

John Bahnsen

In the days before John Bahnsen made his mark as the driving force behind the renowned Globe Furniture Company of Waterloo, he was out in the cold wilderness – chopping down trees for 75 cents a cord.



The gifted cabinet maker from Germany had immigrated to Ohio in 1884 where he met and married Helene Lorenzen. The young couple moved to Wisconsin to live with her parents, but during the winter months there was no work for Bahnsen. “Rather than lie around in idleness waiting for mild weather, John Bahnsen went out into the woods as a wood chopper . . .”

In 1890, he got a job at the Manitowoc Manufacturing Company where he rose from workman to general superintendent over all the factories of what became The American Seating Company, headquartered in Chicago.

While Bahnsen’s star was rising in the United States, things were evolving in Waterloo’s furniture industry. In 1906, Edward Seagram managed to get Waterloo town council to provide incentives for the Toronto Office Specialty Company to move to Erb Street. While the furniture business prospered here, Seagram began to look further afield, this time to Walkerville, Ontario, where the Globe Furniture Company was based.

Together with two other prominent businessmen – Aloyes Bauer and John Letter – Seagram bought the Globe, amalgamating it with his local furniture business to become The Globe Furniture Company of Waterloo in 1910.

The first year of the amalgamation was a troubled one and Seagram began negotiations with Bahnsen to bring him to Waterloo in 1911 to reorganize the factory and introduce new products in the school and church sectors.

With Bahnsen’s expertise, the Globe Furniture Company prospered and in 1914 a modern, four-storey brick building was erected, making the new building the largest factory in Waterloo. New machinery was put in place and by the 1920s the company had become “one of the important industrial institutions of Canada.”

“From all corners of Europe they pick the finest of the wood carving craft and add them to their staff. The work when installed in churches and other public buildings throughout the Dominion of Canada is not excelled and seldom equaled by other firms on the North American continent.”

Work done by skilled Globe artisans was placed in many prominent buildings including the parliament buildings in London, England. Its products were installed across Canada, South Africa and Peru making it famous for artistic wood carvings depicting scenes like the “Last Supper.”

In 1923 Bahnsen bought a lot on Albert Street to build a home. The house, which still stands next to the Waterloo Public Library, was designed in the Tudor Revival style by a Toronto architect and was completed in 1924.

Bahnsen died suddenly at the age of seventy of a heart attack while visiting his daughter in Wisconsin in 1932. His obituary read, "Mr. Bahnsen, with knowledge gained in leading furniture plants both in United States and Canada, was recognized as one of the best executives and designers of school and church furniture in America."

Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library.