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## ■ HISTORY FROM OHA: A HISTORY OF MARKSON BROS. FURNITURE COMPANY

By Thomas Hunter

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Miss America's official car was parked in front of Markson Bros. Furniture Company on North Salina Street in April 1955.

Throughout most of the 20th century, the Markson Bros. Furniture Company was a business institution in Central New York.

The highly successful family business venture began when Abraham and Isaac Markson opened the National Art Company, located at 227 North Salina St. in 1905, with only \$200 in capital that Isaac's wife, Ella, had saved through her own personal thriftiness. The brothers sold art items, household specialties, and religious merchandise mainly through door-to-door sales. The brothers expanded their business to include furniture, built a new structure at 231 North Salina St., and incorporated their company as Markson Bros. Furniture Company.

Markson Bros. was reputed to be the first company in Central New York to sell merchandise on a credit plan in the early 20th century. In the 1920s, along with an array of furniture, Markson Bros. sold Hoosier cabinets, Frost refrigerators, Detroit Jewel stoves, lamps, phonographs (the brothers marketed their own phonograph called the Marksonola), and records. The company's success allowed it to expand to new locations throughout Central New York: Oswego in 1918; Utica in 1920; Auburn in 1922; Watertown in 1927; Cortland in 1928; Ithaca in 1930; and Fulton in 1937.

In 1936, the family spent \$25,000 (the equivalent of \$445,000 today) to renovate their establishment. Interior improvements included a central entrance, terrazzo floor, and new, larger display windows with improved lighting. Additional improvements included installing an electric elevator. Exterior improvements included new store signs and three-foot tall letters to clearly identify the business. Markson Bros. expanded its building footprint, taking up an entire block on North Salina Street, and opened a warehouse on Walton Street in downtown Syracuse. The company used two advertising slogans: "You can always do better at Marksons" and "The Markson Bros. furnish a home from the cellar to the dome." Markson Bros. even had its own bowling team, with famed local bowler, Andy Piraino, leading the team to multiple championships.

Abraham Markson died at a young age in 1922. Isaac continued managing Markson Bros., hiring other family members, including his son-in-law, Leopold Goldberg, as vice president, and his son, Asher S. Markson, as treasurer. Along with operating the family business, Isaac Markson also was a member of the National Retail Furniture Association, the Syracuse Rotary Club, Philo Lodge No. 968 of the Free & Associated Masons, the Tigris Temple, and the Lafayette Country Club. Isaac Markson also supported several local Jewish organizations, including the Jewish Home for the Aged, Bradley Brook Camp, the Fresh Air Camp, the Jewish Charities, and was president of Temple Adath Yeshurun for 25 years. In 1940, Isaac and his wife, Ella, celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary at Hotel Syracuse. At age 65, Isaac Markson was still president of Markson Bros. and would continue in that position another eight years.

Isaac Markson succumbed to a two-year illness in May 1948 at the age of 72. Rabbi Irwin Hyman of Temple Adath Yeshurun praised Isaac Markson as an exemplary citizen. "It is with profound sorrow that I join with the family of Isaac Markson in their hours of bereavement. In the passing of Mr. Markson, the community has lost one of its most promising citizens and Temple Adath Yeshurun its guiding light and spirit for the last 25 years." Upon Isaac's death, his son, Asher, became the company's president after serving as its treasurer since the 1920s.

Asher Markson graduated from Syracuse Central High School and the New York University School of Commerce. Asher emulated his father's business acumen, as well as his altruistic and philanthropic inclination for local organizations and charities. He served with the U.S. Army Ordnance Department from 1942 through 1944, achieving the rank of First Lieutenant. After his military service, Asher became a member of Post 131, Jewish War Veterans. In 1951, the Jewish War Veterans selected him as Outstanding Citizen for that year.

