

THURSDAY, JULY 20, 2023
EIGHT PAGES

SPECIAL SECTION INSERT TO

MONROE COUNTY
HERALD

100 YEARS of WESCO



John Kress Sr.



John Kress Jr.



John Kress III

AN INSIDE LOOK
AT THE PAST, PRESENT...

...AND FUTURE OF
WESCO HOME OF SPARTA



Western Supply Company as it was on E. Oak St. This property was purchased in 1959. It is currently the sole location of Wesco Home. *Contributed.*

A Century of Service

By KYLE EVANS
Staff Writer

Wesco Home has come a long way since opening its doors a century ago. From its early days as the Western Supply Company, the Sparta business has evolved with the times to remain viable for the past 100 years.

From its roots as a fledgling business that sold monuments and operated as a mill back in the 1920s to today's iteration that deals in furniture and appliances, the families that have owned Wesco have prided themselves on unique customer service to retain its patrons across several generations.

"The longevity comes from evolving product lines and brands as more and more competition arises," said current co-owner Mark Hellmann regarding the store's lengthy tenure.

"This store is very generational, people trust us, we have a reputation of a knowledgeable sales staff and a few employees have been here for over 35 years.

Most of the time if a grandmother shops here, their grandchildren will as well. Helping support the community as much as we can is a big help as well."

Hellmann himself was an employee of 10 years before he approached former owner John Kress III about taking over the business. Hellmann and wife, Marla, bought Wesco in 2018.

Chris Melde bought a stake in the business recently and operates the business alongside Mark Hellmann.

Under the ownership of the Hellmann's, a number of cosmetic changes were made to the business. New logos and a refreshed exterior to the façade on Oak St. in Sparta were just a couple of examples of how the current owners have

“*The longevity comes from evolving product lines and brands as more and more competition arises***”**

– Mark Hellman, current co-owner

tried to keep up with the times – a trend that started and perpetuated by three generations of the John Kress family.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

Wesco Home is currently a full service, furniture, appliance, flooring, and design store, but it hasn't always been that way.

After serving in World War I, John Kress Sr. returned to Tomah, Wisconsin to take over a monument business owned by his aging father, Adolph Kress since 1876. Little did Kress Sr. know that his takeover was the start of a

WESCO cont. on pg. 6

WESTERN SUPPLY CO.

100TH ANNIVERSARY SATURDAY, JULY 29, 2023

MEMORIAL PARK, SPARTA, WIS.

11:00 AM - 6:00 PM

CHICKEN-Q

HELLMANN FAMILY RECIPE
FLIP CHICKEN QUARTERS
WITH ALL THE FIXINS!



FREE

BEER & SODA
AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE!

WILL DONATION
11:00AM - GONE

VINTAGE BASEBALL

LA CRESCENT APPLE JACKS VS. MANKATO BALTICS

NOON - FIELD #5



BIRTHDAY CAKE

CUPCAKES &
OTHER TREATS
ALL DAY LONG



YARD GAMES

1:00 PM - MAIN YARD

WATER BALLOON FIGHT
TUG-O-WAR, & MORE



JAMES
THE
MAGICIAN
2:00 PM
MAIN STAGE



GIVE-A-WAYS

3:00 PM - MAIN STAGE

ENTER IN-STORE TO WIN PRIZES
ALL MONTH LONG FROM:

ALLTILE, ALMO, ASHLEY CASEGOODS, ASHLEY
STATIONARY, BEST HOME FURNISHINGS, FLEXSTEEL,
GENERAL ELECTRIC, HAPPY FLOORS, HERREGAN,
JOFRAN, MAGNUM MEDIA, MOHAWK, MONROE COUNTY
HERALD, QUINN DISTRIBUTORS, SELECT COUTERTOPS,
SMITH BROTHERS, WKBT CHANNEL 8, WXOW CHANNEL 19

SHOCK POCKET

4:00-6:00 PM - MAIN STAGE



BRING YOUR OWN
LAWN CHAIR!!



