BACK IN 1915, in a small town in the Midwest, a chair manufacturer making wooden phonograph cabinets for Edison Records, decided to create its own line of phonographs and records. Confident in its ability to succeed, the company slowly gained recognition and during its peak recording years in the 1920s and early ’30s, produced a large number of jazz and blues records that eventually became recognized as *some of the greatest blues hits by black artists of that time*. Included among them were such names as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Skip James, Ma Rainey, Blind Blake and others.

True blues fans today might know some of the details behind that company’s well-known recording label, but few probably know where those records were produced. That surprising location was Grafton, right here in the Milwaukee area, and the company was the Wisconsin Chair Company, producer of the popular Paramount Records.
Grafton resident, Patrick Mack, who, along with his wife, Angela, have become well-known local historians on the subject of Paramount Records, explained that the Wisconsin Chair Company was started in Port Washington, in 1888, to make chairs and other furniture. When they began manufacturing phonographs, they needed records to give out and decided to produce those records in Grafton.

The company established a pressing plant in Grafton, alongside the Milwaukee River, that eventually produced over 25 percent of the nation's early African-American blues and jazz records, “the type of music that American music is founded on,” Angela noted. And the recording studio was set up in a building across the street from the pressing plant, with a viaduct that connected the two buildings.

Patrick explained that the sound or the music for a record was first recorded on wax, and from that a metal master was pressed which was then used to make the records. “The artists originally sang into a large horn,” Angela added. “The horn would vibrate and there was a string at the end with a needle attached and it would etch into the wax.

“Pat and I aren’t really the experts on the subject,” Angela pointed out, “we received all of our information from Alex van der Tuuk, author of the book Paramount’s Rise and Fall—A History of the Wisconsin Chair Company and its Recording Activities. He spent 10 years of his life researching this book and made several trips here from his home in the Netherlands. He is also co-owner of the ParamountsHome.Org website.” (The Mack’s are the other co-owners.) Angela noted there’s very little hard, historical information available about this subject, other than what Alex has provided.

“Alex is also finishing up another book called Out of the Anonymity, about Wisconsin dance bands that recorded here—their music was also pressed here,” Angela explained, then proudly added, “Lawrence Welk was one of the
and 78 rpm records were
business, some of the master
when Paramount went out of
inventory was sold to scrap dealers.
the story goes that most of the stored
metal and paper drives were formed,
After World War II started and scrap
shooting at them with shotguns.
Frisbees, often sailing them off the
facility “and used the records as
some around here knows. PBS has been
tight-lipped and would only confirm
that the Grafton segment will air this
month. ("History Detectives" can be
seen in the Milwaukee area Monday
nights at 8:00—watch the local
listings for the date it will run.)
According to a recently closed, the
Penning Corporation bought the
facility and began producing Bakelite
(plastic) products. In 1939, Wisconsin
Plastics, Inc. took over the old pressing
plant and by November 1939, the building
housing the recording studio and the
viaduct were torn down. The pressing
factory was taken down a few years later.
A Paramount Revival.”
part of that revival includes an
Inaugural Paramount Blues Festival,
sponsored by the newly formed
Grafton Blues Association, to be held
September 23rd at Grafton’s Lime
Kiln Park, with Alex van der Tuuk in
attendance to autograph his book
(which will be on sale). And—also
taking place in the festival will be the
last surviving Paramount blues
recording artist, Henry James
Townsend, who will return to Grafton
after 76 years to perform once again.
Mr. Townsend’s return is made
possible thanks to Grafton State Bank
and Alex van der Tuuk. For complete
details on the Blues Festival, log onto
www.graftonblues.org.

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