

ESTABLISHED 1908

JOSEPH J. LEINFELDER & SONS INC.

Manufacturers of Stainless Steel and Steel Products

2015 WARD AVENUE, LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN 54601

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The Leinfelder Furniture Era...1925 to 1939

by John Leinfelder

The Joseph J. Leinfelder Company was in existence in La Crosse, Wisconsin, for almost 100 years, and the years of manufacturing wrought iron garden furniture is a story long overdue for the telling. These were but a few years of artistic creations beautiful to behold....a manufacturing process not easy to imagine, basically all done by hand... no blueprints or computer aided designs, just a sketch book and able blacksmith and tradesmen.....the furniture was shipped worldwide..... over the years shipments were made to such retail giants as Neiman & Marcus of Dallas, Gumps of San Francisco and hundreds of small boutiques and stores.....Ye Wot Not Shop...Miss Weston's Shop...The Playhouse...Milady's Vanity...Ye Quality Shoppe....Ship of the Green Umbrella and the list goes on.... In 1929 I found that a shipment was made to The Presidential Palace in Havana, Cuba as well as a shipment to a David Jones of Sidney, Australia....in another year I found a shipment made to a London address and recall being told when I was young that some of our furniture ended up at Buckingham Palace. I also remember being sent to the Rivoli Theater in La Crosse to see a Marx Brothers movie which had our furniture in a garden scene.

These were also years of little government regulation and, of course, the Great Depression. Let our history continue.....

Joseph Leinfelder established this company in 1908 as his sheet metal business. Joseph was born in Jefferson, Wisconsin in 1869 and his family moved to La Crosse 18 months later. He married Elizabeth Stellflug in La Crosse in 1896 and they had three sons, Cyril, Flavian and Placidus. As for these names you might imagine that their parents enjoyed the ancient classics. Cyril and Flavian studied mechanical engineering at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Placidus studied medicine and became the assistant head of the Department of

Ophthalmology at the University of Iowa. Cyril and Flavian joined their father in business.

The company was incorporated in 1925 and the official title became Joseph J Leinfelder and Sons Inc. There were basically three Divisions or fields of activity.....Joseph headed the sheet metal division, Cyril headed the furniture division and Flavian (my dad) headed the structural division. Flavian's division involved metal products for area industrial businesses as well as structural steel and miscellaneous metal for general contractors involved in the construction industry.

Cyril was the artist who created the designs and supervised the fabrication of the wrought iron furniture. The number of employees he needed is not recorded but of course some of his men had to be blacksmiths....one name I remember was an Ernie Lepsch who was the lead blacksmith. Most likely the personnel were from time to time probably used in different divisions of the company. As far as financial information little has been saved but many years ago when we were destroying old records I recall seeing a payroll check made out to an Al Svec whom I had known and who had worked as a sheet metal man for Joseph before the furniture days. I recall his wage at that time was 30 cents per hour. Payroll records for the officers were noted in the corporate minute book which I still have. Officers in that era never received a salary amounting to as much as \$1.00 per hour for a 44 week period. 44 hour weeks were the norm....five eight hour days plus Saturday morning.

Mary Ryan became a manufactures sales representative for us in 1925 probably starting at the time of the incorporation. Mary had sales rooms in New York City and at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. The sales rooms were open for dealers only. You might assume Cyril could have first met Mary in Chicago. Correspondence records of the communication back and forth between Mary Ryan and Cyril no longer exist but we do know that she received at least a 20% commission for the sales. Mary produced the catalogs but we don't know if she paid for them or we did..... however we were responsible for collecting all the money. We have the catalogs from 1933 to 1939 which are included here.

The corporate minute book of June 12, 1926, makes this statement..... "Hand Wrought Iron Furnishings have been added to the business of this corporation. It

will take until after the Chicago Show to tell how the trade will take our new lines. Comments are very favorable and it will probably be our means of expanding and becoming less dependent on the business in this city."..... There was an entry in the minutes on that date listing an expense of \$500 for "manufactured furniture" presumably for sample furniture shipped to the showrooms.

