



Interim Historic Designation Study Report

Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company

1531 North Water Street

City of Milwaukee
Department of City Development
November, 2001

INTERIM HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT
Zohrlaut Leather Company Complex
Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company Complex

I. NAME

Historic: Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company / Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company

Common Name: Pfister & Vogel Tannery

II. LOCATION

Address: 1531 North Water Street

Legal description: Fractional West ½ of SW ¼ SEC 21-7-22 or GAMMON FLOAT
Block 123 ALL BLK 123 & Part LOTS 24 & 25 BLK F HATHAWAY'S
SUBD ADJ LYING S OF HI-WAY EASM'T & (ALL BLK 123 EXC ST
& ALL VAC E LYON ST ADJ & LOTS 1-2-3 & NE ½ LOT 4 EXC
ST IN BLK 144) PARTITION OF SE FRACTION OF SEC NO 20-7-22
ADJ Bid #121

Aldermanic District: 3rd Aldermanic District, **Alderman Michael S. D'Amato**

Tax Key No: 392-1818-112-4

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Barry Mandel
The Mandel Group
111 East Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53202

V. YEAR BUILT:

1880's – 1890's¹

ARCHITECT:

C. F. Ringer²
Ferry & Clas³

¹ City of Milwaukee Building Permits, various years

² City of Milwaukee Building Permits 1509-99 North Water St. #99, February 28, 1891 and #151, September 23, 1891

³ Ibid. #2426, September 18, 1895, # 553, August 22, 1896 and #3568, October 28, 1897

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Zohrlaut Leather Company complex / Pfister & Vogel Tanning complex is a grouping of late nineteenth and twentieth century industrial buildings at the southwest corner of North Water and East Pleasant Streets. The area adjacent to the complex consists of a mix of structures that reflect the area's industrial past: former warehouses to the south, residential property to the east and up the hill from Water Street, scattered warehouse buildings and a former Trostel tannery building to the north along Water Street and a converted Schlitz Brewing Company building (now a medical complex) and new condominium complex across the river on the west bank.

The Zohrlaut / Pfister & Vogel property is irregular in shape and lies along the east bank of the Milwaukee River. There is over 800 feet of frontage along North Water Street as well as over 200 feet along East Pleasant Street. Most of the buildings fronting Water and Pleasant streets are five stories high with a few structures at one, two or three stories. All are built of cream-colored brick and date from the 1880's or 1890's. They are built up to each other in a contiguous row and up to the lot line so there is no landscape treatment. To the south of this grouping and behind it are newer structures built from the 1930's to the 1980's. They are characterized by irregular form and red brick or metal cladding. An enormous water tank with the Pfister & Vogel trademark, a P and a V and the word Tannery set into an orange diamond, sits atop a portion of the factory built in 1967. Structures of varying heights and dimension can be found along the river edge of the property. These buildings were not given a "public face" and are utilitarian in character. They replaced the old wood frame storage and beam houses that had been the legacy of the Zohrlaut tannery. The north property line of the complex was once located fifteen feet from the curb line of East Pleasant Street where it approached a bridge across the Milwaukee River. In 1973 a new lift bridge replaced the old swing bridge and the roadway approach was realigned ninety feet further north. The tannery was able to acquire the abandoned right of way. The new open area was fenced in to provide for parking, loading and storage.

Only the buildings dating to the 1880's and 1890's are being nominated for interim designation because of their cohesive scale, materials and fenestration patterns. The eight buildings are individually described below. Permit records do not exist for all of these buildings, but where specific construction data is missing, fire insurance maps have been able to provide approximate dates. The tremendous growth in the tanning industry between the 1880's and World War I meant that the complex was not constructed according to any master plan, but the earliest frame buildings were replaced as needed by larger and more permanent and fireproof masonry buildings that were designed to show a prosperous and refined front to the public.

The building now designated #2 in the complex (old address 809-813 N. Water St.) appears to have been the earliest brick building at the site and dates to the early 1880's. It served as the office for the tannery. The architect is not known at this time. The five-story with basement, solid masonry, cream brick building has a façade divided into three bays. The centermost bay is emphasized by a slight projection from the main body of the building and a large two story round arch that frames what had once been the main entrance. This bay also features a trio of round-headed windows at the fifth story and ornamental cut stone impost blocks that are carved with ball-in-socket detail that is very characteristic of the 1880's. Similar blocks are found at the piers to either end of the building. Cut stone forms the base of these two piers as well as the piers framing the center bay of the building. To either side of the large central arch on the first floor are large rectangular openings separated by

decorative metal mullions. The first floor is set off from the second story by both a brick and stone belt course between which runs a series of rectangular, recessed spandrels. Another belt course with corbelling sets off the second story from the three floors above and groups the first two stories together to form a visual base for the building. Windows on floors two through five are uniform in size and feature segmental openings and four over four wood sash. The building is also capped off with decorative corbelling. Alterations to the building include the closing up of windows on the first and second stories with either glass block or brick, reducing the size of the center entrance and alteration to the parapet. Historic engravings show that a rectangular plaque framed by tourelles once projected from the center bay and that tourelles once decorated the ends of the building as well. These features reinforced the Romanesque style of the building. The roof was raised four feet in 1950 thus necessitating the removal/alteration of these parapet features. The new brick does not match the original. As mentioned above, the building originally housed the company offices on the first floor, but the upper levels housed the shipping, finishing, stuffing and drying departments.

