

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Water heater panel opens a window to Ripon's past

By Pat Grahm

Recently, the front panel of a water heater was donated to the Ripon Historical Society.

The panel had a silver metal plaque which stated "King Electric Water Heater, W.T.M. MFC. CO. Ripon, Wisconsin."

The Jan. 10, 1947, *Commonwealth* carried a headline on the front page reading "W.T.M. Manufacturing Co. to begin operating." The article stated that the company would begin manufacturing water heaters in a factory at 443 Scott St. The company stated it planned to employ 50 to 60 men on three eight-hour shifts expecting to produce 80 units a day.

There were three owners — Ripon native Eric Woehlke (1887-1982), Joesph Toman (1907-1973) and John Markgraf — who all had worked together at A.O. Smith Co. in Milwaukee.

World War II ended in September 1945, and America experienced a massive building boom. Appliances like water heaters were in high demand.

The population of Ripon in 1940 was 4,566 and grew to 5,619 by 1950 — an increase of 23.1%. By the 1960 census, Ripon had grown to 6,163 people, a 9.7% increase from 1950.

When W.T.M. started its business, raw materials were in short supply across America due to the war. The three owners of the company broke ground on their new plant in September 1946. However, due to building material shortages, the size of their building was limited to a 50-by-150-foot concrete block building.

Two additions were planned when building materials became more readably available.

Obtaining tools for its as-



THIS FRONT PANEL comes from a Ripon King water heater which was made by W.T.M. Manufacturing Co. of Ripon. The company, located at 443 Scott St., started in 1947 during the post-war housing boom. It went bankrupt in 1958.

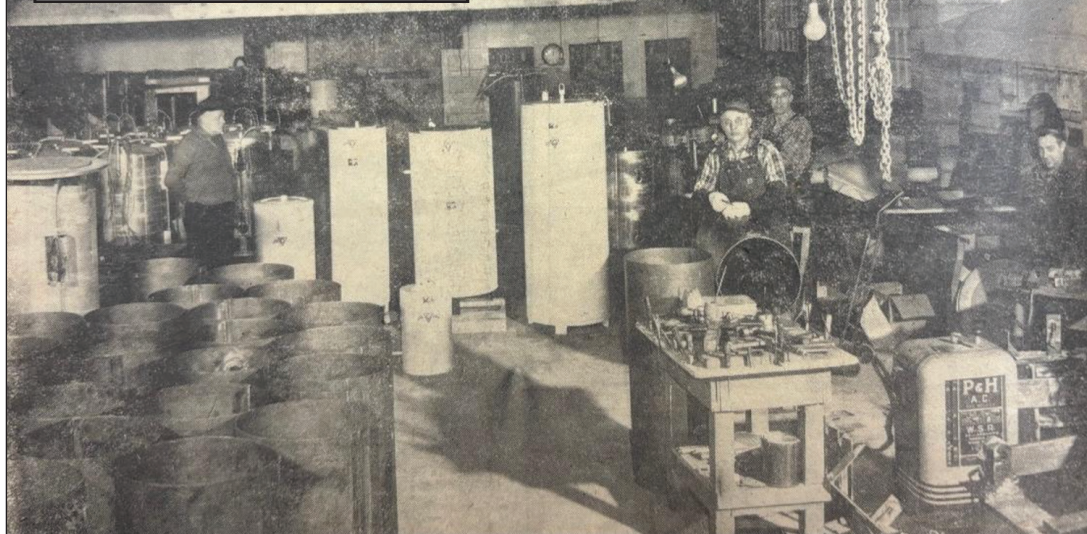
submitted photo

sembly line also was an issue.

The *Commonwealth* article stated, "Machine tool companies have huge backlogs and if W.T.M. had to wait for them production would probably be delayed until 1950. Eric Woehlke who had 18 years experience with A.O. Smith as a designing engineer, broke the bottleneck by collecting odds and ends of old machines and the men made their own."

Woehlke built a 150-ton hydraulic press, a roller press, a hydraulic shear capable of cutting quarter inch steel and a large heater-drier.

In post-war America, obtaining steel for the water heaters was a problem, but the owners thought that they could acquire enough to utilize 100



THE RIPON COMMONWEALTH Press featured this photo of W.T.M. Manufacturing in their March 5, 1948, edition. The caption read, "Ripon's WTM Manufacturing company, now a little over a year old, has reached a high state of production." Shown in the photo are owner Eric Woehlke (1887-1982), Leo Radtke (1887-1967), Frank Gruetzmacher (1910-1984) and Walter Kotlowski (1909-1989).

RCP file photo

tons a week. *The Commonwealth* went on to note that "Like most plants in the appliance field, W.T.M. has a large back log of orders."

W.T.M. boasted that 35,000 units had been ordered by dealers across the nation.

Spencer Vieth (1897-1972) joined the company in December 1948 as vice president. The Sept. 17, 1953 issue of the *Commonwealth* announced that Vieth had purchased an interest in the W.T.M. Co. and became the vice-president in charge of sales and purchases.

Woehlke, who had been the company's president, stayed with the firm as chairman of the board and in an advisory capacity. Toman became the president in charge of plant

operations and production, and Paul Sutton became secretary and treasurer. No information could be found on Markgraf, who was listed as one of the company owners in 1947.

By 1953, W.T.M. was manufacturing both electric and gas water heaters, the new "Ripon King Galvlaglassed Water Heater," milk house heaters, dairy wash tubs and tubular steel scaffolding.

The last mention of W.T.M. in the *Commonwealth* were two bankruptcy notices found in fall 1958 issues.

In February 1959, the W.T.M. building on Scott Street was sold to the United Steel Workers of America Local 1327, which had approximately 600 union members

working at Speed Queen (now known as "Alliance Laundry Systems.") The union purchased the building for \$18,000 (worth approximately \$201,000 today) and spent \$16,000 on remodeling (approximately \$179,000 today.)

The building still is home to the United Steel Workers of America and used as their assembly hall.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



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