

*A. B. Foot*



# LEADER IN LEATHER

# Tanning Co. OF RED WING

Madeline Angell

"I HAVE OFTEN THOUGHT," reminisced Edwin H. Foot not long before his death in 1957, "that the biggest mistake was ever to start a tannery in Red Wing, especially since I knew nothing about the business, just thought I did. My principal equipment was a lot of nerve, a good name which I inherited from my father and also some money which I inherited. At that time, there were several young men who inherited from their fathers, but I am the only one to put the money to work in Red Wing and the thing that I look back upon with the greatest amount of pride is the fact that[,] after

all, the fool-hearty [*sic*] project which I undertook has been the means of giving employment to large numbers of people, paying out a lot of money in payrolls."<sup>1</sup>

Edwin H. Foot, commonly called E. H. or Ed, took after his father, Silas Buck Foot, a colorful and enterprising man. Silas was born on November 7, 1834, in New Milford, Pennsylvania, the youngest of ten children. His father farmed his own land in Pennsylvania and was also a shoemaker. Orphaned at the age of seven, Silas was cared for by his sisters and an older brother and was educated in a log cabin school. Before moving to Minnesota Territory, he clerked in a general store in Prompton, Pennsylvania, and then went into the merchandising business with one of his brothers in San Antonio, Texas. After the death of his brother, Silas returned to Pennsylvania, then headed westward, funded by money he had reportedly earned from the sale of patent rights to a pump he had invented.<sup>2</sup>

He was 22 years old when he arrived in Red Wing in 1857 and decided to look no farther for a home. Red Wing was a booming town of 2,660, located on the west bank of the Mississippi River about 46 miles below the head of navigation at St. Paul. Hamline University, which later removed to St. Paul, was located where Central Park is now. The town boasted five doctors, nine lawyers, and twelve resident ministers. There were numerous retail stores and wholesale companies, three churches, three banks, five real-estate offices, and five boardinghouses. There were also four lumberyards, a brickyard, a lime kiln, a sawmill and a gristmill, and one tannery that lasted only a short time. It was established by John Melander in the basement of a dwelling at Main and Jefferson streets.<sup>3</sup>

Foot experimented with a number of ways of earning

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<sup>1</sup>Edwin H. Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect," unpaginated manuscript in the records of the S. B. Foot Tanning Company, Red Wing (hereafter cited as Foot Company records), although undated, it was apparently written near the end of his life. The author wishes to thank the many individuals who helped provide information for this article, especially E. Hawley Foot, chairman of the board, and Herbert F. Eichinger, assistant treasurer of the tannery until his retirement in July, 1981, each of whom granted her several interviews in 1979 and 1981.

<sup>2</sup>Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Goodhue County, Minnesota*, 626, 627 (Chicago, 1909).

<sup>3</sup>Here and below, see Red Wing Daily Republican Eagle, *Goodhue County's First Hundred Years*, 41, 76 (Red Wing, 1954; Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *Goodhue County*, 627; *Red Wing Republican*, June 3, 1859, May 27, 1908, p. 1; *Goodhue County Republican* (Red Wing), March 8, 1861. For a general account of the early city, see also Madeline Angell, *Red Wing, Minnesota: Saga of a River Town*, 59-98 (Minneapolis, 1977).

Madeline Angell (Mrs. Kenneth F. Johnson), a graduate of the University of Minnesota and a resident of Red Wing, has published a number of books for young people and is the author of *Red Wing, Minnesota: Saga of a River Town* (1977).



DOWNTOWN RED WING, photographed by William H. Illingworth about 1870

a living during those early months in Red Wing. First he opened a retail store dealing in general merchandise; he traded this business for lots and other real estate, and subsequently exchanged his property interests for a stock of shoes and entered the shoe business with a pioneer physician, Dr. William W. Sweney, as the firm of Foot & Sweney. By June 3, 1859, he had bought out Sweney's interests and "removed one door" into a new brick building at the corner of Main and Bush streets. The building was erected by a man named Day, probably John Day, an early settler who is known to have made bricks. Foot branched out into a variety of merchandise: shoes, boots, leather, hats, caps, trunks, valises, jewelry, stationery, ready-made clothing, and liquor. Thus established, he traveled east to Pennsylvania to marry (Lydia) Lorana Park on July 6, 1858. He returned to Red Wing with his bride and continued his mercantile trade. By March, 1861, he was announcing the "Great Opening" of a new "One Price Cash Store" in the location at Main and Bush.

Foot may have run short of capital, because he formed a partnership with George R. Sterling, who had moved to Red Wing from St. Paul in 1858 to manufacture boots and shoes. An advertisement in the *Goodhue County Republican* for September 5, 1862, stated that G. R. Sterling & Company was a successor to the firm of S. B. Foot. The bottom line of the ad read May 10, 1861, possibly the date the partnership was formed. The partners conducted a wholesale and retail business, employing five or six men. The boots and shoes they manufactured were sold in the company's new brick building at the corner of Main and Plum streets.<sup>4</sup>

Here they also made shoe pacs, or rough moccasins tanned with the hair left on. Such footwear was in great

demand by farmers and others who worked outdoors, for it provided good protection against cold and moisture. The supply of leather for shoe pacs — once made from buffalo hides but at this time from cattle hides — was unreliable, and so a tannery was built in 1872 to supply the need.

