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Early Days of Rogers

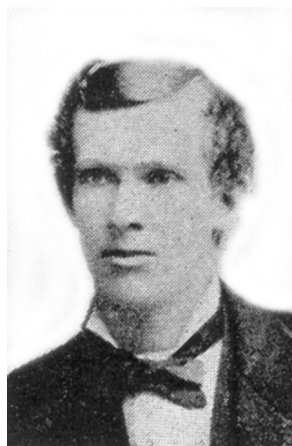
Joseph H. Rogers learned his trade as a boy in the parchment yards of Dublin, Ireland. He immigrated to the United States in 1840, and in 1849 established what is reputed to be the country's first drum head factory. The most reliable sources available indicate that the first Rogers calfskin head facility was set up in Brewster's Station, New York, moving later to Danbury, Connecticut, and finally to Highview, New York. It was here that Rogers began to establish an international reputation as a supplier of top quality calfskin drum heads. Up until this time nearly all banjo heads had been made from sheepskin, which was easier to treat in terms of equipment, materials, and knowledge. Sheepskins, because they contain very little natural glue, wear more quickly and lose their tone from the constant pounding of the drum sticks. Although the prices of Rogers calf heads were higher, customers gladly paid extra to get the superior performance.



Joseph H. Rogers

Joseph H. Rogers Sr. won a blue ribbon, a bronze medal, and a citation at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

When Joseph Rogers died he left the operation to his son Joseph H. Rogers Junior (born in 1856) who maintained a tannery in Highview but moved his base of operations and opened a second tannery in Farmingdale, New Jersey in 1909. (Actually the facility was about a mile outside of downtown Farmingdale, "West of the center of town on the road to Ardena.") The standards of excellence established



Joseph H. Rogers Junior

by Joseph Rogers Sr. were maintained by the family. By the early 1920s, Rogers heads were shipped as standard equipment on all of the finest banjos made by Gibson, Vega, George B. Stone, Walberg & Auge, Odell, M. Chapman, Wm. L. Lange (Paramount,) Weymann &

Son, Bacon, and dozens of others. Rogers heads were not the cheapest, but were without question the finest. Even drum companies that eventually opened their own tanneries continued to catalogue Rogers drum heads as a premium option.

The banjo (and drum) head business was very lucrative for the Rogers family, particularly the first two generations. The fact that their heads were priced higher did not indicate that they were making more profit per head, since they had to spend more for premium skins to process. They sold far more heads than any of their competitors. The firm produced leather products in addition to drum heads; leather coverings for heavy books, as well as coverings for artificial arms and legs. Though the firm employed only about eight employees, they processed up to 500 skins per day. (One fair-sized skin could yield up to 8 heads.) Employees of the 1940s (when production was tapering off) remember that the Pennsylvania Railroad was still a major transporter of the skins. Large tractor-trailors would pull in weekly, and literally tons of skins would be unloaded into huge vats directly below the main head processing building in Farmingdale.

Joseph H. Rogers Junior left the business to two sons, Joseph B. Rogers and Cleveland S. Rogers.



The blue ribbon and bronze medal awarded to Joseph H. Rogers at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

photo by author



The site of the Rogers tannery in Highview, New York. A secluded spring-fed pond.

photo by author



The former home of Joseph B. Rogers, a few hundred yards from the former tannery site. When the author knocked at the door to inquire as to whether the current resident was aware of the Rogers connection, he met 91-year-old Helen Jervis who once knew Joseph B. Rogers. He built this house, she related, in 1924 and frequently shopped for groceries at her family's shop in a nearby village. As a young girl she visited the tannery with classmates on a field trip.

When his father died in 1929 Cleveland assumed control of the Farmingdale operation, while Joseph B. operated the Highview tannery. Surviving relatives remember “Uncle Cleve” as an affable man with a ready wit. Cleve was a member of the Iroquis Hunting and Fishing Club (private) in White Lake, New York, and went there nearly every weekend. He frequently took along employees on a rotating basis so everyone had a chance to enjoy the rustic setting. He nearly always was in the company of his faithful dog who had run of the factory in Farmingdale. Cleve was a crack shot who often had employees throw clay pigeons for him during the lunch break. According to a former employee, a visitor once taunted Cleve, “If you’re such a good shot, Mr. Rogers,” he said as he threw his hat high in the air, “let’s see you hit that!” The words were barely out of his mouth before there was a crack of gunfire, and the hat settled to earth with the middle blown out.

