



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Preliminary Guide to the Iowa Button Industry Collection

NMAH.AC.0504

Craig Orr and Alison Oswald

2003

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	
Administrative Information	1
Biographical / Historical	2
Scope and Contents	2
Arrangement	2
Names and Subjects	
Container Listing	
Series 1: Historical and Background Material, 1898 - 1990	4
Series 2: American Pearl Button Company, undated	6
Series 3: Automatic Button Company, 1965 - 1965, 1937 - 1937	7
Series 4: Barry Manufacturing Company/The Barry Company, 1890 - 1980	8
Series 6: Iowa Pearl Button Company, 1955 - 1955	17
Series 7: J and K Button Company, 1993 - 1993	18
Series 8: McKee Button Company, 1988 - 1988	19
Series 9: Muscatine Pearl Works, 1944 - 1947	20
Series 10: Perkins Freshwater Pearl Products, 1944 - 1966	21
Series 11: Ronda Button Company, 1946 - 1968	22
Series 12: Claus Schmarje Button Works, 1914 - 1941	24
Series 13: US Button Company, 1915 - 1915	25
Series 14: Weber and Sons Button Company, 1900 - 1976	26

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Iowa Button Industry Collection
Date:	1898 - 1993
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0504
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.
Extent:	13 Cubic feet (55 boxes, 4 map folders)
Language:	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).

Related Materials

Materials at the Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Industry on Parade (NMAH.AC.0507)

Reel #215, Processing shell into button blanks, 1954. B. Schwanda and Sons, Denton, Maryland.

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

Places:

- 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
Box 1, Folder 2	Propagation of Freshwater Mussels, 1948 - 1955
Box 1, Folder 3	Muscatine Today, 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
Box 1, Folder 7	National Association of Button Manufacturers, gross sales of water pearl buttons, 1956 - 1960
Box 1, Folder 8	"Washboards, Pigtoes, and Muckets: Historic Musseling in the Mississippi Watershed" by Cheryl Claussen, 1989 - 1989
Box 2, Folder 1	Newspaper clippings, articles and typescript reminiscences of the pearl button industry, 1898, 1911 - 1975
Box 2, Folder 2	National Association of Button Manufacturers, Report of Survey of Hampshire Pearl Button Company, 1918
Box 2, Folder 3	Government regulations related to buttons, 1967 - 1967, 1934, 1945 - 1945
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 2 Cassette tapes Notes: 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 1 Videocassettes (VHS)
Box 3, Item OV 504.2	[One Button/Clam], undated

1 Videocassettes (VHS) (Total Running Time: 37:00)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: American Pearl Button Company, undated

Box 2, Folder 5

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

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: Automatic Button Company, 1965 - 1965, 1937 - 1937

Scope and Contents: Includes samples of buttons.

Box 4, Folder 1	Buttons and trimming, reference guide, 1937 - 1937
Box 6, Folder 1	Main factory (photograph), undated
Box 6, Folder 2	Button catalog (polypearl), 1965 - 1965
Box 6, Folder 3-4	Button catalog (acrylic and plastic), 1965

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

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

Box 7, Folder 1	Historical and background materials, miscellaneous, 1952 - 1952, 1940 - 1940
Box 7, Folder 2	Corporate history, 1930s
Box 7	Photographs, 1914 - 1914, 1923 - 1923, 1952 - 1952
Box 7, Folder 3	Executive Records: Certificate of Incorporation, 1915-03-17 - 1915-03-17
Box 7, Folder 4	Articles of Incorporation, 1915-03-15 - 1915-03-15
Box 7, Folder 5	Ammended Articles of Incorporation, 1962 - 1962, 1955 - 1955, 1973 - 1973
Box 7, Folder 6	Minute Book, 1915-04 - 1942-04
Box 7, Folder 7	Minute Book, 1942-09 - 1953-12
Box 7, Folder 8	Minute Book, 1954-01 - 1957-07
Box 7, Folder 9	Minute Book, 1957-08 - 1964-12
Box 8, Folder 1	Minute Book, 1965-01 - 1972-12
Box 8, Folder 2	Minute Book, 1973-01 - 1980-05
Box 8, Folder 3	Dissolution Papers, 1979 - 1980
Box 8, Folder 4	Procedures for Board and Stockholders Meetings, undated
Box 8, Folder 5	Board Papers, 1939 - 1958
Box 8, Folder 6	Stock disposition records, 1915 - 1943
Box 8, Folder 7	Correspondence, 1927 - 1932
Box 8, Folder 8	Correspondence, 1935 - 1941
Box 8, Folder 9	Envelope, undated
Box 9, Folder 1	Index to letterpress copybooks, 1890 - 1895
Box 9, Folder 2	Letterpress copybook pages, 1891-12 - 1892-01
Box 9, Folder 3	Letterpress copybook (pages 52-79), 1891-03 - 1891-04