Early historians do not agree on who built this tannery, which was called Trout Brook for the stream on which it was located. Some say it was built by S. B. Foot; others credit the Sterling company; still others say it was built by John F. Porter. Two contemporary news items and an advertisement, all appearing in the *Goodhue County Republican*, provide an answer. On February 29, 1872, the paper reported that G. R. Sterling & Company had bought the Baker property, on which the company planned to erect a tannery; on June 20, 1872, it told of a reporter's tour of the new tannery erected by Sterling and Foot. The clinching proof was an advertisement on April 11, 1872, that stated that the Sterling firm wanted to purchase 10,000 hides to supply its Trout Brook Tannery.<sup>5</sup>

A more difficult question is whether Porter owned a tannery located near the one at Trout Brook. Some old-timers believe he did, and two pictures support this view: one is of the early tannery labeled "S. B. Foot & Co."; the other depicts one with the name "J. F. Porter Tannery & Glue Factory" on the front of the building. If there was a second such establishment, it was within a mile of the Trout Brook Tannery. The common belief in Red Wing and vicinity, however, was that there was only one tannery in the area; none of the local historians mention another close to that at Trout Brook.<sup>6</sup>

Historians agree that Porter managed the Trout Brook Tannery. He also ran a subsidiary one, as the *Red Wing Republican* for January 15, 1881, reported: "A new

<sup>4</sup>Here and below, see [Wood, Alley & Co.], *History of Goodhue County*, 388 (Red Wing, 1878), *Republican Eagle, First Hundred Years*, 41; Christian A. Rasmussen, Scrapbooks D, 233, and E, 258. Goodhue County Historical Society, Red Wing.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph W. Hancock, *History of Goodhue County, Minnesota, by an Old Settler*, 225 (Red Wing, 1893), credited the building to Porter; Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *Goodhue County*, 627, said Foot and Sterling started the tannery, but on p. 642 named Porter as the proprietor who sold his interest to Foot.

<sup>6</sup>Interviews with numerous Red Wing residents and with Charles H. Bang of the Goodhue County Abstract Company, February 9, 1980, notes in possession of the author. Porter bought land adjoining that of Foot and Sterling in 1874, but it is unlikely that he was able to build a tannery there in time to be accurately illustrated in Alfred T. Andreas, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 100 (Chicago, 1874). The probable explanation is that the original S. B. Foot Tanning Company tannery operated at first under the Porter name, even though it was owned by Foot. "Foot Tanning Company Sets Envious 82-Year Record," in *Leather and Shoes* (Des Plaines, Ill.), August 14, 1954, p. 30.



THE ORIGINAL TANNERY of the S. B. Foot Company, built in 1872

tannery is being erected near this city in Wisconsin, to furnish more leather for the boot and shoe pac factory of G. R. Sterling & Co. It will be under the direction of J. F. Porter of the Trout Brook Tannery." Even after selling out to S. B. Foot in 1897, Porter apparently continued to manage the Trout Brook plant for a few years before he moved to Amery, Wisconsin, and started a tannery there.<sup>7</sup>

TROUT BROOK TANNERY was a three-story wooden structure 30 by 122 feet, built in Featherstone Township, just southwest of the Red Wing city boundary. It employed 15 men, working with 30 vats, who tanned only about 150 sides a week. The leather they produced was called Trout Brook Tannages after the brook that provided the necessary supply of pure water important in any tanning process. A newspaper reporter who visited the building soon after its erection stated that "the vats are supplied with water having a fall of

thirteen feet and can be entirely filled in five minutes; the water being conducted through a trough 700 feet in length."<sup>8</sup>

Hides delivered at the tannery usually arrived "green," or fresh. They came either from nearby farms or packing houses. In the latter case, the hides were precured in order to prevent deterioration by bacteria present on the skins. The most common method of curing was, and still is, "green salting" — packing salt between the fresh hides. When the hides were received at the tannery, they were unloaded, sorted, counted, and weighed, and then taken to the beamhouse, named for the convex, narrow slabs, or beams, sloping upward from the floor, over which the hides were placed for the convenience of the worker. The beamhouse was noted for its unpleasant odors.<sup>9</sup>

The first operation in the beamhouse was soaking, a process that restored water lost through curing and washed off undesirable substances. The hides were then trimmed, placed on a splitting block, and cut in half down the back with a knife, making two sides. After the flesh was scraped away from the sides, the hides were soaked again.

Leather for shoe pacs had the hair left on, and as a result, its tanning process was not typical. However, the tannery was soon making leather for moccasins and the upper parts of work shoes. For such products, the usual procedure was to soak the sides in a lime vat to soften them and loosen the hair, soak them again to get rid of the lime, and further purify the sides by bating, placing the sides in another solution to delime them and clean the grain. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the bating solution consisted of a warm infusion of the dung of dogs or fowl, but neutralizing or buffering salts and enzymes are used today.

The processing of perishable hides with materials

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Arthur S. Nord, April 23, 1981, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>8</sup> Republican Eagle, *First Hundred Years*, 41; [Wood, Alley], *Goodhue County (1878)*, 388; *Goodhue County Republican*, June 20, 1872.

<sup>9</sup> On the tanning process, here and three paragraphs below, see Dugger Harris, comp., *Dictionary of Terms Used in the Hides, Skin and Leather Trade*, 5, 6, 13, 14, 16, 28, 31, 45, 57, 60, 63 (Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Handbook No. 465* — Washington, D.C., 1974); John Arthur Wilson, *Modern Practice in Leather Manufacture*, 177, 237-239, 265, 708 (New York, 1941); Thomas C. Thorstensen, *Practical Leather Technology*, 82, 104, 142 (New York, 1969); H. R. Procter, *The Principles of Leather Manufacture*, 93 (New York, 1903). The Foot tannery used a Fitz Henry scourer to smooth and press hides — a fairly new device in 1872; *Goodhue County Republican*, June 20, 1872. In later years gambier, a tanning extract from an East Indian shrub, replaced local barks.

that turned them into permanent and durable forms of leather took place in the tanyard. In the early days of the Foot company, bark from trees such as oak and tamarack was used for tanning. From piles of bark surrounding the plant, tannin was extracted, and sides were soaked in vats containing a solution of this. Later, the company produced chrome leather, skins tanned either with chromium salts alone or with chromium salts and a small amount of another tanning agent. Chrome leather did not rewet easily and was stronger than bark-tanned leather. Following the tanning process, the sides were pressed to reduce the water content and then smoothed and stretched. They were taken next to the second floor to be dried and split to a uniform thickness. Following this they were subjected to various finishing processes, such as coloring, depending on the use for which they were intended. In later years, the tannery occasionally bought crust leather (dry leather that was tanned but not further processed), and the finishing processes were then carried out at the Foot plant.

