

**Thomas E. Myers**

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Intergenerational AI and Thriving Families

Lessons from Ancestors

My Historical Intergenerational Appreciative Inquiry

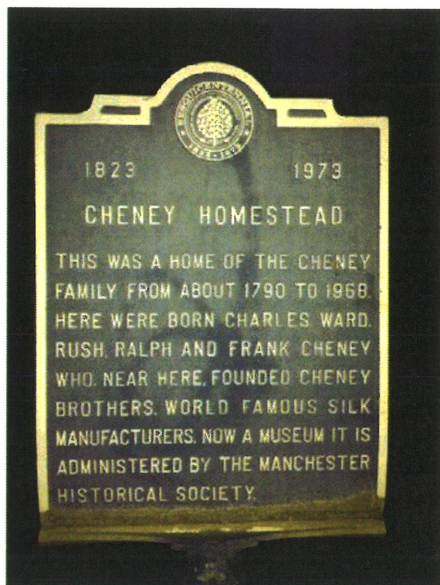
How might we look back at our personal ancestral history in order to create a source of intergenerational energy for today? What might we discover if we explore our ancestry with an appreciative and generative approach? My path to answer these questions begins with a story from the early 19th century. In a quaint New England farming community, a major industrial empire was founded (H.H. Manchester). This family-owned company, Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company of Manchester, Connecticut, innovated industrial manufacturing techniques and philosophies we value today.

I am one of the fourteen generations of the Cheney family of Manchester, Connecticut (Cheney Cemetery Association). It has only been within the last year, through my research around “positive employee engagement”, that I have “re-engaged” with my family’s history. In doing so, I quickly discovered that The Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company was SO MUCH MORE than the typical dirty and dangerous textile mills that operated during America’s industrial revolution. As a progressive company for its time, I noticed that the Cheney brothers applied early principles of Appreciative Inquiry management. The application of these philosophies helped the company to prosper and develop meaningful relationships with their employees as well as the surrounding community.

In 1838, the Cheney brothers founded the Mount Nebo Silk Company in an old papermaking and gristmill (H.H. Manchester). By 1843, the brothers had given the company the family name, and it became the Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company (Cheney Company Records). The company grew to become one of the largest producers of high-quality silk textiles in the western hemisphere (Buckley), and Cheney Silks were known to be best in the world (Grant).

Historical achievements and benefits from the Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company included:

- Development of gas, water, septic and electrical utilities for the town
- The smallest and only family-owned railroad in the US for public transportation (Lewis)
- “Industrial park” philosophy which combined park-like landscaping with the mill complex



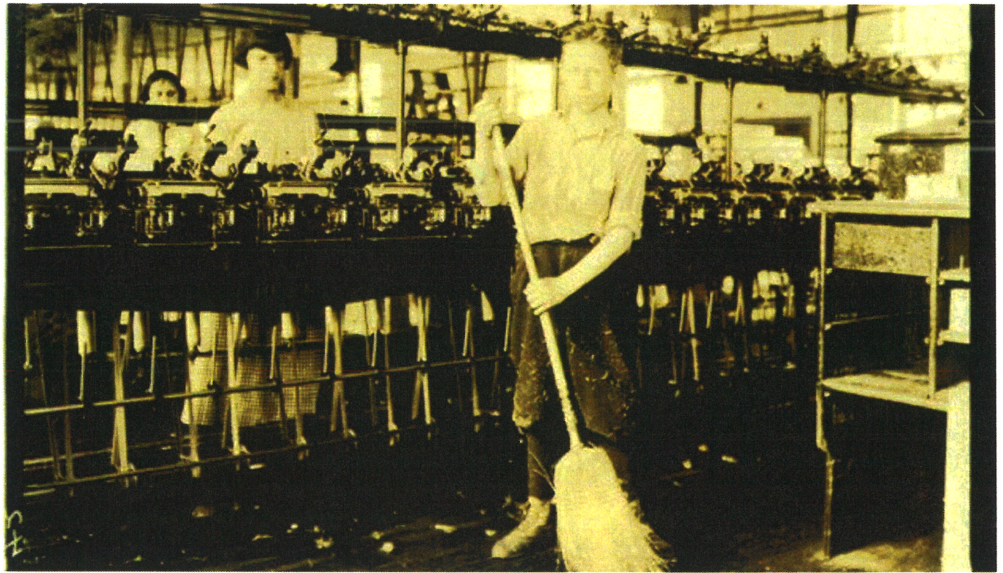
Historic plaque at the Cheney Homestead site. Notice the mulberry tree as part of the official town seal (November 2014).

