

Sprunger Power Tools of Topeka

It should come as no surprise that, given Topeka's early history related to lumber and sawmills, the town's first modern industry would be the manufacture of woodworking power tools. When the Sprunger brothers moved their fledgling tool company from South Bend to Topeka in the fall of 1946, it marked a new chapter in the industrial and manufacturing growth for the area. Today the town has a strong industrial base that employs thousands of people, but it was the Sprunger brothers who took Topeka into the modern era.

When Sprunger brothers, Harry and Lynn, teamed up with Ernest H. Fahlsing in a small tool & die shop in South Bend, Indiana, in about



1943, the result

would be a popular line of

woodworking tools. Following World War II they began designing their own line of woodworking power tools. The first being an 8" Tilt Table Saw. Sprunger Brothers Tools, in working order, can still be found today on secondary markets and are highly sought after by collectors.



Harry and Lynn Sprunger

Photo from the Scott Sprunger Collection

Automobile Company. Harry, according to his grandson Scott, owned a company that manufactured swimming pools. However, the Topeka Area Historical Society's book, "*Celebrating a Century 1893-1993*", says that Harry was a feed company salesman. How Ernie Fahlsing, whose wife Rozzela still lives on the east side of Emma Lake, came to be part of the company is not known at this time. Orland Sprunger, Lynn's son, believes that the two may have grown up together in the Ft. Wayne area.



Moving Day 1946

Photo from the Scott Sprunger Collection

It wasn't long before they needed more space to accommodate the growing business. So in the fall of 1946, the company moved to Topeka, officially filing incorporation papers as Sprunger Brothers Inc. Why they chose Topeka is a question that Lynn's children Jim (THS Class of 1950), Shirley (THS Class of 1963), and Orland can't answer. They do know that the building Sprunger Brothers moved into on South Main had been owned by Shook Egg Company who had recently relocated to another town. That left a vacant building where

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manufacturing could begin almost immediately. Shirley, referring to her conversation with Jim, says that, "Neither one of us knows exactly why Dad and Mom chose Topeka. We can only speculate, but they probably got a good deal on that property and I would imagine that Topeka needed new businesses at that time." Whatever the reason, Lynn moved his family from the farm where Shirley was born in Elkhart to Topeka. Orland was an 8th grader at the time.

Lynn was listed as the president, overseeing day to day operations. Orland says that his Uncle Harry, the vice-president, was really "the financial guy". Orland recalls Ernie Fahlsing always being upstairs at factory, bending over the drawing board getting the designs down on paper. Scott Sprunger writes in his brief history of the company that, "Harry traveled the world often shipping entire sets of tools ahead of him to showcase at trade shows in Israel or Germany (for example). He would then trade the show tools for local items to keep the exposure of the brand in that area long after the show."

Royann (THS Class of 1951), Orland's wife, offered this insight into her father-in-law, "Lynn didn't get to finish high school because during the Depression they were very poor people. His dad told him he had to go to work, so he became an engineer through home study that he got through the mail. He was a genius; I wish someone in the family had some of his drawings because they were amazing!"

When they opened for business in Topeka,

Sprunger
precision built

POWER TOOLS
pay for themselves on just a few jobs!
You'll enjoy making your own home repairs and furniture with these rugged tools — and save money, too!

MODEL BL 8" Tilt-Arbor Saw (Shown)
24 x 16 cast iron table. Depth of cut 25".
Ball bearing **\$74.95**
MODEL C (not shown)..... \$49.95

6" JOINTER PLANER
Front and rear cast iron tables adjustable. Cuts, rabbets to 1/2" **\$79.95**

18" JIG SAW
11" x 11" cast iron table tilts 45°. Max. cut 2" (Also available in a 14")..... **\$34.95**

10" GAP-BED LATHE
38 3/4" between centers. 13" swing over gap..... **\$49.95**

14" BAND SAW
14 x 14 cast iron table tilts 45° right, 5° left. Cuts to center of 28" circle..... **\$84.95**

(Prices subject to change without notice.)
SEE THE SPRUNGER LINE AT YOUR DEALERS
Write Dept. HC-15 for latest literature
SPRUNGER BROS. INC. TOPEKA, IND.

Home Craftsman Magazine
1950 Jan/Feb Issue

Sprunger Brothers employed eight workers. Three years later that number had risen to 20, all of whom were local residents. William E. Davis, from Wabash, was hired to be the plant manager. No one is sure how the Sprungers and Davis came to be connected, but Davis would maintain his association with the company up until six months of his death (January 30, 1995). Davis



Late 1940s trade show, with Harry on the right.

Photo from the Scott Sprunger Collection

also became a pillar in the Topeka Baptist Church serving in a variety of positions for many years.

In his **History of Sprunger Woodworking Machinery**, Ernest Fahlsing includes the following list of the machines and approximate dates when production started:

- 1947: Tilt Table Saw replaced with 8" & 10" Tilt Arbor Saws
- 1949: 6" Joiner
- 1950: 14" Band Saw
- 1951: Wood Lathe
- 1953: 15" Drill Press (floor & bench models)

By 1956 the company was again needing to expand. An additional production facility was built on Gerber Street in Ligonier, a mere two blocks from Harry's home. Scott Sprunger's history says that it was at this time that Bill Davis was hired to run the factory.

