

# Western Tube

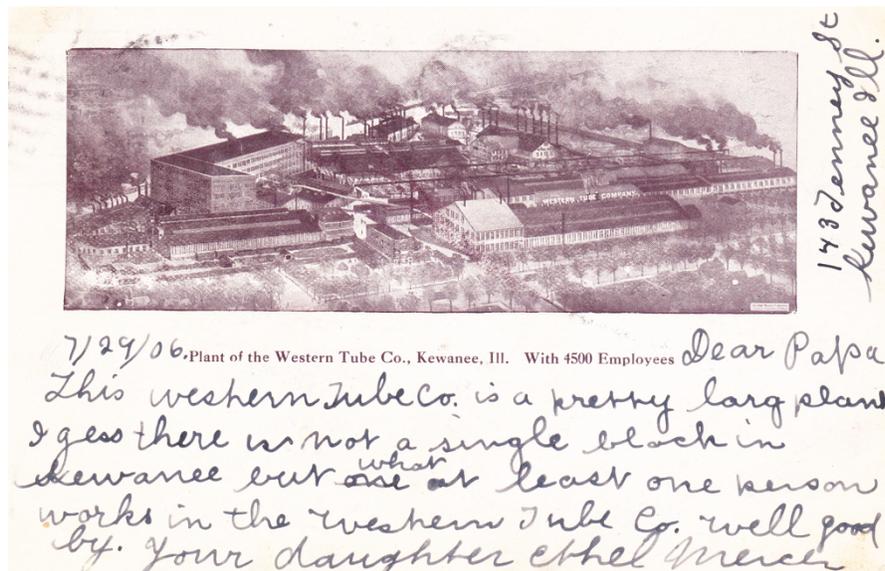
By Larry Lock  
Kewanee Historical Society

*(This article was published in the Star Courier in 2007 and is submitted again in light of the recent decision by the Kewanee Walldog Committee to make Walworth and its predecessors (including Haxtun Steamheater and Western Tube Company) the subject of Kewanee's 20<sup>th</sup> historical mural to be painted next summer.)*

One hundred years ago Kewanee had a manufacturing plant that employed over 4,000 people.

That is one of the two most amazing facts that I have encountered in learning about Kewanee the past several years at the Bob and Marcella Richards Museum of the Kewanee Historical Society. The other is the 3,018 conversions at the 1906 Billy Sunday 38-day revival in Kewanee—the topic of last month's article from the museum.

The super-sized factory was the Western Tube Company and ironically its peak employment of 4,500 or maybe “just” 4,200 occurred in the same year of 1906 when Billy Sunday visited Kewanee.



The 1906 postcard pictured above story asserts that the company had 4,500 employees, but an article written by company president J. C. Bannister in a 1910 history of Henry County states that employment in 1906-07 reached as high as 4,200.

Regardless, Western Tube, which became Walworth Company in 1917, was clearly the dominant feature of life in Kewanee. As the postcard shows, the physical plant was

huge (covering 40 acres) and its smokestacks, and certainly smoke, were visible in most of Kewanee.

Western Tube employees were everywhere in Kewanee or as the postcard writer says there was probably “not a single block in Kewanee but what at least one person works in the Western Tube Co.”

More evidence of the presence of the Tube Company (as it was commonly referred to in news articles) can be seen in the 1905-06 Kewanee and Wethersfield City Directory. Virtually all pages have at least 10 Tube Company employees. The page below of Olsons shows no less than 21 of the 40 entries working at “W T Co.” Still more confirmation of the pervasiveness of both Western Tube and Swedes in Kewanee is the four pages of 160 Johnsons, of which 72 worked at W T Co.

194	KEWANEE AND WETHERSFIELD CITY DIRECTORY.
Olson Miss Anna, dressmkr, r 605 Willow.	
Olson Miss Catharine, dom 613 s Tremont.	
Olson Edward P, wks W T Co, r 310 s Vine.	
Olson Miss Eva, r 120 e Mill (W).	
Olson Frank, wife Anna, wks W T Co, r 403 s Grove.	
Olson Frederick, wks W T Co, r 315 n Rice.	
Olson Frederick, wife Christina, blksmth W T Co, r 913 Pleasant View av.	
Olson George, driver, r 524 Commercial.	
Olson Gust, wife Annie, wks K Boiler Co, r 715 Willow.	
Olson Gust, wife Margaret, wks W T Co, r 315 Ridyard av.	
Olson Herman, wife Caroline, wks W T Co, r 522 e 1st.	
Olson Miss Ida I, clk Bondi Bros & Co, r 522 e 1st.	
Olson John, wks K Boiler Co, r 525 n Chestnut.	
Olson John, wife Hannah, wks K Boiler Co, r 329 w Division (W).	
Olson John, wife Matilda, wks W T Co, r 315 Ridyard av.	
Olson John A, wife Ida C, mach W T Co, r 906 e Prospect.	
Olson John H, wife Anna S, carpetlayer Lyman-Lay Co, r 120 e Mill (W).	
Olson John P, wife Augusta, wks W T Co, r 214 n East.	
Olson Jonas, r 214 s Vine.	
Olson Martin, wife Annie W, wks W T Co, r 802 Elmwood av.	
Olson Martin A, r 906 e Prospect.	
Olson Miss Mary, r 611 Park Row.	
Olson Miss Mayme L, dressmkr Miss E N Norton, r 214 n East.	
Olson Nels, wks W T Co, rms 821 w 5th.	
Olson Nels, wife Marie, wks W T Co, r 929 w Prospect.	
Olson Nels E, clk Lyman-Lay Co, r 605 Willow.	
Olson Olaf, wks W T Co, r 611 Park Row.	
Olson Olaf, wife Anna, wks W T Co, r 516 e 5th.	
Olson Olaf, wife Lizzie, wks K Boiler Co, r 605 Willow.	
Olson Oscar, wks W T Co, r 611 Park Row.	
Olson Oscar, wks K Boiler Co, r 415 n Chestnut.	
Olson Otto F, wife Nellie, mach W T Co, r 300 s Walnut.	
Olson Peter, wks W T Co, rms 821 w 5th.	
Olson Peter, wks K Boiler Co, r 327 n Grove.	
Olson Peter, wks W T Co, bds 915 Railway av.	
Olson Peter, wife Anna, wks W T Co, r 611 Park Row.	
Olson Peter, wife Martha, wks W T Co, r 214 s Vine.	
Olson Miss Sarah, dom 606 Elliott.	
Olson Wm, wks W T Co, bds 1002 Lake.	
Olson Wm L, wife Anna, wks K Boiler Co, r 1108 w Prospect.	

