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# THE HISTORY OF ALUMINUM

by LEONORA KADOW



Combs and novelty items were produced during the first few years in the Manistowoc and Two Rivers plants.

past or present. Then it was that Mirro organized its manufacturing operations on a shoe-string and steadily gained ground until it occupied center stage of the city's most profitable activities.

Previous to the advent of aluminum women did their cooking in iron skillets, pots and pans which were heavy to handle. Some used enamelware which had a tendency to chip. This defect could cause serious illness to anyone partaking of food cooked in the damaged utensil. Some copperware was in circulation. It was expensive and difficult to clean.

This unknown quantity, aluminumware, with a pot, pan and kettle as light as a breeze and fresh as a daisy, was something else again.

What follows is Mirro's own accounting of its stewardship in Manistowoc for the past 75 years.

## HISTORY OF MIRRO

by Leonora Kadow

The founding fathers of Manistowoc had dreams, big dreams. They told themselves that their city would become the GATE-WAY to the great North West territory.

While they fondled these aspirations, Chicago, like Topsy, "grewed and grewed." And to their consternation it was the Windy City that became the GATE-WAY, turning their dreams into nightmares.

What was left? Just another little town. It had two banks, a few small manufacturing plants, some stores, a couple of blacksmith shops and several saloons. Its citizens were hard working and thrifty; but the few thousand of them could see nothing in the foreseeable future to change the situation.

Then there was added to this apathetic condition a fire which

destroyed the Manistowoc Manufacturing company. This loss implemented the failure of the Shrove bank which had underwritten the company's credit to a large degree. The busted bank carried the savings of hundreds of Manistowoc citizens down the drain. Besides this a couple of other small manufacturing plants left the city. They were courted by monetary offers to set up shop in nearby localities.

All these unhappy circumstances left the unemployment here in a deplorable state. Men would gather in small groups at the Eighth Street bridge waiting for a potential employer to rein his horse or team and hire one of them for a few hours or days at a very low wage.

Indeed our home town was in a sad state of being. It had no future,

## THE HISTORY OF ALUMINUM

The prehistoric history of aluminum is as tantalizing a tale as anyone could conceive. It came into being as a material with the creation of the world.

From the time of its creation it instantly combined with other elements so it was not found in metallic form in nature. Aluminum combined with oxygen formed the sapphire, the ruby and the Oriental emerald; with salica it formed garnets and feldspar; with phosphale, the turquoise and with silica, soda and oxygen — jade.

But most important when the earth's mass cooled, aluminum mixed with water and oxygen formed the original material from which bauxite the ore of aluminum



was made. Bauxite is found in every continent in the world except in Antarctica.

More than 5,000 years ago pottery was made in Northern Iraq. The clay used in producing same was a hydrated silicate of aluminum. The Ancients in making cooking utensils foretold by eons one of the earliest uses of the metal itself.

Saint-Claire Deville told the French Academy of Sciences in 1854 that he used sodium to separate the globules of aluminum to coalesce into lumps the size of marbles. A year later bars of aluminum were shown next to the Crown Jewels at the Paris Exposition. This was the first time that the people of France had ever heard of or had seen aluminum.

Napoleon III gave financial support to Deville's experiments with aluminum. The Emperor's most honored guests were served with aluminum forks and spoons while lesser royalty had to be satisfied with gold and silver. Knives were not used in those days. The infant son of Napoleon, the prince, entertained himself with shaking an aluminum rattle.

Charles Martin Hall, an American and graduate of Oberlin College, was the first person in the United States to discover a workable electrolytic in 1886 which was indeed a better and more economical way to produce aluminum.

In 1888 Karl Joseph Bayer, a German chemist, was issued a patent for an improved process for making pure aluminum oxide (alumina) from low silica - content bauxite ores, and the foundation of the aluminum age was complete.

The name aluminum was given by Sir Humphry Davy. This he said sounded more scientific than metal of clay.



This view of Plant 2 was taken before the seven-story addition was built in 1929.

## HISTORY OF MIRRO ALUMINUM COMPANY

The Mirro Aluminum Company, now known as the world's largest manufacturer of aluminum cooking utensils with its six factories, rolling mill and customer service center, had a humble beginning back in 1895.

The present corporation is the result of a merger of the Manitowoc Aluminum Novelty Company, the Aluminum Manufacturing Company and Standard Aluminum Company of Two Rivers and the New Jersey Aluminum Company of Newark.

