

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

The Ironrite Ironer Company

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Another Ironrite ironer rolls off the Mount Clemens assembly line on October 17, 1950
(photo courtesy of The Macomb Daily)

A product which was a household name among appliances during the 1940s and 1950s, the Ironrite Ironer, was manufactured in Mount Clemens, Michigan, from 1946 until 1961. The automatic ironer, also called a mangle, was an electric appliance that used a roller and a cast-iron shoe to press clothing. Company brochures promised homemakers that an Ironrite ironer could take them away from the "nerve-racking method of lifting, pushing and pulling a heavy, hot hand iron back and forth hundreds of times to complete an ironing." A popular home appliance in the era before permanent-press clothing, the Ironrite could be found in many home laundry rooms.

The Ironrite business was established in Detroit in 1911 by **Herman A. Sperlich** and **John H. Uhlig** as a jobbing machine shop. Manufacture of washing machines began in 1917, and production of Ironrite ironers commenced in 1921, with **J.L. Hudson's** as Ironrite's first retail dealer. At that time, the company name was the **Sperlich and Uhlig Company**, but the corporate name was changed to **The Ironrite Ironer Company** on May 12, 1927.

At the end of World War II, Ironrite sought to expand its production capacity and purchased an existing manufacturing plant located at 332 Cass Avenue in Mount Clemens. The new location offered 115,000 square feet of production space, more than double what was available at Ironrite's Detroit facility. The *Mount Clemens Monitor-Leader* proclaimed the happy news of Ironrite's relocation to Mount Clemens in a banner headline on September 21, 1945. The news of jobs moving to the city must have been welcomed enthusiastically with the war just ended and many veterans returning to the

civilian workforce.

The first Mount Clemens-built Ironrite Ironer, number 36691, rolled off the Cass Avenue assembly line on January 30, 1946, and was announced with fanfare on the front page of the *Monitor-Leader*. Backorders which had accumulated while the company was engaged in wartime production could now be met, and company officials estimated that 400 units per day would soon be produced in the Mount Clemens plant.

Production and employment numbers soared, and a 1950 expansion of the Cass Avenue plant was celebrated with a 38-page special section in the *Monitor-Leader*. During the Korean war, the company was awarded government contracts for the production of electric triggers and tooling for 105 millimeter gun parts; at the same time, demand for the ironers remained high.

The Mount Clemens Ironrite plant employed about 400 at its peak, but new advances in clothing manufacture and a change in corporate structure eventually spelled the end for Ironrite. In September, 1959, Ironrite merged with **Dielectric Products and Engineering Company** of Raymond, Maine, a manufacturer of electronic components. As sales of the electronic division skyrocketed and sales of the Ironrite division sagged, Dielectric decided in December, 1961, to cease production of Ironrite ironers. A workforce of about 200 was idled and the Cass Avenue plant was eventually sold to a bicycle manufacturing firm.

Despite the fact that they have been out of production for over 35 years, Ironrite ironers have been slow to fade from the scene. Many examples of the well-built appliance can still be found in homes in southeastern Michigan and across the country, and occasional inquiries about the availability of parts indicate that a number are still in use. In 1995, a Mount Clemens-built Ironrite Ironer was donated to the **Michigan Historical Museum** at Lansing, Michigan, by **Rep. Al Kukuk** of Macomb Township, who wanted to see a bit of Mount Clemens history preserved for future generations.

For more information about the Ironrite Ironer Company, we recommend:

- Selwa, Robert. "Ironing Machine Finds New Home in Lansing," *Macomb Daily*, March 20, 1995, p.3A, col.2.
- "Union Sues for \$2 Million Severance Pay From Ironrite," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, February 23, 1962, p.1, col.5.
- "Ironrite Ends Operations in Mt. Clemens," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, December 28, 1961, p.1, col.3.
- "Ironrite Buys 2 New Plants," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, September 30, 1959, p.1, col.7.
- "24 Page Special Section Salutes Ironrite Inc. on Expansion of Modern Mount Clemens Plant," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, October 17, 1950, p.1. col.2. (see also special section in same issue)
- "First Unit Comes Off Ironrite Line, " *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, January 30, 1946, p.1, col.6.
- "Ironrite Buys Mt. Clemens Factory: Takes Over Trailer Firm Plant Here," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, September 21, 1945, p.1, col.8.