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Keller advertising at the Harrison County Fairgrounds spring in 1909.

Company went from wagons to furniture

Celebrating Statehood

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Did you know that one of Harrison County's major employers, which eventually became the Keller Manufacturing Co., operated from 1850 to 2006?

The Keller story in Harrison County begins with John Leonard Keller, a German immigrant. Local legend has it that Keller arrived in New York in October 1846 with only \$1 in his pocket but with a firm resolution to make something of himself.

Although trained as a clockmaker, he soon realized that this profession held no future for him.

Traveling west, he met and married Christiana Rudy, also an immigrant from Germany.

He decided to try his hand as a rural huckster and started out as a pack peddler, selling housewares to rural families in Harrison County. Keller opened his first store in 1850 at Flocktown in Jackson Township then relocated to Scott Township. In 1866, he opened a store in Corydon at the present northwest corner of Beaver Street and North Capitol Avenue, where the Emporium is located today.

Keller's sold dry goods and grocery items and used the slogan:

Keller's

Since 1850

"THE QUALITY STORE THAT SERVICE BUILT."

John died in 1879, leaving behind nine children: Elizabeth, Isabelle, Caroline Rosanna, William H., Mary Ellen, Leonard C., Lillian, Rosamund and Edward G. His oldest son, William L. Keller, expanded the business to manufacturing spokes and hubs for wagons.

In 1900, Keller Manufacturing Co. began as a partnership between John's sons William H. Keller, Leonard C. Keller and Edward G. Keller and brother-in-law, Thomas J. Hudson. They operated the company under the slogan "We four and no more." William L. Keller was named president of the company.

In 1901, the company began producing farm wagons under the names Corydon Wagons and Keller Wagons, which were of slightly higher quality than the Corydon trademark. Keller also operated several other ventures, including a light company, water company and an ice company.

In 1909, Keller entered into an agreement with International Harvester and discontinued its old wagon lines. The company began making Buckeye, Keystone, Monarch, Sterling and Solid Comfort with the Weber being the top-of-the-line model known as the "aristocrat" of wagons.

Domestic wagon sales dropped after World War I, but times improved from 1925 to 1928 due to increased wagon sales abroad.

In 1920, Charles A. Keller designed what may have been the first camper-truck, and the company experimented with making trucks and bus bodies designed for mounting on a Model T Ford chassis. Unfortunately, this branch of the business never really took off since other companies, like Studebaker, already had a head start and soon all bodies were made of steel, not wood. However, business continued to improve and, in 1929, Keller had the greatest sales and profits the company had known to that time. The company sold 12,615 wagons and trucks for a total of \$622,245 that year.

The Great Depression hit the company hard and, by 1932, Keller Manufacturing Co. was nearly broke. International Harvester rescued the company with a \$15,000 loan that provided the means necessary to stave off applying for bankruptcy. Wagon sales picked up again in the mid-1930s, with Keller producing all of the farm wagons sold by International Harvester and 15 percent of all wagons manufactured in the United States.

Keller branched out into making refrigerator boxes for International Harvester in 1939. Then, relations between the two companies became strained when the company entered into a contract with the government and purchased compressors from another source instead of International Harvester. In 1942, Charles A. Keller severed ties with International Harvester.

The ailing wagon business was liquidated in 1943 and sold its surplus inventory to the Nissen Wagon Co. out of Winston-Salem in North Carolina. Keller Manufacturing Co. was ready to expand in another direction: furniture.

Keller had dabbled in the furniture business in the 1920s and during the Depression years, but now the business concentrated its efforts on furniture making, producing high-quality tables, chairs, beds and other furniture. The business had its up and downs in the '40s and '50s but rose to an all-time high in 1953. Keller's first million-dollar-sales year was in 1945, and, by 1955, total sales had risen to \$2 million.

Keller concentrated on making quality furniture that was creative, well-built, functional and stylish.

The Corydon plant was unable to keep up with demand so the company expanded, first opening a new plant in Culpeper Va., then later one back in Harrison County, near New Salisbury. But the economy, as well as furniture making, changed drastically, and, in 2006, Keller Manufacturing Co. closed its doors. Its closing marked the end of an era in which generations of Harrison Countians worked at Keller.

Keller's was very much a part of Harrison County community life. In fact, there were years when, during the Harrison County Fair, the company showed its support by closing down that week so that its employees could work at and enjoy the fair.

Karen Schwartz, president of the Historical Society of Harrison County, serves on the legacy group of the Harrison County Committee for the Indiana Bicentennial. In preparation of Indiana's bicentennial in 2016, she is providing a monthly column – focusing on a person, place or event from Harrison County's history – that gives insight to our history. She said the columns should serve as an introduction and/or summary of a topic but are not intended to include all known facts and information. To suggest a topic, contact Schwartz at 812-736-2373 or 812-738-2828, by e-mail at karengleitz@hotmail.com or by regular mail at 5850 Devil's Elbow Road NW, Corydon, IN 47112.