

HOBBY HISTORY

The Giant of the Industry

by Mike Prero

When we think of “Giant,” we immediately call to mind Diamond, or perhaps even Universal, but, as it turns out, we’re being much too provincial in our thinking. The giant of the match industry is probably not even known to most American collectors, but it has been the largest manufacturer of matches in the world for over 70 years! Who is this giant? The Swedish Match Company!

Amazingly, the the birth of the Swedish Match Co. paralleled the same process that gave birth to the Diamond Match Co. By 1880, the American match industry was being torn apart by fierce competition between companies, and, because of that, 12 companies, including America’s two largest, merged to form Diamond. Across the Atlantic, the Swedish match industry, already dominating the world market, was also suffering from severe infighting between competing companies. By the turn of the century, it was agreed that, for continued success, an amalgamation of Swedish manufacturers into a single entity was the solution. Thus, in 1903, the three Lowenadler factories, the old Jonkoping Factory, the Uddevalla Factory, and subsequently the large Vulcan Factory at Tidaholm all joined, and the Swedish Match Company was born [*The Vulcan Factory, by the way, was the largest in the world by 1923*]. Later, the Company acquired the Vanersborg Factory and the Junebro Factory at Jonkoping.

Still, a considerable number of Swedish manufacturers, some very active, were operating outside of the new Swedish Match Company, and this is where Sweden’s wiz kid, Ivar Kreuger, came into the picture. In 1913, he put together a conglomerate of these independent companies, forming the Forenade company. Now, Sweden was

divided between the two giant organizations. In 1917 [*on December 7th, ironically*], the two giants merged into The Swedish Match Co., Ltd. of Stockholm. The Company now owned the factories, the necessary forest lands, the paper and lumber mills, the machinery works...everything that was needed to produce matches.

At the same time, Swedish match, like Diamond, was making huge technical advances in match production. By 1923, the majority of all mechanical improvements in match production had been introduced by Swedish inventors, not the least of which was Alex Lagerman, the “Thomas Edison” of Sweden. He not only invented the best match-making machinery of his day, but printing machinery and a brand new type-setting machine, as well.

And, by 1923, Swedish Match and its subsidiaries were cranking out 10 million boxes a year, each containing an average of 60 matches. That equaled 30,000 matches a second and corresponded to one match per day for every person in the world. A full one-third of the world’s match production was originating from Swedish Match. Swedish Match factories were producing these matches under 9000+ different labels [*Oh, my aching trademarks list!*].

Over the ensuing decades, Swedish Match had its ups and downs, which isn’t surprising considering it had to survive the Depression and two world wars...and the grandiose plans of Ivar Kreuger [*but that’s another story*]. Suffice it to say, today, Swedish Match is *still* the world’s largest manufacturer of matches, and, incidentally, the third largest producer in the world of lighters. Currently, it has factories in 26 different countries and a world-wide sales organization. Its main office is in Nyon, just outside of Geneva, Switzerland.

Swedish Match also sponsors the annual Swedish Match Cup [*a sailing competition*] and maintains a web site where events, photos and results are posted. Just do a search for Swedish Match Cup.