A Story of American Glass

This rural Wayne County community was once the center of glassmaking in the United States

Text and photographs by Cindy Ross

When you drive down rural Route 6 through White Mills in Wayne County, you’re probably not thinking “center of the universe” when it comes to manufacturing. Yet a large old bluestone factory on the north side of town provides just the barest hint of what once was a thriving industrial village and home to one of America’s leading luxury glass companies.

For 50 years, Dorflinger glass was unsurpassed in excellence by any American competitor. During the turn of the 19th century, it supplied tableware for the world’s wealthy and influential, including eight U.S. presidents, from Abraham Lincoln to Woodrow Wilson. Since 1921, the factory no longer produces glass, yet Dorflinger glass remains one of Pennsylvania’s most fascinating manufacturing stories.

Meet Christian Dorflinger

As I stand in the Dorflinger Factory Museum, I can almost hear the loud grinding of the cutting machines and the hum of shafts aloft turning the cutting wheels. Old belts rise from the grinding bins to wheels overhead. A large historic photograph of the interior of the factory fills the room’s back wall. This industrial heritage museum opened in 2016 in the restored cutting shop and factory office. A second, older museum, Dorflinger Glass Museum, is housed up the road in the Dorflinger family home. With more than 1,000 glass pieces, including cut, etched, engraved, gilded and enameled crystal, on display, it holds the largest display of Dorflinger glass in the nation. Together, these two facilities tell the history and craftsmanship of Dorflinger glass.

Exhibits at the factory museum portray the glassmaking process, from glassblowing and cutting to engraving and acid etching, and highlight the actual tools and equipment used in the original factory. We begin our tour by watching a rare, six-minute 1916...
film on glass making that was produced by Paramount Pictures for use in vocational schools. It’s our first introduction to the early glass manufacturing process.

Afterwards, museum curator Kurt Reed led us through the museum. A kerosene lamp. Realizing the potential of this new appliance (kerosene had only recently been discovered as a lighting source), he soon after moved to Brooklyn and opened his own workshops. He found success in New York and in 1862 purchased a 600-acre farm in Wayne County as an oasis from city life. The farm sits on a hill, one mile above the Dorflinger Factory Museum, and today the estate has been transformed, through the wills and wishes of his grandson Fred Suydam and his wife, Dorothy, into the Dorflinger-Suydam Wildlife Sanctuary. The large tract has ¾ miles of trails open to the public, as well as Trout Lake and Suydam Pond. The property also features the family home, which houses the small glass museum, and an outdoor amphitheater hosts the popular Wildflower Concert series featuring a range of musical acts throughout the summer, from big-name bluegrass and modern jazz to brass ensembles, country and rock ‘n roll.

The Evolution of Glass Making

WHEN DORFLINGER DISCOVERED THAT lead glass, he moved his operation from New York to a large, modern glass factory in White Mills over a period of several years. He took advantage of the Delaware and Hudson Canal, positioned adjacent to the factory, to ship coal from nearby

During WWI when imported German potash, a necessary ingredient in making lead glass, was coveted by U.S. presidents and could no longer be obtained in America, Dorflinger created a line of wares made with solid-colored blown glass without decoration to hide any imperfections. On display at the museum are samples of the 400 to 500 known and patented Dorflinger pieces, including a magnifi cent, cut-glass, regulation-size baseball bat. Around 40 percent of the collection is rotated annually, and four employees spend a month each winter washing and polishing all of the pieces.

The Ledges Hotel

GLASS MANUFACTURING RUNS DEEP in Wayne County. At one time, more than 30 glass manufacturers and cutting and decorating shops operated here. We will spend to-night in a building that once housed one of them. The Ledges, located five miles away in Hawley, is now a boutique hotel but it began life in 1890 as the John S. O’Connor American Rich Cut Glass Factory. According to The Glass Industry in Wayne County, it was “one of the most extensive glass-cutting factories in America” and produced some of the most beautiful cut glass using blanks from the Dorflinger factory. The building transitioned to the Maple City Cut Glass Company in 1902, and after that glass operation moved to New York, it housed the H.W. Kimble Silk Company. The standards of workmanship and quality continued with each new product.

