

Albany's R. Veal and Sons Furniture Manufacturer

By Cathy Ingalls, Albany Regional Museum board member

The quality of furniture constructed at a business in Albany that operated for nearly 100 years was so good that celebrities wanted to own the company's rocking chairs, including astronaut Buzz Aldrin. Oregon Gov. Tom McCall, then-California Gov. Ronald Reagan and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.

The company, R. Veal and Sons, was located at 553 Main St. S.E. It was forced to close in March 1982 because of mounting debt. A lien holder, the Small Business Administration, bought the company after it was placed in foreclosure and sold at a sheriff's sale, partly because of a chain of events that began in 1978, when a trusted employee was said to have embezzled \$400,000 in cash and merchandise.

Sold later at auction were 658 items, including equipment, inventory and office furniture along with a sagging 60,000-square-foot factory, a rusted wood-drying kiln and 5.5 acres.

Over time, the company that had been headed by four generations of Veals, had gained a worldwide reputation for excellent furniture construction while specializing at first primarily in chairs.

But although the Veal company is gone, for 50 years the factory was considered to be the main source of industrial income for the community.

The history of the factory begins with Robert Veal, a Pennsylvanian and Union veteran, who after the war was employed for two years as a machinist for Chandler & Taylor in Indianapolis, Ind., before moving to Hendricks County, Ind., where he learned the uses of oak, walnut and ash lumber.

Veal worked for other companies before emigrating in 1884 to Stayton, where he operated a lumber company and later a chair factory. Because he had to haul his furniture by wagon to Turner to ship it by railroad, he chose to move to Albany, where rail service was immediately available, and in the process formed a business partnership with his two sons.

The company opened in 1888 on Water Avenue N.E. at the foot of Jackson Street. Veal brought with him from Stayton, some "crude" machinery and 20 cords of maple.

Then in 1901, fire destroyed his operation so when Veal rebuilt on Main, he constructed three buildings so a blaze could not destroy all at once everything that he owned.

To further ensure fire safety, he built an 89-foot-tall water tower with a tank that could hold 15,000 gallons of water at a pressure of 40 pounds, while pipes were laid to every building and ample hose was on hand for any emergency.

At first, Veal produced rawhide seat chairs that were marketed as Flint Ridge Colonial Maple, with the wood coming from East Linn County. Some of the chairs were used in Albany's Masonic Temple.

Later, the company incorporated ash, alder and birch in its manufacturing. Over the years, the firm made rocking chairs, chairs for the classroom, and furniture for children, the kitchen, the dining room and the bedroom.

Only a few pieces were upholstered.

Once, a Louisiana county school district purchased 10,000 chairs for its kindergarteners because they were supposed to promote good posture.

According to catalogs, early chairs sold for \$6 a dozen and a pre-World War II chair was offered for 95 cents.

From other information on file at the Albany Regional Museum, it appears that in 1900, Veal was crafting 500 chairs a day, and in the year 1970, the firm created more than 40,000 pieces of furniture.

To ensure that Veal got the specific lumber he needed, he operated his own sawmill and then in 1947 he added a veneer plant.

Four times daily at the factory between 1901 and 1960, a steam whistle sounded that could be heard in all directions up to 15 miles away. The whistle signaled when it was time for employees to go to and to stop work. Many in the community checked their watches and clocks when the whistle blew.

It is said that when the World War I armistice was signed on Nov. 11, 1918, the whistle blew for two hours until all of the steam from the boilers was used.

In 1960, Clarence Veal, the factory manager and grandson of the founder, remarked in a story to the Democrat-Herald that his firm was the oldest continuously operating company in the West "by far."

He noted that when the factory was "running full blast we make about two million bucks a year."

Veal also told the DH a looming energy crunch wasn't going to bother him. All waste wood was recycled and used to stoke the steam boiler. The boiler, he said, provides heat for the complex and it is used to steam-bend wood and operate the dry kiln.

Veal died in 1995 at age 88.

Located on the former Veal furniture site are Albany's skatepark, Albany Habitat for Humanity ReStore and Hey Diddle Diddle.