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Archival Chronicle

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Ohio At Work: Industry in Northwest Ohio Before 1950

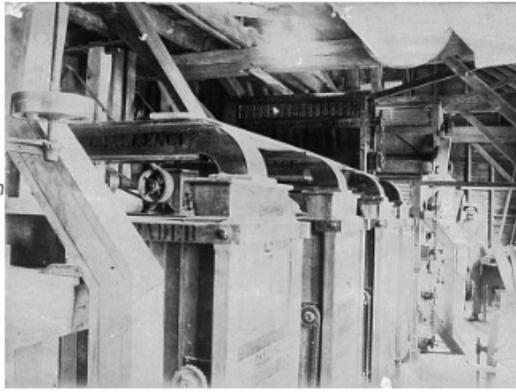
Northwest Ohio is the heart of the industrial Midwest. Settlers who arrived during the first quarter of the 19th century were interested in developing family farms, but businesses quickly developed which took advantage of the natural resources and human talents available in the Great Black Swamp. This issue of the *Archival Chronicle* will examine some of the industries related to the clearing of the land and the production of food.



▲ The photograph above shows sorghum being brought to the mill at Molasses Gap in Paulding County sometime during the 1890s. Farmers brought their own barrels to take home some of the molasses produced, and the rest was sold. Identified in the photograph are, from left, Thomas Aldrich, Andrew Meyers, Frank Wiles, John Meyers, Jacob Schifferley, Leonard Murphy and Mr. & Mrs. Troyer and family. Source: O. B. Workman Collection ([MS 19](#)).

As farmers cleared the land of hardwood trees in order to plant their crops, they often brought the wood to an ashery, where it would be burned and the ashes used to produce lye, which could be used for making soap, or boiled down to produce potash. Potash was a valuable commodity which was used for bleaching textiles, making glass, as a component of fertilizer, and for other industrial purposes. By 1840, Ohio was the world's leading producer of potash.

At right, the sifter room of the Grover Hill flour mill in Paulding County, seen here in the 1890s, is already at a more industrial level than the first mills built by pioneers. Source: O. B. Workman Collection (MS 19). ▶



Once the fields were cleared, they needed to be drained. Locally-made tiles were used for this purpose. Mechanized equipment like the Garwood Industries/Buckeye Traction Ditcher (MS 380) took the ditching process to the next level by manufacturing ditching machines. What began as a local business serving the needs of Ohio agriculture eventually grew to be an internationally-known manufacturer of construction equipment.

Farmers raised a variety of crops, including corn, wheat and oats. Early settlers supplied their families' needs first but also sold their product to a wider market. Grain mills were an important part of the supply chain. The Isaac Ludwig Mill in Grand Rapids, Ohio provided service to Wood and Lucas County farmers, and with its location on the Miami-Erie Canal made transportation of goods to larger markets easily available. Over the course of the next hundred years, rail and truck transportation enlarged the market for Ohio's agricultural products still further.



After the Civil War, industry thrived. Food-related businesses sprang up all over the region. Researchers can review records for some of these businesses at the Center for Archival Collections. The Trommer Extract of Malt Company (MS 12) at Fremont operated from 1874-1933. Similar firms whose records may be studied at the CAC include the Lyon, Clement & Greenleaf Company of Wauseon, Ohio (MS 183—roller mills and grain elevators) and Diehl Incorporated (MS 1057—brewing, soft drink, and dairy products) of Defiance.

▶ At left, the warehouse of the H. J. Heinz plant in Bowling Green, Ohio. Best-known for its ketchup products, the company also produced and shipped beans, pickles, and juices. Source: CAC General Photograph Collection.



A worker at Cain's Potato Chip Company inspects the product before it is packaged. Source: CAC General Photograph Collection. ▶

Food processing plants contributed to the local economy. From 1920 until its closure in 1975, the H. J. Heinz plant was one of the largest employers in Bowling Green. Most of the work was seasonal, but crucial in supporting local farmers and providing a needed boost to income, whether the employee was a worker trying to survive the Great Depression or a student hoping to pay tuition.



▶ At left, potato chips are bagged, ready for shipment. Source: CAC General Photograph Collection.

Cain's Potato Chip Company was founded in 1936 as a family business on Lehman Avenue in Bowling Green. Their wavy-cut "marcelled" chip was unique on the market when it was introduced. Starting with only six employees and a single delivery truck, it had grown large enough to need a new facility by the early 1950s and had seven warehouses scattered throughout the region.

Founder Emerson Cain developed and patented a machine which salted the chips on both sides, another innovation that helped to create a popular regional product. The company was purchased in 1977 by the Clubrow Company, after two generations in Bowling Green.

At right, seen in a postcard from the 1950s, the Lonz Winery headquarters at Middle Bass Island became famous not only for its wine, but also as a tourist destination. Source: CAC General Photograph Collection. ➤

Snack foods have not been the only product of northwest Ohio agriculture. By the mid-19th century, German settlers took advantage of Lake Erie islands' climate to plant vineyards and produce wine. Andrew Wehrle's Golden Eagle winery featured a dance pavilion as well as an extensive wine cellar. Bought out in the 1920s by the nearby Lonz Winery, the company (**MS 150**) remained in business throughout Prohibition by selling grape juice. The years following the repeal of Prohibition saw the introduction of new products such as champagne, and a growing international market.



The following bibliographies list collections dealing with industry or business that are available for research at the CAC:

- **Business and Commerce Collections**
- **Labor Collections**
- **Transportation Collections**

Previous issues of the *Archival Chronicle* dealing with NW Ohio Industry:

- **Gas & Oil Boom** (December 1993)
- **NW Ohio's Heritage in Glass** (August 1996)
- **The Automobile Grows Up with Northwest Ohio** (December 2000)
- **Commerce on the Great Lakes** (March 2006)

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