On July 30, 1895, the Aluminum Manufacturing Company was incorporated, "for the purpose of manufacturing and selling useful and ornamental articles of aluminum, or of other material or metals." Inspiration for the new venture had been the Columbian Exposition of 1893 where novelties imported from Germany, which were made of the new white metal, were on display. Joseph Koenig started this business in a small rented warehouse in January of that year.

In 1898, another farsighted citizen in the neighboring city of Manitowoc, also saw the great opportunity opened up by the discovery of a new process of producing the new metal, aluminum, economically. Henry Vits, successful operator of a tannery since 1864 and active in government as alderman, school commissioner and member of the State Legislature, set up shop to manufacture products of the new wonder metal. He had come to the United States as a boy and had begun his career as a school teacher.

Machinery was purchased and the tannery was converted for the manufacture of aluminum articles. The sign on the building was relettered to read, "The Manitowoc Novelty Company." Henry Vits was president, his son, William, Vice President, and W. F. Pflueger was secretary.

In 1909, when the Manitowoc and Two Rivers companies were consolidated with the New Jersey Aluminum Company, George Vits, son of Henry Vits, one of the founders of the Manitowoc

Company, is credited with doing much of the work which resulted in the merger. He became a Vice President and sales manager of the new company, which was named the Aluminum Good Manufacturing Company. The President of this Company in 1909 was Gustave A. Kruttschnitt, Vice President was Joseph Koenig, and Secretary and Treasurer was James C. Coleman. The main office of the company was at Newark, New Jersey.

Three years later, George Vits, who in the meantime had become general manager, was offered the presidency at the annual meeting. His acceptance heralded a bright new chapter in the aluminum business of Manitowoc and Two Rivers.

Manufacture of cooking utensils by mass production methods began in 1913 when the company produced a double boiler for the Quaker Oats Company which ultimately sold over the million mark. Up to this time the business had been mainly novelties, with aluminum combs the principal product. While the advantages of aluminum cooking ware had been recognized by the public, prices were generally too high to make them popular.

During this early period, the company's heavy-gauge, high-quality brand of pots and pans was "VIKO," the name coined from combining the "VI" from Vits and the "KO" from Koenig. Aluminum was no longer considered a luxury metal and mass production methods were being incorporated to enable the company to offer a high-quality product at the lowest possible price.

In 1915 the company acquired the facilities of the Standard Aluminum Company, another manufacturer in Two Rivers. For the next two years the company concentrated on the production of cooking utensils.

Private brands of aluminumware for wholesalers, syndicate and for mail order houses accounted for the bulk of distribution. Carloads of utensils were made for such distributors as Sunlight Aluminum





The original factory of the Aluminum Novelty Co.

Company, Great Northern Manufacturing Company and the United Aluminum Corporation. While the first two are no longer in existence, the last named company is still a valued customer of the company.

During the same year, 1915, The Aluminum Goods Manufacturing Company received its first contract for automobile hub caps. Company history is not clear whether the first automobile manufacturer was Dodge or Studebaker who placed an order calling for enough hub caps to supply 25,000 cars. Buick soon followed with an order for several hundred thousand hub caps.

World War I had a big influence on the destinies of the company. While the capacity of their facilities was strained, there was no shortage of aluminum. The raw material was available and the only problem was turning out the finished goods. Factory buildings spread as need for space grew. Canteens, cooking utensils and mess kits were turned out in tremendous numbers. The biggest single item was canteens, the total of which went into many millions.

At the conclusion of World War I, the company set out on a large scale expansion program. A plant in St. Louis was purchased to obtain additional rolling mill facilities. Five large additions to the Manitowoc and Two Rivers plants also got underway in 1919. Later when additional facilities in Manitowoc and Two Rivers had been completed, it was found to be advantageous to dispose of plants in other cities.

Up to 1917, the company had no nationally-advertised high quality line. To change this situation, MIRRO, The Finest Aluminum, was introduced in 1917. Full-page advertisements in the Saturday Evening Post of that year told the women of the country about this new MIRRO line of aluminumware. Other advertisements followed in such publications as Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's, Good Housekeeping, Farm Journal and Better Homes and Gardens.

George Vits, who was president at this time, had an intense personal interest in his employees. A familiar

figure in the shops, he knew most of the workers by their first names and he knew about the families of many of them. As early as 1917, the company had an employee insurance plan, which insured adult male employees for \$1,500.00 and all employees under 21 years of age for \$1,000.00.

