

Ravenna bears lasting signs of bygone era of industrial boom

By JACK SCHAFER
AND ROBERT BRUEGMANN

THE DRIVE into Ravenna from the south along Prospect Street provides a good reminder of the rise of manufacturing in Ravenna and its years as an industrial boomtown. This story is well illustrated by two of Ravenna's most impressive industrial complexes, both built and occupied for many decades by the Cleveland Worsted Mills, manufacturers of wool yarn and cloth and for many years the city's largest employer.

The first complex to come into view off to the west along Lake Street at the Pennsylvania (now Norfolk & Southern) Railroad tracks is the Annevar Mill (try spelling it backwards.) This complex started life as the Joseph Turner & Sons Mfg. Co. Turner had operated the Alpaca Mill in Jamestown, N.Y., but moved to Kent in 1878, where he occupied a mill building that had been constructed several decades earlier by the Franklin Silk Company. That building still occupies a prominent site along the river in Kent.

Turner also opened a branch operation in Ravenna. Eventually the Turner operation moved to Cleveland. In about 1890 the Turner Company, which was later reorganized as the Cleveland Worsted Mills Company, expanded operations in Ravenna because they needed a great deal of clean water for their dyeing and finishing operations and realized that they could obtain it from lakes Hodgson and Stafford (now Sandy Lake). They also chose Ravenna, as many other industries did in the late 19th Century, because it had become a transportation hub with three mainline railroads and two interurban networks, a prime location at the center of a triangle defined by the industrial giants of Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Akron, Youngstown, and Canton, an excellent school system, an efficient fire department, a budding road network, a tradition of Yankee entrepreneurship and a hinterland with a good supply of hardworking farm families interested in regular factory employment. All of these factors were critical in creating a great industrial boom in the city and through much of Northeastern Ohio starting in 1890 and not ending until the Great Depression.

The oldest existing buildings in the Annevar complex are a group of brick structures with segmental arched windows and interior wood framing. This kind of structural system, known as "mill construction," represents the standard type for American factories from the New England mills of the late 1700s well into the 20th Century. It was popular because it was inexpensive and sturdy and had two features that were of paramount importance to manufacturers. First, in the era before electric lamps were perfected, the large windows allowed daylight to penetrate deep into the interiors, which was critical for employees operating machinery. Just as important in a building filled with highly flammable textiles, mill construction was fire-resistant. Although not completely fireproof, the big wooden columns and beams were slow to burn



Parapet detail on Building "O" built in 1914. Each building in the mill complex was identified by letter.

and as the outside of the wood charred it would help protect the interior of the structure.

The tallest building in the Annevar complex provides a good example of the next generation of industrial buildings. This five-story "daylight factory" was constructed in 1914, part of a massive expansion in the 1910s that included most of the buildings still standing. When it was built, this was a modern structure with interior steel framing that was truly fireproof because it had no wood and allowed huge windows that permitted daylight to flood into the interiors. In the years that followed, the company constructed two large steel frame dye houses with monitor lighting (windows set into a kind of long shed on top of the roof) and huge and impressive pyramidal ventilators.

About two blocks north along South Chestnut Street and visible from the Prospect Street bridge over the B & O (now CSX) Railroad is the company's Redfern Mill (named for the local manager



The "O" Building of the Annevar complex, which dates to 1914, demonstrates the simple, but elegant proportions that resulted from the desire to create a large, well-lighted interior in a simple straightforward fashion.

of the factory) stretching 350 feet to Prospect Street. Here the company took over an existing small factory structure built by H.W. Riddle in 1892 and vastly expanded to the north in the 1910s. The majority of these buildings were erected using mill construction.

