

Chapter Five:

Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co. 1946-1989

The 1940s

America emerged from the war stronger than ever. Like the aftermath of the first world war, industries poised to resume manufacturing peacetime products. Thousands of former servicemen went to college under the GI Bill¹, new "subdivisions" filled with "tract houses" lured families to the "suburbs," shiny new cars rolled off the assembly lines in unprecedented numbers, and television was in its infancy. Also, production of so-called "consumer durables," resumed as companies like Westinghouse, Frigidaire, Motorola, RCA, and General Electric manufactured new appliances and household gadgets.

Some Akron residents worried that the depression would return when war production orders ceased and thousands of service men and women returned seeking jobs. In fact, over the next four years (1946-1949), more than 50,000 factory jobs were lost in Akron. In 1944, the average number of people per week receiving unemployment relief was thirty-eight, but the number had ballooned to more than seven thousand by 1949.² Even so, post-war demand for consumer goods in the United States grew as spending power increased.

The Akron Porcelain Company had traditionally been more sensitive to national rather than local trends, so the company's directors were optimistic about the future. In 1946, the company was still comparatively small, with less than a hundred employees. Because there were only a handful of managers, they had to have some knowledge of engineering, production, administration, and personnel management. The managers could not strictly specialize in a company this size.³

In the period immediately after the war, the company was squeezed by OPA price restrictions still frozen at 1942 levels, coupled with "a request from the

union employees for an advance in wages, which, if granted, will make it difficult to show much profit unless price relief is secured."⁴ Fred Butler Jr. plainly saw that wage adjustments were necessary, and sought price relief from the OPA. The Federation of Glass, Ceramic and Silica Sand Workers of America, Akron Porcelain Local #96 (chartered July 26, 1944⁵) had worked with management for better working conditions and benefits in previous years, and the company's long-standing policy of staying at the top of the industry pay scale probably averted some of the local labor problems suffered by other industries in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the workplace, some of the outdated equipment needed to be replaced by safer and more efficient machines. The biggest dangers stemmed from machine operations that stressed speed over safety.

"I almost cut my hand off on a turntable [press] that had about six or eight dies. When you turned it off, you were supposed to stop the turntable in between the dies, but I had the habit of stopping the turntable right over a die to clean off clay stuck to the mold. I would reach in there real quick and remove this clay. But one day I turned the machine off and reached in...but the die shifted down. I had [the machine] turned off, but the air pressure caused the top to come down [part-way] on my hand...They came over to get my hand out, and I kept saying 'Don't push the button!' I knew that if they did the top would come clear down and [crush] my hand. They got a jack under there and pried it up, and got my hand out."⁶

The company converted to two-handled presses

(which required both hands to operate, keeping them both out of harm's way) in the late 1940s .

By June, 1946 the company was still waiting for the government's wartime price restrictions to be removed, but had promised the union wage increases just as soon as the OPA acted on prices. Badly needed maintenance and equipment updates were well underway, but more space was needed for a second kiln, which the directors wanted to have in use by the end of the year. The company quickly drew up plans for the building addition, only to run headlong into the OPA's construction restrictions for "non-essential industries." After extended negotiations a reduced plan calling for an addition costing \$15,000 (the company had originally wanted to build an addition estimated at \$65,000) was allowed by the OPA.⁷ Other industries felt the pressure of the OPA in this period, and the Republican party used the country's general dissatisfaction (industries and consumers all had to cope with shortages of products) with OPA as a successful campaign issue in the elections of 1946.

The management team for the late forties included: F.W. Butler Jr., president; D.M. McCann, vice president; S.H. Stevenson, secretary-treasurer; and George H. Lewis Jr., assistant secretary-treasurer. As the decade ended, they dealt with fuel shortages, increased power of the union (partly in response to the labor activities in the rubber industry), and the further need of capital expenditures to keep the company's facilities up to date. In the next two years, new construction included the building addition (which also included purchase of 1.3 acres of adjacent land), a kiln, a power substation, an elevator, oil storage tanks, presses, conveying equipment, finishing machines, and other equipment. In all, a total of more than a hundred thousand dollars were spent. This was just the beginning--in a Directors Meeting late in 1947, the officers listed the following needs for the coming year: expanded toilet and restroom facilities, shipping and

storage facilities, die department equipment, items for experimental purposes, a central dust collection outfit, and additional power presses.⁸

All this took place while the company lost its biggest customer (40% of their business--more than one million pieces per year):

"The president explained that the Western Electric Company had advised that probably by the end of 1948 their porcelain protector block which we have furnished in very large quantities for a number of years, will be eliminated. This means a possible reduction in sales of \$100,000 to \$150,000, at least."⁹

The parts, in fact, were no longer to be manufactured out of porcelain, but out of "Bakelite" (an early electrical plastic), which meant that Western Electric could simply buy plastic presses and make the parts in their own factory. At various times in previous years, the company's directors had worried about the advisability of having a large proportion of sales be dependent on a few big customers. These fears were realized when they lost Western Electric.¹⁰ Akron Porcelain had to look for new possibilities that ideally, would not leave the company as vulnerable to losing a large volume of sales all at once. But there was a positive side to the loss of Western Electric, "In the end, it probably helped us to lose Western Electric, because we immediately started to work on GE, Frigidaire, Westinghouse, and all the other manufacturers of electric ranges."¹¹ New markets for electrical insulating parts were opening up in the burgeoning automotive and household appliance industries.¹²

The national economy took another downturn in 1949, and the electrical industry was particularly affected. Many companies had to cut hours and even shut down for weeks at a time. The loss of the Western Electric contract, coupled with customers



The gas-fired tunnel kiln greatly increased the quality and quantity of fired ware. The loading of the small cars was crucial, the ware had to be stacked carefully, so that it received the heat evenly and did not collapse. A kiln wreck could result if a stack collapsed, requiring the kiln to be completely shut down, a process that took several days. **The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.**

ordering in smaller quantities, caused Akron Porcelain to reduce to a 36-hour week and eventually to lay off several employees.¹³ Still, the company was able to show a profit, even though net profits were off more than sixty percent. It was clear that the porce-

lain industry was declining, custom porcelain manufacturers were failing, and the number of custom porcelain manufacturers was shrinking steadily (by 1974, there would only be six major survivors in this country). The plastics industry was replacing more



Over the years, The Akron Porcelain Company "family" was entertained with company picnics and parties like this 1948 company Christmas program. F.W. Butler Jr. (fourth row back on the aisle) clapped along with the crowd at this gala affair. **The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.**

and more of the electrical porcelain market.

