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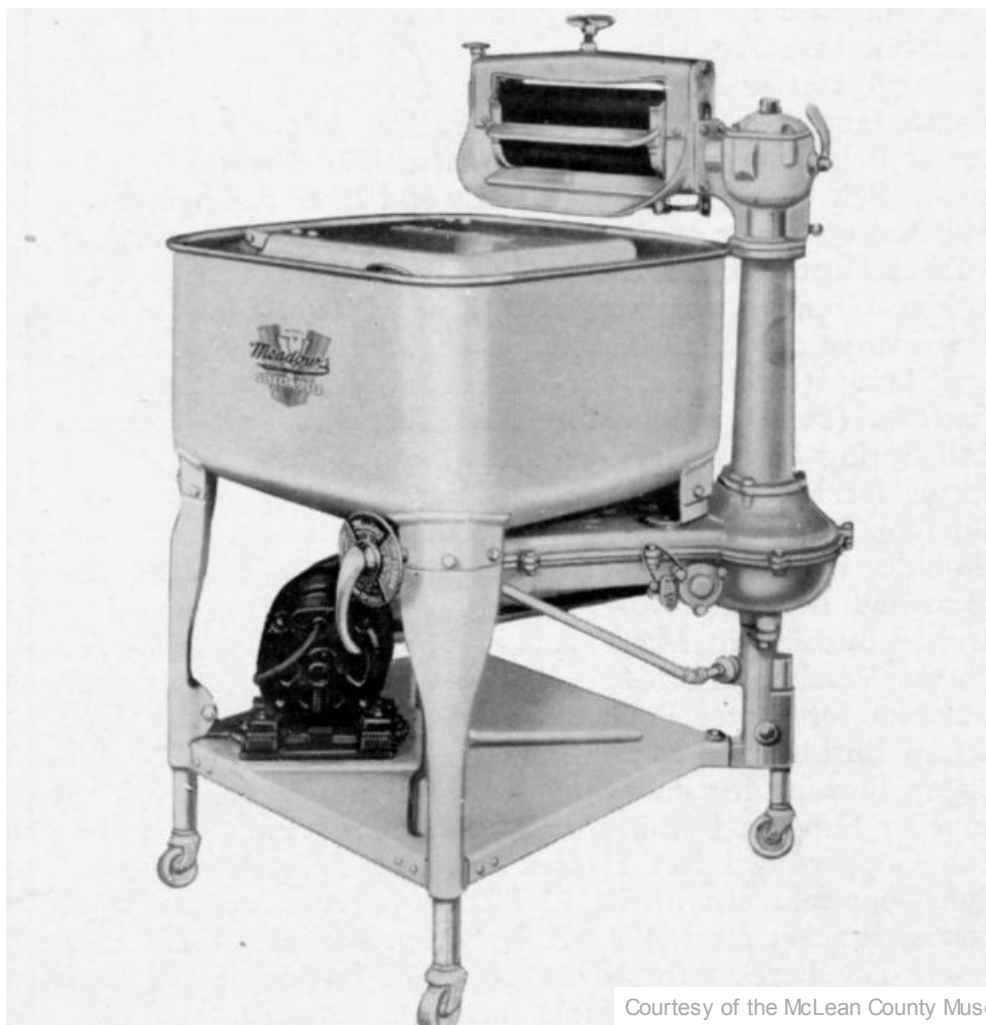
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PFOP

Meadows plant churned out washing machines



Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History

Meadows Mfg. Co. offered this Model V Select-a-Speed washing machine in the late 1920s and early 1930s. (Courtesy of the Mclean County Museum of History)

January 13, 2013 2:00 pm • [By Bill Kemp | Archivist/historian McLean County Museum of History](#)
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In the first several decades of the 20th century, Bloomington was in many ways a blue collar town.

[Skinner music school was once a cultural force in Bloomington](#)

From 1907 until its closing in 1924,

The city's largest employer was the Chicago & Alton Railroad Shops, where 1,800 or more men maintained and repaired steam locomotives and rolling stock.