SILAS B. FOOT, whose distinctive signature is still the hallmark of the S. B. Foot Tanning Company, was active in numerous national, regional, and community projects. A member of the National Shoe & Leather Association, the St. Paul Jobbers' Association, and a director of the Western Shoe Jobbers' Association, he was also a 32nd degree Mason, a Knight Templar, a Shriner, and, for a number of years, a director of the First National Bank of Red Wing. A faithful and generous member of Christ Episcopal Church, he served as vestryman and junior warden of the parish. His wife was also active in

church work, and when she died in 1903, he gave a beautiful and costly chapel for the church as a memorial to her.<sup>10</sup>

Foot dreamed of making Red Wing a major city of the Northwest, and good railroad connections were necessary if this dream were to be realized. He became president of the Red Wing and Iowa Railroad Company, incorporated in 1881, hoping to build and operate a railroad from the Great Lakes shipping port of Duluth, through Red Wing, to the agricultural and coal mining region of Iowa. However, the company made little progress because of keen competition. Already the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Company ran trains from Minneapolis and St. Paul through Red Wing to La Crosse, Milwaukee, Chicago, and also to such Iowa cities as Davenport and Sioux City. The Minnesota Central Railroad Company laid track from Red Wing to Waterville in 1882, and in 1884 the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul built a line from Cannon Junction (Red Wing) to Northfield.<sup>11</sup>

Foot's railroad company was reorganized as the Duluth, Red Wing and Southern Railroad Company in 1886. Red Wing citizens voted, 652 to 92, bonds to

<sup>10</sup> Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *Goodhue County*, 628.

<sup>11</sup> Here and below, see *Red Wing Advance*, March 8, 1882, April 25, 1883; C[hristian] A. Rasmussen, *A History of the City of Red Wing, Minnesota*, 123 (Red Wing, 1933); Richard S. Prosser, *Rails to the North Star*, 37, 123, 124, 131, 140, 220 (Minneapolis, 1966). The Red Wing and Iowa Railroad Company (by then the Duluth, Red Wing and Southern) was purchased in 1901 by the Wisconsin, Minnesota & Pacific, a separately run railroad owned by the Chicago Great Western.



A WORKER removing hides from lime-vat paddles in the beamhouse



THE FOOT, SCHULZE & COMPANY shoe factory, on the corner of Kellogg and Wacouta streets about 1914

the amount of \$50,000 for this railroad, but only half the money was used. Tracks were built from Red Wing to Zumbrota and, to aid the city's pottery industry, from Clay Bank to Clay Pits, nearby railway stations.

Foot's sense of humor was apparent during an attempt he made to trade some of his own railroad company stock for shares in another line. "Why should I trade?" the owner of the other stock asked. "My railroad is a lot longer than yours." Foot replied, "Yes, but mine is just as wide."<sup>12</sup>

In 1881 Foot moved his shoe factory from Red Wing to St. Paul, where, with Theodore A. Schulze, he organ-

<sup>12</sup> Interview with E. Hawley Foot, January 19, 1979, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>13</sup> Here and below, see Rasmussen, *City of Red Wing*, 123; *Republican Eagle*, *First Hundred Years*, 41; Hawley Foot interview, April 20, 1979. The Foot, Schulze firm was large and successful, at its peak it owned six factories, including one in Winona and one in Portage, Wis., with a main plant on Robert Street in St. Paul, company catalogs in MHS library. After S. B.'s death, the Foot family sold its interest to Schulze.

<sup>14</sup> *Republican Eagle*, *First Hundred Years*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> United Commercial Travelers of America, *Nineteenth Annual Grand Council Session*, n.p. (Red Wing, 1912), copy in Goodhue County Historical Society; Hawley Foot interview, January 19, 1979; Secretary of State, Articles of incorporation, April 7, 1897, Book R-2, p. 189. The incorporators were Silas B., Edwin H., Frederick W., and Bessie A. Foot, and Charles E. Washburn, named general superintendent of the firm.

ized the firm of Foot, Schulze & Company. He commuted to St. Paul almost every weekday until near the end of his life, playing whist with his fellow travelers to while away the time. He continued to operate the shoe pac factory and the tannery in Red Wing. Apparently, the partnership with Sterling had been dissolved; in 1881 one local historian described the "shoe pac factory of S. B. Foot & Co." as a prominent industry.<sup>13</sup>

Foot said his reason for moving was the lack of necessary transportation facilities at Red Wing. Some Red Wingites were unhappy with him because of the move, but, perhaps because of his prominence in promoting railroads through Red Wing, his fellow citizens elected him mayor for a one-year term in 1882. During his administration steps were taken toward building a city waterworks, and Foot was instrumental in making it a municipal plant instead of giving a franchise for its operation to a private company, which some people favored. His administration was noted for its strict enforcement of liquor laws (although Foot had sold spirits in one of his early stores), an action that made him unpopular with the liquor interests. Family legend says that opponents even threw a brick through the window of his house. The following year he lost the nomination for mayor to fellow Republican William E. Hawkins.

