

Before the colors fade . . .

Ferdinand & Louis Thun

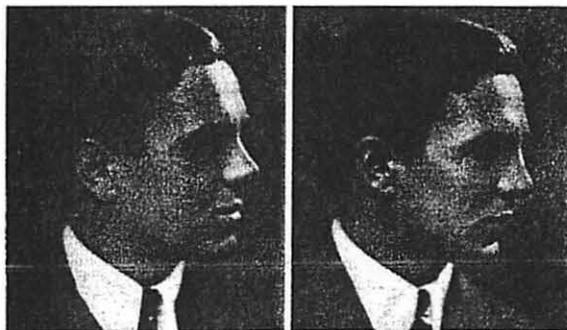
by James L. Holton

*Asked how people were able to tell them apart,
Ferdinand laughed and said,
"That was the fun of it, they couldn't."*

Their family name today is no longer a household word in Berks County. But two extraordinary industrialists, whose quiet philanthropy and civic vision have enriched the area's public institutions and culture during the last half of the 20th Century – and who also happen to be twin brothers – are about to celebrate their 90th birthday.

In fact, they have eluded the spotlight so well that, despite their leadership positions in a manufacturing firm that once was in the first rank of American industry, there was no biography on the two men, no mention in any version of Who's Who, to be found when the author undertook this article.

It was December 8, 1907, when Ferdinand K. and Louis R. Thun were born, in that order, to the former Anna Maria Grebe in the original Thun family home at 22 Reading Blvd. in the young borough of Wyomissing. Their father, Ferdinand, in the 1880s had emigrated to Reading from the German industrial city of Barmen. Before settling in Berks County young Thun had induced another Barmen native, Henry Janssen, to join him here in setting up a machine



These two pictures, even the poses, are so identical it is easy to understand how people confused the Thun twins, shown at age 29. Ferdinand is at left, Louis at right.

Photos from "Partners" book

shop for the manufacture of braiding equipment.

The partners established a plant on Cedar Street in Reading in 1892, then, four years later, set up a new shop along the Lebanon Valley branch of the Reading Railroad in Wyomissing.

There they subsequently added knitting machines for the manufacture of full-fashioned hosiery to the company's line.

That led, in 1906, to the partners' trying a related new business – the use of those intricate machines to manufacture the finely-shaped stockings that they produced. Such "full-fashioned" silk hosiery was expensive and considered an unnecessary luxury for the average woman whose legs in those days were concealed by long skirts under which shapeless and inexpensive cotton or

woolen stockings were adequate. There were only a few hosiery mills in the country that turned out the exotic, full-fashioned leg-wear.

But at just that time a significant social change swept the country. Something that became known as "women's emancipation" got underway and as a consequence Dame Fashion decreed that the long skirts would be drastically shortened.

Women soon were very conscious of what they wore on their newly exposed legs, and sales of the expensive and scarce full-fashioned hosiery boomed.

The Thun and Janssen enterprise benefited handsomely from this sudden demand for such hard to get luxury wear, with the little cluster of buildings along the railroad west of Reading steadily expanding into a huge industrial complex known as the Wyomissing Industries. It comprised the Textile Machine Works, which made the knitting machinery; the Berkshire Knitting Mills, which manufactured the hosiery, and the Narrow Fabric Company, which turned out braiding material. (Today the handsome, carefully tended campus is the site of the VF Factory Outlet complex).

There already were four girls in the Thun family – Anna, Margaret, Wilma and Hildegard – when the twins were born in the midst of the hosiery boom. The elder Ferdinand (business associates differentiated between the two

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Ferdinands by using the middle initial "K." or the informal "Ferdie" to set the younger one apart from his father, who had no middle name), in his cautious, unostentatious style, decided the modest frame house on Reading Avenue might be rebuilt a bit more substantially to accommodate his growing family. Accordingly, the Thuns moved to another nearby house temporarily while the boys were still infants and the handsome brick residence that today is the Wyomissing Borough Hall was erected in its place.

