

Keeler:
120
Years In The Making

by Norma Lewis



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For the Keeler family, and
Keeler employees past and
present, without whom none
of this would be possible.



For my husband, Jay deVries,
who put himself through
Calvin College and Seminary
by working at Keeler Brass.

– Norma Lewis



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Prologue: An Introduction

Keeler Brass Company (Keeler) was founded in 1893. From its inception, the Keeler name has been synonymous with design leadership, high-quality products, and impeccable craftsmanship.

Over the course of its 120 years Keeler has distinguished itself with a rich legacy of resiliency, recognized accomplishments in artistry, and product and manufacturing innovations.

LEGACY



ARTISTRY



INNOVATION



Keeler Brass Company

In celebration of this legacy, Keeler sifted through hundreds of original drawings, images, and internal documents that have been archived over the years at the company headquarters in Michigan.

From supporting the American efforts in both World Wars to enduring the Great Depression, Keeler has observed a long history of creative development and perseverance.

Over the years, when changing times closed many other local businesses, Keeler's long-held belief in innovation enabled the company to emerge stronger than ever.

This book presents just a few of the many exciting and compelling historic milestones and anecdotes along the Keeler journey.



Historic Milestones

1890

Middleville Manufacturing Company is founded by the Keeler brothers, their father Isaac, and other Middleville investors.

1893

Miner, Isaac, and George Keeler buy the failed Middleville Manufacturing Company. The newly founded Keeler Brass Company produces furniture trim.

1900

C.W. Coit transfers title of the Godfrey Ave. property to Keeler. The company moves to a new Grand Rapids facility to be closer to the flourishing furniture industry.

1912

The Keeler Building is erected at the corner of N. Division and Fountain Street. It was used as a furniture exhibition center and offices for Keeler Brass.

1914

Keeler produces refrigerator trim for appliance companies such as Kelvinator, a Grand Rapids-based company.

1914–1918

Keeler manufactures products for military use during World War I.

1920

Keeler purchases Weber Knapp Company, a maker of casket hardware and hinges.

1921

Keeler adds a wooden screw division becoming the first screw maker outside the east coast. Because of its heavy machinery investments Keeler is named the most modern screw maker in the world.

1922

The Keelers are key investors in building the first major hotel, the Morton House, in downtown Grand Rapids.

1932

Between 1930 and 1932, Keeler's total sales drop by half as a result of The Great Depression.

1937

Isaac S. Keeler, son of Miner, is named president of Keeler.

1941–1945

Keeler gains a government contract producing military goods for WWII.

1948

Isaac M. Keeler (son of Miner S.) becomes CEO and Paul F. "Jack" Steketee, his brother-in-law, is named president.

1949

Keeler invests in die casting processes and equipment to make parts for Ford Motor Company.

1951

Cedar Springs plant is completed. Keeler earns the title "most modern zinc die casting plant in the world."

1954

Keeler acquires Curve Street automotive plant.

1957

Keeler acquires Zeeland plant to use as sand casting facility.

1960

Hall Street automotive plant opens.

1962

Miner S. Keeler II (son of Isaac M.) becomes president of Keeler.

1967

Kentwood 32nd Street automotive plant opens.

1972

Keeler buys Belwith Company from Belasco & Withers.

1975

Grandville automotive plant opens.

1976

Kentwood plant undergoes \$5 million dollar expansion to add chrome-plating process.

1979

Mike Keeler sells Keeler to Babcock Industries.

1980

Automotive industry recession adversely affects Keeler, forcing company changes including plant consolidations, new technology, and workforce reduction.

1993

Keeler celebrates its Centennial Anniversary. The first Joe Withers Scholarship is awarded from an endowment established by Keeler in honor of Joe Withers, former President of Keeler.

2004

The Keeler die cast factory located at Godfrey Avenue and Stevens Street in Grand Rapids closes. By 2006, a large portion of Keeler operations moves to Nashville, Tennessee, to be closer to the furniture industry.

2009

JVA acquires Keeler. The company is once again privately owned for the first time since 1979.

2013

Keeler celebrates 120th anniversary. Introduces the Keeler Architectural Door Hardware category.



LEGACY

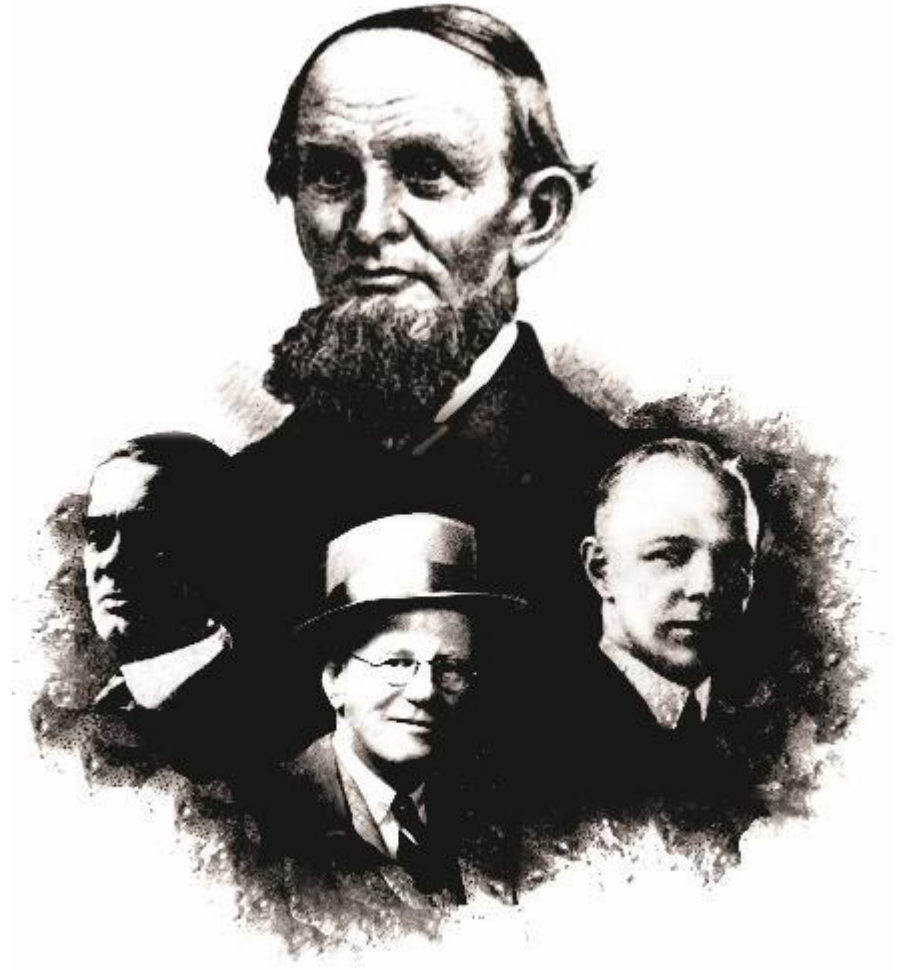
in the making

The Keeler Brothers

Isaac Nathaniel Keeler was a founder of Middleville, Michigan. He established the first trading post there in 1849, sold real estate, and invested in various business opportunities. His wife, Harriett, taught school until their marriage. Three of their five sons, Miner Spaulding, Isaac Herman, and George Lincoln, founded Keeler Brass Company. Their remaining sons, Edwin and William, never took an active role in the family business: Edwin died at the age of 23 and William settled in Portland, Oregon.

When Miner, Isaac, and George Keeler entered the brass industry, they already had a history of working together successfully. All had become merchants at the encouragement of their father. Isaac and George had dry goods stores in Middleville and Charlotte, Michigan. Miner found he had a talent for organizing and merchandising: He managed the Middleville store and eventually bought it from his brothers. George found that sales and marketing were his area of expertise.

When the three brothers took on the failing Middleville Manufacturing Company in 1893, they planned to turn it around quickly, sell it, and recoup their losses. Instead, starting with the leadership of Miner S. Keeler, followed by his son and grandson, they built a dynasty that has endured 120 years and counting.



Isaac Nathaniel Keeler (top) and his sons Isaac Herman, Miner Spaulding, and George Lincoln (left to right)

Establishing Keeler Brass Company

It was a cold winter night in Middleville, Michigan when Miner S. Keeler and a few local gentlemen huddled around the potbellied stove in his dry goods store. A visitor from Grand Rapids convinced them there was money to be made in brass products, and that he was qualified to run such an enterprise. That conversation spawned a company that would flourish for more than a century, and, for a time, would reign as the single largest employer in the nearby city of Grand Rapids.

