

# IN THE GROOVE

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# The Paramount Story

## Part One: The Sheboygan Genesis

by Michael S. Hatfield

Paramount records have long been associated with great blues and jazz performances. Paramount's much coveted 12000-13000 series made in New York, Chicago, and Grafton, Wisconsin studios between 1922 and 1932 are highly prized by connoisseurs and collectors alike. Almost seventy years after the last records were issued by Paramount, people are just as enthused by the discovery of a Paramount record in their local thrift store or antique shop as the customers were who bought these records originally.

The allure of Paramount records needs no extensive introduction here. It is assumed that the informed readers of **In The Groove** are well aware of Paramount's ranking in phonograph history, so I shall not repeat that which you know so well. What I would like to do in the following paragraphs is to shed some light on the earliest recorded history of the Paramount label; a history which is notoriously murky. I also hope to fill in some of the blanks, and correct some errors which have appeared over the years in various articles concerning one of the most important labels of the twenties and thirties.

Paramount Records, a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company, is assumed by many to have been solely based in Port Washington, Wisconsin, because of the information supplied on the record labels themselves. This assumption is essentially true, but experienced collectors are also aware of a connection to another Wisconsin city: Sheboygan. It is here that I would like to begin.

The founder of the Wisconsin Chair Company was Frederick A. Dennett (1849-1920) of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Fred began his career in the manufacture of chairs in the "City of Chairs", Sheboygan, in 1886 with fellow Sheboyganite, George B. Mattoon (1847-1904). George had the chair-making know-how, and Fred had the money to get started in business.

Active in politics since 1875 when he became the First Clerk in the Wisconsin Senate, Fred Dennett was a civic-

minded man who always seemed to want to give something back to his home-town of Sheboygan. He would later serve as a member of the Wisconsin Senate, and as the mayor of Sheboygan from 1901 to 1903. During his four-year term as

State Senator, Dennett represented the interests of Ozaukee and Sheboygan counties, and served as chairman of the Senate's Manufacturing Committee. Fred Dennett's political aspirations aided not only his fellow Wisconsinites, but also afforded him an advantage in his personal business activities as well.

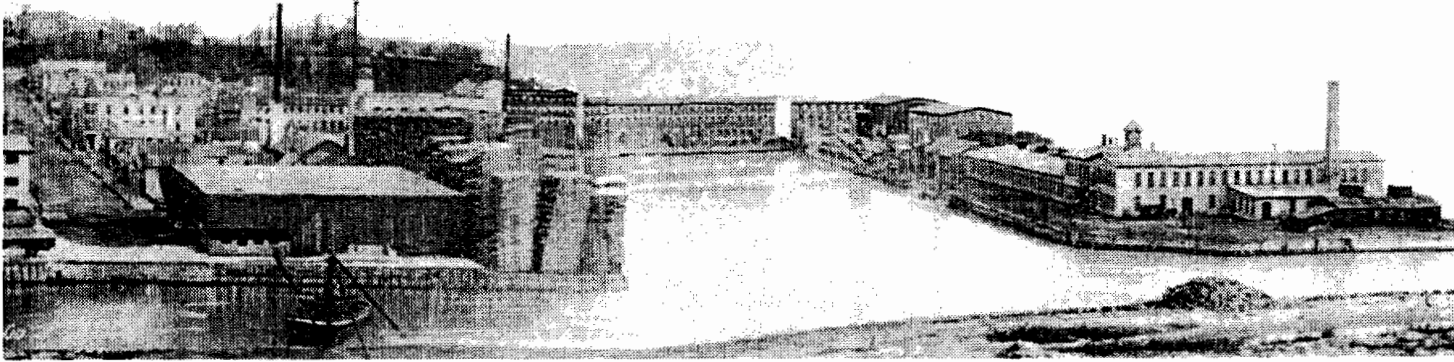
Unfortunately, the Mattoon Manufacturing Company factory burned down just one year after getting started so Fred decided to set off on his own as a furniture manufacturer in his own right. He chose the nearby city of Port Washington, 25 miles to the south, as



a logical place to do business as its port and harbor were better equipped to deal with the transportation needs of a neophyte industry than those that Fred's Sheboygan hometown could offer at the time. Perhaps Fred thought that he could better make a name for himself in a town other than the one from which he came. Or maybe the seven-year-old building on the harbor in the heart of the business district that was up for sale was a better bargain than anything he could find in Sheboygan.