The bark mill, now designated building #9 (old address 109 Pleasant St.), was built in 1891 and designed by local architect C. F. Ringer. The cream brick building is a tall, one-story structure that has been enlarged at least two times. The building's façade reads as two structures with a large modern rectangular opening on the west and a round arched opening on the east. While both have ornamental corbelled cornices featuring Gothic arches, the parapet wall and roof on the east are slightly taller than the rest of the building. The west wall is right up against the riverbank and is clad in metal siding. The arched opening as well as various windows have been blocked up.

Built around the same time is the leach house, now designated building # 8 (old address 113-117 Pleasant St.). It is immediately adjacent to the bark mill. The original architect is not known at this time. Permit records show that the roof was raised eleven feet in 1896 and that this \$2,000 alteration was designed by Charles H. Stehling. Apparently the roof was raised only on a portion of the building as the building façade reads as two structures today. Four over four wood sash windows are set in segmental openings on each floor and there is an ornamental corbelled cornice with Gothic arches.

Another leach house, building # 7 (old address 119-125 Pleasant St.), is located immediately adjacent to the above-mentioned building. The large solid masonry structure was built in 1891 for \$6,000 according to the designs of C. F. Ringer. Permit records indicate that Ferry and Clas designed an additional story in 1895 and the building has five stories today. The façade is grouped into five bays with pairs of four over four wood sash set into segmental openings. The large lower story, actually encompassing a two-story space, features tall window openings and is set off from the upper stories by a corbelled cornice. Many of these ground floor openings have been blocked up or altered. Fire insurance maps show this building to have housed leaching operations as well as shaving, finishing and drying.

The boiler house, building #6 (old address 127-131-137 Pleasant St.) is located directly adjacent to the above mentioned leach house. The five-story solid masonry building features a large ground floor that actually encompasses an interior space that is taller than a single story. Fire insurance maps show this building to have been constructed between 1888 and 1892. The ground story is treated as a base to the building and is embellished with a prominent gothic arched corbelled cornice framed by belt courses. The ground floor's main elevation on Water Street contains three large arched openings that engravings show to have been an entrance flanked by large window openings. A series of large openings and

smaller window openings continue around the corner along the Pleasant Street elevation. The three upper stories of the Water Street elevation are grouped into two bays of three windows each. The wood, four over four sash windows feature segmental openings and stone sills. The windows along the upper stories of the Pleasant Street elevation are grouped in pairs and distributed regularly across the façade to form five bays. They, too, have segmental openings. An ornamental corbelled cornice of round arch design crowns both facades. An immense tile chimney extends from the roof of this building and old illustrations show that metal ventilators also were perched on the roof at one time. Alterations to this building consist mainly of the closing up of the ground floor arched openings and some windows. A large metal platform holding transformers was constructed alongside the Pleasant Street façade in 1987. Fire insurance maps show that besides housing the boilers, the building was used historically for splitting, finishing and tacking.

Building # 3 (old address 815-821 N. Water St.) was constructed sometime between 1888 and 1894. It housed the chrome tannery as well as finishing, stuffing and drying operations. The five story with basement building has a façade divided into six bays with a tall ground floor marked by tall window openings. On the upper stories segmental windows are arranged in pairs except for the southernmost bay which has single windows. The window openings have segmental arches and the wooden sash have a four-over-four profile. A corbelled cornice crowns the structure. Alterations include the blocking up of ground floor windows and the four-foot extension to the roof that was built in 1950. The name Pfister & Vogel and the orange diamond trademark is painted in block letters across the façade of this building between the fourth and fifth story.

Building # 5 (old address 823-831 N. Water St.) was constructed in 1896 at a cost of \$10,000. Ferry and Clas designed the five story solid masonry structure in the new commercial style which incorporated elements from a variety of sources like the running arcade from Romanesque and the penciled rustication from French design. Without the use of costly stone or sheet metal ornament, Ferry and Clas were able to lend an elegance to even this industrial building. The building's fenestration is grouped into six bays by a series of projecting segmental arches that extend to the fourth story. The ground floor is given special emphasis by the penciled rustication which gives a horizontal emphasis to the building and which forms dramatic wedge-shaped voussoirs above each of the windows at that level. Emphasis is also given to the ground floor by use of a stone belt course that separates the ground from the second story. Windows are grouped into threes in the center four bays while pairs of windows can be found in the southernmost bay and single windows in the northernmost bay. The wood sash have four-over-four profiles. A second belt course with corbelling separates the fourth from the fifth story making the latter into an attic level that is crowned by a corbelled parapet. Square tower-like structures extend above the roofline on the north and south ends of the building. Alterations include the closing up of windows in the towers, the addition of security bars across the windows in the northernmost bay, the addition of a metal roll-up door to the north ground floor opening and the enlarging of the opening and removal of the original three windows in the ground floor bay nearest the roll up door. Fire insurance maps show this building was used for pressing, blacking, bolting, setting and tacking.

The second office building, now designated building # 1 (old address 801-807 N. Water St.) was built in 1897 and also designed by the firm of Ferry and Clas. The \$10,000 edifice was designed to look like a tall one story building with small attic level, but actually housed two stories. Sorting took place on the second floor. This building replaced the office function once house next door in the Romanesque style building that had been constructed in the