The years of the 1880s were ones of quiet growth for Foot's enterprises, but 1893 was marked by nationwide financial panic and scarcity of money. Foot considered closing the tannery and the shoe pac factory, since he could not meet the payroll. However, he hated to throw his employees out of work and, hoping the depression might be short-lived, he solved the problem by issuing scrip reading: "In 60 days we promise to pay to the order of bearer the sum of \$5.00." These notes, signed with the company name, were accepted by Red Wing merchants without discount, and for a time they were practically the only currency circulating in town. Foot redeemed all of this scrip in time.<sup>14</sup>

IN APRIL, 1897, S. B. Foot & Company, said to be the oldest manufacturing institution of its kind in the Northwest, was formally incorporated. Of S. B.'s five children, E. H. was the first to make a career in the family business. Ezra, the oldest son, chose the field of music; Frederick, a graduate of the University of Minnesota law school, practiced his profession for a few years in Red Wing, but settled in St. Paul; Robert, the youngest, did join the tannery in 1910. Their sister, Bessie, received much attention from her brothers. Due to a malformation of her last two vertebrae, she was never able to walk, but on the advice of the well-known Rochester physician, William W. Mayo, her parents encouraged her to live as normal a life as possible, and her brothers took Bessie with them to play or to toboggan with good humor and affection.<sup>15</sup>

E. H. Foot, who was born January 6, 1876, attended Shattuck School in Faribault and went on to graduate from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1898. He spent his summer vacations working for his father, and although his original plan had been to go into the ministry, he became so interested in the business that he decided to make it his life's work. He joined the company after his graduation and on November 8 of that year married Evalyn Lawther. She had moved to Red Wing from Louisiana to live with her half-uncle, James Lawther, city benefactor and builder of the Octagon and the Irish Row houses. The Foots had two sons, Silas B. II and E. Hawley, and four daughters, Marynia, Theodosia, Pauline, and Wilhelmina.<sup>16</sup>

Although E. H. said in later years that he "had a fever to go into this tanning," the business letters he wrote indicated that for several years he was more involved in the manufacture of shoe pacs and canvas leggings than in the making of leather. (His father was busy managing Foot, Schulze & Company in St. Paul, where arrangements were such that there was no opportunity for E. H.) Company correspondence revealed that E. H. continually demanded high-quality products from suppliers. He paid close attention to details, pointing out to one company, for example, that the sheepskins it supplied him were in many cases smaller than marked.<sup>17</sup>

Relationships with competitors were sometimes touchy. Foot once wrote to a Fremont, Michigan, firm, complaining, "We have your letter of Jan. 2nd, and note what you say about the wool skins. We are not able to advise you yet as to what we will do in regard to these skins, but we will say further that at the time we bought these we were not aware that we were buying them from one of our competitors but we found this to be the case when we received the invoice. We would have liked it better had your man told us from whom we were buying these skins."<sup>18</sup>

The insistence upon quality materials and attention to details paid off. By December, 1902, orders were coming in faster than they could be filled. The following February, E. H. claimed that every shoe jobber in the Northwest except one was handling the company's sheepskin pacs. He described the plant's output to a Kansas City, Missouri, customer: "Our products are Shoe Pacs, Moccasins, Toboggans and Sheep Boots with wool on them. We also make sheep skin sox." And in a letter to a Mankato firm, he wrote: "Our goods are running right up to sample, and we wish to say that we have never yet had a pair of sheep skin sox come back."

E. H.'s attention to detail included advice to both customers and suppliers. In May, 1905, he urged those who could to ship by water as it cost only half as much as by rail. The steamboat era may have been passing, but merchandise was still being shipped by river. To a La Crosse firm, for example, he wrote: "The agent of the

Diamond Joe Line here just advises us that he expects another boat here about Mon. next, which will probably reach you about Sat. or Sun., so kindly have the tan covert ready for that boat."<sup>19</sup>

The tannery was now producing leather not only for shoe pacs and moccasins manufactured in the Red Wing factory, but for boots and work shoes as well. Foot, Schulze & Company used much of this boot and shoe leather. Some of it was converted into footwear in Red Wing houses, where many residents had their own lasts and awls and earned a living by sewing together the soles and uppers furnished them by the Foot company. Any surplus was sold to other firms.

Despite the success of the shoe pac factory, efforts were being made at this time to sell a part interest in the tannery or all of it. As the country became more settled, the demand for the type of rough leather produced at the tannery fell off. Fashions were changing; shoe pacs (sometimes called plow pacs) were going out of style, and people wanted dressier shoes. In early 1904 the company wrote to Charles G. Barnstead of Columbus, Indiana: "In reply to your letter of recent date we will say that we have a tannery with a capacity of about 10 to 12,000 sides per annum [*about half of what it had once been*] in which we are now making a combination [of] tannage leather for moccasins and shoe pacs. . . . We are also tanning russet and black grain leather. . . . We would like to interest a practical man with some capital to buy an interest in the business and take charge of that end of it. The product of the tannery is used largely by ourselves; the surplus can be marketed without any cost to speak of for selling expense. . . . If this explanation of the situation appeals to you, and you are in position to take advantage of it, we should be pleased to hear from you farther." A similar letter was written a few weeks later to Christ Buyer of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. "To the right man I would sell an interest in the tannery, or I would sell it all," wrote S. B. Foot. "I would sell the whole business for 10,000 dollars, with a moderate payment down and the rest on time at 6%."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Evalyn Lawther Foot died in 1944, and E. H. married Jessie (Mrs. Robert M.) Joyce of Lincoln, Neb., in 1947; Foot Family files in Goodhue County Historical Society; interviews with Hawley Foot, January 19, April 20, 1979; Gladys V. Holst, *The Octagon House*, 19 (Red Wing, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect"; *Republican Eagle*, *First Hundred Years*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Here and below, see E. H. Foot to D. Gerber's Sons, January 4, 1904; to Mankato Mills, May 22, 1903, to Goodyear Rubber Co., October 19, 1903 — all in letterpress book, Foot Company records.

<sup>19</sup> E. H. Foot to La Crosse Rubber Mill Co., May 6, 1905, letterpress book, Foot Company records.

<sup>20</sup> S. B. Foot to Charles G. Barnstead, February 3, 1904, and to Christ Buyer, April 21, 1904, letterpress book, Foot Company records.

By January, 1908, these efforts had been unsuccessful. The company was faced with the choice of liquidating the tannery or investing the necessary capital to build a modern plant.