Box 9, Folder 4	Letterpress copy book (pages 237-940), 1892-03 - 1895-04
Box 9, Folder 5	Letterpress copybook (pages 941-990), 1895-02 - 1895-04
Box 9, Folder 6	Letterpress copybook (pages 303-451), 1895-08 - 1895-12
Box 9, Folder 7	Letterpress copybooks (pages 71-497), 1896-10 - 1987-02
Box 9, Folder 8	Letterpress copybook (pages 500-651, 1897 March
Box 9, Folder 9	Letterpress copybook (pages 652-844), 1896 - 1897
Box 10, Folder 1	Letterpress copybook (pages 845-984), 1897 - 1897
Box 10, Folder 2-3	Letterpress Copybook, 1903
Box 10, Folder 4	Letterpress Copybook, 1903-07 - 1903-12
Box 11, Folder 1	Letterpress Copybook (pages 1-100), 1904 - 1904
Box 11, Folder 2	Letterpress Copybook (pages 102-190), 1904 - 1904
Box 11, Folder 3	Letterpress Copybook (page 202), 1904 - 1904
Box 11, Folder 4	Letterpress Copybook (pages 203-988), 1904 - 1905
Box 11, Folder 5	Letterpress Copybook (fragments), 1906 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 6	Letterpress Copybook (fragments), 1906 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 7	Letterpress Copybooks (pages 2-4), 1906-09-08 - 1906-09-10
Box 11, Folder 8	Letterpress copybook (pages 120-199), 1906-10-06 - 1906-10-30
Box 11, Folder 9	Letterpress copybook (pages 200-214), 1906 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 10	Letterpress copybook (page 284), 1906-11 - 1906-11
Box 11, Folder 11	Letterpress copybook (page 302 and 395), 1906 - 1906
Box 11, Folder 12	Letterpress copybook (pages 303-394; 398-399), 1906 - 1906
Box 11, Folder 13	Letterpress copybook (pages 400-499), 1906-12-18 - 1907-01-06
Box 11, Folder 14	Letterpress copybook (pages 505-517), 1906 - 1906
Box 11, Folder 15	Letterpress copybook (pages 519-578), 1907 - 1907

Box 11, Folder 16	Letterpress copybook (pages 579-599), 1906 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 17	Letterpress copybook (pages 600-614), 1906 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 18	Letterpress copybook (pages 615-682), 1906 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 19	Letterpress copybook (pages 685-698), 1906 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 20	Letterpress copybook (pages 700-799), 1907 - 1907
Box 11, Folder 21	Letterpress copybook (pages 800-895), 1906 - 1907
Box 18	Indices to Ledgers H - L, (5 volumes), undated
Box 12, Folder 1	Financial Statements, 1903 - 1914
Box 12, Folder 2	Financial Statements, 1915 - 1944
Box 19	Balance Statement Book A, 1915-04 - 1939-10
Box 19	Balance Statement Book B, 1939-11 - 1965-03
Box 19	Balance Sheets, 1946 - 1946
Box 12, Folder 3	Balance Sheets, 1947 - 1948
Box 12, Folder 4	Trial Balances, 1963 - 1964
Box 12, Folder 5	Dun & Bradstreet Credit Reports, 1944 - 1944, 1947 - 1947, 1950 - 1950
Box 12, Folder 6	Audit Reports, 1956 - 1956, 1954 - 1954
Box 12, Folder 7	Financial Report, 1978-12 - 1978-12
Box 12, Folder 8	Plat Book of Factory, undated
Box 12, Folder 9	Appraisal Report on Property, 1945-09 - 1945-09
Box 12, Folder 10	Appraisal Report on Buildings, Machinery and Equipment, 1975-02 - 1975-02
Box 13, Folder 1	Tumbling and Polishing Catalog, 1947
Box 13, Folder 2	Pearl Button Machinery Catalog, undated
Box 13, Folder 3	Pricelist for Automatic Machines, circa 1915-1942
Box 13, Folder 4	Pricelist for Automatic Machines, circa 1937

