



Michael J. Hamill / Photo editor

After working at Kroehler Manufacturing during the 1940s and '50s, Bob Chase opened his own business, Chase Upholstery, in Warrenville in 1962. Through the years, Chase has employed up to five other former Kroehler employees. He is one of the last ex-Kroehler workers in the area. "It's a lost trade," he said.

Fabrics of a lifetime

Kroehler legacy lives on in local upholstery shops

By Judy Buchenot
SUN CORRESPONDENT

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The main player in the town's furniture business was Kroehler Manufacturing Co. Bob Chase, a former Kroehler employee, said the company was the major employer in town.

Chase was close friends with Rodney Kroehler, one of the Kroehler family sons.

"He was going to enlist to fight in the Korean War and told me that when he got back, the two of us would take over the company and do it right," Chase said. "But he was killed in a car accident on the way to the enlistment office."

Even though he lost his friend, Chase went to work for Kroehler's, like many other young men in Naperville.

"I remember working there right after the war, about 1946 it was," Chase said. "I made backs. Kroehler was friends with Mr. (Henry) Ford and when he saw how the idea of the assembly line worked, he did that here. So we

"The demand for furniture after the war was so great.

... At that time, all we had was one fabric in three colors - beige, taupe and rose."

■ Bob Chase
FORMER KROEHLER EMPLOYEE

were in lines of fifteen to twenty guys. We stood in one place and the furniture came to us on conveyor belts.

"Then you would do the same thing all day.

You would put seats on all day or the left-hand arm or the right-hand arm. You got 12 cents for every one that went by you and then they totaled it up at the end of the day.

"Kroehler wanted to make a certain amount of furniture each day so he kept the line running at a certain pace. If someone got behind, there were utility men who could come help him catch up."

Chase became one of those utility men and learned how to completely upholster furniture. Few workers reached this level of expertise. This training allowed Chase to open his own shop years later.

Kroehler

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"The demand for furniture after the war was so great," he said. "But one thing that I remember was that at that time, all we had was one fabric in three colors - beige, taupe and rose.

"In my shop today, I got somewhere between fifteen- to twenty-thousand fabrics and colors. The fabric was real cheap because that was all they could get at the time. The dyes would rub off on our hands. When we were making rose furniture, our hands would all be stained a reddish color.

"The other thing that really strikes me is that we made the same piece on a line for a couple of years," Chase said. "That was how many were needed. There were two floors in the factory with about five lines on each floor. There were ten to fifteen guys on a line, so about a hundred and fifty of us in total."

Though they were making the same piece for long periods of time, Chase said the company had a large engineering department that came up with new designs.

"That's what made me proud about working at Kroehler's," he said. "They really were working on good designs. For the money you paid, I think Kroehler furniture was the best there was."

There are several theories about why the business closed. Steve Paver works with Bob Chase Upholstery and has heard many stories over the years from former Kroehler employees who also have worked in Chase's shop. Paver said he started working for Chase "sweepin' floors and stuffin' cushions."

After 28 years and a marriage to the boss' daughter, Paver has become a part of the business.

"The guys who worked here told me that, for years, Kroehler's sold furniture directly to about 2,000 mom-and-pop furniture stores," Paver said. "Then the company decided to move to selling to big chains like Carson's and since they were busy doing that, they lost that base of mom-and-pop

“It's a lost trade. There is not a lot of money to be made by an employee. It takes about eight years to learn how to do this. We have to train everyone that comes into the shop, and there's no guarantee they will stick around.”

■ **Bob Chase**
FORMER KROEHLER EMPLOYEE

stores within two years. They couldn't recapture that market and things just went from there."

Others point to the changing population in Naperville. As more white-collar workers moved into town, there were fewer blue-collar factory workers to fill positions. Chase said for years, many employees walked to work from their houses surrounding Kroehler's.

"Kroehler had bought the property east of the building and encouraged people to build homes there," Chase said. Husbands and wives and then sometimes their grown children worked at Kroehler's. A whistle that could be heard all over town would blow at the beginning and end of each work day."

Through the years, upholsters that learned the whole line were able to use their skills to open their own shops. Only a few remain today.

Kroehler family empire started with single store

The Kroehler family were the ones who built the furniture industry in Naperville, according to historical accounts, but it was Fred Long who got things started.

In 1881, Fred Long, the town's undertaker, set up a little shop in the rear of his business on South Washington to make furniture. He did pretty well with the venture and moved the shop to an abandoned ice rink on East Jefferson.

Long wanted some help making the business grow so he consulted professor James Nichols from North Central College. Nichols took over as head of the company known as Naperville Lounge Co. for a while, but knew there needed to be a dedicated manager. He recalled a promising young student, Peter Kroehler, who had returned to Minnesota following graduation. Long and Nichols contacted Kroehler, who eagerly accepted the position.

Within two years, Kroehler had come up with a plan to increase business.

He had seen an interesting method of upholstering deep-tufted Turkish couches. He came up with a more economical method of the process and business soon was booming.

Kroehler was able to build a two-story factory. He took on Sears, Roebuck and Co. as partners for a few years to expand, but he bought out their shares as soon as possible. The company was renamed Kroehler Manufacturing Co. in 1913.

Kroehler and his design team came up with a bed davenport that held a foldable metal bed with a removable mattress that became very popular.

Branches were opened in other towns and the empire grew. Peter handed the business to his son Delmar in 1938. Other family members, including Kenneth and Peter, ran the company in subsequent years.

A new factory was built when a cyclone hit the plant in 1913. When the company was at its largest, the Kroehler family employed more than 3,500 workers in several factories and ran 23 different establishments, including cotton plants and lumber mills.

At one point, Kroehler's was the world's largest manufacturer of upholstered furniture. The family closed the Naperville factory in 1978 and sold the company in 1981.

- Judy Bucherott

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