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One of Vermont's largest, leading industrial manufacturers has stayed true to its small-town roots.

Story by Matthew Belnap/Photos courtesy of Mack Molding

HEN YOU THINK OF VERMONT'S BUCOLIC SOUTHWEST CORNER, YOU PROBably think of wintertime skiing, hiking in the summertime, visiting a steaming sugarhouse in the spring, or just looking at the beautiful colors that creep down the mountains in the fall. It will no doubt come to mind also that this is the land of Frost and Rockwell, and reaching farther back through the annals of time, Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys. It is rural America personified. However, the small town of Arlington, nestled along the Battenkill River valley, has a long and storied

manufacturing history that rivals that of any industry to be found across the border in New York to the west, or in Massachusetts to the south.

Mack Molding, founded in 1920, eventually moved from New Jersey to downtown Arlington, Vermont in 1939; this old photograph of the Mack plant (right) was taken in 1942. Today, the company's corporate headquarters (below) for the Mack Group, which consists of four divisions that include Mack Molding and the original plant—still in operation are located on Warm Brook Road in Arlington.









The Arlington Refrigerator Company (ARCO), which preceded Mack Molding in the use of this building complex, manufactured wooden iceboxes in record number until the burgeoning proliferation of self-contained refrigerators and the onset of the Great Depression caused its demise. The wood-frame building visible in the photo above was not only the payroll and personnel office, it also served as the model home for the employee housing that sprang up nearby on Munn Terrace. Today, one example of the ARCO line, long since retired, reposes at the new Mack Molding headquarters in Arlington.

This "ice box" was manufactured by the Arlington Refrigeration Company, the original occupant of the building you are standing in today. The Arlington Refrigeration Company was started in 1909 by Dr. John Munn of New York City and was in business until the stock market crash in 1929. At its height the company employed 125 people and produced 40,000 refrigerators annually. Mack Molding purchased the property in 1939 and has been in continuous business since that time.

From the day the town received its charter in the pre-Revolutionary War days until the middle of the 19th century, Arlington's early settlers made their living as most people did in rural America, through agriculture. Accordingly, farms spread out along the Battenkill River, and the forests along the hills above town provided both fuel for homes and businesses as well as fodder for burgeoning logging interests. Ample waterpower, a thriving timber industry, plus attractive positioning on the north-south travel corridor through Vermont that would become U.S. Route 7, made Arlington an ideal location for manufacturing.

By the time the Western Vermont Railroad chose a route through Arlington Village in 1850, a marble works, a blacksmith shop, a sash and blind store, a broom handle shop, and many shops and stores already had been established in town. Many small mills producing items such as clothespins, saw frames, and washboards thrived alongside streams and brooks in the outlying areas. Spurred by the arrival of the railroad, large-scale industry reached Arlington during the height of the Civil War in 1863, when a shoe peg factory opened in town. This factory produced wooden pegs, or pins, used to fasten parts of shoes together, and many of those produced were actually exported across the Atlantic to Germany and Russia. Many of the buildings from this factory still stand and are part of the local True Value Hardware store. A scant mile or so away from the shoe peg factory, a large mill complex in Sunderland was manufacturing chisels.

In the 1870s, one of Arlington's oldest families, the Canfields, attempted to hitch their fortunes to the railroad revolution sweeping the country and opened the Arlington Car Manufacturing Company, intending to produce railroad cars. Although this effort, as well as a later one to produce railroad-car wheels did not turn a profit and failed by the end of the decade, the large brick building constructed to house its machines and workers would eventually spawn a large-scale industrial operation that has continued until this day.

After a period of dormancy, the old car shop became the home of the Arlington Refrigerator Company (ARCO) and over a period of two years, between 1910 and 1911, ARCO expanded the old factory into a new, three-story structure, extending hundreds of feet beyond the main road in town that would later become U.S. Route 7. This structure became the town's largest industrial complex and manufactured iceboxes for sale both within Vermont and beyond state boundaries.

Iceboxes, early cousins of the modern refrigerator, had been around for centuries but new industrial advances such as those employed at the Arlington Refrigerator Company allowed them to be mass produced and available to a larger segment of the population than ever before. In a standard icebox, a block of ice was kept near the top and cold air would sink downward around various storage compartments to keep food cold. The ice in



The new headquarters plant in Arlington (completed in 1995) encompasses some 310,000 square feet, including office space, warehouse space, and the production area shown above.