THANK YOU FOR 100 YEARS!

-WESCO HOME



Wesco to celebrate 100 years

Old-fashioned party to take place July 29 at Memorial Park in Sparta

By KYLE EVANS
Staff Writer

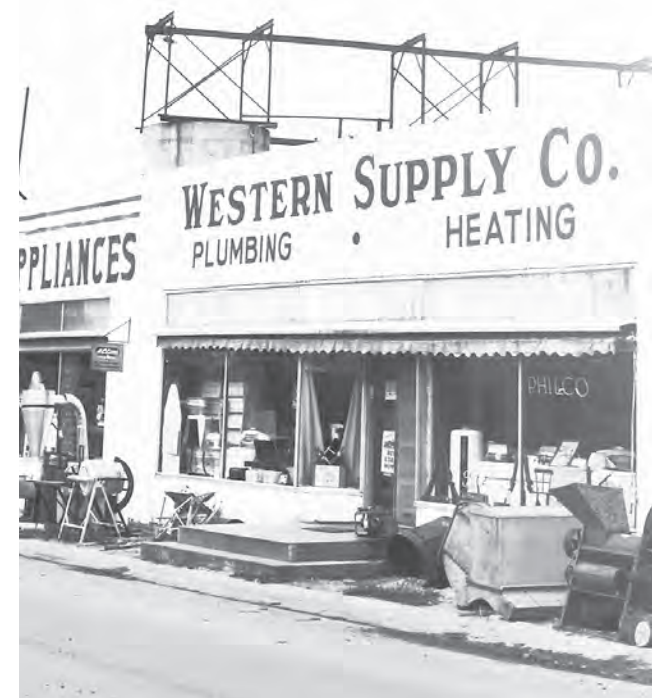
On Saturday, July 29th, Wesco Home (Western Supply Co.) will be celebrating their 100th anniversary. The old school shindig will take place at Memorial Park, in Sparta, from 11 a.m. – 6 p.m. There will be a chicken q for a free will donation, vintage baseball game, magician,

yard games, birthday cake, giveaways', and more.

Wesco's owner, Mark Hellmann stated, "I wanted something different, the vintage baseball game will be fun to watch, there are no gloves."

Shock Pocket, a favorite local band, will take the stage at 4 p.m., with their classic rock mix. There will be a large tent, with tables and chairs, set up in the park, but in case of overflow they are asking for people to bring their own lawn chair.

The store is having giveaways and major deals all month long, to celebrate their 100th anniversary. Wesco will be closed that day, as all the employees will be enjoying and working at the 100th anniversary party.

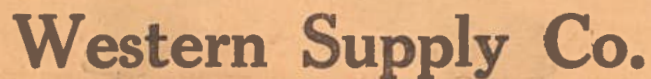


One of many former storefronts, circa 1930 – 1940. Contributed.

Timeline of Wesco

1922

In the 1920's, after the first world war, John Kress Sr. was in the monument business with his father Adolph Kress in Sparta. In 1922, Kress Sr., ended up buying the Tomah Roller Mills (a grist mill in Tomah) and thus began Western Supply Co.



Western Supply Co.

1926

Around 1926, the old Grand Rapids Milling Co. was purchased in Sparta (near the Perch Lake Dam.) The two brothers Kress Sr. and Fred Kress started adding to the company and built a chain of seven grocery and feed stores, with Sparta being the center of the chain.



Tropical Coffee

Vacuum Packed

Only 26c pound



Diced Carrots

2 20 oz- cans 15c

1927

White Eagle Oil Company property purchased; Cashton warehouse opened

1928

Main plant moved to Sparta

1929

Western Supply Company officially incorporates with a stock of \$100,000. Incorporators are John W. Kress, Phillip E. Kress, and Fred R. Kress.

1931

A modern coal plant is erected just north of warehouse on East Ave. John Kress Sr. researched bigger city coal operations for a year before starting construction ahead of the summer of 1931. The coal plant, the first of it's kind in Western Wisconsin, was finished by the beginning of August 1931.