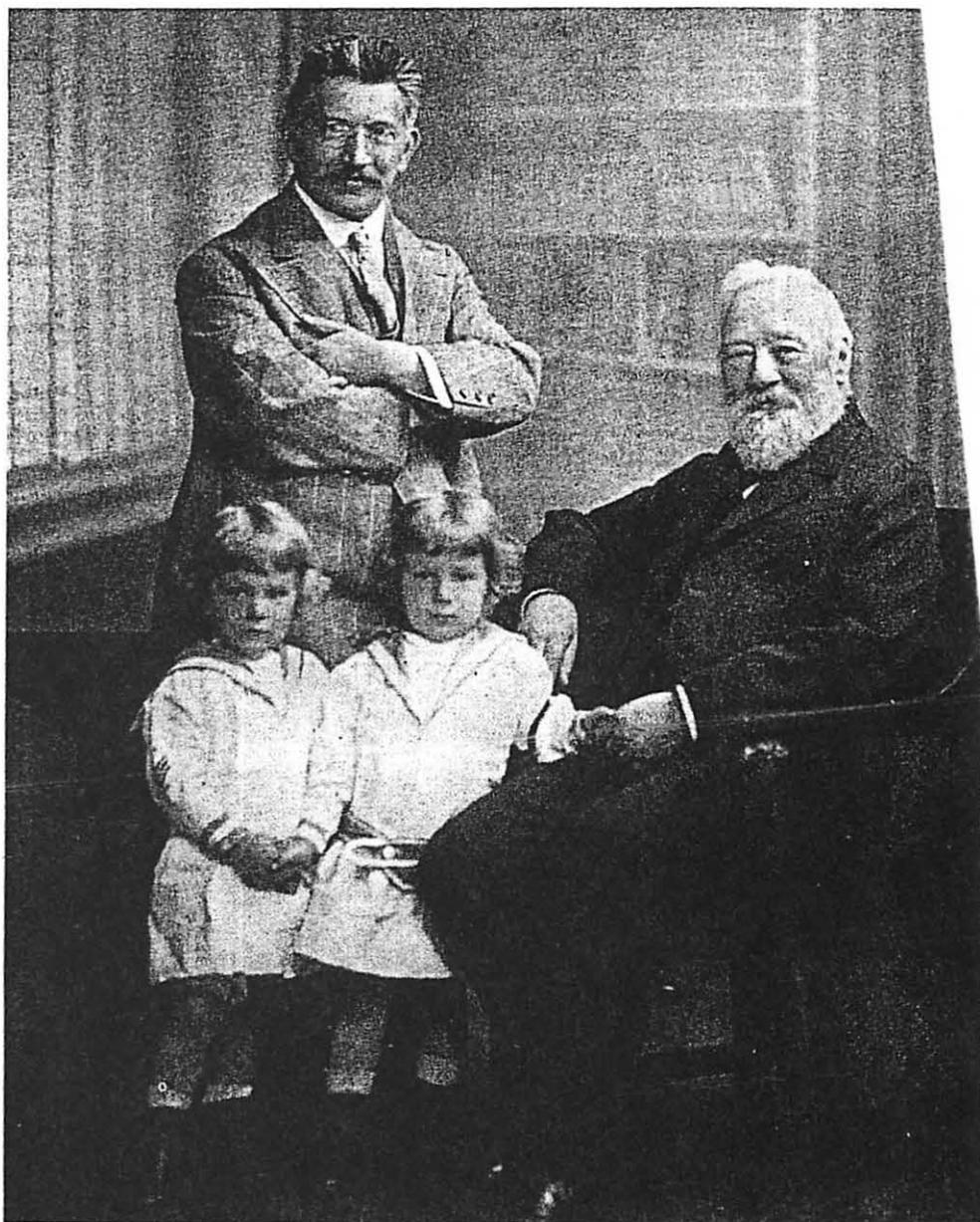
By the time the boys were in their teens, the "Berkie", as it was commonly known, was well on its way to its ultimate position as the world's leading manufacturer of full-fashioned hosiery. Income taxes had not yet become an onerous commonplace in American life, and profits for the Industries rolled in.

"The company made money so fast," the younger Ferdinand once told the writer, "That father and Mr. Janssen at first just didn't know what to do with it."

Such a situation would be laughably naive to many of today's army of multimillionaires. But for the two industrialists from Barmen, once they thought about it, the answer was simple. The partners decided to begin sharing the fruits of their amazing success with the people of their adopted home town.

