

Fall 2018

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A “Self-Made Town”: Semi-Annual Furniture Expositions and the Development of Civic Identity in Grand Rapids, 1878-1965

By

Scott Richard St. Louis

The Right Place at the Right Time¹

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, prominent business figures in the city of Grand Rapids had reason to be both ambitious and optimistic. Striving to pull every last cent of profit out of available resources, they rationalized production workflows and integrated the latest technologies into their factories. They also perceptively discerned that a maturing railroad network connecting Grand Rapids to an emerging Victorian consumer economy would empower the city to achieve new levels of prosperity and fame through an industry on the verge of unprecedented growth: domestic furniture production.²

These entrepreneurs acted upon their hopes for the community's future through the establishment of the semi-annual Grand Rapids Furniture Expositions, beginning in December 1878. At first glance, these expositions might seem to have been a mere manifestation of the community's recognition as America's "Furniture City." However, they actually constituted a fundamental cause behind the construction of this

¹ Previous versions of this research were presented at the Second Annual Midwest History Conference in Grand Rapids on 1 June 2016; at the 131st Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association in Denver, Colorado, on 7 January 2017; and at "History Detectives: Sleuthing for Local History," a program held at the Grand Rapids Public Library on 28 January 2017.

² For more information on the history of industrialization in the Midwest during the nineteenth century, see David R. Meyer, "Midwestern Industrialization and the American Manufacturing Belt in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Economic History* 49.4 (December 1989): 921-37 and Brian Page and Richard Walker, "From Settlement to Fordism: The Agro-Industrial Revolution in the American Midwest," *Economic Geography* 67.4 (October 1991): 281-315. Meyer notes that the Midwest increased "its share of national manufacturing value added from 14 to 26 percent between 1860 and 1900" (922-23). Page and Walker note that in "exploring the spatial form of the Midwest, particular emphasis must be put on the neglected role of small industrial cities in the process of regional industrialization and the formation of a dense network of urban spaces" (284).

civic identity by local citizens: business leaders and supportive community members who collaborated in making the Grand Rapids name synonymous with excellent household furniture on an international scale. These citizens also resolved to prevent similar efforts in rival cities—including the powerhouses of New York and especially Chicago—from eclipsing their own.³ The astonishing extent of their success provided the city with a greater profile in the national consciousness and transformed the physical and economic landscape of Grand Rapids itself.

Given that Grand Rapids fits comfortably into Midwestern historian Timothy Mahoney's description of small cities, this article also responds to his call for scholarly examinations of these urban spaces and their relationship to the broader regional and national economic forces that influence—and are influenced by—the fate of such cities.⁴ By arguing for the importance of the semi-annual furniture expositions to the development of Grand Rapids, this research sheds light on the place of a small Midwestern city in the growth of a national consumer culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵

³ For more information on the place of Chicago in Midwestern history, see Timothy B. Spears, *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

⁴ Timothy R. Mahoney, "The Small City in American History," *Indiana Magazine of History* 99.4 (December 2003): 311-30.

⁵ Within the last decade, scholars have been rebuilding the intellectual infrastructure required to spark and sustain a revival of Midwestern studies in American historical scholarship. For example, the Midwestern History Association was established in 2014; in 2015, it began hosting annual conferences and publishing *Studies in Midwestern History*. Additionally, the *Middle West Review*, published by the University of Nebraska Press, was established in 2014. For more on Midwestern studies, see Andrew Seal, "The Regrowth of American Thought," *Middle West Review* 3.2 (Spring 2017): 1-19 and the works of Jon K. Lauck: *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017); *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013); "Why the Midwest Matters," *The Midwest Quarterly* 54.2 (Winter 2013): 165-85; "The Prairie Historians and the Foundations of Midwestern History," *The Annals of Iowa* 71.2 (Spring 2012): 137-73. See also earlier works by other scholars, including James H. Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of Midwestern States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989); Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jon C. Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray (eds.), *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Terry A. Barnhart, "'A Common Feeling': Regional Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Old Northwest, 1820-1860," *Michigan Historical Review* 29.1

The story of a small city's rise to leadership of the American furniture industry emerged both from favorable demographic circumstances and from consequential decisions made by business leaders in Grand Rapids. In a demographic context, the population center of the United States, as determined by national census data, gradually moved westward over the long nineteenth century, reaching Cincinnati by 1880 after being located just east of Baltimore in 1790.⁶ From 1880 to 1940, the national center of population gradually moved into and across the state of Indiana, never falling more than a few hundred miles away from Grand Rapids.⁷ The westward drift of a growing population meant that a large market of potential buyers lived relatively close to the city.⁸

Immigration constituted a second demographic trend favorable to the Grand Rapids furniture industry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, newcomers entered the United States at unprecedented levels and began working in countless places, the factories of Grand Rapids among them.⁹ A simultaneous expansion of the national railroad network enabled producers located in the maturing city to sell their growing output even to consumers who lived far outside the Midwest, turning Grand Rapids into a burgeoning industrial and commercial hub.¹⁰ Manufacturers also enjoyed access to a vital power source in the Grand River, which runs through the heart of the city.¹¹

(Spring 2003): 39-70; Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, and Andrew Cayton, eds., *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Ginette Aley, "Dwelling within the Place Worth Seeking: The Midwest, Regional Identity, and Internal Histories," in Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz, eds., *Regionalism and the Humanities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 95-109; Edward Watts, "The Midwest as a Colony: Transnational Regionalism," in Mahoney and Katz, *Regionalism and the Humanities*, 166-189; David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁶ US Census Bureau, "Centers of Population," www.census.gov/geo/reference/centersofpop.html. The national center of population is defined as "the point at which an imaginary, weightless, rigid, and flat (no elevation effects) surface representation of the 50 states (or 48 conterminous states for calculations made prior to 1960) and the District of Columbia would balance if weights of identical size were placed on it so that each weight represented the location of one person." See also Kenneth L. Ames, "Good Timing and a Flair for Leadership," in Christian G. Carron, ed., *Grand Rapids Furniture: The Story of America's Great Furniture City* (Grand Rapids: Public Museum of Grand Rapids, 1998), 7-8.

