

Hercules Engine News

By Glenn Karch

The Hercules Legacy



Most of us are accustomed to a seemingly endless cycle of businesses that spring up only to die out, merge with another company or change product entirely. It was no different 100 years ago when the Hercules Buggy Co. began production at Evansville, Ind. As opportunities came along, new Hercules enterprises came into being, making the Hercules industrial complex one of the largest in Evansville by the 1920s.

Besides the buggy company, there was a wagon and surry works, a body works, a paint company, a wheel company, a gas engine company, a tractor company, a refrigeration company – and maybe more.

Henry Ford surely impacted the Hercules empire – his cheap Model T Fords helped lead to the demise of Hercules' buggy, surry and wagon works. Ford's success also gave Hercules the opportunity to establish a body works making various body designs that could be mounted on a bare Model T Ford chassis. Sears, Roebuck and Co. gave Hercules the opportunity to enter the gas engine business, and Hercules Gas Engine Co. was formally incorporated in 1912.

As Hercules evolved into newer enterprises, older ones fell to the wayside. For instance, as the horse equipment business faded, so did the need for a wheel company, resulting in that part of the company shutting down. When you look at it, almost all of the Hercules interests were in products that would, over time, become obsolete and no longer wanted by the buying

public, and some products never made it to market. The tractor company never produced anything more than a couple of three-wheeled prototypes, and the proposed McCurdy car never made it past an engine on a chassis and a man sitting on a box to drive it.

The Hercules Body Works was spun off, and continued to function until the mid-1950s. From what I've been able to observe, it ended up producing dump truck bodies, and also provided parts and service for Hercules gas engines. The Hercules Body Works was eventually sold to George Caddick, who moved it to Henderson, Ky., renamed it Hercules Manufacturing Co. and began producing refrigerated trucks and trailers. It thrives yet today.

The refrigeration business eventually evolved into Servel Inc., a manufacturer of gas refrigerators. These found their way into homes in areas where electrification had not yet reached, and production of gas refrigerators continued into the mid-1950s, when electrical service was finally available almost everywhere. Bankruptcy put them out of business. It's interesting to note that the same patent used by Servel for the gas refrigerator lives on, found in refrigerators used in motor homes and camping trailers today.

You can still see many physical remnants of this great industrial complex. Some of the buildings are gone, while others have been modified heavily to support current use. The deteriorating

buggy and wagon works buildings are still used for warehousing, and the gas engine foundry building and related buildings are warehouse space. The gas engine machine shop and assembly areas are now divided into smaller industrial suppliers. Large letters spelling out Hercules in raised bricks can still be seen on the foundry building.

The legacy of the founder of the Hercules industrial complex, William McCurdy, still lives on in Evansville. What was once the luxurious McCurdy hotel in downtown Evansville still survives, but it is now a senior citizen residential center. There is the McCurdy Memorial Union at the University of Evansville, and one of Evansville's leading banks owes its beginnings to McCurdy.

The next time you crank-up a Hercules, Economy, Jaeger, ARCO or Thermoil engine, think of William McCurdy, for it was his association with Sears, Roebuck and Co. that brought engine production to Evansville, which began early in 1914. In 2004, Southern Indiana's Antique and Machinery Club (SIAM) will celebrate 90 years of Hercules-built engines at their annual show. It's time to start getting engines ready for that big event.

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