early 1880's. Ferry and Clas were adept in designing stylish buildings and did not have to rely on the overlay of costly stone or metal to give the façade elegance. Here the use of penciled rustication and prominent voussoirs create a simplified version of the Beaux Arts style, a style for which they were famous and which they utilized on the Milwaukee Central Library and Public Museum Building. For the Zohrlaut tannery the architects raised the ground floor above a basement level that has small windows at grade. The large ground floor openings are arranged into four bays by pairs of windows. Illustrations show that the entrance was once located in the southernmost bay. A new entrance was created next door when a small one-story addition was built to the south in 1945. A pair of windows was installed in the location where the original entry had been located. Other alterations include replacement windows on the ground story and the addition of another story in 1952. This last remodeling removed the original attic story and replaced it with a metal clad façade that features metal-framed ribbon windows.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company/Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company complex at 1531 N. Water Street is significant as an intact grouping of late nineteenth century industrial buildings associated with the once important tanning industry. Zohrlaut was a very prominent company and ranked with the Trostel and Gallun tanneries in any mention of the industry in local histories. The tannery's association with the international industry giant, Pfister & Vogel, also makes the complex worthy of preservation. In operation from 1847 to 2000, the Pfister & Vogel name has been inextricably linked with Milwaukee's development and it was here rather than at the Menomonee Valley plant that the company last tanned leather. The Zohrlaut / Pfister & Vogel tannery is also one of the few remaining complexes from which we can interpret and comprehend the roll that the Milwaukee River once played in the industrial might of the city. It stands as a visual landmark at the corner of N. Water and E. Pleasant Streets.

The Zohrlaut/Pfister & Vogel complex is also significant as a fine collection of well articulated late nineteenth industrial buildings designed by some of the city's leading architectural firms including Ferry and Clas and C.F. Ringer.

VIII. HISTORY

Tanning in Milwaukee

"In no branch of industry is Milwaukee more prominent than she is in the manufacture of leather, although comparatively few citizens of Milwaukee are aware of the magnitude of the tanning industry of their city". These words, written by tannery executive Henry Eskuche in 1892 for the publication Milwaukee's Great Industries, ring true even today.⁴ Although the great tanneries are now just a historic record in the city most residents have little recollection and less understanding of an industry that once employed thousands and shipped its product around the world.

The convergence of a number of factors led to Milwaukee's preeminence in tanning. The ready availability of tan bark, the access to good shipping and rail lines, abundant water supply along the Rock River Canal, Milwaukee River and in the Menomonee Valley, and the availability of hides from local and regional meat packers were seized upon by the city's German Americans

⁴ W.J. Anderson and Julius Bleyer, eds. Milwaukee's Great Industries (Milwaukee:Association for the Advancement of Milwaukee, 1892), p. 157.

who developed the core of Wisconsin's tanning industry here. Charles Schefft's master's thesis The Tanning Industry in Wisconsin; A History of its Frontier Origins and its Development outlines this development in detail. He does point out, however, that even though other ethnic groups are represented in the tanning field, the industry remained about 70 % German because the training and technical knowledge brought from the old country made them particularly successful in this field. Other communities in other states had similar German American populations and some of the same natural resources but their immigrants did not venture into the costly enterprise of tanning again pointing out the unique mix of people and resources that Milwaukee had to offer. The Milwaukee immigrants also either came with start up capital or were able to accumulate capital in sufficient amounts to start up and sustain tanneries, some of which survived into the 1990's.⁵

By 1860 there were a total of nine tanneries in Milwaukee and the industry ranked eighth in production with \$218,000. The number of tanneries grew to fifteen by the late 1860's and to thirty by 1870. By 1874 tanning had risen to third in importance to the city behind ironwork and clothing and would rank number two in the 1880's, the period of greatest development.⁶ Tanning would retain this status for the next several decades behind steel products and meatpacking.⁷ Important names in the local tanning industry included Pfister & Vogel, Wisconsin Leather Company, Albert Trostel & Sons, August Gallun, Herman Zohrlaut, Conrad Brothers, George Martin, Chris Anstedt, G. B. Vollhardts, William Gerhardt Becher and the Elkerts among others. In 1890 Milwaukee's output of plain tanned leather was the largest in the world, with its closest rivals being Chicago, Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Louisville, San Francisco, Newark and Buffalo.⁸ The types of leather produced also included a variety of glove leathers, patent leathers, sole leather, harness leather, fly net leather and split leather. Eskuche wrote that even "the cowboys and rancheros in Texas, New Mexico, and on the Plains, use leggings made from the products of Milwaukee's tanneries. The large horse-collar factories in Chicago, St. Louis and St. Paul rely principally on Milwaukee for their supplies of collar leather, and the farmer's horse, the southern mule, the fine Percheron teams of the brewers, as well as the stylish coach horses, are decked with harness, collars and fly-nets made out of the always-reliable Milwaukee leather."⁹ The largest of the tanneries even had stores or branch offices in other cities throughout the U.S. Spin off industries grew in abundance as well and included shoe and boot manufacturing, saddleries, harness makers and trunk manufacturers as well as garment manufacturers who utilized leather. As Eskuche wrote, "There is nothing like Milwaukee leather; and the tanners who built this enviable reputation for their fair city accomplished their aim without making much ado about it."¹⁰

As mentioned above, the tanneries tended to cluster near sources of water and shipping. The north end of the Menomonee Valley at Walkers Point saw the giant tannery complex of the Pfister & Vogel Leather Company. Another large complex evolved at the mouth of the Kinnickinnic River at the north end of Bay View. The Milwaukee River saw the largest concentration of tanneries where numerous small factories jockeyed for space alongside lumberyards and coal yards and iron works and other businesses. Most of the Milwaukee River

⁵ Charles Ernest Schefft, "The Tanning Industry in Wisconsin. A History of its frontier Origins and its Development" (unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1938), p.16.

⁶ Ibid., p. 37, 40.

⁷ Bayrd Still, Milwaukee. The History of a City (Madison, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), p. 486.

⁸ John G. Gregory, editor, Southeastern Wisconsin: A History of Old Milwaukee County, Vol.I (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1932), p.354.

⁹ Anderson and Bleyer, p.157.

