

More than just washing machines

Museum delves into Maytag's varied production history

By Christopher Braunschweig Newton Daily News

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Surrounded by, at one time, nine similar businesses in Newton, a place that many folks considered to be the “washing machine center of the world,” the Maytag Corporation emerged on top as the premiere company that outlasted its competition, until it was purchased by Whirlpool Corporation in 2006 and subsequently closed its facilities.

As one might expect, the longtime manufacturer's flagship products — wooden, aluminum and metal variants alike — take up a lot of space at the Jasper County Historical Museum, but as do its other, lesser known appliances and items.

Jack Streeter, board president of the Jasper County Historical Society, said the Maytag factories used to produce agricultural equipment and other home appliances. A seed grader and an old vacuum are on display at the local museum to prove it. One item the museum doesn't have is an old Maytag tractor, which are very difficult to come by. For now, a picture will suffice.

“We started out making farm equipment and made threshing machines and things like that, and *then* they dabbled into washing machines,” Streeter, 92, said Thursday. “And finally they found out the market for washing machines was a lot better than the market for farm equipment.”

Founded 126 years ago by F. L. Maytag, the Newton business was once the workplace of the 92-year-old Streeter, who became head of the maintenance department for Maytag Plant 2. He retired from the company after 39 years. Streeter's mother and father had also worked at Maytag. Now, he gets to revisit his old employment and teach others about the company at the museum.

Maytag was the first company, Streeter added, to build a cast aluminum washing machine body in the 1920s, a style that was very popular among customers and would eventually kickstart the company into national recognition. Streeter said his parents had a similar model in their basement for “20-some years.”

Bill Perrenoud, executive director of the Jasper County Historical Museum, said Maytag was known for its dependability, at least that's how the company sold itself as. Calling it a “top

notch business” back in its heyday, Perrenoud referred to a piece on display in the museum that says: “When you meet a Maytag salesman, you meet a gentleman.”

He added, “That was their image, and they portrayed that. The locations where they sold their washers appreciated that. They knew they were going to have gentleman; if they were to make an agreement they’d follow through on it. They Maytags hired good people (to make and sell products).”

Curiously enough, the gas-powered engines packed inside Maytag’s washing machines found other uses and could power other appliances like lawnmowers and pumps. Staff at the Jasper County Historical Museum have arranged the engines like marble busts inside its South 15th Avenue West facility.

A small race car on display at the museum, Street said, was not sold commercially, but rather was a promotional or sales item. And how did that car operate exactly? The gas-powered engine that was used in a Maytag-brand washing machine.

Researching new additions for its signature product was nothing new for Maytag either. Streeter pointed out a machine on display that was able to do more than wash clothes. With the right kind of attachment, it could churn butter and grind meat. Granted, it couldn’t do all three actions at once. Maytag had even tried adding an ice cream maker attachment.

Ironing machines, dishwashers, refrigerators and more. If Maytag determined a need for something, the company would make it. Staff said a Maytag room is currently under development that further highlight’s the Maytag family’s other ventures besides washing machines, like craft beer and blue cheese.

Maytag didn’t seem to be afraid to try new products, successful or not. However, Perrenoud said the choice in products was not random. The company, he said, likely put in a lot of research hours and listened to the needs of its customers to decide was appliance would be distributed.

“It was well-thought-out,” Perrenoud said. “You take a look at the different washing machines they produced and the changes they made from one model to the next would be looking for improvements. And before they made those improvements they tested them.”

When he toured Maytag many years ago, Perrenoud remembered seeing the company’s test facility where researchers were, among other things, analyzing “load after load after load” of laundry to see how well their machines held up. Niche items, he continued, didn’t seem to scare away Maytag.

Although Maytag Corporation is no longer in Newton, the company certainly left a lasting impression on the community. The family name is ingrained in the town's infrastructure. Perrenoud recalled an old Maytag advertising campaign in which the company's mascot repairman, Ol' Lonely, had a dog — a Basset Hound named Newton.

"One of the catchphrases was: 'Newton needs Maytag,'" Perrenoud said. "... And I think there's a lot of truth to that. Newton would not have been half the community it would have."

Editor's Note: "History Lesson" is a weekly series inspired by the Jasper County Historical Museum's 40-year anniversary. Newton Daily News will publish a story every Friday (until the museum is closed) featuring the people who work to preserve and promote the region's past endeavors, while also showcasing the historical and educational significance of artifacts and exhibits on display in the museum.

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