⁷ "Centers of Population" and Ames, "Good Timing," 7-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ellen Arlinsky and Marg Ed Kwapil, *In Celebration of Grand Rapids* (Northridge, CA: Windsor, 1987), 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

A Golden Trio: Technology, Consumerism, and Victorian Ideals

Being in the right place at the right time undeniably assisted Grand Rapids in becoming the nation's furniture capital by the end of the nineteenth century. Even so, such an achievement was possible only at the lucrative intersection of technology and changing American values. Indeed, Grand Rapids came to hold a place all its own in the furniture industry as local companies transformed prevailing attitudes about machine-assisted production, held by industry insiders and the general public alike. High-quality home furniture had traditionally been handmade before the Gilded Age, but by the 1870s three Grand Rapids furniture companies greatly improved general perceptions about the quality of pieces created with help from machines: Berkey & Gay; Nelson, Matter & Company; and the Phoenix Furniture Company. All three of these firms displayed award-winning furniture to national acclaim at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876.¹² Between 1860 and 1890, many of the city's manufacturers developed machines to perform some of the more rudimentary tasks in furniture production, while skilled craftsmen continued to perform detailed carving, painting, and other decoration by hand.¹³

The use of new technology in the furniture factories of Grand Rapids quickened production and lowered costs without sacrificing quality, empowering local companies to occupy a valuable niche in the growing national market for home furniture. Moreover, these changes would prove timely as the United States entered a veritable golden age of furniture consumption. The culture of the American middle class by the late nineteenth century was heavily influenced by the Victorian principles of gentility and domesticity.¹⁴ Together, these cultural values paved the way for the ascendance of a dense home aesthetic that fueled colossal

¹² Joel Lefever, "They Make Furniture with Machinery," in Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 33.

¹³ Ames, "Good Timing," 8.

¹⁴ For more on the culture of the American middle class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Timothy R. Mahoney, "Middle-Class Experience in the United States in the Gilded Age, 1865-1900," *Journal of Urban History* 31.3 (March 2005): 356-66. "By the middle of the nineteenth century, the middle class had established a secure position at the center of American urban society. They had done so by living their lives according to a gendered social ideology based on individualism, reason, materialism, and faith. Middle-class men achieved success in the public world of work through self-control and discipline. Middle-class women established a moral, genteel, private domestic realm. Together, they believed that as individuals with a secure sense of self, they could influence others within the small cohesive societies they lived in to live as they did and thus lay the foundations of social order." (356)

demand for affordable, high-quality furniture.¹⁵ More Americans than ever before sought to decorate their homes in styles previously associated with the upper classes, as decreases in furniture prices, brought on by machine-assisted production, ensured that quantities of home furnishing once limited to the wealthy became increasingly popular at lower socioeconomic levels.¹⁶ Such home furnishing practices may very well have informed the views of economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who articulated the concept of "pecuniary emulation" at the turn of the century by arguing that material acquisition brought satisfaction to the individual only insofar as it brought about improvements in one's social standing.¹⁷

Victorian culture dictated that the hallmark of sound family life was a homebound mother who would serve as moral exemplar for her children and caretaker for her husband, presumably the family's connection to public life and thus considered the individual most at risk of being damaged by the unrestrained economic individualism of the era.¹⁸ Middle-class wives and mothers were expected to fulfill these two responsibilities by providing their husbands with a safe retreat from the cruelties of an industrializing society, and their children with a space conducive to the development of proper moral and social values. Domestic life in the Victorian era was therefore profoundly influenced by environmental determinism, or the belief that strong mental health and a wholesome worldview depended upon access to a rich, stimulating home environment.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ames, "Good Timing," 8-13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Fairfield, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley, 1991), 22-34. For a classic theoretical account of consumption and class, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁸ Ames, "Good Timing," 8.

¹⁹ Such beliefs were reinforced by the publication of shocking photographic exposés including *How the Other Half Lives*, a poignant 1890 investigation of New York tenement life by journalist Jacob Riis. A Danish immigrant who had struggled with extreme poverty during his earliest years in the United States, Riis deftly tapped into the deepest fears of the American middle class by insisting that the psychological stresses of life in crowded and unsanitary tenements had bred "a proletariat ready and able to avenge the wrongs of their crowds." Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 69. For scholarly explorations into the American fear of poverty and manifestations of this fear in the broader culture, see Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) and Christine Photinos, "The Figure of the Tramp in Gilded Age Success Narratives," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40.6 (2007): 994-1018.



Illustration in a full-page advertisement by the Berkey & Gay Furniture Company, placed in the 1926 South High School Yearbook

Source: Grand Rapids Public Library Department of History and Special Collections

With regard to home and family, Victorian priorities would exert a lasting influence on American culture, finding reinforcement in the contemporaneous growth of consumerism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As late as 1926, South High School in Grand Rapids published a yearbook containing a full-page advertisement from the Berkey & Gay Furniture Company titled “Competing with the Silver Flask—*and the Jazz Orchestra*.” In this advertisement, the company appealed directly to the environmental determinism featured so prominently in Victorian thought:

“Young people never seem to care to stay at home any more.”

How many uneasy mothers have said it, and sought vainly for an answer. Parenthood—never an easy job, even back in the pre-flapper, pre-flask days—calls for nothing short of genius today. . . .

The joy ride, the silver flask and the jazz orchestra will lose some of their insidious allure, when parents have

learned to appeal more artfully to the pride and imagination of youth. Give one-tenth the thought to your home furnishings that your daughter gives to her dresses, your son to his girls, and there will be merry groups around your fireside once more, and more singing in the music room.

Select from time to time an attractive piece of furniture—bearing, perhaps, the coveted shop mark of Berkey & Gay—and you will be astonished, in a year or so, to observe how enchantingly the atmosphere of home has changed—how tempting it is to entertain—how thoroughly your children will enjoy being home, surrounded by beautiful objects.

You will be surprised, too, to learn how little it costs, over a period of time, to furnish the home throughout with distinguished suites and decorative pieces. Ranging in price from \$250 to \$6000, there is a Berkey & Gay suite for every need—almost for every purse.

