

The Cooperative Novelty Manufacturing Company

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August 2024

Wayland Beecher Nicholson was born on January 20, 1854, in Vandalia, Michigan and spent the first decade of his life in Cass County, Michigan until his family moved to Decatur, Michigan, located in Van Buren County. Wayland met Lillie Estelle Parkhurst and became husband and wife on December 13, 1876, shortly thereafter making their home in Augusta, Michigan where Wayland engaged in the hardware business.

Wayland and Lillie moved to Whitehall, Michigan in the early 1880's ¹ and Wayland continued to engage in business with a furniture store in Montague, Michigan as well as Whitehall. ^{2,3} Not content with furniture sales, Wayland engaged in numerous personal and business activities. He established a hearse and undertaking business, ⁴ was a member of the Whitehall volunteer fire department, ⁵ was a member of the White Lake Business Men's Association and served on its executive committee, ⁶ and partnered with Ezra Hubbard in the breeding of fine horse stock. ⁷

Perhaps one of the most interesting activities that Wayland engaged in was producing crayon sketches of horses. He utilized his artistic skill and became well known, ⁸ traveling abroad in state and out of state to create sketches of noted horses which were then turned into plates for use by various sporting papers. ^{9,10,11,12,13}

Wayland arrived in Whitehall at the end of the lumber era where the inexhaustible supply of white pine had been exhausted. Plenty of hardwood trees existed in the greater White River watershed and Wayland saw an opportunity. He was actively selling hardwood furniture produced in other cities and was confident that the furniture could be produced in Whitehall.

He engaged with businessmen to obtain their commitment to purchase \$100 of stock in a company that would manufacture articles for which a ready supply and demand could be obtained, for instance an article of furniture such as an upholstered rocking chair. To allow for



Figure 1. Crayon drawing by W. B. Nicholson compliments of Lowell Area Historical Museum

rich and poor participation with equal footing, stock was sold at \$25 per share with no more than 4 shares per individual. ¹⁴

A meeting was held on December 16, 1887, and it was announced that sufficient stock subscriptions had been received which would allow for the creation of a company. It was decided at this meeting that the company would be named the Cooperative Novelty Manufacturing Company. ¹⁵ The list of stock subscribers was as follows:

Wayland B. Nicholson (Director, President)	John H. Chapman	Lars P. Larson
J.W. Hazelton (Director, Vice President)	Charles E. Covell	Joseph Bell
Albert Mears (Treasurer)	Thomas B. Widoe	Oleson & Degen
Paul I. Hedges (Secretary)	William R. Johnston	Martin Demass
James T. Spearman (Director)	David W. Covell	Lyman T. Covell
James J. Gee (Director)	Andrew Kragstad	Philip R. Vankeuren
John Shelander (Director)	Marshall S. Green	Andrew Nelson
Arthur W. Veal	John H. Sullivan	Israel Erickson
Charles J. French	Hans Marshall	Hiram E. Staples
Klett & Anderson	Frank Fowler	Joseph L. Steffe
Frank Kenfield	George W. Frost	Mark B. Covell
Henry M. Kenfield	William L. Forbes	Frank D. Glazier
James D. Sturtevant	Gottlieb C. Funk	Erick Lindgren
Charles E. Anderson	John Nelson	Andrew Sundstrom
Abraham Youngquist	Charles J. Peterson	John C. Lewis
Johnston & Williams	Christian F. Sollau	Edwin J. Smith
Mrs. Jennie Lake. ¹⁵	Mrs. Adda Robinson	Peter Erickson

The business of Staples and Covell offered a site for the company near the railway for a 5-year lease upon payment of taxes, and the privilege of an additional 5 years at an annual rental of \$25. The offer was accepted, and it was decided that a 30 x 50 building would be erected at this site and would be in operation the following spring producing the first article: a spring rocking chair made of turned maple. ¹⁵

The building was constructed, framed and enclosed by January 12, 1888. ¹⁶ The boiler and engine to power the factory were acquired from the Atlas Engine Works of Indianapolis, Indiana and delivered to the site at a cost of \$840. It was installed by February 9, 1888. ¹⁷

John Kopf of Lowell, Michigan was engaged as superintendent of the factory with the task of setting up machinery, starting the factory, and operating for 3 or 4 months. If everything was found satisfactory, he would be hired permanently with a salary of \$800 per year. ¹⁸ Mr. Kopf was the owner of the Lowell Chair Factory and was knowledgeable about the production of furniture. He had the factory ready for a test run by April 15, 1888, but active operation would not commence until the return of the company president W.B. Nicholson, who was on a business trip in Indiana. ¹⁹ Mr. Kopf had the factory in operation by May 10, 1888, but did not stay to fill a permanent position. He vacated his position with the Cooperative Novelty Manufacturing Company to take charge of a factory in Manistee, Michigan, leaving his son, Sigel David Kopf to

fill his vacancy. ²⁰ Unfortunately, John Kopf did not remain at Manistee very long as he passed away on June 24, 1888, from Bright's disease. ²¹



