

*History of
Maytag Galesburg Refrigeration Products*

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HISTORY OF MAYTAG GALESBURG REFRIGERATION PRODUCTS

To understand the history of Maytag Galesburg Refrigeration Products, one needs to go back in time to the period when the farming industry was developing in the Midwest. Four men and four companies were instrumental in the founding of the company.

The first of these men was Roy Ingersoll, and the company was the Coulter Disk Company. Ingersoll's father started the company in Sandoval in 1884 to manufacture a steel disc known as the Coulter Blade. The device was fastened in front of a plow share to cut the sod.

In 1904, when Roy was 19 years old, he and his father made the decision to move the company to Galesburg, Illinois to bring them closer to customers in the farm equipment center of Rock Island-Moline. Roy enrolled at Knox College while continuing to work for his father, and after his graduation, he was made vice-president and general manager of the Galesburg Coulter Disc Company, at a salary of \$65 a month.

Under Roy's management, the company prospered, and in 1921, the first of many plant expansions was completed. The Ingersolls had developed a heat-treating process that gave their product the reputation of being the most durable of all Coulter blades. Because of this, the Borg and Beck Company of Moline, a supplier of disc clutches to the automotive industry, chose the Galesburg company as a supplier of steel discs. This eventually led to a merger with three other automotive suppliers to form the Borg-Warner Corporation. Roy brought the Coulter Disc Company and the Indiana Rolling Mill into Borg-Warner as the Ingersoll Products Division in 1929. Roy eventually was made president of Borg-Warner Corporation at the age of 65.

The Great Depression helped force the closing of the Ingersoll Products plant in Galesburg in 1931. The facility was not to remain idle for long, however. A second name and second company entered the picture in 1933.

S. S. Battles was the owner of Midwest Enameling and Stamping Company of Morrison, Illinois. Battles had been chief engineer of Ingersoll Steel Company in Chicago, where he became acquainted with Clarence Bullock, a salesman who called on Ingersoll Steel. The two men formed a business relationship, and they were determined to go into the refrigerator manufacturing business. Bullock was to handle sales, and Battles would be responsible for engineering and production. When the two learned of an available plant in Morrison, they bought Illinois Refrigeration Company's empty plant Number 2 in 1934. Illinois Refrigeration

was a builder of wooden iceboxes. The market's shift to electric refrigerators, plus the Depression, had hit the company hard.

There were many experienced craftsmen available in the area, so most of the employees hired by Battles came from the ranks of Illinois Refrigeration Company employees who had been laid off. Midwest agreed to furnish electric refrigerators to the Eureka Williams Company of Bloomington, Illinois, and by early 1935, the first 10 cabinets were coming down the assembly line. Glen Johnson, a Galesburg resident as late as 1984, was the 16th person hired by the new company, and he recalls some details of the manufacturing of those 10 cabinets:

"All of the metal parts were formed on a manually powered brake press. The metal finishing was also done by hand, and then the metal parts were assembled to a frame made of hardwood. They were then painted, and the paint was heat cured by placing the boxes near some steam pipes."

Late in 1935, Stu Battles and Clarence Bullock decided to move their plant to Galesburg. More space was needed to increase production capacity. Battles was familiar with the closed Ingersoll Products plant, as he had formerly worked at the Coulter Disc Company, and had worked for Roy Ingersoll at the Ingersoll Steel Company. Roy and the Galesburg Chamber of Commerce helped to bring about the move. O. N. Custer sent a committee to Morrison to offer Stu the old Ingersoll plant at a reasonable price. The move was completed in 1936, and the company became Midwest Manufacturing. During this period, Midwest Manufacturing assembled the metal cabinets, and supplied them to Johnson Motors, where the compressors were installed. Also in the late 30's, Midwest began to supply ice cream cabinets to the Liquid Carbonic Company.

During WWII, Midwest shifted its production to supply the war effort. In 1946, Midwest resumed production of consumer goods. In addition to refrigerator cabinets, the production of steel kitchen cabinets was introduced under the name of Kitchen Kraft. This new product line was well accepted, and along with the Liquid Carbonic product line, kept the facility reasonably busy over the next few years.

By 1950, a third man and a third company enter the picture. Ross D. Siragusa had started the Admiral Corporation, a Chicago-based manufacturer of radios, televisions, and related electronic products. The company was started in 1932, in a garage on the northwest side of Chicago. Siragusa had earlier started a successful electric storage battery company, and had become a

millionaire by the age of 21. That was all lost in the crash of 1929, but by selling his Model A Ford and mortgaging his household furniture, he was able to get back on his feet.