And you will then be bidding intelligently against the outside world for the interest and companionship of your children—a spirited challenge to the Age of Jazz!²⁰

This advertisement spoke powerfully to the union of consumerism and Victorian culture in the United States during the early twentieth century. By calling attention to the sanctity of the home, the responsibilities and challenges of middle-class motherhood, and the looming moral dangers of experiencing adolescence in a rapidly changing country, Berkey & Gay could make a case for the edifying potential of its products in a society grappling with the dynamo of modernity.²¹

²⁰ South High School yearbook, 1926, 179. Grand Rapids Public Library Department of History and Special Collections [Hereafter GRPL].

²¹ For more on the histories of advertising and consumer culture in the United States, see Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); Simon J. Bronner, ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984); Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1983); and James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). Regarding the relationship of gender to consumer culture, see Mary Louise Roberts, "Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture," *American*

As Victorian families came to believe in the necessity of dwelling in homes that were both comfortable and uplifting, household interiors became dense in their levels of furnishings. Rugs were placed on top of other rugs, tabletops and shelves were buried under ornate decorative pieces, and multiple pieces of furniture were packed into every room, turning home interiors into elaborate spaces that reflected contemporary beliefs in Western dominance of both the natural and cultural worlds. These newly popular tastes drove furniture sales to unprecedented highs and spoke to the comfort and refinement of the individuals and families who bought pieces for their own homes.²²

Selling Grand Rapids: Establishment and Growth of the Semi-Annual Furniture Expositions

By the middle of the 1870s, leading furniture manufacturers in Grand Rapids were selling their products across the country. The aforementioned Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 gave them an opportunity to make a statement like never before.²³ There, the Phoenix Furniture Company displayed two bedroom suites—one specifically made for the event and one from the regular line—alongside a hallstand, sideboard, and table. Berkey & Gay brought a bedroom suite featuring Michigan black walnut and French burl panels and lounges. Beautiful though the products of these two companies were, it was Nelson, Matter & Company that stole the show, displaying a bed and matching dresser that stood eighteen feet high and featured niches filled

Historical Review 103.3 (June 1998): 817-44; Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *Journal of American History* 71.2 (September 1984): 319-42. For a classic analysis of consumer culture in the United States during the interwar years, see Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1929).

²² Arlinsky and Kwapil, *In Celebration*, 131.

²³ For more information on Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exposition and other world's fairs—including the famous 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the great furniture rival of Grand Rapids—see Cathy Jean Maloney, *World's Fair Gardens: Shaping American Landscapes* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012); Bruno Giberti, *Designing the Centennial: A History of the 1876 International Exhibition in Philadelphia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000); Robert Muccigrosso, *Celebrating the New World: Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993); Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).



Matching bed and dresser, both standing eighteen feet high. The pieces feature niches filled with heroic figures from the American Revolution, and both are topped with colossal eagles. Displayed by Nelson, Matter & Company at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876.

Source: Ellen Arlinsky and Marg Ed Kwapil, *In Celebration of Grand Rapids* (Northridge, CA: Windsor, 1987), 131. Courtesy of the Grand Rapids Public Library Department of History and Special Collections.

with carved statues of heroes from the American Revolution, topped with colossal eagle finials.²⁴ All three companies won awards and widespread acclaim for superb workmanship, alluring finish, and judicious selection of materials, with Nelson, Matter & Company taking a prize of \$10,000.²⁵

The enthusiastic praise the city's leading manufacturers received in Philadelphia made a lasting impact on the furniture businesses of Grand Rapids, elevating some of them to national prominence while sparking the process by which Grand Rapidians would come to see furniture as the defining element of their community. As dealers from out of town made

²⁴ Lefever, "They Make Furniture," 41.

²⁵ Arlinsky and Kwapil, *In Celebration*, 131.

their way to Grand Rapids to place their orders after the Centennial Exposition, local companies set up showrooms inside their factories.²⁶ Manufacturers located elsewhere in the country, keen to prevent buyers from passing them over to shop in Grand Rapids, soon armed their salesmen with catalogs and sent them to the city, and by December 1878 the first of many semi-annual Grand Rapids Furniture Expositions was underway.²⁷ Spaces in local factories became permanent showrooms, and out-of-town companies began renting space in downtown buildings to display their own lines of furniture.²⁸ At least eleven buyers were in Grand Rapids for the first exposition; the Morton House accommodated three Chicago buyers and one Philadelphia buyer, while Sweets Hotel lodged four buyers from Chicago and one each from Milwaukee, Toledo, and Boston.²⁹ The expositions announced a new era in the city's development, as the local economy increasingly came to revolve around furniture in ways it previously had not.

By 1880, Grand Rapids had become the seventh largest furniture manufacturing center in the United States. Four years later, thirty-two companies together produced some \$5.5 million of goods annually.³⁰ At the 1884-85 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans, Grand Rapids furniture companies enjoyed the unique honor of having a building almost exclusively their own. Known as the "Grand Rapids Furniture Pavilion," twenty Grand Rapids firms and one Chicago firm were represented therein.³¹ In 1891, the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu purchased twenty carloads of furniture made in Grand Rapids.³² By 1897, thirty-four furniture companies took 10 percent of the national market share, and Grand Rapids was surpassed only by New York and Chicago in the total volume of its furniture production. Even so, it was the small Michigan city—rather than the urban titans it competed with—that set the standards for design, manufacturing technique, and marketing, boasting some of the largest furniture factories

²⁶ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 72-73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Frank Edward Ransom, *The City Built on Wood: A History of the Furniture Industry in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1850-1950* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1955), 22.

³⁰ Arlinsky and Kwapil, *In Celebration*, 131.

³¹ Gordon L. Olson, *A Grand Rapids Sampler* (Grand Rapids: The Grand Rapids Historical Commission, 1992), 133; Arlinsky and Kwapil, *In Celebration*, 131-33. Sixteen of those firms are listed in Grand Rapids Historical Commission, "New Orleans Exposition," <http://bit.ly/2hTHuww>.

³² Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland*, 54.



Display of S. G. Estabrook & Co. from New York at the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition of midsummer 1905.

