

It Began In An Old Chicken House

By John D. Wilson
Rush County Historian

This is the nineteenth article written to commemorate Rush County's Bicentennial in 2022. The topic for this month is the history of Harcourt Industries, Inc., in Milroy, Indiana. The information came from a company history written by Jan Harcourt Long and recently updated by Jean Ann Harcourt.

Harcourt Outlines Company was formed as a partnership on February 1, 1956, by Calla V. "Pick" Harcourt and Conrad C. Harcourt (father and son). The company printed outline maps on carbon masters for use on spirit duplicating machines. School name imprinted pencils were also sold as a supplement.

The demand for school name imprinted pencils increased. A large number of school customers did not want to be bothered with pencil sales, but they still wanted pencils available. This situation created the need for the development of a pencil vending machine which Pick Harcourt invented and perfected in 1958. Those machines were loaned free of charge with continued purchase of pencils from Harcourt.

While Conrad was traveling and selling pencils to schools, Norma S. (his wife) was working in the company imprinting pencils, shipping pencils, and keeping the books. She was also raising three children, Joe, Jean Ann, and Jan. Pick and Allen J., Conrad's brother, were building the pencil vending machines. Allen joined the partnership in 1958 but in 1961 he was tragically killed in an automobile accident.

Schools began to request a vendor that could dispense pens and notebook filler pads. So in 1959 Pick invented a pen vending machine and a paper vendor. As with the pencil machine, pen and paper machines were loaned to the schools if they agreed to purchase from Harcourt. During the first eight years of paper sales, the company purchased tablets from several suppliers and printed a school's name and mascot with an old used printing press. The entire operation took place in an old chicken house with dirt floors and a few cement slabs.



Harcourt decided to begin manufacturing notebooks in house. In 1967 a new building to house the tablet plant was built in Milroy. With a consistent increase in sales there was a need for more buildings. Additional facilities were added in 1969, 1972, and 1984.

The company suffered some setbacks during the 1970's. In 1974 a paper mill workers' strike slowed business. But the biggest setback came on August 29, 1975, when Conrad

Harcourt died of a massive coronary. Norma S. Harcourt became the sole stockholder in September of 1975. Norma handled the responsibility of the company along with her three children and the aid of key personnel that had been trained by Conrad. Today the main east/west street in Rushville's Industrial Park is named Conrad Harcourt Way.

Several innovations came about at Harcourt during the 1980's and 1990's: In December of 1984 the company opened a day care center. The day care served not only the employees of Harcourt, but the community as well. In 1987 a Motorola Computer System was installed. Two part-time employees were hired to enter all customer information into the system. And, in 1991 a fitness center was opened for Harcourt employees.

The year 1993 was a transitional year for Harcourt: Jean Ann was elected President of Harcourt Outlines, Inc. She initiated a major change in management personnel and gave managers more responsibility. At the time, 83 employees worked for the company. Joe Harcourt was Vice President of Sales and Marketing. The sales force grew to 13 representatives, and fiscal year sales for 1993-1994 exceeded ten million dollars. Also in 1992 Harcourt purchased 23 acres east of King's Pike that became the Milroy Industrial Park. The Harcourt Pencil Company occupied five acres.

Harcourt Pencil Company was built in 1992. During peak production years under the management of Darrell Bills (Rick Bill's father and Conrad's best friend), Joe Harcourt, Dan Stephens, Darlene Marlow and Tom Stamm, the facility produced 52,000,000 pencils a year. 1,000,000 pencils per week on two shifts. This was a lot of wood slat grooving, lead-laying, gluing, shaping, painting, tipping with ferrules and erasers. The finished pencils were custom printed by a silk screening process or foil wrapped with graphic designs.

By 1994 Norma S. Harcourt gifted 50% of Harcourt Outlines, Inc., to Jean Ann Harcourt and the other 50% to Joe Harcourt. Norma also gifted the exact same dollar amount to Jan Harcourt Long. Jan started her own company in Rushville called Long Lasting Designs.

All three of Norma's children had a Ball State University education. Joe graduated in 1973, and Jean Ann graduated in 1975. Both earned Business Administration Degrees. Jan graduated in 1976 with an Associate Degree in Business.

Sadly Norma Harcourt passed away on February 10, 1998. She deserves credit for passing on her leadership and organizational skills to her children.

Harcourt Pencil Company and Harcourt Outlines combined employed 116 people at one time. The Pencil Company operated for ten years and was forced to close due to national trade agreements with several countries in Asia...especially China, Thailand and South Korea. These trade agreements offered Harcourt delivered designer pencils to Milroy, Indiana, cheaper than



the individual material parts could be purchased in the USA. To be competitive, Harcourt had no choice but to close and sell the buildings.

A new division called Harcourt Political evolved in the early 2000's when Jean Ann was active in the Republican Party. Harcourt became a major supplier of yard signs, banners, lapel stickers, buttons, bumper stickers, and several other campaign materials. (Jean Ann served as Rush County Republican Chairman and then as Vice Chairman for the Indiana Republican Party. With her husband Terry Showalter, Jean Ann hosted "Picnic with Pence" gatherings at the Showalter-Harcourt home. To be candid, those fund raisers were very important to the political success of Mike Pence.)



Harcourt diversified in other ways. With two new casinos within 50 miles of Milroy, Harcourt pursued business with them through the Woman Business Enterprise (WBE) initiative in 2009. Today Harcourt does some printing for both casino locations, and they print the racing programs for Harrah's Hoosier Park.

Then came the Pandemic. The past two years have been difficult for the school supplier because 88% of Harcourt's annual revenue came from schools. Some school districts went virtual, and some went hybrid. Most would not allow students to touch the Harcourt vending machines. Employment at Harcourt dropped to 20 full-time employees.

So again diversification was/is the order of the day. Harcourt is offering a school security product called Window Graphics to their customers. This product allows a school to see outside, but does not allow those outside to see in. The windows have a graphic design including the school mascot and school colors.

Following Jean Ann's cardiac arrest, Rick Bills was promoted to President of Harcourt Industries, LLC. Through his company, Bills Industries, LLC, Rick purchased a large format printer to print the amazing Window Graphics. Harcourt purchases the window coverings from Bills Industries then sells and distributes them. Rick Bills is managing this new Harcourt division with the assistance of Vice President Theresa Harrison, Project Manager Richard Risk, and Sales Manager Mike Showalter, Terry and Jean Ann's son.

Jean Ann, Joe and Rick expressed gratitude for the many wonderful employees that contributed to the company's success over the past 65 years. Many former employees worked the bulk of their careers at Harcourt Industries, Inc. The special managers mentioned here worked between 25 to 47 years at Harcourt Industries. Those managers included Darrell Bills, Dan Stephens, Darlene Marlow and Tom Stamm. Great appreciation was also expressed about Allen Cohee – Production; Sandy Gwinnup – Administration; Andy Norris – IT Computers; Mark Lykins – Shipping; Leroy Martin – Vending Machines; Jim Shafer – Maintenance and continuing electrician Jim "Butch" Hunt.

The 46 year partnership between Jean Ann Harcourt and Joe Harcourt has included a lot of compromise, hard work, tears, and long days. They continue to own and operate Harcourt Industries, Inc., today, but they attribute a rebound from declining school sales to Rick Bills. As Harcourt continues to make tough decisions and change direction as needed, the future looks to be exciting and successful.

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