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# Leslie E. Tassell: Fun-loving Entrepreneur

Grand Valley State University

Gordon L. Olson

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# LESLIE E. TASSELL

*F u n - l o v i n g   E n t r e p r e n e u r*

A biography  
by  
Gordon L. Olson

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Cover photo by LaClaire

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing and publishing this biography was a team effort. In addition to several delightful conversations with Leslie Tassell, which provided the core of the biography, I was assisted by others who provided background information and illustrations, read and commented on the manuscript, designed and printed the finished product.

Leslie Tassell's daughter, Joyce, reviewed the final manuscript, and his administrative assistant, Colleen DuFort, provided background material and located numerous illustrations. Chris Byron and Rebecca Mayne of the Grand Rapids Public Library's Local History Department helped locate additional information and photographs, as did Todd Buchta at Grand Valley State University's Development Office.

Publication of the manuscript was in the capable hands of a splendid group of professionals. Ellen Arlinsky, who has served as my editor for many years, did her usual outstanding job of turning my fractured syntax and awkward grammar into a smoothly flowing narrative. Dan Murdock designed the text and photographs into a cohesive whole, and the staff at The Printery in Holland, Michigan, completed the task with their usual high-quality work. Throughout the project, Jean Enright of Grand Valley State University provided useful suggestions and support.

All of these people gave freely of their time and expertise to help produce an accurate publication. For any errors that remain, I must accept sole responsibility.

Gordon L. Olson

*Grand Rapids, Michigan*



Leslie E. Tassell  
(All photographs  
courtesy Leslie E.  
Tassell unless  
otherwise noted.)

For Leslie Tassell, the key to business success is always to have fun. As he sees it, every day should be filled with activities that provide either profit or pleasure—and preferably both. Whether at work or play, he has invariably proceeded in only one direction and at a single pace—full speed ahead. Following that precept, Tassell built a multimillion-dollar automobile parts manufacturing company, developed real estate, raised and trained show horses, built a hotel and marina complex in Florida, and explored Africa on safari. More recently, he has employed his boundless energy and talent to plan major gifts to the community that will assure a skilled workforce for the area's tool and die and health-care industries for many decades to come.

## GROWING UP

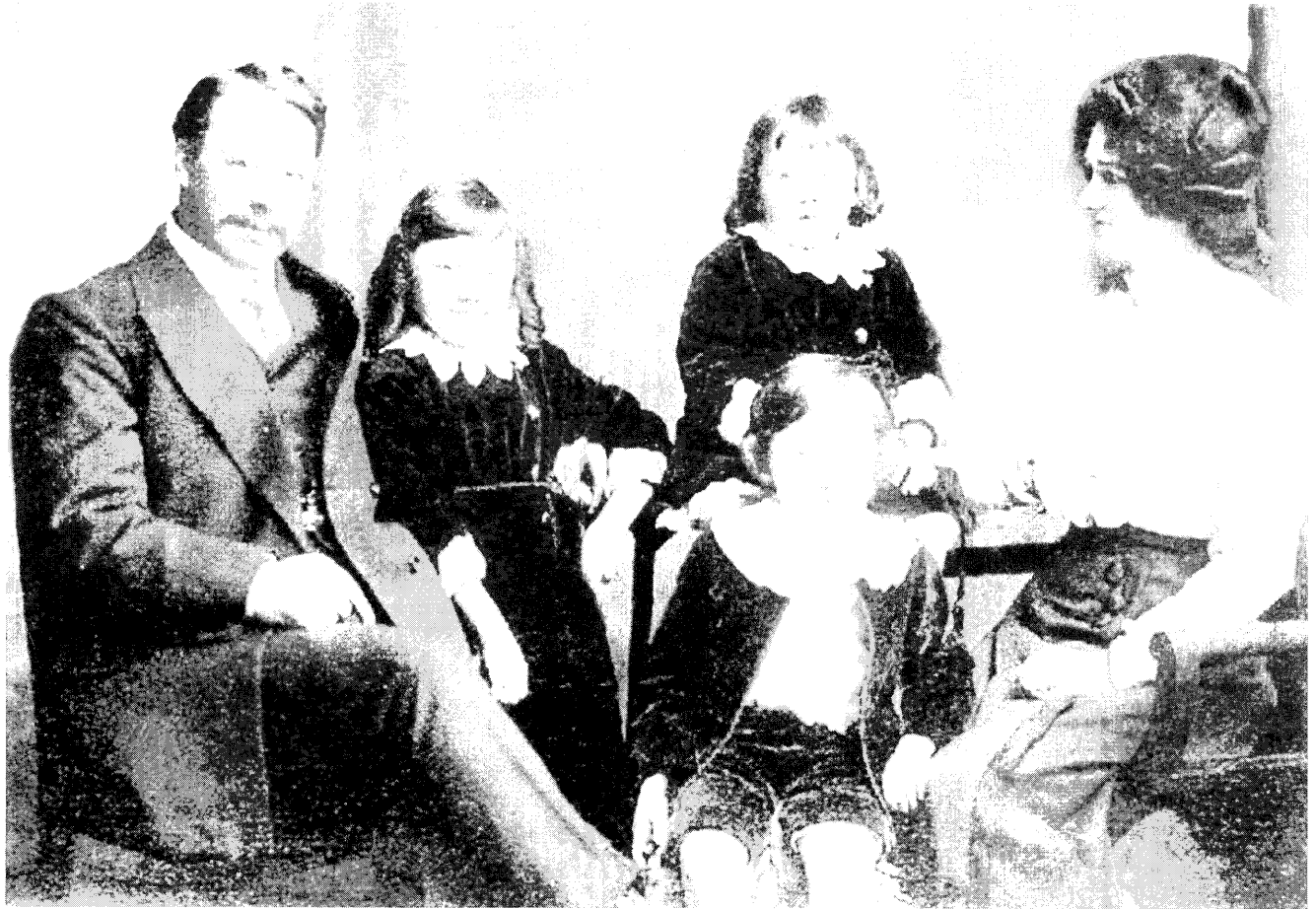
Leslie Tassell was born in London, England, on February 2, 1908, the son of Ernest and Effie (Comfort) Tassell. Ernest's forebears had lived as landed gentry and merchants in Kent County, southeast of London, for many years, raising crops and animals on a sizeable estate and