Source: Grand Rapids Public Library Department of History and Special Collections

in the world.³³ The prestige of the city name was so well established in the industry by 1918 that Frank M. Sparks, associate editor at the *Grand Rapids Herald*, was able to note that “Grand Rapids now is the recognized center of the furniture world,” with buyers attending the exposition “from every state in the Union, from Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Hawaii.”³⁴ Over the course of four decades, the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition had evolved into an international event.³⁵

Back home, the physical and economic landscape of Grand Rapids itself was changing dramatically to accommodate the ever-growing crowds of buyers and exhibitors who swarmed the expositions, held at

³³ Frank M. Sparks, “Why Grand Rapids is the Furniture Market,” in Grand Rapids Furniture Salesmen’s Association, *Souvenir and Annual Program of the Second Annual Field Day: Grand Rapids Furniture Market, Summer of Nineteen-Eighteen*, Collection 84, Box 30, Folder 3, GRPL; Z. Z. Lydens, ed., *The Story of Grand Rapids* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1967), 299.

³⁴ Lefever, “They Make Furniture,” 41.

³⁵ Moreover, the semi-annual furniture expositions in Grand Rapids appear to have inspired a similar event overseas, in Germany. See “Follows the Lead: Stuttgart Holds Furniture Exposition Like Grand Rapids,” *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 17 May 1906, 7.



The Blodgett building (right foreground), constructed in 1889. Photo taken in 1911 by Louis Towner.

Source: Grand Rapids City Archives and Records Center

least twice yearly.³⁶ The number of hotel rooms in the city expanded greatly, new restaurants and bars were built, and vaudeville theaters (later movie theaters) planned for sellout nights during the winter and midsummer expositions.³⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, exposition guidebooks, including maps and directories of furniture

³⁶ As the buyers came from far-flung places, so too did the materials for furniture. Many companies in Grand Rapids produced mahogany furniture, necessitating the importation of timber grown in warmer climes. For example, local furniture industry leader Charles R. Sligh traveled to Honduras in 1883 and established a company there to purchase mahogany timber, which would be cut in New Orleans and then sent to Grand Rapids. See Grand Rapids Historical Commission, “Sligh Furniture Co.,” <http://bit.ly/2snw0FF>, “Mahogany Association Labels,” <http://bit.ly/2Ed11A7>, and “Mahogany Association Number,” <http://bit.ly/2EhEOhM>. Additionally, the John Widdicomb papers at the Grand Rapids Public Library include business correspondence with Wm. E. Uptegrove & Bro. regarding the purchase of mahogany from 1896 to 1918. See Collection 17, Box 9, Folder 48, GRPL.

³⁷ Arlinsky and Kwapil, *In Celebration*, 370; Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 73, 77.

companies organized by the location of their display, were printed to help visitors find their way around the busy city.³⁸

The guidebooks were needed in large part because of another significant transformation brought to downtown Grand Rapids by the expositions: the construction of numerous buildings specifically for the purpose of displaying furniture. In 1889, wealthy lumber baron D. A. Blodgett opened the office building that still bears his name, prompting Philip Klingman and Charles Limbert, two clever salesmen with experience representing a number of outside firms at the Grand Rapids Furniture Expositions, to rent two floors and eventually the entire building in order to display their employers' wares.³⁹ By 1899, Klingman had partnered with Dudley Waters to construct yet another furniture display building, with eight acres of floor space to hold displays from some of the 225 outside manufacturers who brought their products to Grand Rapids in 1900.⁴⁰ The two businessmen put up another building in 1904, and other members of the community completed several more furniture display buildings between 1907 and 1914.⁴¹ By the early 1920s, many existing structures were modified to accommodate furniture displays.⁴²

When J. Boyd Pantlind reopened the former Sweets Hotel as the soon-to-be-famous downtown Pantlind Hotel in 1902, the semi-annual furniture expositions enjoyed a new center of activity. Its large and ornate lobby—furnished, of course, by Grand Rapids manufacturers—was an ideal space for banquets and other festivities.⁴³ Smaller hotels such as the Cody, Herkeimer, and Livingston offered more affordable rooms to guests who did not mind being farther away from the middle of events. Other hotels included the Morton and, by the 1930s, the Browning and the Rowe.⁴⁴ Even Pantlind's Hotel Ottawa on Lake Michigan was not out

³⁸ See the guidebooks printed for the winter expositions in 1896 and 1897, Collection 233, Box 12.5, Folder 1, GRPL.

³⁹ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; Ransom, *The City Built on Wood*, 23.

⁴¹ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 75.

⁴² *Ibid.* For more on the history of furniture display buildings in Grand Rapids, see Henry H. Matsen and the Grand Rapids Historical Commission, "Furniture Exhibition Buildings in Grand Rapids," <http://bit.ly/1y1rXY0>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁴ See Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition Association, *Market Ambassador: News and Previews, 114th Semi-Annual Showing, June 25 to July 14, 1934*, 38-39, Collection 30, Identifier 2002.52.1, and *Market Ambassador: 118th Semi-Annual Showing, June 29 to July 18, 1936*, 35, Identifier 1993.22.19, Grand Rapids Public Museum Archives [hereafter GRPM].



The Waters building, constructed in 1899 (photo circa 1912)

Source: Grand Rapids Public Library Department of History and Special Collections

of reach for those visitors willing to wake up early and catch the interurban line into the city.⁴⁵

Though Grand Rapids had long been home to a thriving furniture industry, by the early twentieth century the physical space of the city itself came to reflect the primacy of the furniture industry, as the city's built environment began to represent in bricks and mortar what the nickname "Furniture City" had come to represent in the minds of local business leaders, journalists, and other citizens. As early as 1896, the city was cementing its image, as recognized in its adoption of the eponymous civic flag.

With so many traveling to Grand Rapids specifically to attend the semi-annual furniture expositions, it is no surprise that entertainment offerings in the city eventually became a subject of wide interest. In late 1933 and early 1934, a group composed of more than one hundred furniture sales representatives established the Salesmen's Club of the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition, an organization with a very specific purpose that foreshadowed its unique, and often humorous, legacy.

⁴⁵ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 74-75.



The Civic Flag of Grand Rapids, adopted in 1896

Source: Grand Rapids Historical Commission, Furniture City History website. Collection of Thomas R. Dilley.