Cleveland and Joseph B. had two sisters, Grace and Ethel. Ethel married Clayton Jones who worked for Cleveland in Farmingdale, doing all of the paint work on drums as well as some skin work. Clayton was very skilled at lacquering drums, using a lazy-susan to spin the drum as he quickly and evenly applied the paint. Relatives remember Ethel sitting at home in the evenings putting stitching on mallets that Rogers produced. Clayton’s son Roger Jones also worked in the factory, in the head department just after World War II until Cleveland died in 1951 and the operation was sold to Grossman.

By the time Cleveland and Joseph B. inherited the family business, the winds of change were beginning to blow a death knell. Competitive pressures were the first factor, as Leedy, Slingerland, and Ludwig all started up their own tanneries. Although these firms catalogued Rogers heads as a premium option, the higher prices of Rogers heads slowed the demand for them when the nation’s economy crashed.

The decline of popularity of the banjo played a major role in not only the Rogers family fortunes, but also those of all three of the major drum companies of the late 1920s; Leedy, Ludwig, and Slingerland. Slingerland had been a manufacturer of stringed instruments including banjos since the early 1920s. When Slingerland learned that Ludwig was responding to a government bid request for banjos, it prompted them to retaliate



photo courtesy Marylyn Hubert

Cleveland S. Rogers served in the Expeditionary Forces in World War I; he joined the family business when he returned in 1922



photo courtesy Marylyn Hubert

Cleve and his dog at the factory

by beginning drum production. Both Leedy and Ludwig began to gear up for banjo production at the worst possible time. It was terribly expensive, the banjo's popularity began to plunge, and neither company could afford that kind of loss. This was tremendously stressful for U.G. Leedy, who was already ill. He sold his entire operation to the Conn Company in Elkhart and died a year later. Soon after that, economic woes magnified by the banjo investment forced the Ludwig family to also sell their business to Conn.

Joseph B. Rogers decided to close his tannery and retire, while his brother Cleveland sensed an opportunity and decided to begin manufacturing drums—something that had undoubtedly been in the back of his mind ever since the drum companies began to operate their own tanneries. Many instruments, accessories, and hardware that Rogers sold was purchased from other manufacturers such as Zildjian, Gretsch, and Walberg & Auge. They did, however, steambend their own shells, apply the pearl coverings or lacquer, sew mallets, etc.

By the time Cleveland Rogers died, his company was producing over 150 items for percussion instruments and banjos. Additionally, he had diversified his operation beyond the music business. By the late 1930s, Cleve was forced to dip into his personal savings to keep the company in the black and could see that he would have to diversify to restore profitability.

Cleve hired a man named Miller from Philadelphia to design and install a full machine shop. There were five lathes, three or four punch presses, and drilling machines. This equipment was used to produce items as varied as tape measures, ladders for military trucks, and bolts for bolt-action guns. Much of the business was done on a subcontracting basis for larger firms holding big government supply contracts.

During the 1940s the firm occupied four buildings;

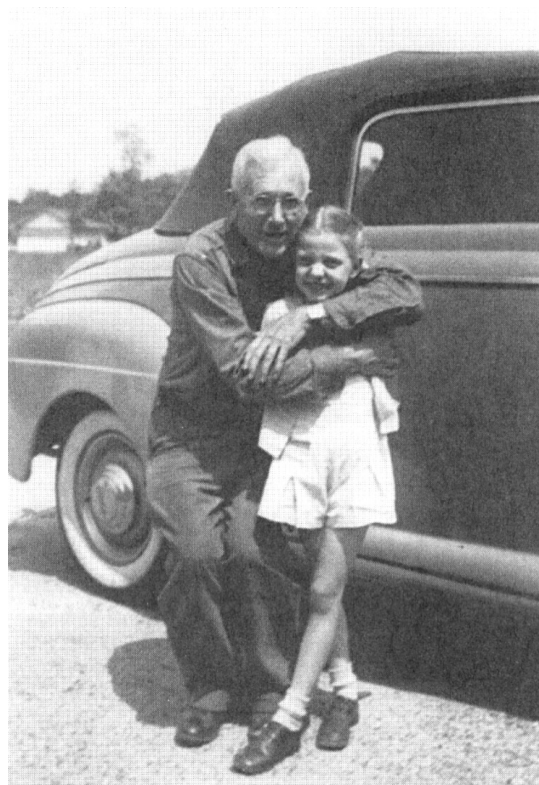


Photo courtesy Lynn Lindemuth

Cleveland S. Rogers with Grand-niece Lynn Fenton, 1944

photo by Ray Bungay



The house (50 Academy St., Farmingdale) as it looked in 1998.



