

HOBBY HISTORY

The Fabulous Fruitmans

by Mike Prero

[Note: Some of what follows is conjecture, but the basic facts are true]

Think for a minute...how many people are really synonymous with the American match industry? Chances are that the average collector could probably come up with two: Joshua Pusey (inventor of the matchbook - 1892) and either Delcie Bean (founder of D.D. Bean & Sons - 1938) or perhaps William Colgate (originator of Diamond's Group I Colgate covers).

Someone interested in the background of the industry might be able to enlarge the list with: William Swift and O.C. Barber (founders of Diamond Match Co. - 1881), E.J. Young (founder of Ohio Match Co. - 1885), and the Rosenbergs (founders of Universal Match Co. - 1925).

But no Fruitmans! And thereby hangs the tale, for the Fruitmans certainly deserve their place in the Industry's Hall of Fame...and in the memory of each and every "Oldies" collector.

Picture this: It's 1932. Three men are seated in a small office in the business section of Newark, NJ. The office belongs to one Rae Korn, the man shaking hands with Nat and Sully Fruitman. The three have just agreed upon a new business venture. They're going to set up a match manufacturing company, one named after an older Newark match company that had folded some 26 years before: The Atlas Match Company.

Production began in 1932, and the three entrepreneurs had high hopes, and things looked as if they were getting off to a good start, but they were up against stiff competition: Diamond, Ohio, Lion, and Universal, just to name a few. This wasn't an area for the faint-hearted. Then there

was the Depression. Things started going downhill; debts began accumulating. Nat and Sully could see the writing on the wall.

The two brothers found another backer, Ruth Katz, and founded the Jersey Match Company in nearby Elizabeth, NJ. This was in 1935. The Atlas Match Company held on for another 18 months and then gave up the ghost.

The Jersey Match Company fared somewhat better than their previous company. At least, it lasted longer. Part of the reason was World War II. It brought the country out of the Depression. Things were booming by mid-1942, and the match industry, as American industry in general, was doing its part to defeat the fascist menace abroad. But, especially for the smaller companies, the war soon presented another side. There were severe curbs put on materials and other outright shortages.

A number of companies folded, and the Jersey Match Company was one of them (1944). But, the fat lady hadn't sung yet! Nat had apparently hedged his bet by starting yet another company. In 1936, Nat had gone in with two other partners, Jesse Markel and Louis Lipset, to form the Manhattan Match Company, also in Elizabeth, NJ.

Like the previous companies, the Manhattan Match Company was able to stay afloat for a few years, but by 1948 it was dissolved. That was strike three for the Fruitman brothers.

Sixteen years and three companies hadn't gotten Nat and Sully Fruitman very far, or so it probably seemed. I suppose it would have been of little consequence to them to hear that they had earned their spot in the history of the American match industry, that Atlas, Jersey, and Manhattan covers would be highly sought-after and prized trophies in the hobby for generations to come.

Well, the Fruitmans faded out of the industry after 1948, but if I know Nat and Sully, there were other ventures yet to come.