

Claire: 100 Years of Growth

By Graeme Golucki

Claire Manufacturing Co. first opened as a store-front business on the south side of Chicago, IL, in 1913 with just 18 investors. Its first product was Mr. Jinx, a water-based cleaner, which was soon followed by Jinx Wood Floor Wax. The company also tried its hand at manufacturing tools, developing a handheld fish-tape wire puller. Unfortunately, though, sales of the solutions and the tool did not take off as expected.

Then, in 1933, Theodore F. Ehler, an attorney and judge, took over the company. Ehler had previously served as Claire's legal counsel, and, recognizing Claire's potential, in lieu of cash payment for his services, he accepted controlling stock and the original store front. Ehler quickly re-organized the company, placing himself and his relatives in executive positions.

Ehler and his family then began frequenting Chicago's corner saloons, offering bar patrons a round of drinks in exchange for listening to them pitch the company's cleaning products. Through these saloon connections, Ehler began meeting more and more salesmen and drivers who worked rural routes. These salesmen began selling Claire's line of cleaning products to the small towns and farms they serviced on their routes and the rest, as they say, is history—Claire's history. By the

1930's, the company business was booming, so much so that Claire had to move to larger quarters to meet its growing needs.

After World War II, Claire began looking for a new product idea, and the company found it in the burgeoning aerosol market. Claire entered into an alliance with DeMert & Doherty Co. to make scented aerosol room fresheners, under the Claire brand

name. The public really bought into this new and unique way to combat odors. As the demand for aerosol fresheners grew, so did Claire

In 1964, Jim Murray joined Claire as a sales manager. Murray pushed hard for Claire to get into the sanitary chemical supply trade, which it did with great success. Murray also lobbied for Claire to join ISSA. It remains an active member to this day.

"We've always had a great relationship with ISSA," says Tony Chefari, current vice president of sales and marketing for Claire. "As much as we've grown, ISSA has always been an invaluable resource for us."

As Claire grew in the sanitary chemical market, it also expanded its reach in niche markets, such as glass, silk screen, and graphic arts under its Sprayway brand. By 1970, Claire was producing more than five million units a year.

Before the early 1970s, Claire's aerosol can logos had to be hand painted on each individual can. Yet the boom in business rendered this method impractical. To speed up the process, the company designed and built a proprietary system to silk screen and dry mass quantities of aerosol cans and for more than over a decade, it was reported to be the

only system of its kind.

In 1973 Claire bought a manufacturing plant in Addison, IL. It took almost a year for Claire to move all of its operations from Chicago to Addison, but by the winter of 1974, the new plant was up and running.

Claire continued to grow throughout the 1970s until the fall of 1979, when major stockholders decided they wanted to sell the company. Claire Manufacturing and its



The Claire team at ISSA/INTERCLEAN 2011

—expanding its staff as well as its facilities many times over and building a new office and warehouse facility on Chicago's south side.

In 1958, Claire opened a second plant for its air freshener line in Fort Lauderdale, FL. The Florida plant effectively doubled production. Claire sold this successful plant to the Colker family in 1961, who renamed it Chemical Packaging.

Sprayway line were sold in February 1980 to Oakite Products of Berkeley Heights, NJ, a chemical products firm founded in 1909.

Oakite sold industrial metal cleaning products and metal lubricating chemicals. At the time of the sale, the combined profits of Claire and Sprayway were in excess of US\$5 million. Under the terms of the sale, Claire and Sprayway would continue to operate as separate subsidiaries of Oakite. Claire would keep its name, and its management structure would remain intact.

In the 1980s, Claire acquired the Paula Payne Products Co. of Charlotte, NC. Paula Payne was a manufacturer of professional hair care products with an extensive aerosol production facility. The hair care product line was soon sold by Claire, as its real interest was in the plant rather than in the products it produced. The Charlotte plant soon became the major manufacturing hub for the Sprayway line.

Throughout the mid-1980s, Claire acquired multiple companies in niche markets, such as specialty chemicals for the textile and leather industry, in addition to manufacturers in the cleaning and sanitation industry. The additional plant in Charlotte allowed Claire to grow at a double-digit rate. The relationship with Oakite gave Claire access to extensive product development laboratories. These labs allowed Claire to develop even more cleaning applications. This growth made Claire and its parent company, Oakite, very attractive acquisition candidates themselves. In 1988 Oakite, including Claire, Sprayway, and its other subsidiaries, became one of the first companies

acquired by the Carlyle Group.

With the acquisition by the Carlyle Group, a new holding corporation called The Riley Group was formed. Claire and its other subsidiaries became a part of this group, and the company continued to grow.

In the 1990s, the Charlotte plant was closed and Claire remodeled and further expanded its Addison plant. A state-of-the-art underground storage facility was built, and Claire added a 12,000-gallon railroad tanker for storage of its chemicals. Additionally, consultants were brought in to the plant to streamline its manufacturing processes. Over the course of a few months, every piece of production equipment in the Addison plant was removed and replaced and a new streamlined design was implemented.



Workers in the early Claire manufacturing plant

In the late 1990s, The Carlyle Group decided that it was time to sell Claire and its subsidiaries, including Sprayway, which it did—to Goldner Hawn Jonson & Morrison.

Under the new owner, Claire continued to grow its private-label business, which today, accounts for more than 80 percent

of the company's business and is especially strong in the sanitary supply business. Meanwhile, its Sprayway line continued to penetrate specialty markets.

The relationship with Goldner Hawn Jonson & Morrison continued until 2005, when Claire was sold again, this time to AEA Investors. While this ownership was profitable, it turned out to be short lived, as AEA sold Claire to Olympus Partner in October 2011.

The new ownership with Olympus has already proven to be fruitful for Claire. An existing facility in Missouri was retrofitted and expects to be fully functional by January 2012. It will feature four aerosol lines with expansion for future growth.

"This new facility has opened up a whole new world of opportunities to allow Claire to expand even more," Chefari says.

With the company celebrating its 100th anniversary, Claire looks to the future. Not only does it have a new plant, but also,

according to Chefari, Claire has already started planning for ISSA/INTERCLEAN 2012. "We're going to have a brand new booth built specifically for the Chicago show," he says. "We'll have new literature, new items, all new everything."

It sounds like Claire is setting itself up for another 100 years of success. ■



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