Photo courtesy Donald Conrow

Cleveland Rogers and wife Ethyl in front of their home at 50 Academy St. in Farmingdale, New Jersey

the largest was for processing calfskin heads, one of the smaller buildings was for painting drum shells, the other two housed the machine shop, drum assembly, and shipping. The number of workers usually totalled 8 or less. This was pretty much a “family shop.” Cleveland’s brother-in-law Clayton worked with Mr. Megill in the wood shop. Mr. Megill’s son Joe worked as a bookkeeper for a while in 1942, and his brother-in-law Jeff Smith worked as a scraper. Head finisher Jesse Smith worked there for 20 years. Head quality remained high and although the demand had dropped markedly, they continued to ship heads all over the world. Jay Russell (a machinist from 1943–1945) and G. Donald Conrow (bookkeeper, salesman, truck driver in 1941) remember shipping heads to Africa, China, and many other destinations.

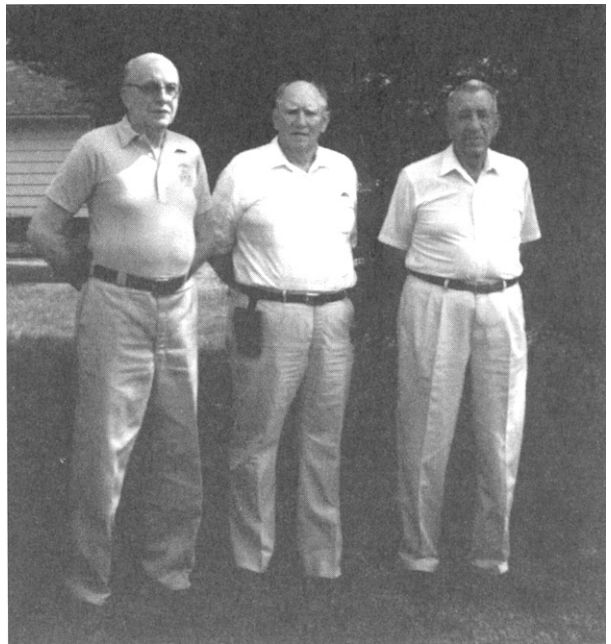


Photo by Ray Bungay

**1998 photo of Rogers employees of the 1940s.
(l to r) Jay Russell, Joe Megill, and Donald Conrow**



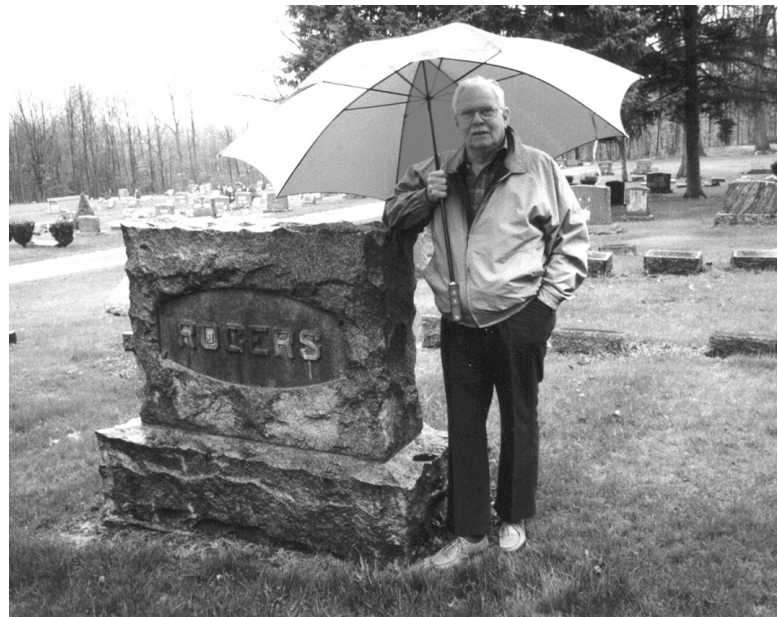
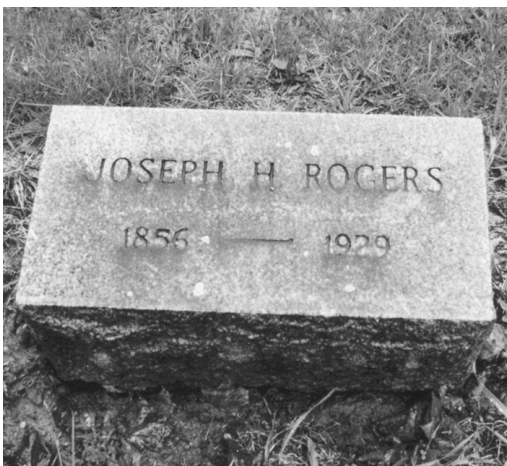
Drum manufacturing in Farmingdale, mid 1930s