engaging in a variety of business ventures. Unfortunately, Ernest's father, Thomas Tassell, had not managed the land and family assets well, and his holdings gradually diminished. He and his wife, Eliza, managed to eke out a living for themselves and their sons, Victor and Ernest, and their daughter, Robin, but after his death, the divided estate was not large enough to support his children and their families. Around 1900 Ernest and Effie moved to London hoping to establish a new life.

Sprawled in all directions from the medieval city along the Thames River that was its heart, turn-of-the-century London was the world's largest city, populated by 6.5 million souls, one-fifth of the total population of England and Wales. It was Leslie Tassell's home until he was six years old. For the small boy, it was a place of immense size, curiosity, and even a little danger. For his father, long accustomed to the welcoming English countryside, it was a forbidding metropolis where he had difficulty finding and keeping jobs.

When Leslie was just starting primary school, his father could stand London no longer and decided to move his family across the Atlantic to Canada. The decision did not mean a complete break with home and loved ones, however. Canada, after all, was still part of the Commonwealth, and Effie Tassell's sister, Fannie, and her husband, Harold Hartley, had already settled there. From their new home in Meaford, Ontario, on the south shore of Lake Huron's Georgian Bay about 80 miles northwest of Toronto, Harold Hartley wrote back to London, describing the opportunities available to those who were enterprising and willing to work hard.

Bidding goodbye to relatives who chose to remain in England, Ernest and his family boarded a liner for Canada. Arriving in Meaford during the warm summer season, the newcomers found the region more to their liking than teeming London. Meaford was located in Grey County, a huge, booming agricultural area that by then boasted a population of 64,000.



It was no accident that first Harold Hartley and then Ernest Tassell made their way to Grey County. Determined to attract farmers to its expanses of open land, county officials published recruiting booklets for distribution in England. Boasting that Grey County offered above-average wheat and other grain crops as well as plums, grapes, peaches, and pears, the promotional literature assured potential settlers they could secure 60-to-70-acre farms, with land cleared and buildings constructed, for little more than £600, approximately \$3,000. Very likely one of these brochures first caught Harold Hartley's eye and caused him to emigrate, and later helped persuade Ernest and Effie Tassell to follow.

Leslie Tassell's first clear boyhood memories are of Meaford. Ernest managed to buy a small farm outside Meaford for his family, and there Leslie, his older sister, Effie, younger sister Cecile (Cissie), and baby brother, Kitchener, who was born when Leslie was 12, spent the next 10 years. Because the farm was not large enough to support the family, Ernest worked in a furniture plant in Meaford, and many of the farm chores fell to Leslie. As soon as he was old enough, he helped plant and tend the crops and cared for the animals—the horse that pulled the plow, the cows that provided the family with milk, and the chickens that were raised both for meat and eggs.

During his years in Meaford, young Leslie nurtured his zest for fun and adventure. He learned to ride the farm horse, and he loved to explore the woods and fields around Meaford as well as the waters of the Big Head River and Georgian Bay. Especially vivid recollections of the region's long winters and muddy roads each spring still linger, as does the memory of the time he hurried to a field several miles from town to watch the arrival

Ernest and Effie Tassell and their children, Effie (next to Ernest), Cissie, and Leslie, posed for a London photographer shortly before leaving for Ontario in 1913, just before the outbreak of World War I.



The Tassell extended family gathered for this group photograph in about 1950.

