

Putnam Plant To Celebrate 20th Anniversary

The month of November will mark the 20th anniversary of the Putnam plant. Here is the story of the products made there and the important role the Safety Division has played in the history of the industrial safety field.

The manufacturing facilities of the Safety Products Division are housed in a three-story brick building in Putnam, Conn. During its 20 years in Putnam, the Canal Street factory has provided steady employment for approximately 200 people, almost all of them living within the immediate area.

Every day, thousands of industrial workers throughout the world are protected from job hazards through the use of the industrial safety products manufactured in the Putnam Plant. Every year, thousands of workers have had their eyes saved through the use of American Optical safety goggles and glasses. The gloves, helmets, respirators, and welder's clothing, all manufactured in Putnam, have protected the lives and limbs of countless others.

Products include safety clothing made of textiles, leather or asbestos, goggles fitted with AO lenses of all types, respirators for protection against chemicals, gases and toxic dust, and safety accessories including welding helmets, face shields, sweat bands and other such devices.

These and other items are used in industry, in farming, in research, in the armed services — wherever any type of hazard is apt to be encountered.

More than 500 separate items are manufactured, a far cry from the

clumsy pair of safety goggles that gave birth to the Safety Division more than 50 years ago.

At that time, Walter King, a Chicago optician, came to AO's Southbridge headquarters. Distressed by the number of artificial eyes he was called on to make for industrial workers, he wanted to discuss some sort of a guard or protective device for eye protection.

First Safety Goggles

The result of his visit was a rather clumsy pair of safety goggles with plate glass lenses, but the first production order (6 dozen pair to the American Steel Foundries of Chicago) was credited, in documentary evidence, with saving 20 eyes in the first month of use! So a brand new field was opened and it was only natural that the interest in safety should extend from the moment of the accident to the moments before the accident.

Today, American Optical is known as one of the leading suppliers of safety products for industry.

In November, 1941, the Safety Division was transferred to Putnam, where 23 employees and two lines of sewing machines began operations on the first floor. With the advent of World War II, further expansion was necessary in order to meet demands for safety products.



Putnam, Connecticut — The Home of Safety Products

Working around the clock, Putnam employees produced for the Armed Forces more than a million cold weather face masks and goggles. Even today, most of the goggles used on Uncle Sam's aircraft carriers are manufactured at Putnam.

The reputation of the Safety Division is such that when the last series of atomic bomb tests were being held at far-off Eniwetok, the Navy called on AO to produce lenses for observers' goggles which would allow less than 5% of the visible light from the blasts to be seen. Similar lenses were carried on Operation Deep Freeze, for experimental purposes, as well as to the Arctic by one of the country's most noted explorers, Sir Hubert Wilkins.

Four Product Sections

The Safety Division has four product sections: Eye protection, clothing, respiratory protection, and specialty items. The first three are self-explanatory, but the last section covers many areas not usually considered. For example, sound protection is becoming more and more important today, with the roar of jet planes ready for take-off and the din of busy factories seriously affecting workers in these fields.

Studies have shown that the more noise a person is subjected to, the quicker he tires. AO markets a complete line of sound protectors which eliminate the harmful noise of industry while still allowing workers to hear normal conversation.

Using a new approach to a problem, the Safety Division came up with a new look in welding helmets. They were always black until AO, working on the premise that black absorbs and white reflects, came up with a new idea: a white, fiberglass welder's helmet that offers the minimum heat absorption and the greatest comfort to the wearer. This helmet, combined with AO's high-quality filter lenses, is considered one of the best available today.

Putnam Operations

Operations in the Putnam plant cover a wide range. Knitting is done in the form of facelets for respirators. Steel dies blank out leather glove patterns,

and heavy industrial sewing machines stitch them up. In some cases, heavy-duty stapling machines substitute for thread, driving the metal fasteners through the leather at lightning speeds.

In producing several types of respirators, Putnam employees start with rolls of aluminum from which cartridges are cut and stamped. They hold a fiber element to strain out dust, fumes, paint spray and other dangerous foreign particles. The cartridges are attached to nose pieces or face masks and their efficiency is carefully tested through the use of vacuum pressure readings.

Heat molding of plastics produces one-piece goggles. Lenses and eyecups of plastic are stamped out, pierced, and grommeted. Hardhats worn by electrical linemen are made of a special plastic which is non-conductive to electricity.

The safety products produced at Putnam have become increasingly diversified and important, including several types of respirators, welding helmets, face shields, goggles, hard hats and caps, gloves, aprons, leggings, and asbestos clothing.

Respirators, face shields, and welder's gloves, aprons and leggings are the particular specialties among the plant's products which are manufactured as a whole rather than in parts to be finished at another plant.

National Distribution

Products of the division are distributed nationally through eight company service centers across the country. As new products replace older ones, the operations of the plant are changed accordingly. New products developed at the Southbridge plant often get a production test run at Putnam.

Industries of this nature are much more important to the safety and economy of the country than is generally realized and contribute to the welfare of all.

Today, American Optical Company, pioneer and leader in the industrial safety field, stands ready to continue that role in the new fields and industries of the world of today and tomorrow.



During its 20-year history, the Putnam plant has produced safety items which protect workers from head to toe as worn by this worker in the heat-treatment department at Crompton-Knowles Company in Worcester.