

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Andrew Crawford

For nearly a century, iron and steel fabrication was a major Vigo County industry. Rolled iron exhibiting the label “Made in Terre Haute” once signified the finest grade available, a guarantee of excellence.

The “iron and steel era” began in 1869 with the arrival of Alexander L. Crawford and his oldest son Andrew from Newcastle, Pa. The pair founded Vigo Iron Co., a blast furnace on the east side of 13th Street near College Ave. Four years later, they built Wabash Iron Co., a rolling mill soon known as the “Nail Works” at Second and Spruce streets. More than 100 steel workers relocated here to work for the two Crawford enterprises.

By 1880 when Andrew J. Crawford assumed management of the local mills, the blast furnace employed 300 people and produced 15,000 tons of pig iron, mill iron and Bessemer steel annually. Before Alexander’s death in 1890, the assets of the Nail Works were transferred to Terre Haute Iron & Steel, a stock company with 500 employees producing 600 kegs of nails daily. Other local businessmen invested, but Andrew, as president, held the majority interest. Andrew’s three brothers, particularly James F. Crawford, were active in management.

During an era when mills often ceased production during winters and slow business cycles, the Terre Haute plants rarely closed even if temporarily unprofitable. Crawford was nationally renowned for marketing special “Terre Haute” brands. His unassuming manner was effective. By treating employees well during difficult times, he cultivated allegiance.

When dwindling Great Lakes ore deposits and cheaper Southern labor impaired the local smelting business, Crawford built an ironworks in Gadsden, Tenn., but kept local mills functioning. In 1899, as his health began to fail, he sold the two mills to Republic Steel. Both mills were closed in 1901. However, by that time foundries, casting firms and related iron and steel enterprises — most serving the railroad, automobile and coal industries — began situating here.

When Crawford died at his elegant 405 S. Sixth Street residence on July 29, 1903, at age 66, he was reputed to be Terre Haute’s wealthiest citizen. Besides steel mill interests, he was president and stockholder of Crawford Coal Col., Kester Motor Co., Terre Haute Electric Light Co., Vigo Clay Co., Portland Mining Co. (in British Columbia), Home Coal Co., Nashville & Knoxville Railroad and Sligo Iron Co. of St. Louis. He also served as vice president of the U.S. Trust Co. and director of National State Bank (both predecessors of Terre Haute First National Bank). In addition, he impressed local officials with his fiscal shrewdness during his two terms on the Terre Haute City Council.

Ann (Ibinson) Crawford, Andrew’s wife since Dec. 26, 1865, daughters Mary Kidder and Anna Bartlett, and sons James A. and John L. Crawford survived him. Son Alexander predeceased him.



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