MORE THAN ANY other factor, it was the enthusiasm of E. H. Foot which resulted in the decision to expand the tannery. It was he who supervised the building of the new plant. His father still served as company president, but his health was failing, and he no longer took an active role in the concern. At a special stockholders' meeting held on December 3, 1907, the capital stock was increased from \$100,000 to \$500,000, and the number of shares from 1,000 to 5,000, with a par value of \$100 each. The Foot family invested \$250,000, and the other half came from the sale of stock to Red Wing area residents. Among the terms of sale for preferred stock was a condition that it be subject to redemption by the company, at its options, on or after five years from the date of issuance, at \$105 per share plus accrued unpaid interest, if any. (The last shares of this stock were redeemed in 1949.)<sup>21</sup>

The location of the new tannery was the first question to be decided. The company at first hoped to build between the Mississippi River and East 7th Street, where Colvill Park is today, but nearby residents protested loudly that they did not want a "stink-pot" in their area. In order to make the location a workable one, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul would have to build a spur line to the tannery, but railroad officials showed no enthusiasm for this project. These two factors ruled out the Colvill Park location. The company then decided to build the new tannery within the city limits, three-fourths of a mile from the old one, located along the Chicago Great Western line.

Plans for the new structure were drawn by the Chas. H. Stehling Company, Milwaukee designers and builders of tanneries and hide- and leather-working machinery. Specifications called for homemade brick, lumber of

"yellow or northern pine," and all outside wood, tin, iron, and galvanized ironwork painted with "two good coats of pure white lead and linseed-oil paint." The new plant was 133 by 219 feet, with three stories in full use. It had the capacity for processing 600 sides a day. An interesting feature of the building was that every floor rested independently on its own foundation. Fire protection was provided by a sprinkling system in each room and by a huge tank of water, located on the third floor, with a pressure of 75 pounds to the inch. The water came from Trout Brook.

On top of the building was a steam whistle, not much larger than a quart container of soda pop. In the early days, when many employees lived close to the tannery, it served an important function. The sounding of the whistle at 6:55 A.M. meant that employees had five minutes in which to get to work; the same sound at 12:25 P.M. marked the end of lunch time. In later years, when the whistle was no longer needed, the company decided to eliminate it as an unnecessary expense. "But the people wouldn't have it," E. Hawley Foot said. "They like that whistle. It's nostalgic." So the whistle is still in operation.<sup>22</sup>

The man whose initial enterprise gave rise to the tannery did not live to see the completion of the new plant. S. B. Foot died on May 22, 1908. The following winter a formal opening celebrated the finished tannery that still bears his name. Members of the Red Wing Manufacturers' Association, Mayor Arthur P. Pierce, city government officials, and representatives of the press attended the opening, which was held February 4, 1909. The guests left Red Wing to visit the plant on a special Chicago Great Western train at 7:45 P.M. A tour of the new facilities in operation was followed by refreshments, and the festivities received effusive attention in a local editorial the following day.<sup>23</sup>

FORTUNATELY, E. H. had enthusiastic support from local people, for there were individuals in other parts of the country who predicted certain failure. Soon after the tannery was in operation, one of the company's big suppliers told Foot, "You won't last a year," adding that the plant was too far from the markets. By the time the new tannery was built, the Red Wing Shoe Company, founded in 1905, was in operation; there were at least two shoe factories in St. Paul, half a dozen in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and more in Omaha, Nebraska, and Kansas City, Missouri. But the major national shoe-manufacturing centers were in New England, and the Foot tannery was a long distance from that hub of activity. The industry became concentrated in fewer and fewer companies; many early Foot customers went out of business; and these factors mitigated against the success of the new tannery.<sup>24</sup>

During the first years of operation, many tannery

<sup>21</sup> Information here and in the following two paragraphs is from minute book and scrapbooks in the Foot Company records; *Republican Eagle*, *First Hundred Years*, 42; *Red Wing Republican*, February 5, 1909, p. 1. After the plant's location was settled upon, a Shattuck classmate, then president of the Milwaukee railroad, asked E. H. for more tannery business; E. H. had to explain that it was too late.

<sup>22</sup> Foot Tannery file, Red Wing Public Library; interviews with Hawley Foot and Herbert Eichinger, January 19, 26, April 20, 1979, June 11, 1981.

<sup>23</sup> *Red Wing Republican*, May 27, 1908, p. 1, February 5, p. 1, and February 10, p. 4, 1909; Foot Family files, Goodhue County Historical Society. S. B. Foot was succeeded as president of the firm's board of directors by E. H.; P. A. Nelson was named vice-president and treasurer, with Frederick W. Foot, secretary. Minute book, July, 1908. Foot Company records.

<sup>24</sup> Hawley Foot interview, April 20, 1979; *Republican Eagle*, *First Hundred Years*, 42.

employees had to walk to work, and this situation created a need for closer housing. In October, 1908, E. H. proposed that the stockholders organize a new corporation to acquire, hold, and rent real estate at Trout Brook to the firm's employees. The motion was carried, and Trout Brook Realty was organized. By the end of 1909, there were 14 completed houses listed in the account books. Typical rentals were \$1.40 and \$1.80 per week.<sup>25</sup>

The availability of inexpensive housing close by made it easier for the firm to attract the skilled craftsmen — many of whom were immigrants from Europe — needed to keep the tannery operating efficiently. As time went by, Trout Brook developed into quite a little community with a railroad platform, several houses, two stores, and a chapel where anyone who wished could preach.

It soon became apparent that boarding facilities for single men were needed near the tannery. A boardinghouse was built, and at one time the house next to it was used as an annex. On January 13, 1910, Trout Brook Realty entered into a contract with Paul N. Hustings of Goodhue to operate the facility. After a succession of managers, Josephine Huhn, wife of Matthias Huhn, a tannery employee, took over the management of the boardinghouse and ran it for about 35 years, continuing even after the death of her husband in 1928. Her daughter, Irma Huhn Nelson, recalled that the number of boarders varied from five to 14, and when company executives and construction workers employed by the tannery joined them, there were sometimes from 16 to 20 people at mealtime.

THE SUCCESS of the tannery depended not only on its ability to attract and hold good employees, but on its success in selling its products. E. H. undertook this task himself, calling on shoe manufacturers around the country. Slowly business increased, as customers realized that the Foot company was putting out quality work and could be depended upon to deliver the merchandise on time. More and more orders arrived at the small, enterprising Minnesota tannery.