L-R: Mrs. Effie Tassell; her daughter Effie and husband Harold Pinder; Leslie Tassell and wife Ruth; Mr. and Mrs. Kitchener Tassell; Harold and Elsie Comfort. Leslie and Ruth's son Donald is seated on the floor.

of the first airplane to visit Meaford. Even now he clearly recalls the summer days spent with a group of older boys at a swimming hole near the mouth of the Big Head River. One day, they concluded it was time for Leslie to learn how to swim and, with little warning, they threw him in. He managed to flail his way to shore and before long was diving and swimming with the best of them. The time spent boating and swimming as a youngster became the basis for a lifelong love affair with the water that continues today at Caloosa Cove, a resort and marina he operates on Islamorada in the Florida keys.

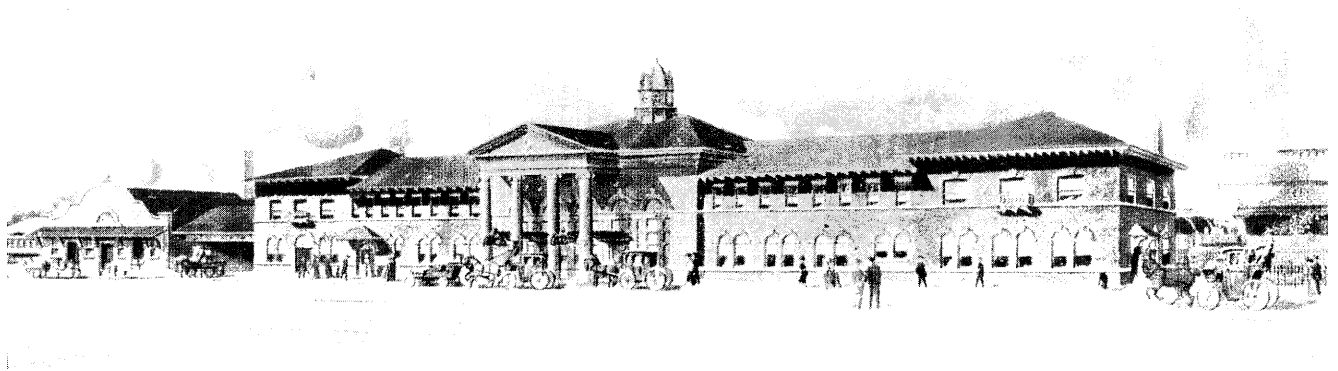
Although he moved to Canada and then the United States, Ernest Tassell remained thoroughly British throughout his life. When World War I broke out, he was considered too old to serve, but he returned to England nonetheless and worked in a war manufacturing plant for the duration of the conflict, sending money home to support his family. When the war ended, Ernest returned to Meaford and went back to work in the furniture factory.

Leslie Tassell's formal schooling came to an end in 1922 when the 14-year-old sophomore left high school to join his father in the furniture plant. It was not a move he remembers with relish. Quickly, he developed a distaste for furniture work. "I didn't like the odor of the varnish and the stain. I didn't think there was much opportunity. I saw men doing the same things they had done for twenty years." Faced with the prospect of a monotonous future in the furniture factory, Tassell, joined by his sisters, began lobbying his father to move to a city with greater possibilities. It was not a difficult sell. Although Ernest was a skilled and experienced employee, his wages were low

and he found few opportunities to move up to a better-paying job. He had heard about the furniture factories of Grand Rapids, Michigan, with their high-quality products and more generous wages. With some misgivings, and great hopes for a more secure future, Ernest packed up his clan, pulled up stakes for the United States, and once again set out for a new home.

## A FRESH START

Traveling south by train, first to Windsor and Detroit, and then across Michigan, the family arrived at Grand Rapids' Union Depot. From there they entered a bustling city with a growing population of nearly 140,000, predominantly of Dutch and Polish extraction, with smaller numbers from Great Britain and Ireland, Scandinavia, and southern and central Europe. The local furniture industry, which had weathered a bitter strike in 1911 and economic doldrums created by World War I, was enjoying a new era of postwar prosperity. Americans across the country were buying homes and outfitting them with the latest in electrical appliances and stylish new furniture. In response to skyrocketing demand, the Grand Rapids factories were expanding their product lines and hiring new workers. With 10 years of experience as a furniture worker in Meaford, Ernest Tassell had little difficulty



finding employment, and he took a job at the Imperial Furniture Company, within walking distance of the home he had rented for his family at 944 Front Avenue.

Founded by F. Stuart Foote in 1903, Imperial built its reputation on a line of dining room table and chair sets that was soon expanded to include a wide variety of formal and occasional tables and bookcases, many of them reproductions of historical designs. Foote also claimed to have invented the “coffee table.” The large Imperial factory was a far cry from the small company Ernest Tassell had worked for in Canada, but he quickly adjusted and within a short time was made a foreman, settling into a career that lasted until his retirement in 1938. After leaving the furniture industry, he operated the Tassell Fur Farm in Comstock Park until his death in 1948 at age 70.

