

HOBBY HISTORY

The Tortured History of the Match: V

[Excerpted from *Diamond Match Company's Fifty Years of Match Making 1878-1928*
[so keep in mind that this was written in 1928]

In some of the small and poorly managed factories, according to *The Popular Science Monthly* of 1877, the men and children were never free from the fumes: their clothes and breath were luminous in the dark, and in the daytime white fumes might be seen escaping from them whenever they were seated by the fire. The phosphorus first attacked a decayed tooth and then spread to the other teeth and jawbone, ending in death. So alarming did the disease become in Germany that it focused the attention of the government.

In England the production of the match-boxes was almost as great a social problem as the effects of the phosphorus. They were mostly made in the poorest tenements in squalid rooms where children of three or four were not considered too young to work from dawn well into the night.

The boxes were made of two scored shavings of wood, a label of colored and another of printed paper, and a square piece of sandpaper for the bottom. The children had to fold the shavings into an inside and outside box and paste on the labels and the sandpaper. The last operation was the hardest as the sand wore the fingers raw.

A mother and three children, by beginning at seven in the morning and sticking it until ten at night, could make only about fourteen gross a day, for which they received five cents a gross but had to furnish their own paste.

A little girl of four who made several hundred boxes a day inspired the following

verses which appeared in the *St. James Magazine*:

“The match-box—the match-box—
My busy fingers ply;
I mould the box, I form the box,
I set the box to dry.
I paste the label on the box,
I place it in the pile,
And they say I number up each gross
With the ghost of a faded smile.

The match-box—the match-box—
Was hard to make at Three;
But now I'm Four, or rather more,
It is easier far for me:
For every night, nine farthings bright,
For twelve times twelve they pay;
So I labour, and I labour still,
From the dawn to the death of day.”

In the United States, fifty years ago, match making was just emerging from a hand trade into a factory industry. Wages were higher than in England, and labor-saving devices more in use.

As in England, the splints were generally cut in another plant before they came to the match factory. A block of wood was sawed to twice the thickness of a match length. This was placed in a machine which first scored it up and down by means of some thirty lancets, and then sliced off the thirty splints, each one long enough for two matches. These splints were collected by hand into bundles of about a thousand each, and dried in a heated chamber.



Boiling and Grinding for Matches, U. S., 1878