Admiral was able to survive the depression by specializing in small, low-cost radios. No inventory was kept on-hand. Rather, Siragusa would call on jewelry and drug stores by day, and gather parts and assemble radios into the night. Delivery would be made and payment received the next day. This allowed Admiral to survive until WWII, when government contracts made it possible for Siragusa's company to expand and obtain the expertise needed for the production of television sets. Ross Siragusa had foreseen the demand for TV, and was ready for it. Growth for Admiral was phenomenal over the next few years, and Siragusa was convinced that the future of Admiral was in supplying a full line of kitchen appliances and televisions.

This was accomplished first by buying production capacity from other appliance manufacturers, and marketing the products under the Admiral name. Because of the post-war housing boom, appliances were hot items, and Admiral found itself unable to supply the distributing branch with enough merchandise. This problem was solved by deciding to manufacture the appliances in-house.

Admiral corporation took over Midwest Manufacturing facilities in Galesburg in 1950. Midwest became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Admiral, and retained its name and corporate identity. It was soon staffed with experienced refrigeration engineers and technical employees hired from other refrigeration manufacturers. While Admiral was only one of many businesses to enter the appliance field after WWII, it is the only one still in operation today.

The 1950's and 1960's were years of great growth for Admiral at Galesburg, largely due to many engineering innovations accomplished by the Galesburg staff. A small but growing share of the refrigerator/freezer market was secured for the local plant. Employment grew from about 500 in 1950 to a high of 3,300 in the early 70's. Substantial plant additions were made, and the physical plant of 1950 is surrounded by new construction. The 1970's found Admiral Corporation in a weakened condition, as were most consumer electronic manufacturers. Competition by Japan, as well as an expensive color TV tube plant for a predicted boom market that never materialized, contributed to a serious financial problem for Admiral.

Although the Galesburg Appliance Division was doing well, it was not enough to offset the drain of the electronics division. Up to 2,750 refrigerators and freezers were produced per shift, in addition to microwaves, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers. In 1974, Admiral Corporation was merged with Rockwell International. H. Dye becomes the director of manufacturing, and

Rockwell decides to invest \$25 million to automate and upgrade the facility. The upgraded plant captured the interest of yet a fourth player, as Magic Chef acquires both Admiral and Norge.

Magic Chef began in 1916 when S. B. Rymer Sr. started Dixie Foundry Company. The company began making cooking appliances, including coal and wood ranges in 1921, gas ranges in 1928, and later, electric ranges in 1952. Rymer, president of Magic Chef, spoke to the crowd gathered for a \$10 million ground-breaking in Galesburg on July 11, 1979. "Magic Chef and its Admiral and Norge divisions are working to BE the competition, not IN competition." H. Dye stays on as Vice President of Operations - Refrigeration at the Galesburg plant, and became the driving force for the next few years. The company goals were to be directed by its "Marketing Manifesto" - to develop the very best new products in the industry.

The production of "The Entertainer," the new king of refrigerators in 1982, and the "A La Mode" model in 1983 featuring an ice cream maker, were revolutionary advancements in the industry. A new \$8 million paint facility was opened in 1983 with the purpose of presenting the finest product to the consumer. In 1985, Admiral introduced the "Party Ice" with a 12-pound capacity icemaker in the freezer, and computer controlled temperature and defrosting cycles were developed.

The final phase of the company development came in 1986, when Maytag acquired Magic Chef, and formed the Maytag Corporation. Maytag was originally founded in 1893, when F. L. Maytag began manufacturing farm implements in Newton, Iowa. In an effort to offset seasonal slumps in his implement business, Maytag introduced wooden-tub washing machines in 1907. Today, Maytag Corporation is comprised of 18 manufacturing operations in six countries. Maytag invested \$100 million in the Galesburg facility in 1988, modernizing production lines and expanding manufacturing. The first official Maytag refrigerator is produced in Galesburg in 1989. In 1991, a new automated door factory is added to the Galesburg plant, providing a much-needed boost to the assembly process.

In 1993, the Admiral Division of Maytag Corporation officially becomes Maytag Galesburg Refrigeration Products. The company once again makes a major commitment to the Galesburg area, when the Maytag Board of Directors voted in 1994 to invest an additional \$160 million in the plant to bring it up to the industry-mandated 1998 energy efficiency standards. Today the plant employs approximately 2,700 people, one of the largest plants in western Illinois.

From farm implements, to ice boxes, to radios and televisions, the predecessors of Maytag Galesburg Refrigeration Products have contributed a great deal to the economy and livelihood of this region.

Acknowledgements

Prairie Journal, Spring 1984, "Admiral Marks 60 years of Growth" by Jim Eagle.

Mr. Michael Heaven, November 1994 - History of Maytag Galesburg Refrigeration Products,
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Mr. Michael Kempniak, November 1994 - History of the Refrigerator,
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