

Karges Furniture Company

Founded: 1886

Location: 422 Lower First Street, Evansville (1886–92); 1501 (originally 301–321) West Maryland Street (1892–)

Karges Furniture Company is the only woodworking factory surviving from Evansville's days as a center of the hardwood furniture industry. As the state's hardwood forests were depleted, hardwood industries declined. The Karges family were pioneers in the Evansville furniture industry. Ferdinand Karges, a German cabinetmaker, immigrated to the United States in 1853 and came directly to Evansville. In the 1860s he helped establish Miller, Karges & Company, which later became the Evansville Furniture Factory, a pioneer in the Evansville furniture industry.

Karges's son, Albert F., worked for a time at his father's furniture company (at a wage of \$1.50 per week) before spending several years as a bookkeeper for two local clothing establishments. He also studied bookkeeping at night at Rankin-Wright Business College. Albert was briefly in the lumber business but in 1885 went to work for Henry Stoltz. Stoltz, like Albert's father, was an immigrant cabinetmaker from Germany. He purchased the Novelty Chair Works in 1885 and established himself in the furniture business at 422 Lower First Street. The following year Karges entered into a partnership with Stoltz, and the firm of Stoltz & Karges began manufacturing wooden bedsteads at the same address. In February 1889 Karges, in partnership with Frederick Bockstege and John Jourdan, Jr., bought out Stoltz and formed the Karges Furniture Company. Bockstege, another skilled German cabinetmaker, became president and Karges, secretary and treasurer.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the Karges Furniture Company was the major furniture factory in Evansville, exporting its goods to South Africa and South America as well as selling within the United States. It specialized in high-quality, heavy, veneered bedroom suites. In 1892, due to the growth of the business, the Karges Furniture Company built a new factory at 301–321 West Maryland Street. Karges became involved in several other business ventures, including the Karges Wagon Company and the Globe-Bosse-World Furniture Company, the latter of which was the result of the 1906 merger of three smaller furniture companies that he had established.

The company gradually expanded its product line. In the 1920s Albert Karges's son, Edwin F., introduced new furniture designs based on French provincial and eighteenth-century styles that have remained the company's specialty. The Karges Furniture Company became especially well known for its Circassian walnut furniture produced in this period. By the late 1920s the company was employing approximately 350 workers. It experienced great setbacks during the Great Depression, however. A strike in 1932 nearly put the firm out of business. After Albert's death in 1937, Edwin, who succeeded to the company's presidency, was forced to sell the firm's completed inventory and some of its equipment. The company's fortunes were boosted in 1939 when it received a loan from the federal government's Reconstruction Finance Corporation to finance production of furniture for the Federal Housing Authority. After a sales dip in 1954, Edwin F. Karges, Jr., who had joined the company after World War II, became executive vice president and plant manager.

The Karges Furniture Company grew steadily from the 1960s through the 1980s and focused on the production of high-quality, handcrafted furniture for upscale markets,

particularly on the West Coast. In the 1960s the factory maintained showrooms in twelve American cities as well as Montreal and imported furniture from Italy and Spain. Edwin Sr.'s daughter Joan managed the company's European affairs from Florence, Italy. Much of the furniture was based on the designs of Edwin Sr., who died in 1987. At the beginning of the twentieth century a Karges oak bed, dresser, wardrobe, and washstand sold for \$21.50; in the 1980s prices ranged from \$1,000 to \$13,000. By the 1980s the company needed to hire skilled woodworkers from Portugal and Canada to replenish its workforce, which numbered approximately one hundred.

The sustained economic growth of the 1980s and 1990s pushed the firm to hire more employees and increase production by the end of the 1990s. Edwin Jr. rose to take his father's place as president of the company, continuing to direct it in 1999, with Joan as vice president. Karges Furniture Company employed 120 in 1999 and realized sales in excess of \$10 million for the fiscal year.