Although he did not like the work, Leslie Tassell, like his father, sought full-time employment in the furniture industry and, shortly after his 15th birthday, landed a job at Berkey and Gay, just across the river from the family's home on Front Avenue. Founded in 1863, the company grew to become Grand Rapids' largest manufacturer of residential furniture by the first years of the 20th century, shipping its products to retailers in every

Union Depot, with its columned entrance, provided Leslie Tassell and his family with their first impression of the city. (*Grand Rapids Public Library, Swanlund Postcard Collection.*)





Leslie Tassell's first job in Grand Rapids was at the giant Berkey and Gay Furniture company on Canal (now Monroe) Street. (Grand Rapids Public Library, General Photograph Collection.)

part of the country. But Leslie's stint at the furniture giant lasted little more than six months. Shortly after he started at the factory, he began feeling pain in his ankle that eventually became so intense he could not work and was barely able to walk. The diagnosis was osteomyelitis, a debilitating bone infection that affects the marrow and is slow to respond to treatment.

For today's osteomyelitis patients, antibiotics are the treatment of choice. In the 1920s, however, physicians could prescribe little beyond complete rest to permit the body to fight the disease. With no family resources to pay for his care, Leslie checked into



In the mid-1920s, Leslie Tassell spent a year in Grand Rapids' new Sunshine Hospital sanitarium recovering from osteomyelitis. (Grand Rapids Public Library, General Photograph Collection.)

Sunshine (now Kent Community) Hospital on Fuller Avenue as a charity case. Operated by the City of Grand Rapids, Sunshine was established in 1905 as an open-air hospital for tuberculosis sufferers and was expanded in 1923 to accommodate patients having other infectious diseases and those who required long-term care. Leslie spent nearly a year there before being well enough to get on with his life.

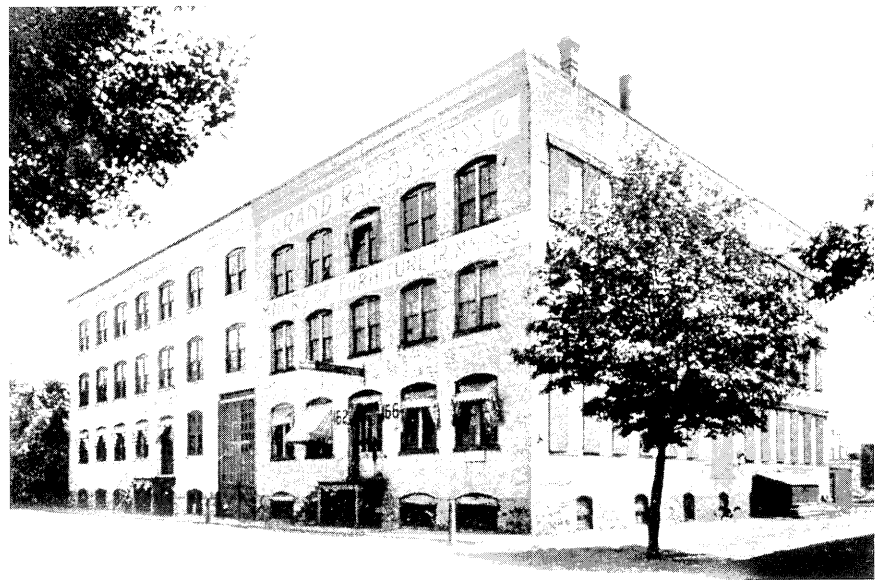
The time, however, was not totally lost. Although he had just turned 17 when he left the hospital, he had thought a great deal about his future, the type of work he wanted to do, and what he hoped to accomplish with his life. Several decisions had crystallized during his stay. First, he did not intend to return to high school. Second, he did not want to return to a furniture industry job. A subsequent stint as a sales clerk at Wurzburg Department Store assured him his future did not lay in retailing. He felt certain there were other areas that paid better, and offered greater independence. While Leslie Tassell had not yet concluded that he wanted to operate his own company, his thoughts were beginning to work in that direction. Thinking he might do well as a trade apprentice, he set out to explore the possibilities the city's manufacturers offered.

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Tassell's quest was not totally random. His older sister, Effie, who worked as a bookkeeper at the *Grand Rapids Herald*, was dating his future brother-in-law, Harold Pinder, who worked as a tool and die maker. Although Leslie had neither a special interest in nor affinity for the trade, the sight of Pinder's nice car and fine clothes had not been lost on him, and he decided to make the rounds of the city's tool and die shops until he found one that was hiring. It was not an easy search. Years later he recalled making four visits before Riney (Reinder) Kooyers, toolmaker at the Grand Rapids

Brass Company and also a neighbor, finally relented and told him, "I'm sick and tired of seeing you come around all the time. I'm going to put you to work."