Box 13, Folder 5	Catalog of Automatic Machines, 1937 - 1937
Box 13, Folder 6	Extra Catalog Sheets, 1937 - 1937
Box 13, Folder 7	Catalog of Automatic Machines, post 1937
Box 13, Folder 8	Extra Catalog Sheets, post 1937
Box 13, Folder 9	Catalog of Automatic Machines, circa 1941-1944
Box 13, Folder 10	Photograph and Descriptions of Automatic Machines, circa 1944
Box 13, Folder 11	Photographs of Automatic Machinery, undated
Box 13	Instruction Sheets for Automatic Machinery, undated (2 items)
Box 13, Folder 12	Price list for Automatic Machines, circa 1948-1952
Box 14, Folder 1	Pricelist for [obsolete?] Automatic Machines, circa 1948-1952
Box 14, Folder 2	Pricelist for Automatic Machines, circa 1965-1966
Box 14, Folder 3	Price list for Automatic Button Feeding Attachment, 1962 - 1962
Box 14, Folder 4	Price list for Automatic Machine Parts, undated
Box 14, Folder 5	Price list for Button Factory Supplies, 1933 - 1933
Box 14, Folder 6	Price list for Button Factory Supplies, 1947 - 1959
Box 14, Folder 7	Price list for Button Factory Supplies, undated
Box 14, Folder 8	Catalog Sheets for Tumbling Barrels, 1959 - 1959
Box 14, Folder 9	Photographs of Grinding Machine, undated
Box 14, Folder 10	Photographs of Machinery, [catalog shots], undated
Box 14, Folder 11	Photographs of Machinery, [catalog shots], undated
Box 14, Folder 12	Photographs of Machine Parts, [catalog shots], undated
Box 14, Folder 13	Photostatic Copies of Machinery Photographs (with written text), undated
Box 14, Folder 14	Photographs of Barry Machines in use in Birmingham, England, 1908 - 1908
Box 14, Folder 15	Photographs of Machinery in various Button Factories, undated

Box 14, Folder 16	Record of Automatic Machines Sold, 1907 - 1923
Box 14, Folder 17	Correspondence re: Exports, 1944 - 1944
Box 14, Folder 18	Exports to Nicaragua, Orders from Jorge Hunter, 1941 - 1941
Box 14, Folder 19-20	Exports to Nicaragua, Correspondence from Jorge Hunter, 1941 - 1942
Box 14, Folder 21	Exports to the Philippines, Manila Button Factory, Inc., 1940 - 1940
Box 14, Folder 22-25	Exports to the Philippines, Manila Pearl Button Corp., 1952 - 1954
Box 15, Folder 1-6	Shell-Craft & Button Corp., 1950 - 1955
Box 15, Folder 7	Correspondence re: Machine Availability and Pricing, 1972 - 1972
Box 15, Folder 8-11	Customers Address Books, undated
Box 15, Folder 12	Suppliers Address Book, undated
Box 16, Folder 1	Sample Stationery and Forms, undated
Box 16, Folder 2	Salesmens Order Forms, 1940s
Box 16, Folder 3	Receipt to Oscar Grossheim, 1900-08 - 1900-08
Box 16, Folder 4	Manufacturing Records: Patents, 1900 - 1909
Map-folder 1	Classifier Gauge, 1926-02 - 1926-02
Map-folder 1	Button or Blank Classifying Machine Roll Gauge Holder, 1926-02 - 1926-02
Map-folder 1	Chain Housing, 1925-06 - 1925-06
Map-folder 1	Button Spool Stands -- Details, 1927-09 - 1927-09
Map-folder 1	Tooth Setting Press -- Details, undated
Map-folder 1	Trimming and Ejecting Saw Press; Button Saw Keying Press; Tooth Setting Press -- Details,, 1927-09 - 1927-09
Map-folder 1	Pearl Button Backing Machine BA -- Assembly of Vertical Drive, 1929-02 - 1929-02
Map-folder 1	Automatic Facing and Drilling Machine G: Assembled and Sectional Views of Parts, undated

