill workers and families. The Willimantic Linen Company spool mill began operation in January 1880. In his *History of Piscataquis County, Maine. From Its Earliest Settlement to 1880* (Portland, Maine: Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, 1880), the Reverend Amasa Loring (1813–1890) wrote of the mill opening, “[T]he electric light shone upon a large company of guests there assembled.” Writing in 1975 about spool mills in central Maine, the *Bangor Daily News* reporter Betsey A. Shirley noted, “The first electric generating plant and transmission line built in Maine was erected at Willimantic under the supervision of the company’s first general engineer, Samuel Green.” (Thomas Edison [1847–1931] had helped Mill No. 4 in Willimantic, Connecticut, become “the first mill in the world to be illuminated by electric lighting.”)

For several years, the Maine mill produced only rough blocks of wood, but in 1886, the company added a spool factory; soon, horse-drawn wagons were carrying boxes of finished spools the 14 miles (22.5 km) to the Howard Siding in Abbot for shipping on the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad to the thread factory in Connecticut. The services of eight to twelve horses were used year round.

An average of 2,000 cords (7,249 cu m) of white birch were cut each year between Sebec Lake and Lake Onawa for the spool mill. Logs were cut to a length of about 4 feet (1 m), trimmed, dried, turned on a lathe, and then cut into shorter bars. A hole was bored through the middle

White birch. Willimantic, Maine. 2008. The mill used this tight-grained hardwood to make the spools.
Photograph by the author.



Wooden thread spools. Collection of Susan Tufts.
Photograph by Susan Tufts.



A Willimantic Linen Company merchandising chest for the company's threads.
Collection of Steve and Ellen Rainsford. 2008.

Photograph by the author.

of each spool, probably after standing a number of blanks on end and moving them as a unit to the drill. The tops and bottoms of the spools were sanded flat, and then the spools were ready to be wrapped with thread and to have labels stamped or pasted on the ends.

In March 1898, the English Sewing Company purchased the Willimantic Linen Company and twelve other independent thread and yarn manufacturing companies, merging them into the American Thread Company. Manufacturing "spool cotton, thread and hosiery yarn" in the plant in Willimantic, Connecticut, the company continued there into the mid-twentieth century.

Not so in Willimantic, Maine: When the birch supply dwindled in Willimantic, the company's spool timber was harvested in Lake View, about 37 miles (59 km) to the east, and was milled in Milo, about 7 miles (11 km) south of Lake View, with railway access nearby. In 1903, they closed the spool factory in Willimantic. Over the course of its seventy-plus years, the American Thread Company estimates that it produced and shipped "three billion, six hundred million spools, bobbins, etc., of various shapes and designs."

Willimantic's population had spiked to 446 in 1890; with the closing of the mill, about 40 employees and their families relocated to Milo in 1903. By 1910, the population had dropped to 271 and by 2000, to 135.

Not much remains of the mill complex and bustling community that surrounded the Willimantic Linen Company. There had been a general store, a boarding house, a dance hall, and a post office. Locals remember the rows of simple red houses where the mill families lived along the road (Maine Route 150) near the falls. The homes are gone now, along with most of the mill buildings.

In 1903, William Earley bought the mill buildings and land in Willimantic for a hotel and later purchased more land for sportsmen's camps, which he called Earley's Camps. Herman Bayerdorffer purchased the property in 1965 and renamed it Two Falls Camp. He uses one slate-roofed former mill building for equipment storage and has refurbished the spool mill boarding house as an office and home for his family. His wife, Cindy, observed that two of the original mill buildings, similar to the one still standing, were moved to Milo one winter across the ice on the frozen Sebec Lake.



Wooden thread spools in a Star thread chest. Collection of Steve and Ellen Rainsford.
Photograph by the author.

The wooden spools from the Willimantic Linen Company once held “the best thread for sewing machines, superior six cord machine thread, [and] spool cotton.” Today, collectors are most likely to find them in antique sewing baskets or in small lots on eBay. ❖

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The one remaining mill building in Willimantic of the Willimantic Linen Company’s spool mill. Maine. 2008.
Photograph by the author.