

John Kropf:

Thank you very much. I want to first of all thank Bowling Green State University Archival Collections for the award. This is the first literary award I've received, and as far as I'm concerned, it's probably the best award I've ever received in my entire life. It really is. I'm so happy to get it and so happy to be here.

The second thanks I would like to give is to all of you who came out on a Friday afternoon, a beautiful day, right before a long weekend. So thank you for coming and staying however long you can stay. I really, I want to make this an interesting story to tell you. It's a story that it happened really in your backyard. It happened here in Ohio. And before I get into it, I want to ask a little feedback from you all. Growing up, when you went to school and you got that first box of crayons, what was really that first impression, that first memory you have from that first box of crayons? Anybody?

Speaker 2:

They were very bright.

John Kropf:

They were very bright. Okay. Anybody else? I'm not sure. Yeah?

Speaker 3:

There wasn't enough colors.

John Kropf:

Not enough colors. Okay. How about anybody remember the aroma when you open that box? If you think about senses, they say the sense of aroma is probably the strongest for triggering memories, and that's certainly one that I remember. How about the brand of crayon? Do you remember what the brand was that you used by any chance?

Speaker 4:

Crayola.

John Kropf:

Crayola. Mostly Crayola. That's going to be 90% of the answers that I hear. Do any of you remember getting watercolor paints that came in a black tin like this with a red oval liner called Prang and they were metal tin and you open them up and you mix your watercolors in there? Well, we're going to talk about the competitor to Crayola today. It's a brand called American Crayon.

They were at one time the biggest manufacturer of crayons in the world, even bigger than Vinny Smith, who made Crayola. And they also have made many other brands of paints and colors, including these watercolor tins are probably better known than their crayons. So what I thought I would do today is I'm going to read just about a five-minute passage from the book to sort of set the scene, and then I have about a 25-minute

presentation just to give you an overview of the story in the book, show you some of the products, some of the history.

And this is a very small group, so I'm happy to make this informal. You can ask questions at any time or at the end, however you'd like to do it. So I'm going to start. I debated, there's two passages I always go between. This is going to be more historical. The story of this crayon company is kind of a typical one that you would know for a Rust Belt company. It's a story of boom, build and bust. So I'm going to read you just two pages here, which is the very end of the crayon factory in Sandusky, Ohio.

15 years after its machinery had been removed, the American Crayon factory sat vacant. The 1902 state-of-the-art building, pride of an inventive Sandusky, became an embarrassing eyesore. There were false starts to tear it down, but the expense of demolishing a building filled with asbestos frustrated companies considering the job. The dilapidated structure was considered a safety hazard and threatened to collapse on the Norfolk and southern brick train tracks that ran alongside of the factory. The factory lost all of its working souls and was left to sit in humiliation with its distinctive white lettering. "The American Crayon Company, Sandusky, Ohio," clearly displayed for everyone to see.

In 2013, the Sandusky Register ran stories about the slow death of the building, quoting structural experts who gave the factory another couple of weeks to stand. Two years later, the factory was still standing, collecting more broken windows. Curiosity seekers climb through holes in the chain link fence with snow on the ground and filmed the desiccation inside that showed termite damage to the giant supporting beams and pulled out bricks from the disintegrating walls.

It was like watching someone poke around the corpse of a deceased friend. The images could not have been sadder against the bleak northern Ohio winter sky. Ben Urban, the grandson who had heard his grandfather's stories about American Crayon, even though he had moved to New England, saw the stories too and commented that, "The old factory called to me even more." Coincidentally, he had gone into business crafting and repurposing old wood, and shortly before the factory was to be demolished, he got his chance to save some of its bones. The site had been purchased at foreclosure auction by a Texas-based company specializing in demolishing and tear down of old buildings for salvage. Ben purchased some of the original wood to be repurposed for his handcrafted wood business.