The building remained a silk mill throughout most of the 20th century until the final business, the Arrow Throwing Mill operated by Yacca and Sons, closed in 1957. Like the Dorflinger cutting factory, it is built of native, hand-cut bluestone and embassies throughout the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the Victorian era, it was not unheard of for cut glassware decorative a formal dining table to be valued at $50,000. At that time, a punch bowl would be an investment similar to a new car today. The wealthy were expected to set a table with cut glass, including five glasses at each place setting.

Like other industries, glass manufactur ing evolved to reflect society’s change in taste and availability of material. Simple cuts in glass led to more elaborate, deep cutting of ornate, geometric patterns, known as the “brilliant age.” At the beginning of the 20th century, glass etching and more floral designs moved into favor. During WWI when imported German potash, a necessary ingredient in creating flawlessly clear lead glass, could no longer be obtained in America, Dorflinger created a line of wares made with solid-colored blown glass without decoration to hide any imperfections. On display at the museum are samples of the 400 to 500 known and patented Dorflinger pieces, including a magnificent, cut-glass, regulation-size baseball bat. Around 40 percent of the collection is rotated annually, and four employees spend a month each winter washing and polishing all of the pieces.

The Ledges Hotel

GLASS MANUFACTURING RUNS DEEP in Wayne County. At one time, more than 30 glass manufacturers and cutting and decorating shops operated here. We will spend to-night in a building that once housed one of them. The Ledges, located five miles away in Hawley, is now a boutique hotel but it began life in 1890 as the John S. O’Connor American Rich Cut Glass Factory. According to The Glass Industry in Wayne County, it was “one of the most extensive glass-cutting factories in America” and produced some of the most beautiful cut glass using blanks from the Dorflinger factory. The building transitioned to the Maple City Cut Glass Company in 1902, and after that glass operation moved to New York, it housed the H.W. Kimble Silk Company. The standards of workmanship and quality continued with each new product.

The building remained a silk mill throughout most of the 20th century until the final business, the Arrow Throwing Mill operated by Yacca and Sons, closed in 1957. Like the Dorflinger cutting factory, it is built of native, hand-cut bluestone and embassies throughout the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the Victorian era, it was not unheard of for cut glassware decorative a formal dining table to be valued at $50,000. At that time, a punch bowl would be an investment similar to a new car today. The wealthy were expected to set a table with cut glass, including five glasses at each place setting.

Like other industries, glass manufactur ing evolved to reflect society’s change in taste and availability of material. Simple cuts in glass led to more elaborate, deep cutting of ornate, geometric patterns, known as the “brilliant age.” At the beginning of the 20th century, glass etching and more floral designs moved into favor. During WWI when imported German potash, a necessary ingredient in creating flawlessly clear lead glass, could no longer be obtained in America, Dorflinger created a line of wares made with solid-colored blown glass without decoration to hide any imperfections. On display at the museum are samples of the 400 to 500 known and patented Dorflinger pieces, including a magnificent, cut-glass, regulation-size baseball bat. Around 40 percent of the collection is rotated annually, and four employees spend a month each winter washing and polishing all of the pieces.

The Ledges Hotel

GLASS MANUFACTURING RUNS DEEP in Wayne County. At one time, more than 30 glass manufacturers and cutting and decorating shops operated here. We will spend to-night in a building that once housed one of them. The Ledges, located five miles away in Hawley, is now a boutique hotel but it began life in 1890 as the John S. O’Connor American Rich Cut Glass Factory. According to The Glass Industry in Wayne County, it was “one of the most extensive glass-cutting factories in America” and produced some of the most beautiful cut glass using blanks from the Dorflinger factory. The building transitioned to the Maple City Cut Glass Company in 1902, and after that glass operation moved to New York, it housed the H.W. Kimble Silk Company. The standards of workmanship and quality continued with each new product.

