

Bass Photo Company

Founded: 1897

Location: 308 South New Jersey Street (1897–).

Central Indiana in the late nineteenth century was a center of the hardwood industry in the Midwest and home to a large number of furniture makers. Most large-scale furniture manufacturers produced two separate lines each year. Rather than maintaining retail outlets across the country for their products the firms armed salesmen with illustrated catalogs, one for each new line of furniture. James Bayne, a photographer based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, planted a branch of his firm in Indianapolis to take advantage of the proximity to so many furniture businesses, each with a need for professionally illustrated guides to their products. A building at 308 South New Jersey Street was constructed for the business, and it continues to house the Bass Photo Company to the present day. Bayne's company focused on commercial rather than portrait work, specializing in the creation of trade catalogs and selling photographs to magazines. Bayne's venture proved unsuccessful, however, and he sold the concern to Walter T. Woodworth and William H. Bass in 1899.

The new proprietors renamed the business Woodworth and Company, changing the name again in 1901 to the Bass and Woodworth Company. Four years later Woodworth left the firm to start his own business, and the company's appellation became the Bass Photo Company, a designation it has retained ever since. Woodworth had been a photographer for Bayne. Bass was a native of Bartholomew County and a graduate of the Indiana State Normal School. He had been a miller at Edinburgh until tuberculosis caused him to quit his job in 1872 at the age of twenty. In 1875, he was hired by the

Indianapolis public schools. Bass taught manual skills at Shortridge High School and was later instrumental in creating Manual Technical High School before he retired from teaching in 1901. Beginning in 1894 he operated a side business as an independent photographer, probably forming a friendship with Woodworth at about this time.

Business was brisk as carriages from numerous furniture factories were unloaded and their wares were photographed; then the furniture was repackaged for its return trip to the factory or the train depot. There was always cardboard left after the repackaging of the furniture, and Bass carefully collected the pieces and used them to ship and protect photographs, saving the company hundreds of dollars each year. Shortly after buying the business, Bass was continually pestered by a young man who wanted a job. Supposedly, after tiring of hearing the plea day after day, Bass told someone to get nineteen-year-old Charles C. Branson a broom, giving him the job of errand boy. Branson, an artist born in Scott County who had moved to Indianapolis at the age of seven, had taken course work at a few of the art and business schools around town. He quickly became Bass's favorite employee and was given increasing amounts of responsibility. He rose to be one of the company's photographers, taking pictures at Indianapolis's first automobile show. Branson's early-twentieth-century equipment depended on flash powder, required glass plates for negatives, and came equipped with a black head cloth. On one shoot he added a little too much blast power and blew out a transom in a room.

In 1901 business demand required that the partners add a third floor to their two-story brick building on south New Jersey Street. By 1902 the business was processing around 200 negatives at a time. The new addition allowed the company to print as many as 300 negatives simultaneously. The nature of the business did not change

after 1899. The company continued to create furniture catalogs, and to craft “lantern” slides and stereopticon images, but shied away from making portraits. Commercial endeavors remained the most important aspect of Bass and Woodworth’s business after 1899. Bass encouraged his photographers to shoot cityscapes, neighborhoods, and individual houses with leftover film. Eventually, these extra photographs, along with the commercial pictures, amounted to a collection that visually depicted the changes that took place in central Indiana during the twentieth century. Between 1983 and 1990 the Indiana Historical Society purchased the negatives and photographic prints from the Bass Company, a collection of around 200,000 items that can be viewed by the public and are stored at the Society’s William Henry Smith Memorial Library.

A 1902 article stated that the company was “making a specialty of colored photos.” It is possible that the “colored photos” meant color photographs. However, it is more likely that the 1902 source referred to the practice of adding color to black and white photographs after they had been developed. The third floor, with its large and numerous windows, was used by the company to do “retouching” work. Bass hired from six to eight women at twenty-five cents an hour to add colors to photographs in an assembly-line fashion, with each woman being responsible for one color. For some time Charles Branson acted as a retouch specialist, painting the grains of the wood into the photographs of furniture, making some pictures opaque, and painting out the backgrounds in others. Bass used the second floor of the building to develop the photographs. Instead of using a darkroom, the windows were opened and negatives were laid on photo paper and were left on the window sills, sometimes for several hours.

In 1912 Bass incorporated the business, keeping the office of president for a decade before relinquishing it to his favorite employee, Branson, the firm's manager since 1904. In 1922 Bass became the secretary-treasurer of the company and set up Branson as his successor. William Bass and his wife, Jane McCormick Wood Bass, did not have any children, and the business passed to Branson after his mentor's death in 1936. Ted Abel, an accountant and Branson's son-in-law, purchased a third of the concern in the late 1930s while his wife, Margaret, also purchased a third of the concern.

When the Great Depression hit Indianapolis, business plummeted for the Bass Photo Company. Ninety percent of the area's furniture makers disappeared, and employees at Bass were only able to work half days. The firm continued to do some work for furniture manufacturers into the early 1940s, but it was clear that the company would need to find a new niche if it was to survive. Bass Photo remained in business by shooting storefront window changes for department stores, interior views of houses for the paneling industry, and any other profitable venture. When Branson died in March 1948, the Abels held a majority stake in the enterprise.

In the 1960s the Abels' sons, Fred and Gerald, both graduates of the Rochester Institute of Technology, joined the firm as photographers. During the 1970s and 1980s the business continued to focus on commercial and advertising photography. Technology created after 1960 altered the manner in which the firm's photographers captured the moment. In 1995, for example, the company launched its first filmless project, using a Kodak/Nikon digital camera to photograph the Jenn-Air Company's oven line. The camera made it possible for the firm to download an image from the device directly into a

computer, modify the image using software, and hand the material to an art director in a digital format.

In 1999 Fred and Gerry Abel continued to co-own the oldest photography business in Indianapolis.