

Fairmont's Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution, according to Merriam Webster's online dictionary, is defined as follows: **–noun:** *a rapid major change in an economy (as in England in the late 18th century) marked by the general introduction of power-driven machinery or by an important change in the prevailing types and methods of use of such machines.*

Perhaps Fairmont's experience with the Industrial Revolution might aptly be characterized as having its inception in the early 1900's with the Fairmont Machine Company, the predecessor to Fairmont Railway Motors, which has since evolved into the present company known as Harsco Track Technologies, which was renamed Harsco Rail effective in April of 2009. In the January 11, 1915, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, the headline read, "Impressionistic View of Fairmont's Greatest Industrial Enterprise." This article went on to say that the company has an international reputation, that it employs 155 people, and stated in detail why their engine was superior to the competition. The officers of the company at that time were as follows: Frank E. Wade, president; John P. Dunning, vice president; Arza R. Fancher, secretary; William M. Hay, treasurer; Howard M. Starrett, director; Matthew Pfeiffer, director, and George H. Snyder, director.

The company began operations in the early 1900's as a small machine shop. It began to manufacture single cylinder engines primarily for farm use for pumping water, sawing wood, and jobs such as these in 1907. Then, in 1909, it was incorporated into Fairmont Machine Company. That year marked the first time that Fairmont engines were applied to railway hand or pump cars and thereby provided their entrance into the railroad industry. Fred Mahlman, Sr., a railroad section hand who was not employed by Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc., was instrumental in the design and development of this endeavor which eventually proved to be a driving force in establishing Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc., as a leader in the industry.

The business prospered and, in 1913, the city of Duluth provided the company with an attractive offer to move their offices and plant there. However, a group of concerned and interested Fairmont citizens pledged to support the company and, consequently, the directors decided to remain in Fairmont.

The company name was changed to Fairmont Gas Engine and Railway Motor Car Company in 1915. Soon the company began the design and development of complete motor cars and began producing their own models in the early 1920's. In addition, during that same decade, the company began to produce and sell "maintenance-of way" work equipment that included weed burners, weed mowers, and ballast discers. In 1923, the firm adopted the name, Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc.

The 1920's saw further expansion that included an international flavor. This involved the purchase of Mudge and Company of Chicago, a railway motor car business, in 1928, and the formation of a Canadian subsidiary in 1929, Fairmont Railway Motors, Ltd., which was located in suburban Toronto.

The late 1940's saw the development of Hy-Rail vehicles that could operate either on road or rail. In addition, they could be applied to operate on passenger cars, pickup trucks, or large railroad cranes.

The early 1960's saw the introduction of a line of lightweight hydraulic hand tools and eventually a hydraulic motor. These were used mainly for electrical transmission line construction as well as maintenance and tree trimming. This resulted in a new division called Fairmont Hydraulics.

Stockholders approved a merger with Harsco, a diversified enterprise located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on June 8, 1979. The goal of this merger from a local perspective was apparently to enhance the operation of the company by providing stability and continued growth.

The company eventually sold its products to nearly every railroad in the U. S. and Canada, in addition to exporting to Mexico, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. In June of 1980, Railway Motors announced a one million dollar renovation and expansion project which was expected to add 62,000 additional square feet to the plant for manufacturing space and offices.

What was once a small motor car operation in the early 1900's in Fairmont evolved over time to gain an international presence and prominence in the industry. The company will celebrate its 100th year of operations in 2009. It has gone through a significant amount of change over its 100 year existence, including layoffs, strikes, expansions, spinoffs, and mergers. However, in essence, it is truly immaterial as to how or what it is called. What is significant is the fact that "the Motors" has been an integral part of Fairmont and Martin County for a century and has arguably been the most significant industry to our local economy in the 152 year existence of this city and county. Its workforce has been effective and efficient, its payroll has supported many families, and in turn many local businesses have prospered, and over the years it has contributed to the community and area in an immeasurable manner. Frank Wade, perhaps the quintessential entrepreneur of his time and the first president of Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc., would no doubt be exuberantly proud of the long term success and economic impact his initiative has had on this community and area over the past 100 years. Perhaps if today's national and international leaders in the corporate boardrooms of big business had the integrity and business acumen of Frank Wade, our economy would not be in its present condition.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.