

Vulcan bowling pins once ruled the nation's lanes

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Wood products have always been a vital part of Langlade County's economy. In fact, Francis Deleglise, arguably the founder of Antigo, first came to the area as a timber cruiser. Within a year of when the Deleglise family settled into its log cabin home (now on the museum grounds) the Novotny brothers established a saw mill. It was later taken over by the Kellogg Lumber Company and the lake created by a dam on Springbrook became known as Kellogg's Pond.

Several wood products companies lined the lake. An 1896 map shows, in addition to the Kellogg Lumber Company, the Wisconsin Handle Company, the Antigo Screen Door Company, Frost Veneer Company, and, just down the road at Eighth Avenue, the Crocker Chair Company. Over the years some companies closed and new ones were formed.

One of the more interesting industries and a major employer was the Vulcan Company at the north end of Edison Street. The company was founded in 1909 in *Portsmouth, Ohio as a manufacturer of wooden shoe lasts*. The business really took off once they developed a new shoe last turning lathe.

In 1919 Vulcan started a plant in Crandon which made rough turned lasts that were then shipped to Portsmouth for finishing. It chose Crandon because of the ample supply of maple, the wood of choice for shoe last manufacturing. In 1925 the Crandon plant was moved to Antigo, taking over the buildings of the Antigo

Tractor Company at the north end of Edison Street. In addition to shoe lasts the company began making heels for women's high heeled shoes.

By 1933 Vulcan had expertise in how to dry maple, an array of kilns, and an ample supply of maple. It expanded the product line to include rough bowling pins for Brunswick that were shipped to Muskegon, Mich. for finishing. During the 1940s production at Vulcan in Antigo expanded to include golf clubs, furniture parts, sewing machine tops, and shuffle boards. During World War II it also made gun stocks. All of this

involved an expansion of facilities into a major industrial region at the north end of Antigo.

These side lines were phased out in the 1950s. In 1951 the company decided to produce finished bowling pins to be sold directly to bowling alleys. By the late 1950s, 20 percent of all bowling alleys in the U.S. used Vulcan bowling pins. In America's post-World War II years bowling gained respectability as a family sport and lost the seedy reputation it held in the early 20th century because of its association with taverns, many of which had bowling allies.

Bowling pins, like other aspects

of the game, from equipment to scoring, are regulated by the American Bowling Congress (ABC) which was based in Milwaukee. In the late 19th century bowling evolved and grew in popularity. The ABC was formed in 1895 to devise regulations and make the game uniform. They also began to organize tournaments to promote the sport. In 1895 they hosted a major tournament in Milwaukee. It was so successful and the ABC was so impressed with the city that they moved its headquarters to Milwaukee, making the city the "bowling capital of

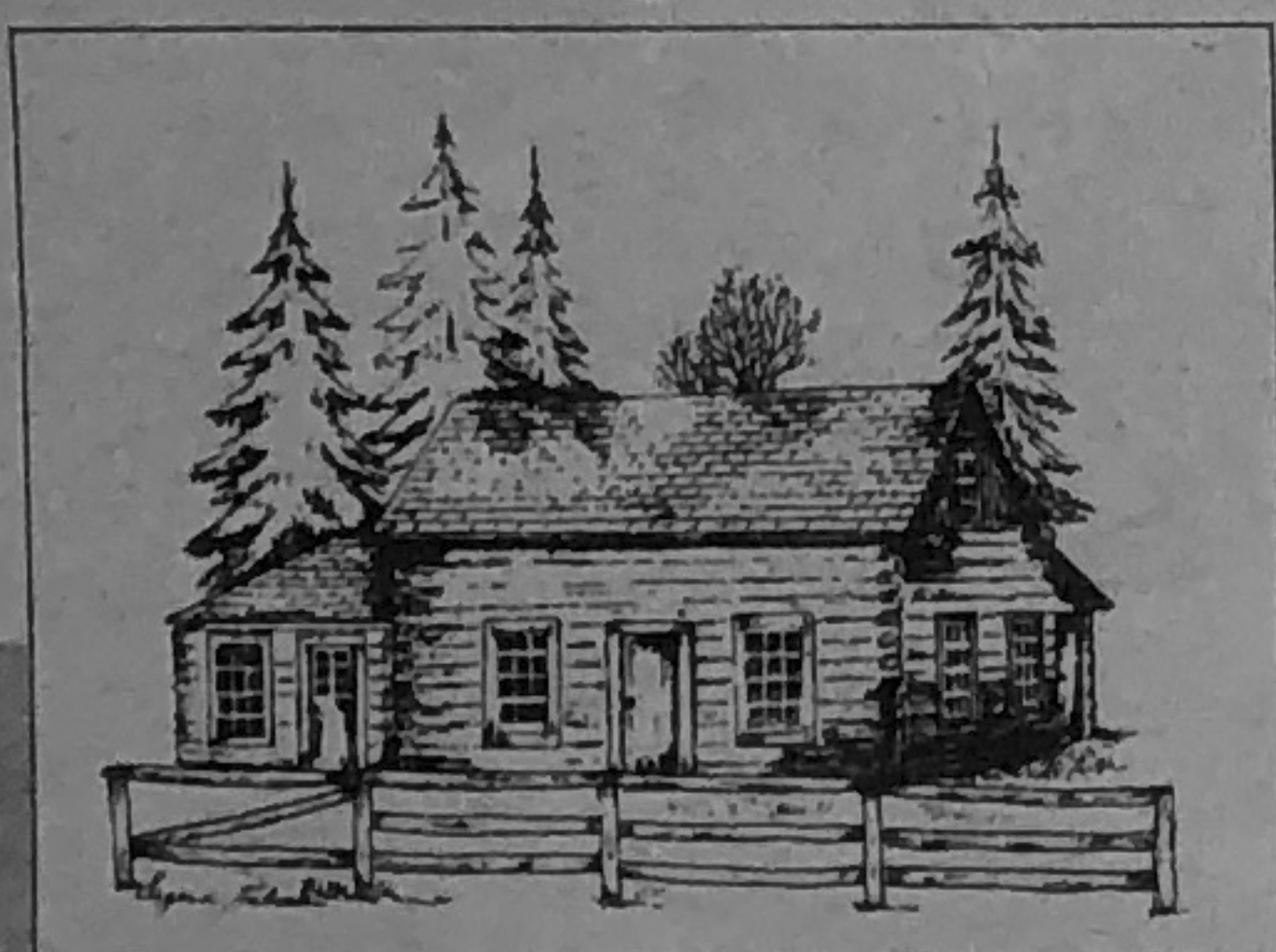
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Vulcan, seen here in 1930, came to Antigo in 1925 and established a shoe last factory on Edison St.



