



The Water Street Block

Steve Johnson

In the fall of 2003, Vesterheim acquired the brick building (508 West Water St.) next to the museum's Westby-Torgerson Education Center on Water Street in Decorah. Like the buildings that comprise the education center, this new acquisition originally housed manufacturing and retail sales businesses. These adjoining brick structures, dating from the 1860s and 1870s, were utilitarian, but had a sense of style that integrated them into an intentionally urban business block, called the "Water Street Block." The buildings to the west of 508 W. Water St., including 510 West Water and the concrete garage buildings adjacent, were acquired by Vesterheim in 2015.

John Ammon with his associates shaped the Water Street Block as we know it today. He was born in Indiana, lived in Illinois, and tried his hand in the California gold rush. In 1853 he arrived in Decorah and set up a blacksmith shop. Within a year, a permanent shop was erected at the site of the present Cary's Machine Shop. Other structures, including a foundry, were added. Ammon and associates prospered, so in 1866 they constructed the three-story brick building to the east of this site that now forms the eastern two-thirds of the Westby-Torgerson Education Center. In these premises their full-fledged manufactory was established.

Ammon's successive partners reflected the changing nature of entrepreneurial relationships: J. & G. S. Ammon; Ammon, Hunter & Ammon; Ammon, Greer & Company; Ammon, Scott & Company. In 1870 Ammon, *et al.* purchased the stone mill, which put them in the flour-milling business. They extended the water power available at the mill by digging a race south to their Water Street buildings. The company expanded their business by building a three-story brick warehouse to the west with a narrow alley between the two buildings. By 1874 they had built a three-story addition where the alley was once located, and had 60 employees producing 500 wagons, 800 plows, 500 bobsleds, a large amount of machine work including turbine water wheels, and about 40,000 barrels of flour. They shipped flour to many cities in the east, and brought in other makes of farm machinery to sell locally. The effects of the national railroad transportation network, which reached Decorah in 1869, were mixed: Ammon & Co. could export flour, but competitors could import machinery. Trouble with the milling part of the business – poor grades of wheat, loss of markets, and drought – seems to have caused a swift reversal in the company's fortunes. Ammon, Scott & Company went bankrupt and was sold at sheriff's sale in 1879. Their former buildings were used for various minor enterprises, or lay vacant for a decade until a new business effort succeeded.

In 1887 a group of entrepreneurs from Beloit, Wis., came to Decorah to establish a windmill factory. Their choice of this location was encouraged by a loan from the townspeople, but also by the knowledge that Decorah was "in a wind-mill purchasing

territory.” The *Decorah Republican* exulted that “the old Ammon, Scott & Co. establishment will speedily be alive again with the hum of industry.” Soon the Decorah Wind Mill Company was producing pumping and power mills, round and square tanks, and scales. Their mills were covered in part by patents. They must have been a quality product, because by 1890 they were listed in a national manufacturers’ directory among 58 makers considered the best in the United States. By 1891 their business was so good that they had to subcontract the manufacture of mills to a Chicago firm. Mills were exhibited at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893) and were sold in South America and Europe. The only cloud on the horizon was the persistent rumor that the company would move to another city. In 1896 the company created a new product, a bicycle called “The Decorah.” Local investors were in control of the company, and the president by this time was B. Anundsen, the well-known printer and publisher.

Anundsen was born in Skien, Norway, and came to North America in 1864, settling in La Crosse, Wis. Three years later, “he and his wife loaded their printing press, type and household goods in two wagons” and came to Decorah. He made a success of printing and publishing, including the long-lived *Decorah-Posten* (1874-1972). His business ability and his investment resources undoubtedly made him a strong leader for the Decorah Wind Mill Company. The firm was prospering. An 1897 report noted that 13 sizes of wood and steel mills were made, along with towers ranging from 15 to 75 feet in height. The newspaper was proud that the company was “essentially a ‘Decorah’ institution,” with local capital and officers who were “representative citizens,” beginning with B. Anundsen.

