

Stratford's Furniture Industry

In the first half of the twentieth century, Stratford was home to Canada's largest furniture industry. It employed about a quarter of the city's workforce, the second largest industry after the railway which employed about a half. During the 1920s almost one-sixth of all the furniture made in Canada was made at Stratford.

The success of the furniture trade can be explained by Stratford's location as a hub on the railway systems of the CNR which carried the products far and wide in six directions. The most important was the main line northeast to Toronto and Montreal, and southwest to Chicago, although the line to Buffalo was also important. Consequently, Stratford furniture was sold all over North America.

The first furniture factory employing more than ten people was begun by Abraham & Hepburn (later Campbell & Abraham) in 1867. By the mid-1880s this was replaced by two larger firms. Joseph Orr built the first modern furniture factory in 1884 in conjunction with his father's lumberyard, about where this sign is situated today. He merged with a larger company in 1901 and the factory was closed shortly after. [The Orr Insurance building next to the park was the original family home.]

His great competitor was Porteous & McLagan, which started at the Scrimgeour mills on Mill (now Douglas) Street in 1886. They did not build a new building as George McLagan, who became sole owner in 1897, had greater ideas and was soon destined to become the leader of Stratford's furniture boom. McLagan had spent a few years in the early 1880s as an apprentice in the furniture industry in Grand Rapids, a town that was the home of the largest concentration of furniture factories in the U.S. It was with this dream that he had returned to his home town, and in 1900 he built the first of the large furniture factories at 93 Trinity Street (at Douro) in what was to become the furniture district in the east end of Stratford. [In 2006, this building, now Krug Furniture, will be the last vestige of the industry to close.]