In the late 1950s Vulcan developed a new nylon coating. It required approval of the American Bowling Congress, based in Milwaukee, which regulated the game. Within 10 weeks a gold coated pin commemorated the production of the 50,000th Nyl-Tuf pin.



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America", a position it held until 2008 when the ABC became part of the U.S. Bowling Congress and moved to Texas.

One role of the ABC was to set standards for pins. One specification was that they be made from hard maple. Vulcan had an ample supply of that, all of the material coming from within a 60 mile radius of Antigo. In the 1950s Vulcan experimented with different lacquer coatings and laminates, all subject to ABC approval, with mixed results. Some of this was necessitated by the introduction of automatic pin setting machines which could not tolerate damaged pins. The machines would jam when the pin surface peeled slightly. But pin setting machines could also damage pins and a sturdier coating had to be developed.

In 1954 a plastic coating for pins was developed in Nebraska but it turned out not to be much of an improvement. Vulcan then developed its "Nyl-Tuf" coating but before going into use it had to gain approval from the ABC. This happened in 1959 and within 10 weeks of approval Vulcan held a ceremony marking the production of its 50,000th pin which coincided with the 50th anniversary of the founding of the company in Ohio. The coating was further improved in 1960 with the development of the Duofold pin in which a nylon sleeve was added between coats of plastic.

Vulcan was still not exclusively a bowling pin manufacturer. It still made wooden shoe heels and shoe lasts although demand was diminishing. In 1953 the company also acquired the U.S. Bung Company, a 106 year old company in Ohio, and in 1963 moved production to Antigo. It produced between 25 and 33 million bungs per year for various breweries. This filled the gap created by reduced demand for wooden shoe heels. But by 1968 Vulcan had stopped making shoe lasts and heels and was out of the beer barrel bung business and devoting itself to bowling pins.