This altruism was a legacy of socioeconomic principles espoused by Otto Von Bismarck, the Prussian "Iron Chancellor" who had created modern Germany at the time. Thun and Janssen were children in the Rhineland. The younger Thun recalled that his father often cited Bismarck's edict that German industrialists whose businesses were particularly successful were obliged to return some of their profits to the community.

To a great degree, today's citizens of Reading and Berks County can thank this Germanic sense of civic duty on the part of the two Barmen immigrants, and their extended families, for the very existence of several vital local institutions that make the region an exceptional place in which to live. Prominent



Three generations of Thun men are shown during a visit of the younger members of the family to the ancestral home in Barmen, Germany, in 1912. The senior Thun bore the same name as his elder twin grandson, Ferdinand K. (at left). The twins' father, Ferdinand (without a "K"), looks on proudly.

The Yarn Carrier photo (March, 1949)

among them are the Reading Hospital and Medical Center, the Reading Public Museum and Art Gallery, and the Berks Campus of Penn State University (now Berks-Lehigh Valley College, Penn State).

While they were alive, Ferdinand Thun and his partner personally devoted much of their time and effort to the construction and development of the hospital and museum, as well as the physical layout and careful evolution of the borough of Wyomissing, which was one of

the pioneer planned communities in the nation. Gustav Oberlaender, who for a time was associated with the partners in the Berkshire business, also contributed funds to the foundation of the hospital and museum.

Beyond their public philanthropy, Thun and Janssen also constituted a powerful behind-the-scenes presence in civic and economic matters which affected other parts of the mid-Schuylkill Valley. A good example was the Buttonwood Street Bridge link-

and West Reading, which the partners financed in the 1930s when state and local politicians dragged their feet on getting the project started.

While their father was helping to make the Berkshire the biggest full-fashioned hosiery mill in the world, the twins were quietly going about the business of growing into young manhood in a notably unspectacular way. They themselves recall their childhood as "rather average", with the twins engaging in the usual innocent mischief to which young boys are prone, especially taking advantage of their near-identical appearance. Asked how people were able to tell them apart, Ferdinand laughed and said, "That was the fun of it, they couldn't."

That game had to be suspended for a while, though, after young Louie (as he was known to his friends and business associates), who had been playing with his brother on Penn Avenue in those days of sparse automobile traffic, fell on the trolley tracks, breaking off a front tooth.

"I was devastated," he remembered, "Not because it hurt, but because people would be able to tell that the fella with the gap in his smile was me."

After grade school in Wyomissing they attended Riverdale Country Day School in New York City. And later they went to Williams College at Williamstown, MA., where, after graduation, Ferdinand became very active as a board member.

"We liked sports," Ferdinand recalled with a grin. "But neither of us was very athletic. We tried playing football, but we weren't very good at it."

After their graduation from Williams in 1930 the Thun twins began on-the-job training at the Industries, Ferdinand at the hosiery mill, and Louis at the textile.

"We did all kinds of low-level work," said Ferdinand. "They'd give me something to do until they could figure out what to have me do next. Any time I showed signs of becoming competent a job I'd be transferred to another job knew nothing about."

Louis spent some time in similar tasks

in the Textile shop, then turned to sales on the road. Just before the start of World War II he wrote, for a Williams alumni book, this typically self-deprecating observation:

"The only distinction I have achieved in the last ten years is one which I share with all Pullman porters – a rather abnormal amount of mileage. I believe they calculate their trips in terms of trips to the moon, but my three trips to Australia and two to Europe would hardly get me clear of the stratosphere."

His second trip to the Far Pacific in 1935 was somewhat extraordinary, as he explained:

"I proved that Emerson's theory – 'The traveler who would bring back the riches of the Indies must take them with him' – is not always true. I went to Australia single and returned after a second trip with a wife.

"In addition to having dedicated my life to bringing the blessings of the Reading Full-Fashioned Knitting Machine (the premier product of the Textile Machine Works) to the United States of America and the South Seas, I raise sheep. My wife is actually the brains of the enterprise, and . . . the prospect of our being able to sell our lamb and eat it, too, is excellent."

By way of explanation, it should be noted that Louis's wife, the former Cynthia Cameron of Tasmania, was the daughter of a sheep farmer on that island province off the southern coast of Australia, whom he married on his second trip "down under". She still raises sheep on the couple's sprawling Spring Township farm.