Map-folder 1	Automatic Facing and Drilling Machine G: Top View of Ball-Button Attachment, 1925-02 - 1925-02
Map-folder 1	Automatic Facing and Drilling Machine G: Elevation from Driving or Tool End, undated
Map-folder 1	Shell Classifier U -- Side Elevation, circa 1924
Map-folder 1	Proposed Shell Conveying and Sorting Table for Hawkeye Pearl
Map-folder 1	Button Company -- Side Elevation, 1924-01 - 1924-01
Map-folder 2	Diagram for Setting Pearl-Button Machines for Two Machine Plant, 1927-02 - 1927-02
Map-folder 2	Layout Drawing of 20 Machine Pearl-Button Plant, 1922-07 - 1922-07
Map-folder 2	Diagram of Pearl-Button Manufacturing Plant, undated
Map-folder 2	Layout Drawing of Button Saw Tooth Grinding Equipment, undated, undated
Map-folder 2	Chart for Design of Individual Duct Systems to be used with Janitorial Conditioners, undated
Box 16, Folder 5	Miscellaneous Engineering Sketches and Notes, undated
Box 16, Folder 6	Sample Work Cards, 1926 - 1926
Box 16, Folder 7-9	Correspondence with Office of Price Administration, 1942 - 1946
Box 16, Folder 10	Automatic Button Making Machinery, 1944 - 1946
Box 16, Folder 11	Shop Orders, Acme Button Company, 1956
Box 16, Folder 12	Shop Orders, American Pearl Button Company, 1956
Box 16, Folder 13	Shop Orders, Automatic Button Company, 1956
Box 16, Folder 14	Shop Orders, Hawkeye Button Company, 1956
Box 16, Folder 15	Shop Orders, McKee Button Company, 1956
Box 16, Folder 16	Shop Orders, Muscatine Pearl Works, 1956
Box 16, Folder 17	Shop Orders, Pearl Blank Company, 1956
Box 16, Folder 18	Shop Orders, Ronda Button Company, 1956

Box 16, Folder 19	Shop orders, miscellaneous, 1956 - 1956
Box 16, Folder 20	Photoprints of "New Barry Plastic Facing and Drilling Machine, 1956, 1961-01-20 - 1961-01-20
Box 20	Time Book C, 1911-02-04 - 1915-05-01
Box 21	Time Book A, 1915-05-08 - 1924-03-15
Box 22	Time Book, 1924-03-22 - 1933-02-03
Box 23	Time Book, 1933-02-10 - 1942-12-31
Box 24	Payroll Tax Record Book, 1939 - 1940
Box 25	Payroll Tax Record Book, 1941 - 1942
Box 16, Folder 21	Wage Rate Data, 1945 - 1945
Box 16, Folder 22	Wage Rate Data, 1948 - 1955
Box 16, Folder 23	Wage Rate Data, 1976 - 1979
Box 16, Folder 24	Wage Rate Data, undated
Box 16, Folder 25	Union Agreement with International Association of Machinists, 1946 - 1946
Box 16, Folder 26	Union Agreement with International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, 1973-1976, 1973 - 1976
Box 16, Folder 27	Directory of Personnel, 1963, 1963 - 1963
Box 16, Folder 28	Correspondence re: Bone Button Manufacture, 1940 - 1940
Box 16, Folder 29	Catalog Sheets from Holub-Dusha Company, New York [manufacturers of vegetable ivory cutting equipment], undated
Box 16, Folder 30	Miscellaneous, 1941 - 1941, 1948 - 1948, undated
Box 17, Folder 1	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: Correspondence, 1929 - 1930
Box 17, Folder 1	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: Manila Envelope, undated
Box 17, Folder 2	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: Balance Sheets, 1945 - 1946
Box 17, Folder 3	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: Barry-Steel Split Pulleys Catalog, 1917 - 1917

Box 17, Folder 3	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: The Barry Steel Split Pulley Catalog, 1937 - 1937
Box 17, Folder 3	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: The Barry Pulley and Modern Transmission Appliances, Catalog, undated
Box 17, Folder 3	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: The Barry Pulley and Modern Transmission Appliances, Catalog, undated
Box 17, Folder 5	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: Price list, circa 1921-1947
Box 17, Folder 6	Sales statistics, 1938 - 1939
Box 17, Folder 7	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: Correspondence with Office of Price Administration re: Sheave Pulleys, 1945 - 1945
Box 17, Folder 8	Pulley and Power Transmission Department: Miscellaneous, 1943-1944, 1943 - 1944