Figure 2. John Kopf

Initially the company produced the spring rocking chair, with the first purchase of that product by stockholder Frank Fowler for \$5.00, ²² but found that it was more advantageous to produce center tables of various designs. ²³ The center tables became the focus of the operation as more orders for the product were received, such as an order for 3 dozen from an entity in White Cloud, Michigan. ²⁴

The business began to grow throughout the year 1888 and a company meeting held on January 8, 1889, showed that after the first year of operation the stockholders were entirely satisfied with the performance. Additionally, the company was negotiating for work that would keep it in steady and paying operation. ²⁵

The company began attracting attention from abroad. Andrew Starr, a chair maker from Traverse City, Michigan took note of the company and submitted a proposition to the directors at the January 3, 1890, company meeting. He proposed converting the factory to chair manufacturing where he would run the factory the first year for the expenses, and the second year he would pay a minimum of 7 per cent of the value of the plant. ²⁶

The directors were in favor of the proposition and contracts were drawn up but in early March 1890 Starr quickly scooted out of town claiming that he could not obtain suitable lumber in the area at a price that would allow manufacturing of the product at a profit. ²⁷ The factory was shortly thereafter leased to stockholder Peter Erickson, a partner in the firm Erickson & Carlberg, for a period of 3 years, the first year at \$150.00, and the second and third years at \$395.00, respectively. ²⁸ Erickson and Carlberg quickly had the factory producing tables and by July 1890 found the factory working at full capacity. ²⁹

Friday September 19, 1890, the Cooperative Novelty Manufacturing Company came face to face with its fate. A devastating fire consumed numerous buildings in Whitehall that day with the Novelty factory being one of the victims. The insurance payout was received prior to October 1, 1890, in the amount of \$540.00. ³⁰

A stockholders meeting was held on November 26, 1890, where it was agreed to dissolve the company. The boiler and engine were sold to John Shelander for \$250.00 and stockholders were

to receive 30 cents on the dollar after paying all debts. ³¹ Stockholders eventually received a refund of \$8.59 per \$25 share of stock. ³²

Wayland Nicholson continued his success in horse breeding and crayon lithographs after the fire but may have felt like he was being targeted on March 26, 1891, when his house caught fire. The fire did not do great damage but there was considerable water damage to the furniture and the interior of the house, which was fully insured. ³³ He and his family moved back to Augusta, Michigan in 1892. ³⁴

Wayland Nicholson spent only a decade in Whitehall, Michigan but had a positive impact upon the area. His crayon lithographs exist in anonymity.

Resources

1. *The Whitehall Forum, August 23, 1883*
 2. *The Whitehall Forum, October 1, 1885*
 3. *The Whitehall Forum, May 5, 1887*
 4. *The Montague Observer, June 5, 1884*
 5. *The Whitehall Forum, October 1, 1885*
 6. *The Whitehall Forum, August 19, 1886*
 7. *The Whitehall Forum, January 7, 1886*
 8. *The Whitehall Forum, March 18, 1886*
 9. *The Whitehall Forum, November 29, 1888*
 10. *The Whitehall Forum, March 1, 1888*
 11. *The Whitehall Forum, May 16, 1889*
 12. *The Whitehall Forum, April 26, 1888*
 13. *The Montague Observer, January 2, 1890*
 14. *The Whitehall Forum, December 1, 1887*
 15. *The Whitehall Forum, December 22, 1887*
 16. *The Whitehall Forum, January 12, 1888*
 17. *The Whitehall Forum, February 9, 1888*
 18. *The Whitehall Forum, February 23, 1888*
 19. *The Whitehall Forum, April 12, 1888*
 20. *The Whitehall Forum, May 17, 1888*
 21. *The Grand Rapids Daily Eagle, June 26, 1888*
 22. *The Whitehall Forum, May 10, 1888*
 23. *The Whitehall Forum, May 24, 1888*
 24. *The Whitehall Forum, July 5, 1888*
 25. *The Whitehall Forum, January 10, 1889*
 26. *The Whitehall Forum, January 9, 1890*
 27. *The Whitehall Forum, March 6, 1890*
 28. *The Whitehall Forum, March 13, 1890*
 29. *The Whitehall Forum, July 17, 1890*
 30. *The Montague Observer, October 2, 1890*
 31. *The Whitehall Forum, November 27, 1890*
 32. *The Whitehall Forum, January 15, 1891*
 33. *The Whitehall Forum, March 26, 1891*
 34. *The Whitehall Forum, February 18, 1892*
- Findagrave.com*