

31 x 6.6

## EARLY INDUSTRIES

Early on Owosso attracted many businesses and industries. Besides Woodard Furniture and Casket Companies, D.M. Estey Manufacturing Co. and Robbins Table Company, both founded in the 1870s, manufactured fine furniture.

480SQI  
20 x 24

20 x 30

600SQI



### Robbins Table Company

Joseph H. Robbins, Sr., the first of three generations to bear that name, came to Owosso in 1864 from Sullivan County, New York and founded with his father, Benjamin E. Robbins, the Robbins Table Company in 1873. By 1878 they had built a large factory on the southeast corner of Main and Robbins Streets in Owosso.

At first, the company employed 45 men and was making 200 tables a week in a wide variety of styles. By 1894, they were manufacturing 50,000 dining room tables, employing 50 men and serving customers all over the U.S. Robbins supplied the 1900 Sherman County Courthouse with many of its furnishings.

In 1911 the Robbins Table Company ceased manufacturing and began reselling furniture with the slogan "One Location Saw You Mean". Renamed the Robbins Furniture Company, their sales in 1924, which included Woodard Furniture, were two million dollars.

Following the death of Joseph Robbins, Sr., his eldest son, Joseph H. Robbins, Jr. was president of the company for fifty years until his death in 1944. The company continued to be run by family members until 2001 when Robbins Furniture Company was sold to Oscar Bank of Farmington. At 129 years, the Robbins had been one of the oldest and longest-running family-owned furniture businesses in Michigan. Their catchphrase, "It's Worth the Drive to Owosso," is still loudly remembered by many today.



### Wolverine Sign Works

Wolverine Sign Works has been in existence since 1916 when two Owosso residents, Gene Cook and Ralph Volberg, created the company. In 1918 the men, borrowing against their life insurance for the capital, purchased the building formerly occupied by the Taylor Mattress Factory at 923 Bradley Street in Owosso. Since Michigan was the Wolverine state, they called their company Wolverine Sign Works.

Cook's son, Dick Cook was hired as a salesman in 1924. His outstanding sales ability saved the company well over the years. They sign on their walls with the Robbins Furniture Co., leading insurance companies, such as Auto Owners, many local banks, real estate and some of the leading motor manufacturers in the state including the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island and Beaumont's Christmas Wonderland in Farmington.

Over the years, four generations of the family have been involved with Wolverine Sign Works, which continues to use and maintain over 1,000 billboards throughout Michigan and eight additional states.



Other wood-making businesses fabricating doors and trim, caskets, carriage, carts and sleighs and even sports equipment grew.

### Owosso Carriage & Sleigh Co.

Founded in 1886 by J.A. Casper under the name The Owosso Carriage Works, the growing business, which was located on the northwest corner of Washington and Street Streets, became The Owosso Carriage Co. in 1896. A.M. Bradley was president of the company in 1905.

Jackson Sleigh Co. purchased the company in 1906 and renamed it The Owosso Carriage & Sleigh Co. In 1907 they manufactured 1,500 carriages (10,000 wheels) and 1,000 carts and sleighs (30 wheels), employing 125 men. An automobile became more common, the company went out of business around 1914.

Later, the factory was occupied by Field Body Manufacturing Co. and sold later by Burwood Products Co. owned by E.C. Matson. The plant burned in 1932.



39 x 6.6

## IRON & STEEL INDUSTRIES

Owosso's economy grew with the founding of several new industries, most of them related to iron and steel – and automobiles.

16 x 19



### Independent Stove Co. – Renown Stove Co.

In 1908, The Independent Stove Co. moved from Detroit to Owosso. Under an agreement with the city Improvement Association, a large factory was built in Owosso off Bradley Street. The company was in operation for 120,000 stoves in its first five years. For celebrating that goal, Renown Stove Co. (name changed in 1933) built three additions to the plant. By 1936, the company employed 185 men. Stoves continued to be their main product until 1942. Production ceased during WWII and resumed in 1944 until 1949. In 1950 Renown's assets were sold to Robert Commensator, who built a new plant on South Ottawa Street in 1954. For nearly twenty years the company built more than 300,000 stoves and heaters.



