

Wiss

When Jacob Wiss immigrated to the United States from his native Switzerland in 1847, he supposedly was headed for a job awaiting him in Texas. At Newark, New Jersey, however, his modest funds gave out and he was forced to accept employment before continuing the journey. Having apprenticed as a cutler and gunsmith, the thirty-year-old craftsman took a job in the factory of Rochus Heinisch, an Austrian who had come to America twelve years earlier, perfected a method of facing malleable iron with steel in manufacturing shears, and established a cutlery business. Work became slack, however, and Jacob Wiss not only lost his job; he had to stay in Newark awaiting back pay. Rather than continue the struggle to reach Texas, he opened his own small business in a former stable, forging out surgical instruments and shears. His decision may have been influenced also by the Mexican War raging in the area of his intended destination, although no mention is made of it in historical accounts. Whatever the motivation, his assessment was destined to become an important factor in making Newark a world center of quality shears and scissors.

For several generations, the skills of cutlery makers were passed down through European families, their secrets carefully guarded and protected through guilds. One of ten children, Jacob Wiss had learned precision craftsmanship that typified Swiss expertise in delicate cutting tools and watches. Had he remained in Europe, he might well have followed the traditions of other master cutlers in rejecting the use of power machinery and new abrasives. But in a fresh environment a young man was free to adapt acquired skills to modern developments. Consequently, he eventually would surpass the quality of his Old World mentors.

Jacob Wiss did not break tradition abruptly. In his small shop he used natural stone for grinding and a wooden wheel for polishing, just as he had been taught. But he did introduce power to the one-man operation. The grinding and polishing wheels were turned by a Saint Bernard running on an attached treadmill. Within a year, business grew to the point where he employed a second dog. Taxes apparently posed only petty an-

noyance to business enterprise in nineteenth-century Newark. A tax receipt dated August 1, 1848, shows a total tax of four dollars for Jacob Wiss, cutler — all of it for the two dogs.

As business increased, apprentices came under the tutelage of the shop owner, and each came to realize that the foremost objective was quality. Jacob Wiss was determined to make the finest shears and scissors available, regardless of cost. Few precision tools were made in America at that time. Within a few years the company outgrew its quarters. Two moves were made to successively larger shops on Bank Street, and the dogs were replaced by steam power. Married in 1849, Jacob and his wife Maria always lived in rooms above their place of business, even after they had two sons and two daughters.

Early products were shears, scissors, table knives, surgical instruments, and razors. Word of Wiss quality spread beyond the boundaries of New Jersey, and by the time America entered the Civil War, Wiss was an established rival of R. Heinisch Sons Company for whom the founder had worked when he first reached Newark. During the war, the Wiss shop was called upon to make scissors (two round-handled rings of equal size) for Union Army medical units, and shears (one round-handled ring and one oblong ring into which more than one finger could be inserted for additional leverage) to cut uniforms. The introduction of power driven sewing machines in the manufacture of military uniforms, boots, and shoes brought those industries into the factory system, creating extensive new postwar markets for Wiss scissors and shears. The company benefited also from development of home sewing machines and from lowered textile costs created by a proliferation of New England mills. And improvement in crucible steel provided better raw materials for the manufacture of Wiss products.

As the owner's children grew, the firm's name was changed to J. Wiss & Sons Company. The sons, in fact, were brought into the business at early ages. Frederick C.J. Wiss, the older of the two, arose early each morning to fire the boiler before going to school so that workers would have steam by 7:00 a.m. By the time he was twelve, he was a competent fireman. At seventeen, he took over management of the company when his father became ill. In 1880, Jacob Wiss died and Frederick became president at the age of twenty-two. His brother Louis, twenty, joined the company at that time and the two young men soon initiated an ambitious program of promoting Wiss products as superior to European imports. The latter had been losing ground because of the hesitance to accept new manufacturing and processing methods. The sons shared their father's determination to stick with top-of-the-line quality, despite competition from numerous less expensive scissors and shears.