Series 5: Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, 1914 - 1968

Box 26	Journal, 1957-07 - 1958-06
Box 27	Journal, 1958-08 - 1959-06
Box 28	Journal, 1959-07 - 1960-06
Box 29	Journal, 1961-07 - 1962-06
Box 30, Folder 1	Stock Records, 1961 - 1968
Box 30, Folder 2	Correspondence of Edward B. Hagerman, 1964 - 1965, 1960 - 1960
Box 30, Folder 3	Daily Notes of Edward B. Hagerman, 1966-07 - 1968-08
Box 30, Folder 4	Papers re: Dissolution of Company, 1965 - 1967
Box 30, Folder 5	Insurance Policy, 1961 - 1961
Box 30, Folder 6	Balance Sheets, 1958 - 1964
Box 30, Folder 7	Real Estate Appraisal Report, 1965 - 1965
Box 30, Folder 8-9	Financial Data, 1964 - 1965
Box 30, Folder 10	Photoengraving of Factory, 1914 - 1914
Box 30, Folder 11	Engineering Survey, 1942 - 1942
Box 30, Folder 12	Dyeing Instructions Notebook, undated
Box 30, Folder 13	Sales Data, 1957 - 1960
Box 30, Folder 14	Price lists, 1959 - 1961
Box 30, Folder 15	Sample Forms, Letterhead Stationery, and Labels, undated
Box 30, Folder 16	Mussel Shells & Pearls: Their Value, and How to Acquire Them (Compiled by Hawkeye Pearl Button Co.), undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 6: Iowa Pearl Button Company, 1955 - 1955

Box 31, Folder 1

Letter of Edward B. Hagerman to David F. Sheridan, 1955-05-05 - 1955-05-05

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 7: J and K Button Company, 1993 - 1993

Box 31, Folder 2

Catalog of Polyester Buttons, 1993 - 1993

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 8: McKee Button Company, 1988 - 1988

Box 31

Box 31, Folder 3 Photographs (copy prints) and button catalog, 1988 - 1988, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series Series 9: Muscatine Pearl Works, 1944 - 1947

Box 31, Folder 4 Correspondence between O. A. Hammer and Claus Schmarje, 1944 - 1947

Box 31, Folder 5-7 Correspondence, 1945 - 1947

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 10: Perkins Freshwater Pearl Products, 1944 - 1966

Box 5	Financial ledger, 1944 - 1945 Notes: Includes information for disbursements, receipts, sales, customer charge accounts, and monthly totals.
Box 5	Financial ledger, 1945 - 1945 Notes: Includes information for disbursements, receipts, sales, customer charge accounts, and monthly totals.
Box 32, Folder 1	Annual corporation report (includes certificate of incorporation), 1946 - 1946, 1949 - 1949, 1966 - 1966
Box 32, Folder 2	Price lists, 1946 - 1946
Box 32, Folder 3	Utility Survey Company, 1946 - 1946
Box 32, Folder 4	Bill of Sale, 1948 - 1948
Box 32, Folder 5	Receipts, 1950 - 1950
Box 32, Folder 6	Clarence H. perkins estate and balance sheets, 1947 - 1948
Box 32, Folder 7	Inventory, 1944 - 1945
Box 32, Folder 8	Inventory and balance sheets, 1947 - 1950
Box 32, Folder 9	Property Tax Reports, 1949 - 1950
Box 32, Folder 10	Piece Work Rate Figures, 1946 - 1949
Box 32, Folder 11	Weekly Payroll, 1949 - 1950
Box 32, Folder 12	Iowa State Unemployment Tax Reports, 1949-1950

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 11: Ronda Button Company, 1946 - 1968

