

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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S.A. COOK & CO.

The illustration which accompanies this article is an ad taken from the 1918 Mirror (Medina High School Year Book). It prominently shows an over-stuffed "club" chair which typically would have been made as one piece of a parlor suite. The ad suggests to us that this style of furniture must have been considered "modern" or popular at the time.

Medina Historian, Ed Grinnell, in his recent book "Medina-Here's To Our Heritage" notes the following history about S.A. Cook & Co.:

"One of the largest furniture manufacturers in town was the S.A. Cook Company which started, oddly enough, as a cigar making company. Seeley A. Cook, the founder, was born in the Town of Yates, July 12, 1851, son of George and Olive (Comstock) Cook. According to Signor, S.A., as he was usually called, "embarked in the tobacco manufacturing business" in 1873. His obituary in the Tribune, April 4, 1912, tells that "as a young man in business for himself, he traveled by team (horses) to retail merchants within a radius of 50 miles of Medina, "making his own deliveries", (of) cigars, tobacco and confectionery."

"In 1882 he joined with the Tinkhsm Brothers in this field. On a small scale S.A. started making furniture to be given as premiums for retail customers. By 1900 he purchased the old Beach and Bowen foundry buildings north of East Center Street, on the west side of Oak Orchard Creek, razed the structures and erected a large furniture factory there. The December 4, 1902 Tribune reported that S.A. Cook & Company, "are turning out about 1200 Morris chairs (adjustable back type) weekly." It also noted that the company had shipped to Japan the previous week a 6 piece parlor suite, wardrobe, couch, Morris chair and a "sleepy hollow" (?) chair, apparently as samples.

"In 1911 Mr. Cook built the large block on the west side of Main Street which still bears his name. He followed that by starting a big expansion of the company's furniture making capacity on the east side of East Avenue, just south of the railroad. In the midst of this activity, while returning from a winter vacation in Florida, Mr. Cook died, April 1, 1912. George A. Bowen, a highly trusted employee since the mid 1890's was elected President of the firm and successfully guided the old company until his own death in 1945.

"The S.A. Cook firm continued to grow following the expansion in 1913 to East Avenue. At one point employment surpassed four hundred. Catering to a mass commercial market, S.A. Cook supplied Montgomery Ward, Spiegel and Sears Roebuck. The products were solid upholstered furniture of contemporary design, mostly sofas and chairs and occasionally, tables. Shipment was by railroad (Ref. Roland Howell, Jr.)

"Employees, mostly Polish and Italian, were trained on the job and the most skillful were prom-

S. A. COOK & CO.

Manufacturers of

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"Luxurious
Without
Extravagance"

oted to supervisory positions. Furniture frames were made in-house, mostly from Northern Hardwood which was dried in the factory's own kiln. The cotton coverings came from a Buffalo firm. Horse hair and Spanish Moss stuffing were used at first. In 1931, Duntap Tire & Rubber Co. of Buffalo suggested using foam rubber instead of springs and cushions. S.A. Cook was the first to use this method (ibid).

"Along with Maher Bros. and the Empire Couch Co., S.A. Cook's furniture business put Medina on the map as a center of the industry. It was known for the quality of its products and for the supply of skilled craftsmen. However, the Great Depression took a heavy toll. S.A. Cook survived this period, somewhat better than its competitors, but with reduced productions. The East Center Street plant was closed before WW II, employment had dropped to eighty or ninety, as the center of the industry had moved to North Carolina.

"Following the Maher building fire in 1956, Ernest Becher leased space at the Cook building. Then with Harry Nock of Canada and others, he bought the business. However, by the early 1960's employment had dropped to thirty or forty. In 1965 J. Michaels Inc. of Brooklyn, N.Y., a retail firm, purchased the plant. For a time production increased and employment rose to about one hundred. A large warehouse and showroom was built in 1972. But the improvement was short lived. By 1985 the plant was shutdown, the era of large scale furniture manufacture in Medina had ended."

As a final note I checked the 1923 Sears Roebuck catalogue for furniture like the chair which is illustrated. At that time a club chair with similar upholstery was selling for \$31.64. The matching sofa sold for \$63.85.

This style of over-stuffed furniture enjoyed popularity for several decades beginning in the 1910's.