

## Colebrook in the Nineteenth Century

While there were many small shops scattered about the area, primarily along our streams, the one industry that employed the most laborers was that of the forest industry. Before anything could begin in the vast stretches of the virgin forest, trees had to be removed. Initially they were killed by girdling, the process of removing a ring of bark around the base of the tree, which caused them to die and eventually fall over, thus creating open space for new forest growth to regenerate itself, and by doing so, create a crop of trees that were of manageable size.

Because of the large deposits of hematite ore in Salisbury, there was an unending demand for charcoal to convert the raw ore into cast iron ingots. The amounts of charcoal needed by the iron industry is absolutely staggering. The average blast furnace in Litchfield County produced 40 tons of iron per week. It required from 200-250 bushels of charcoal to produce one ton of iron. Taking the lower figure of 200 bushels, it required a quarter acre of forest to supply the charcoal needed for one ton of iron. This equates to 8,000 bushels per week for one furnace. Another way of looking at the picture is to think of every 2,500 tons of iron equaling one square mile of forest [640 acres].

There were 17 blast furnaces by the early years of the nineteenth century in Litchfield County, in addition to 60 forges. A forge took the pig iron from the blast furnace, and by reheating and hammering, converted the cast iron into useable wrought iron at the rate of about 8 tons per week. Thus these 60 forges required an additional 9 square miles of forest per year, making a grand total of 23 square miles, or 14,720 acres of forest each and every year just for the iron industry alone. In addition, of course, the forest was expected to provide all the lumber needed for buildings, firewood, fencing, bridges, etc.

There were, on average, 30 cords of wood [108.6 cubic meters] in each "burn" at a charcoal pit. Each cord of wood yielded an average of 21 bushels of charcoal; thus a burn consisting of 30 cords would yield 630 bushels of charcoal [22,200.6 liters].

The forests receded from the vicinity of the furnaces and forges in ever-increasing radii, and the process employed thousands of men – mostly woodchoppers, charcoal makers (colliers), and ox cart drivers. By 1840, charcoal was being hauled into northwestern Connecticut from as far away as southern Vermont and New Hampshire. A two or three day trip was common.

Then, as today, economics dictated innovation in order for an industry to remain competitive. Each charcoal pit, which consisted of about 30 cords of wood stacked 10-14 feet high and about 40 feet in diameter, was then covered with earth and set on fire for a two week controlled burn. The yield was approximately 21 bushels of charcoal per cord of wood. This method was replaced during the 1870's with brick kilns. These kilns could produce 42 bushels of charcoal per cord of wood, doubling the yield. Brick kiln, or retort charcoal was cleaner, had less waste and was more efficient in making iron. Not many brick kilns were made in Connecticut however. By the 1880's, most of our countryside was already deforested. At this time Connecticut had also lost its prestige in the iron industry. Salisbury district, once the national leader, in 1880 produced only about 9.5% of all charcoal-iron and about 1.5% of pig iron made with all types of fuel.

In addition to making charcoal, the forest played a vital role in the everyday life of our young nation. Firewood for cooking and heating constituted a major use of the forest in former times.

Records are difficult to come by, as people didn't give more than a passing thought to heating wood. It was so common and ever-present that it didn't warrant writing about. A few clues can be interpreted however, and the results are mind-boggling.

Keeping in mind that the average older house in the nineteenth century had no insulation what so ever and probably relied upon a large central fireplace as well as other supplemental fireplaces for heat. In the early years of the century, before iron stoves became commonplace, and cooking was done at the central fireplace, as much as 30 cords of wood per house were required annually.

Colebrook's town records contain enlightening facts about firewood consumption. Each of the school districts kept on-going records of expenditures, and chief among these was the cost of cordwood. In 1839, for example, the one-room schoolhouse known as the Southwest District School (at the corner of Pinney and Millbrook Roads) required 14 cords of wood for the winter session, which comprised the four months commencing with the first week in October. These 14 cords were to be delivered one cord per week beginning with the first week in November, and it was emphatically stated that all wood must be Beech, Maple or Black Birch and split from the trunk of the tree.

The wording of the last sentence is revealing, as it implies that firewood was to consist of only that part of the trunk of the tree large enough to require splitting. This being the case, my guess is that 20-25% of the forest cut specifically for firewood was burned as brush on the forest floor.

In those days, one man could cut and stack one cord of wood in a day. The prices for a cord of wood in 1839 ranged from 90 cents to \$1.16. As can be seen, many men were employed in the forest, but they weren't necessarily becoming rich by doing so.

Most of the local so-called industry consisted of small shops located on or near streams that had fairly high banks to retain water behind dams and sufficient flow and gradient to provide water to operate waterwheels. As might be guessed, much of the products utilized wood or wood products. Locally, they consisted of chair shops, some of which were quite small, such as the one in Robertsville conducted by Wolcott Deming, and another on Sandy Brook in North Colebrook which were basically one-man operations, lumber mills also manufactured products such as back boards for coffee mills. Others made clock cases, wooden bowls, mortars, pestles and butter presses.

Cider mills were an important part of any community, and we were no exception; this fact must be difficult for young people today to grasp, as the nearest mill that I know of is in Harwinton. In the last century, cider making was a big business, with hundreds of barrels made every year. It supported an active cooper industry making and transporting cider barrels. The product sold in stores these days hardly warrants the name "cider", as recent state laws require all commercially sold cider to be pasteurized unless it is purchased from the mill or from an apple grower.

The finest cider ever produced hereabouts was that of Isadore Jasmin, who established himself in Colebrook in 1893 and continued to make a superior product until his death in 1930.