

HOBBY HISTORY

The Story of a Giant: Diamond Match Company (1881-present)

by Mike Prero

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.

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.

More important than the "business" side,

however, Diamond had also been busy producing a long line of dazzling trademarks which were to mark its position as the premier company in the US industry for most of its 116 years:
...and that's only a fraction of them!

ABC	Golden State	Sanford
Ajax	Good Luck	Santa Claus
Alligator	Green Glo	Satinkote
Ambassador	Green Goddess	Search Light
American	Home	Soverign
Anchor	Independence	Sta-Dri
Atlantic	Jim Dandy	Stop-Lite
Bird's Eye	Little Star	Swan
Black Swan	Orient	Swift/Courtney
Blazers	Perfect 36	Tiger
Blue Bird	Pocketbox	Triumph
Blue Diamond	Press	Ultra-Slim
Clipper Match	Protecto	Uncle Sam
Colgate	Pullquick	Vestibule
Copperhead	Race	Victor
Diamond Color	Red Top	White Star
Domino	Red Wing	Wolverine
Globe	Roma	Yale Blue
Gold Medal	Safe Home	Zorns

Diamond could also point to its development of the first non-poisonous match in 1910 (which it voluntarily made public domain in 1911) and the first cover to carry a national advertisement in 1925 (Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer).

Some of Diamond's innovations were spurred on by the nation's involvement in two world wars. After the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, Diamond opened three experimental plants for the manufacture of muriate of potash from domestic sources. Each plant approached the problem with a different solution, and a variety of needed materials, including potash, were extracted from existing sources.

During World War II, Diamond developed a waterproof match for the military. By the end of the war, more than ten million matches a day were coming off Diamond production lines.

Meanwhile, back on Wall St., Diamond was going through a bewildering array of corporate

transformations. Diamond became "Diamond Gardner" in 1957, "Diamond National" in 1959," and "Diamond International Corp." in 1964. The latter acted as a holding company. In 1986, "Diamond Brands" took over and then merged with Atlas Match Co., the latter eventually being purchased by Bradley Industries.

And then the domestic industry plunged into chaos. The mid-1980's saw the collapse of the American match industry as modern collectors knew it. Current conditions saw increasingly rising production costs coupled with steadily decreasing demand.

American workers simply couldn't work for the wages received by their peers in Asia. Hence, as the price of American matches increased annually, the gap between American and foreign production costs became greater and greater. Eventually the gap had become untenable.

Helping all this to occur, the decline of the cigarette was another major factor. As more and more Americans realized that smoking is, indeed, dangerous to their health, millions of potential smokers (and matchcover users) never acquired the habit; millions of others stopped. Add to this, the controversy over second-hand smoke, the growing trend of smoking bans, and the advent of cheap, disposable lighters.

Universal, Ohio, Lion, Maryland, Superior, and others disappeared as manufacturers...but Diamond survived. Today, Diamond produces all the box matches in the United States. The golden days are over, to be sure, for both Diamond and the domestic industry as a whole. Imports have taken over a large part of what was left after the disastrous '80s. But, the tradition continues, and America's oldest existing match manufacturer is still going. What the future holds for Diamond is anyone's guess, but I can't help thinking that if, someday, Diamond finally succumbs, that will be the final death throes of the American match industry.