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Article Summary: The Deshler Broom Factory, started in 1890, provided employment opportunities and energy to generate electricity for the town of Deshler for many years. Three disastrous fires in the 1940s, followed by reduced demand for hand-pushed brooms, led to the sale of the family-owned company in 1973.

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Photographs / Images: Broom factory foreman Robert Mayer and Rolland Wilkening, grandson of factory founder H J Struve, unloading broom handles, 1942; H J Struve inside factory about 1910; oversized broom erected on Deshler main street, September 17, 1940

The Deshler Broom Factory

BY TIMOTHY L. MOLL

The Deshler Broom Factory, located in the small town of Deshler, Thayer County, has brought that town considerable fame. The broom factory was started in 1890, when Joseph Steiner, an emigrant from Germany via Pennsylvania, started making and selling brooms to his friends on a small scale.¹ At first he was the only worker in his small shop in Deshler, but by 1892 Steiner had four employees. He had also moved into what is now the *Deshler Rustler* newspaper office and was sending brooms to surrounding towns.²

The new business met with dark days during the general Panic of 1893, but H. J. Struve, owner of a local general store which sold the brooms, stepped in and gave Steiner financial assistance. Struve, whose family operated the factory until 1973, had been instrumental in founding the town of Deshler. He had come to Nebraska from Indiana in 1878 and purchased a mercantile business in Friedenau, Thayer County, a village established by German immigrants. In 1888 Struve bought what is now the present site of Deshler (named for original site owner John G. Deshler, a Columbus, Ohio, banker) and he and his neighbors moved to the new location along the recently completed Rock Island Railroad. Struve became a community leader, serving as chairman of the town council for many years and as vice president of the Farmers and Merchants Bank. He built the Deshler Roller Mills and started one of the county's early creameries.³

By the end of 1893 the broom business, now managed by partners Struve and Stein, employed 15 people and had a capital stock of \$2,000. The operation was then moved to its present site along the now defunct Rock Island Railroad in the south part of Deshler. Steiner died in 1895,⁴ and the business was afterwards incorporated for \$2,000 under the name "Deshler Broom Factory."⁵ Business picked up steadily and by 1906 the capital was up to \$20,000.

The factory continued to expand and grow under the manage-



Broom factory foreman Robert Mayer (left) and Rolland Wilkening, grandson of factory founder H. J. Struve, unloading broom handles, 1942. . . . (Below) H. J. Struve, indicated by arrow, inside factory, about 1910. Courtesy Lavada Fintel, Deshler.



ment of Struve until his death in 1931. He had been president of the broom factory for 38 years except for a short period in 1918-1919 when the Reverend Karl Kollman headed the firm. Herman J. Struve's son, Henry C. Struve, then became president and general manager, serving until 1949, when he became chairman of the board. Henry's physician son, Dr. Edgar E. Struve, succeeded to the presidency, and another son, Victor Struve, was general manager.⁶

In 1903 a new building was begun, and by 1926 a new plant which covered about two square blocks had been completed.⁷ By the mid-1930s the broom factory had reached its peak. It boasted \$85,000 worth of equipment⁸ and contained a huge furnace where the burning of chips of waste broomcorn supplied the energy to generate electricity for the entire city. When the supply of chips ran low, coal was used. Three hundred people worked at the plant 10 hours a day for \$1.00 a day each. A freight car (90 bales) of broomcorn, delivered by the Rock Island line from Texas and Oklahoma, was made into brooms daily. (When the factory was started, some broomcorn was raised in Nebraska, but the practice was soon discontinued because of adverse climatic conditions.)⁹ Wire and handles were also shipped in by the carload. Two hundred different kinds of brooms were made, including many novelty, toy, and whisk brooms. One such broom, the Meadow Gold Broom which had a gold-colored plating, was made only by the Deshler Broom Factory. During the factory's best day of sales, 1,400 dozen brooms were sold. Manufactured brooms were once stockpiled until 24 box cars were filled—the largest number of cars ever shipped out in a single day.¹⁰

In September of 1940, the thriving broom factory celebrated its 50th anniversary with a three-day open house, free acts, and fireworks displays. About 30,000 were present. Main speaker for the occasion was Governor Roy Cochran who addressed the crowds on the first night. The world's largest broom, 60 feet high including a 45-foot handle, was erected. It was later dismantled and made into 1,440 standard-size brooms. The celebration, termed a huge success, was not soon forgotten.

