

Chapter Two:

The Akron Smoking Pipe Co. 1890-1919

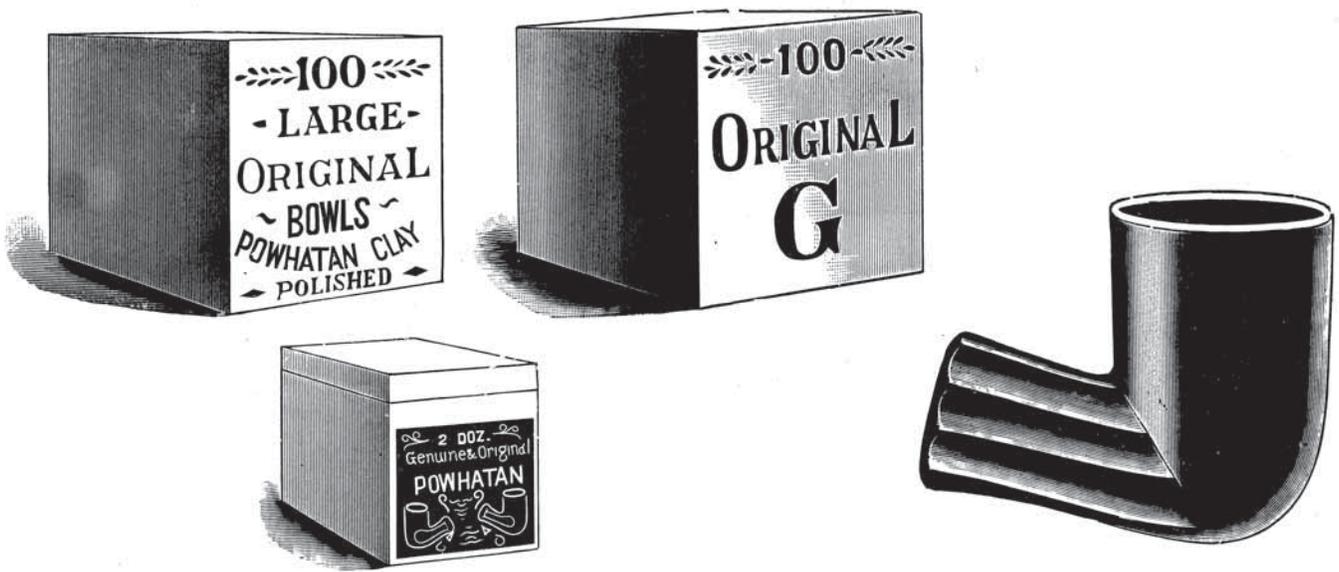
It was an era when dime novels thrilled thousands of readers every week, boisterous crowds thronged to professional baseball games, bicycles shared the street with electric trolleys, amusement parks excited "the masses," and crowded theaters hosted bawdy vaudeville shows. The birthtime of American mass culture was the 1890s. Millions of immigrants arrived at seaports on both coasts, drawn to this mecca of opportunity.¹ Still, the business world of the nineteenth century was not for the fainthearted. There had been severe economic depressions and labor unrest in the 1870s and 1880s, but the worst was yet to come. The deepest depression in history, one that would destroy countless businesses, would afflict the nation in 1893.

Little more than a rowdy canal town in 1838, Akron was transformed into a thriving industrial center by 1890. In the years 1880-1890, the city had seen a 67% increase in population, to a total of more than 27,000.² Many of these new residents came looking for jobs in the factories that dominated the local economy--farm implement, oatmeal, and match manufacturers. Locally, as well as nationally, new corporate forms were taking hold in an increasingly competitive economic climate. Even so, successful businesses in this era were often established by individual entrepreneurs with visions of consolidating the plethora of small competing companies into stronger depression-resistant enterprises.