Box 33, Item 1	Bills Payable [includes Claus Schmarje Button Works], 1944 - 1949
Box 33, Item 2	Cashbook, 1946 - 1968
Box 34, Item 1	Cashbook, 1947 - 1948
Box 35	Sales Journal, 1948 - 1955
Box 36	Sales Journal, 1951 - 1954
Box 37	Sales Journal, 1955 - 1960
Box 38	Sales Journal, 1961 - 1968
Box 39, Folder 1	Record of Blanks Bought, 1949 - 1951
Box 39, Folder 2	Record of Shells Sold, 1949 - 1949
Box 39, Folder 3	Record of Shells Bought, 1951 - 1952
Box 39, Folder 4	Record of Shells Bought, 1953 - 1966
Box 39, Folder 5-9	Inventories, 1948 - 1966
Box 40, Folder 1	Photographs
Box 40, Folder 2	Miscellaneous
Box 40, Folder 3	Executive Records, 1946 - 1947
Box 40, Folder 4	Novelty Room Sales and Salaries, 1955 - 1956
Box 40, Folder 5	Novelty Price lists, 1958 - 1958, 1964 - 1964, 1954 - 1954
Box 40, Folder 6	Maintenance and Operating Costs, 1950 - 1951
Box 40, Folder 7	Customer Address List, undated
Box 40, Folder 8	Miscellaneous Sales Statements, 1950 - 1967
Box 40, Folder 9	Bank Loan, 1952 - 1954
Box 40, Folder 10	Financial Statements, 1947 - 1966

Box 40, Folder 11 U.S. Commerce Department Census of Manufacturers, 1953 - 1954

Box 40, Folder 12 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Surveys, 1952 - 1962

Box 40, Folder 13 Miscellaneous Labor Reports, 1954 - 1962

Box 40, Folder 14-15 Iowa State Unemployment Tax Reports, 1950 - 1962

Box 40, Folder 16 New York City Corporate Tax Returns, 1952 - 1961

Box 41, Folder 1-26 General Correspondence, 1949 - 1964

Box 42, Folder 1-14 General correspondence (John Rie), 1952 - 1960

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 12: Claus Schmarje Button Works, 1914 - 1941

Box 43, Folder 1	Ledger X, 1922 - 1926
Box 43, Folder 2	Ledger C, 1926 - 1928
Box 43, Folder 3	Ledger D, 1928 - 1936
Box 43, Folder 4	Ledger, 1933 - 1937
Box 43, Folder 5	Cashbook R, 1927 - 1937
Box 44, Folder 1	Blanks sold, 1928 - 1936
Box 44, Folder 2	Blanks sold, 1936 - 1937
Box 44, Folder 3	Shell accounts, 1933 - 1936
Box 44, Folder 4	Blanks and shells, 1922 - 1933
Box 44, Folder 5	Shell report book of Mark Katz, 1936
Box 44, Folder 6	Loose papers from inventory of blanks and shells re: C.E. Hendrix (page 34)
Box 44, Folder 7	Loose papers from inventory of blanks and shells re: Mark Katz (page 50)
Box 45, Folder 1	Wage Book, 1920 - 1924
Box 45, Folder 2	Wage Book, 1925 - 1928
Box 45, Folder 3	Wage Book, 1929 - 1930
Box 45, Folder 4	Wage Book, 1930 - 1933
Box 45, Folder 5	Wage Book, 1933 - 1935
Box 46, Folder 1	Receipts, tags and civil action of Philip B. Fleming v. C. Schmarje Button Works, 1914 - 1941, 1932 - 1932
Box 46, Folder 2	Correspondence, 1919 - 1922
Box 46, Folder 3	Miscellaneous (includes drawings, receipts, legal documents), 1924 - 1936

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series Series 13: US Button Company, 1915 - 1915