In either case, Dennett purchased a building formerly used by a bankrupt sash and door manufacturer, Port Washington Manufacturing Company on September 8, 1888. Located on the Lake Michigan waterfront, the Wisconsin Chair Company of Port Washington opened for business with 35 employees just ten days later and within a month, the Wisconsin Chair Company was officially incorporated.

Fred Dennett bought the building from an up and coming Port Washington entrepreneur, John Martin Bostwick (1837-1935), a transplanted easterner from New York who would later become not only a major stockholder, but also vice-president and eventually, president of the



*View of Port Washington showing the harbor and the Wisconsin Chair Company as it looked before the fire of 1899. (Photo courtesy of the author)*

Wisconsin Chair Company and its subsidiaries, the United Phonographs Company, and the New York Recording Laboratories.

It was not just the promise of adventure, travel and business opportunity that led Bostwick to leave his native state, but also the potential for love and marriage. According to Dorothy Bostwick (the wife of one of John M. Bostwick's four grandsons), John met Louisa Blake (1843-1923) in 1859 while her parents were traveling in New York. John was asked to escort Louisa to a dance and once he met her he was so taken with her that a year later he moved to Port Washington to court her. He began work in Port Washington as a postal employee, but since he was trained as an apprentice watchmaker back in Birmingham, New York, he soon set up a watch repair shop and sold sewing machines door-to-door with a horse-drawn buggy. John Bostwick's courtship of Louisa Blake was successful and they married in Port Washington on October 21, 1862.

Dorothy added that Bostwick made his first real estate purchase in Port Washington, the old sash and door factory, with \$12,600 at an auction in October 1887. When Fred Dennett was looking in August 1888 for a suitable building to start his new chair factory, John M. Bostwick encouraged him, and sold the building to him.

Fred Dennett thus became the president, and he chose John M. Bostwick to be the vice-president of the Wisconsin Chair Company. Family ties were evidenced in employment practices at the chair company. Fred Dennett's younger brother, John Randall Dennett (1855-1924), married the younger sister of Fred's wife and joined the firm. Fred's uncle was given an executive job as well. Chicago physician Edward Jenner Barrett married Fred's daughter and became the company treasurer. Bostwick's daughter, Ellen, married William Ramsey, an early investor in the company. (In the interest of space, this listing has been abbreviated but the examples could go on and on, with sons and grandsons being gainfully employed by the company from its begin-

ning until it folded in 1954.)

In only eleven years since its inception, the Wisconsin Chair Company flourished and became the world's largest manufacturer of floor rockers. In 1891 the company received its first financial windfall with the acquisition of the MacLean swing rocking chair patent. This highly popular rocker sold well through Sears and many other retailers, and provided the money for the Wisconsin Chair Company's first subsidiary, the Sheboygan Knitting Company.

There was a plethora of offshoot business ventures that would follow, some directly related to the parent company's purpose to manufacture furniture, and others far removed. Among the many furniture producing subsidiary companies owned and operated by the Wisconsin Chair Company were Northern Couch Company in Port Washington, the Wisconsin Cabinet and Panel Company in New London, the Northern Chair Company in Grafton, and the Lakeside Craft Shops in Sheboygan. There were several other business ventures that had no apparent connection to the Wisconsin Chair Company's original purpose such as the canning company started by John R. Dennett in 1922 and a phonograph manufacturing company, in 1916.