¹⁰ Ibid.

tanneries had smaller complexes, with many frame and a few brick buildings. Eventually the river frontage would be dominated by the impressive buildings erected by the Zohrlaut, Gallun and Trostel tanneries.

By the late 1890's the number of tanneries began to decline as smaller businesses were bought up by larger concerns or just went out of business. Output continued to increase, however. In 1909 local tanneries were processing over two million hides and skins annually and the products of Milwaukee's eleven tanneries was valued at \$27,484,000. Milwaukee "was the queen tanning city of the world."¹¹ The industry peaked during World War I and shortly thereafter when the values of its products rose to an all-time high of \$60,000,000. The great demands of the war for leather harnesses, belting, and clothing however, declined dramatically in the years afterwards. Lifestyle changes brought about by the automobile and electric motors led to less need for leather. Shoes and boots were lighter weight as people walked less, there were fewer horses requiring harness and buggy leather, and belt driven machinery became a thing of the past. Serious competition from foreign markets and the manipulation of the leather market also led to declines in tanning throughout the US. By 1924 Milwaukee's tanning fell to a value of \$47,000,000, then to \$20,000,000 in 1929 and \$16,818,235 by 1939.¹²

The post depression and post World War II era saw an even further decline in the local tanning industry. A few names like Gallun, Pfister & Vogel and Trostel survived, but much diminished from their heyday. Gallun survived as the sole US producer of calfskin, but it closed in the 1980's. Its complex, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, still stands in the 1700 and 1800 blocks of N. Water Street. Its former office building has been converted into apartments while the remainder awaits redevelopment or demolition. The Trostel tannery once encompassed both banks of the Milwaukee River just north of the Zohrlaut. Its surviving tall building was embroiled in the battle over a state prison site and it was ultimately demolished in 1992. One of its buildings in the Star Tannery complex on the east bank of the river, later known as the Northern Lights Building, still stands and is now used for offices. Pfister & Vogel survived in the former Zohrlaut complex until 2000 before closing. Some smaller operations like General Split were once located in the near South Side area but relocated out of the city. Today, the tanning industry is only represented by the surviving buildings in the former industrial complexes that once sustained large numbers of Milwaukee residents.

Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company

The core buildings being nominated for interim designation at 1531 North Water Street consist of late nineteenth cream brick structures that were all constructed for the Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company. City directories show that the German-American Herman Zohrlaut began his tanning career as a clerk with the G. Pfister & Co. at their location on East Water Street. Published histories indicate that Zohrlaut started up his own tannery in March of 1857 as a feeder to his leather store on Water Street.¹³ City directories show him in a brief partnership with Adolph M. Neymann in 1858 as Neymann & Zohrlaut, dealers in leather. Zohrlaut then went out on his own. The Milwaukee Press Club's 1910 Commercial History of Wisconsin and the city directories indicate that he first produced collar, calf, kip, line, flynet and harness leather and then perfected "Milwaukee Oil Grain". The tannery complex was described as a "cluster of ramshackle sheds" at first, on the east bank of the Milwaukee River just south of the Pleasant Street Bridge where it is today. As the tanning part of the business prospered the store was

¹¹ Schefft, p.77.

¹² Still p. 494.

¹³ Milwaukee Press Club, editors, Commercial History of Wisconsin (Milwaukee: Thompson H. Adams, 1910), p.89.

dropped and the industrial complex was expanded almost continually. Herman's son Edward was brought into the business in the early 1870's. The Zohrlaut family, including son Edward and daughters Emily and Mary, initially lived on today's West Wisconsin Avenue between 20th and 21st Streets. In 1875 Herman had a new Italianate mansion, designed by local architect Charles Gombert, constructed near to his plant at the northwest corner of Marshall and Pleasant Streets. He would live in this residence until retirement.¹⁴

Zohrlaut incorporated his business as the Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company on March 1, 1879 with a capital stock of \$100,000. The incorporators included Herman, his son Edward and his son-in-law, Henry Eskuche. Herman would serve as the first president of the company, with Rudolph Mengelberg as secretary and treasurer and director, and with Edward Zohrlaut as director. Edward would later serve as general manager and Henry Eskuche as secretary. By 1881 the business employed 75 persons with an annual income of \$28,000. Some 25,000 hides and 5,000 skins were processed at a value of \$275,000 and 25,000 cords of tan bark used in the tanning process. The business' capital was increased to \$500,000 in 1891. By 1910 the company was processing some 1500 "packer" hides a day along with "country " hides from Ohio, Michigan and Indiana.¹⁵

Milwaukee Sentinel articles show numerous construction projects at the tannery during the 1880's. On June 21, 1881 the paper noted that a four-story, 60-foot long brick building was under way and followed up on August 8, 1881 with a brief mention that the "Extensive additions of Pfister & Vogel, Herman Zoehrlaut {sic} and Trostel & Gallun marks a new era in the tanneries of Milwaukee" and now enabled the industry to employ 300 to 400 more workers."¹⁶ It was during this decade that prominent four and five story cream brick buildings began to be constructed along the Water Street frontage of the property in an attempt to keep up with business expansion and technological innovations and to present a prosperous dignified image to the public. The Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company would have been ranked below the giant Pfister & Vogel Leather Company, but at this time was comparable in size to the output of tanneries like Trostel and Gallun.