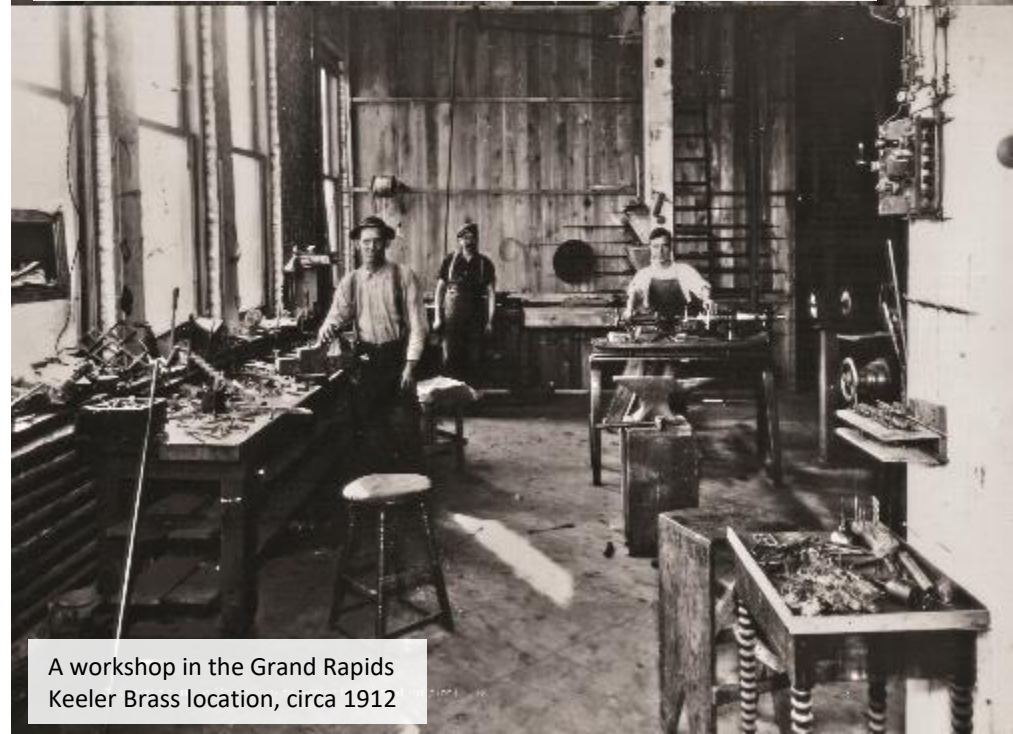
It started as the Middleville Manufacturing Company, with the man from Grand Rapids as manager. Hard financial times befell the entrepreneurs during the Panic of 1893, and they learned the hard way that the smooth-talking man in charge talked a better game than he played. The enterprise failed.

Miner Keeler, with his brothers Isaac and George, took control of the company and renamed it Keeler Brass Company. They closed down long enough to figure out how to proceed, then reopened the following spring to produce brass furniture trim. Keeler eventually added automotive parts to the mix, starting with lap robe rails in Model T Fords. Miner Keeler's dedication and strong leadership kept the company afloat during the challenges of the uncertain times ahead.

In its twelve decades, the company has seen changes far beyond the imagination of the Middleville men warming themselves in Miner Keeler's store. Those changes included an ever-expanding product line for a burgeoning customer base, along with mergers, acquisitions, and technological advances that the Keeler brothers would have placed in the realm of science fiction.



De-burring furniture trim, Keeler Brass, Grand Rapids, Michigan, circa 1912



A workshop in the Grand Rapids Keeler Brass location, circa 1912

Early Struggles and Perseverance

The Panic of 1893 caused the first struggle, while the company was still the Middleville Manufacturing Company. Miner managed the operation, and years later, had vivid memories of the difficulties of those early days. Every morning as he approached the plant, he gritted his teeth, and declared, "I will get you yet."

Other recessions came, then the Great Depression.

People struggled to put food on the table: they stopped buying home furnishings and "horseless carriages." However, while many companies folded, Keeler kept going.

Miner Keeler felt responsible for his employees' welfare, and managed to create and retain as many jobs as possible. With his "I'll get you yet" tenacity, failure was not an option.



Keeler Brass packaging administration and shipping, Grand Rapids, Michigan, circa 1912



Keeler workers prepping sand cast molds, Grand Rapids, Michigan, circa 1912

The Keeler Name

From the early days in Middleville, the Keeler name has stood for honesty, fairness, and personal integrity.

In his memoir, Miner S. Keeler told of his father's stint as treasurer of the school district. A new school building was financed through bonds paying ten percent interest. Every time the interest was paid he remarked, "That's what comes to me by being treasurer." He would have loved to have bought some of the bonds, but felt it improper for an officer of the district to do so.

Isaac taught his sons by example. Miner never had a problem with creditors or getting credit when needed, since he established a reputation of paying in cash. He was a creative and very hard worker who, like his father, was known as honest, reliable, and loyal. Nathaniel Keeler was known for his integrity, honesty, and ability to successfully complete any task he undertook.

In the Grand Rapids community, the "Keeler" became to be synonymous with good employment and top quality. Keeler was one of the first companies to offer most of the benefits today's workers take for granted. Miner S. Keeler once wrote about the pleasure he derived from the company, saying, ". . . to have been able to give so much employment, running steadily all the past few years of depression, and never having any trouble with workmen in the plant, and always with the feeling that we were mutually working for each other." He took pride in rarely laying employees off, and seldom terminating anyone.

Management and labor relations were so good that Keeler employees voted against union representation three times (1979, 1982, and 1989). Those votes occurred decades after Miner Keeler's reign as president, but confirm that his practice of treating workers with dignity was alive and well long after his death.

The innate curiosity that began with Miner, and continued on with his son Isaac, and grandson Miner II (Mike), also meant that Keeler was open to new ideas that kept the company on the cutting edge of innovation.



Keeler Brass logo concept

Moving to Grand Rapids

By 1900, the growing company had compelling reasons to move to Grand Rapids.

The brothers believed they would prosper in the city as Grand Rapids offered a larger pool of potential employees. Also, in 1876, the city's furniture factories had won top honors at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and earned Grand Rapids the nickname Furniture City. In addition to access to good workers, Keeler would be closer to the markets buying its goods.

The city welcomed Keeler Brass and offered financial incentives, including a building site on Godfrey Avenue. It turned out to be a good move; In 1898, Keeler shipments totaled nearly 60,000 units. By 1901, that figure doubled.



World War I (1914–1918)

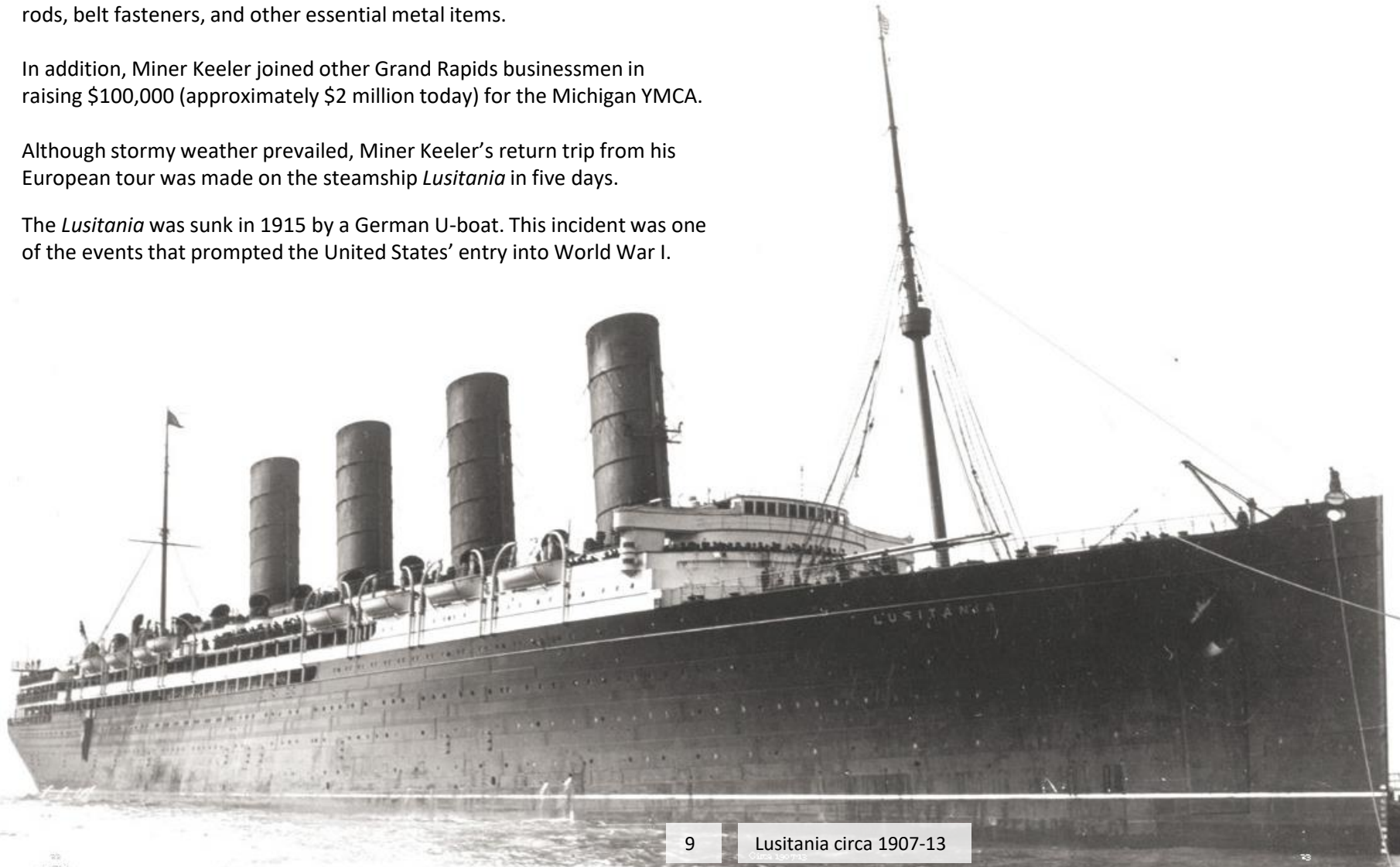
When United States military forces fought in World War I, Keeler was among local companies at the forefront of supporting the effort.

