

# A true melting pot

Descendants of employees and founders remember, celebrate MIF factory

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**BRANFORD** » A town called Branford in Connecticut.

That's what John Makowsky heard upon arriving in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1910 after fleeing conscription in the Tsarist army. Others Lithuanians were working at a company that made malleable iron castings, he was told.

Of course, Makowsky was hardly the only employee to have traveled a long distance to work at the Malleable Iron Fittings Company from the time of its founding in 1854, as his daughter Lillian Makowsky Olejarczyk recognized at a lively MIF Family Day last Sunday at Branford's Stony Creek Brewery, one part of the factory's former site.

Town historian Jane Bouley's great-grandfathers came from Sweden, Hilda Ohidy's mother from Hungary, and Robert Ifkovic's grandfather from what's now known as Croatia. Former Branford Police Chief Robert Gill's grandfather was recruited from Sunbury, N.C., leading other African American families to follow him.

They came to escape political persecution, economic hardship and discrimination. They came in

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Employees pouring molten iron into a mold in the 1950s.



The Malleable Iron Fittings company, once a Branford landmark.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JANE BOULEY



MIF employees in the 1950s seem to stand proud.

COURTESY OF JANE BOULEY

## History

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search of a better life.

Most of them "came with nothing, just with the clothes on their back, and what was inside their pocket," said Makowsky Olejarczyk — nothing but a steely work ethic, the sense that "you had to earn your own way to give the next generation a chance to do better."

And then they stayed. They stayed, despite the "back-breaking work" in pouring brass molds in the crucible of the foundry, as Elaine Balogh described it; despite the threat of burns, and back and head injuries in the oil-fired aluminum furnace; despite the fact that a job counting inventory and fittings was so "filthy and dirty" that Cal Ohidy came home "looking like the fittings," he said.

They stayed for 25, 35 or even 50 years, with an engraved wristwatch from the MIF recognizing their loyalty, with the two or three generations of their family succeeding them.

They stayed because, as Eleanor Hammer Scherer, great-granddaughter of Valdemar Hammer, put it, "the Hammer family held their employees to high standards. If they



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Engraved watch presented to Anthony Ifkovic, worn by his grandson, Robert Ifkovic, to the MIF Family Day.

performed, they were rewarded." And with their willingness to work hard and prosper in their new circumstances, the employees were up to the task.

They stayed because the MIF, through the Hammer family, was a pioneer in equal opportunity employment for all ethnic groups, even when there were no laws compelling them to do it. "The pay was equal. The opportunity to move ahead was equal," Bouley has said. Yes, hours were cut so the factory could endure the Great Depression, but no one was laid off.

They stayed because of the Hammer family's concern in their welfare, improving the working conditions of its labor force, installing modern showers, locker rooms, and dust elimination facilities for the personal comfort of the workers.

They stayed because the



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In rear, town historian Jane Bouley, right, cataloging photo from Shirley Cerrito, across from her, whose grandfather was a janitor at the MIF from 1908 to 1959.

company provided lots for its employees to build their own homes or found them housing. Shirley Cerrito's grandfather, William Lipkovich, a janitor at the MIF from 1908 to 1959, for example. He lived in a house owned by the Hammer family; a generation later, her father built a house on another lot owned by the family where her son and daughter-in-law still live.

They stayed because being afforded adequate hous-

ing gave rise not only to a sense of well-being on the part of the employees but to a "wonderful childhood," said Ernestine Miller, who recalled "kids from families of different nationalities playing together, looking out for each other and not knowing anything about prejudice or racism."

They stayed, in short, because, as Scherer put it, her great-grandfather "was a humanitarian before he was a businessman."

35 to 40 YEARS		
AMBRULEVIC, JOHN	GUMKOWSKI, SIMON	OKIEWSKI, SLEPTAN
ANDERSON, JOHN	HOYT, CLARENCE K.	RAICLA, FERDINANDO F.
BLOOMBERG, J. ALFRED	JAKACKI, JOHN	SMITH, HAROLD B.
DONADIO, PROSPERO	LAY, FARRINGTON H.	SMITH, MABEL V.
DONADIO, ROCCO F.	LINDBERG, LORENS	STRZEMICZENY, ANTHONY
DONOFRIO, A. MICHAEL	MAKOSKY, JOHN	VAILLETTE, JOSEPH J.
BELL, JAMES	MARKLESKY, STEVE	ZAROWSKI, STANISLAW
GIORDANO, GENEROSO	METZ, OTTO	ZAWACKI, FRANK B.
GUMKOWSKI, JULIUS	MICHELSON, J. ALFRED	

  

30 to 35 YEARS		
AGUZZI, ENRICO	HYNOVICH, JOHN	OLEJARCZYK, STANISLAW
ANDERSON, CHARLES E.	HANSEN, GEORGE R.	PALMER, MAY
ANISKOYICH, RAZIMIR	HOLM, HILMER M.	PANARONI, VINCENZO
BALORICH, MICHAEL	HOTCHKISS, WILLIAM C.	PROHOVIC, ANTHONY
BARBA, GABRIEL	JAMESON, ARTHUR H.	QUINN, FRANK
BEAMON, JOHN U.	KOSAK, JOHN J.	RALLIUS, FELIX
BODNER, JOSEPH A.	KOMOROSKI, TROPILY	REFSBECK, GEORGE V.
BULL, CLARENCE E.	KOTOWSKI, ROMAN	ROYALDI, GUISEPPE
CARULLO, COSMO	KREWSKY, ALEXANDER	ROWLEY, SHERWOOD A.
CINQUANTA, PETER	KREWSKY, KORNILE	SBASTRAND, CHARLES O.
CIRIGLIANO, ANTHONY	KREWSKY, SAM	SHARKSHNIS, FRANK K.
CORCORAN, FRANK P.	KREWSKY, WASIL	STRUZINSKY, IGNATIUS
CROWLEY, BERNARD A.	LEPRIC, DOMINIC	VUCINICK, ANTHONY
GODDARD, MABLE E.	MACIUBA, JOSEPH	WASIELESKI, JOH
GUENTHER, GUSTAVE	MCCARTHY, JOHN J.	WYRZYKOWSKI, STEVEA
GUMKOWSKI, JULIUS	MONTELIUS, MAURITZ B.	YUSIEWICZ, WALTER
	MUSTAFA, MOHAMED	

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Long-term employees listed at MIF shows the loyalty the Malleable Iron Fittings Company inspired in its workers.



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Apart from the state-of-the-art Stony Creek Brewery and a new condominium complex, the MIF is "an eyesore," in the words of former police chief Robert Gill.

They stayed because they watched the Hammer family's deep involvement in all aspects of Branford life. Its generosity to St. Stephens AME Zion Church, for instance. "Whenever anything was needed, they helped," Chief Gill said.

They watched president Thorvald Hammer serving as chairman of the Blackstone Memorial Library for over 30 years, founding the Branford Historical Society, and facilitating the acquisition of the Supply Ponds as founder of the Conservation Commission.

Other than the state-of-the-art brewery and a condominium complex on its

former grounds, "it's just an eyesore now," said Chief Gill of the factory which closed in 1970. "Most likely two-thirds of the people living in Branford don't know about MIF and the Hammer family."

Still, he added, amid the animated chatter and the aroma of the Aggressively Laid Back lager wafting through the celebration room of the Stony Creek Brewery, "you can't let something that contributed so mightily to this town for 120 years pass into history without any notice."

Because, in other words, why they stayed is a big part of what Branford is now.