The 1950s

McCarthyism, the hydrogen bomb, sputnik, beatniks, rock and roll, and the Korean War were all

part of the fifties. Americans were just getting settled into a prosperous post-war when they were warned of the insidious creeping threat of world communism. For most middle Americans, however, baseball games, new cars, and "keeping up with the Jones's"

were the comfortable goals of the era.

A new transportation center was built in downtown Akron (for trains and buses), and the rubber factories worked in shifts around the clock, barely able to keep up with the demand for new tires. Televisions were becoming the dominant pieces of furniture in most living rooms, and millions were able to buy new washers, dryers, and stoves. In the field of electrical parts, there was a lot of competition, but an ever-widening market.

The brief downturn in the previous year was reversed in 1950, just when America geared up for yet another war (in Korea). The directors were again concerned about the effect of wartime regulations, shortages, and other factors that had made survival difficult during World War II. Cash was conserved, and capital expenditures were held to about a tenth of the usual outlay. The year 1950 marked the first in the company's history where sales topped one million dollars, almost doubling the totals from the previous year. One of the company's long-time directors, S.H. "Steve" Stevenson, had to curtail his duties due to illness--he was retained as a consultant for the following three years.

As the Korean War escalated, the company had to submit all changes in wages, benefits, and bonuses to the national War Stabilization Board. The directors anticipated the same conditions that had been encountered ten years earlier.

"All reports of the government and various business services indicate that consumer durable goods will be cut to pre-Korean levels during the first half of 1952. If this does occur, many of our good customers today will not require porcelain and our experience will no doubt be the same as during World War II."¹⁴

The 1951 financial report revealed that the company

was able to stay at the same levels as in 1950, but in 1952, sales began to decline as predicted. Increased fixed costs, higher taxes, increases in wages, and price restrictions drove down profits in 1952. The nationwide steel strike and buyer resistance at the consumer level compounded the problem. By the end of the year, the directors reported that the "squeeze between higher operating costs and fixed prices is becoming drastic."¹⁵ Relief finally came in March 1953, when porcelain was decontrolled--new prices were calculated using current costs of production.

The 1950s marked a turning point in the composition of the workforce at Akron Porcelain. Turnover of the factory workers (particularly at entry level positions) accelerated in the next decade, breaking down some of the continuity of the past that had made work in the factory seem like a "family affair."

"It was like a big family, everybody knew everybody else, even [each others'] wives and kids...We knew what [fellow workers] were going to do that night when we left the shop. We had company picnics--everybody went...we went to Chippewa Lake, Meyer's Lake, Playland, or Summit Beach. Everybody in the company seemed to enjoy themselves, and the bosses, everybody came."¹⁶

For the next few years, the lifting of price controls and more efficient manufacturing methods contributed to modest gains for the company. New presses gave the factory more flexibility to produce not only higher volumes of parts, but allowed much greater variety in the shape and size of products manufactured. New offices were constructed and a new machine shop set up during this period. The directors finally took steps to begin manufacturing plastics. An agreement was made with the Wadsworth Electric Company to experiment with plastics production.

The preliminary investigation of the plastics field was performed by McCann and Lewis.

By 1956, the plant was working at full capacity to fill orders, and Butler cautioned that "We must either grow with our markets or see our customers go elsewhere for their requirements."¹⁷ Improvements to the factory included the new machine shop, additional presses, and paving and fencing of the parking areas. But there were indications that the porcelain field was continuing to decline, "Several volume pieces have become obsolete. This points up the necessity of further development and diversification; perhaps by plastics and wet process porcelain."¹⁸ Akron Porcelain ordered its first plastics press late the same year.

A competitor, the Square D Company, discontinued producing porcelain in 1957. The company picked up some of Square D's customers in 1958 and was awarded a one-year contract to produce strainer cores for the Ford Motor Company. However, profits that had begun a downturn in 1957 continued to wither in 1958. The first plastic press was delivered and put through some trial runs on a Wadsworth Electric Company part in April 1958. Akron Porcelain was about to move into the next phase of its long history--plastics.

