

Carter-Lee Lumber Company

Founded: 1878

Location: 1621 West Washington Street (1883–)

Indiana was a center of the hardwood lumber industry in the 1870s and 1880s. In the temperate midwestern climate, the oak, tulip (or yellow poplar), maple, black walnut, beech, hickory, and red gum trees of Indiana's virgin forests had grown slowly, creating grain patterns that had relatively few imperfections and set quality standards for the world. After 1870 a national market for hardwood emerged. Indiana sawmills produced large quantities of high-quality hardwood used in the making of barrels, fine furniture, agricultural implements, carriages, wagons, and wood veneers. In the 1870s George H. Carter entered the lumber industry in Indianapolis.

Carter came to Indianapolis in 1846, at the age of fifteen, from Fleming County, Kentucky. He learned the blacksmith's trade in a shop on the corner of Mississippi and Washington Streets and in 1849 became a blacksmith on a steamer that plied the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Within a year, he was the ship's engineer. Carter was an affable, well-known, and, evidently, self-possessed man. On one trip out West, Carter's train was stopped by bandits. A robber demanded that Carter turn over his valuables; Carter calmly informed the thief that he would turn them over only on the condition that he could keep certain important papers. The bandit agreed. Later in his life the popular Carter served one term as sheriff of Marion County. In 1852 the young Carter sought his fortune in California. The journey took 144 days and provided Carter experiences he

would remember years later. For example, when the crew ran short of water, Carter crawled past a nearby Indian camp and found a fresh spring.

After a year of digging for gold in California, Carter purchased the remains of a burned-out sawmill and a thousand acres of land with two other men. He ran the mill for many years, but in 1868 he sold out and returned to Indianapolis, purchasing a partnership in a sawmill with Isaac Long and another man. The following year Carter bought his partners out and a year later entered into a partnership with Silas A. Lee. Carter and Lee owned hardwood sawmills on St. Clair Street and, later, Yandes and Fifteenth Streets, but the partnership ended in 1876. Lee went into the boot and shoe business, and Carter became a partner in a stock-auction trading partnership. However, Carter returned to the lumber industry in 1877. The following year Lee and Carter again formed a partnership. In 1883 the company moved to West Washington Street, obtaining the first switch on the Belt Railroad.

Like many hardwood mills in Indiana, the Carter and Lee firm remained a family-owned business. George Carter was succeeded by his son, Frederick L. Carter and Silas Lee by his son, Frank J. Lee. In 1893 the two sons converted the firm into a retail lumber and millwork operation, reestablishing themselves as the Carter-Lee Lumber Company. This was a wise decision. The production of Indiana hardwood lumber peaked in 1899 as the old stands of virgin hardwood forests throughout the Midwest and Great Lakes region were gradually depleted. The number of sawmills in Indiana fell by more than half between 1879 and 1904.

Frederick Carter and Frank Lee managed the business into the 1930s. During the flood of 1913 they spent a day moving their records and safe to the second floor of the

business as the floodwaters approached and lumber began floating away. They had to be evacuated by police in boats. Frederick Carter died in 1934. The following year Frank Lee sold his interest to Frederick Carter's sons, Frederick L. "Ted" Carter, Jr., and Wilbur Carter. Lee had no children, Wilbur Carter later recalled, "so he sold his interest to us. We just kept the name and didn't have to re-paint the signs and trucks." Although the Great Depression was difficult for the company, Carter-Lee began a slow recovery in 1938. Under Ted and Wilbur Carter, the company expanded into the wholesale business, supplying lumber to smaller yards across the state. By the early 1950s it employed fifty-five workers. Lawrence N. Carter, George H. Carter's great-grandson, presided over the company into the mid-1990s.

In 1998 David Carter headed the lumber concern that employed 110. David is an avid mountain climber and climbed Mount Everest in 1997. He and his father, Lawrence, led the company through some of its darkest days. The company was named to the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list after a 1985 soil sample was taken. The site may have been used by several other companies for both legal storage and illegal dumping of contaminants. After nearly fifteen years and \$200,000 in legal fees and fines the company was taken off the list in 1996. Two years later a favorable public health report found that the site did not pose a health hazard because of the remoteness of the site from human habitation.