

# Preservationists remember Cook building's past

The Cook Communications Ministries' landmark industrial plant has been a unique part of its north-end Elgin neighborhood for more than a century.

It is situated in a prime residential area, but there have been no complaints from neighboring householders, who have included Cook owners, managers and employees.



Its factory whistle became a local institution, and when the company decided it was no longer needed, a deluge of requests by mail, telephone and in person pleaded to "keep the whistle blowing." Its impressive exterior is as attractive as the day it opened. And now, when it might be replaced by a housing development, there are cries for its preservation.

The David C. Cook Publishing Co., a major producer of nondenominational Sunday school material, moved 14 big cylinder presses from Chicago to a former woolen mill along the east bank of the Fox River in 1882. Its output was so great that more than 1 million pounds of postage, much of it Cook's, was sent from Elgin's post office in 1888. The volume was three-fourths of 1 percent of all second-class mail in the United States.

The company expanded by building the Marguerite Block on East Chicago Street in 1889 and constructing a large addition to the mill in 1893. Although another building in the vicinity was purchased in 1899, by the turn of the century Cook's was running out of space. Its Young People's Weekly alone had a circulation of 235,000, and its correspondence room was receiving 8,000 letters a day.

Funds for a big new plant became available from a windfall of oil. Seeking a remedy in California for a chronic health problem, David C. Cook, the company's founder and president, purchased in about 1889 the 14,000-acre Temescal ranch in California east of Los Angeles. He laid out the town site of Piru, Calif., and built a large home as well as a Methodist church. The land was hilly and dry, and water had to be piped in at great expense to irrigate the 4,000 acres he planted in fruit trees. The venture wasn't profitable, but oil was discovered on the property. Cook sold it to a drilling syndicate for a reported \$500,000 or more in 1900.

In 1901 D.C. Cook's 250 employees moved into a modern building on an 8½-acre tract along with what was then River Street and is now North Grove Avenue. Additional acreage was purchased across the street to the east. David Postle, a local architect, designed the complex, and the construction contract was awarded to Lars Palm of Elgin. A spur of the east side Chicago and North Western Railroad supplied workers with materials, including more than 1.5 million bricks.

A two-story administrative building, flanked by two single-story wings, stretched 394 feet along North Grove. The central building housed a reception area and business offices on the first floor, and the editorial department was located upstairs. Accounting and correspondence departments were in the south wing, and the north wing housed the typesetting, proofing and type foundry rooms.

A covered way connected the administrative building to five, 200-foot-long bays, built behind and parallel to the front. Built side by side with common walls, they were used for a paper stockroom, a pressroom, a bindery, a mailing room, and a merchandising and general shipping room. The bays had sawtooth-shaped roofs that provided abundant light to each section from large north-facing windows.

A railroad mail car was set every weekday on the spur below the building. A wooden tube, 40 feet long and 5 feet square, led from the building to a platform that stood beside the track. An additional tube was used on rush days when shipments of 20 tons were not uncommon.

The steel and brick construction was considered fireproof. A heating, cooling and ventilation system allowed outside air to be passed over steam pipes and through huge ducts to each room, constantly replacing stale air. Employees enjoyed a cafeteria that served meals at cost and a separate recreation hall. Concerned that employees would have difficulty reaching this "far out" location, Cook asked the city to allow the streetcar line to be extended to the new plant, and he agreed to pay all the expenses of its construction.

Several innovations in the printing industry were developed in this plant. The first electrotype was bent for use on Cook's rotary presses, and the company was the first to successfully introduce three-color printing.

The flood of Sunday school publications that once poured from this building can be illustrated by the output in 1913 when the company was supplying more than 60,000 Sunday schools. An average of 15 tons was sent out daily. The combined annual circulation of some 40 publications exceeded 100 million.

The company moved its editorial department to Colorado Springs, Colo., in 1995, and its name was changed to Cook Communications Ministries in 1998. Cook abandoned printing in Elgin in 2003, and the last presses were removed the following year.

The plant has been used as a distribution center since then. A two-story, 40,000-square-foot warehouse was completed in 2000 along Lincoln Avenue. This facility, distinguished by a Christian cross in glass blocks on one wall, can ship 30-35 tons daily by Federal Express, which allows every package to be tracked online from order entry to final delivery.

- E.C. "Mike" Alft, a retired Elgin High School teacher and former Elgin mayor, is the author of several books about Elgin history.

Days Gone By

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