There came the time when the company had grown to such proportions that it was physically impossible for one man to keep in contact with all of the employees. But there was one day each year when these employees got together. It was what, in later years, became almost a community affair, the annual Company Picnic. It was a day that was looked forward to from year to year. A parade marked the official opening of the big day. There were bands, floats and clowns. There was fellowship and merriment, for picnic day was a day of gaiety for young and old alike and really a special day for the entire city. A separate picnic was held for Manitowoc and one for the Two Rivers plants.

In 1914, Albert J. Vits succeeded Henry Vits on the Board of Directors. On May 1, 1914, Mr. J. F. McGee resigned as secretary and treasurer and R. J. Findlan was elected to fill the unexpired term of Mr. McGee. In 1921, A. J. Vits was elected as vice president. He had



These girls were polishing novelty items at Plant 2. Photo taken in 1905.





Office force in 1900.

Miss Herian  
Miss Gaffney  
J.F. Magee

been a stockholder in the company since 1902. Also in 1921, C. F. Isselmann was elected assistant secretary.

The company launched an aggressive sales and advertising program. Dollar sales and special event sales stimulated the business and the policy of giving the trade the largest possible values was instituted. From a line of aluminum novelties, the Aluminum Goods grew to leadership in the field of aluminum cooking utensils during this period.

Not only was the company seeking diversification in products, but diversification in distribution also. Rapid growth of chain and mail order distribution resulted in building merchandise to meet the specific needs of these outlets. Premium, jobbing and retail store distribution was also greatly extended by a large and intensive sales program.

In 1929, when the depression struck, the company which employed 3,400 people at the time was not affected immediately. Sales and production, like employment, was at a new all-time high. However, during the following year, 1930, there was a definite decline in sales and the number of employees was also reduced slightly.

Sales continued to decline during 1931 and 1932 which were the darkest days of the depression. But with sales down more than 65%, the number of employees, in 1921, was reduced only to 2,500. Therefore, three quarters of the 3,400 employees of 1929 were kept on the job during the period when there was no work to be had for

millions who sought it.

In 1933, sales showed a slight increase and the number of employees immediately rose from 2,500 to 2,700. The worst of the depression was over.

During the 1923 to 1933 period, the company and the community suffered the loss of three AGM Co. executives. On November 15, 1929 Joseph Koenig died. Mr. Koenig was vice president and general superintendent and had made a tremendous contribution to the mechanical development throughout the plants. R. J. Findlan, secretary and treasurer died April 22, 1933. Mr. Findlan had been an officer of the company since 1915 and he, too, played a substantial part in the growth of the company.

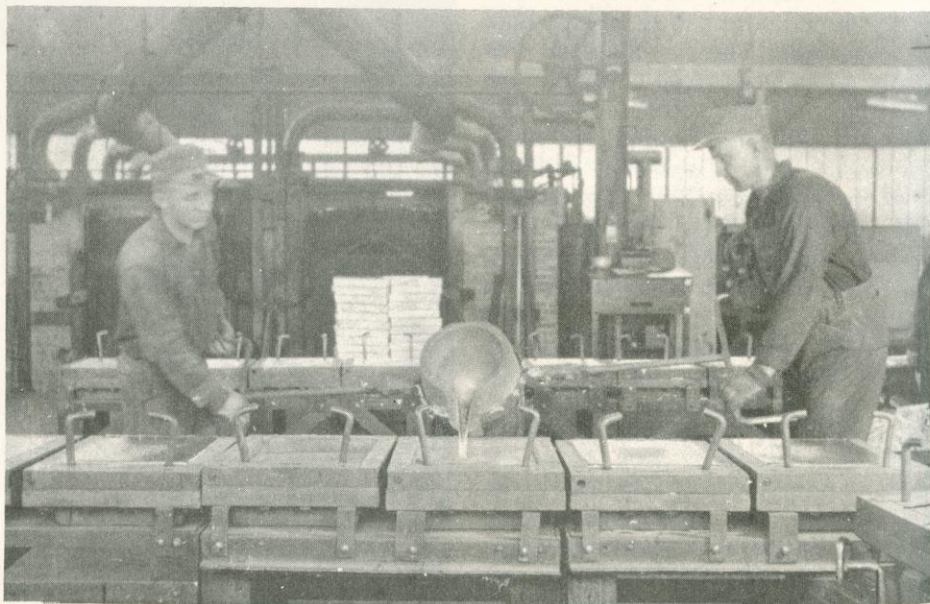
The community was further shocked by the news of George Vits' death, November 15, 1933. It was almost impossible to believe that the man whose vision and courage had guided the company safely through the formative stage was dead. Other officers of the company at this time included A. J. Vits, who was vice president, C. F. Isselmann, vice president and assistant secretary, H. L. Vits, vice president, Earl O. Vits, vice president and John F. Walton, Jr., secretary and treasurer.