1959

In the late 1950's, the Sparta store had outgrown its buildings. Kress Sr. was forced to give Kress Jr. a legitimate place to operate, which is when their current building was purchased. The building was once Evans Lumber. Kress Sr. still had the reigns at this time, but by the mid-late 1960's Kress Jr. took the reins and purchased the Jefferson Leaf Tobacco building (behind the main building) and remodeled it.

At this time, they were a full-service plumbing and heating company along with a hardware store. Furniture started playing a part in the store in the 60's as well. By this time the La Crosse store had been sold off as Kress Sr. was getting older.



Jefferson Leaf Tobacco building was acquired in the mid-60's

1954

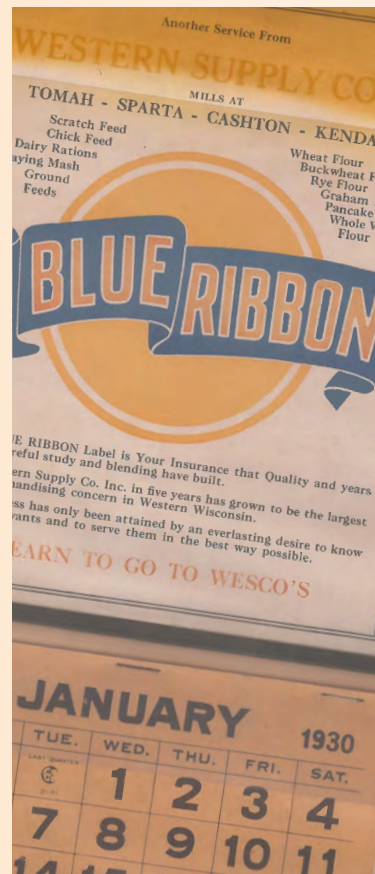
A 25,000 square ft. facility in La Crosse was purchased and remodeled to suit their purposes. Kress Sr. devoted his full time to the La Crosse project driving back and forth to Sparta each day.

1946

John Kress Jr. finished college and went to work at Western Supply Co. Plumbing services were added at this time. In the next few years, Western Supply Co. was caught up in one of the largest building booms in history.

1934-41

In the years from 1934-1941, Western Supply Co. opened stores in Viroqua and West Salem, but when WWII started, business slowed. The two brothers decided to discard of the grocery store chain. Sparta was the only one left standing.



1968

Tom Kress, a nephew of Kress Jr. was hired and did a little bit of everything, from designing and selling kitchens, flooring, appliances, and more. Tom Kress worked there for ten years and is credited with shortening the name in advertising to "WESCO" instead of Western Supply Co.



Mark Hellmann, Marla Hellmann, and John Kress III

1970

John Kress III graduated from college and went to work at Wesco.

1978

The three brothers eventually ended up taking the reins from Kress Jr. in the mid-late 1970's.

John Kress III graduated from college and went to work at Wesco. Tony worked at Wesco from 1978-1992 eventually finding another path in life away from Wesco. Tim worked at Wesco from 1978-2009 when he passed.

Tony ran the hardware department, Tim ran the appliance department, and Kress III handled the furniture & flooring.



Tim Kress



Tony Kress



2009

In 2009, Tim Kress passed away and there was a buyout agreement all set up to where Kress III would buyout Tim's end of the business.

Kress III said his biggest challenge when his brother wasn't there, he had to wear all the hats, seven days a week, "you never stop thinking about it, it definitely took a toll on the family," said Kress III.

Kress III was then the sole owner in the business.

2007

Mark Hellmann was hired as a salesperson. Hellmann worked under Kress III for eleven years.

2006

Chris Melde was hired as a high school student.

2017

Kress III offered Hellmann the opportunity to get in to the business. Hellmann and his wife Marla purchased the business in 2018.



2020

In 2020, the covid pandemic left Wesco with low inventory and other various challenges. Since purchasing the business, the Hellmann's have put on their touch by redesigning logos, advertising materials, and the interior and exterior of the store.