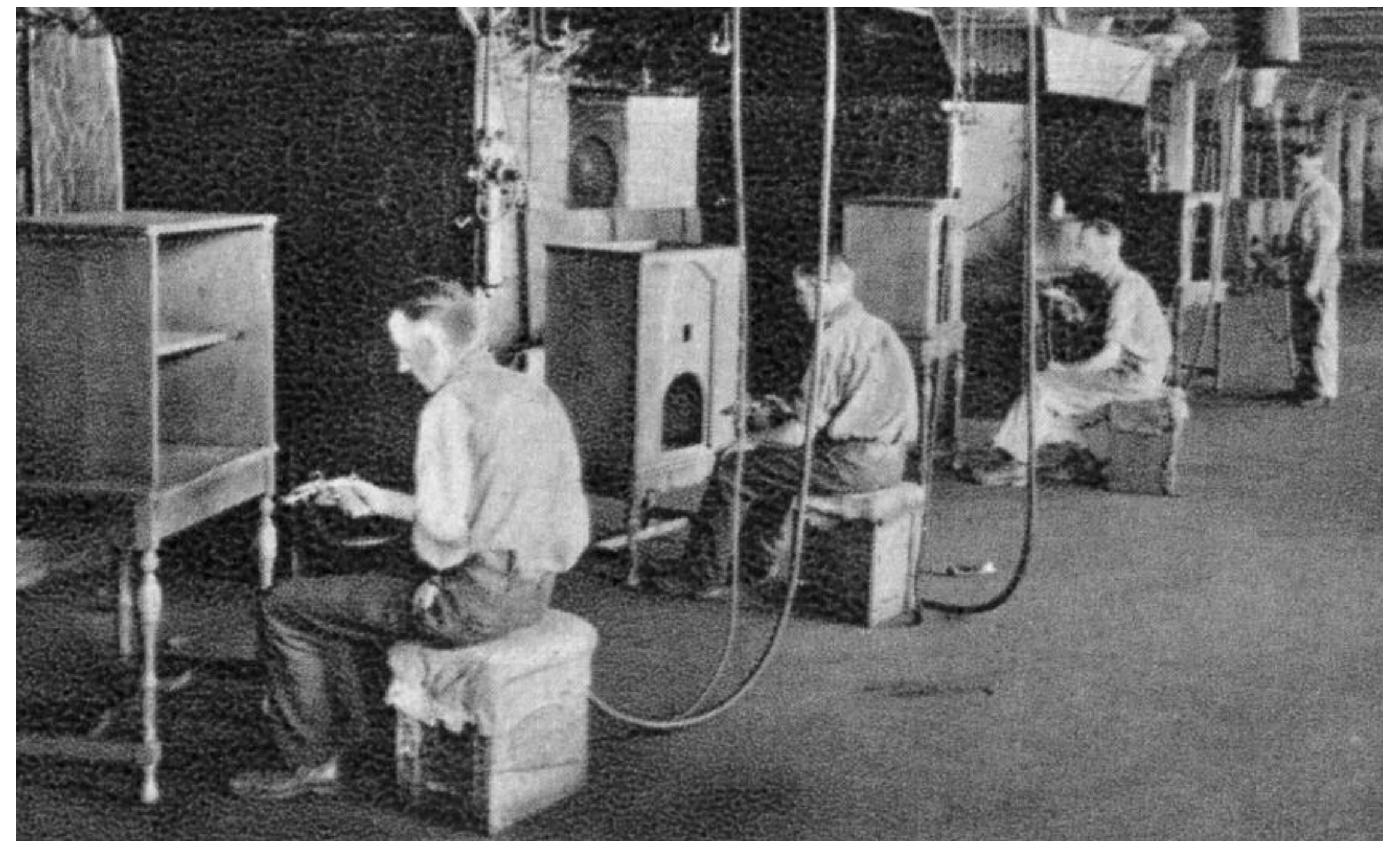


McLagan soon encouraged other furniture companies to locate in Stratford. The major companies were:

- 1900 MCLAGAN FURNITURE COMPANY was the leading company until the 1930s.
- 1903 GLOBE-WERNICKE, later PRESTON-NOELTING (1926), 163 King Street, at Douro Street.
- 1905 STRATFORD CHAIR COMPANY, 459 Albert Street (now demolished).
- 1908 STRATFORD MANUFACTURING COMPANY, later MOORE-BELL and then C.A. MOORE, 182 King Street.
- 1910 IMPERIAL RATTAN COMPANY, 411 Albert Street, at King Street.
- 1912 STRATFORD (later KINDEL) BED COMPANY, known after 1920 as KROEHLER MANUFACTURING COMPANY, 552 Ontario Street, at Romeo Street (now demolished).
- 1913 FARQUHARSON-GIFFORD COMPANY, 390 Douro Street, at Romeo Street.

During this boom period from 1900 to 1930, Stratford developed a semi-annual international furniture show to present new lines available from the various companies. From records that survive, we know that Stratford furniture was being sold from Newfoundland to California.

The Stratford Strike of 1933 in the middle of the depression is among the most famous in Canadian history. Since Stratford was the main centre for the furniture trade, it became the focus of a union drive by the Workers Unity League followed by a strike at five of the largest furniture factories, joined by "chicken pluckers"



from Swift Canada meat packers. This strike was the last time the army was called into a civil disturbance in Canada until the 1969-1970 Quebec crisis. Although the factories opened up the day after the hundred or so soldiers arrived at the Armouries, no-one returned to work. Instead a rally was held in this very park with the bandshell as a podium, and the strike continued for a second month. The only contacts between the strikers and the soldiers were occasional games of soft-ball. Eventually, the workers returned to work with a small increase in wages and new management/labour shop committees.

Major changes happened in the furniture industry in the post-war period. The Canadian Wooden Aircraft Company in Stratford in 1946 used knowledge gained during the war to invent a new line of furniture of bent laminated wood and moulded plywood. The line won many awards for modern design and led to an explosion in this type of utilitarian furniture.

By 1951 the Imperial Furniture Company, which had taken over the Aircraft Company and moved into the Trinity Street factory, hired Dutch designer, Jan Kuypers, to develop innovative new furniture designs. In the next few years, Kuypers set the pace for furniture design across Canada, winning 25 of the 120 national design awards given out in his first three years here. This made Imperial able to compete successfully with Scandinavian furniture that was sweeping North America.

Of the other factories, only Kroehler and Farquharson-Gifford were innovative enough to survive until the early 1980s. Since then furniture making has become a thing of the past in Stratford. In 2006, the remnant of Krug Furniture (formerly Imperial) closed its doors in the original factory on Trinity Street.

BY L. RIEDSTRA, STRATFORD-PERTH ARCHIVES



TOP TO BOTTOM:

THE ANTIQUING DEPARTMENT AT MCLAGAN FURNITURE COMPANY, 1930.

JOSEPH ORR FACTORY AT 18 COBOURG STREET (BUILT IN 1884), SHORTLY BEFORE IT WAS TAKEN DOWN IN 1914.

THE UNION RALLY AT THE BANDSHELL DURING THE 1933 STRATFORD STRIKE.

A SNAPSHOT OF ONE OF THE MELEES OF THE 1933 STRATFORD STRIKE.