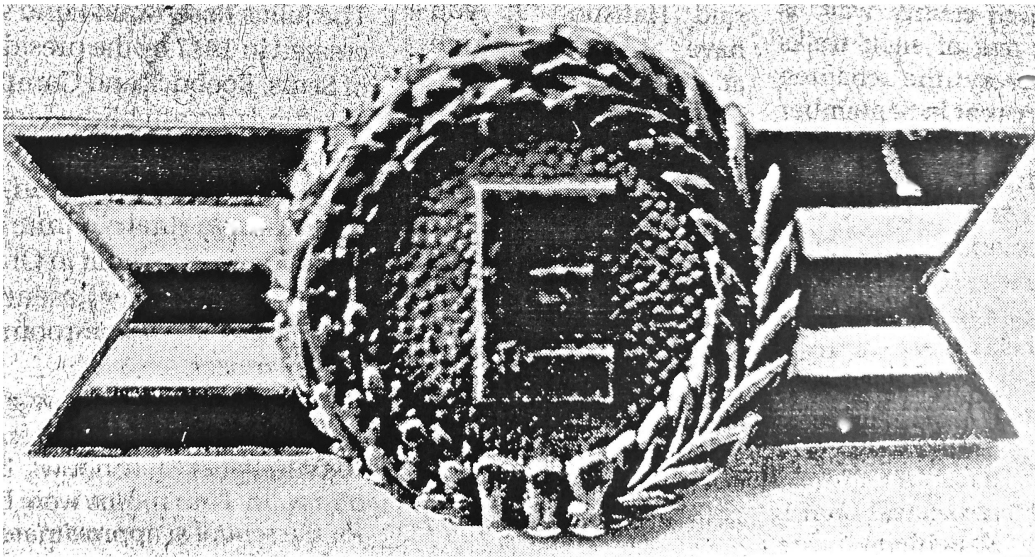
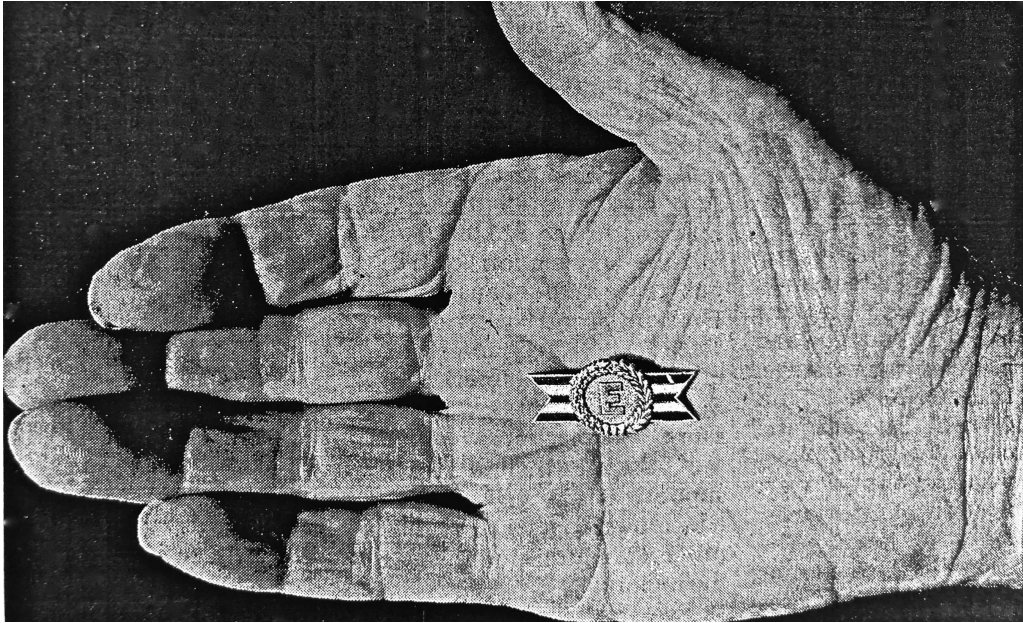


## The American Silk Mill

1. From *It happened, but not recently* section of the *Orange Review* dated September 4, 2014 and the files of Duff Green<sup>1</sup>:



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<sup>1</sup> Paragraphs were added to the original narrative.