Chris Melde

2023

In July of 2023, Chris Melde became part owner with Mark Hellmann.

Timeline of Wesco



No Community, No Matter How Small, needs to be without fire protection, an experience at Sparta has proved. John Kress, right, is demonstrating apparatus mounted on a four-wheel drive jeep, designed for rural fire fighting. At the left is Arthur Scholze who built the entire equipment in the Western Supply shops at Sparta, following designs made by Kress. The equipment includes a 165-gallon tank with 50 feet of

1½-inch fire hose, fire extinguishers, water buckets, axes, two 14-foot ladders with a 28-foot extension. Also included is a 30-foot, two-inch suction hose for use in getting water from a stock tank, creek, pond or any other available supply, through the booster pump. The fire fighting apparatus, by being constructed locally, is inexpensive and early demonstrations have proved its efficiency.

GRAPEFRUIT 12 FOR 25c

Frozen
HERRING
2 LBS. 15c

Bulk Salt
HERRING
LB. 15c

COOKIES 4 KINDS PLAIN 3 LBS. 25c

CRACKERS 2 lb. soda 14c
MACKEREL, canned 1 lb. can 10c

PUFFED WHEAT 2 LARGE PKGS. 13c

P AND G SOAP
6 BARS 23c

Large
OXYDOL 19c

PINEAPPLE LARGE 29 OZ. CAN 17c

Blue Ribbon
FLOUR SACKS \$1.35

Pillsbury
FLOUR 49 LB. \$1.85

CHERRIES 2 20 OZ. CANS 19c

FRESH SMELT 2 lbs. 25c
FROZEN PICKEREL 1 lb. 15c

MATCHES CARTON 15c

RAISINS 4 LBS. 25c

PICNICS NICE HAMS TENDERIZED LB. 13c

PEAS 3-20-oz. cans 25c
CORN, White Cream Style 3 cans 21c

PORK AND BEANS 3 LB. CANS 16c

SIDE PORK
Fresh, Lean
LB. 10c

LARD
2 POUND PACKAGE 14c

7 OAKS COFFEE 3 LBS. 39c

LADIES' Keep yourself in silk hosiery free by purchasing \$10 worth of merchandise. When you present sales slips showing the purchase of \$10 in merchandise we present you with a pair of silk hosiery.

DAIRY FEED 100 LBS. \$1.25
16% Protein

EGG MASH 100 LBS. \$1.79

WESTERN SUPPLY COMPANY

LEFT A newspaper ad from 1940 showing the myriad of grocery options that Western Supply Co. once provided. ABOVE A newspaper clipping from March 9, 1949 out of the La Crosse Tribune featuring John Kress Jr. "demonstrating apparatus mounted on a four-wheel drive jeep, designed for rural fire fighting". RIGHT A vintage Jeep ad from Western Supply Co. Contributed.

WESCO
cont. from pg. 2
business that would grow and thrive and sustain the next two generations of his family over the course of the following 95 years.

Kress Sr. and his brother Fred branched out by buying Tomah Roller Mills in 1922, which ultimately began Western Supply Co. or Wesco as we know it today.

In 1926, the brothers bought another mill, the old Grand Rapids Milling Co. in Sparta, near the current Perch Lake dam. Through the next decade their business grew to include a chain of six grocery stores (Cashton, Viroqua, West

Tomah, Kendall, and Sparta). These grocery stores handled feed, grocery, clothing, radios, and some hardware.

By the the early 1940's, the grocery stores had become less viable as the effects of the Great Depression and wartime efforts, such as rationing, caused problems with day-to-day business. Very simply, World War II made it difficult to do business. Within a few years all the stores were gone, besides the one in Sparta.

By this time, John Kress Jr. had finished schooling and entered the business with a desire to expand on WSC's services – plumbing and heating. In 1946, Kress Jr. was able to convince his father that the extra services were a positive direction for WSC. From that point, WSC took a slightly new direction just ahead of one of the biggest building booms which came after the conclusion of WWII. They went from selling farm implements, coal and other commodities to also offering

appliances, heating and plumbing services.

