

THE SAMPLER

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This is the 20th article I have written to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022. The topic for this writing is The Sampler in Homer, Indiana. The information is based on a history written by Linda Levi and recent interviewing with Bruce Levi, Linda Levi, Steve Brown, Jason Dwenger and Cathy Waggener Kirk.



Seventy-five years ago in January of 1946 an unincorporated private enterprise was started by Roy (Bob) Waggener, Jr., and Emily Waggener doing business as The Rushcraft Shops. Activity of the business at that time included freelance design, sales and management procurement for The Park Furniture Company of Rushville and that firm's associated enterprises. (The Park Furniture Company had been sold in 1945 by its Rushville stock owners to interests in Grand Rapids, Michigan). Rushcraft occupied a suite of offices upstairs in the old Rush County National Bank building on the southwest corner of Main Street and Second Street in Rushville. The Rush County Community Foundation building is located there today.

On April 1, 1946, a full partnership between John H. (Jack) Rehme and Bob Waggener was formed. The new partnership's goal was to manufacture dining tables and commodes for retail trade. To this product line was added hand carved wall shelves, desks, drop leaf tables, and roseback chairs. Furniture was constructed from wild cherry lumber. Eventually designs were based on patterns from the old Park Furniture Company which had closed in 1956.

A former canning factory in Homer was rented from Mr. and Mrs. Ora Lower to construct the furniture. Ten employees were on the initial payroll. Products were sold nationally by commissioned salesmen. The Rushcraft offices were moved to the Homer factory. But by 1942 sales had slumped some and Jack Rehme took a position with Philco Corporation.

A reorganization and financing of Rushcraft Shops took place and by 1950 the trade name "The Sampler" was adopted. According to Bob Waggener the name meant, "We show samples of our wares." The showrooms were a series of side by side business buildings rented from the Lowers and located at the northeast corner of Railroad Street and CR 725W in Homer. In 1957 and 1965 respectively, the manufacturing building and the sales buildings were purchased from the Lowers. Some of the early factory employees were Bill Rankin, Oscar Love, Billy Allen, and Jim Krames. James Emmett Newkirk also became a longtime valued employee. Emmett was the "local historian".

Bob and Emy operated The Sampler as a proprietorship until 1969 when The Sampler was incorporated and shares of stock were distributed to selected employees. Bruce Levi joined the business in 1974 after graduating from Indiana University. Bruce had graduated from Rushville where he was an outstanding football player. By 1978 Bruce was named general manager of The Sampler, and by 2006 he was the majority owner. Bob and Emy had retired in 1981 and became even more active in community projects.



Officers of The Sampler in 2006 were Avis Brown – Corporate President, Steve Brown – Treasurer, and Linda Levi – Secretary. Avis had been Office Manager since 1947. Steve, no relation to Avis, joined the company in 1981. He had grown up in the lumber business in Cedar Grove, Indiana. Bruce Levi’s wife Linda also joined the firm in 1981. She was a graduate of Madison Heights H.S. in Anderson and Indiana University.



The year 1981 was a year for showroom expansion too. The Sampler opened a branch store in an old hotel building at Metamora. By 1995 The Sampler purchased property at the corner of Metamora’s Lovers’ Lane and Mechanics Avenue. The building housed six display rooms, plus office and storage space. After 35 years at the Metamora location, business had slacked off in the old canal town. The Sampler closed their Metamora store in 2016.

One important by-product of The Sampler was the organization of a community festival in Homer. In 1966 with the leadership of Bob and Emy Waggener, Paul and Alice Norris, Eva Robinson, John Houston, Virginia Houston, Carol Houston, Paul and Kay Rogers and many other area residents, the Homer Festival of Arts and Crafts came to be. It featured an exposition and sale of art and craft creations from the Rush County community and beyond.

Also at the Homer Festival a student group called the Slabtown Players performed skits written by RCHS drama teacher Marcia Blair. (Slabtown was the nickname for Homer. Leftover slabs of lumber from the building of the Shelbyville/Rushville Railroad had been used as siding for early homes in Homer).

There were other features at the festival. Paul and Alice Norris had a restaurant called Country Fare in the former home of Mr. and Mrs. Ora Lower. Local sororities, civic clubs, and church groups operated food booths. Proceeds after expenses were used to support summer workshops for Rush County students. Those summer workshops offered classes in art, weaving, drama, history, woodworking, photography, creative writing, and journalism. Three old train cars and the Homer Federated Church served as housing for the workshops.

In 1978 the Homer Festival was moved to Memorial Park in Rushville where there was more parking available. The Rushville festival was sponsored by the Rushville Rotary Club, but workshops at Homer continued into the 1980's. The Slabtown Players became the Briar Patch Kids. Briar Patch was the woodland home of Bob and Emy Waggener in Fayette County, where Bob and Emy had moved after living for 20 years in Homer.

Another community effort organized and promoted by Bob and Emy was the planning and editing of an updated Rush County History called A Rush County Retrospect. The two volume history and index focused on county events from the 1920's to the 1980's. Donald T. Zimmer wrote the manuscript for the project, and it included hundreds of recollections and photos from Rush County residents.

To honor Bob and Emy Waggener, the town of Rushville named their outdoor swimming pool at Memorial Park...Waggener Pool. Sadly Bob passed away in 1999 and Emy passed ten years later in 2009.

Both Bruce and Linda Levi have been very active in community affairs too. Bruce served two terms as a Rush County Councilman and two terms as a Rush County Commissioner. He was also on the board of Rush County Victims' Assistance. Linda was a founding member of the Rush Memorial Hospital Foundation and served as chairman. She also was a board member and chairman of the Rush County Chamber of Commerce. At one time Linda coached swimming at RCHS.

Over the years The Sampler has offered their beautiful cherry furniture in production form. But today most of the furniture is custom made. The customer brings in their design and dimensional needs and The Sampler craftsmen make it to order.

Some of The Sampler's most famous customers were David Letterman, his mother Dorothy, and other members of the Letterman family. Ironically Bob Waggener, Bruce Levi and Dave Letterman were all members of Sigma Chi Fraternity, Bob at Miami of Ohio, Bruce at Indiana University, and Dave at Ball State. This writer and Letterman were both Sigma Chis at Ball State in the late 1960's.



After 75 years, the ownership of The Sampler will now be in the hands of Jason Dwenger. Jason is a 1993 graduate of RCHS and has an Associate Degree in Construction Technology from Vincennes University. Jason has worked at The Sampler for 25 years, and he plans to continue the operation with three full-time employees and four part-time employees.

Jason gave me a tour of the factory, and it looks much like it has for 75 years. Some of the equipment actually was used at the old Park Furniture Company. Everything is made by hand from wild cherry lumber grown primarily in Indiana. There are no computers, no robotic systems. Jason said he will continue to search for craftsmen that have traditional woodworking skills. "They must be willing to learn and willing to work."

The work climate at The Sampler has been a situation with no "chain of command". It has been a cooperative effort. There has been a time clock and a weekly progress report. Worker benefits include considerable release time for family concerns, profit sharing, and a retirement plan.

Bruce Levi and Steve Brown have already "retired". Linda Levi will retire on January 1, 2022. Linda has made the gift shop an integral part of Sampler success, and approximately 20% of the revenue comes from the sale of smaller items. It is a busy place at Christmastime.

Steve Brown said that pride in their product has been the operative goal. He reflected that his proudest moments came when customers were genuinely satisfied with their purchase(s). "Our customers became our friends, and other members of those families became customers and friends. I will miss the People."

So the baton has been passed. As Bob Waggener said, "One can scarcely imagine our community without some semblance of sawdust."