

HOLLAND FURNACE COMPANY - Landwehr Family

no action

Mr. John Tysse met with Mr. Clyde Geerlings on July 2, 1968 to discuss the Landwehr family and some of the history of Holland Furnace Company.

First of all, to give you some history, Mr. John P. Kolla came from Alsace, Lorraine, France and settled in Akron, Ohio. He worked as a foundry man in Akron. While there, he developed a furnace grate that would provide better distribution for a coal furnace.

Mr. August Landwehr, a book salesman, met Mr. Kolla at his house as he was dating Mr. Kolla's oldest daughter, Louise. Mr. Landwehr was a very industrious salesman and realized the possibilities of the grate and wanted to mass-produce a furnace. August Landwehr married Louise and moved to Holland in 1904 or thereabout. Mr. Kolla moved here also and lived on Pine Street. Mr. Kolla and Landwehr began making the furnaces in their basements and sold them from there. In their neighborhood was Mayor Bosman's father, Herb Marsilje's father, Mr. Beech's father, and Mr. Carl Cook's father. Mr. Landwehr needed financial backing and subsequently went to each of these people to ask for \$1,000 to become members of the firm. Each of the families did not want to invest or become members but would loan the \$1,000 to them. Mr. Landwehr felt that they would become more involved and interested if they did become financial backers, and in looking back, if these people had not, most of them would not have had any money today. In fact, Mr. Marsilje's entire money has come from the Holland Furnace Company.

Mr. Kolla's youngest daughter, Katie, married Oscar Nystrom, later divorcing him and marrying P. T. Cheff. At that time, Ted Cheff's father was the minister at Hope Reformed Church. The daughter of her first marriage with Oscar Nystrom later married Larry Kolb. This daughter is now deceased. At the time of her death, her money was left to her daughter, Kathy, and son, Larry Kolb, Jr. Mr. Kolb, Sr.'s main responsibility is managing the estates of his children.

To go back into the history again, Mr. Landwehr was the chief organizer and promoter of the Holland Furnace Company. Mr. Kolla spent most of his time in the factory working. Mr. Landwehr realized that in order to sell the Holland Furnace they must establish branches and so they established many branches from 1912 - 1916 throughout the country. This is when the business began to take off and become one of the key businesses in the country.

In 1928 Paul Landwehr, Jr. was killed. From what I can gather, Paul was somewhat wild and had a speedboat on Lake Michigan. Often times he would race around the pleasure boat (the City of Holland) going to Chicago seeing how close he could get to the boat. He was warned many times not to do so. In 1928 he did get too close and was swept up in the side paddlewheel and he, John Kolla Nystrom, and a Van Lente were killed. Donna Landwehr's husband was not hurt and was the only one to survive. I might make note at this time that Donna Landwehr and her husband were dancers and had danced at the Radio City Plaza many times. Her husband died in 1958, and Donna is now living in California.

The death of Paul Landwehr was a fatal blow to A. H. Landwehr, and since that time he was unable to forgive himself. He always blamed

himself for being rich and stated that if he had not been rich, his son would have been alive. He took it as a personal burden and made sure that the families of those deceased were well taken care of.

From 1928 to 1933, A. H. Landwehr's brother, Charlie, took over the business. This began the actual decline of the Landwehr family and the Holland Furnace Company.

A CONFLICT WITH HOLLAND

There has always been much talk about the poor relationship between the City of Holland and the Holland Furnace Company. It has been said that the City of Holland never did a thing for the Holland Furnace Company, and perhaps in some way this is true. Before the Depression, whenever a businessman needed money he went to A. H. Landwehr and was loaned the money to keep his business in operation. Mr. Landwehr was an extremely optimistic person and wanted to promote the City of Holland and its businesses. The Depression hit and Holland Furnace had a tough time keeping in operation and needed a great deal of money. They went back to the businessmen in town asking if they would pay their notes back so the Furnace Company could keep in operation. Needless-to-say, they were not paid back and the Furnace Company began to decline. Fortunately, the company had taken out \$1 million worth of life insurance on Mr. A. H. Landwehr who died during that time. The insurance money was paid and the company was again put back on its feet. After the Depression, the local businessmen on Eighth Street hid behind the six-year exclusion law, thus they never did pay the money back to the Holland Furnace Company.

P. T. Cheff has held this against the Landwehr family--first of all for loaning the company money to the City of Holland businessmen and, secondly, for the businessmen of Holland not paying the money back. An interesting side-note: Larry Kolb met Cubby Drew at the Country Club one day and flashed a \$1,000 note that Cubby had taken out before the Depression. This was in 1958. He asked Cubby if he knew what it was and Cubby in turn recognized it and said 'yes' he did. Larry Kolb asked him if he would make it good and Cubby said 'yes' he would and, in fact, signed a new note and paid it off. Larry Kolb said, 'you have just made history, as you are the first and only one to ever pay back the company.'