This purpose was outlined in a club roster and directory published in 1940:

While the membership has met together in business or purely social ways on many occasions, the Club's main activities since its organization have been in connection with the planning and carrying out of programs of entertainment for the visiting furniture men during Market periods. . . . It is recognized that larger and more metropolitan centers have more to offer visitors in the amusement field, theatres, night clubs, etc., than has Grand Rapids, so the Salesmen's Club for the past seven years has

provided with financial cooperation of Exhibitors, nightly entertainment of real merit and sophisticated calibre [sic] for the enjoyment of the city's Furniture Market guests.⁴⁶

Existing documentation about the entertainment arranged by the Salesmen's Club in its early years indicate that "sophisticated calibre" may have been more than a modest embellishment; in fact, such a description might even be laced with ironic humor. Indeed, photos show that "cat boxing" was a popular spectacle made possible by the Salesmen's Club during at least one exposition, while "Doris the Cellophane Dancer" also caught the attention of the club's predominantly male membership.⁴⁷ Further, historian Christian G. Carron has found that some Salesmen's Club meetings turned into "spirited, even rowdy, fraternity parties."⁴⁸ At a gathering of club members and their guests in the Pantlind Grill Room during the summer exposition of 1935, expensive damage occurred as men hurled silverware at one another and broke multiple instruments belonging to the house band. The cost of the club's entertainment during this exposition ran to nearly \$6,000 (more than \$100,000 in today's money).⁴⁹ By sparing no expense to show its large membership a memorable time, the Salesmen's Club took advantage—in more ways than one—of the relatively new facilities that had emerged to accommodate the popularity of the semi-annual expositions. This contributed significantly to the distinctive profile of the expositions as robust *social* events, rather than merely professional and commercial ones, that were not to be missed by anyone seeking to make a name for themselves in the industry.

Of course, some spirited moments at the expositions were more carefully organized, and their enjoyment was available to a larger following than raucous sales representatives. In January 1928, nearly six years before the founding of the Salesmen's Club, Grand Rapids commenced its one hundredth semi-annual furniture exposition with auspicious flair. On the day after Christmas 1927, the *Grand Rapids Herald* described the opening plans in vivid detail:

⁴⁶ Salesmen's Club of the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition, *Roster and Directory of the Salesmen's Club of the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition for the Calendar Year 1940*, 4, Collection 30, Identifier 1986.8.63, GRPM.

⁴⁷ An undated newspaper photo of the "cat boxing" spectacle exists in the furniture exposition scrapbooks of Collection 30, GRPM.

⁴⁸ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*



Doris Hurtig, a.k.a. "Doris the Cellophane Dancer," a popular entertainer sponsored by the Furniture Salesmen's Club of Grand Rapids during the 1930s

Source: *Furniture Blue Book* (January 1936): 29, Grand Rapids Public Museum Archives, Collection 30, Identifier 1996.1.65

President Coolidge will open the 100th Furniture Market to be held in Grand Rapids. At about 8 o'clock on the evening of Jan. 2, the president at the White House will touch a button which will turn on the lights, start the whistles blowing and notify the world that Grand Rapids, the Furniture Capital of America, is celebrating an event epochal in the life of a great industry and meaningful to the home. . . .

Monroe ave. [sic] from one end to the other will be fittingly decorated. All the boulevard lights the entire length of the street will be trimmed in Christmas greens until Monroe ave. and the streets for blocks each side will be lanes through evergreen forests. The color scheme for the whole event will be green and white.

The chief feature of the municipal decoration, however, will be something that probably has never before been seen

on this continent at least. Every window on Monroe ave. will be given over to a display of furniture. This feature has been very carefully worked out. To each manufacturer who cared to participate, and all the exhibitors were invited, a big show window has been assigned. Each has been permitted to decorate that window as he chooses to make a proper setting for the group of his furniture which he chooses to display there. . . .

As a result of this plan of decoration, two solid miles of furniture will be on display in the store windows along Monroe ave. and the side streets close at hand

When President Coolidge touches the button the lights will be turned on and the window displays will become visible to all who desire to see. At the same time all the factory whistles in Grand Rapids will screech out their greetings to the furniture men who will be coming to Grand Rapids to attend the market and to take part in the celebration.⁵⁰

In a growing and changing city, with a reputation prominent enough by the late 1920s to win a nod from the White House, the semi-annual furniture expositions did not simply strengthen the industrial and commercial life of Grand Rapids. Rather, they helped endow the city with a distinguishable identity—one answer, perhaps among many, to the question of what it meant to be *from* Grand Rapids—and a symbolic status that would itself become a coveted object of consumption among sellers and buyers of home furniture in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Given the emotional weight and economic clout bound up within the Grand Rapids name by this period, it is not surprising that the city’s residents took great interest in the expositions of rival cities, and that local business leaders began using the law to protect the Grand Rapids brand from usurpation by unscrupulous outsiders.

Building the Brand, Protecting the Throne

Indeed, as the expositions reached new levels of visibility during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, businesses in Grand Rapids remained wary of several possibilities that could have undermined their

⁵⁰ “President Coolidge to Touch Button to Start 100th Market Celebration,” *Grand Rapids Herald*, 26 December 1927, section III, 18. For more on the significance of Monroe Street in the business history of Grand Rapids, see Michael Hauser and Marianne Weldon, *20th-Century Retailing in Downtown Grand Rapids* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014).



**Trademark adopted by the Grand Rapids Furniture Manufacturers
Association in 1900**

Source: Grand Rapids Public Library Department of History and Special Collections

status as leaders of the furniture industry. As the expositions grew both in size and in recognition during this period, a stubborn challenge existed in flagrant attempts by companies located far outside the city to profit from the reputation of Grand Rapids as a leading center of furniture production.⁵¹ To respond to this challenge, in 1900 the Furniture Manufacturers Association of Grand Rapids—exclusively a local business organization—adopted a trademark to provide retailers and consumers with a sign verifying the provenance of furniture actually made by established companies located in Grand Rapids.⁵²

Local manufacturers also took cautious steps to maintain control over the city’s furniture expositions.⁵³ Dealers who visited Grand Rapids

⁵¹ See the trademark infringement legal records of the Furniture Manufacturers Association of Grand Rapids, which sued numerous firms for inappropriate uses of “Grand Rapids” in company names and advertising. Collection 84, Box 15, GRPL.