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The business had become the largest furniture and household furnishings retailer in Central New York with three generations of customers continuing to buy their furnishings there. In April 1955, Asher Markson celebrated the company's 50th anniversary. That same month, he also was elected to a two-year term as president of the Chamber of Commerce. Asher told a Herald-Journal reporter that he started in the family business at age five performing very small tasks. He graduated to framing artwork and delivering merchandise for 25 cents per week. "At some time or other I've held every job in the business," Markson recalled. "I've repaired, collected, bought, delivered, sold, and even written advertising copy!"

Helping Asher celebrate Markson Bros.'s Golden Anniversary was none other than Miss America for 1955, Lee Ann Meriwether. The 19-year-old pageant winner specifically came to Syracuse to officiate the observance by cutting a large cake inside the store at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, April 26, 1955. Prior to her cake-cutting duties that evening, Meriwether had appeared on local TV and met with Ella (Mrs. Isaac) Markson at the Persian Terrace at Hotel Syracuse. The next day, she toured Syracuse University and the Veterans Administration Hospital, then was the guest of honor at a dinner. The next day, Miss America flew to Allentown, Pennsylvania, where she continued her hectic, activity-filled schedule.

In November 1959, Asher Markson sold Markson Bros. Furniture Company to Sonmark Industries, a company formed in Philadelphia for the purpose of purchasing Markson Bros. Furniture Company. Sonmark Industries had actually leased the Markson Bros. stores for 10 years prior to the sale. Asher Markson continued to manage the furniture company, just as he had since 1948. By this time, Markson Bros.' annual sales equaled about \$2 million (about \$16 million in today's dollars). According to Markson, Sonmark planned to open new stores in shopping centers and other locations where the population was growing. The sale occurred through a stock transfer and did not involve selling any real estate, which remained in the Markson family. In March 1961, Asher Markson announced he was severing all ties with Markson Bros., Inc.

In January 1968, Asher Markson agreed to sell his furniture store at 227-231 North Salina St., as well as a warehouse located at 124-132 West Willow St. to the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency for the Clinton Square Urban Renewal Project. The agency planned to purchase a total of 17 properties in a two-block area on the north edge of Clinton Square and clear the site for the Herald-Journal/Post-Standard newspaper plant. The buildings were assessed at \$162,400; Markson sold them to the agency for \$275,000. At the time, Raymour Furniture Company occupied the Markson Bros. buildings, but had plans to move to 421 South Warren St. The new Syracuse Newspapers building opened on June 20, 1971, and published the daily Herald-Journal and the Post-Standard, along with the Sunday Herald-American; in 2001 the company discontinued publishing the two Herald newspapers. In 2012, Syracuse Media Group (SMG) formed to continue publishing the printed Post-Standard, but also publish digital content on its website, Syracuse.com. In June 2013, SMG moved from Clinton Square to the former Merchants Bank building on South Warren Street to publish its online content. In 2016, VIP Structures purchased the Clinton Square building with plans to move its workforce into about 30,000 square feet on the first floor, rent about 50,000 square feet on the second floor to tenants, and lease back the production and press room to SMG to continue publishing the Post-Standard newspaper.

Although Asher Markson had been president of Markson Bros. from 1948 to 1961, and was an accomplished business leader and executive, he also was notable for his civic responsibilities. His long list of leadership roles included serving on the boards of Merchants National Bank, Syracuse Savings Bank, the Better Business Bureau, the American Red Cross, Syracuse Community Foundation, the Youth Development Center of Syracuse University, the Mayor's Human Rights Commission, Syracuse Community Chest, Syracuse Jewish Welfare Federation, and Syracuse General Hospital. He also was president of Temple Adath Yeshurun from 1948 to 1964. He was well-liked and well-respected in Syracuse and spent countless hours as a concerned citizen trying to better the local community. In 1955, the Syracuse Herald-Journal stated, "Suffice it to say that when a proposition involving the welfare of this city and its citizens is up for consideration, Asher Markson is always there. And when the work is passed out he is always given twice his share. And he always does it twice as well as most of us. Syracuse has reason to be proud of this modest man." Asher Markson died at age 79 on March 15, 1980. He is buried in the Adath Yeshurun Cemetery.

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