

121-Year-Old Factory Is Eye On Milwaukee's Past

John Schmid, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

MILWAUKEE (AP) — The bistros, luxury lofts and avant garde galleries along North Water, the oldest street in Milwaukee, are so prolific that they obscure the industrial roots that helped give birth to a once-muscular manufacturing metropolis.

Save for one time-frozen exception.

The last surviving manufacturer in the city's Third Ward, the Harri Hoffmann shoe polish company, continues to produce leather creams and lotions in a 121-year-old factory that's dripping in history — in a way that few other vintage factories can claim, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported (<http://bit.ly/17ABdGL> [1]).

The freight elevator, quintessential in a six-story brick building, is powered entirely by water.

It's based on a system of hydraulic mechanics first developed during the British industrial revolution. And it's been in continuous use at 125 N. Water St., apart from occasional maintenance, since it was installed in 1892.

"The only electricity in this elevator is the light bulb" — a bare bulb in the timber-built carriage, said Lorraine Hoffmann, the president of the company and daughter of its founder.

"It works perfectly," she adds.

The elevator epitomizes the city's economic heritage. It was installed by the building's original owners, John and Andrew Joys, makers of sails, rigging, tackle blocks and pitch at a time when commerce moved on water. Joys Brothers, which decades later merged into the Laacke & Joys outdoors goods retailer, belonged to the teeming industry that clustered along the wharves of the Milwaukee River, which abuts the back of the Hoffmann factory.

"Water Street was a trail along the Milwaukee River," according to "Milwaukee Streets: The Stories Behind Their Names," by historian Carl Baehr. "In June of 1836, it became the first street in the city," predating the city's 1846 incorporation.

Furniture, clothing, metalworking, printing, toys and tools — the Third Ward was a bastion of mass production from its earliest days. Factories and warehouses crowded into multistory facilities that pre-date the more efficient era of sprawling single-level factory floors, often built in suburbs or low-wage nations.

Today, yachts are moored where the longshoremen once worked. The imposing brick warehouses and factories sport stylish makeovers. Many have landed on the National Register of Historic Places.

121-Year-Old Factory Is Eye On Milwaukee's Past

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

The nondescript Hoffmann factory, built in the same era, is easy to overlook. It has an understated display of its polishes, mink oils, saddle soaps and protective silicon finishes in a street-level window ("over 70 high fashion colors"). But in the days of China-centric globalization, it's always a guess whether any production remains behind an old industrial facade in Milwaukee.

"I don't know much about them," said Kate Kazlo, who owns the Home Market, a lifestyle home decor boutique a few doors down from Hoffmann.

"They're the last remaining manufacturer in the Historic Third Ward," said Ron San Felippo, chairman of the Third Ward Business Improvement District.

"I'm happy here," Hoffmann said. "This is home. We've been in this building for 50 years. I have no intention of moving."

The entire Hoffmann building (including the basement) remains in use. A workforce of 12 handles the bottling, packaging or the enormous stainless-steel vats, kettles and tanks used to mix and cook the leather treatments.

Some of the assembly lines are decades old, which makes them easy to maintain, Hoffmann said. "The old machines are simple," she said.

The elevator is essential because workers are spread over six floors moving pallets of bottled lotions or 50-gallon drums of waxes or oils.

It has no buttons, however, and requires an experienced hand to operate. David Everard, a 28-year veteran at Hoffmann's, shows how it's done. He reaches his arm into the elevator shaft through a gap in the wooden planks and finds a steel cable, which he yanks. That opens a valve in the basement, causing municipal tap water to flow into a cast-iron barrel-sized cylinder also in the basement, which in turn displaces a heavy piston that's coupled to a system of greasy pulleys and counterweights.

As the water rises, the elevator descends gently, moving at the speed that water is displaced and feeling a bit like standing on the deck of a ship.

To raise the carriage, Everard reaches back into the shaft and pulls the cable in the opposite direction, allowing the water to flush out of the cylinder, through the back of the factory and directly into the Milwaukee River.

It's a technology first developed in Britain in the 1830s. From about 1870 to 1900, some American cities with abundant water supplies turned to water-powered elevators as an alternative to those powered by steam.