Economists call it creative destruction. The destruction of the factory was nothing new. Other industries came and went, railroads and telegraphs destroyed the Pony Express, automobiles made horse-drawn carriages obsolete. But didn't everybody need crayons made in the Midwest? No matter how the digital the world became, wouldn't children still need crayons to illustrate what they saw in their imaginations? The hopeful answer was yes, but there was more to it than that. Beyond the black brick walls, the factory and its workers brought new color into the everyday world. The colorful crayons and paints were the tools for millions of imaginations. Dover White Chalk conveyed the newness of an idea, whether it was presented by nervous elementary school students or Nobel Prize-winning professors. All that activity and thinking got its start in the factory. How many teachers in one-room school houses or professors at Ivy League universities had mapped out their lessons using American Crayon chalk?

How many millions of children drew pictures of sunsets with crayon watercolors and had their work pinned up by proud parents on the family refrigerator? How many art students went on to create their work from using American Crayon tempera paints? How many houses were built using carpenter's chalk or clothes designed by fashion workers using tailor's chalk? How many first drafts of great literature, and not so great, were written with Sandusky-made pencils. They were instruments of everyday creativity. The creativity that flowed from the fingertips of the teachers, artists, and writers through the products of the factory was incalculable.

Maybe it is the child in everyone crayons have the power to inspire. And having a crayon factory nearby might seem like the closest thing to an eternal fountain of youth. Dozens of comments on Sandusky's history blog express affection, with many posts recounting how the factory was a favorite school field trip. Sandusky residents had snuck behind the chain link fence erected around the perimeter of the old factory and rescued wooden packing crates, boxes, signs, even bricks. Some devotees collected their crayons and one even built a small shrine in his home. Would the teardown of an insurance company building inspire the same compassion for its artifacts of desks and file cabinets? Can a factory have a soul?

So that's how that chapter ends there. That's sort of the sun setting on American Crayon and the factory that was built in St. Louis. So what I'd like to do now is give you a little bit more of a high-level view of the history of both the factory, crayons and the Sandusky community that was basically the home for American Crayon company. So we can go right from here to, this is just my introductory slide. I did grow up in Erie County, went to Erie High School, did all the high school things, was academic challenged, played football. Of course, I think I'm... Whoops, I think I'm right over there. 79. So that's me. And then this is the setting for our story.

Oh, I probably should say, why did I write this book? Well, this is a factory that was founded by my family four generations ago. So I took a very personal interest in it. That was one of the motivating factors. And this is the setting for our story. This is a wonderful print, I think of Sandusky, Ohio. It comes from the Library of Congress, but it really shows one of the great attributes of Sandusky. It sits right on Sandusky Bay in Lake Erie, and this is about the time that the Crayon factory went into business. It was incorporated in 1891.

Small little piece of trivia that you might find interesting while we're on this slide. I don't know if you can see from where you're sitting, if it's dark enough, but you see that pattern there? That is a Masonic emblem. Those street patterns were designed to fit and represent the Mason symbol because the first designer of Sandusky streets and plotted out the layout for Sandusky was a man by the name of Hector Kilbourne. Hector Kilbourne was a mason. And this is the only city in the world that I know of that actually has a Masonic symbol embedded. Side note, nothing to do with crayons.

So this is our setting. So now I'm going to give you an overview of free families that came together right about, this was between the Civil War period in 1900. This is all happening in the 1870s. And a little bit of history for you is Ohio was part of the Northwest Territory. And in the Northwest ordinance that set up this territory, one of the very first provisions in it said that there shall be strong encouragement of education, that there will be public education in the Northwest Territory. So Sandusky was part of that

very first tract of land that was carved out in the Western Reserve. And because of that provision in the Northwest ordinance, it attracted educators into this area. And this man here that we're looking at, this very kind of austere looking gentleman with a beard is a man by the name of Marcellus Cowdery. And Marcellus Cowdery was a very, very forward-thinking, forward-looking educator at the time.

His family came out of Vermont by way of Western New York, and he was drawn to Sandusky, who was setting up their very first public schools. He was so forward-looking. He had created integrated schools at this time in 1850 in Sandusky. And he wanted to also use the most advanced educational techniques and tools that were available to him at the time. It was also very, very, he felt penmanship and skills of writing were very, very important. So you might see where this is going, but at the time he was organizing the school, every morning he would hear this terrible noise coming from the classrooms. And that terrible noise was basically the distraction of raw hewn Dover chalk on the blackboards. The chalk at that time was basically taken out of the cliffs of Dover, put into ships as ballast, sailing ships, brought over to America. And when those ships arrived here, that chalk was taken out and repurposed and just basically chopped up and used, these chunks of raw chalk were used on classroom blackboards, but it was totally ill-suited, totally impractical.