The building remained a silk mill throughout most of the 20th century until the final business, the Arrow Throwing Mill operated by Yacca and Sons, closed in 1957. Like the Dorflinger cutting factory, it is built of native, hand-cut bluestone and embassies throughout the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the Victorian era, it was not unheard of for cut glassware decorative a formal dining table to be valued at $50,000. At that time, a punch bowl would be an investment similar to a new car today. The wealthy were expected to set a table with cut glass, including five glasses at each place setting.

Like other industries, glass manufactur ing evolved to reflect society’s change in taste and availability of material. Simple cuts in glass led to more elaborate, deep cutting of ornate, geometric patterns, known as the “brilliant age.” At the beginning of the 20th century, glass etching and more floral designs moved into favor. During WWI when imported German potash, a necessary ingredient in creating flawlessly clear lead glass, could no longer be obtained in America, Dorflinger created a line of wares made with solid-colored blown glass without decoration to hide any imperfections. On display at the museum are samples of the 400 to 500 known and patented Dorflinger pieces, including a magnifi cent, cut-glass, regulation-size baseball bat. Around 40 percent of the collection is rotated annually, and four employees spend a month each winter washing and polishing all of the pieces.

The Ledges Hotel

GLASS MANUFACTURING RUNS DEEP in Wayne County. At one time, more than 30 glass manufacturers and cutting and decorating shops operated here. We will spend to-night in a building that once housed one of them. The Ledges, located five miles away in Hawley, is now a boutique hotel but it began life in 1890 as the John S. O’Connor American Rich Cut Glass Factory. According to The Glass Industry in Wayne County, it was “one of the most extensive glass-cutting factories in America” and produced some of the most beautiful cut glass using blanks from the Dorflinger factory. The building transitioned to the Maple City Cut Glass Company in 1902, and after that glass operation moved to New York, it housed the H.W. Kimble Silk Company. The standards of workmanship and quality continued with each new product.

The building remained a silk mill throughout most of the 20th century until the final business, the Arrow Throwing Mill operated by Yacca and Sons, closed in 1957. Like the Dorflinger cutting factory, it is built of native, hand-cut bluestone and embassies throughout the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the Victorian era, it was not unheard of for cut glassware decorative a formal dining table to be valued at $50,000. At that time, a punch bowl would be an investment similar to a new car today. The wealthy were expected to set a table with cut glass, including five glasses at each place setting.

Like other industries, glass manufactur ing evolved to reflect society’s change in taste and availability of material. Simple cuts in glass led to more elaborate, deep cutting of ornate, geometric patterns, known as the “brilliant age.” At the beginning of the 20th century, glass etching and more floral designs moved into favor. During WWI when imported German potash, a necessary ingredient in creating flawlessly clear lead glass, could no longer be obtained in America, Dorflinger created a line of wares made with solid-colored blown glass without decoration to hide any imperfections. On display at the museum are samples of the 400 to 500 known and patented Dorflinger pieces, including a magnificent, cut-glass, regulation-size baseball bat. Around 40 percent of the collection is rotated annually, and four employees spend a month each winter washing and polishing all of the pieces.
With former lives as a glass factory and silk mill, the large bluestone building has been repurposed into the Ledges Hotel, which overlooks a precipitous gorge and the Paupack High Falls of Wallenpaupack Creek. Decks have been created between the falls and the hotel to take advantage of the views. Since the hotel’s roofs are on two levels, with a spiral staircase used to reach the bedroom.

The repurposed factory has decks attached to its sides for viewing the beauty of the falls. Our room was equipped with a winding, spiral stair case that reached the bedroom. In the evening, lights illuminate the falls in ever-changing colors. Framed period photographs and maps of the former glass operation and silk mill fill the hotel. In the restaurant, the walls are decorated with original glass mold prints. Furniture has been fashioned from recycled timbers from the nearby Hawley Silk Mill.

The mill, which dates to 1880, is on the National Register of Historic Places and has been repurposed into shops, galleries and a bakery/café. It is definitely worth a visit.

We came to Wayne County to learn the story of glass, and as we departed, we better appreciate and understand the pride of industry that resonates in this northeast corner of our state.

— Cindy Ross of New Ringgold, Schuylkill County, is a regular contributor.