"This happened 70 years ago, but a week ago, a kind lady sent me in the mail a small pin with a clip on its back side. I had never seen this pin before, but I knew that several hundred of them existed. When I opened the letter, I knew exactly what it was and I recalled the summer of 1944 when these pins were presented to the employees of American Silk Mills in Orange. The local mill was constructed in 1928 and began operation in 1929. The plant offered a job to every member of the 1928 graduating class at old Orange High School and a majority of students accepted. Edna Harlow, later Mrs. Atwood Tucker, was valedictorian of that class and became one of the silk mill's first employees. American Silk Mills (ASM) always fascinated me because it was organized the year I was born and I watched it grow to maturity until it died in the late 1970s.

The highlight of the mill's 70 years in operation came during the summer of 1944. World War II was at full throttle that summer. ASM had stopped making silk stockings, scarves, blouses, etc...and had switched to weaving silk parachutes for military aviators and paratroopers. My older brother was a paratrooper and told me he could stuff his entire chute in his shirt within minutes.

But the whole country was warned of sabotage and this included American Silk Mills. The entire Town of Orange and surrounding counties knew what ASM was making. A chain-link fence surrounded the plant and a guardhouse sat at its front gate. More than 1,000 women worked three shifts around the clock, seven days a week. I remember the high, blue-lighted windows and the midnight hum of the weaving machines. During that summer in 1944, half the town turned out to attend a federal government recognition of the great war effort provided by ASM. State and federal officials took part in a ceremony. Every employee was presented a sterling silver pin with a large 'E' surrounded by a wreath and red, white and blue enamel stripes on each side. The 'E' stood for 'efficiency'. On the back, it reads 'Army-Navy Production Award' and the word 'Sterling'. I held it in my hand for the first time last week. The Japan silk supply of course ended after the Pearl Harbor attack and China's silk was in short supply. Synthetic threads filled the gap. The fine weaving machines at ASM could not handle the coarse synthetic threads. When women began buying the less expensive nylon stockings instead of more expensive silk, it signaled the demise of American Silk Mills."

2. Additional information from: *It happened, but not recently* section of the *Orange Review* (date unknown):

"American Silk Mills on Madison Road was an economic savior for Orange County during the 1930s depression years. Not only was no one laid off over that time, the mill increased its employment every year. Known as the 'queen of fabrics', silk was the material of choice by kings and queens for centuries. Most wealthy women in the United States were not affected by the depression and their demand for silk stockings, scarves, dresses and other clothing was higher than ever before.

Plant owner Milton Rubin of New York City had a weekend home just south of Orange on the Montpelier Road and to say he 'ran a tight ship' is an understatement. Employees called him 'The Old Man'..."

The annual plant Christmas party was held every year in mid-December in the auditorium of the old Orange High School on Belleview Avenue. There was music, skits, awards and other entertainment for the employees. The Christmas party in 1949 also celebrated the mill's 20th anniversary in Orange. Its first silk fabric came off the weaving machines in 1929.

"During World War II the plant produced more parachute fabric than any other factory in the US. The mills ran three shifts seven days a week and had more than 1,000 employees."

3. From *County Flashback* by Duff Green, published in the *Orange Review*, date unknown.<sup>2</sup>

"After several years of planning and the construction of one small building, the American Silk Mills in Orange officially began operation in June of 1929. And for more than half a century the local plant was one of the most important economics bases in the county.

It was the first time that women and young girls were able to find part and full time employment in Orange. Although most of the employees were women, there was also a large group of male workers. In many cases, both husband and wife were employed at the local plant.

The Orange Chamber of Commerce was able to gain the attention of Milton Reuben whose father ran large silk mills in Pennsylvania and New York. The younger Reuben came to Orange at the invitation of local businesses.

'My father never did know why I selected Orange,' Mr. Reuben once told this writer. 'The town was so small, there was a question of where the labor force would be found and the community didn't even have a public sewer system,' he said. 'But there was a friendly atmosphere here. I was given a warm welcome and the town was unanimous in its invitation.'

With this simple reason for coming, the small mill was constructed, spinning machines were installed and operation was underway in the summer of 1929.

