

Butler Company

Founded: 1888

Location: On property owned by the Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific Rail Road, Butler (1894–)

In October 1894 seven men, only three from Indiana, invested in a plant to manufacture wind engines and bicycles. The partners included Roscoe Bean, A. G. Jones, T. C. Munger, T. J. Knisley, D. L. Murche, E. W. Catlin, and D. C. Henry. They placed their building strategically between the Wabash and New York Central Railroad lines, using the Eel River railroad depot as a shipping station for their goods. The men employed the latest technology, using the telegraph extensively after 1876 to conduct their business. The partners had purchased the assets of the Butler Manufacturing Company, which incorporated in 1888 and failed in 1899. They adapted their firm to the times and began manufacturing buggies shortly after organizing the company.

The automobiles they made were marketed under the name “star,” but the company was probably better known for their Butler Bicycle. The bicycle was made with wooden handlebars and wheel rims, had metal spokes, but had no coaster brakes. By 1914 the company had three hundred employees and made cypress tanks, metal tanks, pumps, valves, and other accessories, as well as windmills and automobiles, which were traded throughout the world.

The company continually tried to adapt to the changing needs of the time, producing an experimental airplane named the “Yellow Jacket” in 1930. During the Great Depression the partners made only windmills and water storage and handling equipment. L. C. Harding, a Steuben County native and president of the firm since 1896, saw the company through the economic calamity. By 1941 the company was producing

water pumps, windmills, water tanks, and well supplies but was no longer crafting bicycles or airplanes.

In 1958 the Butler Company building burned but was later rebuilt. In the 1990s the company dealt exclusively with plumbing supplies and wholesale electrical goods.