The severe economic lessons of the 1870s and 1880s were not lost on the men running the E.H. Merrill Company. When the company was incorporated in 1887, the co-partners (E.H. Merrill, H.S. Merrill, and F.W. Butler Sr.) intended to manufacture "Ohio Stoneware and clay specialties" for a period of five years, after which their goal was to become "an

incorporated stock company."³ Fred Butler, having served as secretary-treasurer for the company (he remained secretary of the E. H. Merrill Company throughout the 1890s), decided to pursue the smoking pipe trade that had been the mainstay of the Merrill Company for more than a decade. On September 3, 1890, Butler, along with John W. Baker, J. C. McMillen, C. H. Palmer, and Charles Baird, signed the Articles of Incorporation forming The Akron Smoking Pipe Company.⁴ On September 15, after ten percent of the capital stock had been subscribed (the company was capitalized at \$70,000), the Certificate of Subscription was entered in Columbus. The company's offices were established on Falor Street just west of Main Street (an area occupied in the twentieth century by the B.F. Goodrich Tire and Rubber Company) in the same building that housed the offices of the Diamond Match Company.

The founders of the fledgling company moved quickly to ensure the survival of the business in the face of fierce competition in the smoking pipe industry. The same day that the Certificate of Subscription was signed, five other documents were signed. The Akron Smoking Pipe Company's directors consolidated their strength by buying out the smoking pipe business of five other companies: E. H. Merrill Company, Baker & McMillen (co-owned by John W. Baker, one of the founders of The Akron Smoking Pipe Company), Curtis Fenton Company, The Diamond Match Company, and Merrill & Ford (of Pamplin, Virginia--co-owned previously by William G. Merrill, E.H.'s other son).⁵ These transactions ranged from the purchase of buildings, equipment, supplies, and inventory, to the takeover of another company's market, to formal agreements not to compete with each other. Within a year, the company



The Akron Smoking Pipe Company produced a wide variety of different-shaped clay pipe bowls that could be shipped in wooden or pasteboard boxes. This cut is from a turn of the century illustrated catalogue. **The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.**

added another "Do Not Compete" agreement with C. D. Weeks, limiting the sale of smoking pipes by the Weeks company.

The severe depression that started in 1893 did not bring the company to its knees like it did so many others across the country. Sales of wooden matches continued strongly throughout the depression, perhaps ensuring the survival of Akron Smoking Pipe. Company advertisements boasted that 100,000 pipes were produced each day during the 1890s.⁶ The *Akron Beacon Journal* reported that the company moved its offices to Mogadore (adjacent to the factory)

in 1896, and the factory was slightly damaged by a fire in May 1898.⁷

The Pamplin Plant was located in Pamplin City, Virginia, near rich sources of a type of clay found only in Powhatten and Appomattox Counties. The company's mainstay products, Powhatten clay and "stone" smoking pipes were not only included with box matches, but were also packaged for retail sales. An early catalogue stated that,

"You will observe that some of the styles are now packed in attractive strawboard boxes,

which make very nice shelf goods, suitable for the notion dealer to handle, as well as the grocer and tobacconist."⁸

The catalogue explained that "A chemical analysis shows that in the property of absorbing the nicotine and oil of tobacco, these [Powhattan] pipes are equal to the famous meerschaum."⁹ The stone pipes, most of which were glazed (unlike the clay pipes), were made of "the very finest stoneware clay." All pipes came complete with sharpened preshaped reed stems that fit into the molded clay or stone "pipe bowl." The literature promised that the reed stems would not "wear off the enamel of the teeth" like the clay stems of competitor's pipes.

By 1902, the company's officers included F W. Butler Sr., president; C. H. Palmer, treasurer; C. Fenton, vice president; and F. A. Fenton, secretary. The treasurer's report for 1901 revealed that the company made a net profit of \$22,952.84 that year.¹⁰ There was discussion by the directors regarding the need of acquiring (or constructing) additional factory space and purchasing additional equipment. The company's earnings remained stable for the next several years, but the market share increased dramatically--by 1903 the company manufactured 83% of the stone smoking pipes made in the United States.¹¹ But during this same period there were problems for many of the other pottery companies in the Summit County area.

