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WHEN TANEYTOWN WAS “SHOETOWN”: THE CAMBRIDGE RUBBER COMPANY

BY FRANK J. BATAVICK

Those of a certain age may be familiar with the image of Rosie the Riveter, the robust icon of World War II whose labors helped America achieve victory over the Axis powers. She and her cohorts did so by filling in for men on the assembly line, using newly honed talents to manufacture the engines and materiel of war. While many of the nation's males were off fighting, the legions of Rosies didn't just work at a tank factory in Detroit or the Glenn L. Martin aircraft plant in Middle River, Maryland. They were also punching time clocks in Taneytown.

Approximately 70% of the roughly 1,000 people employed at the Cambridge Rubber Company were women. There they helped make rubber boots to specifications for the U.S. Department of War.



First factory of the Blue Ridge Rubber Company, later Cambridge Rubber, 1936.

All photographs courtesy of George Naylor.

Cambridge Rubber is now long gone. After 50 years of impressive productivity and a dependable role as the mainstay of many families in the region, the last footwear rolled off the conveyor belts on December 31, 1986. Today the company is survived by a hodgepodge of buildings housing small businesses amidst acres of weedy, vacant lots off 86 York Street, but in its prime Cambridge Rubber was a force of nature. Its assembly lines churned out 35,000 pairs of casual and waterproof footwear a day, and these proudly “Made in the U.S.A.” products could be found in thousands of stores across the country, including Sears and JCPenney.

The story of Cambridge Rubber is a cautionary tale for American business in the last century. The company arrived in town amidst the tumult of the Great Depression. The year 1935 was especially bleak with the national rate for unemployment stalled at a little over 20%. To help remedy matters, President Franklin Roosevelt and Congress launched phase two of FDR's New Deal with the passage and signing of legislation creating the Works Progress Administration. The WPA paved the way for the hiring of nearly 10 million Americans to construct new public buildings, roads, and bridges.

Here in Carroll County, the Taneytown Chamber of Commerce was not satisfied with this “make work” approach for its citizens and decided to take the dire situation into its own hands. It had previously sent a delegation to Baltimore to successfully lure the H. Borenstein & Sons sewing factory to town. They set up shop in a building on Broad Street in 1935 and began making men’s suits for the greater Baltimore market and beyond. To show his personal commitment to the town, the owner built a duplex house next to the factory.



Factory staff with injection molding equipment which used heat to form soles on footwear uppers, c.1945.

The Chamber of Commerce considered their luring of the sewing factory only a small victory because it supplied a limited number of jobs. The Chamber had its sights set on bigger game. It invited Warren MacPherson, Chairman of the Board of Boston’s Cambridge Rubber Company, and his partner and Vice President, Ernest W. Dunbar, to town, gave them a tour, and made an offer they couldn’t refuse. The Chamber promised to sell bonds to the local population to help purchase a large parcel of land and to finance the construction of a 20,000 square-foot factory. MacPherson and Dunbar agreed to these generous terms and ground was broken on February 26, 1936, for what was then called the Blue Ridge Rubber Company. They finished construction of the \$60,000 building by August and commenced the production of shoes on August 17, 1936. The first shipment of shoes by rail was on October 19, 1936. At the time, the plant employed 30 women and 10 men. It was a start.

The Blue Ridge Rubber Company was family owned. Warren MacPherson opted to stay in Boston but asked Dunbar to go to Maryland and serve as vice president and general superintendent. Eventually Robert W. MacPherson, Warren’s son, arrived on the scene to become president of the firm, and he was later followed by Robert W. MacPherson, Jr., who became personnel manager. Blue Ridge Rubber Company

prospered and erected additional buildings to create a three-acre industrial complex. By 1942, the company was making 12,000 pairs of rubber footwear a day. It also benefitted from some lucrative defense contracts for camouflage-patterned rain coats and ponchos when World War II broke out.

All was going well until Taneytown’s fire sirens split the air at 6:30 p.m. on Saturday, April 25, 1942. A fire had started near some chemical drums in the “making room” of a block-long building and quickly



Preparing and sorting rubber boot linings, c.1960.