The Wisconsin Chair Company enjoyed great success and growth, but it also experienced serious hardships as well. The nation was in an economic depression in the mid-nineties, and for several months in 1893 the company struggled financially as did most other businesses. The chair company at one point offered wood to its employees as partial payment for their labor. Area businesses, recognizing the importance of the company to the local economy, honored the company's invoices as a form of scrip. The Wisconsin Chair Company had become Ozaukee County's largest employer, and the community pulled together to help keep it alive. An article in the July 4, 1898 issue of the Port Washington Star reported:

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"Probably one-half of the city's population is dependent upon the prosperity and continued operation of this immense industry for support, and everything that affects the company and its employees has a deep interest for the community. It has been the great factor in building up and beautifying our city and its life marks an era of prosperity never before known here."

The article went on to describe in great detail, and boast about the company's modern, efficient and elaborate fire protection system and the "competent leadership" of superintendent Holden of the local volunteer fire department. Ironically, the preventative measures so lovingly described failed, when on February 19, 1899 an enormous fire completely destroyed Fred Dennett's Wisconsin Chair Company, and much of Port Washington's downtown business district as well.

The fire's devastation was complete; so much so that Dennett wanted to return to Sheboygan to get a fresh start. John Bostwick, the vice-president and a major stockholder in the company, insisted that they remain. He ultimately convinced Dennett to stay in Port Washington and rebuild, and within ten months the new Wisconsin Chair Company buildings were erected all around the Port Washington harbor. The company once again thrived and by 1910 had expanded its market to other parts of the nation as well as Canada, Mexico and other countries.

Part of this success could be attributed to the popularity of phonographs. At a time when Edison's home phonographs were being mass-produced, the mechanisms were enclosed in handsome wood cabinets that were intended to blend in with other fine accoutrements of the average middle class Victorian home. Since the turn of the century and before Thomas A. Edison secured his first cabinet design

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BOYGAN PRESS

## No Record Surface Noise

# PURITAN

## Phonographs and Records

That raspy record is overcome in The Puritan. No annoying, destroying surface noise whatsoever. Plays smoothly as velvet—and silently. Only the rare, rich, real natural tone of voice and instrument is heard. And that lifelike quality is made possible by the full length, expanding organ pipe-like tonal chamber of The Puritan. (An exclusive and patented feature.)

**COME IN AND HEAR THE PURITAN  
JUDGE FOR YOURSELF ITS SUPREMACY**

Has its own records. Plays all disc records in the world perfectly.

Prices: \$68, \$85, \$95, \$108, \$180, \$200, \$350, \$700

Cash and Easy Payments.

**NEW SHEBOYGAN INDUSTRY EARNS  
RECOGNITION**

Chas. J. Orth of Milwaukee, largest retail phonograph dealer in the country, takes on Puritan line to exclusion of all other makes of phonographs.



# M. W. BRAND

1103 N. Eighth Street

The entire machine, including all parts and records is manufactured in Sheboygan.  
If anything gets out of order it can be repaired right here the same day.

**Open Every Evening This Week**

*This is the first ad for Puritan Phonographs and Records published by United Phonographs Corporation in the Sheboygan Press on March 27, 1917. It was published three months before the company started its own record production. (Photo courtesy of the author)*

patent in 1909, he had contracted with the Wisconsin Chair Company to produce cabinets for him, designed by William H. Thommen. The chair company's involvement with Edison no doubt led to its own decision later to enter the phonograph manufacturing industry.

In 1904, the Wisconsin Chair Company established a branch in a fifty-year-old building in Grafton at the Milwaukee River dam. There an exclusive line of chairs was manufactured and by October 1907 the factory,

renamed the Northern Chair Company, was turning out over five hundred chairs a day. This building would later be the site of the United Phonographs Corporation and the New York Recording Laboratories' pressing plant and recording studio.

