

Match Manufacturers: Diamond Match Co. (Part I)

It is America's oldest existing match manufacturer. Its name is synonymous with matches. Overshadowing all of its competitors from its very inception, the Diamond Match Company is a giant among giants, or at least...was.

As Zeus and the new generation of Olympians gods came from the previous generation of Titans in Greek Mythology, so, too, did Diamond spring from the old titans of the American match industry.

In 1850, there were 60 match factories in the United States, stretching from California all the way to New York. By 1860, the number of plants had increased to 75. The industry was booming. By 1880, however, the number of match manufacturers had dropped from a high of 79 to 37. As the larger companies had become mechanized, smaller businesses that used older, less efficient machines had been pushed to the edge of failure. Many had been forced to shut down after the stock market crash of 1873 led to a deep depression. To make matters worse, the nation's two largest match companies were deadlocked in a ruinous price war.

Swift & Courtney & Beecher, a consolidation of three match makers, had entered St. Louis and the Midwest from the East Coast. Accordingly, its arch rival, O. C. Barber, built a factory in Philadelphia and cut prices even further. Swift & Courtney & Beecher struck back by introducing new and cheaper brands.

Between 1878 and 1880, Barber's company lost about \$90,000. He and William Swift, president of Swift & Courtney & Beecher, finally agreed that they were cutting their own throats and that a merger would be the best for everyone. The two great giants of the industry, and ten other companies (although some sources say 13), merged to form the Diamond Match Company of Connecticut in December, 1880, although production didn't begin until early 1881.

Diamond began expanding immediately. It purchased Zaiss & Co., Reed & Thompson, Stanton Match Co., Hotchkiss Match Co., and Star Match Co. within the first 12 months. After Barber became president in 1889, the company expanded even more rapidly. Portland Star Match Co. was bought out in 1892, and the Loehr Co. was added in 1894, the same year that Diamond bought the rights to Joshua Pusey's matchbook for \$4000.

Collard & Co. was bought out in 1895; Union Match Co. and Adirondack Match Co. were merged into Diamond in 1899. The company was also taken overseas to England, Germany, South America, the Philippines, and Canada, although the European holdings would be sold prior to World War I, and the last South American interest was sold to Peru in 1924. By 1925, Diamond's only foreign holdings included partial ownership in a British company and the Canadian Match Co., Ltd.

However, Diamond, itself, had now become the object of another entrepreneur, Ivar Kreuger. By 1930, he owned at least one-third of Diamond's stock, as part of his bid to create a world-wide match monopoly. When he committed suicide in 1932, Diamond bought its stock back.

Diamond proceeded to expand into a larger Diamond conglomerate. Over the years, Diamond started lumber mills, merged with paper, wood products, printing, and plastics companies, and more. Diamond production sites expanded to keep pace. From original factories in Wilmington, DE, and Barberton, OH, others were added: Oswego, NY; Spokane, WA; Chico, CA; Springfield, MA; and Coloquet, MA.