

The Story of AO—World's Largest Manufacturer of Optical Products...

The day in 1833 that William Beecher, Southbridge jeweler, decided he could make a better and less expensive steel frame than those imported from abroad was actually the beginning of the optical industry in America. At that time, all lenses and steel frames were imported from Europe. They were expensive (85) and delivery took months.

By 1843, he was turning out steel spectacles at a lower price than ever offered before. In fact, he actually wrote letters to customers thanking them for waiting because he had too much work to fill their order immediately!

In 1864, a young man from Woodstock, George W. Wells, joined the company. He and his three sons were to play an important role in the future of the Company.

Since there was no optical machinery to buy, Wells and his associates had to design and build their own. These inventive geniuses came up with machinery, tools, and labor-saving devices never seen before.

The Civil War cut down lens imports, so AO built its own lens plant, designed and manufactured its own equipment and produced the first American lenses.

Gained Independence

With this second step, the United States gained complete freedom from its dependence on European manufacturers for the eyecare of this growing nation. Today, rather than importing essential products, AO exports to all the free countries of the world. There are a good many other firsts for the Company but those two, frames and lenses, are basic.

AO Today

Today AO, primarily a New England industry, has nine plants in the East:

1. Southbridge, Mass., headquarters of the Company, where a large part of our lenses and metal frames are made.
2. Brattleboro, Vermont, where safety goggles and sun glass are made.
3. Keene, N.H., which produces precision instruments and equipment.
4. Buffalo, N.Y., where scientific and diagnostic equipment is manufactured.

Through The Years . . .

Auto goggles were a big thing in the days of the touring car. AO's first entry into national advertising was announced in November, 1912. Actual sharkskin was used for nose guards on the "Eliot" glasses, thus enabling them to be held "securely and comfortably" on the nose. AO cases were once used with a screwdriver attached for tightening frames. The first production record found reports the manufacture, in 1832, of 11,378 pairs of silver spectacles, 2,932 pairs of steel spectacles, 1,506 pairs of gold spectacles.

AO's first safety goggle order, for six dozen pairs, was received from American Steel Foundries of Chicago. In the first month of use they were credited, with documentary evidence, with saving twenty eyes.

AO manufactured gold and gold-filled hairpins in the early 1900's, along with matching eyeglass holder chains.

5. Putnam, Conn., where the world's most complete line of scientific equipment is produced.
6. Chelsea, Mass., which produces sun glasses.
7. Frederick, Md., where plastic frames are made.
8. Nashua, Quebec, which produces frames for our Canadian branches.
9. Belleville, Ontario, which makes lenses for our Canadian branches.

Some 255 branch laboratories, each a miniature processing lab or manufacturing plant in itself, are found throughout the country. These branch labs serve our customers, members of the optical profession.

South of the border, American Optical has plants in Mexico and Brazil.

In addition to its American operations, AO has seen a steady growth on the world market. Its British affiliate, Fleming and British - AO, maintains branches in England, Sweden, Holland and Germany, in addition to the manufacturing plants in England.

Story of Leadership

The story of AO is one of recognizing a need for something and then fulfilling that need. This guiding factor, beginning with William Beecher, was passed on to George W. Wells, handed down to his three sons, Albert B., Channing M. and Joel Cheney, and carried on by the third generation, George B. Wells.

When the latter retired, Charles O. Cozzens, who had risen through the ranks, became president. Upon his death in office, George B. Wells came back until Walter A. Stewart was elected.

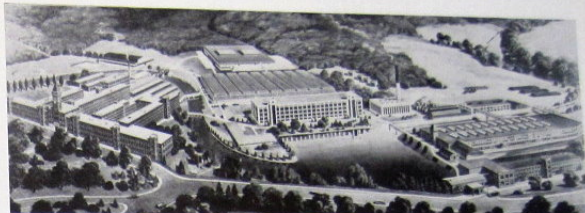
During this regime, the Wells family decided to dispose of their interest in the Company and it changed from controlled by a single family to a family of 9,000 shareholders. Stewart retired in 1952 and E. W. Schumacher assumed the presidency.

Growth of AO

From a small, village shop, employing just a few people, and making one product—spectacles—in 1833, AO has grown to the largest optical manufacturer in the world, with nine plants, thirteen affiliates and subsidiaries, employing 10,000 people producing over 2,000 items.

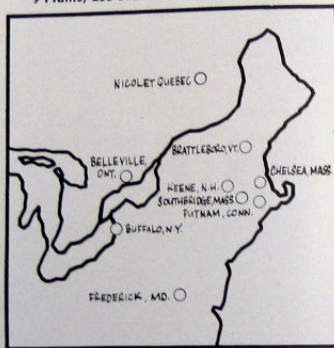


From 1833 . . . This is the original AO factory, occupied until 1872.



to 1959 This is the Southbridge headquarters with the administration buildings on the left, the warehouse, frame plant and lens plant in the center, and the case plant in the right foreground.

9 Plants, 255 Branches



2 Plants in South America



7 Affiliates on the Continent



Early AO Products in North America



In AO's antique collection are samples of the early 1833 frames, the wider selection available in 1848, and the "streamlined" versions of 1883 — all part of our history.

Current AO Products



Royal Clic



Sophisti-Case



Executive Bifocal



Fiberscope



R567 Respirator

Frames, lenses, cases, safety products, fiberscopes are just a few of the 2,000 AO items which make up the 200 groups of products AO manufactures today.