

Ivory and its Uses

by Don Malcarne, Town Historian

An elephant tusk is merely a large, curved incisor. Tusks varies greatly in size. The largest tusks were to be found in Uganda and the softest in Kenya and Tanganyika. The record Ivory tusk known to come from an East African elephant is in the National Museum of South Kensington. Its weight is 226 pounds and its length is 10 feet, 2 ½ inches. Years ago, prime tusks averages about 90 pounds. An average of 55 pounds was considered good. The ivory tusks were harvested from freshly killed elephants. Licenses were issued to a number of white hunters in districts where elephants were in abundance and did considerable damage to native crops. Those elephants were shot by hunters and the tusks were turned over to the Game Department, which were sold at public auction. The license fee was deducted and the balance went to the hunter. "Dead" ivory, or that which was found on the ground was of inferior quality and very brittle. When the hunter brought in a tusk to the Game Department, an initial and number were burned into it for identification purposes.

Ivory is of two types – hard and soft. The hard ivory came from India. Soft ivory, which was used for making piano keys, came from Africa. The softest and best quality of ivory tusks was imported to the United States where Pratt, Read and Co. of Ivoryton was the largest buyer and manufacturer.

In 1884, three quarters of the Ivory exported from Zanzibar was sent to Deep River and Ivoryton where it was primarily used for the manufacturing of keyboards. It has been estimated that 30,000 elephants were killed between 1905 and 1912 to supply these factories. A 70-pound tusk would supply ivory for about 45 keyboards. Since about 1958, plastics have been used for piano keys.

The entire tusk was utilized. Each tusk was kept by itself through each process until the keys were laid on the keyboard. The first process in the manufacture of piano keys was the "junking" of the tusk into four-inch lengths. The blocks were then marked for the parting and blocking; this was done for the purpose of having the grain in the head and the tail match and to get the equal number of heads and tails from each tusk. The blocks were then slit into keys, after which they were thoroughly dried and then bleached in specially prepared bleach water. After this process they were dried again and put under glass in bleach houses. They were then separated into various grades, matched up and laid on the keyboards. The best grade of ivory was from the inside of the tusk.

After the pieces of piano keys were cut, the odd-shaped leftovers were used to make trinkets and many other small items, such as button hooks, toothpicks and beads. The dust was sold as fertilizer.