When Herman Zohrlaut retired in 1899 and was succeeded by his son Edward, the historic core buildings along Water and Pleasant Streets had all been built. The tannery compared favorably in its architectural design to other industrial complexes flanking the Milwaukee River. Nearby Schlitz Brewery underwent extensive development and expansion during this era with architecturally significant buildings clustered in the Brewers Hill neighborhood. Directly across the river from Zohrlaut and both north and south of the Pleasant Street swing bridge lay the extensive buildings and yards of the Schroeder Lumber Company. The Schroeder Buildings showed shaped gables and other embellishments derivative of German architecture. To the north of Zohrlaut and Schroeder along both banks of the river were numerous buildings of the Trostel Tannery. Further north in the 1700 and 1800 blocks of North Water Street was the complex of the Gallun Tannery. Trostel and Gallun employed towers, corbelled cornices and other embellishments to give their buildings prominence and utilized many of the same architectural firms as the Zohrlauts. Not much remains of this prosperous era. The Schroeder buildings have all been razed. The fate of the Trostel and Gallun tannery complexes has been cited above. All evidence of the smaller tanneries along the river has been erased long ago.

¹⁴ Ibid.; Milwaukee City Directory, various years; Milwaukee Sentinel, October 23, 1875, page 3 column 1.

¹⁵ Milwaukee Press Club, p. 89.

¹⁶ Milwaukee Sentinel, June 21, 1881, page 5 column 2.

Edward Zohrlaut would pilot the company through generally prosperous times for the next 15 to 16 years. Founder Herman Zohrlaut died in April, 1911 in Munich where he had spent his retirement years.¹⁷ Later officers included D. Milton Jones (secretary 1905-1912), Nathan Pereles Jr. (vice-president), Frank B. Desmond (assistant secretary), and Edward Friedman (secretary). Perhaps age or health conditions prompted Edward Zohrlaut to sell his tannery or perhaps there were no heirs who wanted to continue the business. Nevertheless, the company was last listed in the city directories in 1914. It was subsequently purchased by the giant Pfister & Vogel Leather Company. Edward Zohrlaut initially stayed on as the plant superintendent, but left by 1920. After several years of apparent retirement Edward is listed in directories as a leather broker or dealer from 1924 to 1929 with offices in the Metropolitan Block on today's Old World Third Street. He apparently left Milwaukee after that time.

The story of the Zohrlaut tannery complex now continues under its new ownership.

Pfister & Vogel Leather Company, Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company.

The Pfister & Vogel Leather Company was established by Guido Pfister, Frederick Vogel and J.F. Schoellkopf in June 1848. Pfister and Vogel, natives of Hechingen and Kirchheim respectively, in Wuertemberg, Germany worked for several years in the tannery of J. F. Schoellkopf in Buffalo, New York. Schoellkopf was a cousin of Frederick Vogel's. The promise of unlimited development and a large German population in Milwaukee drew Pfister and Vogel to this city where they set up in the tannery business. Pfister was to manage the company and opened a leather goods store in September, 1847. Vogel was the tanner and established a factory on the south end of the Menomonee Valley near what is today's South 6th Street the following spring. Schoellkopf stayed in Buffalo, but put up the finances for the venture. The business was so successful that Schoellkopf was able to withdraw from the company in 1857. The tannery was formally incorporated as the Pfister & Vogel Leather Company in 1872 with a capitalization of \$200,000. Incorporators included Guido Pfister, who became president, Frederick Vogel who became vice-president and general manager, and Gottlob Bossert who became secretary.¹⁸

Operations included not only the Menomonee Valley plant, but also a sawmill and tannery at Two Creeks in Manitowoc County. The latter was phased out in the early 1880's and the former tannery buildings there were destroyed by fire in 1885. By this time the company was doing a national business and was the largest tannery west of the Allegheny Mountains.¹⁹ Statistics show that in 1881 the company was processing 100,000 hides annually and the value of its product was \$500,000.²⁰ By 1890 Pfister & Vogel was the largest in Milwaukee producing 350,000 sides of upper and sole leather as well as 300,000 kip, calf and goatskins and employing between 600 and 700 men with a payroll of \$400,000.²¹ Just two years later Milwaukee of To-Day, The Cream City of the Lakes reported that the number of employees had grown to 750 with wages paid of \$500,000 and hides processed at a value of \$3,000,000. The write-up also indicated that the company had some 25 buildings devoted to the tanning process.²² Pfister & Vogel dwarfed all its competition, but the three tanneries closest in

¹⁷ "Herman Zohrlaut is Dead", April 16, 1911. Unidentified clipping in the collection of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

¹⁸ Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company, 100 years of Service, N.P., 1948, p. 4,8.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁰ {Frank A. Flower}, History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1881), p.1438.

²¹ Schefft, p. 51. Illustrated Description of Milwaukee, N.P., 1890, p.133.

²² Milwaukee of To-Day, The Cream City of the Lakes (Milwaukee: Phoenix Publishing Company, N.D. c. 1892-93), p.106

production at this time were the Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company, A.F. Gallun and Son and the Albert Trostel Tanning Company. Each employed 150 men and produced over 100,000 hides per year valued at \$500,000.²³

Pfister & Vogel's expansion in the Milwaukee area was almost continuous throughout the 1880's and 1890's. The Menomonee Valley site was enlarged through land acquisitions in 1889, 1891, 1900 and 1904. The Cheboygan Tannery in Cheboygan, Michigan was acquired in 1895. In that same year the Pfister & Vogel Leather Company added the Bay View Tannery to its fold. It was located along the Kinnickinnic River at the north end of the Bay View community. By 1896 there were sales branches in Boston, New York, London, North Hampton, Paris and Milan. By 1904 capitalization of the company stood at \$4,500,000.²⁴

It was in the years just prior to World War I that the company grew into the largest tannery in the world. It imported cowhides, calfskins, horsehides and goatskins from Europe, India, South America, China, Mexico, Africa and Australia and employed 2,400 employees with 31,200 pieces handled daily. Its products were known by the names Boulevard, Cremore Horse, Lotus, Velour and Lotaline Calf; Lotus and Pevee kips and sides, Ski Grain, Farmuse, Velo Sides and Pevee Chrome Retan Sole or Nosoak Bends.²⁵ In response to the demand for leather from the Armed Forces, Pfister & Vogel purchased the Herman Zohrlaut Leather Company in 1916. As mentioned above, it is likely that the aging Edward Zohrlaut was no longer interested in maintaining the business and there appears to have been no heir wanting the tannery. Soon after purchase permit records from December 11, 1916 show that Pfister & Vogel spent \$15,000 to upgrade the Zohrlaut complex with a new yard building designed by Herman J. Esser. More new construction would follow in later decades.

