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The Anatomy of a Pencil

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Bread crumbs were used as erasers until 1770, when the first rubber eraser was made. In 1858, erasers were attached to the ends of pencils for the first time.

The numbers on pencils refer to their grades, or hardness. Higher numbers, such as number 4, mean harder pencils. The harder the pencil, the less graphite that comes off onto the paper, making a lighter line.

"Supreme" is the name of one of General Pencil Company's premium pencils.

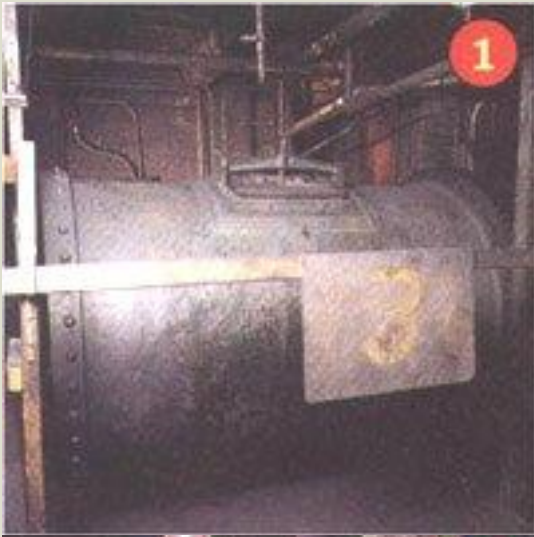
The first known wooden pencil dates back to the mid-1500s. It was a thin rod of wood with a bit of graphite stuck into one end. In the late 1600s, the pencil-making process we still use today was first developed.

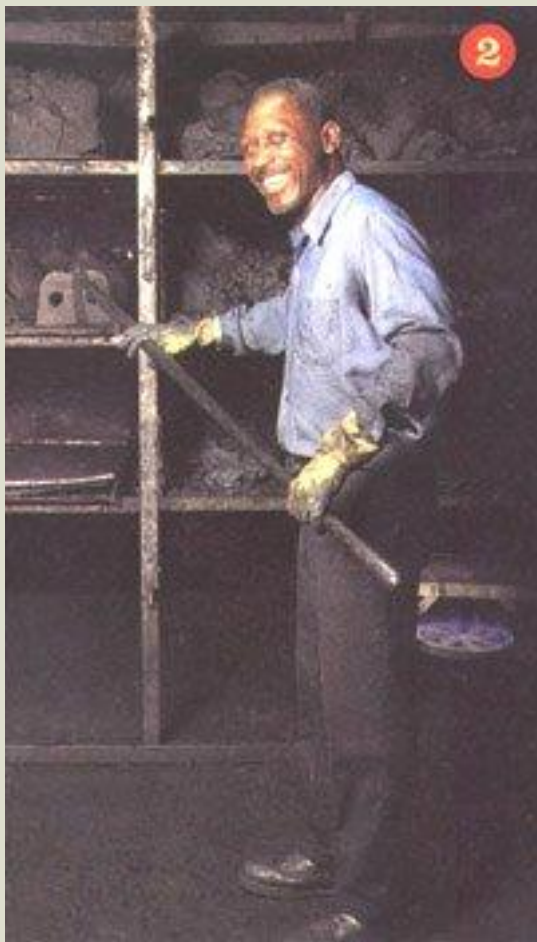
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There are about 2.8 billion pencils used in the U.S. every year. The average pencil can draw a line 35 miles long or write about 45,000 words.