Plastics were really not a new phenomenon in the 1950s. In fact, plastics technology traced back to the 1860s. A man named John Wesley Hyatt invented Celluloid in 1866, and by the end of the century the first injection molding machines were already in use.¹⁹ Emile Hemming developed cold molding at the turn of the century and founded the American Insulator Company in 1916.²⁰ But it was Baekeland's first truly synthetic plastic, "Bakelite" (1909), that made plastics versatile. Bakelite dominated the plastics industry until well into the World War II era.²¹

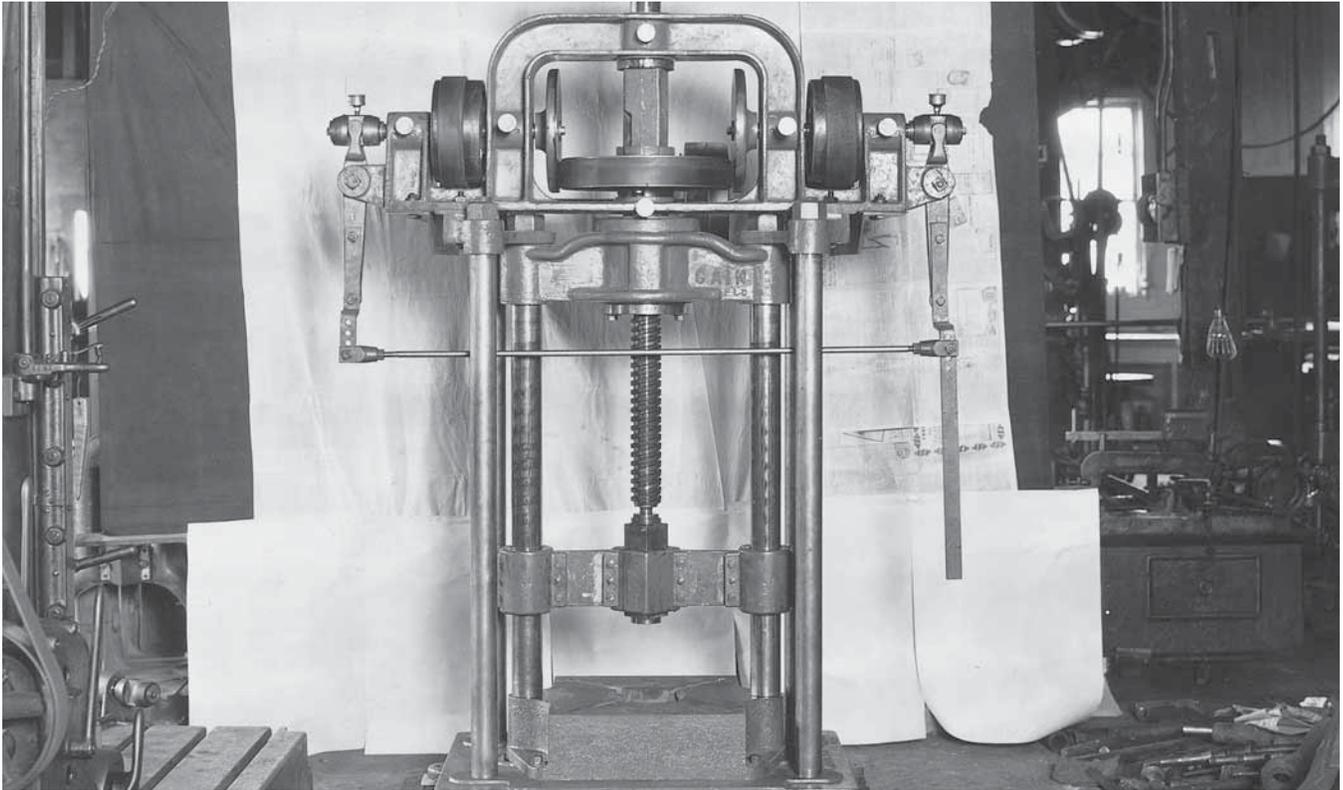
Although at first glance porcelain and plastics seemed to be interchangeable materials, this was not

the case. Plastics are very moldable, can be mass produced, are fair thermal insulators, exhibit good electrical resistance, and can be made transparent, translucent, or opaque in a wide variety of colors. However, plastics are not as strong as other materials, are prone to dimensional changes, cannot survive extremes of heat or cold, and may deteriorate when exposed to sunlight, weather, or ultraviolet light.²²

Porcelain is also an excellent thermal insulator, has surprisingly high compressive strength, good electrical insulating properties, high resistance to corrosion, long-term dimensional stability, and resistance to weathering, sunlight, cold, and ultraviolet light. Conversely, thin sharp edges weaken it, it is brittle, tensile strength is low, it is less moldable, cannot be molded to tolerances as exact as plastics, it is heavier, and above all, it requires special equipment and handling (firing in kilns, drying, and messy handling of raw materials).²³

Plastics and porcelain each had an application in the electrical industry, and Akron Porcelain decided that "If we can't beat them we might as well join them, and we could offer the same range of customers both plastic and ceramic options for their particular parts."²⁴ The ability to offer both processes to customers was a distinct advantage over companies that offered only one or the other. Having a machine shop that was capable of building dies for porcelain production drastically lowered die costs, so often porcelain was a viable alternative (when either material was applicable) to the high cost of plastic molds.²⁵ Being able to produce both materials, however, held other advantages for Akron Porcelain:

"We took advantage of the fact that the larger plastic companies (those that had been in business for quite a while) had [older] equipment...and the industry was constantly changing. The equipment was constantly having to



Although women were beginning to operate the presses by the end of the World War II era, big machines like this friction-powered press were still operated by male employees. **The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.**

be replaced [with] more modern, efficient equipment. So when we went into it as a small company, we had the latest word in automatic presses...we could absorb the overhead in the overhead for our porcelain business. We did not have to fully recover all of our operating costs while we were trying to get started in the business..."²⁶

The first plastics sales were on the books in 1958, but amounted to only a tiny percentage of the company's total sales.

As the decade of the 1950s drew to a close, the fourth generation of the founding family came to work at Akron Porcelain. George H. "Mike" Lewis III had grown up in Akron and attended Lehigh University, where he studied industrial and mechanical engineering. He graduated in June, 1959, and returned to Akron to join the family business.

The 1960s

Generally, America was more prosperous in the 1960s than at any other time in history. But underneath the veneer of well-being were festering social ills. It was a decade of assassinations, riots, new cul-

tural directions, social change, urban renewal, shopping malls, and Americans sent their young off to yet another war.

