

J. O. Mory, Inc.

Founded: [1892]

Location: Originally downtown, South Milford (1872); company headquarters now 7470 South State Road 3, South Milford

J. O. Mory, Inc., was founded by Eugene Emil Mory, a native of Switzerland who immigrated to the United States in 1872. Eugene Mory was enamored of America after listening to the tales of two uncles who had struck it rich in the Gold Rush of the 1840s and 1850s. The fourteen-year-old boy jumped at the chance to travel to America given him by a Swiss immigrant who, on a return visit to Switzerland, offered to pay Eugene's passage in exchange for a year's work on his farm in Wisconsin. Mory worked for the Wisconsin farmer for one and one-half years before moving to Wawaka in Noble County. There he learned English and continued to work as a farmhand. Mory eventually purchased thirty acres of his own but then moved to Lagrange County where he went to work in the Turkey Creek store of John Strayer, a South Milford merchant. Mory later moved to South Milford and for eight years ran a peddling wagon for Strayer.

In 1892 Eugene opened the E. E. Mory General Store in South Milford. Mory also served as the South Milford postmaster, operating the post office out of the back of his general store. In 1926 he sold a half interest in the business to his son, John Olen Mory. The store came to be known as Mory & Son. John Mory purchased the remainder of the firm in 1944, four years before he died. Gene Mory began working at the family store in 1945. The business was incorporated as J. O. Mory Stores in 1951.

Over the years the company diversified. It not only sold hardware, household appliances, and furniture but also expanded into heating, plumbing, air conditioning,

engineering, electrical, ventilation, fire protection, and sheet metal fabrication services for residential as well as commercial and industrial customers. In 1955 J. O. Mory became an authorized Lennox dealer and by the 1990s was one of the largest heating and air conditioning contractors in the state. The company moved into other fields as well, including the production of hydraulic presses for the automotive industry. The Mory family had numerous commercial interests. Part of the South Milford store sold groceries as well as general merchandise, and the Mory family ran a restaurant as late as 1982. The family also expanded into real estate development and construction. Gene Mory was the majority owner or general partner in several enterprises that developed property in Kendallville, Fort Wayne, Avilla, and South Milford. One of these firms was G & B Properties, a partnership with his brother Robert Mory. Gene Mory's FEEM, Inc., in partnership with Richard Kerr of Battle Creek, Michigan, and two others, invested \$5 million in Plaza Limited Partnership, which developed the largest retail development in Noble County. J. O. Mory did much of the work on these building projects.

Various members of the Mory family went to work for the firm, including Robert Mory's son John and Mike Rowe and Tom Nott, sons-in-law of Gene Mory. In 1995 J. O. Mory Stores, Inc., became J. O. Mory, Inc. Back in 1945 John O. Mory had only 6 employees in his general store; by 1980 the company employed 35 people. But the true scope of J. O. Mory's rapid growth can be measured in the expansion of its workforce from 35 to 267 between 1980 and 1996. By the mid-1990s sales topped \$20 million annually, and the company maintained six locations in both Indiana and Michigan: South Milford (corporate headquarters), Fort Wayne, Avilla, Angola, Syracuse, and Sturgis, Michigan.