

Ivory Trade

by Don Malcarne, Town Historian

The villages of Deep River and Ivoryton, although developing differently, grew throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth because of the ivory industry. While ivory can conjure up images that are often exotic and romantic, the cultural application of this raw material in these two Connecticut River Valley towns was direct and practical. Two local companies, Pratt, Read and Co. in Deep River and Comstock, Cheney and Co. in Ivoryton, dominated the manufacture of ivory products in the United States. Perhaps 90-95% of production in this field was located here in Southern Connecticut.

Initially, combs represented the majority of what was produced, but soon all types of toiletries were being made, as well as items such as toothpicks, buttons and billiard balls. During the middle and latter half of the nineteenth century, home entertainment came into focus and this had a dramatic effect on the production of pianos and organs. These two local factories manufactured the keyboards, keys, actions and sounding boards for many of the well-known piano makers, including Baldwin, Everett, Wurlitzer and the like. In this manner, these shops were involved in woodworking and iron fabrication, as well as the handling of ivory.

The location of this unique industry in this lower valley area can be attributed to several factors. Initially, the Connecticut River provided access for raw material and shipping for finished goods. Secondly, the Falls River in Ivoryton and the Deep River in the northern section of Potapaug (Deep River's original name) were available sources of power to run factories, and finally, the human element must be considered. Deacon Phineas Pratt invented a machine that could cut the combs in the late 1790s, and his son Able started producing combs on West Avenue in Essex. Shortly, people such as Ezra Williams, Elisha Comstock, George Read, Samuel M. Comstock, Julius Pratt and George A. Cheney got involved, combining all these elements into fledgling manufacturers of ivory products. Initially, there were many smaller shops, but by 1862 Pratt, Read and Co. and Comstock, Cheney and Co. emerged as the dominating forces.

These factories built homes for their work forces, provided for amusements and generally dominated the lives of their employees. Ivoryton became a classic example of the "factory town," for prior to Samuel Comstock's involvement in the manufacture of ivory products in 1834, there were less than a dozen houses in West Centre Brook, as Ivoryton was then known. He apparently had a vision of a town built around a factory; he and his partner, George A. Cheney, put this idea into effect.

The Great Depression of the 1930s adversely affected both factories. After a period of negotiation, they combined forces on January 1, 1936 and, although now primarily located in Ivoryton, named this new organization Pratt, Read and Co. By 1940, employment was back to more than 700 persons, but soon another dramatic shift occurred. World War II required the cessation of piano parts manufacturing, and Pratt, Read and Co. instead manufactured gliders for the government. Up to 4,000 persons worked at the shops in both towns to meet the demand for this product. After the war, piano actions and ivory keyboards came back into production. However, by 1858 the last ivory was used, to be forever replaced by plastic.