The factory produced rifle and revolver cartridges, hood catches, cleaning rods, belt fasteners, and other essential metal items.

In addition, Miner Keeler joined other Grand Rapids businessmen in raising \$100,000 (approximately \$2 million today) for the Michigan YMCA.

Although stormy weather prevailed, Miner Keeler's return trip from his European tour was made on the steamship *Lusitania* in five days.

The *Lusitania* was sunk in 1915 by a German U-boat. This incident was one of the events that prompted the United States' entry into World War I.



Building Grand Rapids

Miner, Isaac, and George Keeler moved to Grand Rapids and made it their own. They settled in the Heritage Hill neighborhood, and each brother had a house on College Avenue. The brothers served on various boards and joined many local organizations.

In addition to expanding Keeler and providing more jobs, the Keelers poured energy and money into the city. In 1912, the Keeler Building was built at the corner of N. Division Avenue and Fountain Street. It served as an office building and as a showroom for furniture displays.

The Keelers were key investors in the first major hotel, the Morton House, in downtown Grand Rapids. Constructed by J. Boyd Pantlind in 1922, the hotel was intended to make Grand Rapids the center of the furniture business in the United States.

The company grew until Keeler was the city's largest employer. That distinction came with responsibility, and Keeler was known to treat employees well.

When Miner's son, Isaac, took over, he continued the philanthropy for which his father and uncles were known. Later, Isaac's son and daughter-in-law, Mike and Mary Ann Keeler, became large contributors to art and education in Grand Rapids, even after they sold the company in 1979.



The Keeler Family

Isaac Nathaniel Keeler, the family patriarch, was born in Saratoga County, New York. Orphaned at age 9, in 1830, he lived with his older brother. At 29, he followed his brother to Middleville to take advantage of various business opportunities. His life was not easy, and he sometimes worked as a farmhand and carpenter.

Isaac was known for his integrity and honesty and for the ability to do everything he did well. When Middleville was incorporated in 1867, he was elected president by a unanimous vote. He held that and other offices through the years while a resident of that community.

Isaac and his wife, Harriett, had five sons: Edwin, Isaac, William, Miner, and George. The boys grew up in a comfortable but frugal family. Three of his sons, George, Miner and Isaac, founded the Keeler Brass Company.

Miner married Gertrude Spaulding on August 17, 1887. Their first son, Isaac, was born July 5, 1890. Six years later, on January 11, 1896, the family welcomed George. Miner ran Keeler from 1893 until 1937. In 1938, he died of a heart attack while vacationing in Florida.

Miner's son, Isaac, joined the company in 1910 after graduating from Amherst College and spending a year traveling in Asia. He learned the business from the ground up, working first on the factory floor and eventually becoming president and CEO. He married Louise Steketee, and the couple had a son, Miner II (Mike), and a daughter, Helen. Isaac's brother-in-law, Paul (Jack) Steketee, also worked at Keeler and became president in 1948 when Isaac was named CEO. Isaac died in December, 1963, after a long illness.

Mike, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, worked as a shipping clerk, then salesman, and became president in 1962 and CEO in 1971. He married Mary Ann Lynch, and fathered three children, Anne, Isaac, and Mary. Mike died in 2003.

Mike and Mary Ann were zealous supporters of local arts and education. They were the largest contributors to the Calder stabile, and also gave financial support to the Grand Rapids Art Museum and the Grand Rapids Symphony. Mike co-chaired the fundraising drive to build Grand Valley State University. In 2003, he and Mary Ann were the first to donate money for the Mary Idema Pew Library at Grand Valley (completed in 2013). They also gave \$1.2 million toward an addition, now named the Keeler Wing, at the Grand Rapids Public Library.



World War II (1941-1945)

In the predawn hours of December 7, 1941, close to 360 Japanese aircraft launched from six of Japan's largest aircraft carriers. Their target: the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In the ensuing chaos, over 3,700 American troops lost their lives and roughly 18 American ships and 170 aircraft were destroyed.

The following day the United States officially entered World War II as President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered one of the most stirring speeches in US history, the "Infamy Speech."

As the war progressed, American companies and workers strove to meet the country's materiel needs: tanks, warships, airplanes, rifles, and other equipment and supplies. Keeler and its employees were no exception: during the war years Keeler produced various materiel component parts for the war effort.



Department of the Navy, 1804 - 1958; National Archives



Magazines for the M3 submachine gun "grease gun" produced by Keeler



Library of Congress, July 1944



Army canteens produced by Keeler



Department of the Navy, 1804 - 1958; National Archives

Postwar Success

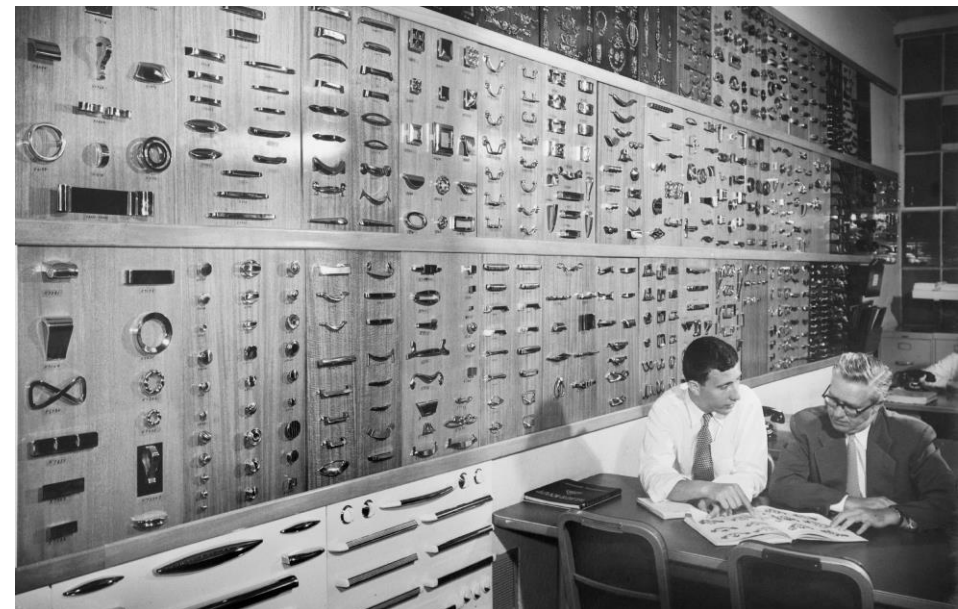


The post–World War II era marked unprecedented economic growth throughout the country.

Not just babies were booming. Veterans needed homes and household furnishings. People everywhere had suffered through the Depression and faced shortages of goods and rationing during the war. Now, with jobs and money, they were ready to create an “affluent society.” For the first time in history, a college education was a reality for the children of the middle class, and not a rite of passage reserved for the wealthy .

Keeler had added appliance trim and marine products to its automotive and furniture markets, and poised to grow as consumer demands escalated.

By setting a standard of innovation early on, Keeler positioned itself in the right place at the right time.



Sale of the Company

Mike Keeler sold Keeler Brass to Babcock International, Inc., in July, 1979, for a reported \$75 million (approximately \$234 million today).

Both companies called it a friendly transaction, and Babcock had no plans to change Keeler. David Low, who handled the acquisition for Babcock, called Keeler a widely respected company that has "done quite well without our help so far." Mike Keeler agreed to stay on as CEO of Keeler, and sit on the Babcock Board of Directors.

When Mike Keeler announced his retirement in December of the following year, it marked the first time in 87 years that a family member neither owned the company nor ran the business. No one in the family wanted to take it on, and Mike had other interests to pursue. He devoted time to the various boards on which he sat, and managed the family's philanthropic pursuits.