Once more efficient electric systems came along, most building owners replaced the old hydraulic drives. There are no known records about the nation's remaining hydraulic elevators, but they're increasingly rare and bordering on extinction, said Edward Donoghue, managing director of the National Elevator Industry Inc. trade

121-Year-Old Factory Is Eye On Milwaukee's Past

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

association. The handful that exist are disappearing "because they don't fit code in some places or just outlived their useful life and taken out of service," Donoghue said.

Milwaukee has only one other water-powered elevator, although it's not in use; it's in a vacant three-story commercial structure on E. Clybourn St., according to city elevator inspectors.

At mid-century, when Hoffmann was founded, Milwaukee was more than a hotbed of industrial entrepreneurialism. It also welcomed entrepreneurial immigrants.

And that included Hoffmann's parents and grandparents from Germany. It was the late 1930s and Germany was spiraling into chaos and terror. Harri Hoffmann was a cabinet maker in Aurich, near the Dutch border. In 1938, the Nazis forced Hoffmann and the other Jews in the town onto a train headed for the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Midway through the trip, Hoffmann and a few others got themselves kicked off the train by feigning advanced tuberculosis. He made his way back to Aurich and immediately began plans to leave Germany, taking his fiancée, Herta, with him.

Both abandoned family businesses. But the J. Greenebaum Tanning Co., which had a family friend, helped pay for passage and gave Harri a job when he arrived.

Lorraine was a baby while Harri worked at the tannery. A grateful customer once gave Harri and Herta a bottle of white shoe polish for Lorraine's baby shoes. Herta loved it — it kept its clean shine but never rubbed off any chalky white onto the parents' suits.

Herta learned to cook high-grade shoe polish on her stove. The couple started their own shoe-polish business and it expanded rapidly. In 1962, the Hoffmanns acquired the Water Street factory from the Joys brothers. With a new base, they added different brand names (Hoffco; Cadet; Bostonian) and built an export business that to this day ships shoe polish to Asia, South America, Canada and Mexico. The company also produces shoe finishes on contract under private labels including Clarks, Wilson's and Allen Edmonds.

It's not surprising the Hoffmanns made shoe polish, given that much of the city's earliest industry included leather tanneries and shoe makers.

"Milwaukee was the leather capital of the United States from the 1870s through 1970s," said Dave Mitchell, who runs a boutique leatherwares business one block away. "There were more leather tanneries in Milwaukee than anywhere in the country, with 27 tanneries at our peak," Mitchell said.

Apart from Hoffmann, Mitchell's is the closest to any other surviving industrial vestige in the Third Ward. Mitchell's father, Jerry — himself an immigrant entrepreneur from communist Romania — built the Mitchell Leather Factory at 226 N. Water St. as a mass-production operation with dozens of full-time sewers.

121-Year-Old Factory Is Eye On Milwaukee's Past

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Since his father's death in 2009, Mitchell changed the business model. These days, he sews one briefcase or wallet at a time, based on Internet orders. "When I was growing up, there wasn't a building around here that didn't have some kind of manufacturing," he said.

Until a few years ago, the Reliable Knitting Works had a massive multi-story factory and warehouse on Chicago St., right off Water, making clothing. It ran three shifts a day, but moved production to China in 2006. Today it houses SPiN Milwaukee, a social club co-owned by Oscar-winning actress Susan Sarandon. The rest of the Reliable industrial space was converted into the Cityside Plaza condominiums, featuring indoor heated parking, among other amenities.

Just looking out the windows of the factory that she's known since childhood, Lorraine Hoffmann has watched the neighborhood evolve. Lorraine had a career in the investment industry in Chicago, but took over the family business after Harri died in 1999 and Herta in 2001.

Real estate brokers stop by and make offers to buy the building.

"I tell them, 'Thank you, but we are making shoe polish here. I'm not interested.'"

Source URL (retrieved on 11/27/2014 - 12:33am):

<http://www.impomag.com/news/2013/09/121-year-old-factory-eye-milwaukees-past>

Links:

[1] <http://bit.ly/17ABdGL>