Photo courtesy Dave Drew



Cleveland S. Rogers
 Born 1890, died Saturday, May 17, 1952.
 First buried in Evergreen Cemetary,
 Farmingdale, New Jersey, and later moved
 at the insistance of family members to the
 family plot in a rural cemetary in Bloom-
 ingberg, New York.



Donald Tracey (nephew of Joseph B. Rogers and grandson of Joseph H. Rogers Junior) visits the family plot in Bloomingburg, a rural New York cemetary. The cemetary is located about 1.5 miles from the site of the Highview tannery.

ROGERS CALF SKIN HEADS

There were two basic reasons why Rogers skin heads were superior to any competition. They were made from the very finest materials available, and the processes & workmanship of the manufacturing process were unparalleled. As the Rogers catalogs of the 1930s pointed out, there were many skin heads on the market to choose from. These included:

Sheep skin Rogers cautioned their customers that some of their competitors made their heads from sheep skin and represented them as calf skin. These hides contained little or no glue and wore out quickly.

Goat skin Another inferior hide which, according to Rogers, was often sold as genuine calf skin. Like sheep skin, this material was inferior in quality to calfskin.

Veal calf The highest grade of calf skin, veal calf came from cattle which were fed only milk from the cow. This type of feeding provided the calf with "an excellent and healthy constitution thereby eliminating imperfections usually attendant in calves fed by other means." These hides were plump and tight-fibered. Rogers applied their name only to heads made from veal calf hides.

Patent feed calf Slightly inferior in quality to the veal calf hides, these hides came from calves that were fed by the farmer; patented feeds, skim milk, or buttermilk.

Pasture calf The lowest grade of hide, from calves allowed to graze in the pastures.