Downtown Akron continued a slide that had begun in the 1950s. Many businesses left and there were vacant buildings within a few blocks of shiny new Cascade Plaza. It was the last decade in which thousands of tires a day were made in the rubber factories around the community.

Akron Porcelain entered this new decade with a new vision--porcelain and plastics--the best of both worlds. But in the extreme competition of the early sixties, the plastics division was just getting started, and even though the porcelain division was able to absorb some of the overhead, sales and profits were down. Late in 1960, longtime employee and advisor S.H. Stevenson died.

In 1961, the company purchased equipment from the Ceramic Specialties Company of East Liverpool, Ohio, who ceased operations the same year. The former sales manager at Ceramic Specialties was retained on commission.²⁷ Parts of Colonial Insulator were transferred to Akron Porcelain the same year. Severe competition and high costs, along with lower sales contributed to the further erosion of profits. However, the plastics investment was beginning to show promise, two new dies were "awarded" for manufacturing plastic parts.²⁸ For 1961, plastics still only totalled about one half of one percent of the company's sales.²⁹

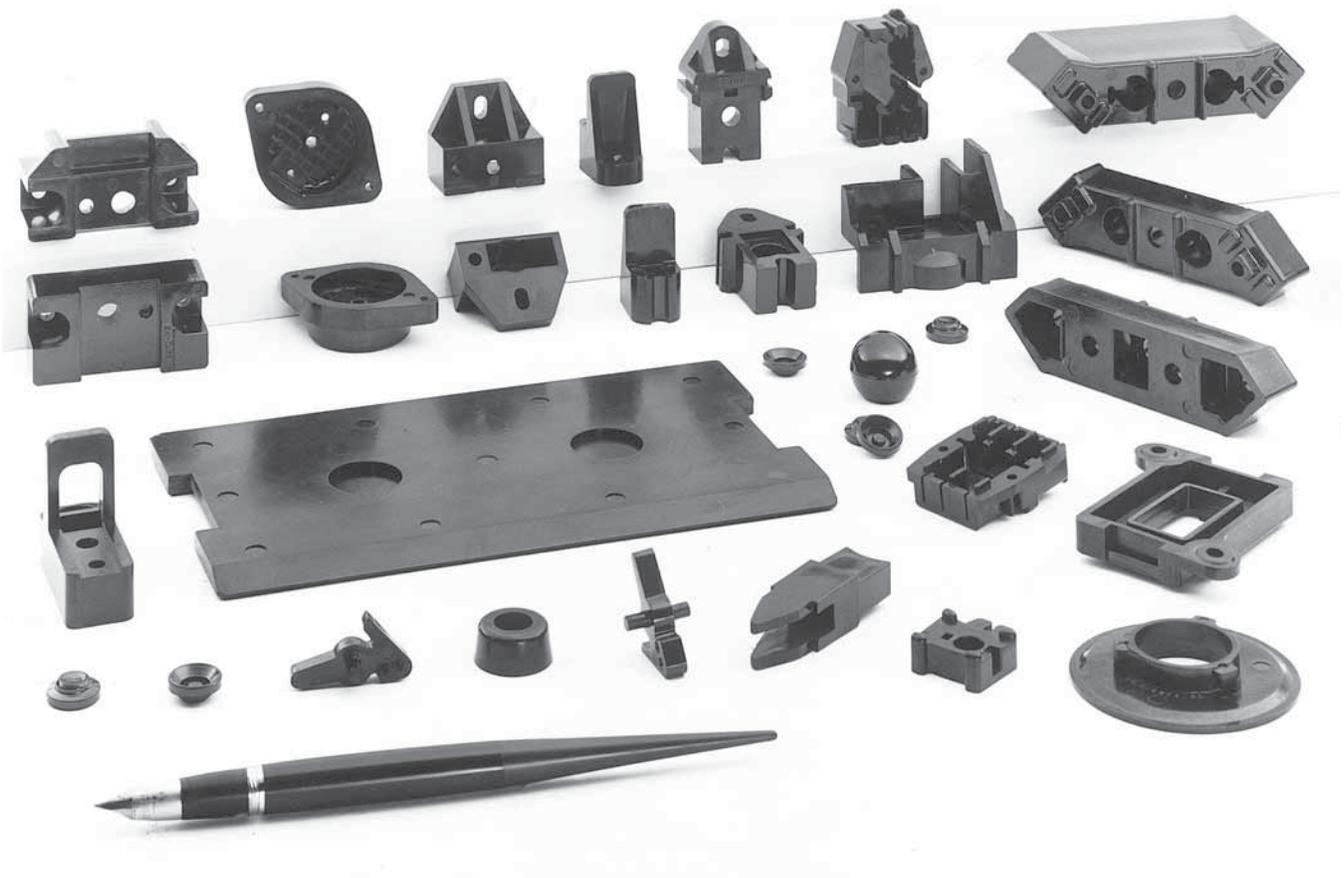
The directors realized that more presses would be needed for plastics. "In order to produce efficiently, eight presses are required for one operator."³⁰ Still, Fred Butler Jr. recommended that no outside financing be used to build up the plastics division. As the early sixties passed, porcelain sales continued to decline slowly (more and more porcelain parts were becoming obsolete) while the company slowly developed the plastic division.

Employees starting with the company during the sixties, usually worked in one or the other of two quite different working environments (plastics or ceramics). Every new employee worked next to an experienced worker, but even the veteran could encounter problems:

"One of the reasons the company moved to the [Kenmore] site was because it was on a swamp they could take ceramic scrap and fill the swamp with it. There was a concrete runway out to the swamp. One day it was rather icy, and a fork truck went skidding down the ramp without even slowing down, straight into the water--[the driver] wasn't hurt, but it took two tow trucks to remove the fork truck from the swamp."³¹

Plastic sales increased modestly at first--to three percent of total sales in 1963, eight percent the next year, and were nearly fifteen percent of the total sales by 1965. The company had to move fast to ensure that there were enough presses to keep up with the flood of orders for plastic parts. Still, the directors did not vary from the conservative spending policies of the past. No equipment was purchased unless the cash was on hand to buy it.