M.S. Keeler II Ends Family Ties With Brass Firm Founded in 1893

When Miner S. Keeler II retires Dec. 31 from his position as chairman of the board of Keeler Corp., it will mark the first time in 87 years a member of the Keeler family has not been associated with the firm.

Keeler, 56, will be ending 33 years, 18 as president, with the company founded by his grandfather, Minor S. Keeler about 1893.

His grandfather started the business when he purchased a bankrupt firm located on the Thornapple River near Middleville, Keeler recalled.

The company had second rights to the Thornapple's water power and Keeler said his grandfather's original intent when he bought the firm was to sell those rights.

When the rights couldn't be sold, the firm was moved to Grand Rapids and eventually headquartered at 955 Godfrey Ave. SW.

It grew steadily, adding several manufacturing facilities in the area. The main operation is Keeler Brass which manufactures hardware for the automotive and furniture industries as well as screws and fasten-

The Keeler Corp. is the parent firm of the Weber Knapp Co. of Jamestown, N.Y., and Belwith International Inc. of Los Angeles. Both firms manufacture furniture fittings.

Keeler employs about 2,500 persons and has annual sales close to \$150 million.

In July of 1979 Keeler sold the company, reportedly for \$75 million, to Babcock International Inc., a diversified manufacturer and engineering firm based in Arlington, Va.

Keeler said that from the time of the sale he had planned to wind down his business activity and retire.

In October William S. Bennett, a company vice president, was elevated to president.

With the announcement of Keeler's retirement, Donald Parvin, president of Babcock, has been elected chairman of the board. Bennett is vice chairman.

In another change, John A. Gehret, vice president and director, is retiring after 25 years with the company. He will be replaced as vice president by Theodore F. Smith



Miner S. Keeler II

who has been with Keeler for 25 years and was sales representative in the Martinsville, Va., area.

Keeler said that when he retires he will "tend to personal affairs," run the Keeler Foundation and, "I'm going to win the Chicago to Mackinac race."

US, UK Nod to Put Keeler Under Babcock Int'l Wing

By HANS-JURGEN PETERS

LONDON — Subject to the approval of regulatory agencies in the United States and the United Kingdom, Keeler Corp., Grand Rapids, Mich., will become a wholly-owned subsidiary of Babcock International Inc., Arlington, Va., on July 31, according to Babcock International's parent company here.

Babcock and Wilcox Ltd., here, said this week that its wholly-owned U.S. subsidiary and Keeler signed an agreement July 2 whereby Keeler would be acquired by Babcock International "for a cash consideration of \$75-million." Keeler, a major die casting concern, is said to be among the largest — if not the largest — independent makers of zinc die-cast products in the U.S. and its products are best known for their use in furniture hardware applications.

However, Babcock said that as a con-

sequence of recent moves to reduce vehicle weight in the interest of fuel economy, Keeler also has strengthened its position as a supplier of interior automotive hardware and trim to the American motor industry. Keeler also has been active in development of thin-wall die casting technology, as well as in the chromium-plate of plastic parts as substitutes for finished metal products.

Pleased with Acquisition

At Keeler, William S. Bennett, vice-president, finance and administration, said last week. "We're very pleased with the acquisition. We feel it will provide us with new markets overseas.

"There will be absolutely no change for the management or employees (of Keeler), since subsidiaries of Babcock International operate themselves independently," he continued.

Bennett noted that Keeler has two subsidiaries: Weber Knapp Co., Jamestown, N.Y., which makes furniture hardware; and Belwith International Ltd., Los Angeles, which makes cabinet hardware for mass merchandisers.

Babcock is a major producer and supplier of industrial plants and equipment, and its U.S. subsidiary Babcock International, has interests in plant and equipment production for the water treatment and coal industries as well as general fabrication. Babcock also owns Acco Industries Inc., formerly named American Chain & Cable Co. Inc., Bridgeport, Conn., with international interests in chain and wire products, materials handling and process control equipment and other industrial products.

Keeler to be Director

M.S. Keeler II, chairman and president of Keeler, will remain in that office and be appointed a director of Babcock International following the acquisition, and D. Parvin, deputy managing director of Babcock and chief executive officer of Babcock International, will join the Keeler board.

In the year ended Jan. 27, Keeler posted earnings of \$5.9-million after taxes, on sales of \$146-million. Babcock's earnings in 1978 amounted to \$21.4-million (\$46.9-million), on sales of \$777.7-million (\$1.7-billion), according to its recently released annual report.

Babcock & Wilcox Ltd. U.S. Unit Plans To Buy Keeler Corp.

By WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

LONDON — Babcock & Wilcox Ltd. said its U.S. unit, Babcock International Inc., agreed to buy Keeler Corp. of Grand Rapids, Mich., for about \$75 million.

Babcock & Wilcox, which isn't related to the J. Ray McDermott & Co. unit with a similar name, said "the acquisition will strengthen its position nearer the volume consumer end of the market for engineering products."

Keeler, a closely held die-casting company, has about 3,500 employees. In the year ended Jan. 27, it had a profit of \$5.9 million on sales of \$146 million.

The British concern said Keeler would become a unit of Babcock International around July 31. Holders controlling 63.7% of Keeler's shares outstanding have indicated that they favor the transaction, Babcock & Wilcox said.

Babcock & Wilcox is a manufacturing and engineering concern.

Keeler Centennial

The Keeler Company celebrated 100 years of business in 1993. In October of 1992, the company sent a letter to customers informing them of upcoming milestones.

It thanked them for their support during the past century, noting that without them, Keeler's phenomenal success would have been impossible. It ended by promising to "become a partner in the achievement of your future objectives. To that end we sincerely pledge our energy and experience." These were not empty words. Keeler had been doing that for 100 years.



1993 WILL BE THE KEELER HARDWARE CENTENIAL YEAR. MINER S. KEELER WAS THE FOUNDER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER UNTIL 1934. HE WAS FOLLOWED IN THE FURNITURE HARDWARE BUSINESS BY HIS SON, ISAAC KEELER AND GRANDSON, MINER S. KEELER II.

THE KEELER CORPORATION WAS SOLD IN 1979 TO BABCOCK INDUSTRIES LTD., LONDON, ENGLAND. MINER S. KEELER II RETIRED IN DECEMBER, 1980. AT THAT TIME KEELER WAS OPERATING THE WEBER KNAPP COMPANY AND BELWITH INTERNATIONAL AS WHOLLY OWNED SUBSIDIARIES. SINCE THAT TIME THE FAULTLESS CASTER COMPANY, EVANSVILLE, INDIANA, AND CHAUTAUQUA HARDWARE COMPANY, JAMESTOWN, NEW YORK HAVE BEEN ACQUIRED BY THE PARENT COMPANY AND FOLDED INTO WHAT IS KNOWN AS THE BABCOCK HARDWARE GROUP.

WHILE WE ARE PROUD TO CONTINUE THE GROWTH OF THE COMPANY MINER KEELER STARTED IN 1893, WE WANT TO RECOGNIZE AND THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT DURING THESE HISTORICAL YEARS. WITHOUT YOU OUR SUCCESS WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE.

NOW OUR OBJECTIVE IS TO BECOME A PARTNER IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF YOUR FUTURE OBJECTIVES. TO THAT END WE SINCERELY PLEDGE OUR ENERGY AND EXPERIENCE.

