

HOBBY HISTORY

The Story of Universal Match

by Mike Prero

Although Universal was the undisputed giant of the industry when I entered the hobby in 1982, one normally doesn't think of Universal Match when pondering the field of "golden oldies." Universal had its thumb in a number of pies over the years, however, and the company, itself, was a respectable 60 years old before it withered. It dominated both the American industry and the hobby during the 1960s - 1980s. Universal Match presents the collector with a truly awesome variety of covers and boxes. Som much so, perhaps, that its venerable history is often overlooked in favor of the names of companies which started long before, such as Diamond, Hio, and Lion.

The Universal Match Company was founded in 1925 by A.H. and S.M. Rosenberg [*to put that in perspective, Diamond was formed in 1880*]. The Rosenberg family had already had a number of years' worth of experience in match manufacturing and by 1925 had embarked on a venture of their own. Little did they realize that they were giving birth to the one-day giant of the industry...or perhaps they did!

The ensuing history of the company is a tangled web of subsidiaries, mergers, takeovers, and other mysterious financial goings-on. Universal, itself, for example, says that it "formed" the Star Match Co. in 1930. The records indicate, however, that the Star Match Co. was already in existence in 1928. What probably happened was that Universal took over the struggling company [*although the latter is near and deal to all old cover collectors*] and began to make a going concern of it in 1930.

In 1939, Universal absorbed both the Union Match Co. and the Federal Match Co., in the form

of the Federal Match Corp., to form the Pan American Match Corp. with the Virginia Match Corp. [*still with me?*] Later, the whole thing went back to being Universal Match, only now it was Universal Match Corp. Contrary to popular early reports in the hobby, Universal did not take over Crown Match Co. or King Midas Match Co., both of which were California operations. It did, however, take over Atlantic Match Co. c. 1941.

Universal changed its name to UMC Industries, Inc. in 1966, as by then the very successful company had spread out to become a multi-faceted conglomerate. Eventually, the company was sold to Swedish Match AB of Stockholm in 1981, and the resulting entity became Universal Match Corp (again).

Production centers for Universal included Hudson, NY; Los Angeles, CA; St. Louis, MO; and Kenner, LA, all of which are things of the past now.

As part of the general decline in the American match industry, by the mid-1980s, Universal was already pulling out of match manufacturing in the U.S. In 1985, for example, Universal introduced its new Jupiter One-Eight line, which was manufactured in Belgium. Rising production and labor costs, the increasing anti-smoking environment, foreign competition...all of these factors and more spelled the end of Universal's peak in the industry. By 1987, production of all fancies had ceased, and soon Universal production in the United States disappeared.

New Universal manumarks reflect the company's merger with Canadian, European, and Asian interests, along with its now exclusively foreign locations.

Over the years, Universal produced a truly remarkable variety of covers and boxes in an effort to surpass its stiff competition from the likes of Diamond and Lion. Not all of its innovative ideas found acceptance, of course, but the great majority proved to be successful additions to the industry's armory of varieties, and all are now sought by collectors. Just look at this

JUPITER ONE-EIGHT (Belgian-made; 1985)
 UNIGLO II (Uniglo-type box; 1985)
 GEM (box; 1987)(continued by Atlas-Diamond)

formidable list of Universal trademarks/types:

SAFETY FIRST (actually a footer; late 1920s)
 EMBOSS-O-MATCH (embossed; late 1920s)
 ROYAL FLASH (40-strike; 1936)
 BILLBOARD (40-strike, 1936)
 TEN-STRIKE (first 10-strike; 1938)
 METALLIC (1940)
 ACTION (30-stick w/flared saddle discs; c.1940)
 MIRRO-GLOSS (laminated exterior; 1941)
 AQUA-PRUF (waterproof; late 1940s)
 VICTORIA (box, date-?)
 SATIN TIP (box, date-?)
 SAFE-T-LITE (safety match; 1949)
 SAFEY TAB (1949)
 FIRECHIEF (box, date-?)
 ARISTOCRAT (first modern 30-strike; 1951)
 JEWELITE (Jewel-size, dye cut; 1951 reintroduced 1963)
 JEWEL (30-strike width, longer length; 1955/re-introduced 1963)
 MATCHORAMA (color photo-type; 1956)
 STICKY-BACK (adheres to cigarette pack; 1958)
 SIGNET (fancy debossed Foilite; 1963)
 FOILITE (fancy impressed foil; 1964)
 FLORENTINE (bubbled or raised ink definite patterns; date-?)
 CENTURY LITE (100-strike; 1964)
 CAMEO (fancy debossed; 1965)
 CLASSIQUE (slightly larger Jewel, glued-in matches; 1967)
 FILIGREE (waxy texture, random bubbled pattern; 1969)
 SILKTONE (fancy overlaid with silk-like threads; date-?)
 SERRATED GOLD (date-?)
 UNIGLO (fancy, soft oily texture; 1972)
 AMERICAN ACE (hobby's most popular box; 1977)
 MATCHTONE (fancy, top is different color from rest of color, date-?)
 RAINBOW (fancy, peral-finish; 1979)
 EXTEND 'N AD (peel-off label; 1982)
 CLASSIQUE 180 (box; 1983)

Today, Universal, located in Canada, is no longer a manufacturer, although its name can still be seen in a number of new manumarks: *Universal/Eddy*, *Universal/Atlas*, etc. At least one, perhaps more, of its trademarks has apparently passed on to current survivorss of the decline of the American match industry.

In many ways, the evolution of the Universal match Company is the evolution of the American match industry, itself, and just as Universal production sites have faded from the country, it's exceedingly doubtful that America will ever again enjoy a prominent place in the world industry, as it once held. Our future seems to be based on data management rather than manufacturing.