It crumbled, it made this terrible sound that was, it was really hard on the ears for Marcellus, for the students and the teachers. So Marcellus, wanting to use the most advanced teaching techniques, turned to his brother-in-law. This is the second man in the second family in our story. This gentleman here, a man by the name of William Curtis. William Curtis was married to Marcellus's sister. He had been a farmer in the Sandusky area before the Civil War went off to serve in the Civil War. He was, I think in the 105th Ohio Volunteer Regiment. I love this picture. You can see he's kind of in his uniform with his sword and rifle with bayonet looking pretty stern there. But William Curtis was also a very inventive guy. He was a farmer. He pretty much knew the soil around the area. He was pretty inventive. So our superintendent of schools turns to Marcellus, turns to William and says, "What can you do to fix my chalk model?"

Well, William knew the soil so well. He knew that around Sandusky Bay, there were small quarries that had large deposits of gypsum. Gypsum is a very fine silty substance that is basically created and left over from the Ice Ages, and it's almost like a talc. So William had the idea that maybe I should take some of this gypsum and we'll start mixing it up with some of the chalk, diluting it, coming up with different, testing, different formulas and recipes. So on the family stove, they would boil up different mixtures and different recipes, and then they began to pour it out into wooden molds and they would bake it in the family oven to try out a new form of not only improved smoother chalk, the modern chalk that you know today, but it also came in sticks. It was before it was just sort of blocks of chalk. So William had hit an idea that actually worked. So the beginning of modern crayons really starts in this invention of chalk. And from the chalk, they started to add pigment and add colors.

So they incorporated into a small company back the 1870s. They turned to another one of the Cowderys. That was the brother of Marcellus. This gentleman, John Cowdery, had formed something called the Western School Supply Company, but they just sold in a very small area around the state. What they really needed is what we would call today

a venture capitalist, somebody to put up money, to raise money, to turn this chalk idea into an effective business plan that could be nationwide. So this is where the third family comes in. The third family is represented by this man, John Whitworth, who was, he started as a grocery clerk in Sandusky, became very, very successful and respected in the community. Eventually he became the head of the local bank, the Citizens Bank of Sandusky. And he also happened to marry William Curtis's sister. So we're intertwining all these families through marriage.

You've got the Curtis's, the Cowderys and John Whitworth are all marrying each other's siblings. But he said, "You know what? We're going to issue public stock and incorporate." So they issued public stock, they incorporated in 1890 under the name the American Crayon Company. And they were called crayons at that time because even though we're still talking chalk crayons, there was a lot of confusion over what a crayon was. There were chalk crayons. And in 1902, they hit on another improvement, another invention, which was essentially to distinguish chalk crayons from wax crayons. They came up with wax crayons in 1902. The first practical children's crayons were the wax chalk crayons that they were put together by a similar sort of recipe and needed a binding agent agent, which combined wax and pigment and began the manufacture of children's crayons. And this is not very good, but this is what I could find in some of the family papers.

Someone had created what was considered to be a diorama of the very first baking of the chalk in the family oven. I don't know how great it is or how well you can see it, but I had to put it in there. But this is a picture of their very first factory in 1901. So they've now got their stock issued, their story to sell through most of the eastern part of the United States. But that factory burns to the ground in 1901. So they very, very quickly built this factory in 1902. It was a state-of-the-art factory. And this is also the year in which they had now adopted this new formula to create wax crayons with adding pigment to the wax. This factory is where it's really kind of in the center of Sandusky. This is the main avenue here, Hayes Avenue, which turns into route four.