In 1964, F.W. Butler Jr., the man who had guided the company through the depression, World War II, two relocations, and countless other ups and downs, died after more than forty years of service to the company. Butler was not only known for his honesty, business acumen, and foresight--he was respected for his "sense of humor, understanding of human nature, and attitude toward associates." The Directors' resolution said in part, "there has been lost to the company a man of keen intellect, whose vision and aggressive leadership has contributed greatly to the success of the company..."³² The new officers were



Plastics can be molded into smaller shapes and closer tolerances, as can be seen in this photograph of different plastic parts manufactured by The Akron Porcelain Company (note the fountain pen in the picture for scale). **The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.**

D.M. McCann, president; George H. Lewis Jr., vice president; and C.F. Tate, secretary.

Once again a war clouded the company's fortunes in 1965, when the Gulf of Tonkin incident compelled President Lyndon Johnson to send combat troops to Viet Nam. The same year, Akron Porcelain lost large volume plastics customers Marathon Electric and Clark Controller. In 1966, "Mike" Lewis was instructed to "draw up plans for an addition to

the plant."³³ The new addition was solely for the purpose of housing the burgeoning plastics division.

Another of the leaders of the depression and war years, D.M. McCann, retired in late 1967. From his early days with the company through the time he was president, McCann's knowledge and expertise were major factors in the company's growth—he was always Butler's "right hand man." In the face of wildly fluctuating prices, downturns in the automobile

industry, and the uncertainties of the Viet Nam War, he urged management to diversify the product mix and only expand with available company funds. He also remarked that the year 1967 was the toughest year he had experienced with the exception of the early depression years, the company had to shut down for two weeks for lack of orders.³⁴ In 1968, the company's officers were: George H. Lewis Jr., president and chairman; Richard G. McCann, vice president; George H. "Mike" Lewis III, vice president; and C.F. Tate, secretary-treasurer.

As the decade drew to a close the company's investment not only in the plastic field, but in updated (some automated) porcelain equipment began to pay off in both divisions. In 1968, sales and profits had rebounded, with plastics comprising about fourteen percent of sales. The rise continued in 1969, when the highest wage increase in the company's history was negotiated with the union. Parts from the Washington Porcelain Company, of Washington, Pennsylvania, were transferred to the company in 1969. Plastics business was accelerating, and increases in productivity and automation helped the porcelain sales to increase modestly.

The 1970s

The 1970s saw the end of the Viet Nam War, the first resignation in history by an American president in office, an energy crisis, rampant inflation, disco clubs, smaller automobiles, a painful, prolonged hostage crisis abroad (Iran), and microwave ovens in most American kitchens. Psychologists called it the "me-decade"--a turning away from the tumult and self-examination of the previous decade.

The rubber companies ceased tire production completely in Akron during the seventies. The air, once thick with the pungent aroma of burning rubber, was now cleaner, but it was not the smell of prosperity. Whole neighborhoods from the Akron of the 1940s

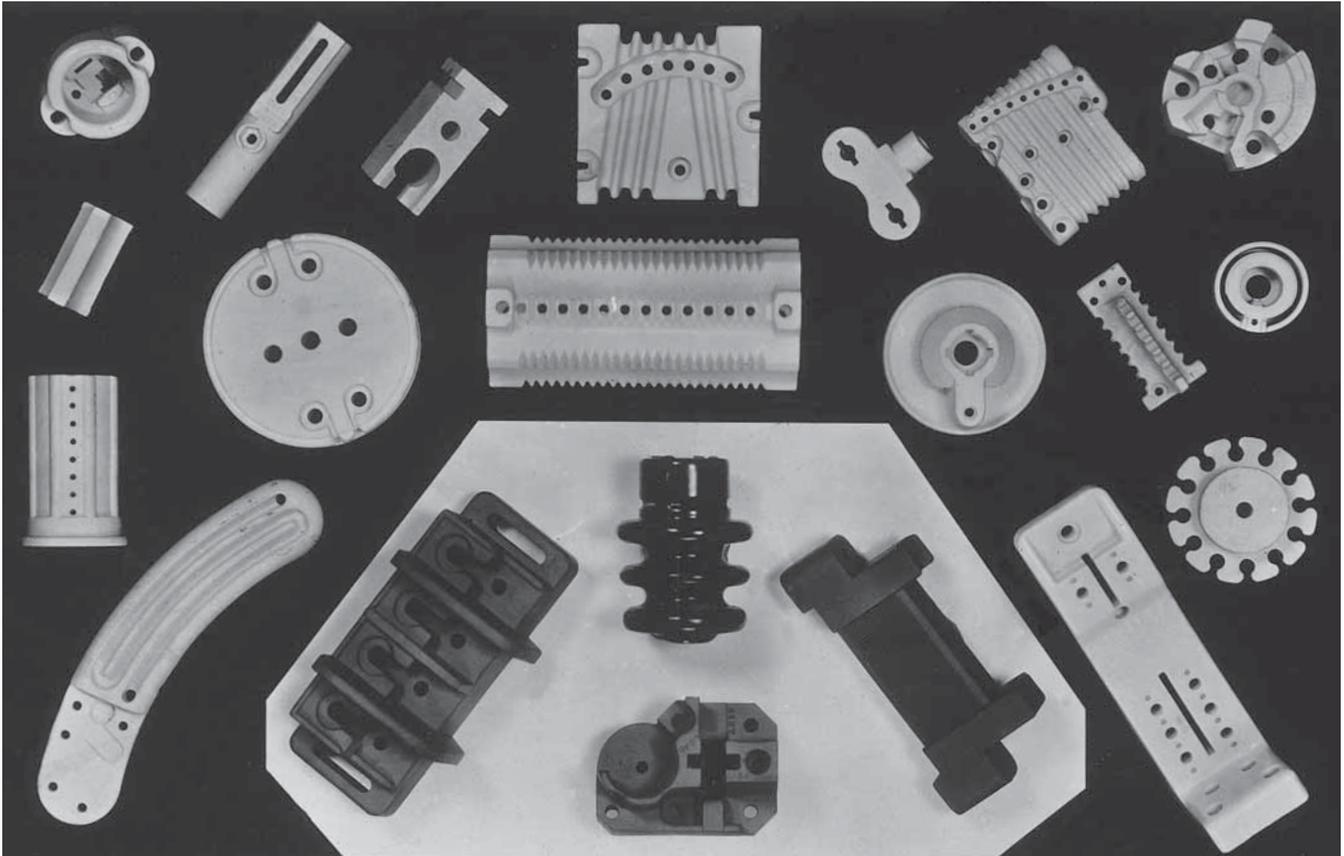
were razed and rebuilt with contemporary-styled small business structures. The city's skyline was altered with the construction of new buildings in Cascade Plaza and Superblock, a new public library, and E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall on the campus of The University of Akron. The city celebrated its sesquicentennial year in 1976 with parades, fireworks, and much hoopla.