Major products in the 1800s included several lines of shears and scissors, trimmers, pruning shears, and tin snips. Manufacturing and wholesale-lot shipping were supplemented by the company's own retail

outlet at the shop site. With its rapid growth of business, Wiss made plans for large-scale construction and company realignment. A block of property at Littleton Avenue and West Market Street was purchased, and work started on a new two-story brick factory building. When the plant opened in 1887, the company divided into three operations: manufacturing, retail, and real estate. All manufacturing was moved into the new building, but the retail segment, Wiss Store, remained on Bank Street. Later it was moved to another location where it began specializing in jewelry. Subsequently expanding to include branch operations in neighboring towns, it became the largest retail jewelry firm in New Jersey. The third division, established in 1887, was Wiss Realty Corporation, a real estate holding company. In 1903 it built the city's first skyscraper. Frederick Wiss described the move into a new manufacturing plant with a letter to customers:

It is with pleasure we announced the completion of our New Works, the erection of which was found necessary to accommodate our constantly increasing trade, which has grown so rapidly that we have been unable, for some time past, to fill orders as promptly as desired. The many details incident to moving, transfer and placing of machinery, have caused some delay in filling orders, and we would express our appreciation of kind indulgence for any annoyance that may have been experienced. Our new factory has been supplied with everything needed in improved machinery, etc., and all departments enlarged to an extent that will enable us in a very short time to promptly meet all demands. We now have what is conceded to be as fine, if not the finest works of the kind in the world, and intend to fully sustain our well-known reputation of manufacturing only strictly first quality and fully warranted goods.

The guarantee was no idle claim. Wiss replaced any broken product, regardless of the reason for damage.

The Wiss chain of ownership was broken temporarily in 1898 when its manufacturing segment was purchased by the National Shears Company, better known as the Shear Trust. Organized in New Jersey but with main offices in Manhattan, Shear Trust quickly purchased five plants, among them J. Wiss & Sons. The leading man in the drama was J.H. Clauss, head of one of the purchased companies, who was voted president of the new trust. Three of the companies were closed, but by operating Wiss and Clauss Shear Company, the trust controlled from 65 to 70 percent of the shears and scissors output in America. Success seemed assured, but in less than two years the organization was declared bankrupt. Production continued for a short time under receivership, then in May, 1900, the Wiss family bought back its factory. A few days later the business was incorporated as J. Wiss & Sons Company, and business continued with Frederick Wiss again the president-treasurer and Louis Wiss elected secretary.

Additional plant construction followed, and in 1906 power drop hammers for hot forging steel shears frames were installed, making it possible to weld tough high-carbon steel blades to softer, more malleable steel. This new process, which made shears and scissors virtually indestructible, prompted the Wiss brothers to launch the industry's first spirited national advertising campaign through such popular magazines as *The Ladies Home Journal*. Most sales at that time were to cutlers and grinders who sold to tailors, dressmakers, and milliners, but Wiss wanted to clear additional channels to the customer market through hardware and cutlery retailers. Louis Wiss did not live to see complete results of the advertising effort. He died in 1908 at the age of forty-eight.

A vigorous sales campaign, bolstered by the national advertising, put Wiss products with inlaid cutting edges on counters and in show windows across the country. The push was accelerated in 1912 when the company perfected a process of forging steel handles. Until that time, the steel blades of tailors' shears were attached to handles made of malleable iron, which tended to crack. Contours of handles were considered by tool and die makers too complicated for drop forging, but Frederick Wiss overcame a series of experimental failures to add another improvement to his scissors and shears. His "steel forged" process was completed with the welding of inlaid blades of high carbon crucible steel to the forged steel frames of tailors' shears.

Still competing at prices above those of most other manufacturers, Frederick Wiss remained convinced that customers would pay more money to avoid pulling and tearing their fabrics. On the wall of his office was a sign bearing the words, "The recollection of quality remains long after price is forgotten." The company even began making its own screws, bolts, and nuts since it was impossible to buy supplies that met the standard of what the president referred to as "watchmaker accuracy," and it became the first manufacturer to apply the technique of blade-edging to the production of garden cutting tools.