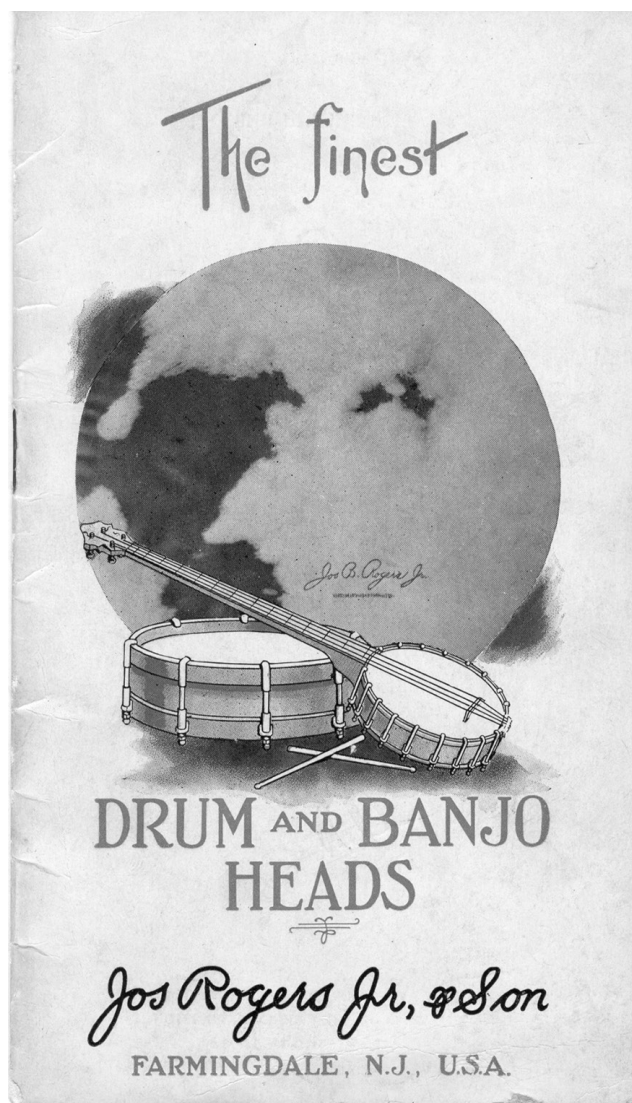
Grades of Rogers Heads, 1938

Three Star Brand, Superior Brand The "ultimate" head; the very best that Rogers was capable of producing. Three Star Brand heads were from Farmingdale, Superior Brand were from Highview.

Union Brand, First Quality Brand The next step down from Three Star and Superior. Rogers described these heads as "superior in every respect to competitive makes" and warranted them to be free from flaws and defects. First Quality Brand heads were from Farmingdale, Union Brand heads were from Highview.

Daisy Brand These heads were slightly off in color (the heads above were all guaranteed to be all white) or bearing some other slight defect which was "not detrimental to either wearing qualities or tone value."

Soo Brand These heads were not stamped with the Rogers name or bleached white; a budget head, though still made from veal calfskin.



Earliest known Rogers catalog; head booklet, mid 1920s

A cursive signature stamp that reads "Jos Rogers Jr." in a fluid, handwritten style.

Highview, NY tannery stamp

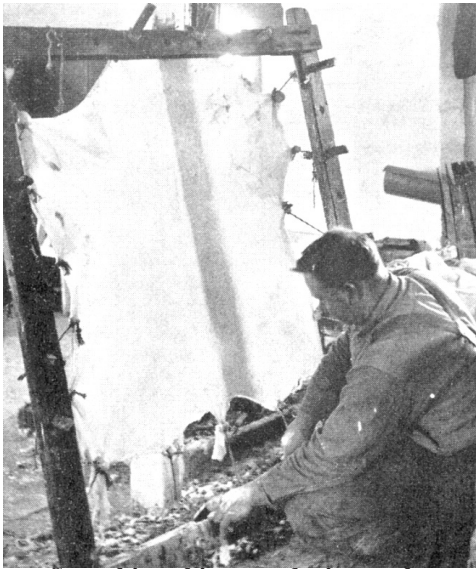
A cursive signature stamp that reads "Jos B Rogers Jr" in a fluid, handwritten style.

Farmingdale, NJ tannery stamp

Processing the skins

The truckloads of skins were received pretty much free of flesh, but with hair. The heads were unloaded from the trucks directly into large soaking vats, where they soaked for two days.

When the skins came out of their initial soaking bath, they were put on a barrel-like board where the remaining flesh was removed and the rough edges were trimmed. They were next put into the “secret chemical bath,” perfected by Rogers, for two weeks. This conditioned the skin and removed a lot of the hair. Now the skins were ready to be stretched onto drying frames.



Stretching skin onto drying rack

As soon as the skins were mounted on the drying frames, they were placed in the drying room for 24 hours. Former employees remember that they had to walk through the drying room to get to the office, and that the temperature there was kept over 80 degrees Fahrenheit year-round.



Shaving the skin

When the skins were removed from the drying room after 24 hours, they were scraped again. By this point, the procedures were done only by qualified and experienced workmen. One of the main “skin scrapers” for many years was William E. Gravatt. Cleveland Rogers’ niece Marylyn loved to visit the factory because the Gravatts lived right across the road and had a daughter Marjorie’s age she could play with. This daughter always fascinated Marylyn because she had an extra thumb. Gravatt’s son Robert W. Gravatt also worked for Rogers for a few years.



Drying the skins outdoors

After the skins left the drying room and were scraped, they were taken outside to the drying field. Rogers prided themselves on the fact that the sun and open air bleached their heads, while other companies resorted to chemicals. This procedure took longer and was more costly, but this was part of the reason Rogers heads were more durable.

