

**Ely and Walker Shirt Factory No. 5 - National Register of Historic Places - 1923 to mid-1980s**

221 S. Main St.

**History**

In 1922 two Kennett businessmen began looking for a complementary industry to establish in the Bootheel. In January 1923, Frank Shelton and A. M. Riggs became aware that Ely & Walker Dry Goods and Company was looking into expanding their operation by building new factories in small towns.



Together, the representatives of Kennett and the Ely & Walker Company struck a deal in which the City of Kennett would "...foot the bill for the largest structure that had ever been built prior to that time."

By May 9, 1923, the Ely & Walker Dry Goods Company opened a temporary shirt factory in the old opera house, while the new Ely & Walker Shirt Factory No. 5 was being constructed just down the street. The new factory covered one-fourth of a block and opened for operations in late August 1923.

**Success and Expansion**

Within the first ten years of operation, the factory expanded by moving into the unused third floor. By 1934 they further expanded the plant with an addition to the south side of the original building. The new section housed the sewing room with 225 machines relocated from the second floor into a space that had room for a total of 500 machines.

In 1936 the plant needed a second addition, while a third unit was added in 1937. By the end of its growth, the factory had expanded to cover more than a city block in size.

**The Women of Ely & Walker Shirt Factory No. 5**

While executives were in Kennett finalizing plans to locate Factory No. 5, Miss Alvena Budde, a top-notch machine operator at the St. Louis factory, was asked if she would take over the position as trainer for the new staff that would be needed in Kennett. She was allowed to pick an assistant, Cary Pfaff, whom she considered to be one of the best operators in St. Louis. Although there were a few men on the payroll, over the next 50 years, the employees would mostly remain women.

Budde and Pfaff arrived in Kennett on May 9, 1923, to begin their job of training the Kennett staff in the old opera house. There were 50 electric, treadle-operated, sewing machines set up when they arrived. The two women began with 75 women who were hired to operate sewing machinery. Budde and her assistant demonstrated the construction of the first shirt made in Kennett, which was displayed in the J. C. Penney store window. Budde found while training the women in shirt construction methods that very few of the local women had any experience working outside of the home. They spent the next several weeks giving the women scraps of cloth as practice material while the two women trained them on how to run the equipment.



*Ely Walker employees circa 1935. Photo courtesy Dunklin County Museum.*

The working conditions during the first four months of operation were difficult. The portion of the building that housed the training site had no running water or toilet facilities. Summer was quickly approaching and working conditions became more challenging as the weather began to warm up. A dentist, located in the same building, supplied the women with ice water and opened his restroom facilities for their use.

The building that housed the Ely and Walker Shirt Factory No. 5 was named to the National Register of Historic Places on March 12, 2008.

*Source: National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, April 2007*



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