

CRAVER, STEELE AND AUSTIN

Hands down, the premier industrial operation of Grinnell, Iowa, in the 1880s was Craver, Steele and Austin—largest payroll, highest wage—with nation-wide and indeed world-wide sales.

The partnership began in 1868 with a lumber business, Craver Welles & Co. Charles Francis Craver, a transplanted New Jersey type, joined forces with J. M. Welles and Alonzo Steele (the Co), both from Arcade, NY, in an arrangement in which Craver was the active dynamo and the other two something of "angels," with money to invest. Welles moved off early to Minnesota. Craver and Steele remained partners until the latter's death in 1900.

Having acquired an existing foundry and the rights to an Iowa-invented harvesting machine--the Randolph Header--the company moved to manufacturing the machine, divesting its lumber operation. Michael Austin, an Iowa College (now Grinnell College) graduate of 1871, brought a new law degree and great energy to the business and was soon admitted to the firm.

A rapid building program soon filled up the W two thirds of the block bounded by Fourth Ave. and the Rock Island tracks and by West St. and Spring St. and spilled over into the block between Spring and Pearl.

The plant's chief—but by no means its only—product, the header, i.e. a machine suitable for harvesting wheat and flax and the like, caught on thanks to its qualities and to vigorous promotion. Substantial markets were developed in the U.S.—midwest and west—but soon were joined by markets in Canada, Russia, Australia and Argentina among other host sites.

The lithograph displayed here today (a permanent exhibit in the Grinnell Historical Museum) depicting—and peddling—the chief product in central focus was one of a whole series commissioned of a Chicago firm. Indeed, on the occasion of the dispatch from Grinnell of an entire trainload of headers, each car bore on its sides one of the colorful ads. Note, in the lower right corner, the overlay identifying the Randolph dealer in an Argentine city.

With the congressional adoption of the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, Grinnell's pride lost its preferential rail rates and this, in combination with other more local considerations, persuaded management to heed the siren call of Turlington Harvey to "come over" to the town south of Chicago he was in the act of developing. In 1890, CSA went, taking with it much machinery and several scores of Grinnell employees and their families.

The resultant physical-plant vacuum was soon filled by the expanding Spaulding buggy and carriage enterprise. But that is another—and better known—story.

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