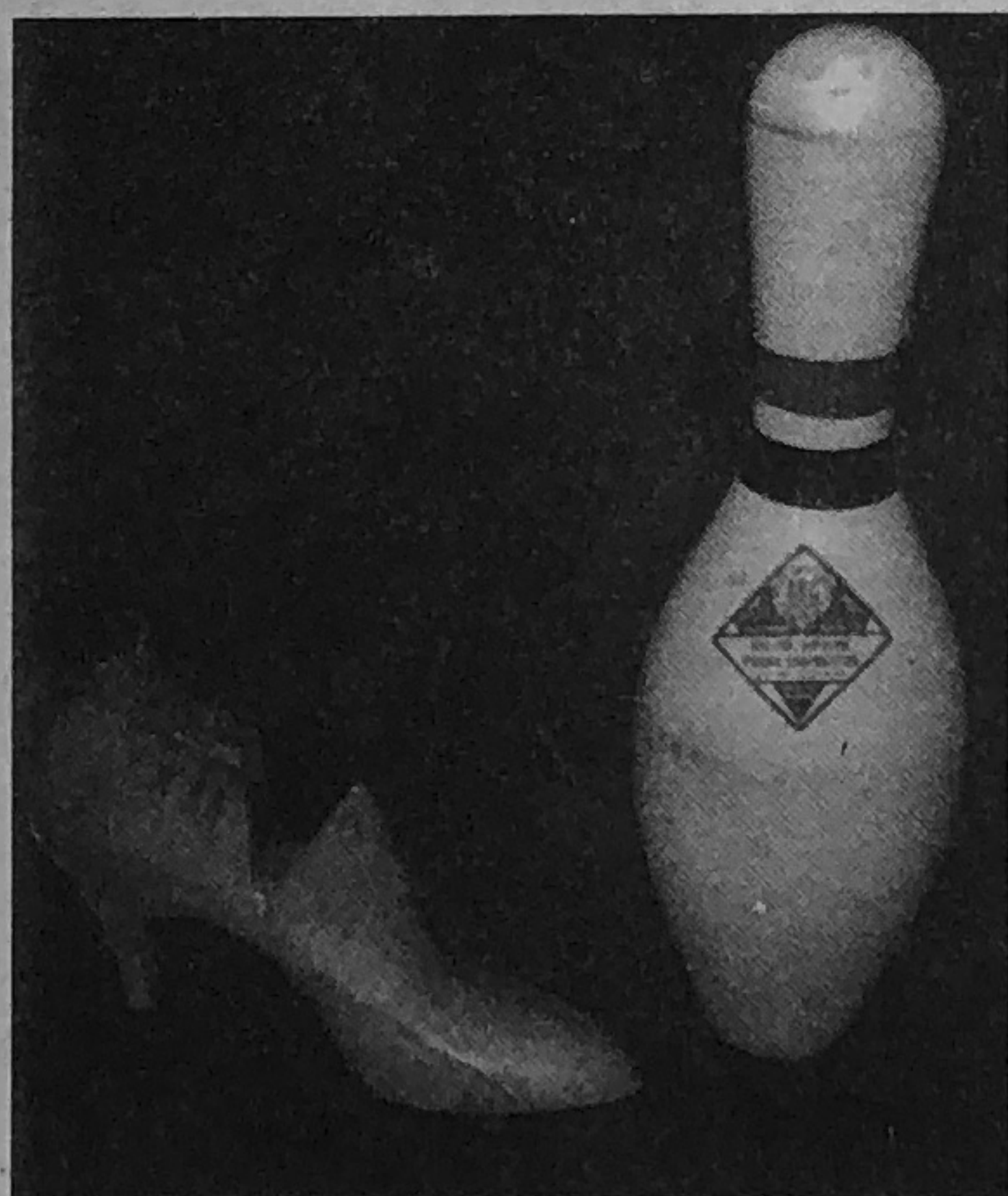
In 1964 Vulcan was visited by a representative of a Japanese trading company seeking a deal to import bowling pins to Japan. Vulcan didn't think much of it - bowling pins in Japan? But following World War II many American customs gained popularity in Japan, including bowling. In 1968

Japan had 14,000 lanes, by 1970 63,000, and by 1972 there were 124,000 lanes, second only to the U.S. which had 130,000. Vulcan got into the Japanese market in a big way. It acquired plants in St. Louis, Richland Center and Hancock Mich., and transferred some production to Antigo. The company chartered air flights to ship pins from Minneapolis to Japan. In their best year, 1972, they shipped 2,170 sets, manufacturing 500 to 600 sets per day in Antigo and 200- to 50 sets per day in Richland Center. But by the mid-1970s the bottom had fallen out of the Japanese market.

By the early 1980s several companies, including Vulcan, were experimenting with different production methods, all subject to ABC approval. In 1990 Vulcan and Brunswick merged. While some buildings closed Vulcan continued to employ 145 people in Antigo, with a payroll of \$3 million into the 21st century.

While wood products are no longer a major part of Antigo's economy it is still important. Department of Natural Resources statistics show that lumber generates 422 jobs in the county with 495 indirect jobs and an economic impact of close to \$65 million annually. Zelasoski Wood Products is now in its third generation of family ownership, manufacturing a variety of wood products. The Wood Technology Center, associated with Northcentral Technical College, is training a new generation in improved production methods.

William Faulkner is supposed to have said: "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." Langlade County has a long economic history of dealing with wood products that continues today.



A Vulcan shoe last, bowling pin, and other Vulcan ephemera are on display in the museum.



Manufacture of wooden shoe lasts declined but Vulcan continued making wooden shoe heels into the 1950s.



By the mid-1950s Vulcan had phased out many of their less profitable products and concentrated on bowling pins.



Regulations require bowling pins be made of maple. Vulcan's maple supply came from within 60 miles of Antigo.