Devastating fire at Blue Ridge Rubber, April 25, 1942.

spread throughout the complex. A watchman discovered the blaze and soon fire companies from Taneytown, Union Bridge, Littlestown, Westminster, and Emmitsburg responded. Tanks of naphtha exploded, flames leaped 50 to 60 feet into the air, and thick plumes of black smoke could be seen for miles as the intense flames fed on volatile solvents and 150 tons of old tires. The company may have stockpiled the tires in fear that coal would become scarce during the war; tires are quite combustible and can be used for fuel. Newspapers reported that winds

carried charred debris over six miles, some of it igniting a tree on a local farm; people 20 to 30 miles away claimed they could smell the smoke. The raging inferno burned for days, and the intense heat blistered the siding of houses that backed up to the factory.

The fire put more than 1,000 people out of work, and the estimated damages hit the \$400,000 mark. Because the company was about to start work on a military contract the following week, there was some early speculation about enemy sabotage, and the *Baltimore American* newspaper reported that “the Federal Bureau of Investigation would send men to

Taneytown to look into the cause of the blaze.” But insiders put that concern to rest by admitting to a number of small fires and explosions in the previous five years. An investigation determined that arson was not the cause. Nevertheless, the factory lay in smoldering ruins, along with the community’s livelihood.

The officers and board of directors of Blue Ridge Rubber came down from Boston the next day and inspected the still-burning buildings, now no more than a tangle of bent steel and piles of charred bricks.

Company management immediately decided to rebuild, doing so in sections so that workers could return as soon as possible. During the reconstruction, the owners transferred work to the Carroll Shoe Company, a subsidiary of Cambridge Rubber, in nearby Littlestown, Pennsylvania, to maintain a minimum of production and employment. When Taneytown’s new plant was ready, the company emerged under a different name, Cambridge Rubber Company, taking on the name of the parent company, which also had a factory in Canada. Blue Ridge Rubber Company was finally liquidated into the Cambridge Rubber Company, a Maryland



Aerial view of the Cambridge Rubber complex, c.1965. York St. (Rt. 194) runs left to right near the top.

corporation, on December 31, 1947, and the Blue Ridge Rubber Corporation was officially dissolved by the State of Maryland as of January 30, 1948.

Over the years, the plants in Taneytown and Littlestown produced boots, canvas footwear, sneakers, women's sandals, ponchos, raincoats, and foam pillows. At the height of World War II the work force swelled to over 1,000 employees. Most came from a 15-mile radius. To ensure a deep pool of laborers and because not many of them owned cars and there was no mass transportation, the company provided buses driven by co-workers to bring in people from outlying communities.

The manufacturing process actually began on the jungle plantations of Sumatra, Borneo, and Malaysia where latex sap was harvested from Pará rubber trees. There, it was refined and molded into solid 30" x 30" bales weighing up to 400 pounds each. Once received in Taneytown, the bales could only be moved by hooks that dragged them across the factory floor. A large steel knife blade then cut the rubber into chunks that workers could lift. They put this rubber on powerful rollers that compressed it into thin sheets destined to be molded into boots or to serve as the heels and soles of sneakers and casual shoes that had fabric uppers. Workers then treated the rubber with sulfur and other chemicals and colorized it with red, blue, or black dyes, depending on the shoe or boot style.

While the rubber was being processed, other employees die-cut coated fabric into the parts of a shoe—the backstrap, quarter, tongue, vamp, and lining. Then these parts were sent for stitching. But because of the high volume of production, the Taneytown plant couldn't keep up with all of the sewing required, so it out-sourced this step to subsidiary stitching plants in a number of locations, including Mont Alto, Arendtsville, and Biglerville, Pennsylvania, and Uniontown, Alabama. There, workers assembled the parts on a last, a mechanical form with a shape similar to a human foot. The completed uppers were then sent back to Taneytown and Littlestown, lacking only their rubber soles and heels.



Above: Slicing sheets of rubber prior to die-cutting, c.1960

Below: Die-cutting soles for casual shoes, c.1960.





Display for sales show, New York City, c.1955.

temperatures could soar as high as 120 degrees, and heat stroke was not an unusual malady for employees.

