

A HISTORY OF THE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

1896 - 1952

by Douglas Steward #84

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# I

## A HISTORY OF THE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

1896 - 1921

The Shakespeare Company, is known as one of the foremost leaders in the production of fishing tackle throughout the World. The company originated in the city of Kalamazoo, Michigan. The success of the company is due in a large part to its founder, William Shakespeare, Jr. He was born September 21, 1869, the son of General William Shakespeare, an outstanding family of Kalamazoo.<sup>1</sup> Mr. William Shakespeare, Jr., started his career in the manufacture of photographic shutters. He was first employed by a Mr. Green for several years, later formed a partnership with a Mr. Lowe and worked with him for a few years.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Shakespeare, a devoted fisherman, began to think of a way to make fishing a better sport. At this time there was much trouble in casting, because in retrieving the lure, the fisherman had to guide the line in with his thumb. Over a jeweler's lathe he made a piece of equipment known as a level wind reel. The result was a mechanical device to wind the line evenly on the spool instead of having to depend upon the thumb while retrieving the lure. The reel was built in 1896 and later that year a patent was established.

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1. Compendium of History and Biography of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, Editors-David Fisher and Frank Little, Chicago, A.W. Bowen and Company, page 335

2. Kalamazoo Gazette, July 25, 1925

In 1897, a manufacturing set-up was readied for use. The site was established on Water Street in a four story storage building.<sup>1</sup> The manufacture of the reels took place on the third floor. A picture of this building appeared in a "Dealer Magazine", dated 1889.<sup>2</sup>

On a different floor Mr. Shakespeare, Jr., was engaged in the medicine business with Mr. Stephen Roe. They were selling a copper cure with great success, because of William's genius as an advertiser. The A.M. A. was responsible for closing this operation presumably because they did not get permission from the association before selling the medicine.

After this Mr. Shakespeare began to turn his attention toward the fishing business with greater zeal. The company was named the William Shakespeare Jr. Company.

Mr. Shakespeare employed at this time Walter Marhoff, the man who made and improved the level wind reel. The improved Marhoff reel became the best level wind reel on the market. This furthered the progress of the company a great deal. In 1902, the employees numbered about a dozen.

The company began to expand at this time, because it added fishing rods, lines, and baits. Baits were the number-one seller because of the popular rubber frog. The company did not have enough room to manufacture all these items, so in 1904 it began to move its operation from the location on Water Street, to the

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1. Kalamazoo Gazette, July 25, 1925

2. Shakespeare Scrap Book # 1 General

Traction Building, which now houses the Vermeulen Furniture Company.<sup>1</sup> On November 18, 1905, the company became a corporation organized under the laws of Michigan, act # 232 of the public acts of 1905, with an authorized capital of \$250,000, of which \$175,000 was in common stock and \$75,000 in preferred stock.<sup>2</sup> Later the building on Water Street was sold to the inter-urban railroad. The company began to manufacture more reels, rods, lines, and baits at its new housing.

The company at this time added new automatic machines worth \$30,000 to improve production. In 1907 and 1908, the company expanded the line by adding Jarvis fishing coats, leather rod cases, hooks, and trout flies.<sup>3</sup> The reel business in the first few years broke about even, with the other products making a slight profit for the company.

In the early years of the company Mr. Shakespeare did a very fine job of advertising his tackle. In selling his products he stood behind them with a 100% guarantee. He also used slogans such as "built like a watch" and "baits that catch fish". He also would publish booklets telling people how to use tackle. This is a method still employed by the company today.

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1. Kalamazoo Gazette, November 17, 1935

2. Facts and Figures, 1910, page 5, by William Shakespeare, jr

3. 1907 - 1908 Catalogues.

Mr. Shakespeare was always original and what he invented always had to be proved before putting it on the market.

In 1910, the organization employed about a hundred men. It had three salesmen on the road. The factory was capable of producing more than a hundred thousand dollars worth of fine fishing tackle annually.<sup>1</sup> The first order received for the level-wind reel came from Simmons Hardware for eleven thousand dollars.<sup>2</sup>

In 1910, the business was so good that at the end of the fourth month the output was practically sold and the salesmen had to be taken off the road to prevent over-selling.<sup>3</sup>

The company started selling many items not manufactured by it such as hunting clothes, refrigerator baskets, dog leads, boat oars, etc. It became a jobber for these products and also put its brand name on the products.