A closer look at the city directory shows many other European nationalities, including a large number of East Europeans, including such names as Kuzman Wukadnovic, Egnosks Ywanosky, Stanislaus Zemutanzka, Thomas Gvazdinkas and

many more that no longer appear in the Kewanee city directory or phone book—and all of these four men worked at the Tube Company.

According to the publisher of the 1905-06 city directory, Kewanee's population "including the suburbs that are in reality a part of the city" was "at least 17,500." Even though the official census for Kewanee in 1910 was only 9,500, the publisher was probably correct. Areas west, north and east of Kewanee with 900 households were annexed in the latter part of 1910 and Wethersfield was annexed in 1921 (they were the "suburbs"). And 1,000 or more Western Tube workers, many with families, would leave Kewanee when employment levels started to drop before 1910 because of the 1907-08 recession.

When I first learned of the 4,500 WT workers, I asked the late Robert (Mr. Kewanee History) Richards where all these people lived. He explained that there were many boarding houses for young unmarried men who had been enticed to come work in Kewanee. Some housed Swedes, others Belgians, still others Serbs, and so on. And since the Tube Company had two shifts, it was possible for two men to take turns occupying the same bed. (At the time the day shift was 10 hours with 8 on Saturday, while the night shift was 11 ½ hours 5 days a week.)

Kewanee native Ted Vlahos, whose father came to Kewanee about 1905, tells a similar story. He recalls his father telling him about living with 30 "Greek boys" in a large dormitory-style room on the second story of the building that became the Smith Peerless Bakery at 210 W. 5<sup>th</sup> St. They also lived two to a bed and one of them was chosen to be "house mother" to cook and clean—and be paid the same amount as the factory workers. (Ted has since died.)

The 4,500-worker peak at Western Tube was apparently a short-lived phenomenon. In 1898 there were "only" 1,600 employees, according to the 1898 city directory. The dramatic increase reached its peak of 4,500 in 1906. But then a business recession in 1907-08 cut the employment level in half. In 1909 the company president reported the workforce at 2,300. Normal employment would be 2,000 to 2,500 until the early 1950's.

The apparent reason that the 4,000-plus level was not regained after the recession is that the company gradually discontinued the production of tubes or pipes, moving much of that production to its parent company in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. According to President Bannister, writing in 1909, the reduction in pipe production was "on account of its (Kewanee's Western Tube plant) isolated position away from the base of supplies which run into large tonnages."

The huge plant would still remain Kewanee's leading employer for another 50 years, for as Bannister explained, "the other lines of goods which are manufactured, fittings, valves, and other steam and water appliances, are continually becoming in greater demand and this part of the business will undoubtedly grow to very largely increased proportions."

Western Tube and Kewanee's other industrial giant of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kewanee Boiler Company, both had their origin in 1868 when Valerius Anderson started a company to produce boilers to heat hog feed. By 1871 the little company produced its first boiler for heating buildings.

A major turning point occurred in 1875 when company employee William Haxtun purchased the business, and it became known as Haxtun Steam Heater Company. Starting with just 25 employees he built the operation into a major enterprise that employed 1,000 in 1890, producing boilers, pipes (tubes), valves and all of the apparatus in a boiler heating system.

In 1890 Haxtun was ready to retire and he sold his shares to National Tube Company of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, which had already begun to invest in the Kewanee company. In 1891 the name was changed to Western Tube Company and in 1892 the company decided to stop producing boilers. However, that portion of the business would live on as E. E. Baker, one of Haxtun's top two "lieutenants" in the 1880's, would head up a group that purchased the boiler shop. E.E. Baker and Kewanee Boiler would achieve exceptional prominence in Kewanee and even national renown.

Haxtun's other top lieutenant, John H. Pierce, became president of the newly named company and would oversee Western Tube's rise to mammoth proportions until his retirement in 1904.

Western Tube's name was changed in 1908 to Kewanee Works of National Tube Company, but it was still the same company. Then in 1917 the Kewanee plant was sold to Walworth Company of Boston, Massachusetts.

Those Kewaneeans who remember the great factory located between Third Street and the railroad, and there are many, knew it as the Walworth. It thrived during the 1920's, suffered during the Depression years of the 1930's, revived in the World War II period of the 1940's and began a decline in the 1950's. In 1958 what had been so good for Kewanee came to a virtual end when most of Walworth's operations, which at the time employed 1,200, were moved to its East St. Louis plant. The final ending came in 1978 when the Kewanee plant, then employing only 200, closed completely.

The historical society museum has a great deal of pictures, artifacts and information on Western Tube (later Walworth) and Kewanee Boiler and their common predecessor Haxtun Steam Heater Company. They are available for viewing or analyzing. The museum is currently closed and will re-open May 1 of next year in its new location at 125 Tremont Street.