

The Most Enduring and Graceful Oar

Swanson Boat Oar Company - Albion, Pennsylvania

by Herm Hoops ~ 2007

The Swanson Boat Oar Company in Northwest Pennsylvania smells deliciously of sweet freshly cut wood, just as when I visited it in the early 1970's. The Swanson family, of Albion, Pennsylvania, has been producing high quality boat oars and canoe paddles for five generations. Many companies make wooden oars for whitewater use, but only one company produces the finest thin, graceful, balanced and extremely flexible white water oar, and the company is unique in that it controls the product from the forest to the customer.

The Swanson's developed the skills to produce fine spoon blade paddles for European canoe and kayak competition in the mid 21st Century. They were the primary supplier of oars to river outfitters in the Western United States for decades. In the 1940s and 50's their oars were used by Grand Canyon River Expeditions, Hatch River Expeditions, and most outfitters on the Colorado Plateau. Swanson oars were the choice for government river surveys and many organizations like the Powell Society. Even though the private river running community was not widely popular in the 1970's, large sporting good companies like Gart Brothers in Denver stocked their oars. Swanson oars were used by Sobek River Expeditions in their descent of the African Zambezi River in the early 1980's. Today Swanson still supplies oars to outfitters like OARS, AZRA and others. Most recently their largest paddle orders have been to the worldwide Walt Disney Company. The longest oars they produced commercially were 16 feet long, used primarily in the Grand Canyon.

For all around strength and durability, no wood can match white ash, and the Swanson Boat Oar Factory is located in the heart of the Central Hardwood Forest, where second growth hardwoods (ash, maple, oak and basswood) grow straight and true. The hardwood forest of Pennsylvania has nurtured companies that produce boat oars since the earliest days of our Country. The first boat oars in Northwestern Pennsylvania were made before the 1850's by the Rev. Ezekiel Page at a mill in Pageville. First grade No. 1 oars are still known as "Page" brand in the area. By 1855 former employees of Page had invented an oar blading machine and lathe and opened an oar company in Albion. By 1860's Andrews and Wells owned the company called the Wells Boat Oar Company. On March 1868 the mill burned and the loss of \$10,000 was only partially covered by insurance. By 1871 the company was back in business producing oars from 200,000 board feet of timber annually.

Fire is a constant threat to a wood-working operations and the Swanson plants in Northwestern Pennsylvania was no exception. In 1895 fire again took its toll and that began the Swanson Family's manufacturing oars and paddles, a tradition in Northwest, Pennsylvania for over a century. The Swanson Boat Oar Company had its start in 1897 when Jim Swanson's great-grandfather Albert and brother Alvin Long took over operation of the mill. The Long's produced hand-carved wood blades using planes, draw knives, and other hand tools in their mill which burned in 1930. The business was restarted in McLane, Pa. and was purchased by Victor Swanson, who moved it to Albion in 1941, at 58 Bradish Avenue, the same site it occupies today.

During the Second World War, the Swanson Boat Oar Factory employed more than 100 workers and turned out over 2,000 paddles and oars weekly, for the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard. The production of oars for the military continued into the 1970's. To keep plant operating in war time they used 1,500 board feet of timber a day. The 20' oar over the plant door was in the 1978 *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. That oar was not the longest Swanson Oar ever produced, during World War II Victor turned out 24' oars for life boats.

Oar production returned to normal levels after the war, but by 1949 post war employment levels were maintained by producing insulation board made from sawdust and cardboard for construction industry. In 1953, after a break for service in the Korean War and forestry college, Victor's son Jim Swanson joined the business. At that time the shop included an extensive sawmill, kiln, and a complex myriad of saws, planers and lathes.

By 1959 the Swanson's expanded their manufacturing to include water skis, baseball bats, ice and field hockey sticks and canoe paddles. In 1974 the company continued to employ more than 30 people, but on October 4, 1974 fire again leveled the 29,000 square-foot building. It wasn't until April 1976 that Jim was able to get the company back into production. Many of Swanson's employees had worked there for over 20 years, they took a personal interest in their part of the oar making process and showed their pride in the smoothly finished oars they produced.

