

1998

## 13 Schramm: The Legacy of 100 Years

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### Recommended Citation

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## **Schramm: The Legacy of 100 Years**

by Thomas W. Brientnall, HIS 480 (submitted  
April 24, 1998)

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Schramm, Inc. was established in 1900 as a local West Chester corporation. Schramm, Inc. was a family-owned business with connections to major national and international industries. During the historical time period in which Schramm, Inc., existed, many social, technological, political, and economic changes took place within America. A central question raised was how the company lasted for approximately a hundred years with numerous different changes in products and development. The history of the company, their products, the strength of the company, fringe benefits of working at Schramm, and the unique relationship Schramm has to the community of West Chester have been examined.

### **HISTORY**

When Christian D. Schramm and Emil Maerky met at the Philadelphia Export Exposition, their lives and the business world would never be same. These two founders of the present-day company Schramm, Inc. revolutionized the use of gasoline engines, air compressors, construction tractors, and the rotadrilling business. The success of the company was largely due to their insightful marketing of products, and a perceptive and conscious treatment of their work force.

They formed a partnership on January 2, 1900 to repair stationary gasoline engines for elevators in the Philadelphia area during the early 1900s.(1) "Armed with lots of knowledge, enthusiasm, a lathe, a shaper, a drill press, two vises, a work bench, a few hand tools, and 1 « horsepower gas engine, the two men set out make money.(2) Their business became very profitable, since many elevators broke down on a daily basis and Schramm and Maerky

had few competitors in the business. The company operated on a small scale, but as time grew, so did their profits.

After the first year of production, when the company grossed \$4,000, Henry N. Schramm joined his father in the company.(3) Schramm, Inc. received numerous orders which enabled them to expand their operations. The company moved from 129 North Third Street, which they rented for \$25 a month, to a larger facility at 308 North Fourth Street in Philadelphia.(4) This enabled the owners to hire a large workforce and the company grew steadily during the early years.

Several important events occurred in 1902 and 1908, which altered the company drastically. In 1902, the partnership of Schramm and Maerky was dissolved, and Chris assumed responsibility for all assets and liabilities. In 1907, Henry Schramm became a partner of the company, which was renamed Chris D. Schramm and Son.(5) Within a year, George W. Davidson of Wilmington, Delaware asked the company to construct a portable air compressor for his marble cutting business. The result was a gasoline engine modified to produce compressed air for pneumatic tools.(6) The portable air compressor was a success and proved to be a valuable source of orders for the company.(7) "The years from 1911-1917 saw Schramm continue their repair and servicing of gas engines as well their line of sales items."(8)

Schramm produced three different sizes of compressors, all of which were becoming very popular in the stone-cutting industry. The Schramm name received very positive coverage during this time period. They set the standard in the air compressor business and other companies copied their techniques.(9)

In 1916 and 1917, Schramm accomplished two major achievements for the company. First, the company opened showrooms and branch offices in New York City and Philadelphia. The showroom in Philadelphia was located on 704 Arch Street.(10) Second, the company changed its name to Chris D. Schramm and Son, Inc., and moved the business to a new facility in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The company incorporated and sold stock to businessmen in West Chester, Philadelphia and New York.(11)

The company bought a factory belonging to the Sharpless Separator Works, which was built in 1910 and contained 25,000 square feet on seven acres of land.(12) By 1922 Schramm had phased out all the repair and conversion of domestic engines, and produced only air compressors, pumps, engines for power applications, and hoist units.(13)

During the First World War, the company had few contracts, but after the war, Schramm manufactured equipment for the Allied Army in Europe. "In 1918-19, the local plant (Schramm) was largely converted to the manufacture of captive balloon hoists (French Balloon Windlasses) for the United States Signal Corps"(14) The balloons had a range of 1,600 feet and provided important information for the army. Schramm also assembled special low-pressure compressors for diving and salvage work.(15) The balloon hoists and the compressors became important Schramm products that made the company a leading military supplier during World War II.

The World War II contracts started off slowly. At first, these small contracts did not slow production in the main factory,(16) but as United States involvement in the war escalated, war contracts became more numerous and very profitable. Schramm completed a great deal of work orders for portable generator sets, which the Army and Navy used during the war.(17) Schramm expanded operations and began to subcontract out their regular work to other local businesses. This excerpt from the Daily Local News described the atmosphere of the West Chester plant during the Second World War.

"During the past six weeks, Schramm Inc., has been going at full speed, night and day, seven days a week, averaging better than 28 units per day. In normal times, this amount of production would not have been achieved in a full year. Expansion of its factories was necessary in order for Schramm, Inc., to attain its (wartime) goal."(18)

As the company broke all peacetime production records, Schramm's suppliers and contractors also began to reap the benefits from wartime production.

"Until five years ago (1939), Schramm's use of the railroad totaled about four car loads of coal a year, other haulage being by truck. Between June 1st 1943, and June 1st 1944, there were 250 car loads of materials coming in, and 254 going out from the plant, while since June 1st there have been three train loads consisting of fifteen or more cars.(19)

To meet its needs, Schramm hired a variety of workers from other businesses whose production was restricted by the government or curtailed because of priorities for war goods.(20) The company produced spare parts, tractors, trailer trucks, air compressors, welders, air tanks, and railway cars for the United States Navy, Army, Marines, and the Engineers.(21) As production increased, the company expanded its operation facilities.

After the war, Schramm continued to prosper. The company celebrated its Golden Anniversary on May 24th and 25th in 1950, (22), and published a company history in Schramm's own publication, Bores and Strokes.(23) That same year, the company introduced the Pneumatractor, a self-propelled air compressor unit that was designed to operate with a front-end loader, snow plows, backfill blades, front and rear winches, mowers, posthole diggers, rotary brushes, pneumajack, and more.(24) The tractor found applications in many industries and provided Schramm another opportunity to expand the company. (Note: West Chester University still uses their original Pneumatractor on campus projects which require compressed air.)