Company sales reached their peak in 1919 with an annual turnover of \$34,447,614. At this time its capital stock had risen to \$8,300,000 with surplus of \$9,700,000.²⁶ The post World War I years saw a decline in the fortunes of Pfister & Vogel and the tanning industry as a whole. A company history cites government regulations, tariff charges, exporting hides to Europe and the fast European recovery and competition as factors in the decline while historians as Schefft and Still cite changing fashion, lifestyle and technology as factors in the declining need for leather products. Pfister & Vogel held on during the turbulent 1920's, but when conditions did not stabilize, the company ceased tanning operations on December 31, 1930. Stock inventories were liquidated, and the factory complexes were converted into rental space for smaller businesses under the umbrella of the P & V Atlas Industrial Center, Inc.²⁷

To utilize the expertise of its workforce and the experience of some of the supervisory staff, Charles P. Vogel established a new successor corporation in December, 1930 called the Pfister & Vogel Tanning Co. The new corporation leased the buildings at Water and Pleasant Streets and began operations on January 1, 1931. It was able to purchase the complex from its predecessor company on November 2, 1932. Corporate officers included Charles P. Vogel as president, Frank Belz as vice-president and Stephen Pierson as secretary-treasurer. The plant had specialized in the Workshoe Elk line but gradually added other product lines throughout the 1930's. Its first trial order for Army leather was received in 1939 and beginning in 1942 almost

²³ Schefft, p.51

²⁴ Ibid., p.76. Pfister & Vogel , p. 8,9. R.H. Odell, compiler, Official Directory of the Corporations of Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Milwaukee: Odell & Owen, 1904), p. 159.

²⁵ Pfister & Vogel, p. 9.

²⁶ Ibid. p.11.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 11,12.

its entire production went into leather for the military. These efforts earned the employees an “E” award on November 24, 1944, especially deserved as the double shift operations were run by a force that averaged 52 ½ years in age. Products in 1948 included Elk, Ski-grain, Chrome-Waterproof, Nimrod, Diana, Wiscona, Econo, Zenith, Juvenile, Pevee, Playshu, and Pfister-ski. Sales representatives were located in St. Louis, Missouri, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Boston, Massachusetts.²⁸

The Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company continually monitored costs and invested in changes in plant layout, machinery chemical controls and technological improvements during the 1930’s and 1940’s and was able to produce 66% more leather within the same plant in 1948 as it had during 1931. The company also boasted that it was among the first in its industry to provide vacation benefits for its employees, establish a formal plan of cash profit-sharing for all employees and set up a retirement trust for all employees.²⁹

By 1950 Charles P. Vogel was still with the company and served as chairman of the board. Erhard Buettner was president, Stephen A. Pierson was vice-president-secretary, L.E. Meyers was vice-president in charge of production, and J. Kultgen was treasurer and assistant secretary. However, by 1960 Charles P. Vogel was no longer with the company and the long association of Pfister and Vogel family members had come to an end. Members of the Vogel family did retain ownership of P & V Atlas with its complex at 6th and Virginia however, until 1993 when they sold the buildings to developer Hans Moede. Moede has since demolished part of the complex and converted the remaining structures to offices, apartments and artists’ lofts.

It was during the ownership of the Pfister & Vogel Tanning Company that much new construction was added to the Water Street complex. These efforts are documented in over 1400 building permit records on the property. Most of the new buildings and additions are located to the rear or river side of the complex or to the south as the tannery expanded onto an old sand and gravel company site and the former property of the W. L. Wagner architectural iron works. These new buildings did not try to blend with the core of the complex, but also did not significantly alter them. Red brick and corrugated metal were the siding materials of choice for the new buildings. Pfister & Vogel made the first alteration in December 1916 when it hired Herman J. Esser to design a new yard building that cost \$15,000. Later alterations occurred in the 1930’s with the construction of a sewage screen plant, dock wall, and various repairs and reinforcements to footings and floors and alterations to openings. Small additions and reconstructions and a garage followed in the 1940’s. New additions of varying sizes were almost continual during the 1950’s. The architectural firm of Eschweiler & Eschweiler did a majority of this work starting in the 1930’s and its successor firm would continue the working relationship through the 1960’s. Probably the most noticeable change to the footprint of the complex occurred in 1973. In that year the old Pleasant street swing bridge was replaced with the current lift bridge, a process that resulted in a realignment of Pleasant Street to a point 90 feet further west. The tannery complex, once fifteen feet from the curb line, was now able to acquire a sizeable amount of land up to the new roadway. This area, enclosed with chain link fencing, allowed for the construction of a transformer platform and storage tanks alongside the building as well as provide for a parking lot.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., p.13-17.

²⁹ Ibid., p.16.

³⁰ Pleasant Street Bridge and Right of Way. Interview with Greg Rugalinski, City of Milwaukee, Department of Public Works. By Carlen Hatala November 8, 2001.