Keeler's centennial letter to employees, circa 1992

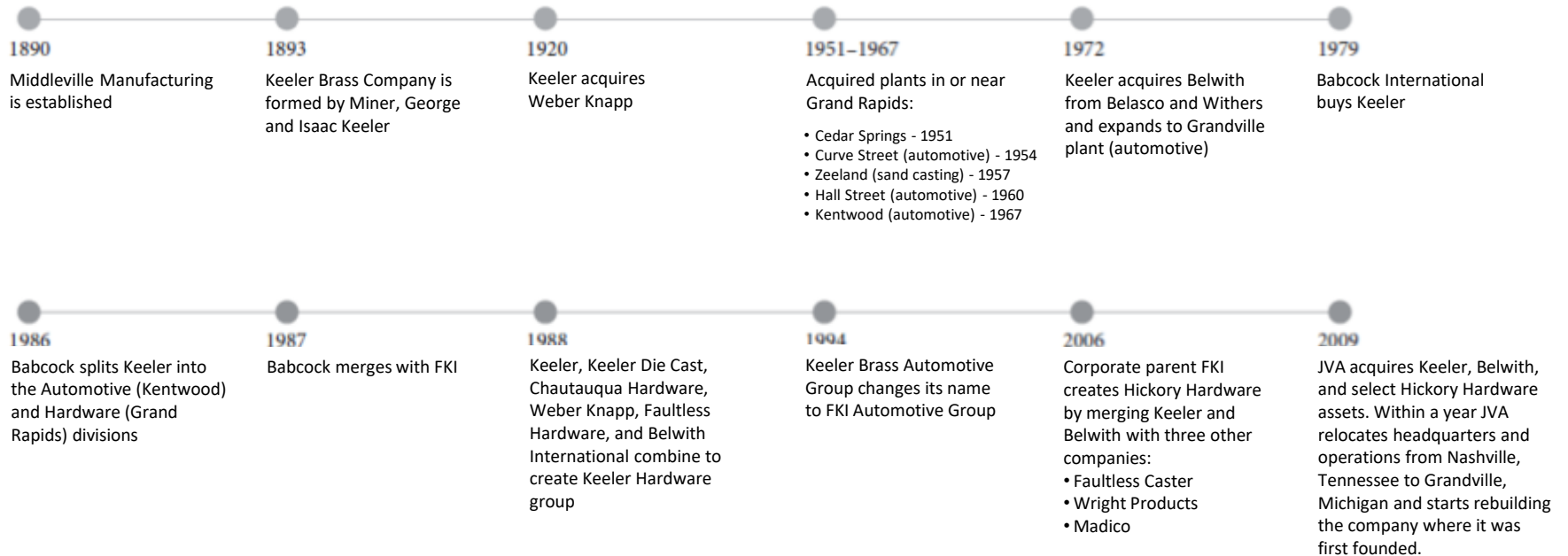
Mergers and Acquisitions

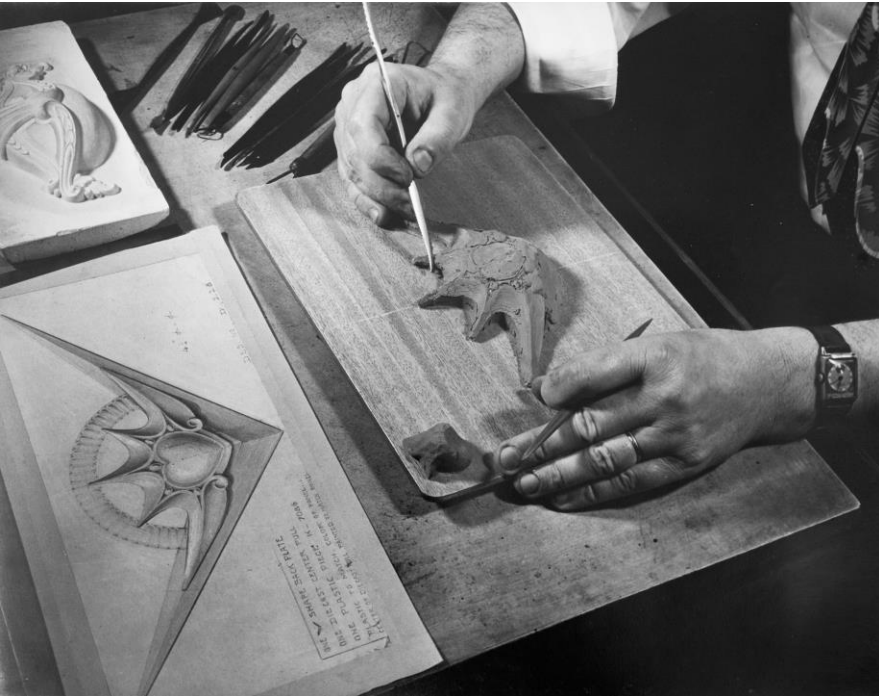
Though the phrase had not yet been coined, Miner Keeler thought outside the box. So did his son Isaac. Neither was afraid to take a chance in 1920 when they bought the Weber Knapp Company located in Jamestown, New York. The acquisition strengthened both companies and led to new product lines for new markets. Later, new plants were acquired to accommodate the needs of a company on the rise.

A complex series of mergers and acquisitions began when Mike Keeler sold Keeler Brass in 1979. The one constant is that the name Keeler has remained on at least one division of each new company. Starting with Miner, then his son Isaac, and finally his grandson Mike, the Keeler name has remained synonymous with innovation, finely crafted products, and customer service excellence.

As the old adage goes, "If it's not broken, don't fix it."

M&A Timeline





ARTISTRY

in the making

La Grande Vitesse

Mike and Mary Ann Keeler's passion for art in all forms led to their involvement in bringing the Alexander Calder stabile, *La Grande Vitesse*, (the Great Swiftness, or the Grand Rapids) to the city in 1969. They were the largest contributors to this project, led by Nancy Mulnix.

Today, resplendent in bright red-orange, the stabile rises from Calder Plaza, an easily recognized city icon.

However, when *La Grande Vitesse* was in place, the Keelers were not quite satisfied, as they wanted everyone to be able to enjoy it. In 1976, they commissioned a 1/23 scale model of the stabile to be placed at the Calder Plaza, so the blind can experience by touch what others see. The model was built at Keeler by modeler Hetzer Hartsock.

Calder Plaza, Grand Rapids MI



La Grande Vitesse



1/23 scale model of *La Grande Vitesse* (circa 1976)

High Point Restoration

By 1989, the furniture industry had long since abandoned Grand Rapids in favor of North Carolina.

Keeler has maintained offices in Highpoint, North Carolina since 1989. It chose a 3,500 square foot home built more than eighty years earlier by William Brooks, a Pittsburgh Plate Glass executive. Restoration would not be easy, but those who undertook the project knew that buried beneath misguided "improvements" were architectural gems including pocket doors and original hardwood floors.

After eight months of painstaking work and loving attention to the smallest detail, the house was returned to its former splendor. The hardwood glowed, and brass gleamed in doorbells, and from the carpet rods of each step of the staircase. Stenciling drew attention to the period-correct crown molding. The overall look was masculine, but quietly elegant - a perfect home for a company known for its artistry.

The home now serves as a showroom for Keeler.



Keeler executive Ted Smith (Left) stands in the former house of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Gurely (Right), circa 1989

Kendall College of Art and Design

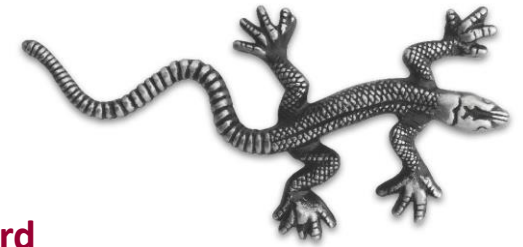
When Hardware Group president Joe Withers retired in 1993, the FKI Hardware Group companies including Belwith International, Chautauqua Hardware, Faultless Caster, Keeler, and Weber Knapp. FKI marked the occasion by establishing the Joe Withers Scholarship at Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids. The scholarship is awarded annually, at Kendall's discretion, to outstanding students in the Furniture, Industrial, and Interior Design programs. That was not Keeler's first involvement with the school. Mike Keeler was a Kendall board member for 25 years, and was well acquainted with the school's reputation for talented graduates. He made it a point to hire Kendall-trained furniture designers.

Keeler still employs Kendall graduates in its creative departments, and offers internship programs.

Keeler Antiques and Collectibles

The famous Keeler Lizard is not the only fun product the company created. Every year required a holiday memento that served two purposes: it had to be innovative, and it had to showcase the artistry for which Keeler was known. Over the years, the mementos have included decorative animals, ashtrays, bottle openers, and paperweights in various styles. These items served as giveaways to various clients, as well as holiday gifts.

Military collectors can sometimes find World War II items manufactured by Keeler, such as canteens made for the Army Air Corps and ammunition magazines, among other treasures. Finely crafted antique brass doorknobs and drawer pulls are also coveted collectibles.



The Keeler Lizard

One unique artifact discovered was a lizard that was first given as a gift to colleagues and friends in 1898. He was an affable fellow, as lizards go, so in 1959, CEO Isaac Keeler reintroduced him.

Hollis Baker, of the Baker Furniture Company, remarked that he had a lizard on his desk that sixty years earlier had adorned his father's desk. Keeler borrowed the memento and reproduced it. In 1973, Mike Keeler again sent the captivating reptile out to relay the Keelers' best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

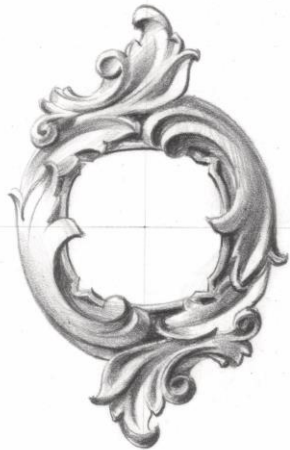
The lizard's long history with the company makes him a natural to be brought to life again in 2013 in celebration of this milestone anniversary, 120 years in the making.

Keeler European Trip

Miner Keeler toured Europe in 1909, accompanied by William H. Gay, president of Berkey and Gay Furniture Company; A. Margantin, a Berkey and Gay designer; and A. W. Hompe, president of the Royal Furniture Company.

For four weeks they studied furniture exhibited in museums and galleries in England, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Brass trimmings were Miner's primary interest, and he found that some were inferior to those made in the United States. He rated the finish quality poor and the fasteners crude and dated. He was impressed, however, with the furniture shown in London and Paris, and came home full of ideas.