Growth continued into the 1950s as well. Kress Sr. went on to start a new project – an expansion of Western Supply Company – which was built in La Crosse in 1954. The new store was 25,000 square feet of area just outside of the downtown area. Kress Sr. devoted his full time to a La Crosse store in which they were doing plumbing, heating, appliances, radios, and more.

The La Crosse location lasted until the late 1960s. By then, Kress Jr. had taken the reins from his father and was ready to facilitate the business's next mutation.

Tom Kress, a nephew of Kress Jr. and employee at Wesco from 1968-78 recalled some of those changes, most of which he credited to Kress Jr.'s wife, Marion.

According to Kress, Marion's ideas helped put some real class into the building.

"She really brought in the furniture draperies, fabrics, design

THE 'Jeep' IS THE ANSWER
WHEN THERE'S WORK TO BE DONE

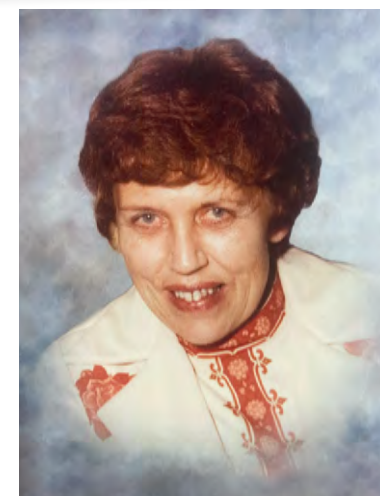


GET A 'JEEP' ON THE JOB

Got some tough work to do? Then get a "Jeep" and get it done. The rugged Universal "Jeep" does more farm jobs and does them better than any other machine. It works the year 'round as a light tractor, pick-up, tow truck, and mobile power unit. Let us demonstrate on your farm.

Western Supply Co.

SPARTA, WISCONSIN



Marion Kress

elements, and higher quality merchandise into the store," said Kress.

Those changes were just part of the fabric of the family dynamic, said Kress. He recalled his aunt and uncle's work ethic and care they put towards the business each and every day.



INSET Salesperson Andrew Hellmann and Owner Chris Melde talk about the features on a washer and dryer set. Owner Mark Hellmann sifts through the fabric wall – hundreds of different samples to fit anyone’s aesthetic. Herald photo by Nate Beier.

“The whole family had a work ethic that didn’t quit. It was almost impossible to impress Kress Jr. as you could go to work early, and he was there, if you worked late, he was still there.”

Kress referred to his uncle as a workaholic of sorts, taking on a wide array of duties while owning Wesco.



John Kress Jr.

“Kress Jr. did just about everything, he was an implement dealer, plumber, electrical contracting, and also delivered coal to homes for heat,” said Kress.

That meant that the former Wesco owner didn’t have much time for hobbies. However, he did forge a love for old fire engines. Even then, the business came first. It was no surprise to Tom Kress when he was sent to an auction to bid on a fire engine in place of his uncle, John Kress Jr. just so the former could continue to work at Wesco. Kress remembered his uncle collecting upwards of 40 fire trucks before his passing.

The Wesco torch would be passed from John Kress Jr. to John Kress III in the late 1970s.

Kress III graduated college in 1970 and went to work in the family business. Eventually, Kress III and his twin brothers Tony and Tim Kress took over the business from Kress Jr.

Once again, another generation of Kress family helped Wesco

transform to match the wants and needs of its customers.

“When I came into the business, the plumbing and heating side was phased out and we narrowed our focus to hardware, furniture, appliances, and flooring,” said Kress III.

Kress III was into the furniture and flooring end of the business, while Tony ran the Hardware department and Tim ran the appliance department. Changes in societal wants and business practices continued to force the Kress brothers to innovate as they operated Wesco and pushed it towards the 21st century, however.

