



## **How Did Winchester Repeating Arms Company Become a Major Hardware House?**

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The Winchester \* Keen Kutter\* Diamond Edge Chronicles  
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After the First World War , Winchester Repeating Arms Company found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. They had done a Herculean job during the War Effort, expanding and developing their facilities to meet the tremendous and vitally important demands for guns and ammunition. However, meeting these production challenges, ( they could and did sell everything they could manufacture) left them with another. What to do with this highly efficient combination of machinery and manpower when they no longer needed to be geared up for supplying vast amounts of arms to the military?

Without the support of such government contracts, Winchester would not be making the money they needed to maintain their corporation. They needed to restructure, reorganize and redirect the focus of their production. But how?

A letter to the stockholders, dated October 26, 1918 included the following information. " The Company's earnings prior to the war may be taken as an indication of the earning power of its commercial business. There seems little likelihood that the Company's normal commercial business can be materially increased after the war. The Company will, therefore, find itself with a large investment in plant facilities subject to taxation, insurance, depreciation, and interest, upon money invested therein, without existing business sufficient to

carry these charges, and at the same time pay adequate dividends to the present stockholders.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to divert the plant facilities in substantial degree to the manufacture of articles other than those previously manufactured, involving the rearrangement of the existing machinery, and the purchase and installation of machinery suited to the new purposes.

In addition to making provision for the manufacture of new products, it will be necessary to make arrangements for their sale and distribution involving expenditures for sales promotion and advertising. It will require time and money to develop these new manufacturing and sales facilities." It is quite evident that the Company was facing another major challenge: One that needed to be met head on with as much speed and creativity as could be mustered.

They brought their "big guns to bear" so to speak. Company President, John Otterson was given nearly free reign to work out the details and implement the broad expansionist program. This was started in earnest by the middle of 1919.

To give some idea of the scope of this expansion, what it came down to was that the company had to increase their production of the new product lines by an amount that would take up the factory space left idle because of "peacetime". This would have to be nearly double what it was producing before the war.

The Company did detailed studies to ascertain what types of products in general should be manufactured as well as the individual items. They also considered the Company's reputation gained in the munitions field and its experience in producing metal products. The data they gained lead them to the following conclusions upon which to base their product/item choices.

It was decided that "First, they should be articles of personal use in order to capitalize upon the "Winchester" trademark; second, they should be items that would utilize the same general kinds of labor and equipment used in the manufacture of guns and ammunition; third, they should be of high quality; finally, they should be products that were customarily sold through the same trade channels as guns and ammunition.

Sporting goods and certain kinds of hardware that were bought for home and personal use fit the bill. Some of these items included pocket knives, kitchen cutlery, skates, fishing equipment, flashlights and batteries, tools, shears and such. These and related products lent themselves to brand-name recognition and purchase.

**This then was the beginning of "The Winchester Store" and their slogan "As Good As The Gun".**

**(Thanks to THCKK member Charles Key for the loan of his books. They made excellent resources for detailed descriptions, references, pictures and the fascinating history of the Winchester world. In researching for this piece, I used the information found in Chapters 21 and 22 of Harold F. Williamson's book "Winchester, The Gun that Won the West", A.S. Barnes Company, Inc. New York, 1952)**

**For Further Reading: "Winchester---The Way It Really Was", by P. Muerrle, Featuring rare and unusual photos, employee interviews. In-depth look at Winchester itself through detailed descriptions of its many departments and their functions, from engravers to engineers, from rifles to roller skates. Available from for \$25.00 plus \$4.00 postage from:**

**Winchester Arms Collectors Association**

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**• THCKK is a not-for-profit organization formed in March of 1996. It serves to distribute information and provide an interactive forum about vintage hardware companies such as E.C. Simmons, (Keen Kutter), A.F. Shapleigh (Diamond Edge) and The Winchester Store (and the popular collectibles bearing their logos and associated house brands) as well as other historically interesting hardware companies such as "Our Very Best" (Hibbard, Spencer & Bartlett), Blue Grass (Belknap Hardware), Stanley, etc. are included as interest dictates (Witte, Wyeth, Lee, Sargent, etc)**

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