Ravenna bears lasting signs of bygone era of industrial boom

By JACK SCHAEFER

and ROBERT BUHREMMANN

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 the examples of Ravenna’s impressive industrial complexes, both built and occupied for many decades by the Cleveland, Youngstown & Lake Erie, manufacturers of wool yarn and cloth and for many years the city’s largest employer.

The first complex to come into view off of the west along Lake Street at the Pennsylvania (now Norfolk & Southern) Railroad tracks is the Annievar complex, which dates to 1914, demonstrating the simple, but elegant proportions that resulted from the desire to create a large, well-lighted interior in a simple straightforward fashion.

The "O" Building of the Annievar 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.

The old existing buildings in the Annievar complex are a series of four-story 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 1800s 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 operating machinery. Second, it was efficient in the event of fire, allowing for rapid evacuation.

The tallest building in the Annievar 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 building 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 interior. In the years that followed, the company constructed two large steel frame dye houses with monitoring window (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 of the factory) stretching 350 feet to Prospect Street. Here the company had a large existing small factory structure built by H.W. Riddle in 1892 and recently 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. SVG

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 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 lab and land were cheaper. All of these things would eventually erode the region’s position as an industrial powerhouse.

As the 21st Century dawned, Ravenna 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 Bycrosse Street, the Ravenna Electric Lamp Co., the A.C. Williams Company, which came from Chagrin Falls in 1893 after the factory 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 other examples of conversion for retail, loft residential, Internet server farms, even industrial incubators around the country. Ravenna has more than 2000 buildings 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 other examples of conversion for retail, loft residential, Internet server farms, even industrial incubators around the country. Ravenna has more than 2000 buildings. Ravenna bears lasting signs of bygone era of industrial boom

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

One of two great dye houses at the Annievar 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.

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