During manufacturing, footwear destined for Sears, JC Penney, A.S. Beck Shoe Stores, and other large clients were branded for them on the soles. Next, the finished shoes were boxed and stored, awaiting a shipping destination. The plants churned out so many shoes and boots—35,000 pairs a day in the 1960s and '70s—that additional storage space had to be found. The company rented 10 to 12 vacant barns in the area and virtually every empty carriage house in town to store hundreds of thousands of pairs of shoes. Amazingly, they lost inventory only once to an isolated fire.

Each style of footwear required a different manufacturing method. Workers placed casual shoe uppers on a last in the making room, put liner fabric inside, and created their soles and heels through injection molding, which shaped liquefied rubber to the uppers.

Other styles, like boots and sneakers, required curing. After workers applied die-cut outsoles and heels to the insole using special cement mixed at the plant, the footwear was “baked” under intense heat in large ovens using a process known as vulcanization. This improved the elasticity, strength, and stability of the rubber. Huge coal furnaces supplied heat for vulcanization as well as for the factory and offices. In the vulcanizing room

Sneakers were manufactured under the Tredlite and Cambridge brands. In casual shoes, Cambridge offered the Hi-Stride Oxford and the Target, both with laces, and the Hi-Stride slip-on. The company established a not-so-surprising seasonal routine of making rubber boots in the summer and casual wear in the winter.

Cambridge had many contracts with the U.S. Army and Navy. During the Korean War, the company started making insulated boots to Department of Defense specifications. Korea was known for its brutal winters, and battles like Chosin Reservoir were fought in the ice and snow. Cambridge took pride in its role outfitting our troops in a way that protected them and improved their fighting capacity.

One notable customer of Cambridge was an ex-soldier and former President, Dwight D. Eisenhower. He had befriended some of Cambridge's executives and even visited the factory once, arriving by helicopter from his farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In a photo of this event, and another taken at Camp David with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the President can be seen wearing Cambridge Oxfords, though with leather uppers tailored especially for him.



The Hi-Stride slip-on was a popular casual shoe style from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s.

Cambridge was wholesaling its footwear to stores at a cost of four to five dollars a pair and retailers sold them for eight dollars and up. In 1977, the company enjoyed annual sales of 14 million dollars.

Cambridge's maintenance department had a huge task as the company continued to grow, but it still found time to build three homes for company executives and a fourth to be used for meetings when management and sales staff came down from Boston. Today, these homes are private residences. There were approximately 25 salesmen headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but they roamed the country promoting the Cambridge brand. When in Taneytown they were pampered, and a chauffeured station wagon took them to and from airports and train stations.

Cambridge was a union shop for just one year. The employees quickly voted the union out because they didn't see any benefits commensurate with dues paid. However, at 11:30 a.m. on May 11, 1978, 600 assembly line workers turned off their machines and walked off the job in a protest for higher wages and better health benefits. Most of the workers were making a minimum wage of \$2.65 an hour, with the take-home pay averaging \$80 to \$100 a week. They also complained that the company offered no pension program and that working conditions were unsafe. Displaying their burned and blistered hands, some workers told the *Carroll County Times* (May 12, 1978) that Cambridge did not even provide gloves, glasses, or breathing masks to protect against cutting knives, hot materials and equipment, and noxious gases. However, with no union to represent the workers, negotiations stalled, and with fears of reprisals and the hiring of replacements, the strikers went back to work two days later. To defuse the situation, the company agreed to give minimum wage employees a 25-cent hourly raise.

For the next five months, workers campaigned for unionization. On October 27, 1978, employees used an up or down vote to decide whether the Retail



Float displaying a casual shoe, United States Bicentennial parade, Taneytown, 1976.

Clerks Association should represent them in salary negotiations. Surprisingly, workers rejected unionization by a vote of 193 to 161. A fear among older workers that the company would shut down if unionized fueled many of the "no" votes.

An Employee Remembers

George Naylor was salaried and worked in the business office as chief cost accountant. His section was charged with tracking the cost of materials, work in progress, inventory control, waste control, finished goods, and machinery leases. He had accepted a position at the plant in 1947 when he came home from a stint in the Navy and was offered a job by a friend of the family who was an office manager at Cambridge. Naylor worked there 42 years and holds the claim to being the second-to-last employee to leave the plant when it closed. A member of the Taneytown Heritage and Museum Association, Naylor carries the torch for the legacy of Cambridge Rubber and has envelopes filled with photos and documents from his time there, some saved from the dump when the buildings were being emptied. He remembers management as quite beneficent, and he was regularly permitted to take time off from his job to attend to town business when he served on the Taneytown Council. The plant manager also kept him supplied with cigars. When he wandered by Naylor's desk, he'd often check his



Sales staff down from Boston for meeting in Taneytown, c.1960.