The dried heads were now ready for a final scraping. This final scraping was the most delicate stage of the entire process. Skilled workmen used 14-pound half-moon shaving knives with razor-sharp feather-edge blades to scrape the skins to a uniform thickness. It took workers at least three years to reach this level of skill which paid the top salary in the factory. This scraping was done in a clean room where the white shavings were carefully preserved and sold for use as gelatin stock.

Finally the scraped skins were removed from the racks and sent to the cutting bench where workers could produce over 400 heads per day.

It is unclear whether competitors did not know how to produce white heads using natural processes the way Rogers did or whether they found it necessary to speed the process up. For whatever reason, they used chemicals in the whitening stage—usually sulfuric acid and hydrogen or sodium peroxide. (The more delicate “slunk” heads made from the hides of unborn calves and used for the snare side heads of snare drums were placed in a room with burning sulfur for less than an hour.) These processes resulted in heads of lesser quality than Rogers.

The Covington Era

The Covington era is what “put Rogers on the map” as a major drum manufacturer. It was while the company was in Ohio that it grew into one of the largest and most reputable drum companies in the United States. The first three years after the move from Ohio to California saw a temporary setback and a roaring resurgence to the third largest drum company in the country before a total collapse, but we’re getting ahead of our story.

There were four basic factors in the Rogers Covington-era success story. The first was the man from Cleveland who bought the company and moved it to Ohio, Henry Grossman. The second was the man to become, to most endorsers and dealers, “Mr. Rogers;” Ben Strauss, whose job can best be described as sales and marketing manager. The third was Henry Grossman’s good friend and business associate Joe Thompson. Thompson lived in Covington, the small Ohio town about 25 miles north of Dayton (approximately 225 miles from Cleveland.) The fourth was the Covington community itself, epitomizing the heroic notions of small town America. Without any one of these four factors, it’s difficult to imagine Rogers gaining a shadow of the success it enjoyed.

COVINGTON

*Simple lives,
Yet, complex in minor ways.
Families born to live and to die here,
within numbered, counted dates.
“A friendly town,”
I’ve heard many people say.
It has a lingering wave of
homespun passion throughout.
We’ll live here—
We’ll die here.
That’s what Covington is all about.
People here seem “dubbed”
in hometown laughter, unlike big city ways.
It’s a town united whenever sorrow invades.
There is sometimes a sting of loneliness
in the air... It’s quiet, tame.
Neighbors have a way of blending,
A way of coping, good or bad.
But that’s what Covington is all about.
Simple, yet complex in minor ways.*

Patricia Miller Barker

SMALLTOWN HARMONY

*It grows on you...
Living in a small town.
All is familiar:
Even the curves in the road
can be driven blindfolded by those who live here.*

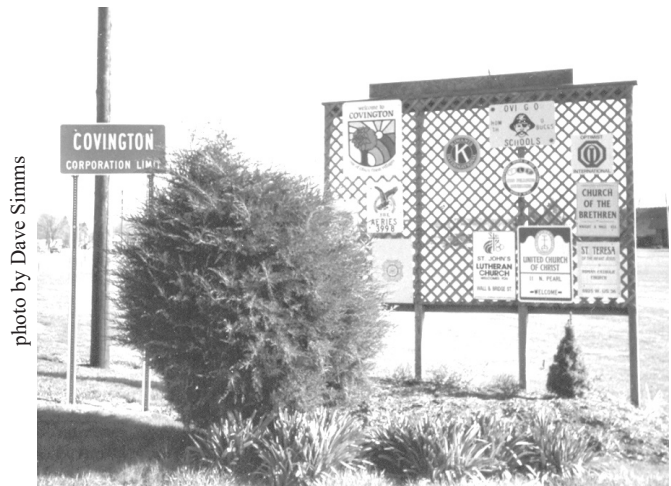
*It grows on you...
living here.
Everyone knows your name.
Your life is an open book
for all to read.*

*It grows on you...
The small town shops—
window displays from locals.
Here, your name is your honor.*

*It grows on you...
It traps your soul
Once you stay here past the leaving
time limit,
you must stay forever.*

*Our kids have grown up here.
They have their roots secured,
All made from home spun Harmony
Welcome to our small town...*

Patricia Miller Barker



Covington, Ohio, Corporation Limit