- Schools, technical training centers and English-language classes for all employees and their families
- Early adoption of Frederick Taylor's Principles of Scientific Management for production and management applications
- The Cheney family mansions were built within the mill district
- They constructed:
 - New, single-family neighborhood homes for their employees
 - An open-air sanatorium school and fund for children with tuberculosis
 - They offered employees free land to build places of worship (over ten churches)
 - Cheney Hall – cultural facility and theater
 - The Mary Cheney Public Library
 - The Cheney Fire Station, now the Connecticut Fire Museum (www.thefiremuseum.org)
 - Public recreation centers, bathhouses, and walking trails
- Use of the first sustainable method of turning waste silk in to a final product (the Rixford Roller and the Grant Reel)
- Company-sponsored employee retirement plans
- At-cost meals from company cafeterias
- Employee health, dental, and life insurance benefits
- Company-backed low-interest, long-term mortgage loans
- The company hired first full-time industrial psychologist for employees
- In 1978, the Cheney Mill district was designated a National Historic Landmark and placed on the National Register of Historic Places. (www.manchesterhistory.org)

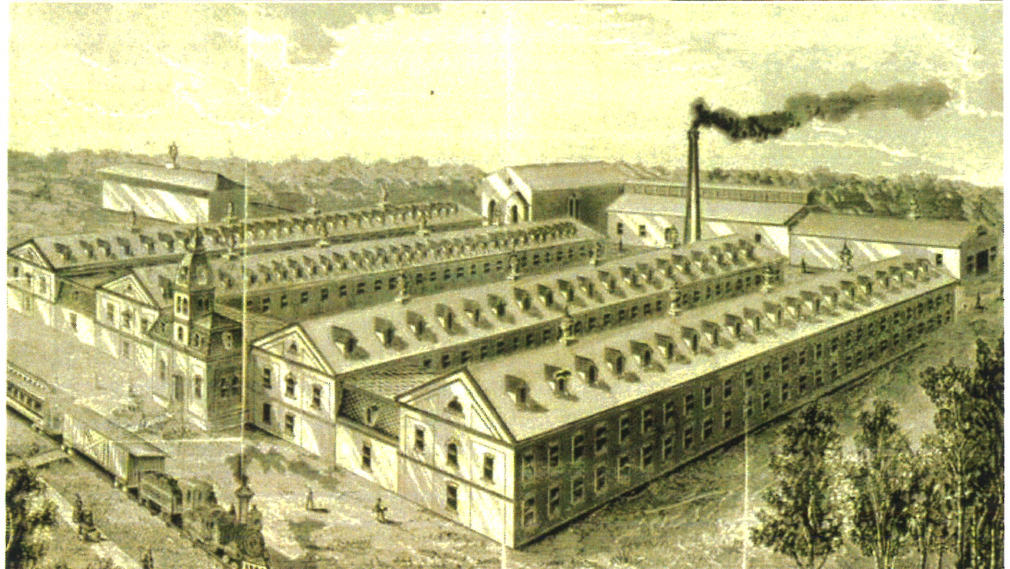
The industrial powerhouse declined and then closed in the 1950s, largely due to the high cost of silk production, trade difficulties with Japan and China, and the advent of, and competition from, new synthetic textiles (Grant).

As I see it, the Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing approached the science of managing people and natural resources. Knowing that employees and resources were valuable they asked, "How might we create a work environment where employees can flourish in their workplaces?" and "How do we provide a work environment where multiple generations of workers will remain and prosper?"

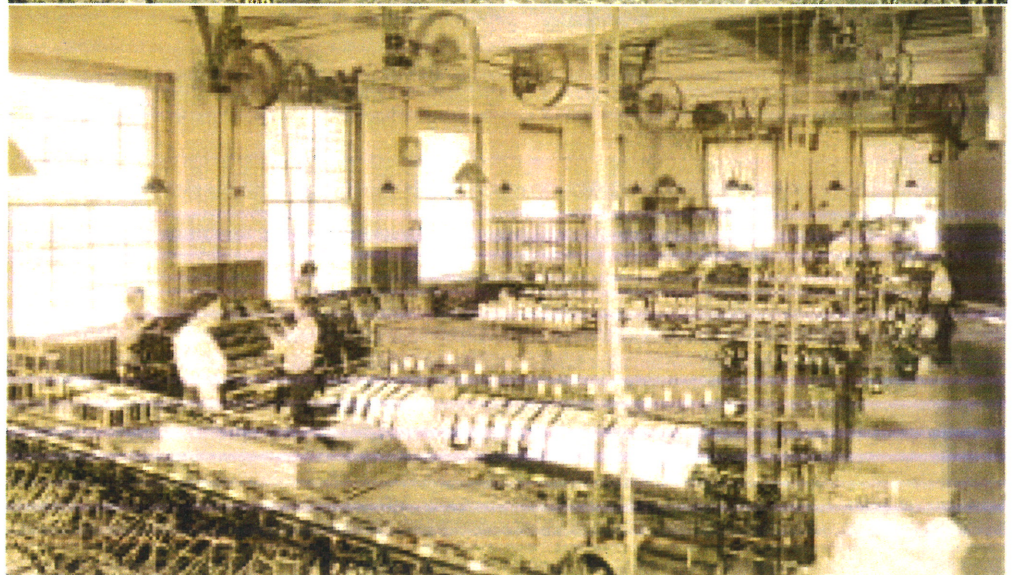
Silk mill child laborers. Despite children working in mills at that time, the Cheney's created 'favorable working conditions' and education opportunities for them. Photo by Lewis Hine (1924).