The company's early productions included thermos bottle caps, plastic operating handles for Otis Elevators, and the Indian head ornament that graced the hoods of Pontiac automobiles. Wartime production included that of Army canteens and mess-hall trays; measuring cups, Schick shaver displays, and the very first plastic milk cases came later.



the early years had come from lakes and ponds—harvested in the winter—and then delivered from insulated icehouses throughout the year; this method was replaced by industrial ice production in the 20th century, especially as pollution fouled many of the ponds and lakes from which ice used to be harvested. Regardless of the source, this ice required periodic, sometimes daily, deliveries by an iceman, who was once as much a part of the daily fabric as the milkman.

The Arlington Refrigerator Company required a large labor force to produce the iceboxes. To house this labor force, and due to a shortage in local housing near the factory, the company developed the Munn Terrace neighborhood, which still stands, within several hundred yards of the factory. This was the first employee housing in town at affordable prices.

Arlington Refrigerator Company closed its doors in 1929. The company never had been extremely profitable, and numerous factors combined to bring about its closure. First and foremost was the stock market crash of 1929, which crippled businesses around the country and did not spare ARCO. Coupled with this, those who had the funds to purchase a method of refrigeration were increasingly drawn to electric refrigerators, which provided a more efficient way of keeping food colder for longer. As electricity spread from cities into rural areas of the country, more and more people were able to update their kitchens with these modern appliances. Frigidaire had introduced the first self-contained units in 1923 and they had grown in popularity throughout the decade. The one-two punch of the stock market crash and new competition was enough to topple ARCO and to usher in a decade of dormancy for the largest manufacturing plant in town.

Large-scale manufacturing returned to Arlington in 1939, however, when Mack Molding Company moved to Arlington from New Jersey, where it had been founded in 1920. The company was originally founded to make thermos bottle caps, and other early-year productions included plastic operating handles for Otis elevators and the Indian head logo that graced the hoods of General Motors' Pontiac automobiles.

The move to Arlington was a mix of business and pleasure for the company's





Donald S. Kendall, Jr. (1923–1974) served as the second President and Chairman of the Board at Mack Molding, from 1964 to 1974.



Donald S. Kendall III took the helm of Mack Molding in 1974 and is the current President and Chairman of the Board.

founders, according to Larry Hovish, Director of Communications for Mack. "They were drawn, as so many people were and still are, to the quality of life in Vermont, and combined with the opportunity to occupy the old ARCO factory, they decided to take the opportunity to move to Vermont."

co-founder, and President and Chairman of the Board

from 1920 to 1964.

Don Kendall, CEO and Chairman of the Mack Group, agreed about the reasoning for his grandfather's moving the company to Vermont. "My grandfather was from Vermont, and he always liked Vermont." In addition to this love of the area, Don says, there were other reasons as well. "We were the only ones making shell casings at the time, and the Defense Department wanted them to have multiple factories in case one got bombed. My grandfather, being from Vermont, heard about this empty plant that was in Arlington."

One of Arlington's most famous residents, author Dorothy Canfield Fisher, actually brokered the deal. "Dorothy Canfield Fisher invited my grandfather up to take a look at the empty plant (the old ARCO building). The whole town had a meeting, and my grandfather liked the plant."

While the Great Depression had lessened somewhat toward the end of the 1930s, it still had a hold on Arlington. The town relied on a farming cooperative and a wood cooperative to survive, with each citizen pitching in to help the rest of the community. These economically desperate times led to a community eager to learn and work hard to learn a plastics business. When the company came to Vermont, no one in the town had any knowledge of plastics, and Mack in fact brought up a lot of workers from Wayne, New Jersey, where it previously was based. "The great thing about Vermonters," Don says, "is that they are in general extremely good workers, very reliable workers ... through the years Vermont has always had great workers. Workers are so reliable, so good, so well educated." In fact, Don says the quality of workers is one of the biggest reasons that, even as Mack has grown through the years, they have remained located in Vermont. He says it is a point of pride with the company that many secondand even third-generation employees work at the company today. "It tells me we're doing well as an employer if people want their children to work here," he says.

Although Mack started its Arlington operation from scratch, it soon had filled all the space within the ARCO building and was quickly churning out material to support the American and Allied war effort in Europe and the Pacific. Mack produced not only shell casings that were so important to the government, but also booster tubes for bombs, firing blocks, fuse setting rings, gas mask parts, and mess trays, among many other items. The company was awarded the Army/Navy "E" award for excellence in the production of war equipment.

This strong relationship with the government helped in the immediate aftermath of the war, when suddenly, no more military items were needed. "The government helped Mack get work from Frigidaire, which was owned by General Motors at the time," explained Don. "The government brokered the deal and said, 'Help these guys from Vermont out, they've been a great help with the war effort." Ironically, Frigidaire had been the company whose refrigerators had rendered the ARCO iceboxes obsolete.