A Chicago office was opened in 1910, with Otto Abel in charge. The board of directors felt that this arrangement did not work out well, however, and at a special meeting voted unanimously to close the Chicago office. The resolution, introduced by director Peter A. Nelson and addressed to E. H. Foot, also stated: "The Directors of S. B. Foot & Company have come to the conclusion that you are spending too much time on the road assisting in the selling of our production of leather." E. H. clearly felt it necessary to involve himself deeply in every aspect of the business. He once wrote: "ignorant as I was . . . I think that I can honestly say that I did most of the work . . . such as buying the hides, selling the leather, doing most of the bookkeeping, in addition to supervising the tanning process."<sup>26</sup>



E. H. FOOT, about 1950

Part of the company's success was due to its ability to adjust skillfully to changing conditions. As the sheepskin footwear trade declined, for example, the company solved the problem by selling the "wanagan, sock and leggings business" to the Wiley-Bickford-Sweet Company of Worcester, Massachusetts, in September, 1916. By the time the United States became involved in World War I, the tannery was receiving orders for a fine leather called Black Chrome Waterproof. And a government purchasing department spokesman, describing the kind of leather required for the armed forces, said that Trout Brook tannages were to be the model for the industry. E. H. Foot noted proudly that "we must have made some pretty good leather, and naturally we were called upon to produce . . . to our fullest capacity for the duration of the war."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see Minutes, October 24, 1908, December 16, 1911, and company ledgers for 1909 and 1910, Foot Company records; interview with Irma Huhn Nelson, April 17, 1979. Mrs. Huhn retired in 1951 and no replacement could be found; the boardinghouse was torn down a few years later. In 1981 Trout Brook Realty owned less than five acres of land; Eichinger interview, June 11, 1981.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes, December 16, 1911, Foot Company records; Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect."

<sup>27</sup> Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect"; Minutes, August 24, 1916, Foot Company records. The company store in downtown Red Wing was taken over by Lyndon D. Stickle and became the La Grange Shoe Company.

E. H. Foot recalled that during the inflation that followed World War I his firm, "like most of the tanners, made money hand over fist." The company's capital stock was increased from the \$500,000 of 1907, just before the new tannery was built, to \$1,000,000 on December 20, 1919. Foot wrote: "We built up a beautiful surplus, but soon the day of reckoning came. However, after recovering somewhat from the hangover of a disastrous inflationary drunken spree, we got ourselves together and started over again. Fortunately, we had good credit, and we were able to carry on."<sup>28</sup>

During the decade of the 1920s the tannery experimented with various types of leather. Production difficulties ensued, and E. H. found himself returning from selling trips "to tell the boys how to correct their mistakes. I suppose I was guessing most of the time as they were." To solve the problem, he decided to associate with someone who knew how to run a tannery and manufacture leather without constant supervision. The man he wanted was Edwin B. Thorstensen of Milwaukee, and Foot persuaded him to join the organiza-

<sup>28</sup> Here and below, see Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect": Minutes, December 20, 1919. Foot Company records.

<sup>29</sup> Here and below, see interview with Edwin Thorstensen, February 9, May 14, 1979, notes in possession of the author; Thorstensen, "Memoirs," unpublished manuscript, copies in possession of Robert E. Thorstensen, Delmar, N.Y., and Thomas C. Thorstensen, Westford, Mass.; author's notes on this reminiscence are filed in Goodhue County Historical Society.

<sup>30</sup> Until 1938 when the Wages and Hours Act was passed, tannery employees worked six 10-hour days a week; when the work was shortened to 40 hours, a number of employees near retirement age quit rather than change to the shorter week and its resulting decrease in pay. Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect"; interview with Lloyd N. Nelson, April 17, 1979, notes in possession of the author.

*EDWIN B. THORSTENSEN, superintendent of the tannery from 1928 until his retirement*



tion as plant superintendent on August 1, 1928. Addressing himself later to Thorstensen, E. H. wrote that "your first year here was a discouraging one, because you discovered that the formulas that you had worked on for a good many years, probably had developed yourself would not work under the conditions that prevailed here, especially with the water which you had to buck up against, and I have no doubt but that you were at times at the point of throwing up the sponge, but you didn't, and you finally began to lick the difficulties that you first encountered."

Foot was correct in his belief that Thorstensen found the first few months discouraging. Equipment and storage were inadequate. Some water was still being taken from Trout Brook, but Thorstensen stopped that because there was too much sand in it. A number of paddle wheels were purchased and installed in the annex to fill old lime vats from the wells at night so there would be enough water for the next day's beamhouse operation. The small well in the hidehouse was redrilled, and a larger deep-well pump was installed.<sup>29</sup>

Soon after Thorstensen joined the tannery, the organization began to feel the effects of the Great Depression. Their chief product was made for work shoes, and the demand diminished as the depression deepened. "From that time on up to 1932 or 1933, our story is a sad one," Foot wrote. "It was a downhill movement from about the middle of 1928 to the latter part of 1932." Wages and salaries were reduced; banks that had loaned the company money insisted on receiving fifty cents from each dollar of sales.

