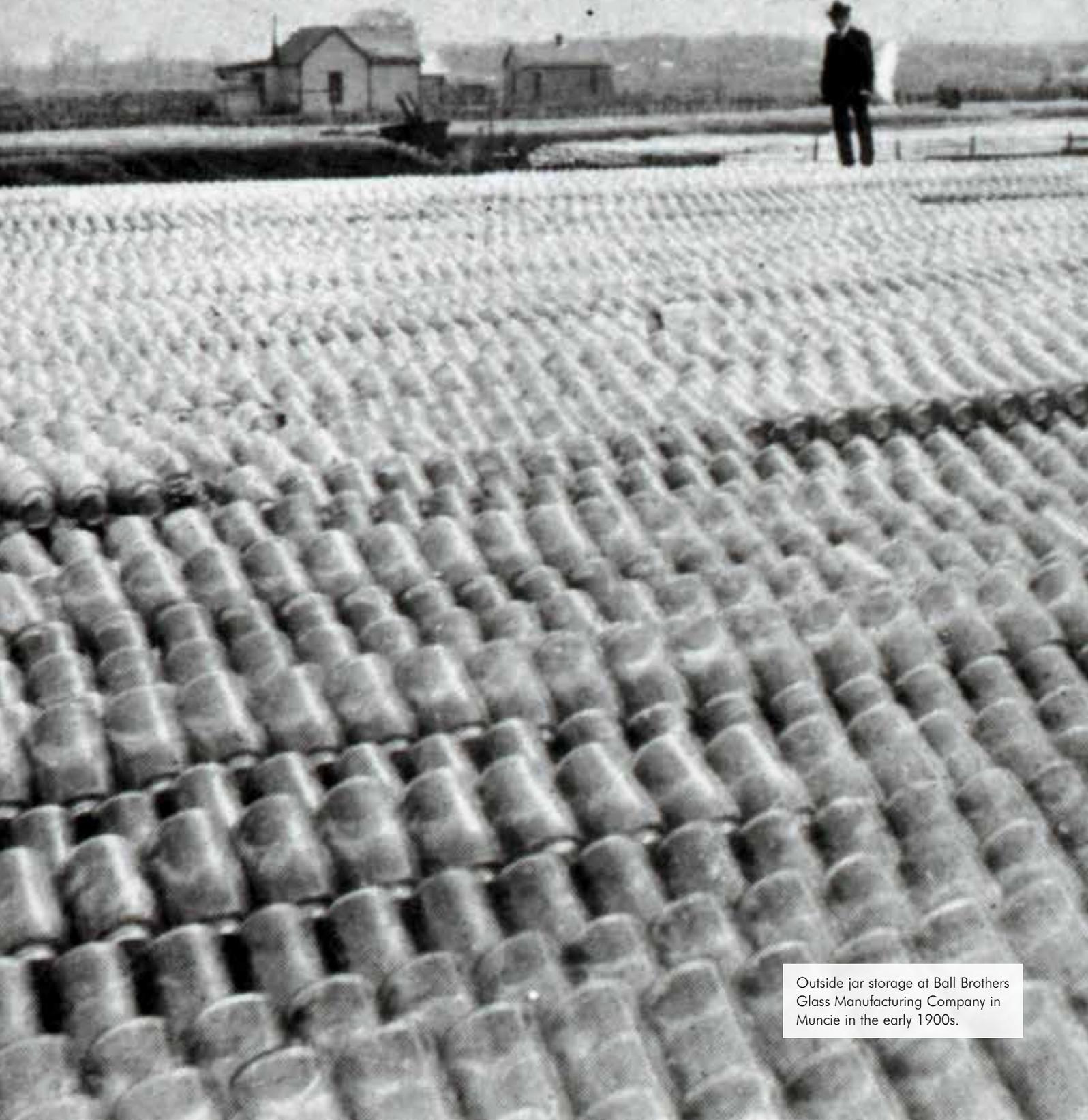


UNBREAKABLE

Glass Makers Still Going Strong

By Symone C. Skrzycki



Outside jar storage at Ball Brothers Glass Manufacturing Company in Muncie in the early 1900s.