This transition kicked off a process of reinvention that has continued at Mack to this day. "If you look at our history, we've reinvented ourselves every 10 or so years," Don says. "We're a contract manufacturer, so we always need to be ready to engineer products for our clients as well as new sectors where the market could be headed." This evolution had led to Mack making a myriad of products, including Timex display cases—a new one for each store worldwide every year—the first milk crate, and the first plastic housing for an IBM computer, as well as Wiffle balls, Legos, and Fisher Price motorized toy cars, produced in Pownal. "Which makes Mack," Don says with a laugh,



Sherry Stevens, medical device assembler, at work on one of Mack's production lines. The company is a leading contract manufacturer for all sorts of industries, with six locations in the eastern U.S.



Andrew Bell (above) is a quality engineer on this assembly line. Although Mack Molding has expanded its operations greatly, it has stayed true to its small-town roots.



Today, the molding of battery boxes (or cells) continues at the original Mack Molding plant. Here, a cell has just been released from a horizontal press molding machine by employee Scott Curtis.

"the largest automobile manufacturer in Vermont."

Through it all though, Mack has stayed true to its small-town Vermont roots. It is still family owned and operated after 95 years, and it still remains involved in the communities in which it operates. "Every Mack plant is in a small town," Don says, and the company makes numerous charitable donations to those communities. "We really feel we should give back to the communities where our employees live, and give to local charities that our employees are either involved in or benefit from. We like to stay involved in the community."

This small-town philosophy includes four Vermont locations: two in Arlington, which include the old ARCO factory and a headquarters facility completed in 1995; one in Pownal, acquired in 1988; and one in Cavendish. The Cavendish building was Mack's first expansion, in 1962. The company was looking to expand at that point and was able to acquire the facility inexpensively. In those early days, the facility's biggest product was Schick razors. Mack would mold the handles and then assemble the razors for distribution. Fitting with Mack's ethos, the plant remains a key part of this town of approximately 1,400 people.

The community involvement has allowed Mack, like the Arlington Refrigerator Company and Arlington Railroad Car Company before it, to play a key role in the Vermont community it calls home and to maintain a proud tradition of manufacturing in this beautiful, bucolic corner of the state.

Matthew Belnap was born and raised in Arlington, VT. He attended Boston College and now lives and works in Boston.



MACK MOLDING THROUGH THE YEARS



The Mack Molding plant near downtown Arlington changed little in outward appearances over the years, except for the addition of a steel water tank in the 1950s and the removal of the old office building; by the late 1970s, plastic pellet storage silos, a paint shop, and a shipping/receiving building had been added at the rear of the complex.







Eric Erickson removes a clear plastic battery box from the force plug on a huge vertical press molding machine. This operation was manually controlled and required close attention to details, as well as the timer seen near the breaker boxes.



Mack Molding produced battery boxes for all sorts of uses, including batteries in aircraft and for storage batteries destined for telephone company use. Quality control was everyone's job, and careful packaging ensured damagefree product delivery.



Facing the veritable maze of belts, pulleys, driveshafts, and control levers on his assigned machine, employee Curly Tuttle is pictured at work in the late 1950s or early 1960s, operating a machine that is turning out plastic bottle caps.





George Walsh (left foreground) is running a milling machine and Leo Dousa (right foreground) a grinder on the main floor of the plant. Engineering occupied the second floor and the third was used for storage.



The plant originally heated plastic with steam in order to mold it. Pictured are two men deburring a steam injector (using an air drill to clean the ports and a file to remove rough edges) that has just been turned on a large lathe in the shop.



The tool room, where molds received maintenance and repair, was on the main floor near the plant's front wall. Here, overshadowed by a radial arm drill press in the foreground, George Walsh (left), Archie Robertson (center), and a third, unidentified man are working with grinding machines.



Inside the Cavendish, Vermont plant, these ladies (above) are examining Schick shaver displays and preparing them for packaging. An assembly line (below) prepared other small, countertop shaver displays.





Mass production, circa 1965; the Cavendish plant was Mack's first expansion, in 1962, and Schick shavers and displays were its largest volume output. Mack also made Timex watch display cases a new one every year for every Timex dealer the world over!

Mack Molding's engineering department as it was in the '60s when Tsquares, calipers, pens, pencils, and drafting tables, not computers, got the job done. From left to right are Rick Rice, Steve Hilchey, Jerry Danker, and Humphrey Wrin. An engineer would often be called upon to visit a prospective client with the salesman to provide expert advice and insight into making a product that would exceed expectations.