'The locating of American Silk Mills, Inc. has meant a great deal to Orange County's economy,' was the first line of a lead story in the January 2, 1930 issue of the *Orange County News*. 'The present employment of 130 persons and the contemplated establishment of another unit within a short time will mean steady work under pleasant conditions for a larger number of additional employees. In addition to its payroll, the new plant will greatly add to Orange County's tax base.'

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<sup>2</sup> Copy on file at the Orange County Historical Society

Mrs. Atwell Tucker, the former Edna Harlow, lived with her family about four miles north of Orange on the old Rapidan Road. She graduated from old Orange High School in 1930 and was the class valedictorian at age 18.

‘There were 17 boys and girls in our class,’ Mrs. Tucker recalled this week. ‘Mr. Reuben came to our school and talked to all the graduates. He offered everyone a job and most of the class accepted.’

Mrs. Tucker explained that the country had just entered a severe depression and jobs weren’t available anywhere, especially for women. ‘Several members of my family found employment at the Silk Mill. We walked the three or four miles every morning and arrived at the plant at 6:30 a.m. and worked to 3:30 p.m. Then we walked back home. I made about \$15 every other week and it was the most money I had ever seen.’

A group of people from Reuben’s Pennsylvania plant came to Orange and taught the young men and women how to run the spinning machines. Most of these people returned to Pennsylvania but a few stayed and made their homes in Orange, Mrs. Tucker said.

The raw silk was shipped from Japan and China to New York and San Francisco, according to the 1930 newspaper article. The silk was in the form of bales with each bale weighing about 130 pounds. Silk is so fine that about 310,000 yards of thread weighed only one pound.

When the bales arrived in Orange by rail and truck, they were unloaded and stored in a fireproof concrete vault at the local mill, showing how expensive the material was regarded. From these bales, or skeins, the raw silk was taken to the winding department where it was converted to single threads on spools.

Spools were then taken to the ‘doubling department’ where the fine, single threads were twisted into two, three and four strands to make a heavier and strong filament. Tours of the new plant were given to county residents who were fascinated by the modern technology.

‘The Orange plant has one of the most sophisticated and modern systems in the world,’ the local newspaper reported in 1930. ‘The work requires attention, alertness with skilled hands and fingers, but there is nothing in the line of strenuous and hard labor.’ Local residents could hardly believe that a machine would stop automatically when a thread broke.

‘Being clean, spotless and comparatively easy work, this is one of the most desirable occupations that can be found by young girls,’ read the newspaper account. ‘I was most agreeably surprised and favorably impressed,’ said Gordonsville Mayor J.H. Stratton who led a delegation of visitors from that town.

‘It is an institution of which all of us can be proud,’ added Gordonsville banker C.W. Grimm.

The town of Orange turned out and welcomed the new plant. Many homes were opened to young men and women who were looking for room and board. 'All assistance possible is being given by local residents,' said Mayor Frank Perry.

The spinning machines were turned on early Monday morning and ran continuously, night and day until late Saturday night. The plant was closed on Sunday. Women and young girls ran the machines during the daylight and men with young boys ran them at night. The minimum age, however, was 16....

When World War II broke out, Orange Silk Mills stopped making fine material for women's clothing and the manufacture of military parachutes began. The local plant was awarded a president 'E' for efficiency and effort to the war effort.

Since the operation could be handled mostly by women and the men were off to war, females began to work at night also. At its peak over 1,000 employees were involved in the war effort.

After Pearl Harbour, the Japanese silk supply ended and the Chinese supply was severely limited. It was at this time that synthetic materials, rayon, nylon and dacron, were developed.

Following the war, it was found that synthetic materials were far less expensive than natural silk. It was the beginning of the end for American Silk Mills. The plant was sold several times, its modern machines became tired and antiquated, and the plant was closed in the 1980's."

Also from the *Orange Review* of March 3, 1988:

"The plant shut its doors on February 28, 1988 at 10:00 p.m. The workforce had dwindled from a high of 500 people to 45 people in 1988 who worked mostly the day shift. The plant had struggled to keep going in the face of cutbacks and the transfer of processes to other plants owned by the parent company, Gerli and Company of New York."