

Mercantile Past... Remembering Merrill Woolen Mills

"How do I get to Merrill Woolen Mills?" was a question often asked pedestrians a half-century ago.

The three story concrete block building at 105 Blaine St. in mid-city was for many years one of Merrill's most popular attractions for tourists.

To remember that era when woolen clothing was the most desired winter apparel the Merrill Historical Society is featuring a window display of Merrill Woolen Mills products from the city's mercantile past.

Museum display items include a white woolen cape with red lining, a plaid sport coat, child's cardigan, girls skirt and a lady's jacket, all "loomed and tailored" at Merrill Woolen Mills.

In later years, the Jumbo Jac and Mac-Jac jackets for men, the Loaferette for women, and the Sports Topster were among the best known Merrill Woolen items, all labeled as made with 100 percent virgin (new) wool.

The Mill began in the pre-World War I era, first making homespun type yarns and wool bats for comforters from wool brought in by area farmers who were raising sheep on cutover land.

Looms were installed in the early 1920's and blankets for the home and robes for the auto were woven.

Eventually, Merrill wool was tailored into a variety of products. A tailoring plant called Merrill Sportswear was opened in the former Emerich Mercantile store building at 1502 W Main Street as a subsidiary of Merrill Woolen Mill in 1941. Combined employment totaled about 75 employees.

Before synthetic fibers, wool was the most popular choice of clothing to keep warm during harsh winters. the sales room at the Blaine Street plant became a popular destination for travelers. And, company salesmen traveled the country to wholesale Merrill Woolen products to nearly 1,000 stores during the post World War II era.

Merrill Woolen Mill products included snow suits, underwear, wool socks and mittens, woolen pants and overcoats for men, and of course the popular sports jackets.

Albert Anderson was the first president of the Merrill Woolen Mills Company with Joseph A. Emerich as vice president and Harry A. Kolls, secretary-treasurer.

Emerich was also in the general store business, having acquired the West Main

Street store building with E.H. Staats in 1893. Emerich Mercantile was organized in 1919 when Lyndon Emerich, Joseph's son, returned from World War I duty after having been trained as an army pilot. A branch store was operated for a time in Tomahawk and another was operated in Wausau.

Merrill Woolen Mill activities broadened after Lyndon Emerich became general manager in 1934. He started the weaving of distinctive and colorful Merrill Woolens patterns and the quality tailoring of virgin wool fabric which gained the company a national reputation.

Besides his leadership of the Merrill Woolen Mills and Lincoln Sportswear operations, Lyndon Emerich was also a director of the Merrill Woodenware Company. He served the community as an alderman, member and Chairman of the Lincoln County Board, a member of the Water Commission when the utility was acquired by the city in 1947, and as president of the Merrill Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club.

Merrill Woolen Mills plant operations were eventually closed as wool faced growing competition from other winter apparel but retail stores under the Merrill Woolens name at Merrill and lastly at Tomahawk were operated into the mid-1960s with Donald Milbrandt as company president.