

Bruno Paul (B.P.) John

Scott Hanson

Driving south away from the high-rise buildings of southwest downtown Portland along the Willamette River you reach Macadam Avenue between the Ross Island and Sellwood Bridge. Today, this three-mile stretch of Macadam is lined with commercial buildings, condominiums, restaurants, and office buildings. The name Johns Landing is used in the title of several businesses in the area; and many Portlanders refer to the area by this landmark name. Historically, the name Johns Landing referred to the site where logs were deposited after being transported by barge or log raft down the Willamette River. The logs were used at the B.P. John Furniture Factory.

Bruno Paul John, An Oregon Legacy is a limited edition book commissioned by Bruno Paul John's grandson

John Condon. The book's author is Kathryn Hurd of Estacada, Oregon. This article is a short summary of Ms. Hurd's book. My sincere thanks to Mr. Condon and Ms. Hurd for allowing me to share the B. P. John story with you.

Immigration to America

Bruno Paul John was born June 6, 1874 in Stechenback, Germany to parents Adolph and Frances John. As a young boy he had an older sister Anna and younger brother Paul. Adolph was a miller by trade and the family moved frequently in Germany to engage in new jobs. Money was tight, so Adolph left his young family in Germany in early 1880's to travel to America seeking better work opportunities. In 1883 Frances and her young children left Germany and traveled by ship to New York. The family was reunited in Manistique, Michigan where Adolph found work. Bad fortune struck the John family when a fire engulfed their rented rooms in a building, and

destroyed most of their clothes and other belongings. This event in addition to travel expenses to reach America meant the John family had very little money for clothes or furniture as they moved into a new home. During this time Adolph worked as a carpenter and Frances took in boarders.

Machine Genius

The John family moved to Tacoma, Washington in 1888 and one year later moved again to Chehalis, Washington. It was in Chehalis in 1890 that the young 16-year old Bruno showed early signs of genius working with machines after being hired by Ludinghouse Sash and Door Company. He worked there for three years receiving \$1 per day average wages for workdays that lasted up to 18 hours. His genius was converting or adapting old worn out machines so they were more productive than the original new machine.

Doernbecker Furniture Company

A life-changing event happened for the 19-year old Bruno in 1893 when he was hired by Doernbecker Furniture Factory in Chehalis. He continued to become proficient using many of their machines; and eventually gained a comprehensive understanding of the furniture making business while displaying leadership capabilities. He was promoted to plant foreman. The Doernbecker factory moved to Portland Oregon in 1900; and Bruno was invited to move also and stay with the company. The furniture

factory was built in the Sullivans Gulch area in Northeast Portland. Bruno spoke in a direct manner and was unsophisticated. However he was a smart and self-educated man. Plant workers took to calling him by his initials "B.P." for Bruno Paul. He received two more promotions to general superintendent of the manufacturing department and then vice-president and general manager of the business and plant. Bruno traveled to study production methods and see machinery used at other furniture plants. He introduced alder and cottonwood into furniture making. During World War I years Portland had grown to become the largest furniture manufacturing center west of the Rocky Mountains. Doernbecker became nationally known for bedroom and dining room sets at a reasonable price. They owned their own timber resources and sawmills; and also established a well organized sales force. Frank Doernbecker sold his interests in the company in 1919 to a group of employees including B.P. John. This was a huge financial break for B.P. John. He became vice-president and production manager. The Company continued to prosper under the new leadership for the next eight years into 1927. In July 1927 after 35 years of employment, B.P. John received notice that his services were no longer needed at Doernbecker's. In a power play, a corporate decision had been made to buy out his minority interest and ease him into early retirement. So at 53 years of age, B.P. John was wealthy and unemployed. But retirement was not a good fit for his German work ethic.

B.P. John Furniture Company

Fourteen months after leaving Doernbecker's, a furniture salesman named W.L. Swearingen convinced B.P. John to start his own furniture manufacturing company; the B. P. John Furniture Company in August 1928. B. P. purchased the Carmen Manufacturing furniture factory in an industrial area on

Macadam Avenue. The site was a good strategic choice with Macadam Avenue on one side and the Willamette River on the other side. The river allowed log rafts to arrive from log booms (an entry point where the log can enter the river) along the Willamette and Columbia River. His goal was to offer a quality product that was affordable to the common person. A few years later he bought a nearby second plant (the Heywood-Wakefield Company) and transformed both plants into a single factory. His furniture factory now had four large buildings with new machinery and two complete sawmills. The buildings added together covered one million square feet over a 40 acre site. Through consolidation and modernization of these two plants he made his furniture factory more efficient. He lowered production costs by using fewer furniture patterns and making volume cuttings.

The B.P. John plant turned out bedroom, dining room and living room furniture. By June 1940, B.P. had supervised the making of 1,000,000 pieces of furniture. The firm employed 650 people in 1940 and maintained an inventory of 1 million board feet of lumber stacked in kilns. By the early 1950's B.P. had worked 60 years in the furniture business and was 76 years old. The factory buildings constructed in early 1900's were becoming antiquated. He made the decision to sell his company in 1953, six months before he died. Furniture continued to be produced on site until 1973 by other owners. Today, the factory site looks much different with office buildings, condominiums, and restaurants. ■

Editor's Note: Master Woodland Manager and CCFFA President, Scott Hanson, researched and authored this article.