Tool and die making, an integral component of America's industrial might, traces its roots to inventor Eli Whitney's concept of mass production using interchangeable parts manufactured to preset dimensions. Whitney, in fact, had made both his reputation and his fortune by mass-producing firearms for the United States Army in the War of 1812. This first successful application of interchangeable parts, and the subsequent development of machine tools, brought about the modern machine shop—or job shop. Instead of craftsmen making each piece by hand, manufacturers shifted to a two-stage process in which uniform parts were made using dies or presses and then assembled into the final product, a gun, say, or a farm implement. The difference between the older, handcrafted



In 1925, shortly after his 17th birthday, Leslie Tassell began a two-and-a-half-year stint as a toolmaker apprentice at the Grand Rapids Brass Company. (*Grand Rapids Public Library, Fitch Collection.*)

method and the modern production process is akin to a baker shaping each cookie individually, or using a machine that dispenses precise amounts of dough so that all of the cookies are the same size and shape.

Producing no finished product on their own, machine shops fabricated the tools other manufacturers needed to make their products. Metal hinges, handles, and trim pieces for the furniture industry, for example, were either cast in dies or stamped from sheets of metal, with additional holes either punched or drilled. Machine shops made the dies, stamps, punches, drills, and other tools required to produce each uniform piece.

Press dies were an important late-19th-century development that aided manufacturers by cutting and forming sheet metal between two complementary forms, one concave and the other convex. Between these two dies, the sheet might take on the shape of parts for a stove, a tank, or later, an automobile fender. As manufacturing became increasingly complex during America's rapid late-19th-century industrialization, growing demand for press dies led to the emergence of specialized machine shops known as tool and die shops.

Like the major furniture makers during the turn-of-the-century heyday of the Grand Rapids furniture industry, some of Grand Rapids' larger companies during the 1920s had their own tool and die shops. Smaller concerns were served by a number of independent shops located throughout the city. Whether they were independent or part of a single company, tool and die shops employed the apprentice system to train new workers.

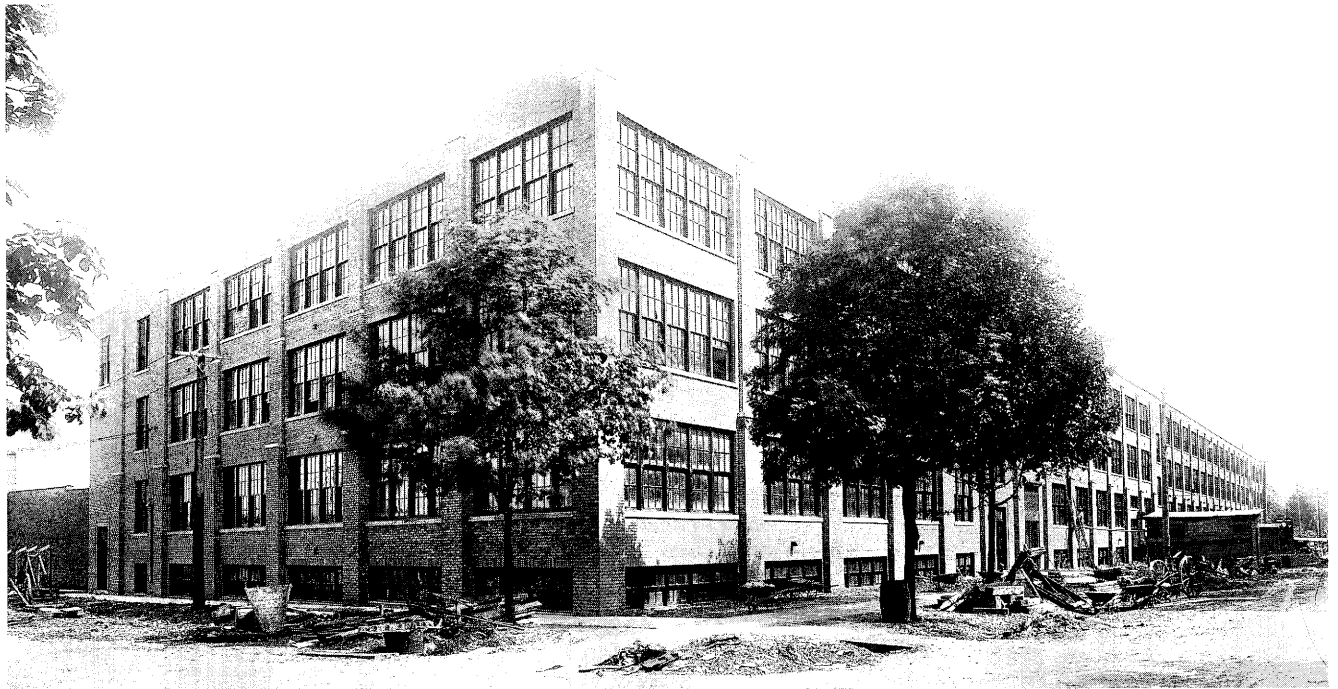
From age 17 to 20, apprentice Leslie Tassell learned the tool and die business from the ground up, one step at a time. His first job at Grand Rapids Brass Company was in the tool crib. There, for six months, he passed out tools until he knew the name and use of every tool in the crib, as well as how to sharpen, straighten, and properly clear each one. Although the company didn't make much effort at formal instruction, Tassell took every opportunity to learn from those around him. When his boss did not take time to teach him, Tassell learned by doing, sharpening band saws, for example, until their operators were satisfied. Whenever he could steal a few moments, he watched how other operators ran their machines. Some of the men were willing to instruct the eager young tool crib attendant, but many others resented his curiosity, seeing him as a potential threat to their job security.