Ferdinand's marriage two years earlier had its own special twist. Marian Greene, daughter of a New York lawyer who lived in Montclair, N. J., had designed a doll and was looking for someone to manufacture and market it. Her brother referred her to a Williams College classmate whose family, he said, was in the hosiery business in Wyomissing, Pa. While he didn't mention that this Ferdinand Thun was a pretty handsome looking fellow, she promptly went off to Pennsylvania to see him about helping her with her doll. Nothing apparently

came of that business proposal except the young couple's eventual marriage.

As the two younger Thuns slowly advanced through the ranks of the Wyomissing Industries, World War II intervened, with the Berkshire concentrating on making stockings for the arm forces, and Textile being converted to the manufacture of weapons and military guidance equipment. Louis volunteered for service in the Army Air Corps and spent two years in North Africa, Italy and Germany. Ferdinand tried to obtain a commission in the Navy, but was turned down on physical grounds.

Both twins had risen to senior executive positions in the Industries by the time of the post-war reconversion of the Textile and Berkshire. In 1949, with the death of the elder Ferdinand Thun, his namesake son was named president of the Berkshire, and later chairman of the board. Louis remained with the Textile, holding a succession of senior management positions, including chairman, of the sister company.

When asked about the difficulty of trying to follow in the footsteps of such a towering figure as their father, Ferdinand K. offered this modest reflection:

"Well, it wasn't easy. We just did the best that we could."

But the die already was cast for the end of the full-fashioned business by the late 40s and the twins' "best" could do little to stave off the eventual demise of the Wyomissing Industries. By the end of World War II, nylon seamless hosiery and, later, panty-hose, seized the fancy of fashion-conscious women the world over who wanted nothing to do with the "old style" hose with the seam up the back – just the reverse of what had happened 50 years earlier – and the full-fashioned industry would soon be history.

As the business declined and other local full-fashioned manufacturers moved operations to southern states, the Berkshire, with the younger Ferdinand at the helm, embarked on a \$10 million project designed to upgrade its Wyomissing facilities. That was in 1952, but that noble effort only postponed the inevi-

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The Thun Twins

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table. In 1968 the Thun and Janssen families agreed to sell the Textile (which was purchased by Rockwell International), and a year later the Berkshire was sold to Vanity Fair Corp., which continued making stockings until it decided to convert the Wyomissing campus to the very successful VF Outlet Center which is a leading industry in Berks County today.

But for Ferdie and Louie there still was that civic-conscious tradition of their father's to challenge them.

The borough of Wyomissing became the particular interest of the former. He was elected president of the borough council when his father resigned that position in 1945, and remained in that office until 1966. Between them, the two Ferdinand Thuns headed the borough's government continuously for 60 years following its founding in 1906.

Louis, in addition to his activities on the board of the Reading Hospital, devoted much time and effort to the evolution of the Wyomissing Polytechnic Institute, a highly regarded technical school which had been created by the partners in the 1920s. After convincing Penn State University officials that taking over WPI would be a good idea, he took the lead in a complex inter-family transaction with the Janssens which, over a period of some years, provided the land along the Tulpehocken Creek which today houses the Penn State Berks-Lehigh Valley College (formerly the Berks Campus of PSU). The handsome campus library bears the Thun name in honor of the family's support – led by Louie – of the project. To many he is regarded as the "father" of the Penn State presence in Berks County.

In 1974 both twins became engaged in environmental activities in two parallel ventures both of which have had lasting beneficial effects on the landscape of the county and beyond.

Ferdinand focussed on the preservation of the Schuylkill River following the state's cleanup of the coal-sodden river-bottom in the late 1940s. Along with former Reading Mayor Victor

Yarnell, he founded the Schuylkill River Greenway Association which is dedicated to improvements along the historic "Hidden River" from the coal regions in Schuylkill County to Philadelphia, including the dream of a hiking and biking path along its entire route.

The Berks County segment, which is virtually complete, is called the Thun Trail, in Ferdinand's honor. The Greenway project has since been enlarged to include a variety of riverside historic and cultural features to be known as the Schuylkill Heritage Corridor.

