

# Reliance Shirt Factory

## Opened here in '28

written by Bertha Finn

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There were 154 people at the Reliance Company reunion luncheon of former employees and their spouses Sunday, September 24, at the Fawn Creek County Club.

The event coincided with the 50th Anniversary of locating the factory, which is known colloquially as 'the

Shirt Factory', in Anamosa, September 1928.

Those helping plan the reunion were Mrs. Percy Ruhl, who originated the idea; Mrs. Art Marek; Mrs. Gearhad Kray; Buster Davenport, who emceed the program; Mr. and Mrs. Don Bunce, Tootie Scott, and Mrs. Don Woods.

## Memories

"I was making nine dollars per week", recalled Bus Davenport, who worked for the factory from 1933-37 "It was raised to \$13 dollars a week, or \$58 per month. Postage stamps were then two cents and sometimes we didn't even have that."

Don Bunce reminisced, "I have never known a more dedicated, hard working group of people. Mel Stoecker and a Reliance man and I went to Kansas City to meet with the War Labor Board and returned with a seven-cent per hour increase and it was met with rejoicing."

Davenport said, "That was when the Maid-Rite (located on the north side of Main Street, east of the alley, between Ford and Garnavillo streets) was practically an annex of the factory. You could buy a very large hamburger for 10 cents and a glass of milk for a nickel and make a meal." Someone added, "Yeh,

and a beer for 10 cents." News of the Reliance company locating in Anamosa was met with rejoicing during the Depression in March 1928, when William Taradash of the Reliance and Stirling Manufacturing Co. came to town and assured businessmen that if they would provide a site, a garment factory would be located here.

Willing civic leaders formed a stock-holding company known as the Anamosa Improvement Corporation and a modern two-story plant was built on North Garnavillo Street.

Over 600 persons attended a celebration dance held in August 1928 in the first floor of the new building.

The Sterling company had an apron factory located inside the walls of the Anamosa Men's Reformatory since 1921. However, the renewal of the state contracts



*Interior view of Reliance Manufacturing Co. trimming room. (Submitted by Kathryn Barnes.)*



*Interior view of Reliance Manufacturing Co. sewing room. (Submitted by Kathryn Barnes.)*



*Interior view of Reliance Manufacturing Co. folding room. (Submitted by Kathryn Barnes.)*

were uncertain due to competition with private industry. Over 500 inmates were (happily) employed making the Happy Home aprons, a type of house dress. Facilities were finally moved from there about 1933.

The factory was located in Anamosa, outside of the walls, mainly through the efforts of D.E. Ruffler, who had been employed by the Sterling company at the reformatory since 1921. As a personal friend of William Taradash, president of the Sterling company, now known as the Reliance company and the world's largest manufacturer of cotton goods, he and a group of influential Anamosa men got Mr. Taradash to agree to locate here. Mr. Ruffler continued on in Anamosa as superintendent of the factory. He retired in 1944.

The Reliance company dates back to 1898, when Milton Goodman, an east coast salesman, decided the mid-west was ready for a more substantial shirt than could be bought in the stores. His first shop was located in Michigan City, Indiana.

During World War I, the company's shirts were worn by millions of Yanks fighting in Europe — hence the name Big Yank shirt.

When the factory opened its doors in September of 1928, over 300 applications were taken for the 94 initial positions. Unfortunately, by the fall of 1931, due to the slow economy, the plant was closed down. Operations were resumed in 1933 with \$25,000 worth of new equipment installed. Shut-downs also occurred in 1935 and 1938. Unemployment compensation was a thing of the future and the closings were severely felt by those who worked there.

During World War II, with government contracts, 8,000 shirts per week were produced, in addition to their regular output for J.C. Penney company, and a night shift was added.

Over the years, starting wages were raised from 25 cents, to 35½, to 75 cents per hour. A clipping from a 1929 article in the local papers showed the stupendous salary for one employee, Josephine Wolfe, who made a record on piece work at the Stirling factory one day. She did the machine work on 64 dozen pair, of 1,536 single cuffs, of aprons, working the usual 9 hours. Her check for that day was \$5.12, the highest earned by any piece-work operator since the factory opened (that year).

