

# COOEY-BENTZ COMPANY

## “Where Tradition Meets Tomorrow”

by Judi Hendrickson

The history of the Coeey Bentz Company can be traced back to a Peter J. Altmeyer, who operated a furniture and undertaking business at 3305 Jacob Street in Wheeling from 1889 until 1897. On August 1, 1897, W.R. Coeey along with Herman Bentz and Sanford Furbee bought the Altmeyer furniture store inventory and started a partnership on the northwest corner of 36th and Jacob Streets..

Peter J. Altmeyer was born in 1847 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. He was one of nine children of John Altmeyer, a native of France, and his wife Lizzie, who was born in Germany. The family moved to Benwood where at the age of six Peter began working in the nail mills. They then moved to Steubenville, Ohio, for five years, returning then to Benwood and back to Wheeling, where they lived in what was called the Vineyard on Chapel Hill. John Altmeyer died in 1873 followed by his wife two years later.

Peter Altmeyer continued working as a nailer in the mills for twenty years. In 1874 he married Mary Dimmey, daughter of Joseph Dimmey of Wheeling, and they had three children. During the Nail Strike, Altmeyer took a vacation and visited California, where he spent about six weeks in the Pacific Nail works in Oakland, demonstrating how nails were made in Wheeling. While there, he cut the first steel nail in California and operated a spike and four self-feeders at the same time. Altmeyer then became involved in the furniture business in Benwood and in 1887 became a senior partner of the Altmeyer and Zimmerman undertakers. Two years later, the firm dissolved, and Altmeyer went into business in Wheeling in the firm of Altmeyer and Meyer. Upon the dissolution of that firm a year later, Altmeyer went into business for himself and was extremely successful. In 1897 he sold the business to Coeey, Furbee, and Bentz. He had just opened a new storeroom business at 36th and Jacob Streets when he contracted a cold that developed into pneumonia. He died a week later at his home at 4214 Jacob Street, on June 1, 1897, at the age of 49.

William Randolph Coeey was born in McMechen, September

1, 1860, a son of Matthew and Nancy McCombs Coeey. He was raised on a farm, which his father owned and operated in Wetzel County, until he was twenty-six years old. After leaving the farm, Coeey worked in several places until 1897 when he came to Wheeling and was employed by the John Arbenz Furniture and Undertaking Company, located at 1115 Main Street in Wheeling. He left the Arbenz Furniture Company and for the next four years worked for the Peter J. Altmeyer Furniture and Undertaking Company, located at 3305 Jacob Street in South Wheeling. While employed in this position, W.R. Coeey attended the Oriental School of Embalming and was listed in the Wheeling City directory as being an undertaker for the P.J. Altmeyer Company. In 1885, the 27-year-old Coeey married Mary Sengenwalt, age 25. The couple first lived in Martins Ferry, Ohio, then in 1887, moved to 2306 Jacob Street in Wheeling, and then to 3838 Wood Street. They had ten children. W.R. Coeey, died in his home at 5 Cross Street, Mozart on July 5, 1941.

Herman Hardesty Bentz was born in South Wheeling on November 22, 1877, son of Christian and Mary Lewis Bentz. His father was a native of Germany but came to America when he was very young. When his father died, Herman Bentz became the main support of his widowed mother and brothers and sisters. Beginning at the age of ten, he worked throughout his boyhood as a cooper for nail kegs at the La Belle mill. As a young man, he became deputy sheriff under Sheriff Lewis Steenrod before beginning his partnership with W.R. Coeey. Bentz never married and died on April 19, 1924 at the age of 66.

Sanford Furbee was born August 1, 1861, in Wetzel County, the son of Thomas Furbee and Elizabeth Huggins Furbee. He came to Wheeling in 1892 and worked in the furniture and embalming business with P.J. Altmeyer. At the death of Altmeyer, he engaged in the furniture and embalming business with Coeey and Bentz under the name of Coeey, Furbee, and Bentz. Later he sold his interest to Coeey and Bentz and went into business with the firm of White and Foster. He then sold his interest in that business and accepted a position with Watson & Co. and became a partner. In 1903, when the Palace Undertaking firm was established by Vernon Watson, he became a partner and remained there until his death. For years he was president of the state association of embalmers and was considered one of the most expert embalmers in the county. Furbee and his wife Christine had two paternal children and an adopted son. During the Monongah, W.Va., mine disaster, Furbee was among the first to answer the call for embalmers. His work ultimately resulted in his death as he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis from which



he never recovered. He died at his home at 28 South Penn Street, on March 26, 1911, at the age of 49.