At the same time that the Greenway was being created – in a coincidence which has become the pattern of the brothers' careers – the other twin helped to found the Berks County Conservancy, a similar non-profit group which is dedicated to the protection of agricultural, environmental and historic resources of Berks County. Over the years the Conservancy, like the Greenway and its custodial care of the river, has been able to save hundreds of acres of Berks land which might otherwise have been lost to development or industry.

It might not be a coincidence that when the elder Thun first arrived in Berks County he was struck by the similarity of the landscape, including the Schuylkill, to his native Barmen on the banks of the verdant Wuppertal, a Rhine tributary.

All the aforementioned civic projects have received proper public attention, although the personal involvement of the Thun twins has been typically obscured. But what the public knows much less about is the philanthropic work of the Wyomissing Foundation, which is the Thun family apparatus for funding these undertakings as well as a variety of other charitable and cultural activities that benefit the community.

The Foundation originally was conceived in 1929 by the three partners (then including Oberlaender) as an efficient and businesslike device for "the promotion of such charitable, scientific, literary and educational activities as the trustees in their discretion from time to time may select." A few years later, Oberlaender, whose health had been failing, resigned from the firm and withdrew

his share of the fund, establishing the Oberlaender Trust as his own foundation. In 1936, Henry Janssen did the same thing, setting up the Henry Janssen Foundation. On the same day, Ferdinand K. Thun was elected a trustee, and vice president, replacing Janssen and from that time forward the Wyomissing Foundation was essentially an enterprise of the Thun family. Louis was named to the board and elected treasurer a few years later.

Thus, with their sisters who subsequently became members of the Foundation board, the twins carried forward the philanthropic work of their father for another half century.

And the results have been substantial and, except for the organizations themselves that benefited directly from the foundation's largesse, generally unknown. Not counting the original enormous donations of land and money in the 1920s for the erection of the hospital and museum, the Foundation has given just under \$10,000,000 in grants of \$1,000 or more over the years to 34 institutions and projects throughout Berks County. Smaller grants to a wider diversity of local recipients totaled approximately another half million dollars.

The foundation also has been responsible for a variety of charitable grants to organizations far afield from Berks County over the years, especially funding for famine relief efforts in Europe following World War II. Altogether the Wyomissing Foundation has disbursed about \$30,000,000 since its founding.

The Reading Hospital and Medical Center, the area's largest employer which is regarded as one of the leading medical institutions in eastern Pennsylvania, leads the list of local recipient organizations with a million and quarter dollars given to it by the Wyomissing Foundation since the Industries partners underwrote the erection of the new campus in 1926.

Donations to the Berks County Community Chest/United Way is second, also topping a million dollars.

In the range of a half million are the Y.M.C.A., Penn State Berks Campus, Albright College, Berks County Conservancy, Reading Musical Foundation,

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Chit Chat/Caron Foundation and the Reading Public Museum.

Other organizations which received sizable grants ranging into six figures over the years include Schuylkill River Greenway Association, St. Joseph Hospital, Oliver's Boys Club, Kutztown University, Lutheran Home at Topton, Wyomissing Library and Community General Hospital.

In the 1950s the Thun sisters – Mrs. Anna Scheffey, Mrs. Margaret Fry, Mrs. Wilma Muhlenberg and Mrs. Hildegard Plehn – were made members of the foundation board and took their turns in the rotation of officers with Ferdinand and Louis.

Even after the passing of the elder Thun and Henry Janssen, who had preceded him in death by one year, their partnership continued, in a manner of speaking, in the benefactions to the Reading Hospital from their separate family foundations. When the Thuns' foundation would propose a new building or other major project for the institution arrangements were made with the Janssen Foundation for it to match the Wyomissing Foundation's financial outlay. And the reverse was also true.

Both twins were inveterate world travelers. And like their parents, they often took their children on their voyages. The elder Thuns were very family-oriented, conscientiously maintaining direct contact with their relatives back in Germany, and that has carried forward into the second generation.

Ferdie has two sons, Ferdinand and Peter. A daughter, who suffered from a chronic illness, died at an early age.

Louie's family consists of two sons, David and Michael, and three daughters, Mrs. Cynthia Willauer, Mrs. Noel (Chip) Karasin and Mrs. Alexana Frazee. Interestingly, Michael and his wife are the parents of twins.