Box 31, Folder 8

Photographs, 1915 - 1915

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

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

Box 47, Folder 1	Director's Meeting Minutes, 1952 - 1976
Box 47, Folder 2	Trial balances, 1950 August-1962 December
Box 47, Folder 3	Trial balances, 1963 January-1974 September
Box 47, Folder 4	Appraisal of the company, 1961
Box 48, Folder 1	Audit reports, 1936 - 1939
Box 48, Folder 2	Census of Manufacturers, 1935 - 1958
Box 48, Folder 3	Fish and Wildlife Survey, 1949
Box 48, Folder 4	Iowa Unemployment Tax Reports, 1936 - 1937
Box 48, Folder 5	Iowa Unemployment Tax Reports, 1938 - 1940
Box 48, Folder 6	Iowa Unemployment Tax Reports, 1941 - 1946
Box 48, Folder 7	Iowa Unemployment Tax Reports, 1947 - 1952
Box 48, Folder 8	Iowa Unemployment Tax Reports, 1953 - 1956
Box 48, Folder 9	Iowa Unemployment Tax Reports, 1958 - 1960
Box 49, Folder 1	General Journal, 1960 - 1963
Box 49, Folder 2	General Journal, 1964 - 1967
Box 49, Folder 3	General Journal, 1968 - 1971
Box 50, Folder 1	General Journal, 1972 - 1974
Box 50, Folder 2	Manufacturing Expense Journal, 1960 - 1963
Box 50, Folder 3	Manufacturing Expense Journal, 1964 - 1967
Box 50, Folder 4	Manufacturing Expense Journal, 1968 - 1981
Box 51, Folder 1-2	Ledger, 1952 - 1963
Box 51, Folder 3	Dyeing instructions, 1950 - 1950

Box 51, Folder 4	Dyeing instructions, 1957 - 1957
Box 51, Folder 5-7	Dyeing instructions, undated
Box 51, Folder 8	Polishing instructions, undated
Box 51, Folder 9	Family and company history, 1991
Box 51, Folder 10	Statement of assets and liabilities, 1923-12 - 1923-12
Box 52, Folder 1	Shop photographs, 1980 - 1980, 1952 - 1952
Box 52, Folder 2	Work force photographs, 1922 - 1922
Box 52, Folder 3	Iowa Unemployment, 1942 - 1942
Box 52, Folder 4	Union contract, 1941 - 1943
Box 52, Folder 5	Contacts, 1942 - 1947
Box 52, Folder 6	Meeting minutes, 1936 - 1940
Box 52, Folder 7	Slide tour of factory, circa 1970-1971
Box 52, Folder 8	Sales to Hawkeye Button Company, 1963 - 1963
Box 52, Folder 9	Petitions to Internal Revenue Service re: excess profit tax, 1942 - 1943
Box 52, Folder 10	Piece rates, 1947 - 1947
Box 52, Folder 11	Inventory papers, 1947 - 1947
Box 52, Folder 12	Inventories/comparison sheets, 1963 - 1965
Box 52, Folder 13	Miscellaneous contracts, 1935 - 1940
Box 52, Folder 14	Sewing machine contracts, 1955 - 1955
Box 53, Folder 1	Inventory record book, 1957 - 1960
Box 53, Folder 2	Ephemera, 1975
Box 53, Folder 3	Catalog of buttons, undated
Box 53, Folder 4	Catalog of buttons, undated
Box 53, Folder 5	Catalog of buttons, undated

Box 54, Folder 1	Blanking machines, 1939
Box 54, Folder 2	Williams White and Company (button blank cutting machine, 1949
Box 54, Folder 3	Improved cutting machine drawings (patent application), circa 1940s
Box 54, Folder 4	Button feed hopper patents, 1900 - 1954
Box 54, Folder 5	Self-shank button chucks (US 2,276,552), 1939 - 1942
Box 54, Folder 6	Grinding machine (patent application), 1938 - 1940
Box 54, Folder 7	Circular saw (patent application), 1940 - 1943
Box 54, Folder 8	Self-shank button drilling machine (patent application), 1940
Box 54, Folder 9	Blanking machine (patent application), 1943 - 1944
Box 54, Folder 10	Self-shank drill machine (photographs and negatives), 1947
Box 54, Folder 11	Employees of Weber and Sons (photograph), undated
Box 54, Folder 12	Cook and Chick Company (part feeders), 1954
Box 55, Item 1	Weber and Sons Button Company, Inc. (empty binder), undated
Box 55, Item 2	[Weber family portrait?], undated
Map-folder 4	Ring fish eye sheet, 1945
Map-folder 4	Unidentified drawing, undated
Map-folder 4	Machine drawing by John Weber, 1934
Map-folder 4	Drive shaft in channel/worm to drive gear (Essanen Company, Evanston, Illinois), 1959
Map-folder 4	Button Drill (Williams, White and Company, Moline, Illinois), 1938 21 Blueprints
Map-folder 4	Vertical cutting machine (John Weber Jr. and Associates, Muscatine, Iowa), 1950

9 Blueprints

Map-folder 3

Standard grading chart for freshwater buttons, 1927-01 - 1927-01

[Return to Table of Contents](#)