On October 7, 1910, Fred Dennett and his brother John, together with Fred's son-in-law Edward J. Barrett, John M. Bostwick, and furniture designer William H. Thommen formed the Lakeside Craft Shops. A

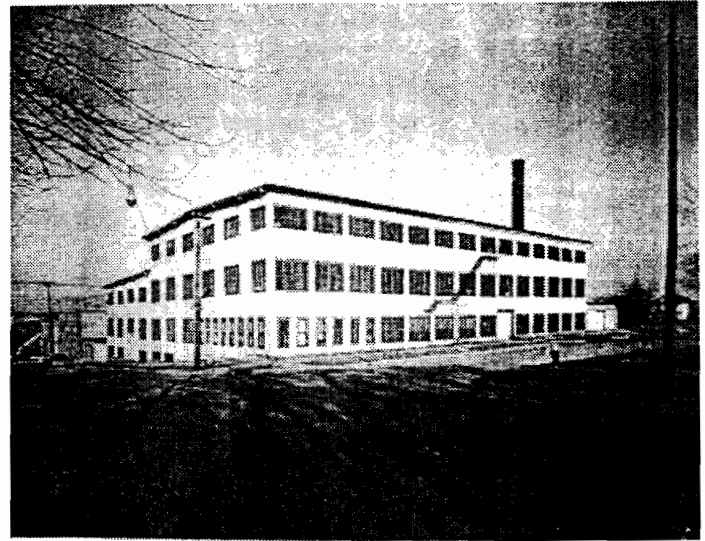
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building was erected in the manufacturing district of Sheboygan's south side, not far from where Fred Dennett began his chair-making career twenty-four years earlier with George Mattoon. The Lakeside Craft Shops' original building still stands at the corner of South 13th Street and Kentucky Avenue.

The Lakeside Craft Shops manufactured very high grade cedar chests and furniture of unusual and high class design. It is interesting to note that Fred Dennett, who continued to live in and support Sheboygan, chose his hometown to be the place where his highest grade furniture products were to be made. The furniture made in Port Washington's Wisconsin Chair Company plant and Grafton's Northern Chair Company facility, while of good quality, were mainly mass-produced, affordable utility furnishings. There were fine lines of furnishings available as well, as an examination of contemporary catalogs will demonstrate. But the finest, most sublime and aesthetically detailed craftsmanship came from Sheboygan's Lakeside Craft Shops.

Beginning in 1914, Fred and John Dennett along with John Bostwick and Edward Barrett made a series of business decisions which were to lay the groundwork for the formation of a new subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company two years later. Whether the board of directors made these decisions as a part of a conscious long term plan or not is unknown. As principal officers in the Wisconsin Chair Company (and its branches), they authorized the



*This Sheboygan building, which still exists, once housed the Lakeside Craft Shops and United Phonographs Corporation, headquarters of the makers of the earliest Puritan and Paramount records. (Photograph courtesy of the author)*

corporate purchase of all remaining stock in the Northern Chair Company at Grafton and the Wisconsin Seating Company in New London.

On December 9, 1914, Thomas A. Edison's main plant in West Orange, New Jersey burned down. He then began to investigate alternative avenues of production, among them the Wisconsin Seating Company in New London, owned by the Wisconsin Chair Company. A year later, notes of a Board of Directors meeting on December 7, 1915 indicate that the chair company was interested in selling its New London location to an as yet unnamed party. At a Wisconsin Chair Company board meeting on September 9, 1916, John M. Bostwick suggested the following:

"That all acts and arrangements made up to date by the president of the Wisconsin Chair Company (Fred Dennett) with the Edison Phonograph Company regarding the operation and disposal of earnings and plant of the New London branch of the Wisconsin Chair Company be hereby approved and ratified."

The reader will recall that since the early 1900's until around 1909, the Wisconsin Chair Company had been contracted to produce quality wooden cabinets for Edison Phonograph Company, and later for Pathé and other phonograph makers. It is likely that they had outfitted the New London plant and perhaps the Lakeside Craft Shops in Sheboygan for this purpose. After the sale of the New London plant to Edison, opportunity in the burgeoning phonograph industry could no longer be ignored by the officials of the Wisconsin Chair Company.

