

A Quad City Bed Time Story

From the L & W Bedding sales floor you can't hear the seamstress guiding fabric through the two Singer sewing machines bought used, built in 1951 and 1933. You can't even hear Mr. Wheatley, the 37-year old owner, sneezing in the factory office from 30,000 disintegrating customer receipts dating back to the year 1989.

The sales floor seems, at first glance, to be another no-frills specialty store along 16th Avenue. Bare mattresses with a variety of ticking stand all in rows. A salesperson sits in a small office at a wooden desk near the center of the store.

But beyond the showrooms' antique entry door, smoothed and faded as old velvet, lies a slice of Quad Cities past. When streets were lined with small factories run by families who worked 7 days a week and made deliveries themselves, when products were made one at a time by workers who stayed for decades.

A business initially operated out of his garage, for 12 years in this building John Wheatley and family and ½ dozen employees have produced, on average about 10 mattresses a day.

There are still no automated assembly lines or voice mail; a call

to L & W Bedding after hours will simply ring unanswered. Orders are still written up by hand, and the 4-digit telephone line has not changed since 1989. The mattresses are still being made primarily by John Wheatley himself.

Yet the company has become downright trendy.

For 6 years he would work a 12-hour shift at a Rock Island mattress manufacturer and then turning his evenings over to his Moline operation. "If your going to be somebody you have got to do a lot of hard work", he say's. He doesn't see a lot of the profits, as he puts it right back in the business. You don't need a fancy place to sell beds or, need to spend high amounts of rent to sell the masterpieces we make.

The mattresses are something of an inside secret among chiropractors and orthopedics, decorators and socialites. Talk radio's Jim Fisher owns one as does half of the Chicago visitors that have slept on one in a friend's guest room. As have families that are retrofitting heirloom beds.

L & W Bedding is the only local manufacturer in the Quad Cities still operating, and buyers line up to take whatever just-finished mattress slid off the finishing table.

John Wheatley came to the mattress business by the way of pillows. Born in Moline of local heritage, he moved on to make his fortune by using the scrapes of the bedding otherwise known as extra pieces with this he created top quality pillows and cushions for ease and comfort the body once again. He then sold them in area Flea markets and sporting events; the profits made were switched to mattress machinery.

**At L & W
Bedding, in
Moline's Uptown
district, they
make mattresses
the old
fashioned way.
Maybe that's
what makes
them such a hot
item.**

Buying, and operation of the Factory began in 1990. The 10,000 square foot building, for twenty years the Salvation Army thrift store operated, is now L & W Bedding.

"Word of mouth gets around & people are finding out that I've got the best mattress & best price" — right down to his no-pressure sales approach. In fact, he encourages those who visit his showroom to shop and compare. (More than twelve years later

the mattresses are still tailor-made.) No sales, no gimmicks just guaranteed.

One secret is low overhead, passing the savings directly over to his customers. No short cuts assuring quality mattresses.

But, about 22 years ago, when Johns daughter was born his aunt Marcie King who was employed as a seamstress 40 years, though he could use the money. As dozens of mattresses were made by John, every time he walked by the Boss's office he started his own dream.

Growing up in the business and never considered any other avenue. He joined up with Craig Long a partner for about one year. John became full owner. He worked 30 hours a day 7 days a week, family persuaded him to take one day off a week. He did it for about a month, but couldn't stand it and started coming in everyday again.

His brothers all younger never took after John and went on to separate vocations. One bookkeeper his only sister Sue has worked hard and unselfishly to put L & W Bedding first. We treat each other as human beings not just employees, not, as part of the machinery.

Over the years the number of mattresses manufactured steadily

dwindled some driven out of business, some driven by rising rents and wages to other locations. "We've worked our little niche pretty good," John Wheatley says except for the first few years, the company has never sold mattresses anywhere but its Moline sales floor, and the product was and is, unlike any other.

As his reputation continued to grow, John began to envision, yet another expansion February 1, 1995 he made the plunge in the Iowa market crossing the Mississippi River opening his 2nd showroom in Davenport. "We've continued to grown every year since it opened the business".

Entering the basement floor of the factory is like stepping into a black and white photograph of a bygone era. There's a simple and unhurried quality to the place, though cotton and foam is flying and hands are sewing and stapling. A visit is a reminder of a time when there was great value in simply doing ones jobs well day after day week after week and year after year.

John Wheatley is a smallish, wiry man overseeing everyone's move at the factory. He makes sure the coils are hinged together properly to form a coil boxspring, which John considers the secret to a great mattress set. John Wheatley now with 20

years development and research in the industry, is anxious to teach all he knows to apprentice Keith Scruthers. Keith has worked for John 4 years after high school hours on weekends when other guys are out playing. Side by side the various jobs in the factory are hand-crafted with pride of doing so.

Customer satisfaction letters pile in the mail thanking for custom built bedding with an at home feeling. A place where Goldilocks would sure love.

Customized goods go further than traditional mattresses. He features crib mattresses, boats, campers, prestige pillow tops, and waterbed fillers. I'll make any mattress to your specifications.

Plus there's the added bonus that they are ALL made right here the Quad Cities. People like it that way. Customers are so loyal. When you start to recognize different generations of the same family coming in. That gets you involved. We care.

As city life whirls by with its disposable restaurants and management theories, L & W bedding stands in the Moline Uptown district like a gentleman in a dark suit and hat a bit old fashioned a bit plain, teaching by its mere presence that integrity and simplicity never go out of style.