Then, on August 3, 1898, the paper reported that “for several days it has been pretty well known in Decorah that the Decorah Windmill Company had sold its plant with the patents, etc., to the Challenge Windmill Co., of Batavia, Ill. The transfer was made a week ago Saturday...” Before the end of the month “the last bolt, the last piece of machinery, everything” had been loaded on railroad cars and shipped to Illinois. “It is to be regretted,” the story concluded, “that the business could not have been made more successful in Decorah, but transportation facilities were against it quite largely.” Decorah had two railroads, but both were branch lines, and the plant had no direct sidetrack from either line.

The pattern of rise and fall in business enterprise was part of the entrepreneurial game in the 19th century, as it is in the 21st. One should not automatically infer that an entrepreneur ultimately failed if, as in the case of Ammon, Scott & Co., the business had prospered for a quarter-century, providing a local workplace and jobs for nearly a generation. Nor did the Decorah Wind Mill Company fail—in fact, it was too successful to fit in its location, and its chief product too cumbersome to ship profitably without optimum transportation facilities. B. Anundsen’s printing company, which shipped reasonably compact items, survives today.

Among the entrepreneurs who carried out their ventures in the Water Street Block, we find various continuities—of type of manufacture and of family. For some reason that is not yet clear, Decorah was a minor manufacturing center for scales, including platform scales used by merchants and farmers for weighing bagged, boxed, and barreled goods, and wagon scales for use at elevators, mills, and stockyards. Decorah’s first scale factory was apparently that of T. E. Gaston at Twin Springs, west of town,

which operated from 1880 to 1897. His scales were sold by a Minneapolis supply house as late as 1903, but where his business was then located is unknown. In any event, others in Decorah were interested in the business. In 1897, Ole Korsrud and C. M. Sandbek were “arranging to open a shop in the old Ammon, Scott & Co. machine shop for the manufacture of the Decorah platform scale.” Korsrud soon found a new partner.

Albert O. Sampson was born in Winneshiek County of parents who immigrated from Voss, Norway. He grew up on a farm, but moved to Decorah in 1890, when he was 22, to start work as a mechanic. It is likely that he had some experience in Gaston’s scale factory, as he joined Korsrud in the scale business around 1898. For a few years the details are obscure, but by 1905 he was advertising as “Decorah Scale Works, Albert O. Sampson, Prop. Scale and Machine Work.” At other times he called it “A. O. Sampson Scale Works.” He moved to Chicago in 1913.

H. F. Thompson took over Sampson’s machine shop when A. O. Sampson left for Chicago in 1913. Thompson was another true entrepreneur in the inventor/mechanic tradition. He was born in Iowa and learned much about machinery while working in a planing mill and for the Pullman Company. Coming to Decorah in 1896, he worked as a tinsmith until 1909, when he opened the Thompson Boat and Pattern Works. In addition to wooden boats, he built folding metal boats designed for transport on the running boards of touring cars, and metal ice chests for automobiles. Thompson even patented bait buckets with compartments for the angler’s minnows and cigars. Health problems and, most probably, the effects of the Great Depression eventually ended his business in 1936.

In the 1936, A. O. Sampson’s son, Alvin G., helped establish the High Life Inn and the A. G. Sampson Machine Works, which survived through the 1940s. His specialty was the repair of printing presses and equipment. In 1938, the High Life Inn was moved next door and run by Bernadine Sampson, Alvin Sampson’s wife. After a postwar apprenticeship, Alvin’s brother-in-law, Lyle Cary, took over the machine shop in 1948 and was proprietor of Cary’s Machine & Welding until his death in April 2004. Lyle Cary, Jr. purchased the business in 2004 and currently runs the operation.

Before Lyle's death he sold the east half of the building to Vesterheim. At that time Lyle had been renting the store space to Oneota Net. Vesterheim continued to rent this space to Oneota Net until 2008 and then to ArtHaus until 2019.