

C. L. King and Montague Basket Companies
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C1880 – C. L. King Basket Company

For about 10 years, during the 1880s to 1890s, it appears that Montague had two companies that made baskets, butter plates and other similar types of products.

The June 1880 Census shows a Charles L. King working as a Foreman of a Basket Factory in Muskegon. He was about 24 years old and was born in Minnesota. At the time, the factory was known as Wood Package and Basket Company.

On December 3, 1881, at the age of 25, Charles L. King of Winona, Minnesota, married Mary Johnston of Six Corners, Minnesota in Muskegon. His occupation was listed as a Foreman in a Basket Factory.

The 1883 City Directory showed a listing in Montague for Charles L. King of C. L. King & Co., Hanchett Bros, Chicago, Mfgs of Baskets, Butter Plates and Fruit packages. Further investigation revealed that the Hanchett Bros consisted of Charles H., Frank J., Fred B., and Louis J. all of Chicago.

A map, also from 1883, showed the Montague Basket Company facilities which were located on Water Street east of Knudsen, near the E. P. Ferry Mill. The names associated with this company were Rutter Bros and Fenlason. The Rutter Brothers appear to be Frank and William. Orin C. Fenlason was born in Wisconsin in 1858. He married Jeannie Boomsluitter in Grand Haven on 23 December 1893.

A news item in the Forum on 7 February 1884 stated that King & Co had installed a kindling machine. This news item seems to be the first mention of the King company locally.

In August 1885 it was reported that 8,000 market and bushel baskets were shipped to Chicago by the Montague Basket Factory on the steamer Brittain.

On 7 May 1886, at 3:00 AM, the Montague butter plate factory was enveloped in flames. Fire departments from both towns responded but with the absence of several Montague members at the State firemen's convention, Whitehall was the first to throw water. Both departments worked heroically and succeeded in saving the surrounding property. The factory with contents, however, was totally destroyed, but the engine and storehouses, containing 6 million plates were saved. The loss was listed at about \$12,000. About a dozen insurance companies were reported to be interested in the fire. With F. J. Hanchett reportedly being in town all week, this indicated that the fire was at C. L. King & Company.

In the 1887 City Directory, Chas. H. Cook (Muskegon County Bank) is listed as the Proprietor of the Montague Basket Factory.

C. L. King was listed in the City Directory as one of the Village Trustees in 1887.

At the end of September 1887, it was reported that the C.L. King Company was planning to build a 50x100 foot warehouse on the sidetrack near their factory, to be used for storing butter plates and fruit packages. By the end of October 1887, the large warehouse was near completion.

On Sunday, 10 June 1888, high winds contributed to the basket factory in Montague catching fire. Before anything could be done, the entire structure was a seething mass of fire. The two departments and the Forum yacht were promptly on the scene. The first water came from the Ferry mill hydrants followed by the Whitehall engine and the Montague department. As it was clear that the factory was going to be lost, attention was turned to the large storehouses filled with baskets. The firemen were able to save these even in the face of a wind amounting almost to a gale. In an hour's time, the factory was reduced to ashes. The building and its valuable machines, worth upwards of \$25,000, were a total loss with an insurance amount of \$7,500. It was thought the fire originated from firecrackers which were being exploded by boys in the neighborhood. At the time of the fire, the plant was owned by C. H. Cook, of Michigan City, and O. C. Fenlason of Montague. Unfortunately for the town, the factory was not rebuilt, so that just left the C. L. King Basket Factory.

October 1888, C.L. King purchased two new boilers from Wilson & Hendrie and would be putting in about \$8,000 worth of new equipment during the winter including a new chime whistle and a new 12-foot-long peeler.

During 1889 and 1890, Frank and Louis Hanchett and their families came to the area several times and visited C. L. King and his wife.

In the early morning hours of Thursday, 6 June 1890, flashes of lightning lit up the skies and crashes of thunder awoke the sleeping citizens, along with the shrieking of whistles and the clanging of bells. The night watchman at the C. L. King & Co. basket factory discovered a fire under a heater and extinguished it. However, moments later he found flames breaking out all over the engine house. It was not definitely known if the fire originated from under the heater or from lightning. An alarm was sounded but before the engines could reach the scene the immense wooden structure was a seething mass of flames. Only

the books and papers could be saved. The fire rapidly spread to the surrounding lumber and log piles, and it looked like the whole plant, warehouse and all would succumb to the lapping flames. With a great effort by the firemen, however, they were able to confine the flames to the immediate surroundings of the factory, which, together with its contents and about 200,000 feet of lumber and a large quantity of logs, were reduced to ashes. The loss of the business was great because the season had just started, and 25 additional hands were about to start work. As it was, 75 people were thrown out of work.

Offices were temporarily set up over Ripley's drugstore. Plans for the future were unknown pending the insurance adjustment. Until then there was talk about putting a few machines in the warehouse where some stock of baskets and butter plates were saved to supply future orders.

There was talk that a large brick factory, 3-times the size of the old, might be built which would give employment to no less than 200 men, boys and girls. The dimensions of the old building that burned were 3-story, 50x120 feet, connected with a 200-foot tramway to the 50x100 foot 2-story warehouse which contained \$6,000 worth of baskets and butter plates ready for shipment.

Local Montague photographer Theo. Wirsing took pictures of the King factory ruins.

In August 1890, C. L. King & Co. made a contract to build a large wooden ware factory in Holland. They were given a bonus of \$7,000 in money and 12 acres of land on Macatawa Bay.

In February 1891 the C. L. King Company indicated they would operate their Montague basket factory all next season in hopes of getting stock ahead to supply their trade while the new factory in Holland was underway.

By late May 1891 a new engine built by the Montague Iron Works was being shipped to the new Holland factory which was near completion.

In June 1891, a fire was discovered under the King's warehouse by George Lawton, who was working at the Iron Works. The firemen did a good job of putting the fire out with little damage to the building. This was the second unexplained fire in the area in recent days.

On 23 Jul 1891 it was announced that the C. L. King basket and butter plate factory would shut down for good this week. Machinery was being removed to the Holland plant. Some of those employed in Montague were also heading to Holland to work.

By mid-September 1891, the King Basket Company began making preparations to move their business. A barn on site was loaded onto a lighter and was towed by the Steamer Cayuga to Holland. The watchman's dwelling near the old factory was the next to go and then the factory itself. The warehouse was staying as it was being used by George Gardiner for grain and vegetable storage.

In October 1891 three workmen employed to tear down the King Company 2-story factory building miraculously escaped death. Charles Fechner and Adolph Windeknecht were working on the roof tearing off shingles, when a gust of wind blew the building to the ground. George Squires, working on the second floor, was carried down with the debris but luckily the old steam box prevented the timbers from crushing him. He fell lengthwise between the joists. Had he been a few inches either way no doubt he would have been killed. He escaped with a bruised nose, black eyes, a scalp wound, and both shoulders bruised. Windeknecht was thrown forward when the roof struck the ground, and received chest injuries that laid him up for a few days. Fechner was not injured beyond a severe shaking up.

In June 1892, Herren Grocery and Stock Company of Montague announced that berry crates made by C. L. King & Co. were available in their store. It's not known how long the King Company remained in business.