Lloyd N. Nelson, a long-time employee, described the day E. H. Foot called the employees together in the buffing room and told them that a cut was necessary: "He had tears in his eyes, and he said he just didn't have any other way. He said it was up to the men. If they wouldn't accept the cut, they would have to close the tannery. Everybody wanted to work, you know, and there was no work to be gotten. So we got along, and we lived pretty good at that. You know, everything was cheaper, too. Hamburger was 10¢ a pound, and bread was 10¢ a loaf." The officers of the corporation took two salary cuts in 1931. The second time, Foot took a reduction of 17 per cent in his own salary; other salaries were lowered 10 per cent.<sup>30</sup>

TO RESOLVE some of the difficulties, the company reorganized on December 29, 1932, and its corporate name was changed on February 8, 1933, from S. B. Foot & Company to S. B. Foot Tanning Company. A few of the preferred-stockowners, perturbed by the lack of dividends, tried unsuccessfully to force E. H. Foot out of the business. "I was the goat," Foot commented, "because they naturally held me responsible for all the troubles of the business, but I wasn't responsible for the

situation which led up to the depression in 1932. In spite of these recalcitrant stockholders, we were able to reorganize our business on a sound basis, and from that time on, I think we can say that we have made fairly steady progress."<sup>31</sup>

Foot also decided to build a better sales organization and hired Charles F. (Fred) Dodge in 1932 to head that department. Like Thorstensen, Dodge was not particularly happy at the tannery the first few months. Soon after he had started on the job, he was sitting on a nail keg with a box for a desk. Foot suggested that a chair be obtained for him, but Dodge replied, "Don't go to that expense. I may not be here long enough to make it worthwhile." But he remained with the tannery until he retired, and Foot gave both Dodge and Thorstensen much credit for the firm's success, pointing out that "I was smart enough to hire you in the first place."<sup>32</sup>

In 1933 when the price of hides was so low that Foot felt it had reached bottom, he bought a large supply of crust leather and stored it. Soon afterward the cost went up, and his investment turned out to be very profitable. Business picked up, prices continued to rise, and it became apparent that the tannery had survived the depression. Wages were raised in 1933 and again in 1934.

New blood entered the business when E. H. persuaded his elder son, Silas B. Foot II, to join the company in 1935. Si, as he was commonly known, had attended Princeton University and had been employed by the First National Bank of Chicago for seven years. Instead of moving to the tannery as a junior executive, he worked in the plant itself, under the expert supervision of Thorstensen; during his five-year apprenticeship he worked in every department, gaining an excellent grasp of the leather industry.

ON THE NIGHT of September 5, 1940, members of Local No. 32 of the International Leather Workers Union who were employed at the S. B. Foot Tanning Company voted to strike. Their demands included a 10-per cent wage increase, a week's paid vacation, and a closed union shop. Rolland H. Mehrikens, union president, said the demand for a closed shop was dropped and that the demand for a 10-per cent pay increase was lowered to 8 per cent during the course of the prestrike conference, but company representatives and union delegates still were unable to reach an agreement. The conflict, marked by unsuccessful efforts at negotiation, dated back to the expiration of the tannery's contract with the union 15 months earlier.<sup>33</sup>

On Friday, September 6, 270 of the 290 union members on the payroll walked out. That same day the company presented its side of the conflict in a full-page letter "To the Citizens of Red Wing, Stockholders and Employees of the S. B. Foot Tanning Co." that appeared in the *Red Wing Daily Republican*. The letter said, in part,

"As to the matter of vacations with pay and increases in wages, we have repeatedly explained, especially during late negotiations, that we could not afford at this time to raise our costs. As it now stands, we are in many instances non-competitive on account of the high cost of our product.

"In spite of the fact that the Union refused to enter into the contract offered by the company in July, 1939, which contract contained a wage increase, the company voluntarily put the proposed wage increase in effect on August 1, 1939, and has paid it ever since.

"We are paying wages which approximate the average wage paid in this industry making our type of leather throughout the United States and all we can possibly afford to pay at this time.

"The Tannery is Open for Any of Our Men Who Wish to Work."

The union set up strike headquarters on the second floor of a tavern opposite the tannery and established lines of pickets who marched continuously on the highway in front of the plant. Throughout the strike, three additional policemen were employed by the city of Red Wing, and regular officers put in much overtime. Sometimes there were as many as 150 pickets, but except for a few unpleasant incidents — such as occasional stoning of houses of workers who returned to work, and smearing their cars with yellow paint — good order was maintained. During the seven weeks the strike continued, some workers returned to the plant. At the end of the walk-out, 203 men were still reported out on strike.

The conflict ended with approval of a new labor contract on October 24, 1940. The demands for a further increase in wages and a week's vacation with pay were not included in the contract; however, the employees were to receive a full week's bonus pay in 1941, contingent upon profits that would first warrant payment of a reasonable stock dividend. Among the clauses of the contract was one that protected workers against a rise in

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<sup>31</sup> Secretary of State, Articles of incorporation, February 8, 1933, Book E-5, p. 363, Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect."

<sup>32</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see scrapbooks and ledgers, Foot Company records; Hawley Foot and Thorstensen interviews, April 20, May 14, 1979.

<sup>33</sup> Information on the strike, here and in the following five paragraphs, is from *Red Wing Republican*, September 6, 1940, pp. 1, 2, 3, October 25, 1940, p. 1; scrapbooks, Foot Company records. In November, 1943, the union adopted a new charter and became Local 335 of the Fur and Leather Workers Union; interview with Elizabeth (Mrs. Francis) Marsello, secretary of Local 335, August 5, 1981, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>34</sup> *Republican Eagle*, January 14, 1942, p. 1; Thorstensen interview, May 14, 1979, and "Memoirs." During the war the tannery also set up a laboratory under the direction of N. Clifford Benrud of Milwaukee; by 1979 Thorstensen called it "one of the best manned and equipped laboratories in the industry."

the cost of living as shown by national indexes and automatically granted wage increases to offset such rises.

