

PLYWOOD AND VENEER

At the turn of the century many of the older New Albany industries had closed – the glass works, the iron mills, and the woolen mill. But the city had good railroad and river transportation facilities; factors which were important in the new plywood and veneer plants set up in the city. Soon New Albany became one of the leading centers in this branch of the woodworking industry – a position it still holds . . .

New Albany was a pioneer in the manufacture of plywood and veneer. The first factory in the United States set up exclusively to produce the two wood products was opened in New Albany in 1901.

Other woodworking industries had been established in the city in 1890s – The Klerner Furniture Company, the New Albany Box and Basket Company, and the I. F. Force Handle Company. The city was a logical place for woodworking industries. There was an abundance of good timber in southern Indiana, the city was located on the Ohio River so that products could be shipped easily south and north. The river also made it easy to transport tropical lumber from South America up to New Albany from New Orleans. Railroad connections from Chicago also converged at the Falls Cities and the K & I Bridge gave New Albany through connections to the South. There was also a good supply of labor and of electric power.

These factors led a group of Chicago manufacturers to select the city as the site of the Indiana Veneer & Panel Company at the turn of the century.

This firm was later known as the Crescent Plywood Company and today is the General Plywood Company. At the time this pioneer plant was established, wood for furniture manufacturing was increasing in cost because of the dwindling supply of timber in American forests. To solve the problem, the manufacturers developed the veneering process by which a thin sheet of quality wood is used to cover a solid piece of less expensive wood. Plywood was developed at the same time by binding together several sheets of veneer.

The New Albany plant was an immediate success, and in 1907 another factory was built, and others soon followed. The new industry grew so rapidly that by 1920 more plywood was made in New Albany than anywhere else in the world. The development of radio in the 1920s brought added demand for veneer to cover radio cabinets.

The New Albany Veneering Company, now the Breece Plywood Company, had the largest plywood plant in the world by the 1930s. Timber to be made into veneer and plywood was shipped to New Albany from all over the United States and many foreign countries. With the increasing use of plywood and veneer, plants were established in other parts of the country, but New Albany and the southern Indiana area continues to be one of the large manufacturing areas of these products.

Today New Albany has four plywood plants – Breece Plywood Company, Hoosier Panel Company, Paramount Plywood Products, and the General Plywood Corporation, the descendant of New Albany's pioneer plant. Two plants are devoted to veneer manufacturing – B. L. Curry & Sons and Chester B. Stem, Incorporated. The E. M. Cummings Company is devoted to a specialized operation of cutting already-manufactured veneer into special shapes and sizes for use by plywood and furniture manufacturers.

The prefabricated home, another New Albany product utilizing wood has changed the architectural look of many American suburbs. The first practical pre-fabricated home design was worked out by Foster Gunnison of New Albany. The Gunnison Homes plant soon became an important addition to New Albany industry and today is operated by the United States Steel Company.

Southern Indiana soil is especially suited to the production of quality timber, and efforts are being made by private individuals and governmental agencies to promote conservation of the area's woodlands and to promote reforestation. An adequate supply of good timber will assure a constant flow of raw materials to the wood-using industries of New Albany and the surrounding region so that it can continue in the future to be an important factor in the prosperity of this area.

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