Both Ferdinand K. and Louis spent summers when their children were growing up on Cape Cod where they acquired beach houses overlooking Nantucket Sound at Hyannis Port. Ferdie sold his home a number of years ago, but Louie



President John Kennedy and his family relax on rear patio of *Brambeltyde*, Louis Thun's summer home on Cape Cod in the summer before JFK's assassination in 1963. Family dogs abound, including a pup named Pushinko (with Caroline), which was a gift to the Kennedys from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchey. An ocean-side view of the Thun house is shown in the insert.

John F. Kennedy Library Photo

and Cynthia still go to their rambling home, *Brambeltyde*, for a month every summer.

That 19-room house on Squaw Island is of some historic significance because of a rental the Thuns made in 1963. As had become their custom they would lease the property to suitable tenants for a portion of each summer, and that year it was rented to a couple from Washington, D. C. – at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., to be exact.

Thus the Thun seashore home became the summer White House for President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy and their infant daughter and son for what tragically turned out to be Mr. Kennedy's

last vacation. The place obviously proved to be to the Kennedys' liking because on November 1 of that fateful year – just three weeks before his death in Dallas – President Kennedy signed a lease to rent the house the next year, too.

In January, 1964, the Kennedys' real estate agent, Mildred O'Neil, wrote this poignant letter to Louis Thun:

"Mrs. John F. Kennedy wants to go ahead as originally planned to rent your house for July, and has sent me the enclosed check for the first payment of rent as called for on the original lease signed by the late President. I am enclosing this lease in duplicate, and would appreciate your signing and returning

one copy to me for Mrs. Kennedy's files.

"I am sure you will not mind going along with the original lease rather than having a new one drawn for Mrs. Kennedy's signature, and in her name."

As it turned out, Mrs. Kennedy's personal schedule in that first summer as a widow prevented her from taking her planned vacation at the Thun home and she canceled the lease.

On May 22 of this year Ferdinand and Louis were honored by a group of retired Berkshire office employees when they planted twin linden trees dedicated to the brothers at the head of the Schuylkill River Greenway's Thun Trail along Route 10 near Angelica. The group, headed by Paul Ruth and Dick Roeder, used to work with Ferdinand and had begun a tradition of honoring him at a birthday luncheon every December 8. This year, because it would be his 90th birthday, they decided on the tree planting and the inclusion of Louis in the ceremony. And because of the possibility of inclement weather in December, they chose to hold the affair in the spring.

Despite some mobility problems associated with their advanced age, both twins, and their wives, attended the ceremony and the traditional luncheon – seven months early – which followed.

The brothers still try as often as possible to spend time in their adjoining offices in a modern office building which houses the foundation quarters on Penn Avenue, across from their old family home in Wyomissing.

After they retired from the Industries



The Thun twins and their wives at an advance 90th birthday at the Alpenhoff Restaurant on May 22, 1997, following planting of two linden trees on the Thun Trail in their honor. Ferdinand, with his wife Marian, is at left; Louis and his wife, Cynthia, to the right.

Nancy Yarnell Photo

in the late 1960s, the twins busied themselves there with the family's many investment interests and the foundation. Their activities have slowed since then, but they still depend on their affable, long-time secretary, Cindy Weiler, to help handle their affairs on their sporadic visits to the office.

The extended Thun family has left its mark on history in another way that goes well beyond Berks County. Altogether, the 1990s *freundschaft* of the elder Ferdinand and Anna Maria Thun comprises 89 living descendants – give or take a new great-grandchild or two – as it reaches its fourth generation. Members of the family now may be found in all corners of the United States, in every

major city from New York to Chicago, to Washington, San Francisco, Atlanta, Seattle and Denver, even as far away as London, England. It also should be noted that there is still a sizable representation of Thuns and their kin in the pleasant Pennsylvania countryside where the patriarch helped establish an extraordinary industrial empire and a generous tradition for public beneficence a century ago.

For Additional Reading

50 Golden Years: The Full-Fashioned Hosiery Industry in Berks County, Pa., by James L. Holton. Schuylkill River Greenway Assn., 1993.

Partners, by J. Earl Ruthardt, Sr. Wyomissing Industries, 1936.

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