STORIES of New Jersey

PREPARED FOR USE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY THE

FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT of the WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

1060 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

WHERE DOES YOUR PENCIL COME FROM?

The lead pencil, which is really not lead at all, but manufactured of another mineral called graphite, has a history and geography that extends over a long period of time and miles of varied country.

Before the discovery of graphite in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the comparatively few people who could write were compelled to use only ink compounded from various natural earth pigments. Split reeds, quills and fine hair brushes, such as painters use today, were the only writing implements. The beautifully illuminated manuscripts that have come down to us from the monasteries of the Middle Ages, on which we have based authority for most of our recorded history were prepared by the patient monks in this manner.

In 1564 a new substance was discovered in the ground at Barrowdale, England, which made a black mark on paper similar to that made by lead, and it was called black lead. The name has persisted to the present day. No one asks for a "graphite" pencil, and a stationer would probably surprise his customer if, on being asked for a "lead" pencil, he replied that he had never heard of one.

It was not for two hundred years that a way was discovered to make the new marker practicable. At first pieces of "antimony", as it was sometimes called, sharpened to a point, were inserted in wooden handles and used for writing, drawing, etc. Farmers in England used it for marking their cattle. A German chemist in the latter part of the eighteenth century finally established that it contained no lead at all, and called it "graphite" from the Greek verb "to write." In 1795 a Frenchman, Conti, discovered a method of mixing graphite with varying proportions of clay to produce grades of hardness and blackness, and it is on his principles that our present day pencils are made.

At the factory of the Joseph Dixon Crucible Company in Jersey City, New Jersey, many millions of lead pencils are produced annually with very highly specialized machinery. The process is a long one and to the uninitiated it may seem unduly elaborate. It is dependent on the accuracy and skill of a highly developed technical organization.

Starting in 1827 in Salem, Massachusetts, as a small business to manufacture graphite crucibles and other graphite specialties, the industry has grown until it now occupies a number of blocks and employs several hundred persons. Graphite paints, greases and motor brushes have been added to the