By purchasing R. Heinisch Sons Company in 1914, Wiss became the world's largest producer of fine shears and scissors. World War I brought further gains when imports from European cutlery centers of Sheffield, England, and Solingen, Germany, were halted. Production soared to plant capacity during the war and continued at a high level until 1920. Then disaster struck. In its haste to rehabilitate a defeated enemy and encourage it to pay war debts, the government permitted Germany to dump large quantities of duty-free goods on American markets, including scissors priced at less than half the cost of domestic merchandise. Before the tariffs of 1923 rescued American industry, several plants that had expanded to join the wartime production armada were capsized. Wiss was among the survivors, but many months were required to reestablish its position with a price conscious public amidst the leftover glut of cheap goods. One method it used was to direct a new sales effort

toward department stores, which were growing rapidly in size and number in the '20s.

By the end of the decade, the company manufactured annually more than two million pairs of shears and scissors in 250 varieties. At age seventy, President Wiss was still one of the first men at the factory every morning, even when he commuted from his summer home at Avon. His daily routine included a mid-day visit to the downtown jewelry store, then a return to the plant until evening. A believer in recreation, the president backed employees in their request to stage boxing events during lunch breaks. Gathering on the second floor, spectators would form a human ring around the participants flailing away with big gloves. Intrigued, President Wiss came up with an idea that could be unique in the annals of personnel relations. Whenever he learned of friction among plant employees, he checked to see if the men involved were of comparable age and weight. If so, he arranged to have them settle differences in the ring. An employee who attended the bouts reported that the system worked well. Arguments ended with exhausted, laughing reconciliation. Frederick Wiss died in 1931 and was succeeded as president by his older son Robert. His other son, Norman, was elected vice president and treasurer.

The third generation Wiss president faced an immediate problem shared by most Americans, the Great Depression, which already had taken a heavy economic toll. Wiss did not close its doors, but employees worked what they dubbed appropriately "short weeks." Sometimes that meant two days a week, every other week, for a total of four days per month. The company set up a program where employees could spend nonworking days selling products door to door. But families who could barely find money for food could make an old pair of scissors last. Textile companies without customers did not need tools. When at last the nation began to recover, Wiss helped encourage sales by introducing such new products as pinking shears with zig zag edges and a new Metalmaster line of industrial cutting tools.

The depression appeared to etch lasting memories into the personality of Robert Wiss. Long after production returned to normal levels, he walked through the plant once each morning and again each afternoon. Joseph Rega, who joined the company in 1929, learned every job in the factory, and later became head of quality control, said, "Robert Wiss had production control in his head when he walked through the plant. The men worked on piece rates, and when someone told the president he did not have enough work to finish out the day, I would be told to send him more shears or scissors. If I said we already had that requirement filled for a month, he'd say to send them down anyway, because he didn't want the man out of work."

Wiss products were converted to military applications during World War II, sometimes in unusual ways. Cuticle and nail scissors proved ideal



Assembling scissors at Wiss. This photograph of the inspection and rework department of Wiss, in 1948, was part of a group of photographs taken in honor of Wiss' 100th anniversary.



Of 360 J. Wiss & Sons Company employees in 1936, there were 28 father and son combinations. Twenty-nine sons are standing behind fathers, with the odd number attributed to one man having two sons in the firm. J. Robert Wiss, company president, is seventh from the left in the first row, with his son, Richard, behind him.

for the manufacturer of precision radar and radio systems. Pruning shears were adapted to preparing poultry for overseas shipment, and pinking shears were utilized in the manufacture of airplanes. Several Wiss products were used to barter with natives in remote parts of the world where American money had no apparent value. In more conventional applications, metal snips were used building ships and tanks, and surgical scissors went to hospitals on every fighting front.