A news column was a regular feature in the Anamosa Eureka during the 1940s, called 'Reliance Shirt Tales by Big Yank' written by Don Bunce. The factory also had its own publication, called 'Newsy Susie'.

The Reliance Company moved from Anamosa in early 1952. For a short time after that, the Cleveland Overall company operated here and manufactured army fatigue jackets. The factory was the back-bone of the economy for nearly 25 years.

Folks attending the reunion came from Florida, Illinois, Kansas, and from many cities across Iowa. The oldest attendant was believed to be Helen Simpson, 84, of Mechanicsville.

Charles R. Arthur, Anamosa native, now of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, with the Big Yank Corporation for 38 years, is head of the pattern department located at the Big Yank Service Center. The service center makes the master patterns for all garments produced by the company. Arthur was unable to attend the reunion, but sent a letter. Excerpts from the letter follow: "It is almost impossible to believe the changes that have taken place in the garment industry. Today, an automatic pocket-set machine creases the pocket, places it on the front, then sews it and stacks the fronts at the rate of 100 dozen per



Cutting room at the Reliance Manufacturing Co. Back row: Boyd Brandt, Robert Newhard, Robert Powers. Front row: Al Gerdes, Bill Smith, Don Bunce,

June Houstman, unidentified, Virginia Hinz, Charles Arthur, Jim Goottee. (Submitted by Kathryn Barnes.)

eight-hour day.

"Electric spreading machines spread material, which comes in 500-yard rolls, loaded by electric hoists. Automation now replaces individual handling, by spacing and sewing buttons and button holes and stacking them. Master patterns are made with a computer controlled Plotter Head which makes original master markers used in all other plants, thus controlling yardage use, one of the biggest costs of the 'rag business'.

"All information for the patterns ranging from size 3X to 60-inches in men's waists in jeans and slacks are stored in computers. We have five plants and five shipping centers and export primarily to Japan and England."

The building built by the Improvement Corporation in 1929 is currently being used by Rockwell-Collins Corporation.

For a time, a manufacturing firm called Turner Microphone was located here in the 1970's.



*Flag-raising ceremony at the Reliance Manufacturing Co. at the time they were awarded a*

*large government defense contract during World War II. (Submitted by Kathryn Barnes)*

## **Watters - 126 Years in Business Now Anamosa Lumber Co.**

by Bertha Finn

Back before the Civil War a fellow by the name of John Watters came to Anamosa from Dubuque to start up a business. His brother, George, followed a year later and they formed a partnership in a meat market and stock-buying concern. They worked side by side for a total of 44 years. Although others became partners to the Watters Bros., there was never a break between the brothers.

William Brunskill said of John "Jack" Watters, "He was instinctively and absolutely honest. For a quarter of a century he stood behind the block in the meat market, and we do not believe he ever refused to supply any man, woman, or child who called for meat, no matter if destitute of both money and credit. His great big heart never permitted him to say no to the appeal of any living mortal. Frequently we have bought a steak, or roast, and sometimes, remarked that he gave too much down weight. He always smiled and said that he would make it up next time. Next time would very

likely be a repetition of the previous episode.

He often worked from four or five o'clock in the morning until ten or 11 o'clock at night.

George Watters, of the Watters Brothers firm, lived 20 years after the death of his brother, "Jack", in 1906. George was 86 when he died.

The Watters Brothers were connected with many of the business and progressive enterprises of the city. They first engaged in the butcher business near where the South Sales Street and Main Street intersection is; on the north side of the street. Later, they erected the building where the Town Tap is now located, west of South Ford street, in 1871. That same year, along with C.L. Niles, and H.C. Metcalf, John and George Watters organized the First National Bank in Anamosa. The bank was first located where the Town Crier is now, second door east of the alley between North Ford and Main streets. In 1884, the two-story brick building was built. The top still bears