

John C. Groub Company, Incorporated

Founded: 1862

Location: South Chestnut Street, Seymour (1863–71); 71 West Second Street (1871–1938); 110 Ewing Street (1938–64); Freeman Field (1964–99)

A Swiss immigrant who had faced the death of both his parents while he was still a young man moved to Rockford, Indiana, in 1852, working first in a saddlery and later for grocers Jacob and Henry Peter. A decade later the immigrant, John C. Groub, decided to go into business for himself and bought out Frank Smith and Edwin Moore's store, losing it to fire the same year. He and his wife, Elizabeth, then relocated to the newly platted town of Seymour, where they opened a new grocery store on South Chestnut Street. Because of the long hours required and for financial considerations, the couple had to live in the back of the store until 1871, when they were able to buy a new property for the business in Seymour's downtown area. Nine years later the Groubs expanded their business by adding a wholesale department that served the needs of retail establishments within a thirty-mile radius of the city.

After 1871 the company conducted its business out of a West Second Street location that had three stories of floor space, with a warehouse off-site. In the warehouse the Groubs stored products such as cooking oil, vinegar, and syrup. Interestingly, the warehouse also housed cements and plaster of paris, goods the company sold on a regular basis. Beyond canned and dry goods, the Seymour firm also dealt in farm and dairy products.

By 1885 sales of the firm had reached \$80,000 a year. John died in 1888, leaving the business to his son, Theodore Groub, and his son-in-law, William P. Masters. Masters

had married Emma Groub in November 1887. Masters was an experienced retail grocer, having opened a store in the same year as his marriage to Emma. He and Theodore turned the John C. Groub Company into a solely wholesale concern shortly after 1888. Masters continued to have an active part in the company, as a traveling salesman, until 1902, when Theodore Roosevelt appointed him the postmaster of Seymour. Later, Theodore Groub handed the company's future to his sons Thomas C. and John C.

In the beginning of the wholesale era, Groub representatives traveled by train to call on grocers throughout southern Indiana. Goods were delivered either by wagon or via the railroad. By 1904 the capital assets of the company had reached \$35,000. The general chain-store phenomenon of the 1910s and 1920s, however, hurt the Groubs' grocery wholesale business, which had seemed so successful in the previous century. In 1927 the organization reentered the retail market in the form of the Jay C Food Store of Scottsburg. By the 1940s the parent company owned forty-four such stores. The shops carried mostly dry goods and bread, preferring not to compete with butchers and farmers in the fresh-produce categories. As the times changed, however, the John C. Groub Company evolved, adding fresh fruits, vegetables, and fine meats.

From 1960 to 1980 the number of stores was consciously reduced, while the overall size of each unit was enlarged to carry more and fresher produce. In the 1980s the company began replacing its older facilities with newer buildings that included delis and bakeries. The firm also began experimenting with a new type of discount food store in which customers received reduced prices in exchange for bagging their own groceries and carrying their own bags to their cars. By 1989 three of these new Foods Plus stores were operating in Bedford, Madison, and Columbus.

The practices developed when the company was a wholesaler came into good use after 1927. With the increase in stores in the 1930s and 1940s new warehouses were built to accommodate the increased volume of traffic. In 1964 the company built a large, modern, central warehouse on the outskirts of Seymour. The new storage facility made use of motorized carts and forklifts rather than mechanical pushcarts. After 1964 several large additions increased the size of the facility, and new technologies installed in the building, such as refrigeration vaults, kept pace with the changing demands placed upon grocers.

By 1994, with close to nine hundred employees, the John C. Groub Company was one of the five largest private retail companies in Indiana. Within three years the company had more than doubled its number of employees, becoming the single largest private retail employer in the state. By the end of 1998 the company ran thirty stores, most under the name Jay C Food Store. In January 1999 the Kroger Company, a Cincinnati-based national food chain with 2,200 stores in thirty-one states and \$43 billion in annual sales, purchased the John C. Groub Company. Under the merger agreement, Jay C Food Stores kept their name and all employees were kept in place. The merger was part of a trend in retail consolidation in which large chains with billions in revenues have purchased small-to-medium-size companies that are forced to either merge with a larger company or face increased competition when a superstore is built in their sales zone. Until the acquisition, the John C. Groub Company had remained in a single family's hands since its inception, a rare characteristic for Indiana businesses.