After his six-month stint in the tool crib, Tassell was assigned to clean machines. When he finally had the opportunity to work with metal, his first job was annealing the various parts of the brass locks the company made. Working brass causes it to become brittle, and annealing is simply the process of reheating it to make it less brittle. Leslie's job was to place a bucket full of lock parts into a small metal furnace and, when they were red hot, pull them out and immerse them in water. Thus annealed, the parts could be assembled into a strong, durable lock. It was not particularly challenging work, and before long Tassell was restless for something more complicated.

Eventually, by keeping his mouth shut and doing what he was told, Tassell convinced his superiors he was serious about learning the tool and die trade, and they gave him some small, simple tool parts to make. At last, he was learning how to use the lathes, grinders, punches, drills, and other tools that he had only seen others use. Looking back many decades later, he recalled with a mixture of pride and pleasure the first time he was entrusted to cut, shape, and sharpen pieces of blank metal into the tools of his chosen trade.

# MOVING ON

After two and a half years as an apprentice, Tassell “got cocky enough” to think he could do it all. He took his toolbox and went looking for a job that would give him “something to do.” He did not have to look far. Before long, he landed a position as a toolmaker at the Hayes Body Company on Seventh Street and Muskegon Avenue near his home. At the time, with more than 1,000 workers, Hayes was one of Grand Rapids’ largest employers,



supplying auto bodies to the Overland Auto Company, the Durant Motor Company, a forerunner of today’s General Motors, and to other automakers in several states.

At Hayes, Leslie was part of the large crew making the tools and dies used to shape and assemble parts such as hoods and fenders. Like his previous job at the Grand Rapids Brass Company, his new position was a learning experience—giving him a particular appreciation of the importance of carefully structured manufacturing processes and effective management—and he had more independence in his work. Off the job, he had met Ruth Eggleston, daughter of Wilber and Phoebe Eggleston. Wilber and Leslie were fellow metal workers at Hayes, and Wilber’s attractive daughter had caught the young bachelor’s eye. Before long, the couple were dating and in 1929 they married.

As things turned out, 1929 was not the most auspicious year to begin a marriage. Tied to the auto industry that began declining even before the stock market crash of 1929, Hayes Body Company was losing customers. At about the time Leslie and Ruth were married, Hayes reduced its workforce and, as one of the newer workers, Leslie was laid off. With a new wife at home, he anxiously began looking for a new job.

Unemployment in West Michigan was rising, and Leslie Tassell was not alone as he began talking to West Michigan manufacturers, hoping one might be interested in hiring him. Fortunately, he was young, he had nearly four years of experience as a tool and die

In 1927, Leslie Tassell began his first tool-and-die-making job with the Hayes Body Company, which supplied parts to automobile manufacturers throughout the Midwest. (*Grand Rapids Public Library, General Photograph Collection.*)

maker, and he and Ruth were willing to move. After a few tense weeks, he found work at the Hart & Cooley Company in nearby Holland.

Founded in 1892 by Howard S. Hart and Norman P. Cooley, Hart & Cooley manufactured furnace registers, capitalizing on the national trend toward replacing stoves and fireplaces with central heating systems. Originally operating from New Britain, Connecticut, the company established the Federal Manufacturing Company in Holland, Michigan, in 1924 to supply registers to the famous Holland Furnace Company. Four years later, the company moved its Connecticut operations to Holland and merged with Federal under the name of Hart & Cooley Co., Inc.

For Leslie and Ruth Tassell, it was a very fortunate development. Despite the onset of the Great Depression, Hart & Cooley grew rapidly at its new location. By the early 1930s, the company had established itself as the world's largest producer of warm-air furnace registers, and by the time Howard Hart left the business in 1935, he held more patents for furnace registers than any other individual. While many of the nation's workers stood in long unemployment lines or turned to federal relief programs, those employed by Hart & Cooley enjoyed full-time jobs with steady pay.

While the work may not have been as interesting as making the larger tools Hayes Body Company required, it was challenging nonetheless. Warm-air registers, whether for commercial or residential buildings, were basically small, adjustable doors through which furnace heat was directed. The key was to make registers that could be adjusted easily and that opened and closed smoothly. This meant careful tooling so that parts fit together precisely. For a young man still learning his craft, the work at Hart & Cooley was an opportunity to continue his education.