⁵² Olson, *Sampler*, 135. For more information on trademarks in modern business history, see David M. Higgins, “Forgotten Heroes and Forgotten Issues’: Business and Trademark History during the Nineteenth Century,” *Business History Review* 86 (Summer 2012): 261-85; and Mira Wilkins, “The Neglected Intangible Asset: The Influence of the Trade Mark on the Rise of the Modern Corporation,” *Business History* 34.1 (1992): 66-95.

⁵³ Not surprisingly, the interest of local manufacturers in maintaining control over the furniture expositions sparked conflict with outside manufacturers who brought their goods to Grand Rapids. See “Fight Over Exhibit,” *Muskegon Daily Chronicle*, 18 January 1901, 7: “An exceedingly interesting strife is being waged between the Grand Rapids Furniture Manufacturers’ [A]ssociation and the outside manufacturers who exhibit in this market over the question of when the summer furniture exhibition shall be held. The Grand Rapids manufacturers have decided to hold the next exhibit beginning on June 10. The outside manufacturers to the number of 250 held a meeting and decided to abandon

factory showrooms were taken on tours of the facilities and lavished with food or cocktails, as small dining rooms were often built next to showrooms and part-time cooks were hired specifically to prepare meals for special exposition visitors.⁵⁴ Grand Rapids manufacturers knew that they could take up large amounts of buyers' time with eating and touring, thereby preventing them from seeing the displays of companies from out of town.⁵⁵ In short, the expositions offered business leaders in Grand Rapids an opportunity to defend their hard-won dominance, and they were keen to take advantage of it.

Additionally, local newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries assisted Grand Rapids furniture manufacturers by contributing to the solidification of their community's status as "Queen City of the Furniture Trade," a prosperous "Self-Made Town" with an honorable past and a bright future.⁵⁶ In doing so, Grand Rapids newspaper officials were not using an imaginary threat to justify self-congratulatory praise for the community. Instead, they were asserting the primacy of the local expositions as similar events took place in much larger cities. When a furniture show was held in Chicago in July 1891, the *Chicago Herald* published an article with the proud headline "Biggest of Them All," making sure to slight their nearby rival by ending the article with a brief description of the Grand Rapids exposition, which opened on exactly the same day.⁵⁷ Such a disagreeable coincidence was almost certainly caused by the adversarial poses taken up by the two cities against one another in matters related to the furniture industry. By late October 1901, the *Grand Rapids Evening Press* explicitly called for the city's furniture manufacturers to "be vigilant" when "meeting shrewd competition of this kind," warning them that "it is never safe to underrate the efforts of rival factories or rival cities[.]"⁵⁸ Only through such a competitive frame of mind could the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition hold its own "against the attempts to build up expositions in other cities and rob Grand Rapids of its importance in the furniture industry."⁵⁹ Having spent decades

this market unless the local manufacturers compromise on a July date for the next exhibition. They believe the local men are trying to control the market."

⁵⁴ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 76.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ "Queen City of the Furniture Trade," *Grand Rapids Herald*, 18 October 1899, 1; "In Furniture Town," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 28 June 1902, 6.

⁵⁷ "Biggest of Them All," *Chicago Herald*, 7 July 1891, 9.

⁵⁸ "Chicago's Final Effort," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 30 October 1901, 2.

⁵⁹ "By New Exhibitors. Extra Space for the Furniture Exposition is Already Taken," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 26 October 1901, 14.

climbing to the top, the citizens of Grand Rapids were ready to fight for their throne.⁶⁰

The rivalry between Grand Rapids and Chicago for supremacy in the domestic furniture industry was even strong enough to generate its own rumor mill. In January 1910, the *Grand Rapids Evening Press* published a short article addressing local gossip about a supposed conspiracy among Chicago businessmen to harm Grand Rapids by targeting local saloons enjoyed by visitors to the semi-annual furniture exhibitions:

There have been some rumors floating about in furniture circles that the furniture manufactures [sic] and exposition building owners of Chicago were to furnish a fund of \$25,000 to the local option campaign to help place Grand Rapids on the dry list. The purpose would be to injure this city as an exhibition center. By the best posted men this is considered a very silly rumor, as the dealers and furniture manufacturers come here for business and not because saloons exist. Moreover, Chicago has some local option problems of its own.⁶¹

The rivalry between Grand Rapids and Chicago was not exclusively a matter of concern for furniture industry insiders in the two cities. On the contrary, such rivalries attracted attention and interest wide enough in Grand Rapids to warrant regular coverage in the local news.

Like the *Chicago Herald*, the *Grand Rapids Evening Press* also offered its readership at least a few condescending descriptions of furniture expositions in other cities. When it was announced that Minneapolis would host such an event in February 1895, the *Press* was quick to chime in with acerbic commentary, blasting the endeavor as a "pretentious affair" and dismissing it as a "one-horse furniture exposition."⁶² Upon

⁶⁰ Many more articles elevating the semi-annual Grand Rapids Furniture Expositions above similar events in other cities are available online. For example, see "He Likes Grand Rapids: How a Minnesota Furniture Buyer Speaks of This City," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 12 August 1903, 6; "He spoke of the Chicago furniture exposition, and said that the lake city had endeavored to surpass Grand Rapids in this respect, but while it was a good one it could not compare favorably with that of the Furniture City." See also "Cuts Out Chicago: Heavy Baltimore Buyer Says This Market Gives All He Needs," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 21 July 1905, 8.

⁶¹ "Rumor is a Silly One: Chicago Men Alleged to be Planning to Hurt This City," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 12 January 1910, 7.