The excellent economy caused by World War I resulted in huge growth in the phonograph industry. In 1914, about 500,000 people owned phonographs nationwide. Four years later that number had quadrupled. The number of phonograph manufacturers grew over twelve



*Pressed by Bridgeport Die & Machine Company for three months until the Grafton record plant was operational on June 29, 1917, this and the record seen on page 21, are the earliest records produced by the Wisconsin Chair Company's subsidiary, the United Phonographs Corporation of Sheboygan. (Photos courtesy of the Author)*

fold. A number of furniture manufacturers nation-wide including the Wisconsin Chair Company began to make cabinets for Edison, Victor, Columbia and Pathé. These same furniture manufacturers similarly became involved in the production of their own records, and they had a built-in marketing mechanism in their networks of wholesale outlet stores. Port Washington's Wisconsin Chair Company could no longer resist the lure of the potential of the phonograph industry.

The Wisconsin Chair Company began to lay the groundwork for its newest phonographic subsidiary. Back on November 16, 1915, the Northern Couch Company, a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company, amended its corporate articles to change its company name to the Wisconsin Couch Company. A year later on December 14, 1916, the Wisconsin Couch Company amended its corporate articles to include the production not only of furniture, but "phonographs and phonographic records" and changed its name to the United Phonographs Corporation. In its trademark application, filed from Port Washington on January 5, 1917, the United Phonographs Corporation, claimed use of the trademark "Puritan" on its own line of phonographs and records since October 1, 1916. The United Phonographs Corporation was initially headquartered in Port Washington on paper, while its phonograph production activities were actually conducted in the old Lakeside Craft Shops buildings in Sheboygan.

The "Paramount" name, logo, and trademark of an eagle perched on a phonograph were all registered by the Wisconsin Chair Company with the United States Patent

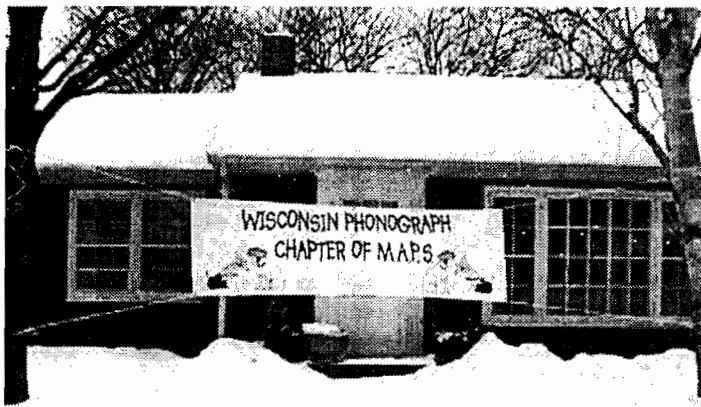


Office on November 5, 1917, which claimed use of the same since October 20, 1917. The stage was thus set for the Wisconsin Chair Company to become a part of the burgeoning phonograph industry.

*(Editor's Note: Mike S. Hatfield will continue with Part Two in a future issue. He welcomes your comments. He can be contacted at: 3715 S. 76th St. Apt. #1, Milwaukee WI 53220 (414) 328-1667.)*

## MAPS Chapter News, continued from page 3

### Cheeseheads go Honky Tonkin' by Robin Rolfs



The first meeting of the millennium was held on a cold & wintry day at the home of Bob Stutz. The Wisconsin MAPS banner was out in front of Bob's home to

welcome members. We now have 30 members in our Wisconsin Chapter. A record number for 2000.

We will be inviting the Early Talking Machine Club of America from Chicago to join us for a joint meeting on Saturday, May 20, 2000 at the Bunny Berigan Jazz Jubilee at Fox Lake, Wis. The Wisconsin Chapter will also be displaying phonographs and playing jazz 78's.

Jeff Young suggested a portable phonograph picnic in the park for the July meeting to be held in Green Bay as a summer event.

A surprise Baby Edison Shower was held for Bob & Wendie Coon who are expecting a little Edison on February 11th.

Show and tell was as interesting and exciting as ever. Everything was shared from a new Puck phonograph to Nipper items, jazz records and a complimentary CD for each member attending from our new member Kris Knaus.

We concluded the meeting with honky tonk piano music on Bob Stutz's new Yamaha Player piano. It was awesome. Of course food and brew followed the meeting at a local restaurant with great food and good service.