“You used to be able to have a sale tomorrow, call the radio station and have an ad on the air tomorrow. That doesn’t happen anymore,” said Kress III. “We started offering free delivery, I even called it free shipping sometimes in the advertisements to compete with the

WESCO cont. on pg. 8



Inside the showroom in 2023. Herald photo by Nate Beier.

“
*We're small enough
 that we're not big, and
 we're big enough that
 we're not small”*

– John Kress III, third generation former owner

WESCO

cont. from pg. 7

big box stores.”

Tony continued with Wesco and left in the early 1990's, and Tim worked until his passing in 2009. Kress III worked there up until five years ago, when he was approached by Mark Hellmann who was interested in purchasing the business.

NEW BUSINESS IN THE COVID ERA

In less than two years after acquiring Wesco, the Hellmann family was dealt with a series of setbacks with the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Aside from the stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidelines, supply chain issues provided several challenges for the newfound business owners. Many vendors which Wesco had utilized for years could not continue to deliver enough product, if any at all.

Hellmann said, “we stayed with the status quo and made it through, with our mindset focused on the future.” Former owner, John Kress III commended the new caretakers of one of Sparta's oldest businesses on pulling through the highpoints of the COVID era.

“The Hellmann's have had many challenges that I, thankfully, did not have to deal with, including product shortages, employee turnover, and more. They've built it all back up and are now one of the biggest single store sellers of General Electric (GE) Appliances,” said Kress III.

SMALL ENOUGH, NOT BIG; BIG ENOUGH, NOT SMALL

Maintaining and reaffirming Wesco's place in the market of a post-COVID world didn't require new philosophies. Instead, the Hellmann family relied on some tried and true business practices.

“(We have) great customer service, the idea of a one stop home shop, our own service department, and free delivery,” said Hellmann.

Those pillars of success are present-day echoes of philosophies that kept Wesco as a vibrant and strong brand for the past 100 years.

Those pillars helped Wesco persevere through COVID and allows the company to continually compete with the increasing presence of chain stores and online retailers.

Those pillars are part of the reason Wesco's current and former owners aren't afraid to tackle those big box stores, either.

As a single-store entity, Wesco has to battle with bigger chain stores both in perception and prices.

John Kress III admitted that the issue of box store competitors isn't new and it isn't something Wesco has been afraid of.

“One of the problems we always had,” said Kress III, “is that people thought there is no way that our local store can be as competitive as the big box stores like Home Depot, Menards, etc., but every time we got the chance, we could almost always beat their price.” Kress continued, “I don't think people should shop local, just to shop local. I think if the local business is even with the competitor, then buyers should choose the local option.”

Kress III said his theory was to be important to its vendors. Wesco had to be a successful destination for their products.

“At one time we were the biggest independent Ashley (Furniture) dealer in the state of Wisconsin,” said Kress III. “Through the years, my grandfather, father, mother, brothers, and I maintained great relationships with vendors, in which the vendors wouldn't sell to anyone else in the area. Since



A CLEAN SWEEP — Sparta's WESCO Shopping Center ends its “win a Hoover anniversary contest” with a winner selected from more than 1,500 entries. Mrs. Walter J. Gerhke of 718 East Division street takes ownership of the Hoover Dial-A-Matic from John Kress III.

11/29/73

COVID, that's all changed, now vendors run short on product, and you must find product from somewhere.”

Kress III said that he watched his father put in the time, meticulously going over paperwork to ensure the satisfaction of both customers and vendors.

“Kress Jr. went through every single invoice. He would not bill a customer until he had a chance to go through it. (He was) very detail oriented and some customers got mad because their bill wasn't ready yet.”

That attention to detail and dedication to a positive customer and vendor experience are reasons why Wesco has reached its diamond anniversary.

Kress III said, “I can't believe it's been that long. The success has been able to change with the times. Find your niche and run with it. I think too many places don't do that and they don't last.”

“One of my famous lines,” said Kress III, is “We're small enough that we're not big, and we're big enough that we're not small.”