Ed Landwehr was a brilliant boy in high school and led his senior class. Upon graduation he was more or less forced to go into the Holland Furnace Company. It would have been much better if he had gone into some other firm, as he had wanted to do. This being the case, he was under the control of P. T. Cheff and this again is where conflict arose between the Cheff and Landwehr families. Eddie was "just on the payroll" and eventually went to drinking. Eddie's first wife died, leaving two children. His second wife divorced him and in the midst of doing so took a great deal of the money. Eddie went to Hope Church to a great extent and then to Beechwood Reformed Church and took his children to church on a regular basis.

P. T. CHEFF

Ted Cheff worked his way up to the presidency of the Holland Furnace Company the hard way. He first started out at the bottom in the foundry as a supervisor. In those days, anyone who was supervisor had to be able to fight and beat anybody in the foundry, which Ted

did. He began gaining control after Charlie Landwehr in 1933, although Herb Marsilje's father was president, but only nominally. Ted Cheff became actual president in 1940. As he took control the Landwehrs faded out of the picture. At the beginning of World War II the Holland Furnace Company had over 650 branches throughout the country. Most of their branch managers were in their 50's and all the younger men who were expected to take over were drafted. As a result, the branch managers began taking what men they could and then the complaints started to come in. All of the control was held here at the central office rather than in the branches so it was not known what was going on in the branches until the complaints started getting too large and trouble started to multiply. From here on I do not know the full story as yet, but Cheff's close assistants were Jay Wabecke and a ^{HENRY}Weinberg. Up until the day that Jay Wabecke and Weinberg turned state's evidence against Ted Cheff, they had not consulted or talked with him or even discouraged him from the practices that were going on. Ted Cheff took the blame for the fall of the company and went to prison.

Some interesting sidelights on Mr. Cheff: He has commented to Clyde Geerlings that he has never known who his friends were. It seems that every time that he would start an acquaintanceship with anyone they would next ask him for his money for some particular reason. Clyde Geerlings is a very close friend of Ted Cheff and gave him his flying lessons for his license. Mr. Cheff has been flying all his life and flew some of the early planes. For this reason, Clyde has never asked Mr. Cheff for any money and will not do so. Mr. Cheff

is also very interested in horses.

Another interesting story is that Mr. Cheff is very much against unions. During the time that he was president, the unions tried to take over the Holland Furnace Company. Mr. Cheff went into the foundry and told the men that he did not want anything to do with unions but would make them a deal. He would fight any of their five best fighters one right after another and if they licked him they could have a union. If not, of course, the union would be out. No one challenged Mr. Cheff.

Some interesting anecdotes on Mr. Kolla: During the hot summer months he would always have a barrel of beer in the foundry for the men to drink. Some of his assistants were afraid they would be in conflict with the Labor Standards Law, but he never cared. His true interest and devotion was in the foundry and he would always be willing to pitch in and help and work in the factory and continuously wore old dirty overalls.

Another story: Mr. Kolla did not ever want anyone to do a time study on his men. One week when he was out of town, one of his managers hired a time study man to come in to do a study on the operation of the foundry men. The first day as he was standing next to a foundry man, a bucket of whitewash was dumped on him. The same thing happened the second day and on the third day they took him by the legs and tossed him out the front door, but only after carrying him through the entire foundry. Needless-to-say, that was the last time study ever done at the Holland Furnace Company.

Mr. Kolla was also interested in the bands and would sponsor the local band throughout the country. He would do so only on the basis that he could lead one or two numbers and he knew nothing about it.

Mr. Kolla was very sensitive to waste and often took walks along the railroad tracks to pick up scrap which he brought back to the foundry. Also, whenever someone was not using a room and there was a light on, he would turn it off. In 1920, Mr. Kolla wanted to buy a Cadillac. There were none here in town which he could buy so Mr. Landwehr took him to Grand Rapids. Mr. Kolla always wore dirty foundry overalls. The salesman assumed that Mr. Landwehr was the man who wanted the Cadillac and began showing him around. In the meantime, Mr. Kolla went around getting in and out of Cadillacs with his dirty overalls to the point where the salesman said, 'would you mind telling your friend to keep out,' and just as he did so Mr. Kolla said, 'I'll take this one' and bought the car.

P. T. Cheff used to buy hams at Christmas time. During the war you couldn't buy meat. After some deliberation they decided to get Oregon apples. The apples were kept in the lobby next to his office. When the apples came the men started to complain saying--we can get apples in our own back yard. Most of the men were buying farms while working. This turned P. T. against the men.

A good contact to learn more information on the Holland Furnace Company is Mr. Frank Kleinheksel, who was a manager of the company for all the years through the Depression until the fall of the company.