"Beginning about 1910, the plants began to close down, some because their clay deposits were becoming exhausted, others because their close-in properties had become so valuable that they could be sold at a good profit to concerns which wanted them for other uses, and still others because of the high wages paid in the rubber plants."¹²

Even the mighty Robinson Clay Products Company (really several different companies under the single corporate umbrella) began to close down plants.¹³ Pottery companies, sewer pipe companies, brick and tile manufacturers--all were losing ground in the highly competitive clay products field. New companies around the country were beginning to produce the same products using less expensive materials (like tin and glass) and more efficient manufacturing processes.

Only the companies who responded creatively could survive such market pressure. Creative response "involved going beyond existing practices or techniques, and required the doing of new things or the doing of things that have already being done, in a new way."¹⁴ F. W. Butler Sr. and his fellow officers had built a nationally recognized business (at least in terms of volume) in smoking pipes, but along the way, they realized that it was dangerous to "put all the eggs in one basket." While still in the 1890s, they looked for other product lines that promised long-term markets for porcelain. They found such a market in the burgeoning electrical industry.

At the turn of the century, the United States was well on its way to becoming the leader of the industrial world partly because of the emergence of new sources of power. In turn, oil, coal-fired steam, natural gas, and finally, electricity, became the dominant new sources of power.

"[Electricity] had begun to change the face of cities by 1900--electric wires multiplied in startling confusion...and even earlier had begun to displace oil and gas lighting in factories. Gradually electrical power altered industrial machinery as well, enormously speeding the internal transformation of the factory."¹⁵

Electric power transmission began as early as

the 1880s (there were 449 power plants in the United States in 1885), but most of these plants produced power for factories and businesses.¹⁶ It was not until the 1890s that the nation as a whole rapidly converted to electrical power.¹⁷ As this process of electrification gathered momentum, a whole new market for porcelain products emerged. Every single house, business, and factory had to install the equipment needed to receive electricity. Porcelain was found to be the ideal material for these standard insulators, because of its resistance to corrosion, ability to withstand high temperatures, relatively low conductivity, shape retention, longevity, and overall durability.

The Akron Smoking Pipe Company may have first experimented with electrical porcelain production as early as the mid-1890s.¹⁸ Two other local companies; The American Marble and Toy Company and The Columbia Insulator Company, began manufacturing molded porcelain insulators during that period. The potential of this business was not lost on the officers of the Akron Smoking Pipe Company--by the turn of the century, the company had also begun to mold electrical porcelain. As the century ended, there was a growing need for manufacturing space for the company's new product line. Ample evidence of the venture into electrical insulator production was evident in the company's 1908 catalogue. The fifty page illustrated booklet featured a full line of the current standard porcelain knobs and cleats for connecting electrical lines to homes and businesses.

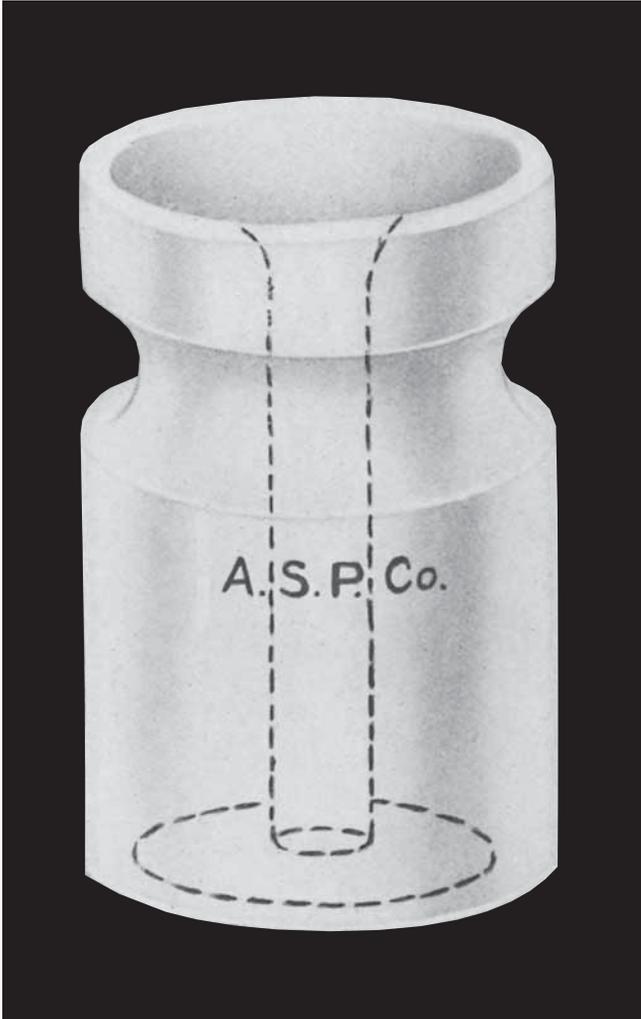
Akron Smoking Pipe had reported a net profit increase of more than 100% in 1906, and that same year the Board of Directors began to talk about building a new factory in Mogadore.¹⁹ But the early standard electrical porcelain insulators and cleats that swelled the company's orders could only be a temporary market, because as soon as the country was electrified, the market would be drastically reduced to

