

Showers brothers rivaled limestone industry as top employer

By ROSE WOERTZ

Special to the H-T

Rival of the limestone industry as a major employer in the county was the Showers Brothers Furniture Company. Once called the "largest furniture factory in the world," it employed over a thousand skilled and non-skilled workers between the Civil War era and 1955 when it closed.

LIKE MOST COMPANIES it had a modest beginning. Two brothers, William N. and James D. Showers, started the business in a small shed in the eastern part of town. The sons of a cabinet maker who had settled in Fort Wayne, the brothers came to Bloomington in 1856 to set up their own shop.

When they had saved enough money to buy a small upright engine and some second-hand tools, the company actually began. The quality of their workmanship must have been in demand and recognized by prospective customers. There was also a certain amount of ingenuity and sound business sense built into them.

As the company grew the brothers decided to buy their own timber land to "cut out the middle man" so

Contributions to the Looking Back column, which appears each Saturday, are accepted by The Herald-Telephone. They can be in the form of manuscripts (not more than 800 words) or pictures. Articles and pictures can be sent to: Looking Back, Herald-Telephone, P.O. Box 909, Bloomington, Ind. Pictures will be returned.

to speak. At that point in time the company slogan became "From Tree to the Trade." They even owned their own saw mill to cut down on the costs of farming out their timber and to make the slogan a reality.

VENEERED FURNITURE was in style then, and the Showers brothers set up their own veneer plant. Not wanting to pay someone else for dresser and wall mirrors, they also acquired a mirror factory.

Craftsmen were needed for every phase of the business from lumberjacks to sawyers to men who specialized in glueing drawer bottoms to designers. They took in every phase of the furniture-making process

The factory buildings located on Morton Street near the northwest side of downtown Bloomington were built of brick and concrete and had built in sprinkler systems to protect them from extensive fire damage. In the areas where sanding and glueing were located, ventilating systems were installed.

Along the Monon Railroad tracks the Showers Brothers Company had siding and loading docks to handle 24 cars for their shipping department. An inter-departmental phone system speeded up communication between departments and buildings that ultimately contained over 15 acres of floor space.

JAMES SHOWERS WAS one of the organizers and an officer of the Citizens Loan and Trust Company. William was associated with the First National Bank as a stockholder and had other business interests besides the company. Both became community leaders and staunch Republicans.

The brothers continued to expand their company until 1904. In a time when factory safety measures were

(Back page, col. 6, This sec.)