

KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BULLETIN

February 1996



INSIDE:

**Eighty-two-Year History of Wadsworth
Electrical Manufacturing Plant**

WATCH FOR FLYER ABOUT-----

The 3rd Annual History Day

March 2, 1996

Northern Kentucky University Center
Registration 9 AM

Keynote Speakers:

Dr. James Klotter, Kentucky Historical Society,
speaking on "Governor Goebel: Northern Kentucky's
Assassinated Governor"

Walter Laughlin, Associate Director of Kentucky
Covered Bridge Association, speaking on "The
Covered Bridges of Kentucky"

Eight Workshops

Displays of Historical Local Artifacts

Advanced registration: \$3; Door \$4

Send registration to: History Day, Aileen Hurst, 5 East Ridge
Place, Newport, Kentucky 41071

For information, call the Campbell County Historical Society,
635-6407

KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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K.C.H.S MEETING NOTICE

DATE Saturday, February 10, 1996 2:00 P M
PLACE Behringer Crawford Museum, Devou Park

After a short business meeting, Jim Kelly will present a video about the Ancient Indian Ruins of the Southwest. Jim has visited the Southwest many times over the past 20 years. The video features photographs taken by the speaker at all of the major ruins in that area. In conjunction with the talk, participants at the meeting will enjoy the Behringer Crawford Museum's display of more than 20 Hopi Kachima Dolls collected by Mr. Kelly. The Kachima Doll display will continue through the month of February.

Kenton County Historical Society, Publisher of the award winning Northern Kentucky Heritage Magazine, a semi-annual magazine of regional history covering ten counties.

Subscriptions: \$12 a year for members; \$15 a year for non-members
To subscribe mail check to KCHS, P.O. Box 641, Covington, Ky. 41012

Editor of KCHS Bulletin: Jo Ann Brown

THE WADSWORTH ELECTRIC MANUFACTURING COMPANY 1918-1990

By Leah Konicki, Covington Historical Preservation Officer

The old Wadsworth Electric Company building on 22 West Eleventh Street in Covington, was occupied by the Wadsworth Company from the time of its construction in 1923 until 1990 when Wadsworth went out of business.

Founder George B. Wadsworth (1872-1954), was one of the nine children born to George W. and Margaret Wadsworth in Campbell County. He held a variety of jobs until 1900 when he was listed as an electrician in Newport, Kentucky. He and his brother, Harry, formed Wadsworth Brothers Electrical Contractors in 1904. Harry left the company 6 years later.

George Wadsworth received his first patent for an electric safety switch in 1907. His switches were not the kind that turned on electric lights; they were controlling devices located at the the point where electricity enters the property. In 1927 the Kentucky Post reported that these switches reduced the possibility for accident, fire and theft. They also allowed homeowners to replace fuses without calling the the electric company. This first patent was awarded in the years when the incandescent bulb with tungsten filament was perfected, which led to widespread use of electric power.

In 1918, Wadsworth Electric Manufacturing Company was incorporated. A manufacturer of safety switches, the newly incorporated Wadsworth located its plant at 405 Madison Avenue, employed 16 people, and was listed as worth \$100,000. In January 1919 the company moved to a four story building at 18-22 Pike Street (demolished in the '20s).

The Covington Industrial Club boasted in 1921 the following:

"As a manufacturing City, has the largest X-ray machine factory, largest iron fence works in the world, largest tile works, largest wood carving plant, finest inlaid furniture factory in the United States, one of the largest automobile truck manufacturing plants, largest manufacturing external electric operating switches, largest sheet metal corrugating plant in the South, third largest

engine and boiler plant.....”

These claims about Kelley-Koett X-ray, Stewart Iron Works, Cambridge Tile, Ohio Scroll and Lumber, U. S. Motor Truck Company, Wadsworth Electric, Moeschel-Edwards Corrugating, Houston Stanwood and Gamble, and others, however exaggerated, indicate that Covington enjoyed high ratings as a base for large industry.

In May 1922, The Kentucky Post reported that the company of 100 employees claimed a significant portion of the national market. Some large cities such as Boston used the Wadsworth brand exclusively. A September issue of the Post reported that Wadsworth made its first foreign shipment advancing its national reputation.

