Krank Building, St. Paul

Even before the building at 1885 University Avenue in St. Paul was complete, a rooftop sign declared: KRANK’S: THE MARK OF MERIT ALL OVER THE WORLD. The sign was not an exaggeration: the Alfred J. Krank Company, “Perfumers and Makers of High Grade Toilet Requisites,” had offices or warehouses in New York, San Francisco, London, Barcelona, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires.

Alfred Krank (1866–1928) began his career working for a cutlery business, Christian Franke and Herman Schnell. After advancing to partner, then owner, he expanded the company’s endeavors, adding manufacturing and wholesale and retail sales of more than 50 hair tonics, perfumes, and barber and beauty shop supplies, sporting names like Pine Hair Root Oil, Honey Rose Skin Food, Solidified Brilliantine, Pink Blush Massage Cream, and Lily Orient Toilet Water. Krank’s also sold cut glass, carving sets, electric appliances, and many other items to “make people happy and homes more complete.”

Krank joined other St. Paul manufacturers in moving his facility from downtown to the newly expanding Midway district. The Krank empire’s proud new home was completed in 1926, a three-story, dark-brown-and-red brick building designed by the prominent firm of Toltz, King, and Day. It has been called one of the Midway district’s finest and most sophisticated industrial building. Its distinctive use of brightly colored terra cotta flowers and garlands is considered one of the best examples of terra cotta work in St. Paul. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

The Krank building was opened with great ceremony in October 1926. Designating opening week to be “Beauty Week,” the company offered lectures, demonstrations, and radio concerts to an estimated 7,000 visitors over four days. Hair bobbing, finger waving, and the “Dermatone Scientific Scalp Treatment” were among the demonstrations given, as well as tours of the company’s extensive manufacturing process with its shampoo tanks, bottling, filling and shipping departments, and Krank’s own box factory.

Krank, who apparently loved tennis and driving fast, died only two years after his new facility opened. The headline of a front page article in the Minneapolis Journal on September 26, 1928, tells the story: “A. J. Krank Dies in Auto-Trolley Crash: Tries to Jump, Thrown Under Wheels.”

The Krank Company continued on University Avenue until 1941, when the company merged with another one located downtown. Since then, building tenants ranged from Northwest Airlines and Control Data to small individual businesses. Although the interior has been extensively remodeled over the years, the exterior’s pink, yellow, lavender, and green terra cotta flowers remain and seem appropriate for the building’s current name, Iris Park Place.

—Linda James

LINDA JAMES works with newspaper and historic photos as a researcher for films, books, and photo exhibitions.

Krank’s Manufacturers, 1885 University Avenue, St. Paul, 1928. Company founder Alfred Krank, 1925. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)
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