

Kokomo Opalescent Glass Company, Inc.

Founded: 1888

Location: 1310 South Market Street, Kokomo (1888–)

In 1888 Charles Edward Henry and an unnamed Frenchman opened the Opalescent Glass Works on a site in the Hamlin Highland addition to Kokomo. Literally hundreds of glass businesses operated in the city by the late 1880s and early 1890s, with most closing after the natural gas boom ended. The same fate almost befell the glassworks as Henry's business slipped into receivership around 1890. Three Kokomo residents—John W. Learner, William E. Blacklidge, and Peter E. Hoss—bought the works in a receivers sale in 1891. By 1909 the company employed twenty workers, had a capital stock of \$20,000, and had a payroll of around \$800.

The partners split the responsibilities of operating the concern. Hoss served as the first president of the firm, while Learner became secretary-treasurer, and Blacklidge was vice president. All three men were active in the growing community. Hoss controlled the *Kokomo Tribune*, and Blacklidge was active in various clubs and sat on the library board. Learner, the son of a German immigrant, had been deputy sheriff of the county for a time and also belonged to several Masonic lodges.

The business grew and prospered over the years. The business's leaders established ties with several Indiana manufacturers, including Ball Brothers of Muncie. Some early clients included Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Comfort Tiffany, who bought Kokomo glass as early as 1891. Tiffany continued to order glass from the company for several years. In 1893, for example, Tiffany ordered ten thousand pounds of glass from the Kokomo factory in just one order; the total cost was less than \$650.

By 1910 Lora C. Hoss, Peter's son, took over as secretary-treasurer, and Learner became the superintendent of the factory. A year later the board of directors voted to change the firm's name to the Kokomo Opalescent Glass Company, Inc. Management of the firm continued with the three families for some time. Until the 1970s work at the plant continued on an even pace. In the late 1970s, however, demand for the special glass exploded, and the company spent \$1.1 million in an expansion project, buying a circular twelve-pot furnace, built by Sismey & Linforth of England. New firms jumped into the opalescent glass business, and giant distributing firms opened to handle the demand. The Kokomo company was almost left behind, in part because it had always sold directly to the various studios. By 1984 the company was in serious jeopardy.

The board of directors tapped descendants of the founders to refashion the glassworks for the next century. Richard Elliott, Peter Hoss's great-great-grandson, and Bill Wright, the great-great-grandson of Learner, were chosen as president and vice president, respectively. The two reached agreements with distributors that allowed the company to continue selling directly to smaller studios, yet have the ability to gain larger sales through distributors.

In many ways the company has not changed in more than a century. The glass is still made in giant clay pots in mixtures of up to one thousand pounds. The molten mixture is then mixed both by workers and by machines into the vibrant colors that gives opalescent glass its name. Surprisingly, many of the recipes for colors still come from Peter Hoss's 1904 handwritten book. While most glass companies have gone to making glass in day-tank furnaces, which allow for greater volume and a less expensive product, Kokomo Opalescent Glass continues to make it in the old clay furnaces. The company's

officers believe that the more traditional way of making glass gives the Kokomo firm an advantage, as the glass made in the older way allows for more diversity in color and a faster turnover time in changing the color of glass made.

In 1998 the Kokomo Opalescent Glass Company was still managed by the duo of Richard Elliott and William Wright. The company offered customers choices in the size of their order, from only 50 pounds to as much as 850 pounds in six light density codes. The enterprise employed fifty workers and expected more than \$5.5 million in sales for the fiscal year.