⁶² "Furniture Exposition. One to Be Held at Minneapolis Next Month—A Pretentious Affair," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 31 January 1895, 4; "The Minneapolis

hearing that New York City would host a furniture exposition in June 1911, the *Press* happily commented that the Grand Rapids show would take place earlier than normal, opening on June 26, just two weeks after the start of the New York show.⁶³ Such timing would empower local manufacturers to make the pieces for sale at their own exposition only after seeing what goods would be in demand at the New York exposition, providing the Grand Rapids manufacturers with an edge over their rivals in the larger city.⁶⁴

However, even the vivid posturing that took place in the pages of Grand Rapids and Chicago newspapers paled in comparison to the reputation management pursued tenaciously by the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition Association. Established in June 1931 as successor to the Grand Rapids Market Association, founded about sixteen years earlier, the Furniture Exposition Association counted among its responsibilities the protection of the Grand Rapids name from denigration by outsiders. The very name of the city had become, over the course of the preceding decades, a brand enhanced by the success of the furniture expositions; conversely, it was also largely responsible for the prestige that the expositions continued to enjoy in difficult economic circumstances.

Indeed, even during the early years of the Great Depression, the expositions remained important business endeavors: a form letter sent to at least eighty-three furniture exhibitors in June 1934 by A. P. Johnson, educational director for the Furniture Exposition Association, yielded responses showing that businesses would assemble twenty-nine displays of a value estimated at \$10,000 or more, including ten displays at \$30,000 or more. Fifty-nine exhibitors would include at least one hundred pieces in their displays, and twenty-three exhibitors included three hundred pieces or more. The most valuable display at this exposition was that of the Century Furniture Company of Grand Rapids, which responded to Johnson's letter with an announcement of its intent to display some

Show: Its One-Horse Furniture Exposition Began Today," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 4 February 1895, 1.

⁶³ "Lasts Three Weeks: New York Furniture Show Will Open June 12," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 17 May 1911, 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: "The Grand Rapids exposition will open June 26, two weeks after the New York opening. This is to give the eastern buyers a chance to see the New York show before coming here. An advantage claimed for the earlier date is that it will give the manufacturers an idea of what goods are wanted before cutting stock and making up the goods."



Representatives of the Grand Rapids furniture industry stand on the White House lawn, inviting President Calvin Coolidge to take part in the one hundredth semi-annual furniture exposition of January 1928.

Source: Grand Rapids Public Museum Archives

eighteen hundred pieces at a total estimated value of \$190,000: more than \$3.4 million today.⁶⁵

Addressing the need for reputation management meant developing firm responses to any bad press that Grand Rapids received as the furniture capital of the United States. The correspondence of Johnson offered several valuable illustrations of the important work the Furniture Exposition Association pursued to preserve the national standing of Grand Rapids and its expositions. For example, in August 1931, Johnson wrote to the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, A. M. Howe, to express his disappointment with an article that the daily New York paper had recently published:

⁶⁵ Responses to form letters from A. P. Johnson, Educational Director of the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition Association. Original letters from A. P. Johnson dated 1 June 1934. Eighty-three responses total. Collection 57, Box 1, Folder 1, GRPM.

Our attention is called to an article in your issue of August 9, "Story of Lacquered Furniture," by Loraine Letcher Butler, which gives a splendid resume of the art of lacquering throughout the countries where this finish has been used in connection with home furnishings. In the second paragraph of the article, however, Miss Butler makes what we believe an unnecessarily prejudiced comparison involving Grand Rapids furniture as being anything but complimentary to the industry. . . .

We believe it is unfortunate that a writer of Miss Butler's scholarly attainments should be either so misinformed or so definitely prejudiced as to malign so outstanding a center of furniture production and distribution as is Grand Rapids and its furniture expositions.⁶⁶

A letter Johnson sent to the editor of *Time* magazine in early 1933 was far more strident and exacting in its criticism:

In your brilliant review of Noel Coward's equally brilliant play, "Design for Living," *TIME*, January 30, are two glaring errors—one due to reviewer's lack of judgment, the other to his lack of facts. Description of the second act places Gilda "in a gaudy penthouse full of Grand Rapids 'moderne' furniture which she is selling to people with more money than taste."

The association of Grand Rapids with gaudiness and lack of taste reflects wrongfully upon the standing of the product in industry and indicts the judgment of the thousands of American people who regard their Grand Rapids furniture as a cultural enrichment of their homes. Grand Rapids, for more than half a century, has set the furniture styles of this country.

We are unable to find that a single article used in the second act was made in Grand Rapids or ever exhibited at the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition which takes in

⁶⁶ Letter from A. P. Johnson to A. M. Howe, Editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), 26 August 1931, Collection 57, Box 1, Folder 1, GRPM.

several hundred producers of America's finest furniture. Where the authority for Grand Rapids?

Your "error in fact" lies in your designation of Gilda's furniture as "Moderne." This particular species (if we may be allowed to use the term) has long been classed with forgotten disasters. It appeared and disappeared in New York shortly after the Paris Exposition in 1925. No one makes it now and no one buys it. Only New York thought it found in the erotic delirium of "moderne" a salvation of American home furnishing artistry. Grand Rapids did not participate in this fiasco.⁶⁷

When confronted with insults targeting the quality of the local furniture industry, Johnson and his colleagues at the Furniture Exposition Association did not hesitate to defend the Grand Rapids brand with vigor and flair, in this instance by going on the offensive against certain outmoded tastes that had once gained a stronger footing in New York than in the small Midwestern city it competed against.

Johnson's role as education director for the Furniture Exposition Association was not limited to scouring major metropolitan outlets for poorly substantiated criticism of Grand Rapids, in search of low-hanging fruit ideally situated for refutation and counter-attack. Opportunities to engage in guardianship and promotion of the Grand Rapids name occasionally arrived at his desk, to which questions from individuals interested in the state of the furniture industry were directed. An April 1932 letter referred to Johnson included the following introduction from Russell McConnell, a student in Chicago:

I am a student in the Chicago Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago and am a graduate (31) of Olivet College. As an assignment in an advanced sociology course, I am writing a thesis on the conflict between Chicago and Grand Rapids for supremacy in the furniture market. I would greatly appreciate any assistance you can give me with regard to this conflict.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Letter from A. P. Johnson to the editor of *Time* magazine (New York). 3 February 1933, Collection 57, Box 1, Folder 1, GRPM.

⁶⁸ Letter from Russell H. McConnell to Joseph Brewer, referred to A. P. Johnson, 14 April 1932, Collection 57, Box 1, Folder 1, GRPM.

