

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

THE PIONEER TENT AND AWNING COMPANY OF BOISE (Advertiser Column By Nancy DeHamer)

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The success of any frontier business was dependent upon its ability to supply a needed product at a reasonable price. Most of the early businesses in Boise "imported" their goods from the East, which consequently caused the prices to be somewhat inflated. As Boise grew and transportation improved, prices became more realistic, although getting the goods to the market was still a problem.

Some men realized that at least part of the answer lay in the local manufacture of goods to be sold. Boise has never been a major manufacturing center, although various companies have produced goods to be sold locally and throughout the northwest. Many of these enterprises were begun around the turn of the century when Boise was experiencing something of a boom. Most are not in existence today, but one was still in business in 1971, manufacturing and selling the same type of products as it was in 1900.

Pioneer Tent and Awning Company had its humble beginnings in a frame building located at 516 Main Street. The Company's founders had seen a need in the Boise area for canvas duck goods and had decided to make them locally. By 1903 the company was advertising in the city directory that they were manufacturers and dealers in "Tents, Awnings, Wagon covers, Machine, Hay and Grain Pauling, Miners' and Herders' Supplies, and Cotton Duck goods of every description." By 1905 the company had relocated in slightly more commodious quarters when they moved into a building at 524 W. Main, formerly occupied by a grocery store. They were, however, advertising the same line of goods.

Also by 1905, the company was owned solely by Ira Rohrer, one of the founders, who had previously been in partnership with two different men. A biographical sketch of Rohrer, published in 1912, states that he started the business with a capital of only \$11.00, which may explain why he needed partners in the early years. Under Rohrer's leadership the company continued to expand. By 1912 it was the "largest establishment of its kind in the state, employing on an average of twenty persons." By this time the firm had added a harness and saddlery department, and was manufacturing extensively in this line. Salesmen traveled throughout Idaho and other western states selling the company's goods.

The rapid expansion soon caused the company to outgrow its quarters, so a new brick building was constructed on the corner of Sixth and Main in 1910. This building was two stories in height, with display and sales rooms on the first floor and manufacturing shops on the second floor. The business operated in the same location but became known as the Pioneer Company. Its name was appropriate as it was the first business of its kind in the state, and it outlasted its

competitors.

The files of the Idaho State Historical Society do not contain any pictures of the exterior of the firm, although there are two interesting views of the second floor workshops. One shows men working with yards and yards of canvas and rope; the second shows the sewing room, complete with seamstresses and industrial-sized sewing machines. A third picture shows a neighborhood camping party which was held sometime after 1900. Many of the things shown in the picture, including the tent, wagon covers, harnesses, and saddles, could have been made at the Pioneer Tent and Awning.

When our first column dealing with Pioneer Tent and Awning Company was published, it was stated that the Historical Society had no photographs of the exterior of any of the buildings the company had occupied, and only had two interior photographs. Thanks to the generosity of Deon Miller, Jr. (Whose father worked for Pioneer Tent and Awning for thirty-five years), and Ira Rohrer, Jr. (Whose father was one of the company's early owners, and who owned and operated the store until recently), the Idaho State Historical Society was given many interesting exterior and interior photographs of the shop.

One showed the frame building which the company occupied at 516 Main Street in the late 1890's and early 1900's. In 1903, the company moved into a building which had formerly housed a grocery store at the corner of Sixth and Main. An interior photograph, taken in 1903, shows a large room used both as workshop and salesroom. Ira Rohrer, owner and operator, is shown second from the left.

In 1910, Pioneer Tent and Awning built a new building with much more space and work room. The grocery store was torn down, and for a few months while the new building was being constructed, the company had its headquarters in the old Good Templars Hall, which was in the same block on Main Street. In fact, part of the Good Templars Hall is visible in the photograph of the new building. The new building was a credit to the company and the community. Inside, the showrooms and salesrooms were downstairs, the workshops upstairs on the second floor. Another photograph shows the canvas department and the company's office in the new building shortly after it was completed.

Through the years the store adapted itself to the changing times. With the advent of automobile transportation, an automobile fitting shop was opened where canvas tops and other accessories were custom made. One photo shows this shop as it looked in 1926.

Remodeling and changes occurred over the years, the interior and exterior of the Pioneer Company long reflected its early image in the city. Our thanks to Mr. Miller and Mr. Rohrer for providing photos which helped us to understand better the company's history.

After the Pioneer Tent and Awning business finally closed in 1972, the building was transformed into Old Boise, a "mini-mall" with many shops occupying the space that once was used to make and sell canvas and leather goods.