Upon the death of George Vits, his brother, A. J. Vits, executive vice president, took over the direction of the company. He had been a director since 1913 and a vice president since 1921. It was during this time, 1934 to 1941, that the company recovered from the effects of the depression.

On August 8, 1936, the community was further shocked by the death of Mr. C. F. Isselmann. Mr. W. F. Bugenhagen, who had been with company since 1910, succeeded Mr. Isselmann, becoming vice president in charge of sales.

The company's facilities were engaged both directly and indirectly in national defense work in 1940 and the years following. Production included coffee filters, meat platters, syrup pitchers and other utensil items for the armed forces, contract parts such as airplane fuel tanks, landing gear parts, airplane engine deflector, radar parts, meat cans and cartridge cases of brass and steel. Again millions of canteens were made for our armed forces, just as had been done during World War I. Aluminum was also rolled for Lend-Lease.

With the war over, the company resumed civilian production at the end of 1944, when another milestone was reached in the



Casting aluminum into slabs was a hand operation during the early days at Plant 4 in Two Rivers. These men are pouring molten metal into molds, producing a 50 pound slab of aluminum.





The cookware above and to the left was manufactured by MIRRO between 1923 and 1927.

introduction of the MIRRO-MATIC Pressure Pan. This was the highest priced utensil ever made by the company and has since sold in the millions. Another product introduced a little later was the MIRRO-MATIC Electric Percolator which also became a large volume sales item.

In the effort to establish a growth pattern and carry out a policy of continuing warranted expansion, the company acquired a 104-acre site between Manitowoc and Two Rivers to be used for future building expansion. Within the next two years the first unit (Plant 5) of the new building expansion was erected in 1955 and used as a central Receiving and Supply Department. A second unit was added in 1956 which is currently being used for warehousing and part for manufacturing.

In August 1957, the company announced its plans to erect a new \$12 million rolling mill adjacent to Plant 5.

The new operation has the newest type heavy-duty, fully integrated mill using the latest methods and the most modern machinery obtainable. It has an annual capacity of 60 million pounds of sheet aluminum.

The new mill has put our company in a stronger position to engage in the development and marketing of more new products, thereby broadening our operations and expanding our sales.

While the company has been known primarily as a cooking utensil manufacturer and a leader in this field, it has branched out into other lines such as giftware, boats,

aluminum siding, toys, aluminum foil and foilware.

On April 10, 1957, stockholders of the Aluminum Goods Manufacturing Company voted in favor of changing the company's name to the MIRRO ALUMINUM COMPANY. It became effective on December 31, 1957. The name change provided immediate brand identification every time the company's name is mentioned.

Upon the death of A. J. Vits in January, 1955, W. F. Bugenhagen was appointed to the presidency by the Board of Directors.

In 1963 a new Customer Service Center was completed on the company's 104-acre tract northeast of Manitowoc, adjacent to Plant 5 and the Rolling Mill. This 362 x 717 foot building provides central shipping and product storage

facilities for all Mirro manufacturing plants.

Purchase of the National Metal Coatings, Inc., at Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, was consummated in January 1964. The plant, known as Mirro Plant 8, manufactures building materials, primarily aluminum siding.