In July of 1926 I noted the first "past due" account to The Painted Butterfly for \$10.50 and the October 1926 "past due" accounts listed Browne's Gift Shop for \$3.25 and for Hanna Flower Shop for \$23.00. 1926 sales were made (and presumably promptly paid for) by the likes of Marshall Field & Co..... Meier and Frank of Portland, Oregon..... Porteous and Braum & Co. of Portland, Maine, ...M.I. Lusky of Nashville, Tennessee, among others. 1927 listed such names as B. Altman, New York City...Hudson Co, Detroit...Gimbel Brothers, New York and RH Macy, New York.

The "shop" as we called it was located at 323 South 3rd Street...it has recently been torn down and the entire half block is now the site of the La Crosse Transit Authority, apartments and all.....The shop consisted of 4300 square feet of floor space plus a 500 square foot "paint room"..the width was 28 feet and the length was 153 feet plus.....the ceiling height was 10 feet and 8 inches.....a blacksmith forge was located in the center of the building merely 80 feet from the paint room, there was a small office, one toilet and a sink for washing up...no lockers, merely pegs on the wall to hang your coat..... I'm guessing that just 18 workers would make things very crowded. I recall being told that when business was "slow" the men would show up to work in the morning hoping that there might be some job to perform and if there was not they would sit out on the curb to wait for the mailman who might arrive with some "orders".....if there were no orders they would go home and wait for tomorrow.....these became the "depression years"....people did not have money to spend on such things as garden furniture.....there was no unemployment compensation.

The "shop" was split level....one third of the building to the west end bordered 3rd Street...there was a 4 foot 6 inch wall to the east separating the two levels and there was a narrow stairwell of 8 steps leading up to the higher level which led further east to the alleythe lower level contained the office, toilet, wash sink, work bench, Lenox Shear #10, forming rolls and bending brakes mostly for sheet metal work.....the upper level to the east contained the forge, anvils, work

benches, drills, acetylene gas welding equipment, paint shop and crating and shipping area....there was a single Yale one ton manual chain hoist suspended from a 20 foot I beam...other than that all lifting was done by "muscle power"...we wouldn't own a fork lift truck until 1946 when we moved operations to a new facility on Ward Avenue.

At the southwest wall of the shop were hung a multitude of one dimensional sheet metal patterns.....these were used to recreate jigs and fixtures to form the various curved pieces used for the furniture.....now when you are looking at the following pictures try to estimate the time taken to cut the wrought iron bars, bend them, assemble them and weld them...after that you must do the painting, crating and loading onto a truck.....and now assume a wage rate and an overhead and then look at the catalog price.....then deduct a 20% commission plus a discount to the dealer..... Finally try to imagine if there was anything left for the proprietors.

We don't know what type of advertising was done prior to the 1933 catalog ...maybe the showrooms were enough to attract buyers and apparently Mary Ryan was able to convince some of the magazines of the times to feature the Leinfelder furniture. The cover of the 1934 catalog featured a picture from "Good Housekeeping" referring to an article by them. There were also references made to "House Beautiful" and "House and Field" for their Leinfelder furniture articles.

And so the furniture business continued on under the direction of Cyril until 1939 when he became ill with encephalitis... Cyril served in the Army during the First World War and there was an encephalitis epidemic from 1918 to 1930 but it more likely that Cyril was bitten by a mosquito while tending his flower garden at 323 South 17th street.....in 1965 a strain of mosquito was discovered in La Crosse which carried encephalitis lethargia and of course this mosquito did have its ancestors..... This unfortunate event caused an early retirement for Cyril and he moved to Dallas, Texas, for a different climate, thus ending our furniture business.

I wish to thank cousin Edward Leinfelder (Cyril's son) for his assistance in making this presentation and for his good memory and, of course, these catalogs.

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