

J. C. Lauber Sheet Metal Company, Inc.

Founded: 1890

Location: 228 North Emerick Street, South Bend (1892); 506 East Water Street (1893–1900); 504 East LaSalle Avenue (1900–)

Joseph Charles Lauber was born in 1868 in Hamilton, Ohio. His father, Anton, was a German immigrant as was his mother, Crezencia. Anton died in 1868, and his wife moved with the children to Mishawaka, where her brother was a partner in a brewery. The family survived the Great Mishawaka Fire of 1872, and eight years later Joseph became Jared Morse's apprentice. He finished his tinner's apprenticeship in Michigan, also studying architecture and drafting under a Mr. Hall of Grand Rapids.

Lauber returned to St. Joseph County, settling in South Bend, and went to work for Meyer & Poehlman, the largest tinsmith and hardware business in the area. In 1890 Lauber decided to strike out on his own, and he and George T. Titzell started a metal shop. The partnership quickly failed, and in the same year he rejoined Gottfried L. Poehlman, this time as a partner. Two years later Poehlman retired, and Lauber began working alone, forming the firm Lauber and Company. He soon formed yet another partnership, this time with Paul Weiss, a German immigrant and a former colleague at Meyer & Poehlman. Lauber and Weiss continued as partners until 1908.

The Lauber and Weiss firm provided metal for roofs, iron cornices, and house ornamentation. After the Civil War business and home construction expanded rapidly. The cut stone that had been the mainstay of business building cornice work before 1865 had to give way—due to costs, consideration of weight, and the need to build quickly—to more practical products, which included sheet metal. The partners were very successful, and the added business meant that they needed more room at the office. In 1900 the duo

moved to an East LaSalle Avenue location and expanded it for their purposes. After Weiss left the firm, it continued to prosper, and additions to the building were again made in 1924 and 1945. In 1986 the J. C. Lauber Building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its “commercial-industrial style,” common for downtown facades at the beginning of the twentieth century, is rarely found extant by the dawn of the twenty-first century.

In the early years of the firm all sheet metal and roofing work was done without motorized equipment. Until the eve of World War I the company did not own a gasoline-powered truck, depending on real horsepower or steam-driven machinery. Before the introduction of arc and torch welding, workers had to solder or rivet sheets of iron, copper, zinc, and lead into shapes. The company used slate and tile for its roofing projects, a practice continued into the 1990s.

By 1901 the partnership had become well known and highly regarded. Lauber and Weiss were chosen to complete several important projects, including work on public schools and libraries, private homes, an Episcopal church, and a plow factory. They also repaired copper washing tubs that were used in the era before the widespread availability of the electric washing machine. By the 1920s the firm employed as many as twenty-six men. Lauber took an active part in the life of the city’s business and civic affairs, becoming a director of two financial institutions and a land company as well as participating in the local chamber of commerce and a Masonic organization.

Joseph William Lauber took over the business upon his father’s death in 1947. He had worked at the plant for almost twenty years before accepting the company’s top post. Most practices continued as they had before World War II, including using the

company truck's license plates for wall decorations, but the tradition of paying workers in cash had to give way to changes in the tax laws. Copper boiler tubs no longer lined the street waiting for repair as they had as late as the 1930s, but the firm continued its use of single entry bookkeeping until 1967. After 1945 aluminum production costs were lowered, and the company began to use this malleable product more than in the past, when it had been too expensive to be anything but a curiosity. Jobs continued to pour in on important projects. The company's reputation earned it the contract to apply gold leaf to the dome of Sacred Heart Church at the University of Notre Dame in 1961.

After Joseph William Lauber died in 1964, his widow, Agatha Wilhelm-Lauber-Mootz, presided over the company. Under her leadership the family enterprise continued largely as it had in the past, but she introduced some reforms including new accounting procedures. A grandson, Howard J. Schmitt, took over the business in 1970. Howard Schmitt was the son of Irene Lauber and August John Schmitt.

In the 1990s the company focused on commercial and business construction and was especially known for its work on slate, tile, and modern roofs, as well as gutters and heating, cooling, and exhaust systems. The company also handled smaller jobs for individuals, such as reproducing old car parts or welding broken tools. Howard J. Schmitt served as president of the company into 1998, taking the office of secretary of the firm in 1999. His son, Paul Schmitt, became president. In 1999 the South Bend company had five employees and reported sales of under \$1 million.