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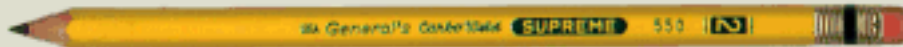
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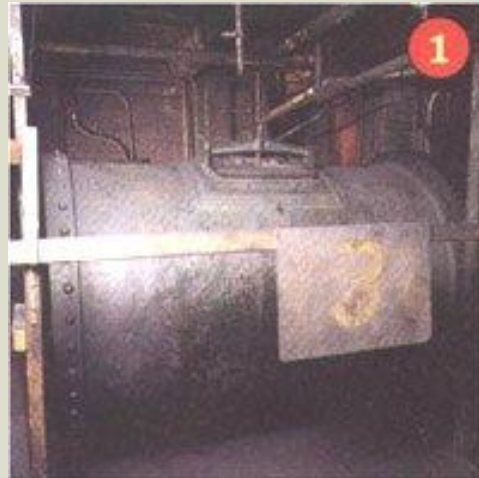
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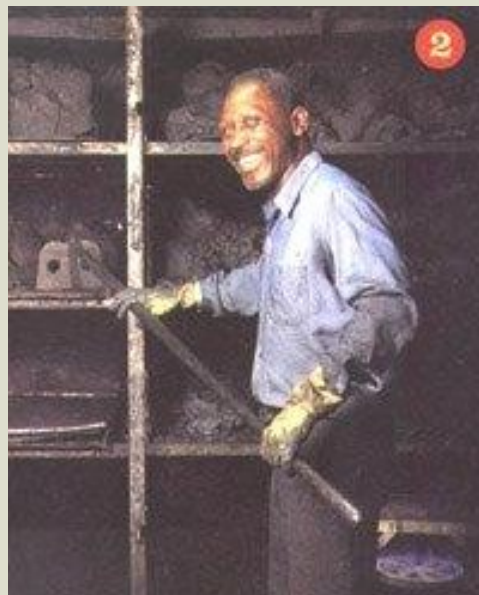
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Chunks of graphite (a soft, dark mineral) and clay are placed inside a huge rotating drum. Large rocks inside the drum crush the graphite and clay into a fine powder. Then water is added, and the mixture is blended in the drum for up to three days.



A machine squeezes all the water out of the mixture, leaving behind a gray sludge. Here, a worker puts the sludge in a cabinet where it air-dries and hardens for four days.

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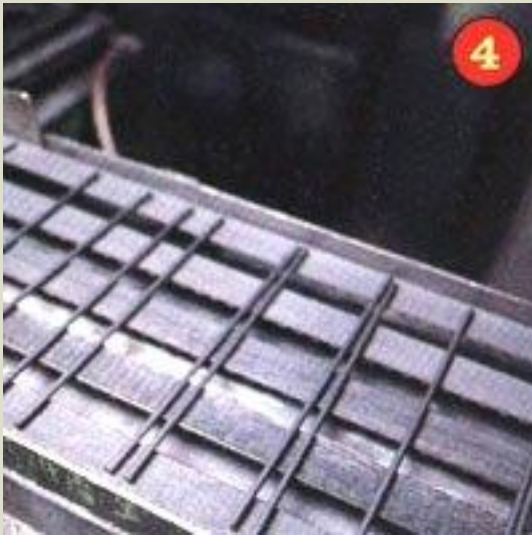


Huge wheels grind the dried sludge into another fine powder, and water is blended in again to make a soft paste.

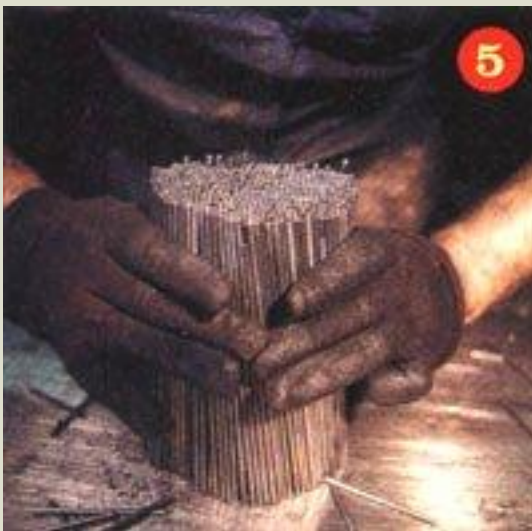


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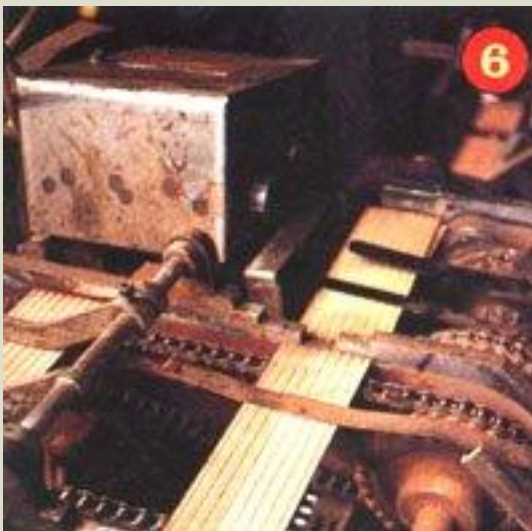
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The paste is pushed through a metal tube and comes out in the shape of thin rods. Then the rods are cut into pencil-length pieces, called leads, and sent along a conveyor belt to dry.