During their four-year-stay in Holland, Leslie and Ruth became the parents of a son and daughter, Donald and Joyce. Leslie had a steady job, earning a decent paycheck during hard times, and he and Ruth and their children might have been content to remain. But the 29-mile-trip to Grand Rapids took at least an hour in those days, and they longed to be closer to family and friends. In addition, Leslie was too young and ambitious to settle for the largely routine and repetitive tasks assigned by Hart & Cooley. Not only that, but his work required him to be on his feet and moving about the plant much of each day, and his old osteomyelitis began acting up again. Even though he did not have a job lined up, he and Ruth decided to gamble on his ability and his contacts in Grand Rapids and returned to the larger city. Although his bosses at Hart & Cooley tried to persuade him to stay, Tassell's mind was made up. In 1934, he and Ruth loaded up their children and household possessions and moved back to Grand Rapids.

At first, they wondered at times whether they had made the correct decision. Many Grand Rapids furniture factories had closed, and the demand for tool and die workers was down. When he could not find work in the furniture city, Leslie had to take a job at the Pontiac automobile plant in Pontiac for several months, driving home to see his family on weekends. His chronic ankle pain continued for another year before once again subsiding—exacerbated by the long hours in the auto plant and the equally long drive to and from Grand Rapids. At the first opportunity, Leslie took a job in Grand Rapids, with his old employer, the Hayes Body Company. Although they were short term, these two jobs, plus temporary work for other Grand Rapids toolmakers, had one positive effect—they gave Tassell more and varied experience in his chosen trade.

Those nomadic years of moving from one employer to another and honing his tool-making skills paid off for Tassell. Not only was he becoming a master craftsman, he was also establishing a reputation around Grand Rapids that made finding good jobs less and

less difficult. The decade of learning that began at Grand Rapids Brass Company also shaped Tassell's view of education and the best way to train skilled industrial workers. By virtue of his own experience, he came to believe that, along with academic education, the city's secondary schools and colleges should offer hands-on training that would enable its young people to find meaningful jobs that benefited themselves, their employers, and the economic health of the community. Years later, he would support practical engineering education at Grand Valley State University and technical training programs at Grand Rapids Community College.

## THE WORLD WAR II YEARS

Leslie Tassell's life reached a milestone late in 1937, when he landed a job with the Jarecki Machine & Tool Company. Not only would he have steady work for the next eight years, but he gained the experience and contacts that would enable him to start his own company at the close of World War II.



Jarecki Machine & Tool Company was founded in 1913 when Frank J. Jarecki, a former tool and die maker for Fox Typewriter Company and later tool and die maker and then superintendent of Oliver Machine Company, purchased the Manhattan Machine & Tool Company. The company grew as a sole proprietorship throughout the 1920s, and in 1931, he incorporated the business as Jarecki Machine & Tool Company, with his son, Clare, as vice president. In addition to machine tools and dies, the company made and sold presses and grinding machines.

When Tassell joined the firm, Jarecki was one of Grand Rapids' largest tool and die companies, principally making dies for the automotive industry and doing a lot of work for the Gibson Refrigerator Company in Greenville, the Leonard Refrigerator Company of Grand Rapids, and others. Tassell and Jarecki were a good fit, and Tassell did well. Within a couple of years, he was made a shop supervisor, assigned to move from work bench to work bench, making sure each toolmaker was following the drawings precisely and build-

Leslie Tassell received much of his business experience while working for Jarecki Machine & Tool Company at this complex in Grand Rapids. (Clare Jarecki photograph.)

ing the dies and tools just as they were drawn. It was his most responsible job so far, and the best paid, but it also required him to be on his feet and on the move all day long. After several months, the pesky osteomyelitis once again reappeared, not to be cured until the development of antibiotics during World War II. When the pain eventually became too great, he had to go back to making layout drawings for the dies—something he could accomplish while sitting down.

Tassell remained with Jarecki throughout the 1930s, happy to be back in Grand Rapids, but also thinking about one day going into business on his own. Before he could act on that idea, however, Hitler invaded eastern Europe and the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Physically unable to serve in the military because of his bouts with osteomyelitis, Tassell was nonetheless in an industry vital to the war effort. For the next five years there were government-imposed limits on his ability to leave his position and strike out on his own.

The work pace at Jarecki, already busy before the war, picked up after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Suddenly, with America entering the war, the government needed everything from airplanes and tanks to rifles and small arms. Local foundries and plating plants, which had a long history of making parts for the automobile industry, quickly adapted to war production. Even companies that specialized in residential furniture production found a way to shift their factories over to the war effort. In 1943, several local firms joined together to form the Grand Rapids Industrial Corporation and began seeking federal war production contracts. With ample factory space available, they managed to land contracts for a variety of products ranging from gun sights to parachutes. The economic slowdown of the 1930s was soon a memory, and before long, like the rest of the nation, Grand Rapids enjoyed full employment.