In 1910, William Harrison joined the firm. Throughout the years he gave the company valuable financial advice. He later was to become president of the company, after serving many years as sales manager.

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1. Facts and Figures, 1910.

2. Although this order is undated it has been figured to have been received between the years 1905 and 1910.

3. Facts and Figures, 1910.

In 1913 the company moved from the Traction Building to its new and present site on 417 North Pitcher Street.<sup>1</sup>

The company was able to increase its business because of the added room and new machinery. It added three or four new salesmen, bringing the salesforce up to seven men. The company also added sporting goods to its list, such as tennis rackets, baseball equipment, Ingersoll watches and other items.

On September 2, 1915, William Shakespeare decided to change the name of the company from William Shakespeare, Jr., Company to the Shakespeare Company, which is its present name.

Through 1914 - 1918, while World War I was in progress, the company kept right on manufacturing fishing tackle even though metals were very hard to get.

During World War I the company had a sub-contract in which it produced trench mortar fuses to help the cause of the war.<sup>2</sup> This was easily done because of its precision tools used to manufacture fishing reels.

Mr. Shakespeare also ventured into the manufacture of carburetors. He sold these to the Yellow Cab Company of Chicago and made parts for the Mercedes Benz.

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1. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Vol. 2, Industries.

2. Ibid

It was discovered that some of these parts were on a Mercedes Benz owned by Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German leader during World War I. Even though the carburetor business was not a success in a financial way, it did show the quality of the products.<sup>1</sup>

II  
THE SHAKESPEARE PRODUCTS COMPANY

1921 - 1952

William Shakespeare was interested in anything he could improve or invent. He next purchased the Kalamazoo Broom Company on Walbridge Street. The broom business reached a market of \$60,000, including an export trade to Canada. It was known as the Kalamazoo Fibre Broom Company. The business employed twenty workers, with a yearly payroll of \$26,000. The broom business did not prove to be a successful venture, but did start a new company. It became known as Shakespeare Products Company. On August 13, 1921, it was incorporated under the laws of the state of Michigan. Shakespeare Products was set up as a subsidiary to the Shakespeare Company.<sup>2</sup>

After the failure of the Broom Company, he then purchased the Lovis Company, which made can openers and Roamer automobile parts.<sup>3</sup> This building was located at the Walbridge site, also. Mr. Shakespeare found that

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1. Ibid

2. Ibid

3. Kalamazoo Gazette, September 25, 1921.



the manufacture of can openers also made by the Products Company, did not prove to be profitable, so he turned to the manufacture of automobile parts. Here he furthered his experiments with carburetors and also began to make choke throttles. This enabled the driver of a car to enrich the gas mixture. The company made all kinds of wire instruments and board controls. They began selling to name car manufactures in a volume business. They also began to make parts for aircraft. Metal springbacks for loose-leaf binders were also made by "Products".

Up to now, various products had been manufactured but a new development took place in the manufacture of flexible wire controls for engine equipment. The controls were sold direct to manufacturers of automobiles, trucks, aircraft and others.

With the demand for more space, "Products" bought the Kalamazoo Paper Box building in 1940. This was a building adjoining the regular plant. This made possible the move from the Walbridge location to the site on Kalamazoo Street.<sup>1</sup>

During World War II "Products" become engaged in the production of war materials. Even before the war it was making controls for all kinds of aircraft, tanks, jeeps, and other war material. During the war production increased at a tremendous rate. It continued to make controls of all kinds, plus such devices

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1. Kalamazoo Gazette, November 7, 1940.

as stand assemblies for the B-20 bombers, self-locking irreversible quadrants for navy planes, and quadrant flexible controls for tanks.

"Products" has always had a very competent engineering staff and after the war it became possible for them to turn their attention to peace-time activities. They again began to produce many types of flexible controls for the major automobile companies and a good volume of business in the manufacture of aircraft products.

### III THE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

1921 - 1941

In 1922 the company began a profit-sharing plan for the employees. The company would split the profit between stock holders and the employees. The bonus checks usually ran from \$100 to \$300 annually.

The business improved in the early 20's. The price range of the reels ran from \$5.00 to \$40.00 as compared to \$1.50 to \$35.00 in 1902.