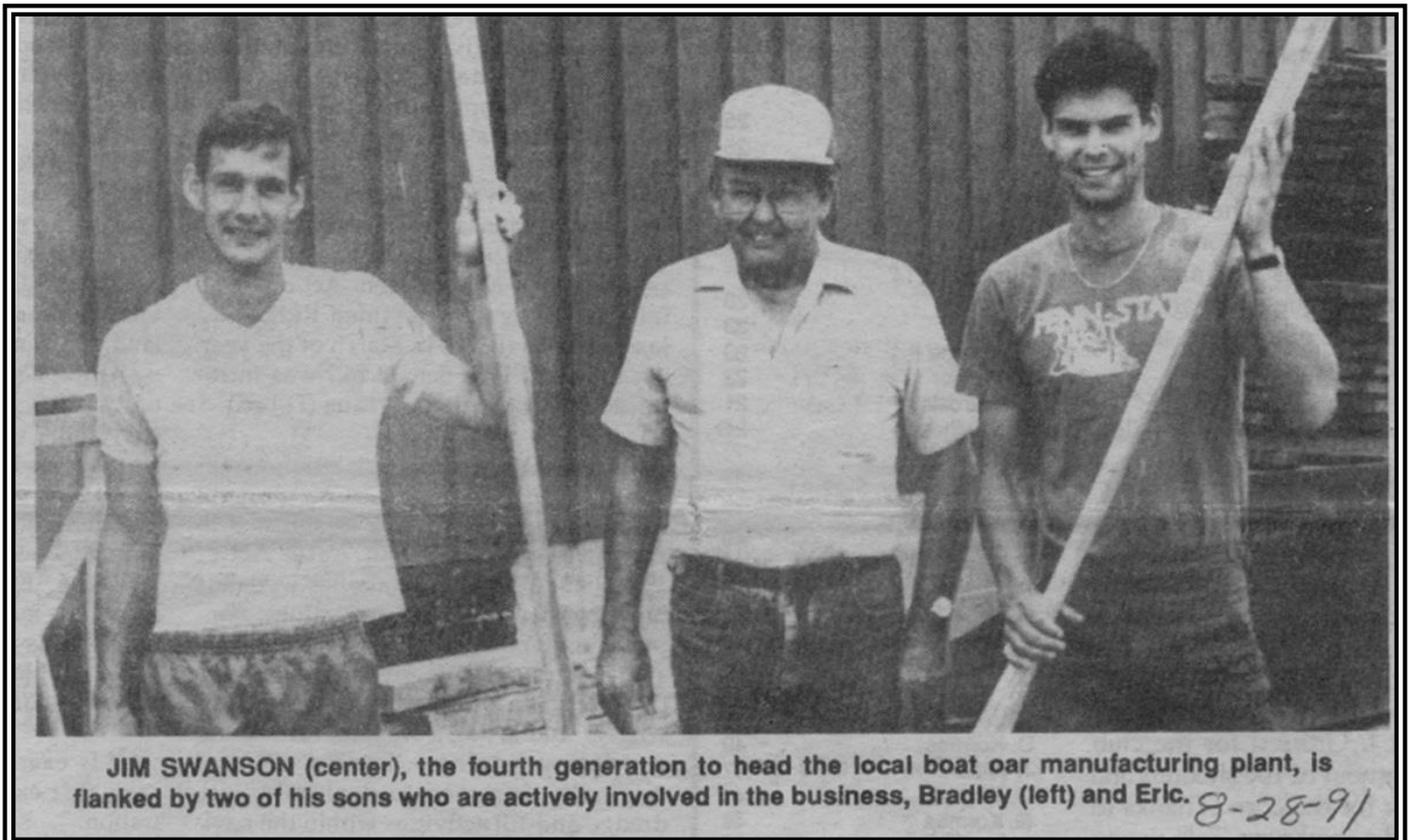
Jim's oldest two sons, Eric and Brad Swanson joined the company and by 1985 the operation was reestablished in a 3,500 square-foot building that houses lathes, saws and planers driven by electrical motors. In 1987 the plant was still producing around 500 oars and paddles a week in a shrinking market. Brad and Eric, like their father, produced two grades of oars. The Viking grade is straight, true and without blemishes. The Trojan grade oars have small blemishes like knots, wormholes and slight bends, they are ever as durable as the higher priced Viking Oars.

Jim's wife Josephine continues to handle the office and book work, son Eric operates the plant, and is occasionally assisted by his sister Terrie and brother Brad and his sons. There are significant differences between today's plant and the one that turned out 2000 oars a week in World War II. In the early days the lathes and other machines were powered by a steam "donkey engine." The engine transmitted power to the lathes and saws through a myriad of belts and gears. The singing of the moving belts was a constant background sound in the plant. The steam engine used wood scraps from oar and paddle production. Today all of the machines are electrical powered. Specialty canoe and kayak paddles, once made by machine are now made by hand as some of the machinery damaged by fire proved irreplaceable.

Other things remain the same though, and that includes the production of extremely high quality long Swanson Boat Oars. The Swanson operation is one of fewer than a dozen plants in America that makes wood oars and the only plant that makes oars longer than 11 feet.

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JIM SWANSON (center), the fourth generation to head the local boat oar manufacturing plant, is flanked by two of his sons who are actively involved in the business, Bradley (left) and Eric. 8-28-91