The plant continued production at the Water Street facility until its closing in February, 2000. Its last owner, U. S. Leather, had acquired the facility in the 1990's and produced finished leather for the auto industry, footwear, furniture and personal goods such as purses, apparel, hats and gloves and had plants in North Carolina, Nebraska, Canada and Indiana. The company was plagued with large losses and bankruptcy for a number of years before closing the Milwaukee plant. The complex, including land on the north side of Pleasant Street, totaling 7.5 acres went up for sale in November, 2000. It recently (October, 2001) sold to Milwaukee developer Mandel Group, Inc. that plans to demolish the complex and build a mixed-use development including condominiums, apartments and retail.³¹

Milwaukee Cream Brick

The Herman Zohrlaut / Pfister & Vogel tannery buildings are significant not only for their associations with the vibrant industrial activity once located along the Milwaukee River and their associations with the titan of the tanning industry, but also because they are among the rapidly dwindling number of structures made from Milwaukee's unique cream-colored brick that is an inseparable part of the city's history. In the late nineteenth century, the large number of buildings in Milwaukee made from the impressive, golden-colored brick earned the city its "Cream City" nickname. Cream brick, however, began to fall out of favor by 1905 and has not been manufactured since the 1920's making the remaining structures made of this material something of an endangered species. These buildings are an increasingly valuable part of the city's architectural history and its civic pride.

Milwaukee's first brickyard opened for business in 1835 or 1836. The first brick makers thought that red brick would result after firing the red-brown Milwaukee clay, but an unusually high content of calcium and magnesium in the clay gave the brick a unique soft yellow color instead. The cream brick, as it became known, grew in popularity in Milwaukee and the city's brick makers took great pride in their unique product.

In May of 1859 the schooner M.S.Scott sailed to Germany carrying, among other things, samples of Milwaukee's cream brick to the mayor of Hamburg. The Germans were impressed with the Milwaukee brick and later imported some of it for use in ornamenting their new buildings. It is not known if there are any buildings surviving in Germany today that feature Milwaukee brick. There are buildings in other parts of this country that survive, notably the Milwaukee Building in Galena, Illinois that was constructed of our cream color brick. The popularity of Milwaukee's cream brick was reflected by the fact that as late as the 1920's, the Pittsburgh Paint and Glass Co., which was a large paint manufacturer in the east, sold a ready-mixed house paint in a creamy color called "Milwaukee brick."

The Architects

Ferry and Clas

³¹ "U.S. Leather seeks new start" Doris Hajewski, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, December 21, 1997; "Retail Office Use planned for P & V", Kelly Quigley, Business Journal, November 24, 2000

The firm of Ferry and Clas was probably the most respected and talented of its day in Milwaukee. Not only did their work encompass such high-profile major public buildings as today's Central Library downtown, the State Historical Society (now Wisconsin Historical Society) Building in Madison and the Wisconsin Building at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, but extended to commercial and warehouse and even theater buildings. In addition, the firm designed scores of fine residences for well-to-do clientele throughout the state and had commissions from out-of-state clients. By the late 1890's Ferry and Clas had established a reputation for elegant design and were much sought after as *the* prestigious architectural firm.

George B. Ferry (February 7, 1851 – January 29, 1918) was born and educated in Springfield, Massachusetts, and studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1871 and 1872 after which he began his architectural career in his hometown. A year following his 1880 marriage to Springfield resident Cora Frances Phillips, Ferry moved to Milwaukee and established his practice. One of his prominent works during the 1880's was the clubhouse for the Woman's Club of Wisconsin on East Kilbourn Avenue. In 1890 Ferry went into partnership with Alfred C. Clas, and the two had offices on Broadway between Wisconsin Avenue and Mason Street. During their partnership, which lasted until 1912, the two were responsible for many architectural projects.³²

After the dissolution of the partnership with Clas, Ferry retained the offices on Broadway and continued in practice until about 1916. Ferry was instrumental in organizing Wisconsin's first architectural association, and was also a member of the organizational committee that framed the by-laws and constitution of the American Institute of Architects. He was chairman of Milwaukee's building code commission for four years, president of the Milwaukee Art Commission, and a member of the National Academy of Sciences.³³

Throughout his life, Ferry lived at a variety of residences, on North 17th Street, East Kilbourn Avenue, Farwell Avenue, Woodland Court, and Prospect Avenue. He last lived on Cambridge Avenue.³⁴ While his wife and daughter were away in New York, Ferry died at the residence of his son, Robert P. Ferry, who was then living at 1502 East Royall Place. Ferry's passing on Tuesday, January 29, 1918 was the result of grippe complicated by an infection of the heart. Upon his death, George B. Ferry was cited as an ideal architect, conscientious, extremely well educated, well-read, and artistic, and a professional who was inspirational and helpful to younger members of the profession.³⁵ His former partner, Alfred C. Clas, stated that Ferry "was one of the best designers ever in Milwaukee, an architect of exceptional good judgment and of very artistic temperament."³⁶

Alfred Charles Clas (December 26, 1859 – July 8, 1942) was born in Sauk City, Wisconsin, the son of German immigrants Adam and Magdalene (Ernst) Clas. He was educated in his hometown and after graduating from high school served a short-term appointment as a messenger boy in the State Senate. Clas subsequently apprenticed with an architect (unnamed) and also received two years of practical instruction in building construction. In 1879 he went to Stockton, California and worked in an architect's office there for almost two years. Clas then returned to Wisconsin and settled in Milwaukee. From about 1880 to 1884

³² George B. Ferry, Obituaries, Evening Wisconsin, January 29, 1918, page 1; Milwaukee Sentinel, Home Edition, January 29, 1918, page 5; Milwaukee Journal, market edition, January 29, 1918, page 1.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wright's Milwaukee City Directory, 1881-1918

³⁵ Ferry, Obituary, Milwaukee Journal.