A local brewery bottled beer (at least until Prohibition) and a dozen or more factories and mills small and large shipped out farm equipment, flour, furnaces, mattresses, stoves and other items.

Bloomington was also known for washing machines.

From 1920 to the mid-1950s, Meadows Manufacturing Company made clothes washers from its plant on the city's near southeast side. Over the years the Bloomington factory churned out one washing machine after another under brand names such as Meadow Lark (spelled as two words) and Select-a-Speed.

The company's origin can be traced to the inventiveness of John Rocke, who at the end of the 19th century began making grain elevators, conveyer-like machines to move ear corn upward and into cribs or bins. His busy little workshop was based in Meadows, a hamlet in northern McLean County between Gridley and Chenoa, and he found a ready market among his rural neighbors.

In 1903 Rocke incorporated the Meadows Manufacturing Co., and in a short while the workshop had become a factory assembling about 500 grain elevators annually.

The ever-growing enterprise moved to Pontiac in 1910, and in two years the company's floor space had increased to 60,000 square feet.



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In addition to portable and stationary grain elevators, Meadows was now manufacturing other farm-related equipment like livestock scales, pump jacks and binder hitches.

from whence they came. "The Oaks," a Depression-era apartment building at 301 E. G...
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And it was in Pontiac that the company began making power washing machines.

In 1920 Rocke relocated his operation to Bloomington, the move apparently spurred by Pontiac's reluctance to extend water mains to his factory.

He faced a more welcoming climate in Bloomington where the local Association of Commerce purchased 14 acres south of Bell Street and west of Hannah Street for the factory site. The association also picked up the tab for the Illinois Central switch and siding to connect the plant to the wider world of rail traffic, and developed the Meadows subdivision to create affordable homes for the new workforce.

The Bloomington plant included an administration building, paint, wood and machine shops, and "one of the most up-to-date foundries to be found in Central Illinois," with the furnace (and by extension the company's moulders and pattern makers) able to handle 10 tons of molten metal an hour.

During its years in Bloomington, Meadows dropped its farm implement lines and instead concentrated on the design, manufacture, marketing, distribution and sale of washing machines.

Its early ones were either equipped with an electric motor or set up for power takeoff from a free-standing gasoline engine already owned by the customer.

Generally speaking, city residents purchased the first type and farm folk — at least before rural electrification — bought the second. During its first decade in Bloomington, Meadows boasted a distribution network spanning not only much of the U.S. (from Boston, Mass. to Oakland, Calif.) but parts of Canada and Europe as well.

Yet the Great Depression was most unkind to the household appliance industry, and the Bloomington company fell into receivership. In 1934 Meadows was absorbed by the Hurley

Machine Corp., manufacturers of the Thor line of washing machines (the company would later be known as Thor Corp.). Despite the sale, the Meadows name survived since the Bloomington plant became a division of the parent company. By the end of the Depression, Meadows was turning out an average of 50,000 washers a year.

During World War II the company made parts for a 20mm anti-aircraft gun. “Wars are won with machine ships and factories, just as much as they are with battleships, fighting planes and armed men,” declared Meadows President I.N. Merritt in May 1942. During the Korean War the plant manufactured artillery shells.

Yet by the early 1950s it was becoming increasingly apparent that Meadows couldn’t compete against giant full-line appliance makers like General Electric and others. In late 1955, Thor sold Meadows to Bloomington-based vacuum maker Eureka Williams with its plant opposite Hannah Street. The sale price was \$450,000, or about \$3.8 million in inflation-adjusted 2012 dollars.

The original Meadows buildings are still standing south of Bell Street, and until a few years ago they were part of the Wildwood Industries complex. The old administration building — 93 years old this summer — still carries the inscription “Meadows Mfg. Co.” as well as a handsome corporate “coat of arms” with the interlocking letters “M,” “M,” and “C.”

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