

HOBBY HISTORY

Swift & Courtney & Beecher

"In 1853 Edward Tatnall started the manufacture of matches in Wilmington, Delaware at Market Street Bridge over Brandywine Creek. Tatnall got into the match business by accident. A few years before William R. Smith canned fruit which he took to England to sell. His venture failed, but while in England Smith met a wealthy Englishman who was interested in the manufacture of matches.

This Englishman had a son named William Bell who gave his parents considerable worry. Young Bell was sent to the U.S. with Smith to break him of his dissolute habits. For helping Bell, Smith received a recipe for making matches. While Smith was in England, Tatnall had cared for his family. As payment Smith gave Tatnall the match formula on the condition that Bell be helped.

The early matches were awful. The first batch came out bright yellow instead of brown. They also ignited with the slightest friction even in the pockets of users. Tatnall finally decided that because Wilmington's climate was much hotter and drier than that of England, this fact was causing his problems. Therefore, he reduced the phosphorous content of the mixture by 25 per cent. This change helped.

After a few years a young Englishman, Henry Coughtrey, came to Wilmington. He was an experienced match maker. He went to work for Tatnall, changing his name to Courtney. In 1857 a business depression came and the match business went bad. Tatnall closed his plant. Courtney tried making matches at home, but did not do well. He tried countless experiments to improve the quality of his product. At last he made a match that could be used safely. It would produce an instant flame with no smell. These matches were popularly known as "cracking matches" because of a faint popping sound when ignited against a hard

surface. The exact secret of these matches were never revealed as Henry Courtney never told it!

William H. Swift joined Tatnall's firm in 1860 to look after clerical and financial details. He saw the potential of Courtney's matches. But Tatnall decided he had spent enough money on the match business and so he turned his interests over to Courtney and Swift for nothing. In 1861 a partnership was formed to create Swift & Courtney. The new matches were called Diamond State Parlor Matches. The Civil War greatly stimulated demand for matches as high grade foreign matches could not be imported. When the country's first income tax was imposed, Swift & Courtney were the largest income taxpayers in the state.

When the French government laboratories in 1864 examined Diamond State Parlor Matches, they were rated superior to German matches. At the time German matches were considered the best in the world. All these matches were hand dipped. Demand far exceeded production. This situation led the company to merge in 1870 with a company in New Haven, Connecticut that used machines. This company, A Beecher & Sons, became the Swift and Courtney and Beecher Company of New Haven, Conn. Incorporation in Delaware at the time involved getting a charter from the Delaware legislature, so the company incorporated in Connecticut. However, the match machinery was installed in Wilmington.

Later, in 1870, the new company purchased the match business of Thomas Allen & Company of St. Louis, MO. In 1872 they bought McGiugan & Daily in Philadelphia. They also acquired contracts with or part ownership in the businesses of Joseph Loehy of New York City and Charles Busch of Trenton, N.J. Some idea of the volume of business of this match empire can be gained from the fact that they purchased over \$4 million of match revenue stamps between 1873-1883. They employed 300 workers. They bought whole forests to insure their supply of pine wood.

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Wages of workers ranged from \$18 to \$25 per week and were quite high for the period. Still it was hard to find employees due to the dread of necrosis from the handling of phosphorous. In 1880 everything was sold to the Diamond Match Company. The plant continued to operate in Wilmington. The full selling price was \$25,000. William H. Swift and Joseph Swift were on the Board of Directors of Diamond in 1881. It has been widely written that the name Diamond came from the Diamond splint used by Ohio. P. Barber, another famous early match maker but the long used name of the Diamond State Parlor Match by Swift & Courtney & Beecher rather suggests another origin for the name Diamond.