As sales reverted to civilian markets after the war, the company's position was strengthened by its military record, particularly in the manufacture of industrial shears. When the company observed its 100th birthday in 1948, five hundred men and women were employed at the Newark Plant and plans for expansion were in the blueprint stage. The manufacture of scissors and shears remained more manual than mechanical, however, and a large percentage of the craftsmen were veteran employees. A 25-year service club was established during the centennial, with 117 employees eligible for immediate membership. As part of its birthday celebration Wiss publicized the art of manufacturing its products, explaining the approximately 176 operations required to make dies and tools, forge, grind, heat, treat, polish, finish, and test a pair of scissors or shears.

In 1954, Vice President Norman F. Wiss died. The following year, President J. Robert Wiss died and was succeeded by his only son Richard. That same year the family sold the jewelry business it had formed at the turn of the century. Four years later, the Wiss Realty Corporation was dissolved.

Manufacturing continued to expand in 1957 with the purchase of the Kroyden Golf Club Company factory at Maplewood, New Jersey. As a division of Wiss, the plant produced snips and garden tools. In the decade that followed it bought the Crook-Miller Company of Hicksville, Ohio, manufacturer of wooden garden tool handles, and started a three-stage expansion program at the Newark plant. Construction of a warehouse, manufacturing facilities, and a new office was completed by 1970. But the most important event of that year was the purchase of Boker Manufacturing Company's factory adjacent to the Wiss division plant at Maplewood. With that acquisition, Wiss became producer of the renowned Boker "Tree Brand" pocket and hunting knives.

Boker predated Wiss in America. Founded in 1837 by Herman Boker, a descendent of an old family of Prussian merchants, it imported and manufactured cutlery sold primarily to hardware jobbers. Operating from quarters in New York City, the company earned its reputation principally by selling German and English hardware and cutlery for many years. Among its products was the celebrated "Tree Brand" knife, manufactured by Heindr Boker & Company of Solingen, Germany. H. Boker & Company, Inc., of New York was exclusive distributor in the

American market, but there was no other official connection between the two companies beyond the founders tracing their ancestry to the same family. Eventually, a royalty arrangement permitted the American firm to apply the Boker Tree Brand name to its own manufactured products. This was halted in World War I when all German patents and trademarks were dropped in this country.

In 1926, John R. Boker, Sr., president of H. Boker & Company, expressed concern that business had not grown for many years, having been “just allowed to be kept alive.” To instill new momentum, he built a manufacturing plant at Hilton, New Jersey. Later the town name was changed to Maplewood. It was not until 1949 that the company again was able to acquire rights to produce knives under the Boker Tree Brand trademark. Two years later a vigorous advertising campaign opened worldwide markets, ironically putting Boker in competition with the Solingen, Germany, firm from whom it obtained trademark rights. In 1965, the plant was purchased by The New Britain Machine Company, which was acquired later by Litton Industries. When Wiss bought the building and certain assets, it acquired the Tree Brand trademark.

In the years after Paul Richards became president, increased mechanization cut the cycle time for producing a pair of shears or scissors from nine months to fifteen weeks. Induction hardening improved the process and a patented set-easy pivot provided individual adjustment of the cutting action. Yet some operations, such as the final angling of blades, continued to depend on personal craftsmanship.

Documentation

CHAPTER 24

Characterization of Jacob Wiss and the company he founded was drawn from the pages of several publications. Among company-published booklets were *Wiss: The Edge of Excellence since 1848; A Story of Shears and Scissors, 1848–1948*; and *The Wiss Story of Shears & Scissors*. Historical data also was contained in the articles: “Wiss Has the Edge,” in a 1965 publication of the New Jersey Bell Company; “The Evolution of Shear Perfection,” in *Oakite* magazine, 1962; and “The Kindest Cut of All,” in a 1960 Esso magazine. A profile of personalities was printed in a brief Wiss family history. Products were described in illustrated price lists and catalogs, which also contained occasional period excerpts on company history. The company had a wealth of documents, letters, memoranda, and newspaper clippings in archives compiled in 1967 and maintained in a large safe. Basic Boker Manufacturing Company information was contained in two volumes, *Great American Story I: Boker Tree Brand Knives*, and *Great American Story II, Boker Tree Brand Knives*, published for general distribution promoting a series of products, and in a scrapbook of newspaper clippings.