only new construction and replacement parts. The Directors of the company realized that the standard electrical pieces were not going to be the market of the future, and accordingly, began to make custom pieces as early as 1917.

The company entered the second decade of the twentieth century with net profits generally growing slowly and the shareholders enjoyed regular healthy dividends. The trend toward special porcelain products had accelerated with the purchase of the third rail (insulator block) business from The Ohio Brass Company in 1909.²⁰ The company made one final acquisition relating to their smoking pipe business in 1913, with the purchase of Bainum & Peterson Company's rights to produce stone smoking pipes.²¹ This was the last gasp of the smoking pipe business that carried the load for the first twenty years of the company's history.

In 1908, Butler's son, Frederick W. Butler Jr., had finished his studies at Kenyon College, worked for a time as a paint salesman for a paint supply house in the East, and then returned to Akron to work as a clerk for the Robinson Clay Products Company (where his father was the assistant secretary).²² Although the elder Butler transferred shares in the Akron Smoking Pipe Company to his son as early as 1907, it was not possible to ascertain the younger man's involvement with Akron Smoking Pipe in these early years. F. W. Butler Sr. died on October 26, 1915, but his son did not appear in the company records as a Director until 1919, the year he took over as president.

F. W. Butler Sr.'s death in 1915 ushered in not only a new era of family leadership, but marked the final chapter in the production of smoking pipes by the company. America entered World War I in 1917, and that same year the rights to manufacture porcelain insulators was purchased from the General



By 1908, The Akron Smoking Pipe Company was producing sufficient quantities of standard electrical porcelain parts to publish a 51-page catalog of the standard ware. The Standard No. 1 part, which sold for \$88 per thousand, was packed for shipment 680 parts per barrel. **The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.**

Porcelain Company of Parkersburg, West Virginia.²³

All during its first thirty years the Akron Smoking Pipe Company adhered to the conservative

fiscal policies that had become the hallmark of the company's success. No long-term debts were incurred in purchasing equipment, constructing building additions, or upgrading facilities. Only when there was enough money generated to "pay-as-we-go," were any improvements undertaken.