AFTER THE ENTRY of the United States into World War II there was a tremendous demand for government issue army boot leather, and the tannery produced much of it, including leather for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. In January, 1942, company employees voted unanimously to go on a seven-day work week in order to meet government demands. Thorstensen was appointed an advisor to the quartermaster's department, and he spent much time going back and forth to Washington and other places to evaluate leathers and to find out why some tanners were unable to deliver certain leathers. "I also assisted in writing specifications for a number of leathers required by the armed forces," he recalled. "The army wanted to put me into uniform and each time I refused they raised the rank I was to have. Eventually Mr. E. H. Foot intervened and told them he was afraid that if I were in uniform I might sooner or later be court-martialed as I would not say yes and amen to every idea of a superior officer. As a result, I remained a civilian with the privilege of expressing myself with no fear of attrition. He [Foot] also told them that I would serve without pay and with no expense to the government."<sup>34</sup>

The awarding of the army-navy "E" in the fall of 1944 to the men and women of S. B. Foot Tanning Company was but one recognition the tannery received for the quality of its products. When the polar explorer Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd prepared for his second antarctic expedition (1933-35), he used the company's leather for dog harnesses because no matter how low the temperature, it did not get hard or stiff. Admiral Byrd, appreciative of the tannery's generosity, sent an autographed photograph "To S. B. Foot & Co. With very sincere appreciation and cordial regards. R. E. Byrd." A year after his return, Byrd wrote a second letter of thanks, and attached to it an autographed piece of insulation from the wall of his advance meteorological base.<sup>35</sup>

The United States Naval Academy specified Foot tannery leather for its water polo balls, because other leather sank. And the white leather shoes for Olympic skating champion Sonja Henie and her troupe, manufactured by Riedell Shoes Inc. of Red Wing, were made of leather produced by the Foot company.

From small beginnings in 1872, when its



THE AUTOGRAPHED PICTURE of Richard E. Byrd presented to the tannery in 1936

payroll numbered only 15, the Foot tannery by the end of the 1940s was one of Goodhue County's largest employers. Its 350 employees processed 275 operations, and its annual payroll was about \$1,000,000. Most of the leather it produced was used for shoes, but other products included horsehide garments, camera cases, golf and gadget bags, and volleyballs. E. H. Foot moved up to be chairman of the board and was succeeded by his son, Silas B. II, who continued the firm's expansion by organizing in 1946 a Massachusetts company of the same name to broaden distribution in New England.<sup>36</sup>

The younger Foot also continued the progressive policies begun under E. H., such as the group insurance provided in 1925 to its workers for the duration of their employment. At that time the firm signed a contract with Equitable Life Assurance, becoming the fifth one in Minnesota to adopt such coverage — only 12 years after the concept of group insurance was put into practice. Joining with other leading tanneries, the company also conducted extensive research programs at such institutions as Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and the Battelle Memorial Institute of Columbus, Ohio.

Throughout the years, the Foot company has been generous in gifts to the community. In 1950 it donated \$10,000 for an addition to the Red Wing City Hospital; in 1952 it approved a gift for refurbishing this hospital. The S. B. Foot Tanning Company Foundation, estab-

<sup>35</sup> Here and below, see *Republican Eagle*, September 8, 1944, p. 1; Thorstensen interview, May 14, 1979. The Byrd memorabilia are in the Foot Company records.

<sup>36</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see Hawley Foot interview, January 19, 1979; Thorstensen interview, May 14, 1979; scrapbooks, Foot Company records. A copy of the contract with Equitable is also in company records. The insurance company presented the tannery with a bronze plaque in 1974; *Republican Eagle*, January 5, 1974, p. 5.

lished May 15, 1956, has made substantial community contributions to expansion of the YMCA and to the new city library, completed in 1969.

E. H. FOOT was nearing the end of an active life. A dean of the tanning industry and a director of the Tanners' Council of America, he was one of Red Wing's most admired and respected citizens. Active in Christ Episcopal Church, he had also worked for the YMCA and had served for many years on the fire and cemetery boards. On his 80th birthday he was the guest of honor at two parties — a family reunion and a party held at the tannery. At the latter celebration 150 employees, including some who were off duty, presented him with a silver coffee tray, matching a coffee service that had been given to his father, S. B., in 1891. Henry Jagusch, who had been a tannery employee for 53 years, made the presentation. Working at the tannery was, and is, a tradition in the Jagusch family, and four generations, beginning with Gust Jagusch in 1894, have worked there.<sup>37</sup>

E. H. was a man keenly aware of his own strengths and weaknesses. Regarding his role as the company's president, he said: "A fellow died, and I took his place, and I'm just holding it until the next fellow comes along. I have so many weaknesses that it would be hard for me to enumerate them. I think that my strongest asset is my ability to do long-term planning. When I look back, I cannot find that I ever made any great mistake by having courage, and by following my convictions."<sup>38</sup>

E. H. Foot died on July 4, 1957, just 100 years after his father arrived in Red Wing and went into business. Silas B. Foot II then became chairman of the board, as well as president. Meanwhile, E. Hawley Foot, younger son of E. H., had joined the company in 1956. He assumed the presidency in 1972, thus becoming the

fourth president in the 100 years since the original tannery was built.<sup>39</sup>

The importance of the S. B. Foot Tanning Company was summed up by Eugene L. Kilik, president of the Tanners' Council of America. He described the firm "as a leader in the world tanning industry. Its leadership extends not only to marketing of products, but to the development of the most advanced technology in leather manufacturing. [It] has been a pioneer in the development of effective techniques of effluent control in order to protect and enhance the environment. The S. B. Foot Tanning Company has an international reputation for quality and leadership in each one of these disciplines."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Marjorie (Mrs. James) Jagusch, October 20, 1980, notes in possession of the author; *Republican Eagle*, July 5, 1957, p. 1; scrapbooks, Foot Company records.

<sup>38</sup> Foot, "Retrospect and Prospect"; Hawley Foot interview, January 19, 1979.

<sup>39</sup> *Republican Eagle*, July 5, 1957, p. 1, March 7, 1977, p. 1. E. Hawley Foot resigned the presidency in June, 1980, but remains chairman of the board, his nephew, Silas B. Foot III, is now president.

<sup>40</sup> Kilik to the author, October 27, 1980. The company expanded considerably after E. H.'s death, but high interest rates on construction and other problems connected with a new plant near Dumas, Texas, caused a financial crisis. By May, 1981, these problems of quality and cost control were in hand, and company officials expressed confidence in the future of the corporation. Hawley Foot interview, June 11, 1981; *Republican Eagle*, May 28, 1981, p. 1.

THE PORTRAITS on pp. 262 and 270 are owned by the Foot family; the pictures on pp. 264 and 267 are in the MHS audio-visual library. All others are from the S. B. Foot Tanning Company.

THE TANNERY'S distribution center, built in 1964





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