

In 1890 advertisements appeared in the MERCURY as follows: 'Workers Wanted - Apply at Waiontha Knitting Mill'

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywitz

The mill had been established with the intention of manufacturing and selling knit goods which would provide local citizens with a means of year-round employment. The building was a two-story one that was 64 x 44 feet, thoroughly equipped with the latest in improved machinery and had all the modern conveniences that were available at that time. Employment was given to over fifty people who produced dozens and dozens of long underwear - more commonly called 'Union Suits'. The factory was originally on Lake Street.

Later that year, after the superintendent was found to be negligent in running the mill, a new manager was chosen. More machinery was installed, making it possible for the workers to manufacture summer as well as winter underwear.

The manufacture of 'union suits' began in Utica, NY, and originated as women's wear during the 19th century, an alternative to the constricting garments of earlier generations. Men soon saw the usefulness of such garments and their popularity grew. The winter garments (usually in red) had long arms and legs, buttoning up the front with a button-up flap in the rear which became known as an access hatch or drop seat. Summer garments were of white with short sleeves. We often refer to these garments as 'Long Johns' but there is a difference in that union suits are one piece and long johns are two pieces. The name for these two-piece garments is attributed to the famous boxer John L. Sullivan who always entered the ring wearing only his long underwear bottoms.

All went well until April of 1899 when there was a fire that destroyed a large quantity of goods at the Waiontha mill. This didn't stop the production of goods and by 1900, the mill was rushed with orders with as high as two-thousand garments per week turned out. Ads for more workers continued as the business grew. The pay at that time was ten cents per hour.

By 1904, the facilities were found to be inadequate and a new knitting mill was constructed on Elm Street Extension. The Lackawanna Railroad Company had ties ready for the purpose of laying a new switch to

accommodate the mill. Arrangements had been made with the water commissioner for the extension of Village water mains to the building which was heated by steam. Sidewalks were added for the safety of workers who walked to their jobs.

The new mill was opened in February for public inspection. The old mill on Lake Street was for sale - used for a time as an evaporating plant where hundreds of bushels of apples were processed.

By 1909, the Utica Knitting Mill consolidated with Waiontha and took over running the business. Even with the high price of cotton during 1910 which affected the earnings of the company, they managed to show a good profit. The product produced had an advance sale for a year. There were also plants under Utica Knitting in Clayville, Sherburne and two plants in Utica as well as the one in Richfield and they all ran night and day.

The need for workers and a place to house them continued. In 1917, eight new dwelling houses were ready to be occupied, built for the use of workers at the mill with reasonable rent, free water rates and plenty of work with good wages at the knitting mill. These were located on Linden Avenue.

To help the situation, the Utica Knitting Mill became the owners of what was to be known as the Colony House. This home was built in prior years by the father of F. M. Zuller, an area photographer. The elder Mr. Zuller was a carpenter by trade and the building which was made of selected timber, cost him \$14,500, aside from his own labor on it. The building of this home was responsible for the opening of Bronner Street. George Bronner, who owned the site, agreed to extend the street if Mr. Zuller built the house. Its ownership history included the Bringloe family, Charles Conway and then the Utica Knitting Company.

Workers for the mill were brought from what was then called the Rome State School which was started in 1894. They provided a system of education that was geared to the ability of those attending and work opportunities were started

for boys and girls. A large number of older boys were employed on various farms while the girls were employed as domestic or factory workers.

The Colony acted as a working-girl's club. They were easy to supervise as they all were living in one place and working at the mill. Not only was their work supervised but their recreation and health were also an important part of their lives. They were not too closely supervised, however. It was the thought of the school that if you give people an opportunity to do a good job and do not watch them too closely they usually do well. A man and wife were hired to supervise the home. Mr. and Mrs. Manzer were in charge of the working girls here.

About one-third of the girls' earnings were given directly to them for the purchase of clothing and other personal items. Another portion was placed in the bank to the credit of the girl who earned it and the remainder went into a fund which was used to provide things that the State did not provide. Citizens accepted these girls into local activities with picnics, meetings and special suppers. The ladies of St. John's Episcopal Church showed special concern and in return, the girls often reciprocated with supper or a program including song and dance, held at the parish hall.

All went well until 1921 when the Colony House burned. According to the writeup in the MERCURY: "Sunday Morning Blaze Results in Total Loss - All Occupants Saved - Knitting Company to Rebuild. Discovered by Mrs. Manzer at about 5:30 Sunday morning, there was very little furniture and scarcely any clothing saved but there was no loss of life among the twenty-seven girls from the Rome Custodial home who were under the charge of the Manzers.

Mrs. Manzer smelled smoke and Mr. Manzer's investigation took him first to the cellar. Then he went to the enclosure at the rear of the house which held the kitchen and found that those rooms were ablaze. The girls from the second and third floors were removed to the home of Mrs. J. C. Waffle next door. Then the alarm was sent in. Within five minutes

of the time of the alarm, the fire department's truck went down James Street to the site. Though the fire had gained considerable headway and was fanned by a strong south wind, the fireman thought at first that they would be able to overcome and extinguish the blaze, but it soon got beyond control and at eight o'clock, the building was in ruins. While most of the girls were without clothing, the residents of the village were generous in seeing that the young women got clothing and essentials and were able to start work in the knitting mill Monday morning. They were all taken to the Richfield Hotel where they were being housed until other quarters can be supplied. All are employed in the local branch of the Utica Knitting Company and this company owned the building destroyed. The total insurance on the building was \$4500. Officials of Utica Knitting were here Sunday and stated that a new building would be erected on the old site."

Construction on a new house began almost immediately and the business of the knitting mill continued to be profitable - for a short time. By 1922 there was a notice in the paper that a reduction of 12 1/2 % in wages would take place. In 1928, the mill was closed for a week due to lack of work for the operators. In August of 1932, the knitting mill closed permanently. The machinery and other equipment was shipped to Anniston, Alabama. The Colony Girls were sent to other facilities around the state where they continued to provide help where needed and were schooled to the best of their abilities. It wasn't until July of 1936 that the ShurKatch Fishing Tackle Company showed an interest in the old mill.

In 1938, Charles Ostrander purchased the former Colony House on Bronner Street from the Utica Knitting Company. In 1940, the Colony House was advertised at auction with the description being a three story, fifteen room home with steam heat, electricity and water, two baths, hardwood floors, laundry, and slate roof on a three-acre lot for \$2500. It was purchased by Jack Wilkinson who was then the manager of the I. L. Richer Co. feed mill nearby.