

George Koch Sons

Founded: 1873

Location: 1012 (later 2112–2120) West Pennsylvania Street, Evansville (1873–); 10 South Eleventh Avenue

In 1843 George Koch's family immigrated to Evansville from Albig in Hesse-Darmstadt, Germany. His father, a cooper by trade, helped establish the Eagle Brewery. George learned the tinning and sheet metal trade in Evansville but left the city, building a boat with a friend and traveling down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to Vicksburg where he established a tinner's shop. He fought as a Confederate during the Civil War, and two of his brothers fought for the Union. In 1873, Koch married Mary Catherine Schwink, a German immigrant also from Hesse-Darmstadt, who lived in Vicksburg. He returned to Evansville and founded another tin shop on the city's west side. Koch did domestic tinwork, sold metal items for the home, and installed gutters, piping, and roofing. Mary Koch operated the shop and did minor repair work. The business steadily expanded, and in 1888 Koch built a separate brick factory and two-story warehouse.

George Koch died in April 1903, and the next year his three sons and three daughters incorporated his business as George Koch Sons. Koch's oldest son, George Jr., became vice president; George Jr. later helped found the West Side Building & Loan Association and served two terms as Evansville's deputy comptroller. Louis J. Koch served as general manager and secretary; he had joined the firm in 1901 and assumed control after his father's death. The youngest son, Albert C., became president. Both Louis and Albert operated side ventures in the 1910s: Louis established the West Side

Contracting Company in 1912, which built sewers before closing three years later, and Albert ran the A. C. Koch Company from 1912 to 1919.

George Koch Sons gradually evolved from a domestic metalworking shop into a multidivision corporation producing machinery for specialized industrial processes. In the 1910s the company began producing dust-collecting systems for furniture factories and food conveyor equipment. It also entered the trumpet-making business, due to a dearth of that instrument during World War I. Eventually, George Koch Sons built and installed some of the first central heating systems (and later air conditioning systems) in southern Indiana. In 1936 it became one of the first distributors for the Carrier Air Conditioning Company. By the 1930s the company had expanded into industrial baking ovens. In that decade George Koch Sons set up engineering and manufacturing departments. Its manufacturing department produced metal furniture, metal floral baskets, and related goods; the engineers improved the company's paint finishing abilities, installing spray baths, conveyor systems, and surface preparation machines. During World War II George Koch Sons built ventilating systems for tank-landing invasion craft. After the war the company expanded rapidly, winning more defense contracts during the Korean War and a \$50 million contract for construction of an Atomic Energy Commission plant in Portsmouth, Ohio.

Much of the growth in George Koch Sons occurred while Louis was manager. In 1947 he became chairman of the board. In 1941, during a long illness, he and his wife conceived the idea of a park for children, which they established as Santa Claus Land in 1945. He also founded the Santa Claus Samaritans, a group that distributed Christmas gifts to poor children. Albert and George had no children, but several of Louis's children

moved into the management of the business. By 1982 George Koch Sons had nine manufacturing plants and eight hundred employees. By the 1990s it had five divisions and a paint-finishing laboratory. It produced paint-finishing machinery in four plants, including one in West Memphis, Arkansas. The company also produced modular paneling, electronic air conditioners, and precision machines for the aluminum, steel, coal, and industrial maintenance industries. Robert L. Koch II, the great-grandson of George Koch, Sr., was president of the company in the 1990s. The firm remained locally owned and privately held.