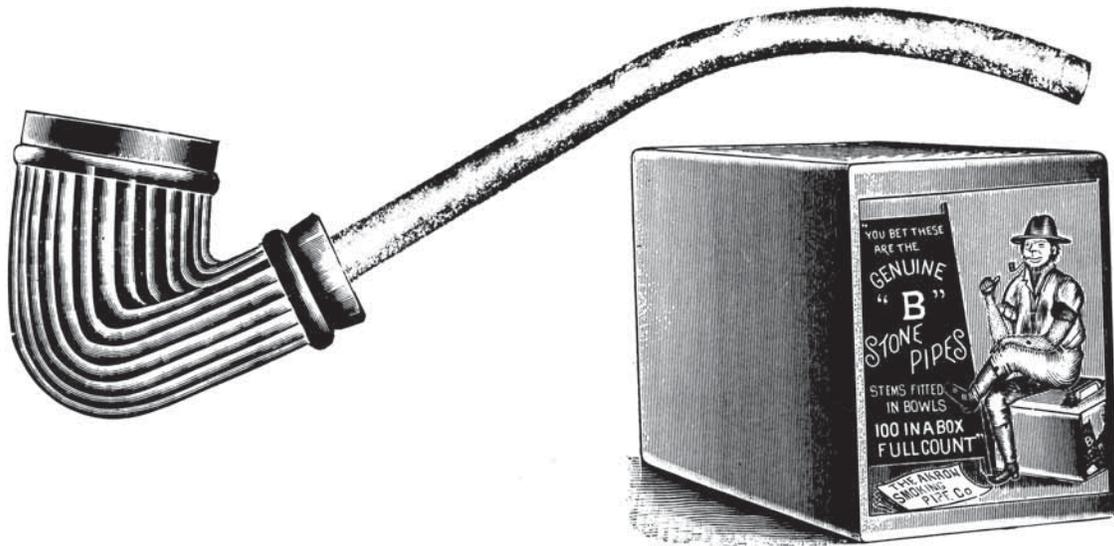
F. W. Butler Jr.'s name first appears in the company's records as a director in 1919--on the eve of the company's next great change. The Akron Smoking Pipe Company was about to be rechristened:

"Resolved, that since we have discontinued the manufacture of smoking pipes, and the sale thereof, that our corporate name be changed from The Akron Smoking Pipe Company to The Mogadore Insulator Company."²⁴

Notes for Chapter Two

1. America was extremely conducive to entrepreneurship in the 19th century, due to general optimism, increased mobility, individualism, the will to succeed, emphasis on material success, achieved status, and the lack of social stratification as found in Europe. pp. 58-59, Peter George, *The Emergence of Industrial America*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1982).
2. From table 3G. Population of Principal Ohio Cities, 1880-1920, p.281, Raymond Boryczka and Lorin Lee Cary, *No Strength Without Union*, (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Historical Society, 1982).
3. State of Ohio, "Articles of Incorporation, The Akron Smoking Pipe Company," 3 September 1890.
4. State of Ohio, "Articles of Incorporation."

5. E. H. Merrill Company, contract, "Sale of Stone Smoking Pipe Business;" The Baker McMillen Company, contract, "Sale of Smoking Pipe Business;" Curtis Fenton Company, contract, "Sale of Stone Smoking Pipe Business;" Diamond Match Company, contract, "Sale of Smoking Pipe Company;" Merrill & Ford Company, "Sale of Smoking Pipe Business;" to the Akron Smoking Pipe Company, September 15, 1890.
6. The Burch Directory Company, *Akron City Directory*, Akron, Ohio, 1892-1893.
7. *Akron Beacon Journal*, "Moves Offices to Mogadore," 13 March 1896, 3:4. *Akron Beacon Journal*, "Mogadore Factory Damaged by Fire," 14 May 1898, 3:2.
8. The Akron Smoking Pipe Company, "Smoking Pipe Catalogue," p. 5, no date.
9. Catalogue, p. 5.
10. From The Akron Smoking Pipe Company, "Minutes of Meetings, 27 January 1902 to 8 December 1916."
11. *Akron Beacon Journal*, "83% of Stone Pipes Used in U. S. Produced in Mogadore," 4 July 1903, 7:2.
12. Karl Grismer. *Akron and Summit County*, (Akron, Ohio: The Summit County Historical Society, 1952), p.425.
13. As described by Karl Grismer. Also elaborated on by C. Dean Blair. *The Potters and Potteries of Summit County 1828-1915*, (Akron, Ohio: The Summit County Historical Society, 1965).
14. George, p. 56.
15. Boryczka, p. 99.
16. "The American Electrical Directory for 1885 listed a total of 449 isolated incandescent plants in the United States..." Harold C. Passer. *The Electrical Manufacturers, 1875-1900*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p.115.
17. "The basic technical advances in the generation, transmission, and utilization of electrical power had been made, and the succeeding decades saw a widespread use of electrical power throughout the economy." Harold C. Passer, *The Electrical Manufacturers, 1875-1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 345.
18. Referring to the period, Karl Grismer asserts that "The Akron Porcelain Company [Akron Smoking Pipe Company] and the Colonial Insulator Company built up good businesses manufacturing porcelain insulators used for electric power transmission..." Grismer, p.425.
19. From a meeting of the Board of Directors, 12 February 1907, Akron Smoking Pipe Company, "Minutes of Meetings," 27 January 1902 to 8 December 1916. "The facilities here in Akron were quite small, they were downtown where the old O'Neil's building is, and they went out to Mogadore where West Chevrolet is now." From an interview with George H. Lewis III, 18 May 1989.
20. The Ohio Brass Company, "Purchase of Third Rail Business," by The Akron Smoking Pipe Company, 1 March 1909.
21. Bainum & Peterson Company, contract, "Purchase of Smoking Pipe Business," by The Akron Smoking Pipe Company, 31 January 1913.