Despite the recent upturn of business at Akron Porcelain, there were still some nagging problems as the seventies began. For one, employee turnover had increased considerably. Where generations of family members once toiled, workers now were more mobile and apt to relocate. Perhaps one of the shortest employments on record involved a man:

"personnel hired, sent for a doctor's exam, and then assigned to a foreman. He [the new man] took his shirt off because it was pretty warm near the kiln. He was to be part of a labor group carrying plates full of parts and stacking them on the kiln car. He took one plate over to the kiln car, placed it on the car, and then ran straight out the back door so fast he didn't even bother to pick up his shirt. He must have decided that it was too hot there to work that hard. He never even came back for his shirt."³⁵

In 1970, George Lewis Jr. inspected a Dorst Plant in Germany, where he saw automatic porcelain presses being manufactured. Although he was not sure that the volume was sufficient to make the press feasible he still recommended purchasing one. At the same time, the company was loaned an automatic deburring machine for testing purposes.³⁵

Many customers were changing from porcelain to plastic, and Akron Porcelain tried to respond to the change by making the plastic parts also. One customer, the Kearny Company, converted their ceramic



While plastics have some advantages over porcelain, the company's ability to constantly upgrade technology continues to make porcelain an important product, as illustrated by this sampling of special porcelain parts. **The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.**

volume part to plastic in 1971, and the company was able to respond with the purchase of a 175 ton press. Plastic sales had elevated to twenty-four percent of the company's total by early 1972, but the cancellation of a large volume porcelain contract with Delco-Remy temporarily interrupted an otherwise successful year.³⁷ Better porcelain sales were expected, but the directors credited tremendous growth in the plastics market with maintaining the company's business

position.

The oil crisis of 1973 caused a sudden downturn in the national economy, but Akron Porcelain continued to plan for expansion (keeping the traditional conservative fiscal policy).³⁸ In the face of an erratic economy, the company's sales were remarkably stable. A yearlong dispute with the Internal Revenue Service ended in a favorable ruling for the company. The next year was even more unpredictable, as erratic

natural gas supply, escalating prices, and declining volume combined to cause a rapid decline in business. There were a large number of workers laid off, but still the plant had to close down for a week late in the year. In 1974, the company dealt with "rampant inflation and a rapidly deteriorating economy."³⁹

Early in 1975, two of the three men from the generation that brought the company through the post-World War II era retired--George H. Lewis Jr. and William M. Pearch, the plant manager. George H. "Mike" Lewis III (president), R.G. McCann (vice president, sales), and C.F. Tate (treasurer and chairman of the board) were the team that led Akron Porcelain into the second half of an unpredictable decade.

The difficulties continued through 1975, as the company suffered through one of its rare years in the red. Along the way there had been a kiln wreck, purchase of plastic handle dies and inventory from the U. S. Ceramic Tile Company of East Sparta, rising energy costs, and a poor national economy exacerbated by conflict between Congress and President Ford. The plant was closed down for three weeks during this troubled year.⁴⁰

Fortunately, the economy bottomed out and began to recover quickly in 1976. Sales rose by ninety-eight percent, although the directors did not view future porcelain sales as promising.⁴¹ Plastic sales had increased in 1976 to one third of the company's total. This trend was to continue throughout the rest of the 1970s. The volume of plastic sales had put stress on the injection molding facilities--all the presses had to be functioning on a tight schedule and there was no allowance for machine failures. The company needed another new press. By the end of 1977 the pressure was eased by the addition of another machine.

New employees to the management team in the seventies included Ken Burkins (a 1975 graduate of the University of Akron with a degree in marketing) to the sales department and accountant Mike

Dunphy (a 1975 graduate with a degree in accounting from The University of Akron).

In the late seventies, the company's plastics division continued to rival the levels of porcelain production. It was an era of hard winters, as attested by the severe blizzard of January 26, 27, and 28, 1978. During that storm, the built-up roof on the plastic building was destroyed by high winds. Fortunately, none of the plastic equipment was damaged.⁴² The porcelain division was still the larger and more profitable division, but the gap was narrowing--plastics promised to contribute at least half the company's income in the 1980s. The year 1979 was the best year in company history with both porcelain and plastics sales up. There was a world of difference from the situation just four years earlier.

