

When Covington worked for the beat of the drum.

By Judy A. Deeter

In Covington's Fort Rowdy Museum, drums that once filled the air with music now silently sit on shelves. Their use as musical instruments is probably over; their purpose now is to tell the story of the company that made them – the Rogers Drum Company of Covington, Ohio.

The Rogers Drum Company did not begin or end in Covington, but the years there are considered their best years. Some writers refer to the Covington years as the company's "Golden Era".

Joseph H. Rogers, Sr. founded the company in New York in 1849. The company was known for its outstanding calfskin drumheads and sheepskin banjo heads. (coverings of the drum and banjo). Years ago, parts of the drums and banjos were made from animal skins. Musicians paid top dollar for these heads, which were made from the highest grade hides and had a consistent thickness. With the exception of drums made for the Union Army during the Civil War, the Rogers Drum Company seldom made drums in its first 80 years in business.

The company was a family-owned business for over 100 years and for most of that time the standards of excellence started by Joseph H. Rogers, Sr. were maintained. Joseph H. Rogers, Jr., who took over the company after the death of his father moved the company (with the exception of a hide tannery) from New York to Farmingdale, New Jersey. A second tannery was built in New Jersey.

When Joseph H. Rogers, Jr. died in 1929, his sons Cleveland S. and Joseph B. Rogers took over the business. Cleveland ran the operation in Framingham, New Jersey and Joseph the tannery in Highview, New York. Other family members including a brother-in-law and nephew also became involved in the business. Product quality had been instilled in the family, but by the third generation of family ownership times were hard. Near the time Joseph Rogers Jr. died, the U.S. Stock Market crashed.

The United States fell into an economic depression, banjo playing was on the decline, other drum companies started tanning their own skins for drumheads and customers began looking for less expensive skins - - they looked for affordability rather than quality. World War II followed the "Great Depression" of the 1930s. In order to stay afloat, Cleveland Rogers began to diversify the products and used his own money to keep the Rogers Drum Company in business. When Cleveland Rogers died in 1951, the company was producing more than 150 music-related products.

In 1952, the Grossman Music Corporation of Cleveland bought the company. It had been the intent of the owner Henry Grossman to move company operations from Farmingdale, New Jersey to Cleveland, Ohio - - the New Jersey plant was in very bad shape. Grossman also wanted Joseph Thompson of Covington, Ohio to run the company; Joseph Thompson wanted to stay in Covington.

Thompson was born in Miami County's Newton Township in 1897. As a young man, he played the saxophone and drums in several local groups. In the book The Rogers Book by author Rob Cook describes Thompson: "Thompson was a small wiry man with a quick wit and unpretentious style. A gold tooth flashed when he smiled, and he often wore a felt hat cocked to one side. He has been described as eccentric and as a genius."

In 1924, Thompson and fellow musicians G.F. "Bidly" Etter opened the Piqua Music Shop at Water and Wayne in that city. When the stock market crashed in 1929, they lost the store.

After the store closed, Etter and Thompson remained friends but went their separate ways. Etter became a private music teacher and, for one year during World War II, directed the Covington High School Band. Thompson went home to his father's farm. There, he started a musical instrument repair business and began marketing experimental changes to instruments. By the late 1930s, he was not only repairing instruments, he was inventing new instruments and products for the music world. His inventions eventually included the flutophone, the "mouthpiece puller" (to remove mouthpieces stuck in instruments) and the Cambridge Recorder - - a plastic, two-octave instrument used both in elementary schools and in colleges.

In a 1982 letter, Henry Grossman of Grossman Music Corporation wrote:

In 1953, when our firm acquired the Rogers Drum Company of Farmingdale, N.J., we were planning to move it to Cleveland. Among the numerous reasons Joe battled for Covington was his steadfast allegiance to his hometown, its people, his environment and his sentimental attachment to the soil. The latter had special significance to him - - perhaps because of the land grant, which was deeded to his ancestors. Joe showed me the original deed, which was signed by President Madison if I recall correctly.

The Rogers Drum Company came to Covington in 1954. Residents knew something was "going on" on Joe Thompson's farm, but they weren't sure just what was happening. Because of competition among drum companies, the move to Covington was shrouded in secrecy. The new plant was not only built on Joe Thompson's land; Joe Thompson helped build it.

A manuscript by an un-known author titled "Covington's Famous Factory" on file at the Fort Rowdy Museum states:

The combination of Joe Thompson's inventive genius, Henry Grossman's guidance, faith, good business sense, and money, along with the great work ethic of the area citizenry, got things going in the right direction as production began in 1954. Holding the operation on a string, steady course was the job of a hard-working and very dedicated man named Ben Strauss. Ben was a quality-conscious problem-solver, salesman, coordinator, and Henry Grossman's right hand man. Strauss visited drummers and asked them what they wanted. Ben would then see to it that those ideas were put into production. Officially Ben was retail manager Trophy Products.

The first few years in Covington were spent in organizing the company, working in product development, and rising to a place of prominence in the music world - - going from a "so-so" company to the best in the world; selling drums world-wide. The company's best product might have been the "Dynamic" snare drum, which featured several innovations. The "Powertone" snare drum was another beloved drum.

The best drummers started using the "world's greatest drummer", endorsed Rogers Drums for nearly a decade. Other well-known drummers such as Bob Rosengarten (played for Mitch Miller), Bob Neel (played for Les Brown), Art Anton (played for Stan Kenton) and Hal Blaine (played for Tommy Sands) were Rogers endorsees.

The Covington factory employed about 130 people and was considered a good place to work. The "Covington's Famous Factory" manuscript says;

By the early 1960s, sales were picking up and, with advent of the cast lug about 1964, Rogers drums now had no 'weak spots'. Sales boomed and they became a real force in the industry. Employment climbed, profits soared, and they actually had a difficult time meeting customer demand. The industry's best bass drum foot pedal the 'Swiv-O-Matic' never caught up with demand.

When the company was at the "top of its game" in 1966, Henry Grossman sold it to the Columbia Broadcasting Company, which promised the Covington they would keep operations there. For a while, manufacturing continued in Covington in the building leased from Joe Thompson; company officers and the warehouse moved to Dayton. In February 1967, the plant caught fire. Employees acted quickly to restore the building, but in a few months, the manufacturing was also moved to Dayton.

Joe Thompson died 1968. Carved into the tombstone are the words "Creative genius, extraordinary human being in the Rogers Drums. Buddy Rich, who some believed was finest sense, outstanding contributor to the world of music and those sincerely associated with it."

In 1969, the business moved to Fullerton, California. A few Covington employees moved to California along with the business.

Although good drums were made in California, there are those who believe the best drums were made in Ohio during the Grossman and early CBS years.

The company had many problems in Southern California and operated in half a dozen locations. The company closed in 1983. A few sets were made in 1999 in honor of the 150th anniversary.

Rogers drums are now considered collectibles. Collectors and lovers of the drum have set up a website about the company at www.rogersdrums.com. Interested parties can also visit the Fort Rowdy Museum at 101 Spring Street in Covington. The museum is open by appointment at (937) 473-3488 or (937) 473-2322.