HISTORY FROM OHA

let’s have a good clean fight:
The Prosperity Company Goes to War

Samuel John Braun, born to German immigrants in Illinois, was keenly interested in becoming a successful entrepreneur at an early age.

BY THOMAS HUNTER

After leaving home at 17 in 1873, Braun opened his own grocery store. He then went to Germany in 1897, and returned in 1907, when he began to manufacture laundry pressing machines.

During the 1920s, the Prosperity Company stayed true to its name and prospered. Its mascot, “Mr. I Will Prosper”, promoted personal thrift in the not-so-thrifty decade. Mr. Prosper’s philosophy was to prosper by paying close attention to his clothes. If his clothes were clean and pressed, they would last longer. If his clothes lasted longer, he would save money, and thus have more money to make more money.

By the late 1920s, the Prosperity Company was one of the largest makers of steam-pressing clothing machines in the U.S. In March 1929, the company made its 50,000th laundry-pressing machine. It was also the largest machine built to date, measuring 87 feet wide.

As the 1920s segued into the next decade, and the Great Depression, the Prosperity Company stayed in business and continued to thrive, even opening a distribution center in New York City. On February 17, 1938, the company founder, Samuel J. Braun, died at age 81. Along with managing the successful company, Braun was a lay minister with the Apostolate Christian Church in Syracuse. Braun had founded the church in 1914. Initially supporting it with his own money, he traveled to Europe and South America promoting church activities, contracting and subsequently recovering from smallpox on one of his trips. Braun’s children continued and expanded their father’s church work in succeeding decades.

By 1940, the U.S. had begun mobilizing for war without directly committing its military personnel to combat. With World War II raging in Europe for more than a year, President Roosevelt declared that the U.S. would begin to sell war products to Great Britain and Canada. American isolationists protested against entering a European conflict, and the concept of selling was later modified to lending equipment and supplies to European allies. The U.S. government began to plant factory orders for a wide variety of weapons, ammunition and machinery, including laundry presses. Anticipating obtaining several lucrative government contracts, Prosperity rented 30,000 square feet of floor space in the empty Gemminger-Rand Textile factory on Gifted Street in Syracuse to store its inventory. At the time, the largest manufacturer of power-steam clothing presses, in 1940, Prosperity received 581,341 to make laundry presses for U.S. Army camps. To make the presses, Prosperity had invested $100,000 in new equipment and added almost 650 new employees. By the end of 1940, Prosperity’s government contracts accounted for over $1 million.

Wartime production workers in Syracuse held a Rededication Day on Thursday, Sept. 28, 1944. Over 44,000 local workers were involved in the war effort, with 10,000 workers doing the work that making wartime products while the total of only 1,100 employees. The government authorized a plan for expanding its production facilities. The company’s president, Aquila Rufus Braun, envisioned a future, mechanized America that included electrical laundry presses. He predicted that the production floodgates would burst open once wartime production restrictions were removed, creating a dramatic appeal for workers for labor-saving laundry machines. Surveys showed that the war, women remaining in the workforce, as well as returning to work in their homes, would take their laundry to commercial businesses that would wash, dry, and press their clothes. Braun added that laundries would merge with dry-cleaning businesses, and he wanted Prosperity to be prepared to meet that demand.

As America surrendered in May 1945, and the U.S. military turned its attention to defeating the Japanese in the Pacific War, Prosperity produced and shipped 1,000 service machines to the South Pacific Islands to clean clothes and dry military uniforms. Concerned that mold and mildew unleased by heat, moist air would degrade uniforms, the “portable, self-contained, air-operated laundry” machines were designed to dry clothes, wash, dry, and press uniforms for GIs stationed in remote outposts. Officials boasted that the one-hour service would outclass the traditional “primitive method employed by nannies — pounding the wash on a rock beside a running stream.”

By September 1945, World War II had ended and Aquila Braun could begin his plan of filling the world with mechanized, labor-saving laundry systems. As the U.S. returned to peacetime civilian activities, and opening new markets for a vast array of American consumer products, the Prosperity Company finished the 1940s and entered the 1950s with great optimism. However, Prosperity had its share of difficulties during the decade. Aquila Braun retired as company president in 1953, but remained chairman of the board. Stockholders accused Braun and his family of managing company funds during his tenure and sued for control of the company. In 1955, Prosperity officials sold control of the company to Ward International Corporation. John Bouvier, Prosperity’s president, stated that selling a majority control of its stock to Ward would not only hasten Prosperity’s expansion and advancement in the commercial laundry and dry-cleaning industry, but also would develop water clarification and neutralization from atomic contamination. Richard Weininger, president of Ward vouched to keep Prosperity a prosperous concern in Syracuse. The year 1956 marked Prosperity’s 40th anniversary with its slogan, “Life Begins at 40.” That same year, the sale Prosperity stockholders voted their case against members of the Braun family, ending a six-year legal battle, and gaining for them a substantial financial settlement. In 1958, Ward International Corporation, parent company of the Prosperity Company was purchased by Leibenstein Lines, a NYC shipping business.

In January 1961, an article in the Syracuse Post-Standard described local citizens on Prosperity’s role as one of Syracuse’s oldest businesses and leaders of manufacturing of laundry and dry-cleaning machinery throughout the world. It also informed the public on Prosperity’s firsts — designing and making air-operated presses, automatic controls, and equipment suitable for property handling dry-cleaning solvents. Company president, Fred Courtney, promoted community relations. It is difficult, if not impossible, to place a dollar value on good corporate-community relations.

“...it is not unimportant to us at Prosperity.” There has been much public criticism of absentee ownership with the feeling that such a company is only interested in what it can take out of a community rather than in what it can contribute. Today any company with such a policy will not in the long run be successful.” In April, company officials assured Prosperity employees and the local community that the company would remain viable in Syracuse.

Nevertheless, all of that positive rhetoric came to a screeching halt by June 1, 1961. Niels Gammeltoft, president of Ward Industries, Inc., announced that the Syracuse plant would close and that operations would move to Portland, Maine. On June 10, a group reconstituting 600 Prosperity employees met to discuss the possibility of forming a new company to save the local jobs and $52 million in annual payroll, but to no avail. About 100 employees would remain in Syracuse to operate a new business, House of Kleen Development Corp, a coin-operated laundry and dry-cleaning equipment assembly plant, established by Ward Industries. The Prosperity Company closed in the fall of 1961, displacing 300 employees.

The end had finally come for the once-flourishing Prosperity Company and its place in Syracuse business history. Similar to many other family-owned local businesses, the former manufacturer of laundry presses had been swallowed by larger companies and then dissipated. And, yet, the Prosperity Company’s rich legacy lives on at the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) Museum in downtown Syracuse. OHA acquired pertinent company archival material and photographs, as well as the salesmen’s models of laundry presses.

Thomas Hunter is the curator of collections at the Onondaga Historical Association (www.onondagahistory.org), located at 321 Montgomery St. in Syracuse.

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