In recent years, Keeler has sent their hardware designers, engineers, and modelers abroad to countries including Italy, France, Germany, Denmark, and China to attend trade shows, peruse art, and study architecture.



Des. no. 4395



Furniture Industry

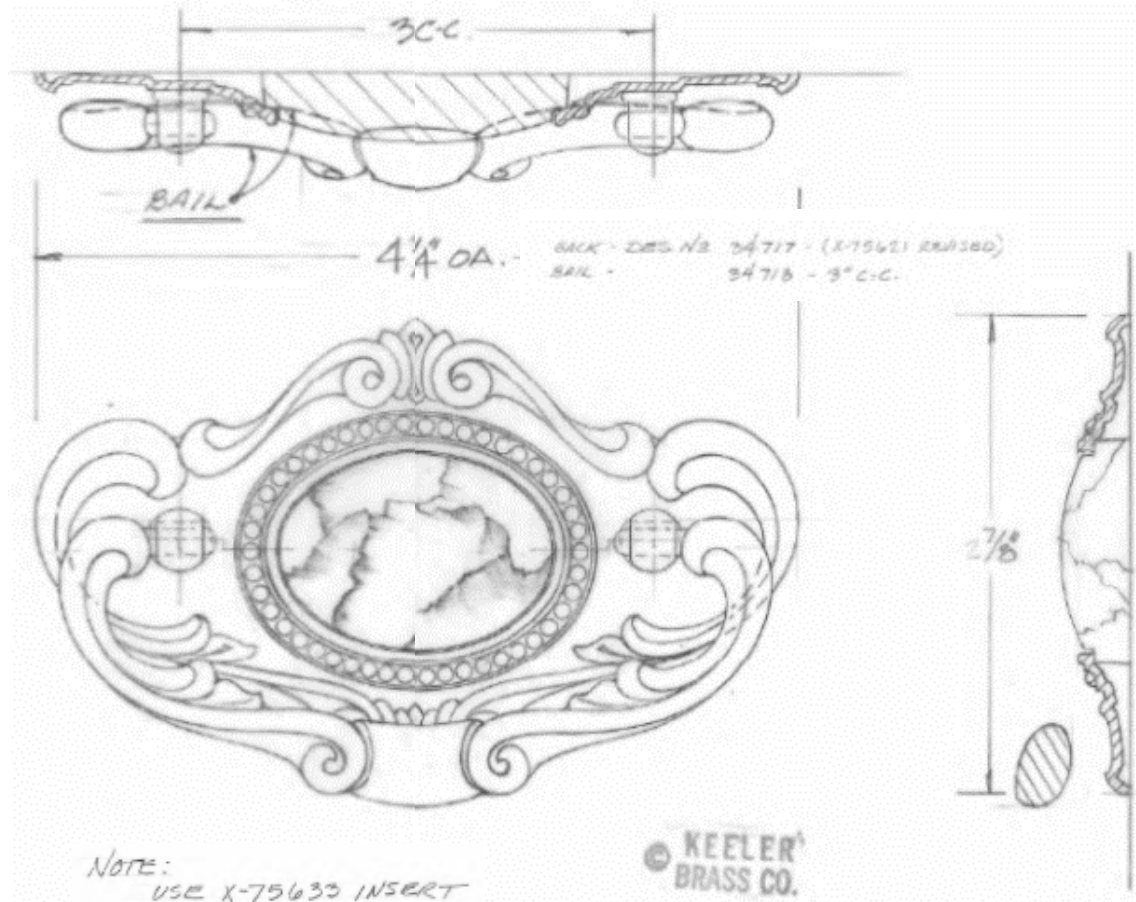
In 1847 William “Deacon” Haldane became the first furniture maker in Grand Rapids. Among his offerings were chairs, cabinets, tables, and coffins. Other furniture makers soon followed. The Grand River provided easy transport in the days before railroads and trucking. In 1876 Grand Rapids was nicknamed “Furniture City” when local companies amazed visitors to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Though Keeler also served the automotive and other markets, the company has always been a major player in the furniture industry.

During the city’s furniture zenith, buyers flocked to the biannual markets. In the mid-1920s, ten exhibition buildings, including the Keeler Building, offered 1.5 million square feet of showroom space. This was in addition to factory showrooms.

The end of the era was in sight by 1965, when the markets were discontinued. Instead, furniture would be shown year-round in exhibition buildings. Factories had become outdated, and the river was no longer needed for transport. Rather than rebuild, furniture manufacturers began a slow exodus to North Carolina, lured by building incentives and cheaper labor. But they still looked to Keeler for quality trim.

In 1981, the company was named the largest producer of furniture hardware. Today, furniture is still an important part of Keeler’s business.

Not only does Keeler supply the home furnishings industry, but contract office furnishings as well. This includes branching out into new materials and finishes, and in recent years introducing new product lines.



Intellectual Property

Keeler is known for superior design and high quality products, which are the result of artistic talent, market knowledge, and the latest technological production and finishing processes.

As an innovator and industry leader, Keeler supports intellectual property rights with a staunch belief that infringements harm the entire industry. With a vast library of design copyrights, the company has a consistent track record of pursuing and successfully prosecuting intellectual rights infringement that includes imitations of its designs.

Keeler Brass creates art. Evolving as ideas in the minds of designers and architects, the company designs unique hardware and decorative accents for the wood and steel furniture markets. With more than 54,000 designs to date, and 2,100 finishes, one would think that crafting new looks would be daunting, if not impossible. Yet the company's Design Department continuously works with customers to create new works of art.

“Each designer wants his/her design to be different, unique,” stated Bill Ellis, finishing manager. “We may have 400 standard finishes, but there are 1,700 variations on those finishes.” These finishes help provide the individuality the designers and architects are looking for.

Products Finishing, Beverly Graves, former editor from Products Finishing – 8/1/2001





INNOVATION

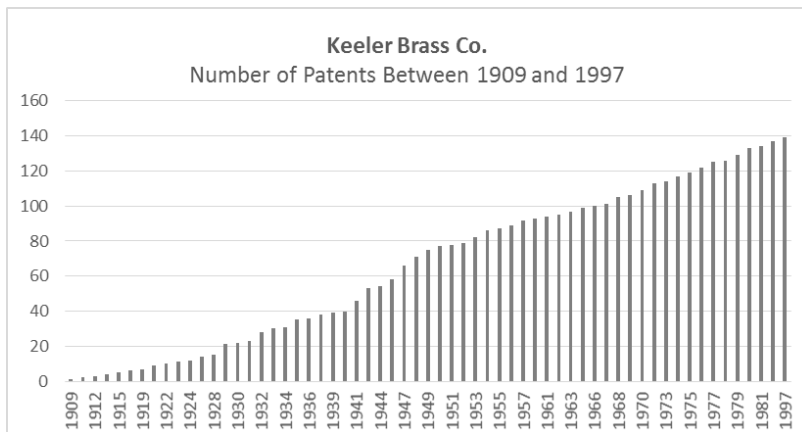
in the making

Auto Industry

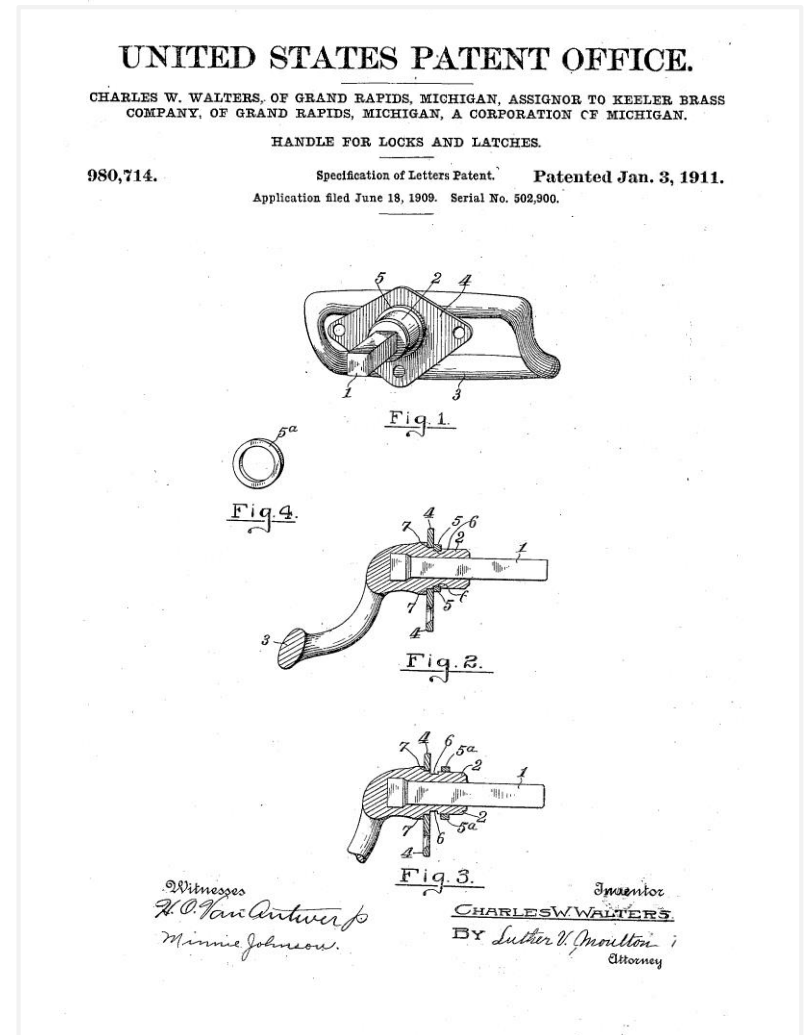
What began in 1909 with Model T robe rails escalated to the development of new items for the emerging auto industry. This required imagination and willingness to change with the times. Robe rails led to door handles. In 1949, Keeler was producing door handles for Ford Motor Company for 58 cents each. Ford found another supplier who could produce them for 46.5 cents. By converting from sand casting to a less costly die casting process, Keeler lowered the cost and selling price. Ford renewed the contract.