After drying, the pencil leads are put into an oven heated to 1,800° F. The intense heat makes the leads smooth and hard, which makes for good writing points.



In another part of the factory, the wood is prepared. Machines cut blocks of cedar into wide slats. Eight shallow grooves are sawed lengthwise into each slat.



A thin coat of glue is applied to the slats, and one pencil lead is placed into each of the eight grooves. Within seconds, another wide grooved slat is glued on top, sandwiching the leads.

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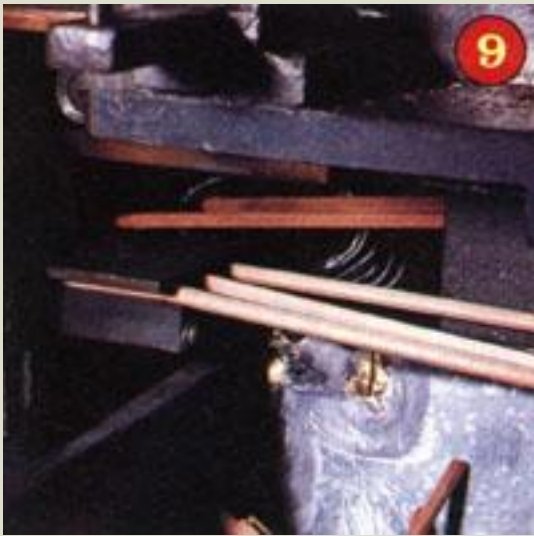


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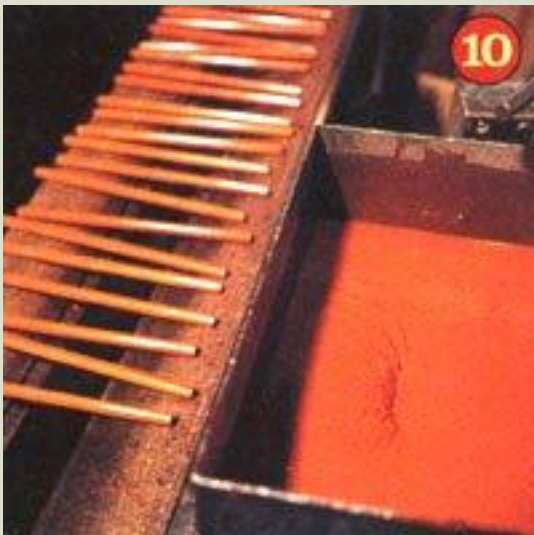
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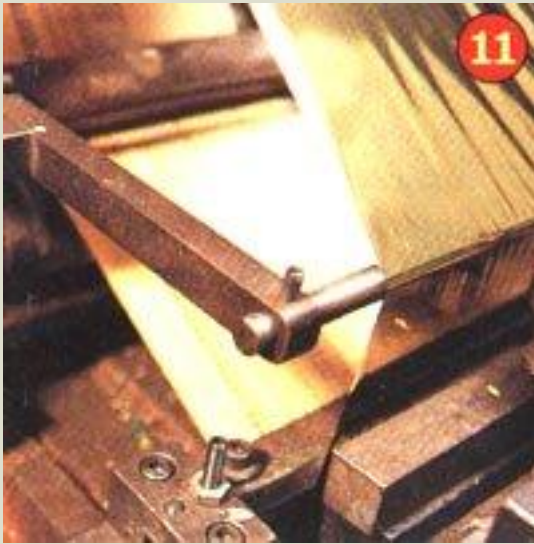
When the glue dries, the slats are fed through a cutting machine. Fast revolving steel blades trim the wood into round or hexagonal shapes, one side at a time.



The same machine cuts apart each slat into eight separate pencils.



The pencils are sanded, and each one receives from five to eight coats of paint.



A heated metal stamp presses the name of the company and a number (such as the number 2) on the pencil in gold foil or in paint. The number indicates how hard the pencil lead is.



A metal band, called a ferrule, is wrapped tightly around one end of the pencil. It holds the eraser, which is being added here. The pencils are then ready to be packaged, sharpened, and used.

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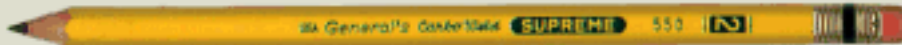
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