In 1955, Schramm introduced another of their products, the Rotadrill, which was used for drilling water, wells, blast holes, drilling shallow gas and oil, mineral exploration, environmental construction, and many other applications.(25) Throughout the 1960s, '70s and '80s, Schramm perfected the art of deep drilling by redefining the Rotadrill. In 1975, Schramm, Inc., celebrated their 75th Anniversary. Today, Schramm mostly produces industrial Rotadrills, stationary compressors, and high-pressure compressors.

## **EMPLOYEE RELATIONS**

Schramm's employee relations policies were innovative for a company founded in the early twentieth century. As early as 1917, Schramm introduced a bowling league for employees,(26) and following its success, Schramm introduced other employee sports teams. In 1921, the company formed a basketball team to compete with other companies in West Chester, and added baseball, boxing, track, and other sports in subsequent months.(27) The company introduced annual awards banquets for its employees, and in the 1950s, the local newspaper covered them regularly. The banquets were attended by over one hundred people each year and participants received awards for outstanding achievements in their respected areas. The sports teams created a regular camaraderie among the employees, which fostered an improved working environment for them.

In 1924, Schramm began to offer paid vacations. By 1952, employees with at least five years received two weeks of paid vacation during the summer, while workers with less than five years of service received one week of paid vacation.(28) In 1958, the company granted three weeks of vacations to employees who worked more than fifteen years, and in 1977, vacations were increased to four weeks for workers with twenty years of service.(29)

In 1927, Schramm began to offer sick benefits and life insurance, while inaugurating a group hospitalization plan in 1943, and instituted long term disability insurance in 1967.(30) Schramm paid its employees a fair weekly wage, but also provided employees a monthly bonus based on the company's shipments. Schramm was owned by its employees and company stock was available to all of them on a payroll deduction plan.(31)

During World War II, when Schramm needed to increase its work force quickly, the company made a number of changes. Schramm hired women for shop work,(32) and since 1944, Schramm held an annual picnic for their employees.

In 1940, the company opened a restaurant for employees in the Parker mansion, which still stands adjacent to the factory. The restaurant was a success from the beginning. Newspaper reports from the time provide descriptive detail:

"The mansion has been completely renovated and contains six dining rooms, which can hold about 200 people ... Joseph Umani, of West Chester, is in general charge assisted by a staff of local women. ... Yesterday, the menu consisted of grape juice, roast beef, string beans, sweet potatoes, iced tea or coffee, applesauce with cantaloupe as dessert. During dinner classical and popular music was played on a phonograph for the employees. ... Henry Schramm, president of the company, pronounced the dinner and the service excellent in every respect."

The company subsidized the cost of meals at the restaurant, although by 1977, inflation had forced the price of coffee up to ten cents.(33) The company also provided flu shots to its employees.(34)

### **SCHRAMM'S RELATIONSHIP TO WEST CHESTER**

After Schramm relocated its business to West Chester in 1917, the company developed a special relationship with the community. For instance, Ernest Bayliss, a member of the Rotarians and a former Director of Public Works for West Chester, remembered that during a project to raise money to equip Green Field (a neighborhood athletic field) with lights, Henry Schramm got out of his sick bed to write a check and said that if they didn't get enough, to come back and see him for the balance.(35)

Charles "Bud" Dunwoody, currently a Regional Sales Manager at Schramm, Inc., reported that Schramm donated the athletic fields across from the present facility as a sign of good will. Schramm has done many philanthropy projects within the borough to foster an improved community.(36)

Schramm, Inc. has operated in West Chester for nearly a century, and during that time, it employed members of many of the Borough's families. Meanwhile, its international sales spread the name of West Chester all over the globe. Within the Borough, Schramm earned a reputation as a good place to work, and although this has not been proven, its employee relations policies may have helped pushed companies in the area to adopt similar policies during times of low employment.

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## NOTES

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2. Preston Foster, "History of Schramm Engines," Engineers and Engines (February/March 1980), 19-24.
3. Foster, "History of Schramm," 19.
4. Ibid., 19-20.
5. Ibid., 20.
6. Ibid., 22.
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8. Preston Foster, "History of Schramm Engines," Engineers and Engines (April/May 1980), 3-9.
9. Daily Local News (West Chester: July 25, 1947), "Schramm, Inc." in CCHS clippings file.
10. Foster, "History of Schramm," 3.
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15. Preston Foster, "History of Schramm Engines," Engineers and Engines (June/July 1980), 3-7.
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25. Daily Local News (West Chester: January 28, 1957), "Schramm, Inc." in CCHS clippings file.
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27. Daily Local News (West Chester: Feb 12, 1921), "Schramm, Inc." in CCHS clippings file.

28. Daily Local News (West Chester: February 3, 1952) "Schramm, Inc." in CCHS clippings file.

29. Foster, "History of Schramm," 5.

30. Ibid., 5.

31. "Celebrating 75 Years, Schramm 1900-1975," Daily Local News (West Chester: 1975) "Schramm, Inc." in CCHS clippings file.

32. Ibid., 5.

33. Foster, "History of Schramm," 5.

34. "Celebrating 75 Years, Schramm 1900-1975," Daily Local News (West Chester: 1975) "Schramm, Inc." in CCHS clippings file.

35. Ernest Bayliss, telephone interview by Jim Jones (December 22, 1996).

36. Charles Dunwoody, interview by Thomas Brientnall (April 1998).

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