Unfortunately in 1958, Harry and Lynn had a falling out. Scott says that it was over the model CS-800 Dual Metal Band Saw. Whatever the issue, it was significant enough that Harry bought out Lynn's share of Sprunger Brothers Inc. and production was moved to Ligonier. Lynn went on to build his own line of tools in Albion, Indiana, but they never achieved the same level of success as that of Sprunger Brothers.

With the dawn of 1977, Sprunger Brothers faced another crossroads. Most of their equipment was of 1940's vintage requiring constant maintenance. Prod-

uct quality began to suffer. Japanese companies were also beginning to invade the power tool market making it difficult for companies like Sprunger Brothers to compete. In July of that year Harry sold

- Answers:
- 1) South Bend; 1943
 - 2) 8" Tilt Table Saw
 - 3) Ernest Fahlsing
 - 4) William Davis
 - 5) Bill Miller

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Ezra S. Miller
1935 – 2015

Ezra S. Miller, Topeka Area History Society Board Member and LaGrange County Historian, entered his Eternal Reward on June 7, 2015. His friendly disposition, his passion for all things historic, as well as his knowledge of local history will be sorely missed..

TAHS Annual Dinner Meeting

You will not want to miss our annual dinner meeting on November 17th.

Eric Alli, author of the book *Counterfeit Justice*, will be with us to talk about the days when life here on the Hawpach was filled with counterfeiters, horse thieves, outlaws, and organized crime.

Be watching for information on the time, location and cost.

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the company to Elkhart based Dale Fahlbeck of Product Forming Corporation. Production continued in Ligonier until 1981 when operations were moved to Elkhart. The last Sprunger power tool came off the line in 1984.

After he sold the company, Harry Sprunger became involved in horse racing in Chicago at Sportsman's Park owning a number of horses. The Chicago Tribune on June 10, 1987, printed the following in his obituary:

"Sprunger changed careers in 1962, at the age of 48, when his son Dale asked him to buy a piece of a pacer he had invested in. 'That was in March, and I just wanted to have one to fool around with,' Sprunger had said in a newspaper interview. 'By September, I had 13 horses.' In 1967, he got his license to drive, and had been involved in harness racing ever since."

Harry died at the age of 72 and was buried in Oak Park Cemetery in Ligonier. His wife Myrle "Be", died in March of 2009.

Lynn Sprunger died in 1993 at the age of 83. He was buried in the Eden Cemetery west of Topeka beside his wife Lula who died in 1965.

HG

Coming Events:

Topeka Area Historical Society Meetings
at the Topeka Branch Library - 6:30 PM
Everyone is welcome

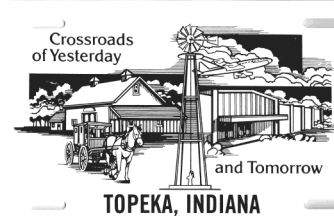
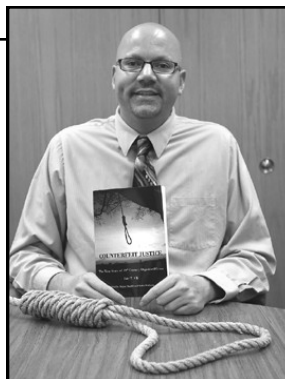
September 15, 2015 *Walking Tour of Downtown Topeka "Then and Now"*

November 17, 2015 *"Counterfeit Justice"*
Dinner Meeting with Eric T. Alli

Visit us online at: www.topekahistoricalsociety.com

The Mile 146 Quiz:

1. Where did Sprunger Brothers begin; in what year?
2. What was Sprunger Brothers first power tool?
3. Who help the Sprunger brothers get started?
4. Who was the Sprunger Brothers' plant manager?
5. Who was the THS softball catcher for two years?



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The Hawpatch History Detective



THS a Softball Powerhouse

The Topeka Bears were once a force to be reckoned with on the softball diamond, long before the school made the switch to baseball in the fall of 1954.

Maggie Glick, editor of *Celebrating a Century 1893-1993*, tracked down former coach Hank Clason to hear some of his memories of his tenure at Topeka High School.

“Hayden was terrific. We won the county two straight years, with Jack Ulmer pitching in 1947 and Hayden helping him as a sophomore. Ulmer got hurt at Corn School that fall and couldn't go all the way against Shipshewana, so Hayden came in and the Shipshewana boys didn't know what hit them. We would have won three straight, but we didn't have a catcher who could hold Holden his senior year. He had such a rise ball that he was hard to hold. Bill Miller caught the first two years.” *HG*



The 1948 LaGrange County Softball Champions

Photo courtesy of Bev Miller, Bill Miller's daughter.

Front Row (L to R): Arnold Buhl, Lyle Schrock, Quentin Hartzler, Eddie Neuffer, Mylin Yoder, Quin Jones, and manager James Sprunger. **Back Row:** Coach Hank Clason, Tom Turner, Orland Sprunger, Don Hayden, Bill Snyder, Bill Miller, Jake Gloor, and Principle Floyd Glass.

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