Because of the extensive retooling involved, every government contract that local companies secured meant more work for the area's tool and die shops, Jarecki included. In addition to producing tools and dies for other manufacturers, Jarecki made its own wartime products. Many were precision instruments, including machines for spotting aircraft and a device for measuring finished ammunition—a critical tool because bullets that did not meet precise specifications of length and diameter might jam a weapon and cause it to malfunction in battle.

Jarecki also contracted to make tools destined for Russia, an American ally during the war. Needing to keep Germany and the Axis powers occupied on both eastern and western fronts, American leaders were anxious to provide Russia with whatever resources and materials were necessary. Russian leaders were quick to take advantage of the situation. Tassell recalled later that the Russians demanded crates for shipping their machines be made of first-class wood with no knots or blemishes. They intended to use not only the machines but the wood as well.

During the war, Clare Jarecki, who had taken over running the company from his father, assigned Tassell to conduct quality inspections at the companies from which Jarecki was buying parts for the various machines he was making. This work represented the completion of the learning journey that Leslie had begun nearly 20 years earlier. Starting out as a green, teenaged novice, he had become a master tool and die maker, trusted by his employer with the responsibility of assuring that all vendors met rigid production specifications. He knew the business from one end to the other and was convinced that he was ready to operate his own company.

Because his own financial resources were modest, the first step was to find a partner. Bob Roberts, production manager at Jarecki and an experienced tool and die engineer,

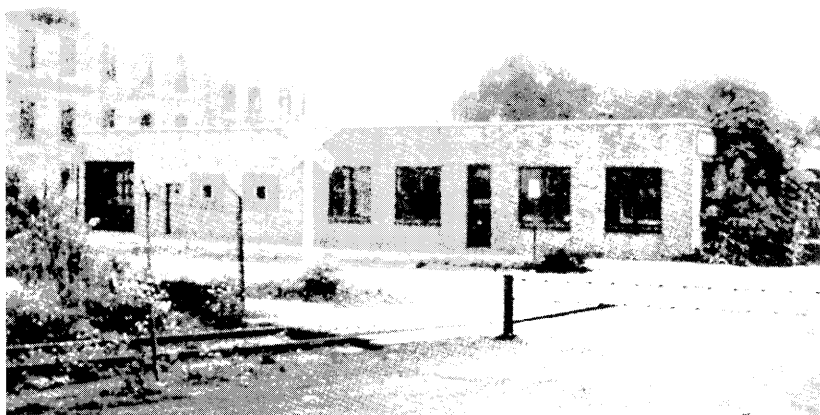
soon emerged as the best candidate. Not only did he possess the requisite skills and experience, having spent more than two decades with Nash-Kelvinator before joining Jarecki, but Roberts had put aside a small nest egg. With the two men each contributing \$2,500, they had the essential ingredients—cash, contacts, and experience—to strike out on their own.

## SUPERIOR TOOL AND DIE COMPANY

Tassell and Roberts began looking for a business in their price range even before the war was over, telling business associates throughout Grand Rapids of their plan. Shortly after the Japanese surrendered in the fall of 1945, they spent their combined savings of \$5,000 to purchase the building and equipment of Superior Machine and Tool from John Yonkers, who had founded the company seven years earlier. It was a modest beginning. Superior, located at 528 Butterworth SW, had a small building, a few pieces of equipment—"a bunch of beat-up old tools: a drill press, a milling machine, and a big old lathe, and that's about it"—and four employees. A tiny room, furnished with a single chair and a desk, served as the company office. Whenever both men were in the office, one had to stand while the other sat.

Years later, employees used words like "crummy," and "no bed of roses" to describe the Superior company building, and one recalled Tassell keeping a supply of mousetraps in his office. One day, the men in the shop killed a rat, placed it in one of Tassell's mousetraps, and brought it to their boss. He responded with "a long, hard look that wouldn't quit... meaning back to work on the double. The boys got the message."

When business started to pick up, Tassell and Roberts built an addition that doubled the size of the building. Gradually four large presses and seven small ones were put into operation. Automation did not exist at Superior; production was strictly hand-fed, with



Superior Machine and Tool Works was originally housed in this building at 528 Butterworth. (Grand Rapids Public Library. Real Estate Card Collection.)

# SUPERIOR MACHINE & TOOL WORKS



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**SPECIAL MACHINERY**  
**STAMPINGS AND OTHER METAL**  
**PRODUCTS**

**528 BUTTERWORTH S. W.**  
**PHONE 8-5611**

Leslie Tassell and Bob Roberts purchased Superior Machine and Tool Works, makers of "dies, jigs, fixtures and other metal products," in 1945 for \$5,000. (Grand Rapids City Directory advertisement.)