

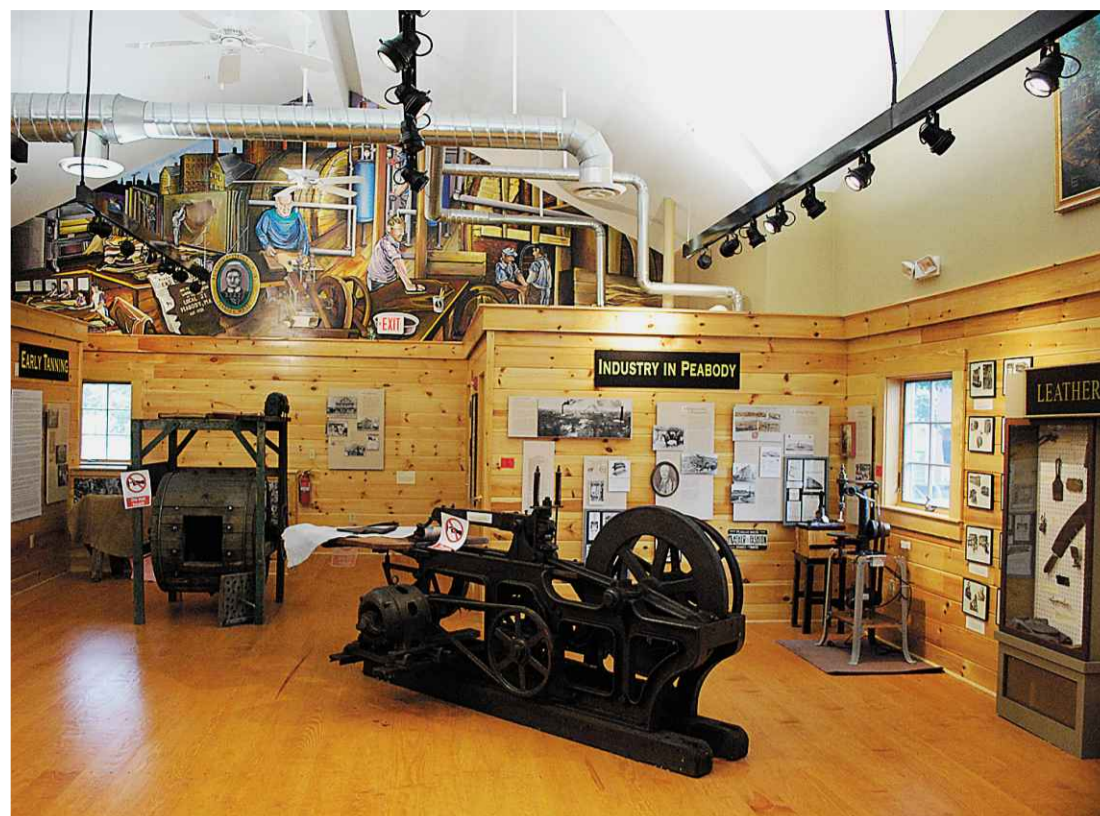
Peabody museum remembers leather workers

By James F. Lee
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PEABODY — One Saturday when I was about 10, my father took me into the leather factory where he worked and showed me the big machine where he split cow hides into pieces of varying thickness. It was a noisy and odorous place, and the visit gave me an appreciation for what he did to put food on the table. Four of my uncles and my grandfather also worked in leather factories.

The labor of those long-ago workers is honored at the Peabody Leatherworkers Museum, the only one of its kind in the country. In Massachusetts, much of labor history focuses on the shoe and textile industries, but at one time in Peabody alone there were 91 leather factories. Today there are none. For a time, leather fueled the economy of Peabody and Salem.

The interior of the barnlike museum is light, clean, and quiet, the varnish on the pine flooring and paneling gleaming in the light from overhead. On the walls, tools of the leather trade are displayed in cabinets as are photos of tanneries and workers. A colorful mural depicting the tanning process adorns an upper wall, reaching to the ceiling. Several machines once used in the leather finishing process sit idle,



JAMES F. LEE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Peabody Leatherworkers Museum is the only one of its kind in the country.

their parts cleaned and pristine, giving little sense of the clamor they used to make when in operation, or to the danger the sharp blades presented to the operators.

My guide, curator Merritt Kirkpatrick, who has since left the museum, explained the intricacies of processing raw hides into finished leather, pointing out the difference between tanneries and finishing plants. Often factories did both processes under one roof. At a tannery, hides were de-fleshed, de-haired, and thrown into huge revolving wooden drums and treated with a chemical stew to soften and hydrate them. This wet process was the most malodorous part, often carried out in the basement of the factories, where workers in leather aprons and rubber boots labored standing in the accumulating animal grease. Upstairs, on the finishing floor, the dried hides were buffed, graded, measured, and ironed.

The machines were large and noisy. Jeff Wignall, a volunteer at the museum, who once worked at A.C. Lawrence, one of the largest tanners in Peabody, said that in the tannery cellar, "the wheels of the big drums were running constantly," with as much as a half-ton of hides in the drums at a time. Upstairs the slam-bang thunk, thunk, thunk of buffing, splitting, and wringing machines powered by foot treadles created a clanging that could be heard throughout town. Workers, motivated by piecework, rushed to keep pace, and had to shout to be heard above the din. The division of labor made most of the work repetitive and boring. "The work was mind-numbing," said

Wignall. The museum cannot replicate that noisy environment, nor can it give a sense of the smell generated by leather tanning, a chemical-heavy process using chrome (chromium sulfate), lime, sodium sulfide, ammonium sulfate, and ammonium chloride, among others, not to mention the animal hair, flesh, and grease. These odors permeated the workers. When my father entered the front door after work, everybody knew it. You could smell him. And like many leatherworkers, he once suffered from chrome poisoning.

And we all suffered from the chemical wastes produced by the tanneries. Much of the tanning effluent emptied into Salem's North River, a tidal inlet, which at low tide emitted a horrendous odor, best described as rotten eggs. On a warm summer night (in pre-airconditioning days) you couldn't keep the windows open because the smell from the river was so bad. There were a lot of ideas about what to do with the river, including paving it over. I remember one summer when helicopters bombed the river with chemicals in the hope of diluting the smell. It didn't work. Still the museum gives a good sense of the workers' struggles in difficult conditions, creating a product through a quite intricate and even artistic process. And it

Peabody Leatherworkers Museum

205 Washington St.
978-531-0355
www.peabodymuseums.org
Wed. and Sat. 9 a.m.-1 p.m. or by appointment

The museum came about with the efforts of Peabody Mayor Michael Bonfanti and Community Preservation Act money, and opened two years ago. Many of the artifacts were donated by John Smidt of John Smidt and Co., Inc., a former Peabody tannery.

The men and women who labored in the leather industry did jobs essential for the well-being of the country back in the days when manufacturing was king. And if you can't actually recreate a tannery in all its particulars, a museum honoring these workers is the next best thing.

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gives visitors an idea of the importance of the industry to the economic well-being of the North Shore. "This museum celebrates a different part of the industrial history of Massachusetts. It's the only one that talks about leather manufacturing," said Kirkpatrick, who is recording the oral histories of many of the workers.

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