On August 1, 1897, Herman Bentz and William Cooley along with Sanford Furbee began their partnership of Cooley-Bentz. They bought the business from Peter Altmeyer's widow for \$1,000. They had only \$500 of operating capital, which was borrowed. During the early months of business, when it was not certain that the business was going to be a success, Bentz and Cooley only allowed themselves enough to live simply. Bentz, a bachelor, took \$8 a week, and Cooley, with his family, took \$12. The stock for the store was kept in one small room 20 x 60 feet.

The new Cooley, Ferbee, and Bentz company continued the tradition of offering funeral services as well as selling furniture, carpets, and oil cloth. It was typical for furniture stores to have funeral homes because caskets were made by cabinetmakers and distributed through the same channels that furniture was distributed. The store's structure was simple, and the selling space occupied only the two lower floors of the building, comprising 2,500 square feet of floor space. Initially Cooley-Bentz used horse drawn wagons to deliver furniture and horse drawn hacks for funeral processions.

At the end of the first year of operation, W.R. Cooley and Herman Bentz's share of the store equity was \$1,468.16 while Sanford Furbee's share was only \$815.65. It is interesting to note that one of the accounts payable at the end of the first year was \$19 owed to Mrs. Peter J. Altmeyer.

Three years later, at the turn of the century, the city's progress was already on the move, and the institution known as Cooley-Bentz Co. enlarged its quarters to 5,500 sq. ft. By 1904 Furbee had been bought out and the store expanded to corporate status with common stock sold over the counter.

By 1907 it was evident that the growth of Wheeling was just beginning, and the two founders of the store again enlarged the display space, this time to four times its original size, encompassing 10,000 square feet.

Just after the beginning of World War I, with complete confidence in the future of Wheeling and the nation, the firm erected a new building at the southwest corner of 36th & Jacob Streets, with 25,000 square feet of floor space. That was considered a lot of floor space in that time, and only the progress of the city could justify the expansion.

In 1923, the company doubled its size with a five-story addition



Cooley-Bentz Co. building in July 1924.

*Photo by Will Cress; provided by Jeff Knierim.*

that was a "mirror-image" of the original building. The architect for this addition was F.F. Faris; the builder was R. R. Kitchen & Co. During this time, the store resembled a department store. The inventory included items such as curtains, rugs, and lawn furniture. Throughout the years, those product lines dropped, and furniture and home accessories became the focus.

On April 28, 1924, there was an explosion at the Benwood mine of the Wheeling Steel Corporation in Benwood, WV. One hundred fourteen men perished. The bodies that were recovered were taken to Cooley-Bentz Co., which served as a temporary morgue. The bodies were then transferred to the Blue Ribbon Company in Benwood.

In the 1930s Kepner Funeral Homes was expanding and purchased the funeral business from Cooley-Bentz.

In 1972, after graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, Jeff Knierim, the great-great-nephew of Herman Bentz, joined the company. At that time, his grandmother, Mary Himelick, who was Herman Bentz's niece, was President of the Company. At her death in 1986, Knierim became President. In 1990, Cooley's interest was bought out.

Christmas was a magical time of the year at Cooley-Bentz beginning in the 1920s and continuing until 1986, when the Ohio Valley Mall



was built. Toyland in the store was known throughout the tri-state area. Displays of toys began on the mezzanine of the store, then moved to the first floor, where 3,500 square feet of floor space was made available. People came from hundreds of miles away to see the live Santa, who listened to the Christmas wish lists of thousands of youngsters. Charlie Snyder, Henry Conrad, Joe and John Bishop, and John Raszewicz were the Santas. The large train display was also a seasonal favorite. Paul Cooley, a former manager of the floor covering department, who retired after 44 years, was in charge from 1947-1980. Every year featured a different scene which took six weeks to set up. Store officials reported that there were many "fender benders" over the years in front of the business as motorists slowed down to gaze into the windows at the whimsical animated displays. The employees would begin construction of the displays right after the New Year, and many of the employees would construct small pieces of the display at home or in their spare time. A favorite of the employees and shoppers was a scene of Santa's sleigh flying over the city of Wheeling.

A large display window was created featuring I-70 when it was still under construction. Santa was suspended by a chain from the ceiling and was guided along a rail through the display and into the store. He would enter the window and fly over a model of I-70 being built. In later years, Cooley-Bentz called on Creegan Co. in Steubenville to construct the window displays. Some of the favorites were a Victorian display, Hansel and Gretel, and modern Santa displays.

The tradition of window displays ended in 1986, the year of Santa's last visit to Cooley-Bentz. Some of the figures were donated to Oglebay Institute and some to the Mansion Museum.

In 2002, 105 years after the business had opened, Jeff Knierim and his sisters, principal owners in the business, decided after much careful consideration to close the store.

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