

Guide to the Paris Woolen Mills Records circa 1911-1990

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Overview of the Collection Creator: Paris Woolen Mills (Stayton, Or.)

Title: Records

Dates: circa 1911-1990 (inclusive)
1944-1980 (bulk)

Quantity: 92 cubic feet (81 record cartons, 28 flat boxes, 5 document cases, 2 oversize folders.)

Collection Number: Mss 6024

Summary: Records of a small woolen mill located in Stayton, Oregon, which operated from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries and produced primarily blankets and clothing fabrics. Most materials date from the 1950s through the 1970s and include extensive correspondence files, financial records, and detailed production records.

Repository: Oregon Historical Society
Research Library

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Historical Note

Located on the North Santiam River near Stayton, Oregon, the Paris Woolen Mills were among the longest-running woolen mill operations in the state. Although marginally profitable throughout its existence, the mill did operate successfully at several periods, most notably during World Wars I and II. Ownership changed frequently, but there was a period of relative stability under the proprietorship of the Etzel family, from 1947 to 1982. Despite efforts to rejuvenate the business in the 1980s, the mill closed for good around 1989.

The Paris Woolen Mills had its origins in a carding operation built in the late 1860s by pioneer Drury S. Stayton, who founded the town of Stayton in 1872. In 1905 a group of citizens headed by Fred A. Carter and S. Philippi organized a new enterprise incorporated as the Stayton Woolen Mills Company. A mill building was completed at the end of that year. The mill continued operation with varying degrees of success and numerous changes in ownership. In 1913 the name was changed to the Wilbur Woolen Mills Company, the result of a purchase by J. P. Wilbur and others the previous year. Profits increased in the late 1910s, in part the result of World War I. New buildings were built after another change of ownership in 1919, when the name was changed to the Santiam Woolen Mills. Despite large orders from Montgomery Ward in the early 1920s, the mill declined and was sold to a group of Portland investors in 1926 and was re-incorporated as the Western Woolen Mills.

In 1933 the mill was purchased by Robert D. Paris, who had been the superintendent of the Portland Woolen Mills. New equipment was purchased and the name was changed to the Paris Woolen Mills. The operation continued with moderate success until 1944, when it was purchased by John W. Powell and his son John E. Powell, who modernized much of the operation.

The most significant change came in August 1947, when John W. Etzel (1895-1980) and his family

purchased the mill from the Powells. Etzel, who had worked for the mill as a wool buyer and sorter, was primarily a farmer who had little experience in wool manufacture. He relied on a series of superintendents to run the plant, most notably Claude Phillips in the 1950s and early 1960s. Phillips's wife, Eunice, who had started at the mill in 1937, was the company's financial officer and became a partner by the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the operations were run by John Etzel's son Elmer (b. 1920), who also operated a cattle ranch in the area. At this time the principal products of the mill's 24 looms were auto robes, pram robes, blankets, and cooler cloth for racehorses. The plant employed approximately 65 people at the height of its operation. Among its principal customers was the Jantzen company of Portland, the Curvon Corporation of New Jersey, and the Horner Woolen Mills. In addition, the Paris Woolen Mills supplied blankets to a number of government institutions such as prisons and universities.

John W. Etzel kept the company running despite increasing financial losses. He personally promoted the company's products, travelling extensively to maintain close contacts with suppliers and customers. As the mill suffered from the competition of inexpensive overseas goods, Etzel lobbied government officials for tariff protection. His vigorous efforts continued until 1967, when he suffered a stroke and had to reduce his management role.

With the mill's profits declining steadily in the 1970s, the Etzel family sold the company in 1982 to Pettygrove Industries, headed by Don and Karen Lachman. The new owners hoped to revive the business through high-volume orders, but their efforts were largely unsuccessful. In 1988, an attempt was made to sell the operation to Harbin HiTec, a company based in Edmonton, Alberta, but backed by the Kanghua Chongming Corporation of China. There was no sale, however, and the mill was closed for good by 1990.