When World War II broke out, the broom factory raised funds for the Red Cross by making a special broom for a benefit auction arranged for war relief.¹¹ The factory produced over \$1,000,000 worth of war materials in 1943 alone and was known

throughout the country as "the world's largest broom factory."¹² During the war the factory produced a special metal-case broom to be sent overseas or to government warehouses. An attempt to boost war production even more by adding an extra eight-hour shift per day was unsuccessful.¹³ Because of the Deshler Broom Factory's contributions to the war cause, H. C. Struve was appointed by the War Production Board to the special advisory committee for the broom industry.¹⁴

On the afternoon of July 31, 1943, disaster struck. Fire destroyed the three west sections of the factory. The blaze was started by lightning that struck the shipping section during a thunderstorm. Bert Mooney spotted the fire from his desk at the Rock Island depot and telephoned the central office. Telephone workers on duty immediately tried to sound the siren, but found it had been disabled by the storm. At the same time, R. Rodenburg, realizing that the circuit was dead, drove through town alerting firemen and city officials of the blaze. Within minutes the Deshler Volunteer Fire Department was on the scene. Smoke was pouring out of the windows of the shipping section. People other than firemen at the scene carried important papers, furniture, and other valuables from the flaming building. The fire chief, realizing the intensity of the fire, called for help from the Carleton, Hebron, Davenport, and Belleville, Kansas, fire departments. Three hours later, the fire was finally brought under control. The .78 inch of rain which followed the electrical storm drenched fire fighters but saved the eastern section of the building. The factory had been closed because of the extremely hot weather, and no serious casualties among workers resulted from the fire. Losses ran into many thousands of dollars, but with the cooperation of factory workers, operations were resumed on August 4. The factory recovered from this disaster quickly and soon was producing brooms in large numbers once again.¹⁵

But three years later on October 22, 1946, another fire broke out, this time destroying the warehouse with all its contents and the bleaching room. The fire was believed to have started in the bleaching room by spontaneous combustion. William Degner and Rosey Kreimeyer discovered the fire when they arrived at the broom factory at 5 a.m. to start the boilers. Firemen from Deshler, Hebron, Bruning, and Belleville, Kansas, fought the blaze. The warehouse contained broomcorn, wire, handles, and

paint, through which the fire spread rapidly. The north, east, and south walls of the 90 x 120-foot building partially collapsed and were later torn down completely. In the late afternoon firemen from Ruskin, Byron, and Chester were called in to relieve the exhausted men who had worked since 5 a.m. The fire, which flamed throughout the night, finally was brought under control in the early morning hours of October 23. Losses ran to more than \$300,000, but thanks to a fire wall that separated the warehouse and the painting room, most of the factory itself was saved. Craftsmen resumed work October 23, 1946, in the areas that had not been damaged by the fire, and other workers helped clear the debris. Arrangements were made to put the bleaching room back in action as quickly as possible.¹⁶

The broom factory had barely recovered from the disaster when yet another fire occurred. This fire, which broke out on December 31, 1947, completely demolished the central section of the broom factory. The fire, of unknown origin, started in the drying room and was discovered by night watchman William Siebenneicher at 10 p.m. Fire companies from Deshler, Bruning, Davenport, Fairbury, and Superior were called. A strong wind hampered the work of firemen, but they were able to put out the fire by 1 a.m. on New Year's Day. No one was seriously injured, but the fire had destroyed over a 300-foot-long section of the uninsured building. The central section was never rebuilt. When operations were resumed on January 12 three 8-hour shifts were maintained, in order that as many workers as possible could be hired. This series of three disastrous fires greatly crippled the production rate of the broom factory, which never again reached its 1930s level.¹⁷

Oversized broom erected on Deshler main street, September 17, 1940.