Clock tower mill, Cheney Brothers, Manchester, ca. 1876. Wood engraved print by Asher Adams (Csizmar). (Courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society)



Inside one of the Cheney Mills, circa 1918 (Courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society)



This identity is punctuated by the socially conscious lives of my Cheney ancestors. I retain and hold closely this solid and appreciative understanding of my identity, which I gladly impart to the next generation of inspiring entrepreneurs.

According to one local historian, the company “exhibited an excellent example of the ‘benevolent paternalism’ as many textile mill owners of the 19th and 20th centuries” (Anderson). The Editor of Harper’s Weekly, Henry Loomis Nelson, in 1890 cited the Cheney’s as the developers of “not such a model village as a family would erect as a monument to its own benevolence”, but rather “a community of friendly neighbors and good citizens” (Nelson). “Welfare capitalism” and “civic responsibility” both played major roles in the Cheney’s corporate philosophy. The company’s owners “decided fairly early in the period of expansion after the Civil War, that it had a deep responsibility to the community and that in fulfilling that responsibility it would create the conditions of small labor turnover and employee loyalty which were important factors in achieving business success” (Buckley).

This was a work environment that companies today emulate as positive work cultures. Leading up to and through the industrial revolution and the Great Depression, the Cheney’s created a utopian “Industrial Experiment” (Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, 1872).

My Cheney family intergenerational legacy

What did the Cheney brothers’ generation pass on to me, in my generation? What characteristics do I take for use in my own life? Armed with a deeper understanding of my Cheney family history, I reflect upon its effect on my life. Does it? I think so. This intergenerational history no doubt confirms the personality characteristics of my traditional New England Yankee roots. The characteristics of early New England settlers were known to be frugal, hard working and innovative with a social consciousness. Michael Carlton, editor of Yankee Magazine, describes the New Englander’s characteristics in five “I” words: “Indefatigable. Ingenious. Independent. Idealistic. Iconic” (Carleton). This identity is punctuated by the socially conscious lives of my Cheney ancestors. I retain and hold closely this solid and appreciative understanding of my identity, which I gladly impart to the next generation of inspiring entrepreneurs.

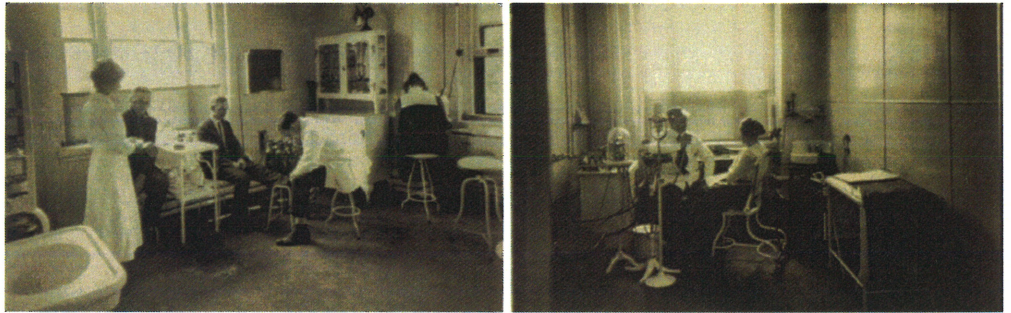
Intergenerational co-creation and a way forward

I invite you to reach back into your family history. Learn about your ancestors and the lives they lead. Apply that “Appreciative Inquiry lens”. What can you learn? What information can you take forward to co-create an enlightened future? Perhaps you too will feel that ancestral presence looking over your shoulder to guide you? Let’s learn from our past generations, take its best practices forward, and then generously provide that learning for our next generations.

The Clock Tower Mill today (November 2014)



Left, A health care visit at the Cheney Brothers Mill, circa 1910 (Czismar); Right, Dental office at the Cheney Brothers Silk Mill, circa 1910 (Czismar). (Courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society)



Modern-day apartments in the former Cheney Brothers Silk Weaving Mill (November 2014)



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