The company expanded by buying \$50,000 worth of tools. With these new tools it started to turn out about \$5,000 worth of fishing tackle a week, while at this time orders were coming in at a rate of \$10,000 a week.

The increase in demand caused the company to enlarge the work force from 200 to 300 men and women.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Industries.

The sales force at this time was also enlarged, to be the largest in the company history. There were 35 men put on the road, with each man covering a commercial center. The sales force would sell directly to the retailer, cutting out profits for the jobber and giving more profit to the retailer.<sup>1</sup> The rigid price system that was set up gave the retailer confidence in buying and selling of the products. In 1921 the company increased from \$425,000 to a million dollar organization.

The expansion program of 1922 now gave the company about \$100,000 worth of precision machines and tools. It was becoming well known for its skilled work. Since 1902 the company had claimed that all reels were precision made to 1/1000 of an inch. Its policy has been perfection of design and perfection of workmanship, to achieve the best possible reel built.<sup>2</sup>

William Shakespeare, in his frequent walks around the factory to inspect production and materials, could look at a box full of gears and pick a piece out that was defective four out of five times. He had a great sense in knowing if materials were good or bad.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1920's, the company started to discontinue some of its items, such as baseball equipment, watches, and other sporting goods, and only sell

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1. Kalamazoo Gazette, January 29, 1922.

2. Catalogue, 1902.

3. Interview with Mr. Burrell.

merchandise connected with the fishing tackle business.

In 1923 a stock holder dealer plan was organized. The first stock was sold to Mr. W.O. Zischang of Syracuse, New York. He bought five shares and in the future, was to buy more stock.<sup>1</sup>

In 1924 there were 5,000 dealers that specialized in fishing tackle made by Shakespeare. The company was far in front in selling of its level-wind reels and its baits were known throughout the United States.<sup>2</sup> It even sold a variety of canned bait, trying to increase its business.

The profit's were very large for this year, so it granted a substantial bonus. The company also improved its profit plus plan to its dealers, letting them establish their own rate of discount. The company became the leader in the fishing tackle industry with the level-wind reels and the baits out-selling others.

For a couple of years around 1927, it sponsored a national fishing contest worth \$10,000 in prizes. This proved very popular with the fishermen throughout the United States. The company also issued booklets on things like "How to Catch Bass", "How to Fly Fish" and others to help the sale of its products.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Tackle Publication, found in Kalamazoo Library Scrap Book, Industries.

2. Kalamazoo Public Library, Scrap Book, Industries.

3. Catalogue, 1927, in files of company.

In 1930, with the depression in progress, the plant did not shut down, but cut down on working hours, to three or four hours a day to keep the employees working. The company paid its wages by giving them stocks worth 50¢ a share. Some employees kept them while others, on receiving them, would sell them for 25¢. Also some employees waited and collected back wages when money became available.

In the depression era of 1929 - 1932, the company still advanced. During the depression it put an automatic fly reel on the market. In 1930 color was added to the reels, for a greater sales appeal. In 1932 approximately two million people owned Shakespeare tackle.<sup>1</sup>

In 1933 William Shakespeare, Jr., was elected mayor of Kalamazoo; he remained in politics until 1939.

During these years the company advanced right along. In 1933, salt water reels were introduced. In 1935 it upped its work force by 100 men and women. In 1936 the company reached its 40th year as a manufacturer of reels, rods, lines, and baits.

In 1937, after a slight depression, the company began a new expansion plan in building 20,000 square feet of floor space on the west end of the plant.<sup>2</sup> It in-

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1. Catalogue, 1930, on file.

2. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Vol. 3

vested \$50,000 in this program; this was under the supervision of Monroe Shakespeare.

The work force was raised to 580 employees. In 1937 it had 17 men on the sales force, a decrease from 37 men before the depression.

In 1936 or 1937 the Kalamazoo tackle company was formed. This company would only sell to jobbers. The jobbers then would sell to dealers that were unable to purchase the tackle.<sup>1</sup> The company would also make reels for companies and would put their names on the reel.