In 1957 H. C. Struve, who had brought the broom factory through three crippling fires, retired. His son, Dr. Edgar Struve, took over as president. Financial trouble at various times during the early 1950s,¹⁸ occasioned in part by the reduced demand for hand-pushed brooms, prompted the firm to seek a loan of \$60,000 from the Small Business Administration. The total amount due the SBA, \$173,571 in December, 1964, was paid in full by July 25, 1961. The factory appeared to be on its feet and booming.¹⁹

Still claiming to be the world's largest broom factory, the business celebrated its 75th anniversary July 2-3, 1965. The event began with a parade followed by a chicken barbecue. Free entertainment acts and fireworks displays contributed to the affair. Governor Frank Morrison and US Senator Carl Curtis were main speakers. A steady rain dampened some spirits, but the celebration was declared a success.²⁰

The once-again-booming broom factory made over 50,000 brooms that year and drew plans for the construction of a new building in 1966. However, business started to taper off in 1966, and the building was never built.²¹ Costs of materials and labor rose steadily, but the company found it difficult to increase broom prices. Explained general manager Victor Struve, "Somehow, buyers think an item as common as a broom should stay at the same price forever and ever."²²

With production dwindling the broom factory in 1973 was bought out by the Twin City Manufacturing Company of Buffalo, Minnesota.²³ General Manager Struve, associated with the broom factory from 1937 until the sale, retired, and the old company lost the family direction which had been present from the beginning.²⁴ Concentrating on modernization, Twin City rearranged much of the plant and installed new equipment, including a machine for the manufacture of plastic brooms.²⁵ Although not producing at the level it once did in the 1930s, the broom factory still hires 15 production employees who finish 108 to 110 dozen brooms a day.²⁶ In 1980 the Deshler Broom Factory celebrated its 90th year of production.

NOTES

1. *Let Us Throw the Beam on Our Friends at Deshler*, Deshler Broom Factory publicity pamphlet, February, 1931; "Sweeping Changes in Deshler Broom Picture," *Focus Magazine*, *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, February 22, 1970.
2. Interview by the author, of Carl and Edward Wilkening, Deshler, Nebraska, February 6, 1980; "World's Largest Broom Factory," *Nebraska on the March*, XI (January, 1959), 2.
3. "World's Largest Broom Factory."
4. *Let Us Throw the Beam on Our Friends at Deshler*.
5. Alan Holle, *Do You Remember?* February, 1980.
6. *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, February 22, 1970.
7. "World's Largest Broom Factory"; *Let Us Throw the Beam on Our Friends at Deshler*.
8. Holle.
9. "World's Largest Broom Factory."
10. Interview by the author of Carl and Edward Wilkening.
11. *Deshler Rustler*, September 18, 1940.
12. *Ibid.*, January 30, 1944.
13. Interview by the author of Carl and Edward Wilkening.
14. *Deshler Rustler*, January 30, 1944.
15. *Ibid.*, August 4, 1943.
16. *Ibid.*, October 23, 1946.
17. *Ibid.*, January 7, 1958.
18. *Lincoln Star*, December 17, 1953; *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, January 3, 1954.
19. Arlene Carstens, *History of the Deshler Broom Factory*, July, 1965.
20. *Deshler Rustler*, July 7, 1965.
21. Interview by the author of Carl and Edward Wilkening.
22. *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, February 22, 1970.
23. *Lincoln Evening Journal*, December 6, 1973.
24. *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, October 20, 1974.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Interview by the author of Bartholomew Cabrera, Deshler, Nebraska, March 19, 1980.