Die casting proved so successful, the company soon became a leader in zinc die casting. Eventually, auto parts included rear view mirrors and taillights. In 1975, Keeler acquired the Kentwood plant for the production of auto parts and screws. Being a major player in the automotive parts industry provided challenges, and Keeler Automotive Group developed cutting edge technology. One such innovation, in 1989, involved a new injection molding process for domestic, European, and Asian automobiles.

Between 1909 and 1997 Keeler filed over 140 patents ranging from various products to production processes and equipment.



Serving multiple markets made Keeler less vulnerable to the automotive industry slumps and the economic recession cycles.



Screw Machines

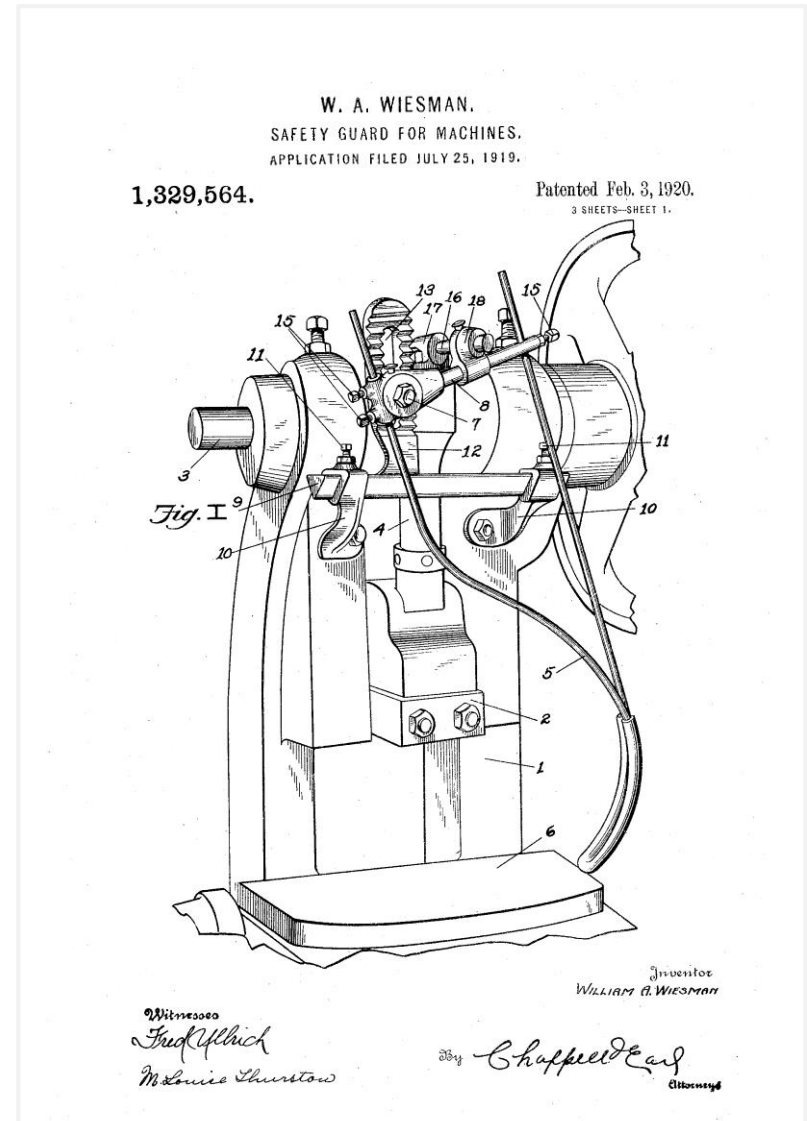
Keeler began producing wood screws in 1921, the first company outside of the East Coast to do so.

By 1922, Keeler was named the most modern screw maker in the world due to their heavy investments in innovative production machinery that included equipment design enhancements of its own. Such machines offered more control over the fasteners that attached hinges, drawer pulls, handles, and other products for the furniture market. Combined with sheet metal and machine screws, the company could then offer a complete line of furniture trimmings.

As business grew, so did Keeler's manufacturing capability. In time, that meant a screw machine facility, hand-operated, and eventually automated CNC screw machines. No job would be too big or too small.



Keeler automotive tapping machines (circa 1953)



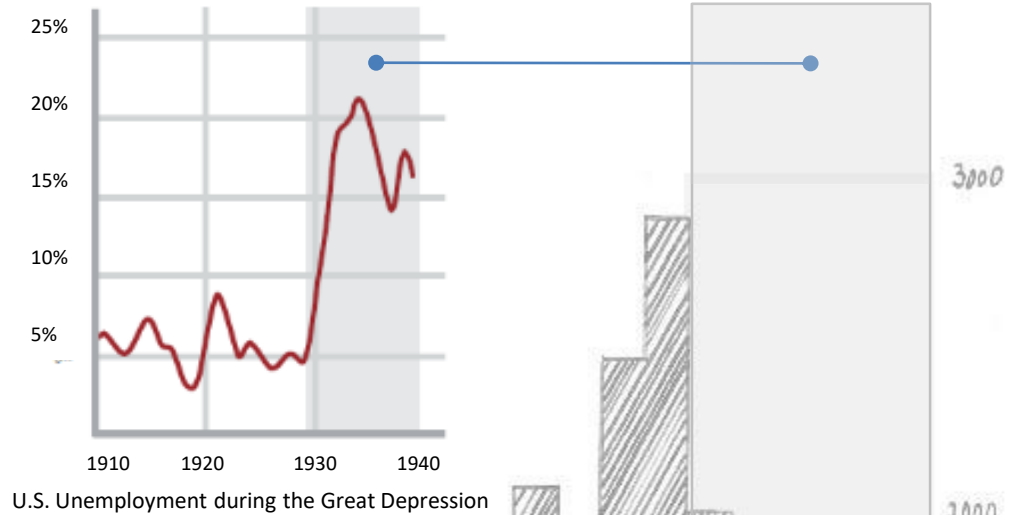
The Great Depression (1929–1939)

The Great Depression, the result of the stock market crash of 1929, affected the world for a decade. Keeler met the challenge by experimenting with new technologies and materials. This led to breakthroughs such as stainless steel metal door handles for the Studebaker and Ford Motor companies.


Miner Keeler felt a responsibility to retain as many employees as possible during those troubling times. Sheer determination coupled with a willingness to take chances made it possible to remain competitive during years of greatly reduced sales. During the Great Depression Keeler annual sales dropped from a high of \$3 million (about \$41 million today) in 1929 to less than \$1 million in 1931.

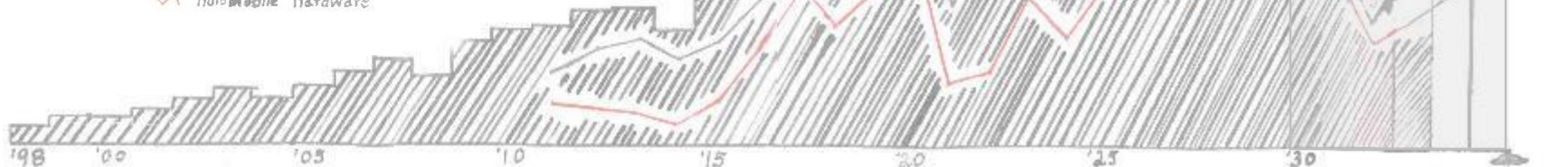
Original hand drawn graph showing the dollar amount of shipments made by Keeler between 1898 and 1935.

The small graph, above, shows the relationship between the U.S. unemployment rate and Keeler's sales.



Keeler Brass Company
Dollar Shipments 1898-1935

LEGEND:  Total Shipments
 Furniture Hardware
 Automobile Hardware



The Keeler Building

In 1912, the Keeler Building was built at the corner of Division Avenue and Fountain Street in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At the time, it was the largest office building in Grand Rapids and was used primarily as offices and for furniture display showrooms. The building housed seven government agencies in WWII.

