

HAER
ILL
50-PERU,
3-

WESTERN CLOCK COMPANY, PERU FACTORY
I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor
Fifth Street
Peru
LaSalle County
Illinois

HAER No. IL-83

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

WESTERN CLOCK COMPANY, PERU FACTORY
I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor

HAER
ILL
50-PERU,
3-

HAER No. IL-83

Location: Fifth Street
Peru, LaSalle County, Illinois

UTM: 16 E.323450 N.4577180
Quad: LaSalle

Date of Construction: 1902-1960

Builder: Unknown

Present Owner: Local investors

Present Use: Industrial

Significance: The Western Clock Company was a highly successful company and large, regional employer from 1910 through the 1940s. The factory buildings display a high level of architectural treatment.

Project Information: The Illinois and Michigan Canal was designated a National Heritage Corridor in 1984. The following year HABS/HAER embarked on an extensive inventory and documentation project of the 100 mile-long corridor. Field work for this project was concluded in 1988. Final editing of the documentation was completed in 1992.

Historians: Gray Fitzsimons and Douglas Kupel, 1985

The Western Clock Company was originally founded as the United Clock Company in Peru, Illinois, in 1885. That year a German mechanic from Waterbury, Connecticut, arrived in LaSalle and persuaded several of the town's merchants to invest in an automatic clock-making process that he had invented. A small plant was established in Peru, but within two years it was forced to shut down. Lack of adequate capital, poorly skilled labor, and disgruntled stockholders contributed to the collapse of the venture. Despite the previous difficulties, local zinc magnate Frederick W. Matthiessen reorganized the United Clock Company under the name Western Clock Company. Matthiessen expended additional capital to mechanize more completely the clock-making process.

Although an economic depression beginning in 1893 stymied development, returning economic prosperity at the end of the decade enabled the firm to grow. New buildings were constructed, and by 1910 Western Clock Company (or Westclox as it was now called), was the largest producer of alarm clocks in the United States. The factory employed 950 men and women and produced about 8,000 clocks daily. The years 1912-20 and 1923-29 saw even greater expansion of the factory complex. In 1923 a three-story headquarters was built across the street from the plant. The company suffered through the depression of the 1930s, but it recovered during the Second World War by producing time delayed fuses for the armaments industry.

By the late 1940s Westclox employed as many as 3,500 people in turning out its much publicized "Big Ben," "Baby Ben," and "Pocket Ben" watches. At its peak, the company produced 35,000 clocks each day. Competition from other clock companies plus relatively high labor costs in Illinois eventually caused the demise of Peru's Westclox factory. In 1980 a new management decided to move the remaining operation to the South. All of the plant's machinery was removed, and for a few years the sprawling factory complex remained vacant. Recently, a local group of investors purchased the property and leased sections of the factory to light industrial concerns. However, a number of structures, including the old power house and the concrete chimney stacks, are threatened with demolition.

The Western Clock Company is a large factory complex with buildings of brick, steel, and reinforced concrete construction. The oldest extant building dates from 1902; however, the Western Clock Company continually expanded its factory complex through the 1950s. Major additions occurred during the years 1907, 1909, 1912-20, 1923-29, 1937, 1940-41, and 1955-58. By 1960 the

factory complex contained an area of over 755,000 square feet. The factory buildings are located on a sloping hillside and are bordered to the north by Fifth Avenue and to the south by the Rock Island Railroad tracks. A particularly noteworthy structure is the main office building, a concrete frame structure with exterior walls of brick veneer built in 1923. Its two-and-a-half stories rise from a rusticated base. Brick pilasters divide the facades into bays, and the pilasters are ornamented with stylized terra-cotta capitals and bases. The high quality of these architectural elements is evident elsewhere in the factory complex.

The factory buildings date from 1902 through the 1960s and are generally reinforced concrete frames with brick veneers and steel roof trusses supporting gable and sawtooth monitors. The factory contains numerous multi-light windows. Buildings dating from early 1900s were enclosed by later additions. Interestingly, the former gable end of the 1902 factory, now part of an interior wall, contains a terra-cotta panel with the inscription "Western Clock Co." along with several rectangular areas of decorative brickwork. The adjacent power house appears to be the earliest remaining structure, possibly dating from the late 1890s. Built of brick, with pilastered walls, the power house also has a steel roof truss with monitor, circular-arch window openings. The 1950s turbine-generator units were recently removed. The turbines were steam driven with steam provided in the adjacent boiler room. This boiler room is presently under demolition. Tall reinforced concrete stacks, a visual landmark of Peru, are also threatened with demolition.

SOURCES:

Twentieth Anniversary Edition, The LaSalle Tribune, July, 1911: "The Twin Cities, LaSalle and Peru in 1911" (LaSalle, IL: LaSalle Tribune, 1911): 77-8.

Sanborn Map Co., Peru, LaSalle County, Illinois (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1926).

Interview with Mr. Jerome Oberholz, plant engineer of Peru Development Trust, August 1985.