



W. T. FALCONER MFG. CO., Falconer, N. Y.

AMERICAN MANUFACTURING CONCERN, Falconer, N. Y., U.S.A.  
Advertising Specialties of Wood

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DEALER IN  
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BEE-KEEPERS' SUPPLIES.

## **Before Fancher Chair...**

By Norman Carlson and Fenton History Center Staff

The Fancher Chair Company in Falconer occupies the site of a sawmill that went into production before Jamestown was settled. A wide variety of wood products ranging from advertising pieces, toys, and wooden washing machines, have been produced there from 1808 to this day. There have been a number of successive owners and complicated corporate relationships, but there is a chain of ownership from Edward Work in 1807 to the present Fancher Chair Company with Bruce Erickson, President, to the present day.

Edward Work was born in Franklin County, Pennsylvania in 1773. In early life he became a lawyer then settled, about 1798, in Meadville. Meadville had been an Indian village and home of several white captives. It became one of the earliest white settlements in western Pennsylvania. Several of Chautauqua County's most interesting early settlers came from Meadville. These included, in addition to Work, Alexander McIntyre, eccentric and colorful first settler of Mayville, and Jamestown's first black residents, Catherine Harris among others.

After 1803, Work became involved both in local politics and business in Meadville with Dr. Thomas Kennedy who was wealthy and very well connected. Kennedy's wife was the niece of Joseph Ellicott of the Holland Land Company. Kennedy and Work together purchased over 1,200 acres in east Jamestown, Falconer, and Levant August 1, 1807, some of the best timberland in the east. Kennedy built his mill on the Conewango (in the present hamlet of Kennedy) in 1805 and Work built a mill at the Fancher Chair location in 1808. This was close to four years before James Prendergast sawed his first board in Jamestown and it was the first mill on the Outlet of Chautauqua Lake. In fact, some of the lumber used to construct the first sawmill in Jamestown probably came from Works' mill. Unlike Kennedy, Work was a pioneer Chautauqua County settler. He built his house, of hewn logs, in 1807 northeast of the mill site.

In that early period, lumbering was the way to get rich in southern Chautauqua County. The most valuable timber, and about the only trees cut commercially in the pioneer period, were white pine which grew to enormous size and ages of 200 to 400 years in the primeval forests. Trees could be over 200 feet tall and three to five feet in diameter, 80 to 100 feet before the first limb, yielding several 16 foot logs each, 5,000 board feet per tree and up to 100,000 board feet per acre. The lumber could be sold in New Orleans for \$25 to \$30 per thousand board feet. That would be the rough equivalent of more than \$30,000 per acre in today's money.

The early sawmill at Falconer was built over a channel, which diverted the water under the mill where it turned a crude "flutter wheel," an undershot wooden water wheel. This powered the saw machinery, including a gang saw. All the saws were reciprocating (up and down) saws, not circular or band saws of the sort familiar today. The Work mill was not as large or productive as either Kennedy's or Prendergast's mills, but it produced a lot of lumber and profit.

The 16-foot boards were formed into rafts of layers ("courses") perpendicular to each other. The rafts were from 12 courses deep up to 26 courses at high water. Two men then took them to Warren

where the rafts were hooked together in units of 60 that went down river with 12 men including one pilot and a cook.

Some of Work's lumber, including the first he cut, was made into keelboats that took salt, shipped in via Lake Erie and the portage on down to Pittsburgh. Since 1796 the Chautauqua route had been used for salt. This trade only lasted to about 1810, but Work had learned by 1809 to pick up baled cotton in Natchez and carry it to New Orleans for additional income. There his men sold any remaining cargo plus the boats themselves for lumber, took ship to Philadelphia and walked back to Falconer.

Robert Falconer, from one of the most interesting families of early Chautauqua and Warren Counties, purchased the mill in 1836. His son, Patrick, took it over in 1843. In the 1850's he branched out into wooden products like doors, sashes, and blinds.

Patrick's son, William took over in 1880 and named the firm William T. Falconer Manufacturing Company. William had a penchant for forming partnerships, creating offshoot companies, and experimenting with different product lines. In 1880 or 1883 he began making bee supplies and for many decades the firm was one of the most respected in the world in that field. In 1888 Falconer went into partnership with D. E. Merrill and began making primitive wooden, hand operated washing machines.

In 1892 American Manufacturing Concern was organized. It produced enormous quantities of wooden advertising products, novelties, and toys. American Manufacturing operated concurrently and with the same ownership with W. T. Falconer Manufacturing, which continued in bee supplies until about 1940. American Manufacturing was legally incorporated in 1910. The company operated under that name until 1981. Under C. Leonard Erickson, it took over Fancher Furniture which had been located on Carter Street and became Fancher Chair.

Falconer Jones, great great grandson of Robert Falconer, retired in 1973. This marked the end of 137 years of involvement of the Falconer family with the business at the same location. The business had dabbled in furniture as early as 1930 but turned exclusively to dining room chairs after C. L. Erickson, the father of the current president, took over in the late 70's. Next week's column will cover the "rest of the story" of the Fancher Chair Company.