The 1980s

The decade of the 1980s brought relative stability to the national economy. Japanese companies made great inroads into the automotive, electronics, and other industries, challenging American industrial supremacy on many fronts. American family lifestyles changed as two income households began to be the norm. Because of the new emphasis on fitness and busier schedules, a multitude of new labor-saving appliances, computers, and other products of rapidly advancing technology were being purchased by consumers with renewed buying power.

Akron witnessed a rebirth of sorts in the technical and service sector, with a growing national reputation as a polymer science center. Population, however, continued its downward trend of the past thirty years.

Akron Porcelain entered the decade on a good footing. The setbacks of the mid-seventies had been reversed, and the future once again appeared prosperous. The plastics business had blossomed in recent years, and the company aggressively sought to widen

markets for both porcelain and plastics. The company's ability to work in both materials afforded an advantage to customers (like manufacturers of electric ranges) who wished to combine the advantages of both plastics and ceramics.

In 1980, the United Glass and Ceramic Workers, AFL-CIO, went on strike for five weeks, finally reaching agreement on higher basic hourly pay rates.⁴³ The year was generally profitable, but due to a cutback in orders from General Electric (comprising nearly a third of the company's business) the work force was reduced from 130 to 100.

The company's commitment to community involvement that had characterized its first ninety years continued in the 1980s.⁴⁴ Generous contributions of time and money have gone to area hospitals, hospital boards, Rotary Clubs, Lions Club, Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce, Jr. Chamber of Commerce, Red Cross, Junior Achievement, Girl Scouts, United Fund, The University of Akron, local schools, and particularly, the Boy Scouts. But perhaps the most enjoyable tradition for the company was one that started when the company first moved to Cory Avenue.

"This goes back to when we first came to the Kenmore area in 1929. The city had built two grade schools in the vicinity, and my grandfather decided that every Halloween the company would donate ice cream [and other treats] to their school parties. We've done that every year for fifty years. Every Halloween the two schools (one is a half a mile one way and the other half a mile the other way) have all the children march in their costumes, right to our door and turn around and walk back to their school. Then they all write thank you notes and we get a big stack of them--they are fun to read. I enjoy the neighborhood children and a lot of them know my name if they

see me outside, they say hello to me on their way to school."⁴⁵

The company undertook a major restructuring beginning in the fall of 1981, that was not complete until 1982. A leveraged buyout of company stock was executed. All non-employee stock was purchased by the company to ensure its ability to control its own destiny and further the best interests of employees and stockholders. This resulted in a major undertaking of debt as well as a significant decrease in the net worth of the company.

In 1982, the company's officers were George H. "Mike" Lewis III, president; C.F. Tate, vice president and secretary-treasurer; Kenneth Burkins, assistant secretary; and Michael B. Dunphy, assistant treasurer.

Akron Porcelain averted a strike in 1982, by signing a new contract increasing payrolls by 6.6% over the next two years. However, a slight recession in 1982 caused the company to shut down for two weeks due to a lack of work. But things looked up later in the year when contracts were awarded by both Ford and General Motors to make ashtrays for automobiles. Another was signed the same year with Cutler-Hammer to make porcelain and plastic electrical distribution parts.⁴⁶

Longtime company leader C.F. Tate retired in 1982, and the company's officers for 1983 became George H. "Mike" Lewis III, president and chairman; Michael B. Dunphy, vice president of finance and treasurer; Kenneth F. Burkins, vice president of operations; and James C. Herndon, secretary. Akron Porcelain had six competitors in the field, but controlled twenty-four percent of the ceramics parts business in the country. New equipment was added and facilities updated, always keeping to the conservative fiscal policies of the past. Additional warehousing was leased from Waterloo Home Supply on Waterloo

Road during this period. The need for expansion was again pressing as "the company was working on a three shift basis at 110% machine capacity."⁴⁷

Computers were installed in the company's offices in 1984, a year in which plastic sales took off again in a tremendous upsurge. On July 12, 1984, in order to reflect the growth and predominance of plastics in the company's business, the name was changed to "The Akron Porcelain and Plastics Company."⁴⁸ Another two year contract was signed with the union, which granted wage increases for each of the next two years.

Akron Porcelain & Plastics began producing ashtrays for Honda automobiles made in American plants in the 1980s. Company president George H. "Mike" Lewis III travelled to Japan in late 1985 to tour Honda's manufacturing facilities.

In 1986, General Electric awarded the company its "Certified Quality Supplier" plaque for overall performance as a major supplier. The year was marred by the passing of C.F. Tate, who was remembered for his "keen intellect, compassion, and diligence."⁴⁹ On a better note, the union signed a two-year contract granting "across the board" raises to all employees, and the company completed its last payment on the restructuring loan and returned to the debt free status that has always been its hallmark. Also, the company picked up a big new contract with Molex late in 1986. The same year sales of plastics, for the first time in the country's history, exceeded that of porcelain.

Another labor contract was signed in December, 1987, granting raises "across the board" for each of the next two years. Although by 1988 plastics comprised the bigger proportion of sales, the ceramic side still commanded more than twenty percent of the ceramic market in the United States.⁵⁰ Part of the reason the company was able to maintain this high share of the market was the improved ceramic production

due to new automated equipment like the Dorst presses. "We have three German semi-automatic presses which are as close to automation as we can get. Not all parts can be handled on the Dorsts--they have to be a certain size, shape and strength."⁵¹ Also, the tunnel kiln used over the years had been improved, maximizing the volume of production possible in ceramics.

