

# Wooden Union Tool Chests

by Lynne Belluscio

A couple of months ago, I was contacted by Ted Johnson who is writing a guide to wooden machinist's tool chests. He was interested in the Union Tool Chest Company which had relocated to LeRoy from Rochester in 1932. It was founded in 1892 and originally manufactured drafting tables and medical instrument cases which resembled fine furniture. Soon the company was manufacturing wooden machinist's boxes with felt lined drawers.

In the 1920s, it began manufacturing metal utility and tool chests. When the parent company went into receivership in 1931, three former executives of the Rochester company, decided to move production to LeRoy. The factory was located in the building on the east side of Church Street, along the railroad tracks. The large stone building was the former LeRoy Cotton Mill. (This massive building burned in 1949.) Union Tool Chest became Union Steel Chest.

Union pioneered the first fully seamless metal fishing tackle box and cover in 1947. The cases were manufactured elsewhere and "trimmed" in LeRoy. During the years that Union Steel Chest was in LeRoy, it is estimated that 13 million tool boxes, utility boxes and other types of metal boxes were manufactured and distributed throughout the world.

Many were used by the armed forces during World War II. At one time the company employed

about 125 men and women from LeRoy and vicinity. In 1973, the company relocated to Chandler, Arizona and four years later was bought out by competitors. The facilities in Arizona were closed in 1984 and inventories were auctioned.

The wooden tool chests, which were manufactured until 1951, have become collectors items, often selling for a couple hundred dollars. The one that I have was purchased by my husband in an antique shop in Rhode Island. It was in pretty good condition and he lightly refinished the



quarter-sawn oak and replaced the green felt. I use it for a jewelry case.

Originally it was used by a machinist to hold a variety of precision tools such as micrometers, inside and outside calipers, punches, dies, and gauges. Looking through the Union catalogue, I know that I have an Improved Style B with knobs on the drawers. Usually the chests have small recessed rings for pulls, but only Union manufactured drawers with knobs. One of the knobs was broken, and Ted Johnson, sent me

a replacement, which is just the right size.

One of the men who brought Union Tool Chest to LeRoy was Seeley Pratt's father. Seeley continued with the company after his father's death, and moved to Arizona. After the company was bought out, he returned to LeRoy and lived on East Main Street. He was the "official" Union Steel Chest historian, and people often contacted him when they wanted information about the tackle boxes or tool chests. All of his notes and catalogues are now in the archives and provide a lot of information about a former industry in LeRoy.