³⁶ Ferry, Obituary, Evening Wisconsin.

he worked his way up from draftsman to architect in the offices of James Douglas. From 1885 to 1886 the two were in partnership, but Clas left in 1887 to set up his own architectural practice with offices on Milwaukee Street.³⁷ Several years later Clas went into partnership with George B. Ferry who had been practicing in Milwaukee since 1881. The two carried on a very successful business from 1890 through 1912 and were responsible for a number of civic and institutional structures as well as residences: Milwaukee Public Library and Museum, Northwestern National Insurance Headquarters, the State Historical Society Library at Madison, St. John's Cathedral Tower, the Matthews Brothers Building, the Y.W.C.A. Building, Buena Vista Flats, the Milwaukee Auditorium building, the Wisconsin State Building at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, and the Wisconsin State Building for the St. Louis Exposition as well as the Forest Home Cemetery Chapel and the First Unitarian Church. Current research documents over two hundred projects executed by the firm.

In the early decades of this century, Alfred Clas was very much involved with civic projects and took an active part in planning Milwaukee's Civic Center, the beautification of the Milwaukee River, and the development of Lincoln Memorial Drive and Parkway. He also laid out many of the city's boulevards, planned and supervised the construction of many of the city's park buildings, and served on the City Board of Park Commissioners and the County Parks Commission, and served as president of the Metropolitan Park Commission.³⁸

After dissolving his partnership with Ferry in 1912, Clas continued in partnership with his son Angelo Robert Clas from 1912 to 1921 and later with another son Rubens Frederick Clas and John S. Shepherd under the name Clas, Shepherd and Clas from 1921 until 1931. After Shepherd left, the firm became Clas and Clas once again. Their offices had remained in the Colby-Abbot Building since 1914. Alfred Clas remained active in the practice into 1933 after which time a corporation was established, Clas and Clas, Inc. Clas apparently retired from active participation at that time although he served as president of the corporation through at least 1936. The corporation was continued under Rubens Clas into the 1940's. Following his retirement, Clas and his second wife, Lucille, spent most of their time in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. After Lucille's death in 1939, Clas made his home with his son, Rubens. His last year was spent at the Masonic Home in Dousman where he was under care for complications following a fall on the ice. Clas died of those complications on July 8, 1942 at the age of 82. Following Masonic funeral services at the Weiss Funeral Home on Milwaukee's lower east side, Clas' cremated remains were buried in Sauk City.³⁹

The firm's work for Herman Zohrlaut shows the finesse and detail that made them famous in their public and residential buildings. It also sheds light on what was probably a lucrative, but to us little known, part of their practice.

Carl F. Ringer

Carl F. Ringer, Sr. was born 1850/1851 in Germany and came to Milwaukee in 1870/1871. He was employed in the architectural firms of George Mygatt, Edward Townsend Mix and James

³⁷ John B. Gregory, History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Milwaukee: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1931), Vol. III, p.188. Wright's Milwaukee City Directory, 1880-1887; Milwaukee's Leading Industries (New York: Historical Publishing Company, 1886), p. 142.

³⁸ Gregory, Vol. III, p. 191; Alfred Clas Obituary, Milwaukee Journal, Local News, July 8, 1942, p. 1; Alfred Clas Obituary, Milwaukee Sentinel, July 9, 1942, Sec. 1, p. 4.

³⁹ Wright's Milwaukee City Directory, 1912-1942; Obituaries, Milwaukee Journal and Milwaukee Sentinel.

Douglas before opening his own office in 1881. He quickly obtained some choice commissions from Adolph Meinecke, the Pfister & Vogel Leather Company, and various churches, among which was Zion Church at 21st and North Avenue. Ringer was busy enough to employ several draftsmen by 1892. He was also known for superintending the construction of his designs. He had many clients among the German Americans of the city's west side and designed dozens of houses, most of which have been razed. One notable extant example is the Queen Anne style David W. Howie House (1886) on Wells Street now listed in the national Register of Historic Places. Ringer also designed a number of commercial buildings in the Third Ward and has industrial commissions as well. Later work included residential work on the lower east side such as the G. Frederick Bossert Double house at 2502 East Webster Place.

In 1904 his son Carl F. Ringer, Jr., joined him in the practice and the firm became known as C.F. Ringer & Son. Carl, Sr. retired in 1934 but the younger Carl continued to work under the Ringer & Son name until his own death in 1938. Mayor Emil Seidel appointed Carl, Sr. as City Inspector in June 1911. After a conflict with later Mayor G. A. Bading over whether or not to raze a building, Ringer was fired. He went to court and the State Supreme Court ordered his reinstatement with full back pay. Ringer submitted his resignation that same day and was proud that the building he wanted rehabilitated was later repaired and used for many years thereafter.

Ringer was a member of the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Milwaukee Turnverein, and the Freie Gemeinde Society for which he designed the clubhouse on Fond du Lac Avenue that is locally designated. Ringer was involved in the establishment of the Badger Exploring Company and the Milwaukee Vinegar Company and also sat on the Harbor Commission and served as its vice-president. Ringer, Sr. died in April 1939 and was survived by two sons, Erwin and Adolph, and three sisters, one of whom was Mrs. Bertha Benz. She was the widow of German inventor Carl Benz, one of the designers of Mercedes-Benz.

Ringer's work on the Zohrlaut/Pfister & Vogel complex show him to be well versed in the industrial idioms of his day. He was apparently a much sought after designer and specialist in tannery buildings since he also did a lot of work at the Menomonee Valley/Walker's Point tannery complex of Pfister & Vogel.

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