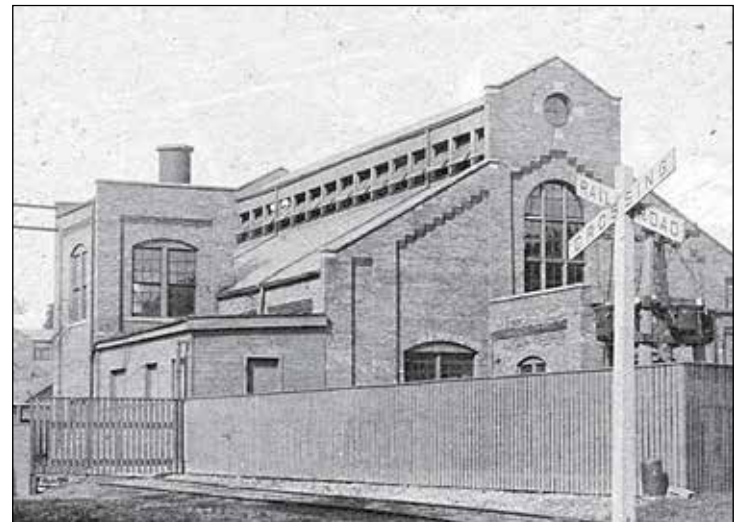
Ravenna industry continued to boom into the 1920s, but by this time industrial production had started to change yet again. Trucks started to replace railroad cars, making locations by the railroad tracks less important. Manufacturers also found that instead of tall multi-story buildings, it was more efficient to have one- or two-story structures where most operations could take place on a single floor. These two factors together resulted in an acceleration of the move of industrial activity from locations near the center of cities outward into peripheral areas where they could buy large land tracts that were still accessible by workers who increasingly owned automobiles. There was also a move away from northern cities toward cities in the South and West where labor and land were cheaper. All of these things would eventually erode the region's position as an industrial location.

Ravenna retains a surprising percentage of its large pre-World War II industrial buildings. These buildings are not only among Ravenna's largest, but they are also among the city's most impressive pieces of architecture. Because they were designed for industrial purposes they were solidly built yet simple. But their simple appearance is deceptive because they are no mere brick boxes. The four-story daylight factory block in the Annevar complex, for example, has beautifully proportioned and carefully composed facades with just enough patterned brick and stone ornament to indicate the company's desire, even in a building meant to house industrial uses, to demonstrate pride in its operations and desire to embellish the city's civic realm.

These buildings are also a tangible reminder of the period in the late 19th and early 20th century when Raven-

na was an industrial boom town. Among the important manufacturers were the Byers Machine Co., which was organized in 1891 and opened a new factory in downtown along the Pennsylvania Railroad on Sycamore Street, the Ravenna Electric Lamp Co., the A.C. Williams Company, which came from Chagrin Falls in 1893 after the factory

loons — are no longer made in the United States, however the imposing buildings remain. Fortunately, the sturdy construction, large floor area, and unstructured spaces in these complexes present many opportunities for creative adaptive reuse as the conversion of the Franklin Silk Company mill building on the river in Kent and hundreds of



The John F. Byers Machine Co. on Mill Road, about 1900. These monumental factories were built like cathedrals with huge arched windows, stepped and corbelled brickwork and stone trim.

burned down twice due to inadequate fire-fighting capacity, and the Oak Rubber Co., which moved to Ravenna in 1917 after fire destroyed its Akron plant. It should be noted that this industrial boom had a

other examples of conversion for retail, loft residential, Internet server farms, even industrial incubators around the country demonstrate.

Ravenna has some splendid raw material. All that is now



One of two great dye houses at the Annevar complex showing its long row of monitor windows and five great ventilators. The end wall was never finished, presumably because the company expected a further expansion.

big echo in downtown Ravenna as the jobs created in these factories gave H.W. Riddle good cause to build the many commercial and apartment blocks that define Ravenna's historic downtown today.

Most of the products made in these vast complexes — from heavy machinery to toy bal-

needed is a commitment to preserving local industrial heritage and the intelligent know-how and effort to exploit the economic benefit of old buildings for new uses.

Jack Schafer is a Ravenna businessman with an interest in historic preservation. Robert Brueggmann is Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Art History, Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago.