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[Archival Chronicle Index](#) | [CAC Homepage](#)

Northwest Ohio's Heritage in Glass



▶ A workman attaches molten glass to form the foot of a piece of stemware. Tiffin Glass Company Collection (MS 401).

Natural gas and oil were discovered in northwest Ohio just as American industry was developing ways to use these fuels efficiently in manufacturing. Eager to benefit from the post-Civil War industrial boom, communities throughout the region offered free fuel as an incentive to companies establishing businesses there. Thanks to the ready supply of fuel, a good rail transportation system and easy access to the lake port of Toledo, the glass industry established itself as one of the most important components of the region's economy.

In the mid-1800's manufacturers flocked to northwest Ohio communities such as Findlay, North Baltimore, Bowling Green, Bloomdale, and especially Fostoria to use the available natural gas for the clean-burning fuel it provided for their furnaces. Window glass, bottles and jars, tableware, and art or novelty glass were all produced in such quantity and such quality that the name "Fostoria" quickly became synonymous with the best glassware. The depletion of the gas fields combined with a national economic depression in the 1890s caused many of these businesses to fail.

The Center for Archival Collections documents this aspect of regional history. Holdings include sales catalogs and corporate records for some of these businesses, most notably the Toledo Window Glass Company (MMS 951) and the Tiffin Glass Company (MS 401). Original mold designs for some of the decorative glassware produced by the Tiffin Glass Company between 1891 and 1970 are a unique feature of the collection.

Toledo, meanwhile, had become the focus of operations for three enterprising glassmakers. Edward Drummond Libbey, a manufacturer from New England, Michael Owens, Libbey's partner with a gift for industrial design, and Edward Ford, a maker of plate glass, all arrived in the city between 1888 and 1898. They prospered while others failed because they were able to devise manufacturing methods which delivered a consistently high-quality product at low cost in large quantities. The firms merged in 1930 to become Libbey-Owens-Ford.

Glassmaking has been a highly-skilled trade since ancient times, and the growth and development of the industry reflects this fact. Nineteenth century glass companies routinely recruited experienced European workers and hired away the most knowledgeable and skilled workers from other firms to begin their operations or to develop new products. Still, working conditions were harsh and thousands of children were employed in the industry. Among the earliest trades to unionize, the glassworkers' organizations covered in the CAC collections include the Flint Glass Workers of America, the Federation of Flat Glass Workers, and the Aluminum, Brick, and Glass Workers Union, Local 9 (MS 34). Thanks to mechanized manufacturing techniques, particularly the automated bottle-making machine designed by Michael Owens (himself a worker in glass plants since age ten), working conditions in the industry have improved radically over those of a century ago.

Today, glass is still an important part of the northwest Ohio economy. Researchers interested in the history and development of the industry, and students of design, architecture, and art can all find valuable resources at the Center for Archival Collections.

--Lee N. McLaird

THE PHOTOGRAPH IN THIS ISSUE is from the Tiffin Glass Company Collection (MS 401). This collection includes other photographs of glassworkers, promotional photographs of glassware for sales catalogs, diagrams and blueprints of patterns, and drawings of the molds used to form the glass produced by the plant. In addition, there are extensive office files including correspondence, financial records, and other material of interest to researchers.
