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Complex had sole origins

Former shoe mill familiar to some

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FITCHBURG— Some residents of the Anwelt Heritage Apartment complex had a “homecoming” when they moved in.

That’s because they either worked in, or lived near, the former mill on Oak Hill Road that has now become an apartment complex.

“That’s me, and that’s my mother,” said Lorraine Emma as she pointed to a small photograph of a woman and a young girl.

Mrs. Emma said the photograph was taken outside of the building that was then known as the Anwelt Shoe Co. She was 7 years old and happened to be taking a walk with her mother, Edith LeBlanc.

When asked how long ago that was, she replied, “Let’s not go there.”

Mrs. Emma said she grew up in the neighborhood on Fairmount Place and started naming several of the other businesses in the area. “There was the Strand Theater,” she said. “This area was really active, lots of activities.”

She also worked for a time at the factory. “I think a lot of people from the neighborhood found work here. It was convenient. You could walk to work.”

Mrs. Emma moved to the apartment complex a few months ago. “I heard about this place and thought, What have they done to the factory? I couldn’t



Residents of the Anwelt Heritage Apartment complex share stories about their new home that was once an old mill. In back, from left, are Frazier Lyle, Ron Dionne, Nancy Tofferi, Lillian Brown and Lorraine Emma. (ANNA L. GRIFFIN)

believe it when I came here. It's beautiful. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to move in."

Anwelt Shoe Co. was a family business from 1926 until it closed in 1986. The former mill is on the banks of the Nashua River.

After an extensive renovation project, the apartment complex accepted its first resident in late May.

The units were specifically designed for those ages 55 and older. For example, doors and cabinets feature comfortable lever handles and cabinets are placed slightly lower and electrical outlets slightly higher so that they are easier to access and more comfortable to use.

The 86 one- and two-bedroom residences range in size from 665 to more than 1,200 square feet. The units are offered at various rental rates, depending on the renter's income level.

Inside the complex is a community room with a flat screen television, computers and a library, as well as a kitchen. The building is served by a central elevator and has a laundry room on each floor.

The grounds of the building feature a landscaped courtyard with bridges, trellises and a granite block fountain. The gardens are planted with flowers and shrubs that contain a habitat for butterflies, fireflies and songbirds. There is also a community garden with planting beds for residents. Some of the apartments feature a view of the Nashua River.

Resident Nancy Tofferi has one of those apartments. "This is just a wonderful facility," she said. Ms. Tofferi grew up in the neighborhood where the mill is located, a place commonly referred to as Cleghorn.

"I just, just moved in here," Ms. Tofferi said, noting she moved into the apartment complex at the beginning of this month. "It's a very nice place. They gave a lot of thought to laying this out."

"It's good to be home, to be in the old neighborhood," she said.

Lillian Brown, also a resident, concurred. "I think this place is very nice. I remember when it was a factory because I worked here and also two of my sons worked here as well."

"I wanted to move in when I first saw it," Ms. Brown said. She has been living at the apartment complex for a little over a month.

Frazier Lyle also worked at the former factory. "I've been in this area, Fitchburg, since the 1970s," Mr. Lyle said. "I came to work at the shoe company almost right after coming to Fitchburg."

"For me, this is a good opportunity," he said. "I just moved in myself and there are a few things I have to work on, but it's very nice the way they've done this building. It's interesting to see what can be done with these old factories."

"They did an outstanding job. I'd like to see more of these complexes developed like this," said Ron Dionne, who is also a resident of the apartment complex. Mr. Dionne is also a former candidate for mayor.

Although he did not work at the shoe factory, "I've lived in Fitchburg long enough to know when to appreciate something like this. I think this is a great place."

Maud Aldrich, who is the resident social services coordinator, said she was surprised to learn how many of the residents had some type of connection to the former factory.

"It shows how important that factory was to the people of this city. We've had a lot of great stories come out, and I think as our apartment community grows, it will be one of the things that helps us to build this community."

The complex is managed by Cornu Management Co. Deb Ellis, who is the property manager for the complex, said some units are available at the complex. "We were very pleased with the initial response to the complex," she said. "As word is getting out, more and more people are coming forward."

For more information about the complex, call Ms. Ellis at (978) 627-4299.