The flood of orders meant that only about half of them could be filled. In the above May Post story, Wadsworth announced that it would build a new plant on East Eleventh Street just west of Madison Avenue, immediately east of the railroad tracks which passed through the heart of the city (also the former location of St. Elizabeth Hospital). Less than a year later, The Kentucky Post printed a large spread celebrating the plant's completion. The paper also reported the names of the Covington contractors and suppliers who worked on the job: George Lubrecht, general contractor and designer, Joe Kampsen, painting and decorating, Advance Millwork, Taylor and Hayes Masonry, John R. Copin, rugs and linoleum, Wissman and Brother, stair builders, William A. Glaser, roofing, J. M. Howk Plumbing, Fischel-Lamb, electrical contractors.

The decade saw the rapid development of the safety switch market. The annual domestic and export market doubled to “upward of” \$10 million between 1922 and 1925. But in that year George B. Wadsworth, at that age of 52, sold “an exclusive license for all rights in a number of improved devices” to Creaghead Engineering Company of Cincinnati for over \$800,000 in royalties. There were 16 patents for electrical devices, most involving safety switches. George Wadsworth then resigned. His name no longer appears in directories. He lived in his home on Erlanger Road, Erlanger, until the age of 82.

Two years later, George's brother, David (1870-1937), was appointed Vice-president and chief engineer. David Wadsworth had joined the company in 1922, and created a

number of inventions. He "was regarded as a national authority on many phases of the business." In 1934 Kentucky Governor "Happy" Chandler presented a bronze plaque which celebrated David Wadsworth's fifty years in the business. In 1937, he died unexpectedly at the age of 67. He was a resident of Fort Thomas. Thereafter, the Wadsworth family ceased to be involved with the company.

The man who succeeded George Wadsworth was a banker named Joseph Feltman. He held that position for about 10 years. Mr. Feltman had been interested in the company since 1922 at least, when he purchased the land for the new plant. He owned the land until his death in 1945 when his survivors deeded it over to the company. His son-in-law, Leo G. Kuhlman, succeeded Mr. Feltman and served as president for 55 years until couple of years before his death in 1984. In the 1940s, Mr. Kuhlman's sons joined the company. In 1990 John was president, and Joseph was secretary.

The company did not fade in the middle years of the 40s & 50s. As a follow-up to its glory years in safety switches, the company was a leader in the design and manufacture of circuit breakers. The company grew in sales and increased personnel to 300 requiring an addition to the old 1923 plant. In 1972, it was determined that the Covington plant too small. Wadsworth established a second plant to make breaker boxes, fuses, wiring ducts, power outlets, and other devices.

During these years the company and the Kuhlman family did very little toward self-promotion or publicity. Two rather modest ads are the exceptions: one placed in the Kenton County Centennial publication of 1940 and the Covington Sesquicentennial booklet of 1965.

In December 1990, the company closed both plants. The Kentucky Post summarized that 74 workers in Covington and 26 in Erlanger lost their jobs. Sixty-three belonged to the Local No. 1102 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. There were 3 labor strikes in the 1980s, but no significant reasons were given by John Kuhlman or others for the company's closing. The president of the union local, Charles Taylor, recalled that experienced personnel had been lost through attrition. Employees were not surprised by the closing.

In 1992, Packages Un-limited bought the old Wadsworth property at 22 East Eleventh Street in Covington.

Sources for Wadsworth Story

Kentucky Post

"Wadsworth... Will Build New Plant," 5-16-22; "New Home...," 9-23-22;
"New Home...," 3-30-23; "Wadsworth in Patent Deal," 6-7-25;
"Switches..Used in Every State...," 4-10-27; Death, David T Wadsworth,
1-15-37; "Wadsworth...Plans To Close..."K.P.,10-10-90; "Vacant
Building...Packaging Plant," 10-30-92.

Cincinnati Enquirer

Death, George B. Wadsworth, 12-18-54.

Oral Sources

John Kuhlman, last Wadsworth President; John Perrazzo, General
Manager, Packaging Un-Limited; Ron Spare, Wadsworth Treasurer.
See also general sources at the library.

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