

# Today

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## Carterville bridge plan ALA benefit

A bridge party benefit for the Carterville Catholic Church, the after American Lung Association will be held by a group of Carterville bridge enthusiasts on Tuesday, July 29. The event will be from 7 to 10:30 p.m. at the Carterville Catholic Church, the after American Lung Association will be held by a group of Carterville bridge enthusiasts on Tuesday, July 29. The event will be from 7 to 10:30 p.m. at

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**Long service:** Employees with over 30 years of service are (kneeling) John Battoli and Mary Barnett; (standing, from left) Pauline Zanzottara, Barbara Sweet, Frances Younkun, plant manager Sam Kirby and Christine Tasoff.



**Stitching away:** Barbara Sweet sews a blouse in the Smoler Brothers Inc. plant at Herrin.

# As fashions change, Smoler plant endures

By Carol Roehm

Southern Illinoisan Correspondent

When most industrial operations become obsolete, they are rejuvenated with computers and modern technology. But Smoler Brothers Inc. in Herrin has found that keeping up to date also requires the hand craftsmanship that has kept its business thriving for nearly 40 years.

Smoler's ability to survive in the highly competitive apparel manufacturing field lies in the dedication of the 104 employees who are currently on the payroll. Of these, 49 have been employed at Smoler's for more than 20 years, and six employees for more than 30 years.

Although the majority of employees are from Herrin, there are employees from as far away as Marlynsboro, Cobden and Tunnel Hill. The current Herrin plant at 720 E. Monroe St. was established in September 1947, but operations actually began in November 1946 in the orchard area of Or-Hill.

John Battoli, a mechanic at Smoler's for more than 30 years, recalled, "The Herrin Chamber of Commerce collected money from every household to build this plant. At one time there were 700 employees here."

In the '30s Smoler's had a fabric cutting department in West Frankfort because work was so plentiful and there wasn't enough room in the Herrin plant," Christine Tasoff, another more-than-30-years employee, said. "It was a growing plant back then."

Smoler's was also said to have had a small sewing plant in Johnson City in the past.

Maurice Smoler, along with his

sons Jerry, Sidney and Irwin, was the founder of Smoler Brothers Inc. Currently Jerry Smoler is the president of the corporation, with Sidney and Irwin and their sons still in the business.

One of the first employees hired at the Herrin plant notably went on to become the plant manager for 19 years. Louise Hamilton was manager from 1955 to 1974.

The current manager, Sam Kirby, who has been overseeing the Herrin plant for almost five years, said he would like to expand operations and is seeking additional experienced employees.

"Right now we're trying to recruit some experienced sewing machine operators," Kirby said.

Besides the sewing department, there is a cutting department in which "spreaders" spread fabric in layers to be cut, "cutters" cut fabric around the patterns with an electric knife, and "bundlers" gather the fabric pieces.

There is also a finishing department in which garments are pressed, inspected and folded. The garments are then bagged and packed for shipping.

"Smoler Brothers is one of the largest privately owned manufacturers of ladies' sportswear in the United States," Kirby said.

Smoler's is headquartered in New York City, where garments are designed, and has offices in Chicago, where patterns are made.

Currently there are five plants in operation. Three of them are located in Alabama, one in Lincoln, Ill., and one in Herrin. A sixth plant, in Jackson, Tenn., was closed down. "All the plants make ladies' sportswear," Kirby said. "The Her-

rin plant makes dresses and tops mostly, and the plants down in Alabama make slacks and skirts."

Sewing machine operator Barbara Sweet, who has been employed at Smoler's since she was a senior in high school more than 30 years ago, said, "We're making more dresses nowadays, and the styles are dressier than in the past."

Another sewing machine operator for more than 30 years, Pauline Zanzottara, agreed. "We went for about 10 years making pantsuits, and now it's all dresses," she said. "It seems like the current styles are back from the '40s."

Kirby said that the Herrin plant receives its garment orders from the Smoler offices in Chicago.

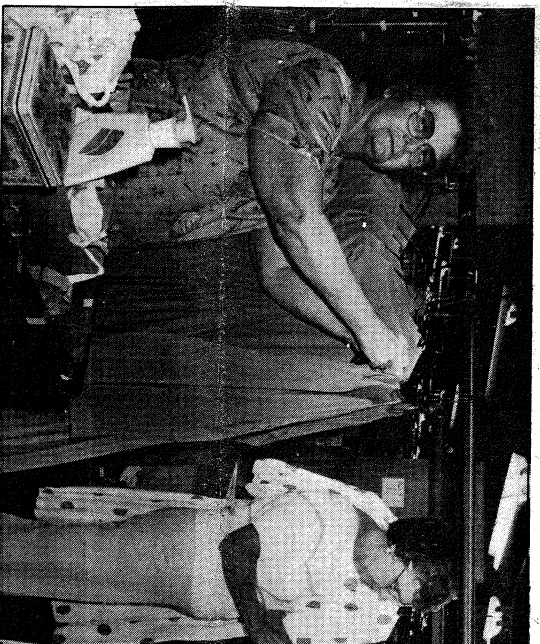
Although the Herrin plant has manufactured apparel for department stores in the past, now the plant is producing garments for Blair New Process Co., a mail order catalog service.

Garments are produced a season ahead, and Kirby estimated that the Herrin plant manufactures 10,000 garments a week and exports about \$1 million a year in payroll.

In conjunction with the Herrin plant is the Smoler's Outlet Store located behind the plant, although not all five of the plants have outlet stores.

Smoler warehouses in Chicago distribute overproductions of garments and cancellations of apparel items from all five plants to the various outlets.

Items that can be purchased at the outlet are fabrics by the yard, piece goods, trim, zippers, buttons, blouses, dresses, slacks, shorts, cut-



**Critical eyes:** Mary Odum (left) and Bonnie Franklin inspect finished garments.

loties and pantsuits.

Bonnie Lackey, a former employee of the fabric cutting plant in West Frankfort, is the outlet store manager. She says, "The store sells items for half the retail price."

With the current trend of various retail stores that claim they are going to increase selling "American made" products, American garment manufacturers like Smoler Brothers Inc. should prosper.

"The trend is definitely helping," Kirby said. "Our business has increased in the last year, but I'm not sure it is necessarily because of the trend."

Still others are skeptical of the trend. Ms. Zanzottara said, "The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union is lobbying in Washington, D.C., and even if the bill gets passed to cut back on imports, it's still going to take a while for us to recuperate."



**Supervisors:** From left, Betty Maze, sewing office; Sam Kirby, plant manager; Ann Barnett, sewing office; and John Barnett, sewing office.