Johnson responded in characteristically florid style, answering McConnell's questions in such a way as to yield no credit to the Chicago furniture industry, beyond the inescapable advantages afforded to it by its location in a major metropolitan area:

May I, first of all, compliment you upon the selection of the subject for a thesis. It is original, to say the least, and yet, it is as old as civilization itself, because wherever mankind has set up industrial pursuits there has always been the conflict between the many who function in crowds and the few who specialize; between the large center of population and the frequently isolated group which distinguishes itself through achievement.⁶⁹

Though it is difficult to discern how useful Johnson's response actually was for McConnell's assignment, their correspondence illustrated the significance of the rivalry between Chicago and Grand Rapids, especially for the national reputation, economic profile, and self-image of the smaller community, in which furniture manufacturing, exhibition, and sales fulfilled a more prominent and meaningful role than they did in the larger city.

Furniture City, USA: An Enduring Cultural Heritage

Despite the tremendous extent to which they morphed the landscape of Grand Rapids while elevating the community's national profile to new heights, the famous semi-annual furniture expositions eventually came to an end. The number of buyers attending the expositions rose steadily during the 1910s and 1920s, but the sheer length of the Great Depression in the 1930s, wartime restrictions on various materials by 1943, and the postwar rise of High Point, North Carolina, to dominance in the home furniture industry all struck blows from which the Grand Rapids Furniture Expositions never fully recovered.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Letter from A. P. Johnson to Russell McConnell, 23 April 1932, Collection 57, Box 1, Folder 1, GRPM.

⁷⁰ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 79. For more detail on the rise of High Point, NC, in the domestic furniture industry, see David L. Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis, *The South, the Nation, and the World: Perspectives on Southern Economic Development* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 87-88. A letter from the (unnamed) Secretary of the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition Association to Margaret Olga Sobeck, 1 May 1940, explained the central advantage enjoyed by furniture producers located in Southern states as the twentieth century progressed: "The average furniture factory wage in Grand Rapids

The experience of World War II especially was a transformative one for the expositions. Several articles and press releases in local papers and newsletters illustrated the effect of war on the gatherings. "The Cupboard is Bare," an article published in the December 1943 edition of the *Grand Rapids Market Letter*, produced by the Furniture Exposition Association, offered an example of wartime needs directly impacting the industrial and commercial life of Grand Rapids as the conflict approached a pivotal stage:

No one knows, of course, what 1944 will bring. While our hopes are for the best our plans should be for the worst. The amendment to WPB's [War Production Board's] order L-260 for the furniture industry indicates that wood is now the most critical material used in the war program and offers no promise of an increase in the amount of furniture available during the coming months. It imposes stringent restrictions upon the use of woods by the furniture industry, which . . . may diminish the trickle of merchandise now reaching the stores.⁷¹

Materials restrictions were not the only factor that transformed the expositions during the war; perhaps more importantly, manufacturers in Grand Rapids—and across the country—shifted their production efforts to meet the country's defense needs during this period, as indicated by the *Grand Rapids Herald* early in January 1944:

The Grand Rapids Furniture market [sic] is now on. It won't be much of a market in the commonly accepted meaning of the term for in Grand Rapids there will be little if anything to be sold by the manufacturers. But a great throng of buyers already are here and more are coming. They wish to talk things over, to find out what may be the furniture prospects, what kind of furniture is coming in the postwar period. . . .

So Grand Rapids' industry is pretty much occupied in doing her bit for the war. We're making about everything imaginable here for the Army, Navy, and Air Corps,

is about 53¢ an hour. It is considerable less in the South." Collection 57, Box 1, Folder 1, GRPM.

⁷¹ Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition Association, "The Cupboard is Bare," *Grand Rapids Market Letter*, December 1943. Collection 57, Box 2, Folder 3, GRPM.

especially in the furniture plants for the Air Corps. All of this requires the work of our most highly skilled men leaving mighty few who could be used in the manufacture of furniture even if the Government would permit our furniture plants to make civilian goods.⁷²

A press release prepared by the Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition Association following the midsummer exposition of 1944 offered a vivid illustration of how the expositions evolved to accommodate the realities of war:

Displays of huge glider wings, ship furniture and other examples of war products in hotel and exhibition building lobbies gave buyers a ready explanation of why civilian furniture production in furniture plants has decreased and also revealed the manner in which the furniture industry's precision machine work and skilled craftsmanship is aiding in the war effort.⁷³

Although the semi-annual furniture expositions enjoyed a minor resurgence in the years immediately following the war, those companies that continued to display their furniture in Grand Rapids during the 1950s and 1960s tended to focus on higher-end products, eroding the mass popularity that the shows boasted earlier in the century. Many businesses relocated the display of their pieces on the middle and lower ends of the price spectrum to the Southern Market of High Point, North Carolina.⁷⁴ The Grand Rapids Furniture Expositions were officially discontinued in 1965, after a remarkable eighty-seven years.⁷⁵

Though the furniture expositions in Grand Rapids reached their peak as long ago as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they left a distinct and enduring mark on the city's identity by transforming its built environment, placing Grand Rapids in unprecedented competition with much larger urban centers, and enhancing its reputation in the Midwest and far beyond. When Grand Rapids adopted its official civic flag in 1896—decorated, in existing archival illustrations, with the words

⁷² "Why Little Furniture Here," reprint of article from the *Grand Rapids Herald*, 10 January 1944, Collection 57, Box 2, Folder 3, GRPM.

⁷³ Grand Rapids Furniture Exposition Association, press release dated 15 July 1944, Collection 57, Box 2, Folder 3, GRPM.

⁷⁴ Carron, *Grand Rapids Furniture*, 79.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

"Furniture City" between two operating factories symbolizing prosperity—the city's inhabitants effectively created a symbol of the legacy they left to future community residents.⁷⁶ As a city that still prides itself upon the maintenance of a robust and dynamic business climate, the legacy of the "Furniture City" continues to influence the civic identity of Grand Rapids to this day.

⁷⁶ Grand Rapids Historical Commission, "Civic Flag of Grand Rapids," <http://bit.ly/1FffKPE>.

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