### A.G. Redmond

A.G. Redmond of Elm, manufacturer of small electric motors, expanded and moved part of an operation to Owosso in 1930 occupying the plant on East Main Street where the Walker Carbody Company had been during the 1920s and where Cleve Johnson had produced precision bearings during the middle 1930s.

In 1944, A.G. Redmond sold the business to a New York man who renamed the Redmond name. In 1958, Redmond Motors (employees pictured), built a new 68,000-sq-ft plant on South Delaney Road becoming Motor Products.



### Reliance Motor Truck Company

In 1908, Alvin M. Bradley obtained \$30,000 from the city to create William Durston and General Motors to build a Reliance Motor Truck plant in Owosso. Early in 1909, the company, including truck assembly, was moved to a newly built factory on Michigan Street near the railroad tracks employing 1,600 men. By the end of the year, two-ton heavy-duty trucks were rolling out of the plant. They had a two-cylinder, two-valve engine, sliding gear transmission, rear drive shaft and power hand-cranked axle.

Many truck manufacturers in the early 1900s, such as GMC, were always looking for publicity and truck races seemed to draw public attention. And, if your truck won the race, such as the Detroit to Chicago race, your sales would skyrocket. Featured in the GMC Truck catalog a Reliance 2 1/2 Ton Truck built in Owosso.

Probably less than 1,000 Reliance Trucks were built in Owosso. General Motors decided to move production from Owosso to Pontiac. In 1912, the last trucks made in Owosso had the GMC logo on them.

The city was very happy that Reliance was pulling out of town. Instead of being completely responsible, local American Machine & Tool used the factory. The company later expanded from Michigan Avenue through Washington Street with the front of the building facing Washington. 1929 was finished by the McMillan firm producing year – until the October 29 stock market crash. The company closed in 1934. Mid-West Abrasives, manufacturer of sandpaper products, occupied the factory in 1940. The factory has been vacant for decades.



John Shuman owned the team of oxen used in this 1910 ad for the Owosso Motor Truck Co. The photo was taken on East Main near Park Street.

Cars growing up in the 200 block of North Hill Street next to Edward Carr Lane & Road Estate, c.1917-1920

The Owosso Motor Truck Co. began making trucks in 1910 and were similar in appearance to trucks produced by the Reliance Motor Truck Co. in Owosso. Only two trucks were built before the plant closed in 1914.

25 x 39  
975SQI

16 x 19  
304SQI

20 x 39  
480SQI

### Estey Manufacturing Co.

David M. Estey born in 1842 in New Hampshire, moved with his wife, Mary, in 1865 to West Haven, six miles south of Owosso, and started a wood furniture company. In 1875 he was invited to move his business to Owosso, during a portion of Palmer's Planning Mill in Owosso (this building was later the Taylor Mattress Factory). After demolishing most of the building, just a portion of it survived to become "Wolverine Sign Works".



Estey moved again to South Washington Street and over time D.M. Estey Manufacturing Co. was the largest employer in town. The large yard of lumber came from the 12,000 acres of industrial Estey owned in Canada County.



Estey's plant "C" burned in 1906. At the time, it was the largest fire in the city history.



Estey's plant "B" (called the White Elephant) was built in 1891 in 57.5 working hours and was destroyed in two minutes by Owosso's famous cyclone of 1911.

The Governor of Vermont, Levi Fuller was a large shareholder in Estey Manufacturing Company and visited Owosso in 1893. Estey's truck, Jack Estey, the prominent Vermont region builder, was also a large shareholder. Over the years Estey was Mayor of Owosso (1884), served a term in New Mexico called "The Great Estey Coy" and was a half owner of the Queen Cart Co. and Estey & Calkins Lumber Co. in Farmington. Estey died in 1901 at age 61. His funeral was held at his home at 529 North Park Street.

20 x 39  
780SQI

20 x 22  
440SQI

20 x 28  
560SQI

### Zimmerman Manufacturing Company

In 1905, the Zimmerman Manufacturing Company on South Cedar Street was established, making wood handles for axes, hammers, axes, chisels and farm equipment.

Zimmerman also produced tennis rackets, polo mallets and baseball bats, which were made of the finest ash. He did business with numerous tool manufacturers and leading sporting goods firms throughout the U.S. Known for their quality, the baseball bat part of the business was sold to the Louisville-Slager Co. in June 1926.

THE SPORTING GOODS DEALER

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