This is the Norfolk and Southern Railway. So it was well-positioned and it employed over 500 people at its peak. It was the oldest and longest employer in Sandusky. And they made and probably more crayons and more paints there at one time than anywhere else in the world. And the marketing people got a hold of it, and they branded Sandusky as the color capital of the world. And that's where the title of the book comes from, Color Capital of the World. That's just a sign that I salvaged from the factory. It was from my grandfather, John Whitworth. But I want to show you now a few of the products down through the years that they made. These are some of the very first wax crayons. This is a copy or a picture of the box. They were still trying to figure out how to introduce this new concept of wax crayons.

These were all one color. They were all red, long and thin. They hadn't standardized the shape of crayons yet in the 1910s. But something else was happening in the country when they're making these wax crayons. And what was happening is you had a large influx, a large German influence that had brought in the idea of kindergarten as part of the curriculum for schools. And as part of the kindergarten curriculum, it was important that children learn creativity early, that you let them express their creativity. And this was the perfect storm because you had crayons. Now, wax crayons, which were many

sold what they called Penny a Pack. They were penny pack crayons. Very inexpensive, practical. And it was a great way for this kindergarten curriculum to address the creative needs that the children had. This is a picture inside the factory in 1916. I thought it was somewhat interesting because this was during a presidential campaign.

The factory was a really very significant, important factory. And this is a campaign of Charles Evans Hughes, who's standing right here, who was the Republican candidate for president back then. He was running against Woodrow Wilson, but he stopped and paid a visit to the factory. And these are all the local bigwigs and dignitaries that came out to hear him. Here's a picture outside of that same campaign stop outside the factory where he's making a speech up here on the podium. But what I love about this picture is I really like these old factories that show all the brickwork. It has the name of the company, where it's located, and this was a solidly built fortress-like structure. It was really substantial in its day. Probably want to hop back to one other thing on this picture. You see all these boxes in the back. These are, they're very lightweight, like a balsa wood box that they made.

It was the packaging that they had for all of their chalk products and all their crayon products. They needed something that was lightweight and sturdy. The ship was very fragile. Crayons and chalk can be very fragile. They were so good at making these boxes that they made them by the millions for other companies. I'll give you an example. Henry Ford, when he made the Model T, he needed something to insulate some of the electronic components to the starter. And the only thing he could use for it was wood. And he had the American Crayon Company make literally millions of these until the Model T finally went out of production. But they had all these other side businesses that came up along the way. And there's one other little automobile industry anecdote I will share with you. Henry Ford also famously said, "People can have any color model they want, as long as it's black."

Well, his competitors at the time were the Chrysler brothers, decided, "You know what? We need to compete with Henry and we need to offer people the choice. We need to offer your choice of a color for your automobile." So they actually came down to the American Crayon company to look at the colors and how they made the colors and how they were applied. And then from there on they started to offer consumers a choice on what color car you could have. So there was a couple of touches there with the automobile industry. I'm going to do a few more products and I'll try to wind up here and take any questions. This is still, this is a 1918 coloring kit, and I love the packaging for these early packets of crayons. They often would hire well-known children's illustrators of the day that would design their packaging.

And this is one from 1918. I consider these almost artwork in and of themselves, but they would contain not only crayons, but they have little coloring books, stencils because they were trying to get children used to learning how to use this new technology. And the way I think of crayons coming into the schools at the time is when I went to college, it was the beginning of the PC and you had all these computer companies buying for you to get brand royalties. They were coming into their colleges and the universities, Apple would bring its PC, Dell, IBM, they would offer theirs. It was very much the same thing with crayons, only in the elementary schools that you had

American Crayon was competing with Vinny Smith, who had just come out with Crayola. And it was a highly competitive area to adopt this new art technology, if you will.

This is just page from a couple pages from inside that coloring kit. You can see what the little coloring books look like, sort of the first coloring books, if you will. This is a picture of their American Crayon Company school catalog. That's where they probably made their most revenue, was really marketing towards schools. And the other important thing to know about the company is they adopted the Old Faithful geyser from Yellowstone as their trademark. Yeah, it was trademarked for decades and decades. It was on pretty much all of their products until they bought out. So here's a Art Deco version of Old Faithful that they put on another way that they tried to market crayons and their paints were, they started a publication called Everyday Art, which was sent to educators, teachers, art institutes. And this magazine ran for almost 50 years and it was, I mean, they had a whole publishing arm that was built around promoting the use of colored crayons and paints. Going up through the 1930s.