Considered a low-rise building, the 7-story edifice, sold in 1959, has been unoccupied for several years. Occasionally referred to as Fountain Place, but still identified by the Keeler name incised in the limestone door detail, the building was added to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1980.



The Keeler Building in Grand Rapids, Michigan, (circa 1947)
Grand Rapids History & Special Collections, Archives,
Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, MI.

Die Casting

Remaining on the cutting edge of new processes has always been a key factor in the success of Keeler.

Keeler has taken many leaps of faith, such as switching from sand casting to die casting to retain a Ford Motor Company contract. This type of change required investing in new machinery, but increased sales made it worth the cost and effort.

In 1981, Keeler became the largest die cast facility in North America and used almost 1.5 million pounds of zinc alloys a month.

To ensure the integrity of the metal, Keeler alloyed the zinc in-house. In addition, the company built 80% of all the tooling used for brass and zinc die casting, and for metal stamping tools. All were state-of-the-art, and made it possible to produce everything from minuscule jewelry parts to large automotive parts.

Today, Keeler creates not just hardware but art, and boasts a library of more than 54,000 designs and 2,100 finishes and finish variations.



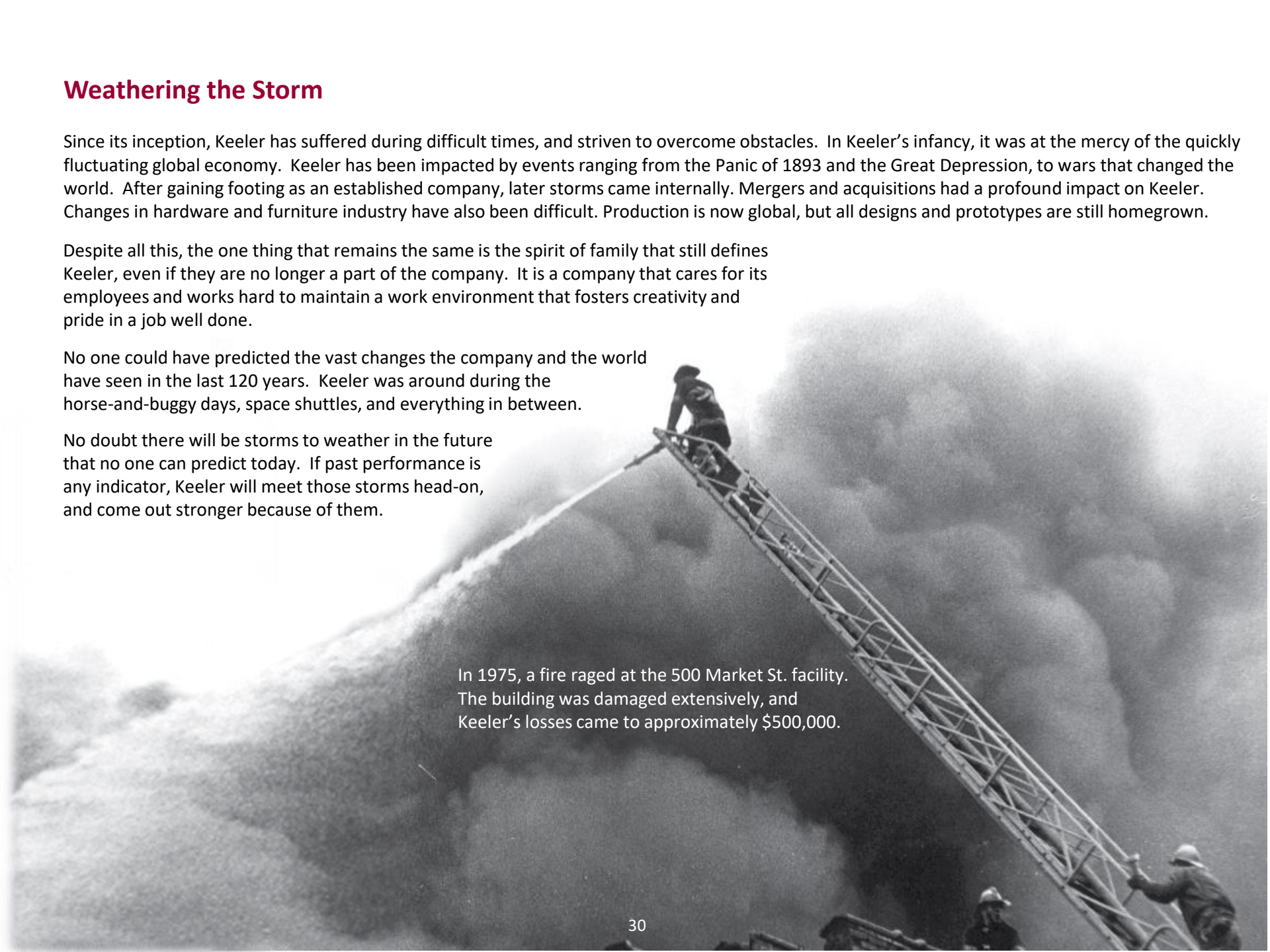
Weathering the Storm

Since its inception, Keeler has suffered during difficult times, and striven to overcome obstacles. In Keeler's infancy, it was at the mercy of the quickly fluctuating global economy. Keeler has been impacted by events ranging from the Panic of 1893 and the Great Depression, to wars that changed the world. After gaining footing as an established company, later storms came internally. Mergers and acquisitions had a profound impact on Keeler. Changes in hardware and furniture industry have also been difficult. Production is now global, but all designs and prototypes are still homegrown.

Despite all this, the one thing that remains the same is the spirit of family that still defines Keeler, even if they are no longer a part of the company. It is a company that cares for its employees and works hard to maintain a work environment that fosters creativity and pride in a job well done.

No one could have predicted the vast changes the company and the world have seen in the last 120 years. Keeler was around during the horse-and-buggy days, space shuttles, and everything in between.

No doubt there will be storms to weather in the future that no one can predict today. If past performance is any indicator, Keeler will meet those storms head-on, and come out stronger because of them.



In 1975, a fire raged at the 500 Market St. facility. The building was damaged extensively, and Keeler's losses came to approximately \$500,000.

Amidst the Great Recession (2008)

In December 2008, the National Bureau of Economic Research declared that the United States was in recession. This period has had the deepest impact on the housing market, home ownership, employment, and the financial stability of businesses of all sizes, since the Great Depression. The Federal Reserve dropped the Fed funds rate to zero, its lowest level in history, and the Dow fell nearly 34% for the year. Since then \$6.5 trillion of residential real estate value has evaporated through a wave of mortgage defaults. After a severe 33% drop, the median U.S. home price eventually bottomed out in 2012.

This was the backdrop of the next chapter for Keeler when JVA acquired the company from FKI Holdings in December 2008.

The Reach of Keeler

Keeler is a trusted name in multiple markets, and has been since its inception. The company insisted that products carrying the Keeler name exhibit fine craftsmanship along with serving the intended functional purpose.

Starting in a small factory in Middleville and eventually becoming the largest North American producer of furniture hardware, Keeler has had a lasting impact on the furniture industry. But it was never just furniture. The company has supplied hardware to the automotive, appliance, marine, electronics, and office equipment industries, among others, and the name still represents the very best in artistry and innovation.

In celebrating 120 years, Keeler is proud to continue the tradition of sponsoring community events and local organizations. Keeler plans to donate the historical items included in this book to the Grand Rapids Public Library for its archives.

Keeler:
120
Years In The Making

Epilogue: New Shoots from Old Roots

The Keeler Brass story is truly remarkable and inspiring. It is about bold people who were fueled by strong values and who triumphed over adversity. People who proved that passion can make a difference to the individual and to the community. They demonstrated creativity in marrying art with products, and innovation in matching craft with new technology. Their accomplishments throughout their journey embodied the American dream itself.

At JVA Partners we believe in making products that enhance peoples' lives. We are passionate about innovation, technology, and manufacturing. To us, the American dream is about realizing our potential and creating opportunities for others.

We believe that the journey is the destination. So, in a way, the Keeler journey embodies both our values and our destination. And from that perspective, the timing of this acquisition in December 2008, at the dawn of the Great Recession, was more about destiny and less about coincidence.

It is an honor for our team to be the custodian of the Keeler legacy, artistry, and innovation for the next generation and beyond.

John Veleris
Chairman and CEO



About Norma Lewis

Norma Lewis has published seven books and hundreds of magazines and newspaper articles since 1989. She is a local history buff, and four of her books are pictorial histories of the Grand Rapids area. She and her husband, Jay de Vries, divide their time between Byron Center and Grand Haven, Michigan.

Research

Katy Koskela, certified school media specialist, extensively researched library archives and explored a number of other research avenues.

Archives

Keeler Product Design and Graphic Design departments.

We have combined information from hundreds of sources, some with conflicting information. To our knowledge the information in this book is correct.

