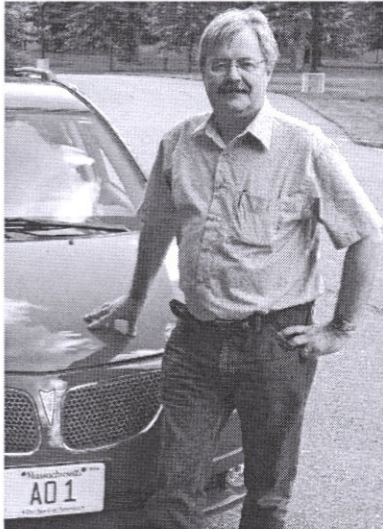


Keeping an Eye on History

The Southbridge, MA town seal proudly proclaims itself “The Eye of the Commonwealth”. Dick Whitney and others are devoting their energy to recording and commemorating the 140 years of optical history made by the American Optical Company. A vast array of the innovations and manufacturing triumphs AO accomplished are available for those who are curious on Dick’s websites www.dickwhitney.net and www.opticalheritagemuseum.org



Dick Whitney displays his AO vanity license plate

The optical industry originated in Southbridge in 1833 when a jeweler named William Beecher began making silver spectacles, and his business was later incorporated as American Optical in 1869. George Washington Wells and three sons Channing, Cheney and Albert were at the center of this remarkable company which held many patents for their numerous optical innovations. It is interesting to note that the Wells family had a golf course built from their Cohasse Farm in 1916 so they could play golf near work at AO, and founded Old Sturbridge Village in 1946 to house their extensive antique collections.

Starting as a family website in 1999, www.dickwhitney.net, Dick began using the site to share information about his father, Donald Whitney, who had worked at AO since 1947. Upon earning a degree in Astronomy from UMASS Amherst, Dick closely followed his father’s footsteps at AO, working in research and ophthalmic lens design, chairing several Industry Technical Committees, and serving on both ANSI Z80 and ISO standards for ophthalmic lenses. He is currently the Global Standards Manager at Carl Zeiss Vision, and his office is located in a historic church on Main Street

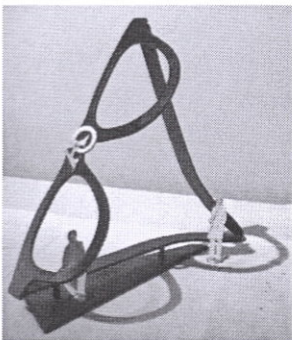
in Southbridge. CZV came about as a result of the merger between AO Sola and Zeiss.

Dick is the curator of the Optical Heritage Museum which was originally located in the AO Main Plant. The museum originated in 1983 with the volunteer efforts of John Young, (a former AO employee who now heads COLTS Laboratory in FL), Ruth Wells, (one of the founders of OSV), and other AO employees who wanted to commemorate AO’s 150th anniversary. The vast collection of the museum was put into storage in the attic above Dick’s office in 2000 when all but the facade of the main AO building was demolished and renovated to become the home of the Department of Defense’s finance training center. The marble lobby with spiral staircase, the clock tower and the Mechanic Street facade were all preserved and incorporated into the new Southbridge Convention Center and Hotel, a beautiful facility that boasts high tech meeting rooms, hotel rooms and dining areas, all with an optical theme.



A sample of antique AO frames now in storage

Dick hopes to put pieces of the museum in various storefronts in downtown Southbridge for public display until the collection can be permanently relocated.



Model of the AO Sculpture to be installed next year

Numerous items from the museum are on display at 12 Crane Street in Southbridge, the site of AO reunion luncheons held each June and December. As each former employee introduces themselves at the luncheon and tells about the work they did at AO, one gets a deeper appreciation for the dedication that existed at this optical giant. Dick hopes to record these memories in a book in the future, before the past is lost. For now he is amassing a wealth of historical information about AO and the town of Southbridge.

A new community project is currently underway by two sisters, Janina and Nancy Swiacki, to install a 20 foot metal sculpture on the common opposite the AO Main Plant entrance. Fundraising is underway for the work of a Connecticut artist is reconstructing a replica of a black zyl AO frame style popular in the 1060’s. A donation was made by OAM to the QVCAH (Quinebaug Valley Council for the Arts and Humanities) on behalf of its members. The sculpture is expected to be installed in the Spring of 2010.