“inventory.” If it was low, the manager would leave a fresh handful of “smokes” for his chief cost accountant.

Exactness was important in Naylor’s job. When he and staff conducted inventory, the value of the parts of the shoes (fabric, threads-on-spools, zippers, buckles, laces, buttons) was calculated to four decimal places because most items were so small. When total value for the parts was established, two decimal places were used. And all this was done with paper, pencil, and mechanical adding machine.

Naylor described vice president and plant superintendent Ernest W. Dunbar as a righteous man with the mien of a preacher. He was also a teetotaler, and Naylor shared this humorous incident. Once when Dunbar learned that some of his truck drivers liked to frequent a certain tavern in town before they turned in their trucks for the day, he made his way down to the bar. Walking in and eyeballing the men, he then loudly proclaimed to the barkeep, “I’ll have what they’re having.” The drivers immediately arose and sheepishly walked to the door.

Dunbar was also patriotic. Naylor has a pamphlet in his collection in which Dunbar, pictured sternly on the cover, urged employees to continue to finance Victory Loans to the government by buying bonds. Even though World War II was over at the time,

there were still munitions and materiel to be paid for; “the cost of guarding Germany and Japan,” the “care of our wounded and disabled,” and the need to “pay off and provide benefits for 8 million or more veterans to be discharged next July.” In each of the plants, arrangements were made to have a bond booth. Dunbar closed his exhortation with “You have done a swell job, not only in the manufacturing of garments for our boys, but by backing them up by investing in bonds. Keep it up!”

Work started each day with a shrill whistle at 7:30 a.m. that could be heard throughout the town, and the whistle sounded again at 4:30 p.m. to signal the end of the work day.

Naylor tells a funny anecdote about this. The person charged with blowing the whistle

often drove by the watchmaker’s shop uptown at noon. There was a big clock in the front window, and he used it to calibrate his pocket watch to ensure the timely execution of his task. This supposedly fail-safe measure was put into question at a later date when the watchmaker admitted to setting his clock to the sound of the Cambridge whistle.

End of an Era

After 50 long years, the plant began a phase-out closing in November 1986, a victim of globalization and the resultant cheap imports that started flooding the market in the 1970s and ’80s from such exotic places as the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, China, India, Turkey, and Portugal. Cambridge also had to compete in sportswear with the rise of trendy name brands like Nike, Reebok, Adidas, and Puma. Their products carried higher price tags than Cambridge shoes, but had bigger advertising budgets and were positioned in the marketplace to sell a life-style along with the shoe. Celebrity endorsements from athletes also helped to buoy competitors’ sales.

Cambridge could have countered the fierce competition by off-shoring the sewn uppers, using more synthetic materials, and improving their technology with computer-assisted design and production, including laser cutting and automatic stitchers. The company could also have emulated the

Japanese by employing “just in time” production to avoid big inventories and storage costs. Instead, the management team in Boston made the decision to shutter an already aging factory whose work force had contracted to just 166. As a family-owned company, Cambridge had no allegiance to stock holders, so the choice was much easier to make. However, when they announced the bad news, many tears were shed in Taneytown and the surrounding region as incomes and a way of life faded away. Because most families in town had someone who worked at the plant at one time or another, the result was psychologically as well as economically devastating.

In 1987-1988 the factory equipment was disassembled and sold, and the three buildings on the 14-acre site were put on the market. Two buildings were 36,000 square feet and one was a massive 200,000 square feet. In 1989 Naylor was terminated, leaving only one employee to handle security and answer phones.

Times change, and by 2014 the once proud Sears and JCPenney brands were struggling to stay afloat in their battle against big box stores and threatened to go the way of Cambridge Rubber. Cambridge employees still get together for an annual summer picnic at the Taneytown Rod and Gun Club. The recent event attracted 65 people, though the numbers are getting smaller with each passing year. No doubt the talk turns to the old days, as attendees remember when the Cambridge Rubber Company was a force to be reckoned with in the wild world of shoe wear.

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