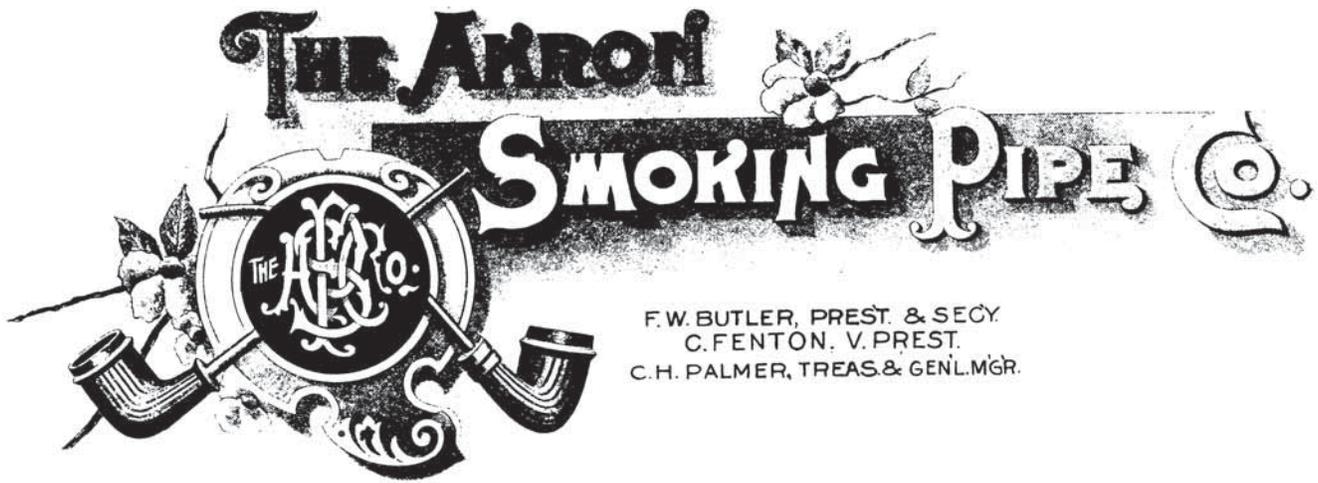
The Akron Smoking Pipe Company produced many different shapes and sizes of clay pipes. This page from a turn of the century catalog stressed the care put into the shipping of finished goods--fragile products like clay had to be packed to protect against breakage.

22. Grismer, p. 727.

23. The General Porcelain Company, "Purchase of Patent License to Manufacture Porcelain Insulators," by the Akron Smoking Pipe Company, 27 February 1917.

24. From the minutes of a "Special Directors'

Meeting," The Akron Smoking Pipe Company, 11 December 1917.



F.W. BUTLER, PRES. & SECY.
C. FENTON, V. PRES.
C.H. PALMER, TREAS. & GENL. MGR.

This beautiful elaborate logo, the original symbol of The Akron Smoking Pipe Company, illustrates the ornate graphics that were common to nineteenth century tastes. The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.