In 1988, a second plant was purchased and put into operation in Barberton, Ohio only two miles from the Cory Avenue plant. Within a year, the Barberton plant expanded, bringing current floor space for both plants to a total of 145,000 square feet. Akron Porcelain & Plastics employs 175 people in 1989 and enjoys sales in excess of \$10 million, with plastics (fifty plastic molding machines currently in production) comprising two-thirds of the total.

The company reached the one hundredth year of operations in 1989, upholding its tradition of leadership with nine upper management people. "Half of those are engineers or the equivalent, and almost all our production people have engineering backgrounds."⁵² New customers are obtained by "representatives and an internal sales force that know our products and can be where ceramics and plastics are used...continually out there beating the bushes trying to find new applications."⁵³ The ability to take the customer's specifications, construct dies, and produce in large volume has taken the company into its second century.

Since World War II the company has evolved from an electrical porcelain manufacturer with less than a hundred employees to a porcelain and plastics company employing nearly two hundred workers manufacturing a wide variety of products. Changes in the product line, new employees, a second plant, a multitude of new machines, and a major restructuring have created a company for the future. But the fundamental underlying strengths of the company remain

strong. The legacy of family leadership is still there-- George H. Lewis III, great grandson of the company's founder, fills the leadership role of the 1980s. The tradition of financial strength that protected the company through depressions, wars, and technological change has continued to keep The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Company healthy into a second century.

Notes for Chapter Five

1. The GI Bill of Rights, or Servicemen's Readjustment Act, passed by Congress in 1944, "provided living allowances, tuition fees, and supplies" to veterans going to college. Mary Beth Norton, et al, *A People and A Nation*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), p. 866.
2. This was an increase of 4,000 per week over the previous year. Karl H. Grismer, *Akron and Summit County*, (Akron, Ohio: The Summit County Historical Society, 1952), p. 518.
3. George H. Lewis Jr., interview, 21 July 1989.
4. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 28 January 1946.
5. The original charter was viewed during an interview with Irene Sayre, 1 May 1989.
6. Sayre, interview, 1 May 1989.
7. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 2 July 1946.
8. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 11 December 1947.
9. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 11 December 1947.
10. The company did not yet have the capability to produce plastic parts, and Western Electric could buy their own plastic presses, avoiding all the equipment necessary to manufacture porcelain. As explained by George H. Lewis Jr. in an interview, 21 July 1989.
11. Lewis Jr., interview, 21 July 1989.
12. "Urgent demands for better electrical insulation and industrial molded parts by the rapidly growing electrical and automotive industries." J. Harry DuBois, *Plastics History U.S.A.* (Boston: Cahner's Books, 1972), p.24.
13. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 10 October 1949.
14. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 10 December 1951.
15. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 19 December 1952.
16. Myron Caskey, interview, 3 May 1989.
17. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 2 April 1956.
18. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 25 October 1957.
19. DuBois gives a more detailed history in his book *Plastics U.S.A.*
20. DuBois, p.45.

21. In *Plastics Materials & Processes*, p. 55, Seymour S. Schwartz and Sidney H. Goodman (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1982) explain that Baekeland's phenolics dominated part way into the war. "The thermoplastics began in the 1930s, but didn't achieve gross commercial success until after 1945."
22. The characteristics of plastics are described in detail by Schwartz and Goodman, p. 57.
23. Maurice Chandler relates the properties of ceramics in *Ceramics in the Modern World*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968).
24. George H. "Mike" Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989.
25. George H. Lewis Jr., in an interview recorded on July 21, 1989, states that "A porcelain mold might cost five hundred dollars or seven hundred dollars, but if you are setting up to make that part in plastic, you could be spending five thousand dollars."
26. Lewis Jr., interview, 21 July 1989.
27. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 23 January 1961.
28. The Directors discussed the possible need for another building for plastics production, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 22 January 1962.
29. C.G. Rausch CPA, "Financial Report," 31 December 1961.
30. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 11 December 1962.
31. Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989.
32. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 25 January 1965.
33. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 8 April 1966.
34. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 8 December 1967.
35. Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989.
36. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 10 July 1970.
37. Delco-Remy planned to make their parts with their own in-plant ceramic operation, as reported in a Directors Meeting 13 October 1972.
38. The company spent money on the following: an injection press, office expansion, water tower installation, patching the press room floor, repair of the parking area, replaced 2,000 batts for the kiln, and replaced an air compressor. From the Directors' Meeting of 9 July 1973.
39. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes' of Directors' Meeting," 17 December 1974.
40. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 9 April 1975.
41. The company acquired portions of the porcelain and plastic production of two companies on a temporary basis--Thermo Disc and Pass & Seymour, to whom the dies had to be returned by the end of the year. From the "Minutes of Directors' Meeting," 9 April 1975.
42. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors'



Not everyone was enthused about playing bingo, as this youngster's expression conveys at the company's shop picnic, pictured here in the summer of 1949. The Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.

Meeting, 13 February 1978.

43. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Directors' Meeting, 16 December 1980.

44. Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989.

45. Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989.

46. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Meetings," 12 October 1982.

47. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Meetings," 15 February 1984.

48. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Meetings," 12 July 1984.

49. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Meetings," 16 October 1986.

50. Akron Porcelain Company, "Minutes of Meetings," 21 April 1988.

51. Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989. Also, Myron Caskey, in his interview 3 May 1989, describes the way the Dorst Press worked: "It has a shaker that shakes the clay over the die and then a pick-up arm picks the part up and drops it on the belt [but] you still have to pick it off that belt and put them in a sagger. Then you take the sagger and put it on a skid."

52. Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989.

53. Lewis III, interview, 18 May 1989.



By the end of World War II, women had begun to move into some of the jobs previously held only by men, operating some of the pressing machines. However, larger presses, like those pictured here, were still usually operated by men.