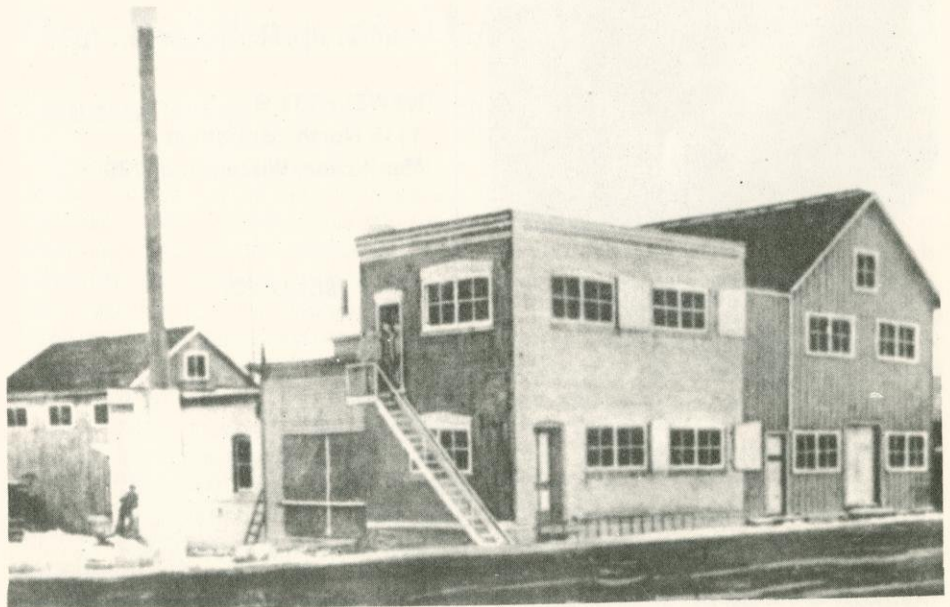
In September 1964, a 30,000 square foot addition to the company's rolling mill facilities at a cost of \$350,000 was announced. The addition is used to concentrate the finished inventory of rolled metal within the mill thereby eliminating storage at the fabricating plants.

In 1960, A. L. Vits became president of Mirro and W. F. Bugenhagen was made Chairman of the Board. In 1964, Mr. Bugenhagen resigned as Chairman and was named an honorary director. C. W. Ziemer was named to the Board of Directors in 1964.

In 1966 additions were completed to the Rolling Mill, Plants 1 and 4 and the Boat Plant.

On January 1, 1967, A. L. Vits was named Chairman of the Board and C. W. Ziemer named President and Chief Executive Officer of Mirro.

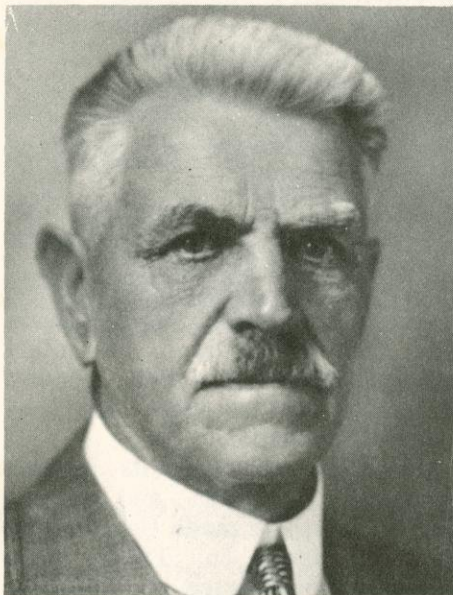
Other officers of the company include F. C. Prescott, Vice President - Marketing; R. N. Thomsen, Vice President - Manufacturing; L. L. Newberry, Secretary-Treasurer; U. E. Garey, Assistant Treasurer; and R. W. Ihde, Assistant Secretary.



This is the building in which Joseph Koenig started the Aluminum Mfg. Co. in Two Rivers in 1895.



# FOUNDERS and PRESIDENTS:



Joseph Koenig  
Founded Aluminum Mfg. Co.  
at Two Rivers in 1895.



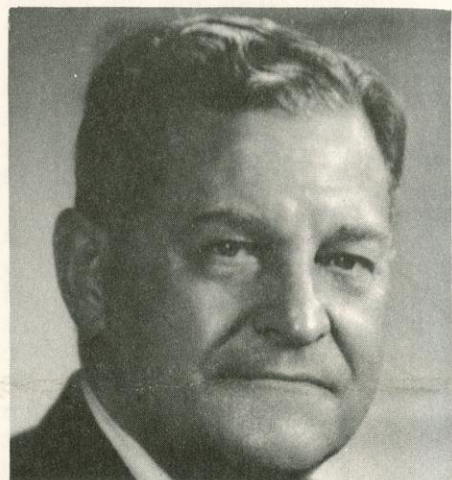
George Vits 1911-33



Walter F. Bugenhagen 1955-60



Albert J. Vits 1933-55



Albert Vits — 1960-67



Henry Vits  
Founded the Manitowoc Aluminum  
Novelty Co. in 1898; Served as  
President until 1909.

Gustave A. Kreettschnitt 1909-11  
(no picture)

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