No, this young lady with the stylish beehive hairdo isn't operating a radar station: she is looking into the screen of a J&L measuring machine situated in the engineering department. The machine coupled an internal micrometer that could precisely measure even microscopic machine parts that needed to be fabricated and displayed the measurements accurately via a sophisticated optical system.



"Let Mack tackle that tough molding and decorating job for you" reads the blurb on one of the vintage promotional posters above that shows everything from milk cartons to Gillette shaver and Timex wristwatch cases. The poster below boasts Mack's ability to mold, paint, wood-grain, heat stamp, and assemble merchandising displays.





Mack Molding trade show display booths, then and now: the new display (above) touts the company's high-tech capabilities in the field of medical device manufacturing and its ISO certifications.





Recreational facilities for employees at the original plant in Arlington included this bowling alley many years ago, where guest kegler Norman Rockwell was once photographed bowling while puffing on his seemingly ever-present pipe.



"Tally Ho to the Mack Molding Picnic" reads the banner on this coach full of fun-seekers that includes a top-hatted driver and a Tshirted footman who is tooting a horn to call attention to the coach's departure from the old plant, sometime in the 1940s. The two pictures below date from a 1943 clambake held for Mack employees, several of whom enjoyed a game of horseshoes afterward (judging by the gentlemen's attire, it might have been held on a Sunday).







With Mt. Equinox looming large in the background, the Mack Molding water tank (installed in the 1950s) stands taller than the array of buildings that form the plant complex and has been somewhat of a landmark for many years.

Where railroad passenger cars were once briefly built in the 1800s, the Mack Molding complex had expanded by the 1970s to include the shipping and receiving dock (center) and a paint shop (the green building to its right). Plastic pellets delivered by rail were transferred via a conveyor pipe to the twin storage silos near the water tank.





The construction of the new headquarters in Arlington demonstrated Mack's commitment to the community, and many second- and third-generation employees work here today. "It tells me we're doing well as an employer if people want their children to work here," company President and Chairman of the Board Donald Kendall III says.



When the new headquarters for Mack opened, Donald Kendall III was joined by Vermont Governor Howard Dean, who cut the ribbon and officially kicked off the grand opening festivities and tours of the new building.



Situated near Vermont Routes 7A and 313 on a rise of land, Mack Molding headquarters on Warm Brook Road overlooks the Battenkill River valley and the Taconic Mountain range to the west and the Green Mountains on the east.

MACK MOLDING MEMORIES

Editor's Note

NSIDE A CERTAIN SMALL, INconspicuous wood-frame shed tucked away in a quiet backyard near the village of East Arlington there is a fascinating little machine shop. Although it is run as a hobby and not a business, it is a place where an eclectic, lifetime collection of old lathes, drill presses, hand tools, grinders, and even a small forge can come to life and, under the capable hands and critical eyes of its owner Donald Brown (master machinist, engineer, and Mack Molding retiree) create or repair almost anything made of metal. On the wall inside hangs a plaque given to Donald by Mack Molding upon his retirement, acknowledging his 39-year career and "dedicated and outstanding service" at Mack from 1949 through 1988.

"I'm the only one [alive] now who's worked for all three of the Kendalls at Mack," says Donald, who is now in his early 90s, and who retired about the time Mack began to build its new plant. "I started in as a toolmaker...but since I'd studied math [at MIT] I went into engineering." For Donald, who had begun work as a machinist in Watertown, Massachusetts at age 13 (working at night; he attended school during the daytime), it all came about in the postwar years, following a stint in the Navy, when Donald moved to Vermont with his bride. "She was a Vermont gal...and she wanted our children to be Vermonters," Donald says. He worked at Bijur Lubricating in Bennington until the unions went out on strike, whereupon Donald looked about for another job, since, as he says, "I had a family to support."

An interview for a job at Hale Company in East Arlington sounded promising un-

til it came to the pay rate; Donald left as he had arrived, on foot, and soon found himself at Mack Molding's plant in Arlington, where he entered and applied for a job. He knew nothing about the company before he got there: "I saw the sign and thought they made wooden ceiling moldings and the like," Donald says. "The fellow sitting next to me...I assumed he was someone looking for work, too," he continues, "but it turned out that he was Mr. Kendall II, who was one of the company's salesmen then." Donald says that Winn Sargent, the personnel manager conducted the interview and then told him: "We'll let you know in a week if you've got the job." Then, "Just a minute," interjected Bill Wallace, the company's general manager, who was also in the room. "This guy has a family. We'll let him know tomorrow." And so they did.