Tony Acetta, a national champion in the art of bait and fly casting, from Cleveland, Ohio, began to tour the country for Shakespeare. He showed his skills, using Shakespeare tackle to about two million sport fans. This started a new trend in selling of tackle. Other men who had been employed on the sales force who gained national fame were Ben Hardesty and Vern "Gadabout" Gadius. Hardesty was a national bait casting champion for three years between 1947 and 1949. Gadius toured military camps and hospitals to put on shows. The sales staff has been very important in helping the company progress through the years because of these nationally known figures and important everyday salesmen.

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1. No definite date, found for the organization of the tackle company.
2. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Kalamazoo News, Industries.

The Shakespeare organization helped out the conservation department in its work in trying to preserve the lakes and streams for the benefit of the fishing public through advertising methods.

The company organized an insurance program for its members. It arranged with the Equitable Life Insurance Society of the United States a plan for group life insurance. This was adopted October 2, 1934. In 1936 the company also added a group accidental death and dismemberment insurance, to protect the members against accidental loss of life. In June, 1940, hospital benefits were made available to employees and their dependents. Besides this, the company tried to improve its year-round-employment. In early times the demand for the product was seasonal. So the organization set up production schedules to help in slack times.

In 1939, a new reel was introduced to the trade; it was called the Wonder Reel. Mr. Shakespeare helped design it.<sup>1</sup> This Wonder Reel effectively prevented the lack lash that was so bothersome to many anglers. This was done by a very light, accurately applied brake, somewhat like an automatic job of thumbing. The reel achieved tremendous popularity and sold throughout the country.

The company expanded in 1939 through the new Wonder Reel and the building of a new office. In this year it moved from its old location on Kalamazoo Street to its present site on the same street.<sup>2</sup>

1. Catalogue, 1939, in Shakespeare files.

2. Kalamazoo Gazette, December 3, 1939.

In 1940, the expansion program was on the move again. It introduced on the market a new handle for casting called the tru-aim double offset handle, which made for more accuracy in casting, also the new Wexford Wonder Line was being tested.<sup>1</sup> The firm now had a very fine line of fishing tackle. It had very fine feels, good bamboo and steel rods, and a fishing line that was being improved. The baits were still in the line but were not being emphasized.

There was now a total of 650 men and women employed.

#### IV THE WAR ERA

1941 - 1946

The progress of the company continued until May 1, 1942, when the government issued the order that no metals were to be used for the manufacture of fishing reels.<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare then turned over its entire facilities to war production. Its precision machines made possible a quick change-over to the production of such complicated devices as parts for the Norden bomb sight and a very complicated remote fire control device for the Sperry Gyroscope Company. It made other items, like the power take-off shaft and speed reducer shaft for

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1. Catalogue, 1940, in Shakespeare files.

2. Shakespeare Scrap Book, # 1 General



aircraft machine-gun-turret controls, and many other equally intricate devices. With the manufacture of such important war goods the Army and Navy awarded the company the Silver Star, plus the Army-Navy 'E' award.<sup>1</sup> The later award was bestowed upon it three times. The company was very proud that it could render a service to its country for an important cause.

V  
POST WAR EXPANSION

In 1945, the salesmen went back on the road and the plant turned its operation back into the producing of fine fishing tackle. In 1946 an expansion plan began to form.<sup>2</sup>

In 1947, the company was 50 years old. To help the celebration of the half-century mark, the organization turned its attention to new ideas. The "President" reel, tested for several years, was introduced at this time. It was to be the most precise reel on the market.<sup>3</sup> This reel was introduced by Henry Shakespeare to start the second generation of the Shakespeare organization. There were many banquets that year to honor William Shakespeare, the founder.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Industries.
2. Kalamazoo Gazette, November 13, 1945.
3. Catalogue, 1950, on file in company office.
4. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Industries.

In the same year the glass wonder rod was introduced to the fishing market. The development of this new rod was an interesting story in itself. The glass fishing rod was invented by Dr. Howald, who was a technical director of the plaskon division of Libbey-Owens-Ford glass company. He experimented with a glass rod and the results of his work were turned over to Shakespeare. The rod was tested out in the field and was found to be successful. As a result, an innovation in fishing tackle revolutionized the rod manufacturing industry.

With this new development. Shakespeare began to expand again. A new rod plant was being planned for the city of Columbia, South Carolina,<sup>1</sup> The plant was to be a single story building having 33,000 square feet of floor space. In the early summer of 1946 the line plant was moved to Estherville, Iowa, to expand the ever changing line industry. The brand name of the line was known as Wexford. The new rod and line plant employed 500 to 600 people. The plant in Kalamazoo employed around 700.