Blend well. So we're in the thirties. This is pretty much you're getting now to the standard sized crayon that you would know today. This was a brand, they had it. It was one of their bestsellers that was sold to school age children. But one thing to note is they're still trying to figure out to standardize what they were going to call crayons. They would have these wax ones, they would call them wax crayons and then they would have chalk and they would call them chalk crayons. It started to get kind of confusing, but they eventually, by the 1940s, they did settle on a naming convention, which was wax crayons simply became crayons and chalk crayons simply became chalk. But there was this confusion for some time.

This picture, I don't know if any of you know the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile, but this is sort of the 1930s equivalent. They had created a series of delivery trucks that had this giant piece of chalk as their symbol. "World's oldest and largest manufacturer of crayons." And I just love that picture. If you saw that driving down the road, you would remember that company. And there's the Old Faithful trademark. Here is a tin from the 1930s that held some of their chalk. They still made the chalk that was, they never stopped making the white chalk that's used on blackboards. I'm not even sure. Do they use chalk anymore at all? I think it's probably long gone. But I love this packaging because it is a tin. It says Dover Cliff, which is sort of paying homage to the original Dover chalk from England. And it's got a picture of the factory on it. And you can go on the eBay and people go nuts. They collect all of these tins. There's plenty of them.

This is a stock certificate that the company issued. I talked about the stock earlier. This is an aerial view of the factory from 1956, black and white of course. But if you happen to buy a copy of the book and look at the cover closely, you'll see that that picture is actually on the cover with the crayons imposed over it. But it was centrally located. This is the Norfolk and Southern rail line. They could easily ship. And this is Hayes Avenue, which is the main thoroughfare in Sandusky. I'm going to jump ahead to the 1970s. This is sort of the last packaging that they had in their crayon line where they used American Crayons as their brand. This was a pack of 64 with a sharpener, but a lot happened between the fifties and the seventies. In 1958, those families that I had talked about, they had gone through two generations, in some cases three, of management.

But in 1958, those generations were sort of at a dead end. And the family accepted a buyout takeover from a parent company called the Joseph Dixon Crucible Company. They later became the Dixon Ticonderoga Company. You may know that name as the maker of the No. 2 pencil, Dixon Ticonderoga yellow pencil. So they were bought out, and this is 1958. They continued to run the American Crayon brand all the way up through the seventies and eighties, but eventually the parent company that bought it out never put money back into the factory. So that 1902 state-of-the-art factory that we saw, a lot of it had not been updated or improved. And without making those improvements, the factory was really beginning showing its age in terms of its productivity. But the final end to that, to the factory, which is the passage I read to you, came around 1990 when you had NAFTA. And with NAFTA, it made labor very cheap across the borders.

And so what the management decided to do is that we'll take all of the machinery out of the Sandusky factory and we're going to ship it all the way down to Mexico because labor's a lot cheaper down there and we'll make the crayons from there. So they stripped everything out of the factory. And this building just sat idle for years and years and the venture down in Mexico actually didn't last for more than year. It folded up. It was not a going concern. So that ended that chapter. But this is really a story that hit home to me because it's where I grew up. If you ask anybody in Sandusky, they inevitably have some family member or some friend that worked in this factory and it was a huge part of the community. This is probably one of the final pictures of the factory before it was demolished.

There's just an empty lot there now, but you can still see the lettering on the company name there in the smoke sack. This is just a... Let's see. If you ever go to Sandusky, there's a park downtown that they do different plantings. This was a planting that they did to mark the company's 125th year, and that was planted in 1960. So I've kind of jumped through a lot, forwarded through a lot of history. If you have any questions, I'm happy to answer them. This is my one commercial plug for the book. If you're interested and you like the story, you're interested, I do have books for sale. One little thing that I offer to do is I have original crayons left from the factory. If you buy a book, I'm happy to inscribe it in a color of your choice. So that's the end of my presentation. I'm happy to take questions or comments or criticism. So next time you pick up a crayon, maybe you might feel a little differently. But thank you for coming.