



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Preliminary Guide to the Iowa Button Industry Collection

NMAH.AC.0504

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Iowa Button Industry Collection
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0504
Date:	1898 - 1993
Extent:	13 Cubic feet (55 boxes, 4 map folders)
Creator:	Automatic Button Company. American Pearl Button Company. Claus Schmarje Button Company. Barry Manufacturing Company. Schmarje, Claus Sessler, Mary Alice U.S. Button Company. Weber and Sons Button Company. Perkins Freshwater Pearl Products, Inc. McKee Button Company. Schmarje, Clarence Ronda Button Company. Hawkeye Pearl Button Company. Hahn, Bernard J & K Button Company Iowa Button Company.
Language:	English Collection is in English.
Summary:	Collection documents the manufacture of both freshwater pearl and plastic buttons in Muscatine, Iowa, including at least 12 different companies from primarily 1925 to the 1960s.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The collection was donated by Mary Alice Sessler, Weber and Sons Button Company, Bernard Hahn., J & K Button Company (November 19, 1993); and Clarence Schmarje (November 19, 1993).

Processing Information

Collection processed by Craig Orr and Alison Oswald. Finding aid encoded by Alison Oswald, 2017.

Preferred Citation

Iowa Button Industry Collection, ca. 1920s-1993, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

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Biographical / Historical

Muscatine, Iowa was the primary American manufacturing source for mother-of-pearl buttons made from Mississippi River shellfish, 1890s-1960s. During the industry's peak, there were some 53 small firms making pearl buttons in the area. In the 1930s some of these firms began experimenting with plastics as a substitute for the dwindling supply of shellfish. Several firms successfully converted to plastics and the city remains a center for plastic button manufacture today.

This unique industry drew upon natural resources to provide employment for almost an entire city (Muscatine is still known as the "Pearl City"). The mass production of low-cost buttons was crucial to the success of ready-made clothing and the development of the modern clothing trade. The industry was also involved in early work by American manufacturers to develop synthetic materials to replace increasingly scarce natural resources.

Scope and Contents

Collection documents the manufacture of both freshwater pearl and plastic buttons in Muscatine, Iowa, including at least 12 different companies. The records, primarily 1925-1960s, with a few items from 1993 production, include corporate financial records, wage and employment statistics, sales and purchase data, photographs, correspondence, catalogs, and publications. Some records document the Barry Manufacturing Company, a machine tool company which specialized in designing and producing the unique machinery needed for this industry; also background material that places the corporate records into the historical context of the button industry in Muscatine.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 14 series.

Series 1: Historical and Background Materials, 1898-1990

Series 2: American Pearl Button Company, undated

Series 3: Automatic Button Company, 1937, 1965

Series 4: Barry Manufacturing Company/The Barry Company, 1890-1980

Series 5: Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, 1914-1968

Series 6: Iowa Pearl Button Company, 1955

Series 7: J & K Button Company, 1993

Series 8: McKee Button Company, 1988

Series 9: Muscatine Pearl Works, 1944-1947

Series 10: Perkins Freshwater Pearl Products, 1944-1966

Series 11: Rhonda Button Company, 1946-1968

Series 12: Claus Schmarje Button Works, 1914-1941

Series 13: US Button Company, 1915

Series 14: Weber and Sons Button Company, 1900-1976

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Button industry -- Iowa
- Button industry workers
- Buttons
- Crustacea
- Mollusks
- Mother-of-pearl
- Pearl button industry -- Iowa
- Plastics
- Wages -- Button industry

Types of Materials:

- Account books -- 20th century
- Audiotapes
- Clippings -- 20th century
- Commercial catalogs -- 1920-2000
- Correspondence -- 20th century
- Photographs -- 20th century
- Price lists
- Trade literature -- 1920-2000
- Videotapes

Geographic Names:

- Iowa -- Button industry
- Muscatine (Iowa)

Container Listing

Series 1: Historical and Background Material, 1898 - 1990

Box 1, Folder 1	Weber and Umlandt Button Company (histories), undated
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Box 1, Folder 3	<i>Muscatine Today</i> , 1914 - 1914
Box 1, Folder 4	Muscatine, Iowa (general information about, 1953 - 1990
Box 1, Folder 5	Muscatine Pearl Works, 1988 - 1988, 1946 - 1946
Box 1, Folder 6	Muscatine Arts Center (guide to the Muscatine pearl button industry), undated
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Box 2, Folder 4	Society of Plastics Industry, industry opposing tariff reductions on polyester and acrylic buttons, 1963 - 1964
Box 3, Item OTC 504.1-2	The Weber Family and Button Company, undated <i>2 cassette tapes</i> Includes Charles Weber family history and boyhood memories.
Box 3, Item OTC 504.3-4	Meeting of Muscatine Heritage Association, undated
Box 3, Item OV 504.1	Muscatine Art Center Clam film, undated <i>1 videocassettes (vhs)</i>
Box 3, Item OV 504.2	[One Button/Clam], undated <i>1 videocassettes (vhs) (Total Running Time: 37:00)</i>

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Series 2: American Pearl Button Company, undated

Box 2, Folder 5

The Romance of Pearl Buttons. Washington, Iowa: American Pearl Button
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2 Copies

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Box 7, Folder 9	Minute Book, 1957-08 - 1964-12
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Box 8, Folder 4	Procedures for Board and Stockholders Meetings , undated
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Box 8, Folder 6	Stock disposition records, 1915 - 1943
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Box 5	Financial ledger, 1945 - 1945 Includes information for disbursements, receipts, sales, customer charge accounts, and monthly totals.
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