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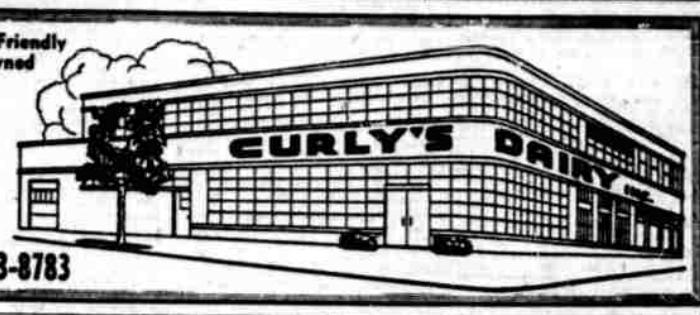

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Kay Woolen Mill Founded By Thomas Kay in 1890; Always Family Enterprise

Original Investment $70,000; Pioneer Industry Has Since Grown With the Capital City; Now Offers a Wide Selection in Practical Christmas Gifts.

By R. KENNETH EVANS

In keeping with the national trends and economy, this is a year when the general public will adopt the plan of giving practical Christmas gifts. This is as it should be, in keeping with national and local readjustments and thinking Americans realize that it is a necessity. The retail store of the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill, 260 South 12th street, has a wide selection from which to choose practical gifts that are of the highest quality and economical.

Residents of Salem and the Willamette valley can thank the ability, ingenuity and farsightedness of Thomas Kay, who in 1889, established the Thos. K. Woolen Mill in Salem.

"The industrial history of Salem is traditionally associated with the establishment and operation of woolen mills, first by the pioneer promoter, Joseph Watt, and later by Thomas Kay, the foremost of the English technicians who came to Oregon in pioneer times," is a quotation from an article written by Alfred L. Lomax and published last June in the Oregon Historical Quarterly.

"After the Willamette Woolen Manufacturing company plant burned, May 3, 1876, the intervening years were sterile so far as the woolen mill industry was concerned until the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill company was established in 1889."

Plans Made for a Mill in 1888

Efforts were made during those intervening years to encourage and finance a woolen mill in Salem. Thomas Kay, who had operated a woolen mill at Brownsville and had disposed of his interests, met with a group of Salem business men December 18, 1888, to discuss the project of establishing a mill in Salem. Kay had investigated the opportunities for establishing a woolen mill in Albany, Pendleton, Eugene and other Oregon cities, but finally decided on Salem. From this meeting in December, 1888, plans were completed for the establishment of a four-set mill to eventually employ 400 workers.

The old tannery and oil mill property including a power site owned by Gray brothers, was purchased by Thomas Kay for $15,000 and a total investment of $55,000 was made in the completed mill, which had a capacity for employing 50 people and consuming 200,000 pounds of grease wool annually. The moving spirits in Salem raised a bonus of $20,000 to aid in the project. The mill when completed was 136 by 55 feet, three stories and an attic with a dye house, two wool houses and the office. Operations were started March 13, 1890.

The Thos. K. Woolen Mill experienced the same troubles that are met by any growing industry but weathered them with the cooperation of Salem financial institutions and individuals. The greatest catastrophe, however, happened when the mill was totally destroyed by fire the morning of November 18, 1895.

Salem and Willamette valley people showed their confidence in Thomas Kay, and subscriptions were raised immediately and construction work for rebuilding the woolen mill was started hardly before the stones of the old structure had cooled. This was done in spite of hard-times and other economic problems facing the residents of the growing Oregon country. A three story building of brick and stone construction, facing 12th street, 58 by 150 feet in size, was completed and the Thos. K. Woolen Mill company was again in business.

Thomas Kay passed away April 27, 1900. Thomas B. Kay, a son of the founder, was elected president of the company. Under his direction the mills were operated profitably meeting all "ups and downs" until his death in 1931. In the meantime he had served as state treasurer from January 4, 1911 to January 6, 1919.

Following the death of his father, Ercel W. Kay was elected by the stockholders as president. He had been assistant-manager under his father's regime. He is president and general manager of the Thos. Kay Woolen Mills today.

Marjorie Kay Huntington is vice president. Thomas Kay, son of Ercel W. Kay, is assistant manager and the fourth generation of Kays to be identified with this Salem woolen mill industry. K. H. Pickens is secretary-treasurer. He has served in that position since 1928, filling the office left vacant by the death of E. J. Swafford, secretary. This year is his 36th anniversary with the mill.

Today, the Thos. Kay Woolen Mill is one of Salem's most important industries. The mill proper has been expanded, new and modern machinery added and it has grown and progressed along with the capital city. There are 85 workers employed and with the modern machinery which is used, these workers are able to produce 300 per cent more finished products than when the mill was employing many more people. The mill superintendent is John M. Reid, who has been with the firm 20 years.

A dependable market is maintained by this mill for approximately 500,000 pounds of grease wool, which comes from the Willamette valley and eastern Oregon wool growers. It is significant that this is a self-contained industry. Every phase of the operation, from receiving the grease wool, sorting, scouring, carding and weaving into woolen fabrics, is done in the plant here. Ladies' coatings, shirting, flannels, sportswear, woolen cloth, light wool cloth for mackinaws, plain or plaids, blankets and automobile robes are manufactured from virgin wool for the market. A payroll of some $180,000 annually is maintained.

The retail store is under the management of W. E. Pero, who has been employed by the Thos. Kay Woolen Mill company for 20 years. "We sure can offer some fine and practical Christmas gifts to people in Salem and the valley at economical prices," he stated.

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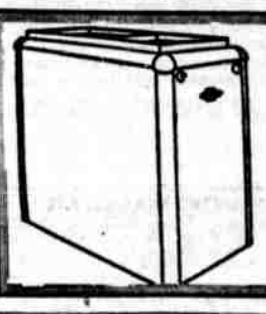
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