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1. Shakespeare Scrap Book, article from South Carolina, progressive newspapers, September 23, 1948.

VI

THE SHAKESPEARE STRIKE

On September 7, 1948, a strike was called by the union because of a failure to break a deadlock in negotiations.<sup>1</sup> There were 700 employees affected by the strike. On September 9, 1948, Judge Archie McDonald issued an injunction against local 3619 of the United Steel Worker (CIO), allowing only one hundred and fifty men to picket at a time.<sup>2</sup>

The major issue was the deadlock on the proposals of arbitration. The company maintained that only thirty or forty per cent of the employees were members of the union and seeing this did not give the union a majority, arbitration was something the management could accept or reject. September 11, 1948, the company ended its contract with the union and invited employees to return to work.<sup>3</sup> There were discussions between the company and union, but the union delayed the proceedings.

On October 11, 1948, there was a clash, with 16 men held by the police after the trouble. The union sought to negotiate.<sup>4</sup> On October 25, 1948, Judge McDonald ruled against the union because of its strike actions.

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1. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Labor, September 7, 1948.

2. Kalamazoo Gazette, September 9, 1948

3. Ibid, September 11, 1948

4. Kalamazoo Public Library Scrap Book, Labor, October 11, 1948.

December 1, 1948, a mob attacked the plant. There were seven people hurt with much damage caused, rioters overturned cars, broke windows and blocked streets. Three hundred invaders wrecked the plant, causing Governor Sigler to fly in.<sup>1</sup> 'In the Chicago Daily News' and the 'Windsor Daily Star', headlines appeared such as these. "CIO admits factory raid," "Goons raid Kalamazoo Shop."<sup>2</sup> On December 4, Hoffman opened a roit hearing with the strike entering into the thirteenth week. Judge McDonald offered a peace plan for both the unior and company but no terms could be reached. On December 13, 1948, Shakespeare sued the CIO for \$45,000.<sup>3</sup> This was done because of the great damage and loss suffered by the company. The union followed suit and on January 10, 1949, sued the Shakespeare company for loss of wages. etc. The trial was held, June 24, 1949, and eleven union members were indicted by the grand jury. Five of the men were found guilty and put on probation. The trial finally ended on July 27, 1949.<sup>4</sup> On September 21, 1949, the Shakespeare strike was declared illegal and finally on Octover 10, 1949, the picketing ended.<sup>5</sup> The trial and hearings were finally closed and this ended a black chapter in the history of the company.

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1. Kalamazoo Gazette, December 1, 1948.
2. Shakespeare Scrap Book # 2, December 2, 1948, examples of headlines.
3. Kalamazoo Gazette, December 13, 1940
4. Shakespeare Scrap Book # 4, January 10, 1949.
5. Kalamazoo Gazette, September 21, 1949

VII  
EXPANSION  
1950 - 1952

The company finally went back into full production. They sold many of the new glass wonder rods. In 1950 they bought the Hoover plant for storage space. This building is located on 416 West Ransom Street.<sup>1</sup>

On June 25, 1950, the founder, William Shakespeare, a man eighty years old died in Melbourne, Florida, leaving a past to be remembered by all who helped in the growth of his fine company.

The company progressed and began to add new products that furthered the tackle business. In 1951 nylon gears were introduced to improve the reels. The nylon gears were as sturdy as the other gears and were cheaper to make.

In 1952 Henry Shakespeare followed in his father's footsteps by designing a new spinning reel of revolutionary design. Its introduction heightened the American anglers "swing to Spinning", giving great impetus to the manufacture of spinning tackle in America.

This brings to 1952 the history of a fine company that has advanced a long way since 1896.

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1. Kalamazoo Gazette, August 4, 1950.

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2. Clippings from the Gazette in the scrap books, Public Library.
3. Catalogues of the Company, on file in the Company's office, 1902 - 1952.
4. Interviews:

Mr. W.L. Burrell - long time employee of the Company since 1902, interviewed at his home, 528 Dutton Street, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Mr. Opie Davis, now Vice-President of the company.

Mr. Harry Rapely, and through him, interviews with employees in the shop with long employment spans.

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