It all started with a bang. Make that a boom.

In the late 1800s, the discovery of natural gas in Delaware County ignited the state's glass industry – particularly in East Central Indiana.

Well drillers seeking coal first unearthed gas in Eaton, a small town north of Muncie. A decade later, natural gas was found in Portland (Jay County).

Perhaps the most well-known glassmaker is Ball Brothers Glass Manufacturing Company, which began producing glassware (with an emphasis on fruit jars) in New York in the mid-1880s and moved to Muncie several years later. (Ball, the namesake for Ball State University and still heavily impacting quality of life in Delaware County and surrounding areas through its many community efforts, eventually diversified to encompass plastics, rubber and aerospace technology).

“Every community here – Portland, Dunkirk, Muncie, Marion in Grant County – was courting the glass industry and offering access to this natural gas,” conveys Karen Vincent, director of the Minnetrista Heritage Collection (dedicated to preserving East Central Indiana history) in Muncie. “Ball was offered cash, some acres of free land and access to free natural gas for a certain time period, plus a railroad spur so they could ship their jars out.”

The gas boom brought more than 100 glass companies to East Central Indiana. But by 1900, many businesses had closed, consolidated, moved away or were purchased (many by Ball) as the gas availability began to diminish. Eventually, 12 to 14 glass companies – including the world's largest window glass company, American Window Glass (Hartford City) – remained in Blackford County.

Today, a fraction in the region have endured.

Among them are Ardagh Group, Glass – North America (largest glass container supplier to the food, wine and spirits industries in the United States) and Sinclair Glass (Hartford City's oldest operating glass house).

What's fueled their success and longevity?

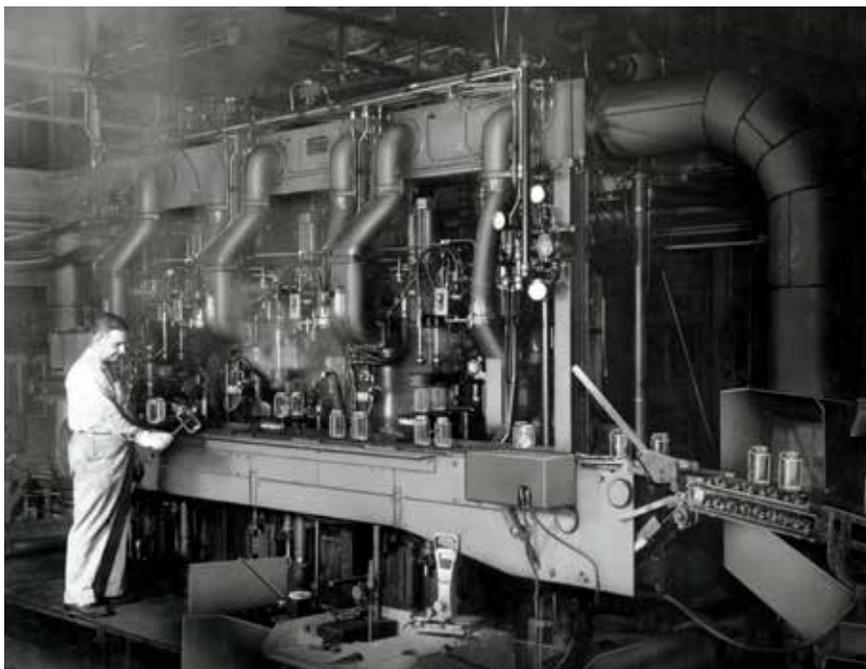
BizVoice[®] posed the question to some of the people who've been along for the journey.

112 years young

Ardagh Group operates glass and metal manufacturing facilities in 22 countries. It employs over 23,000 people globally.

Within Indiana are three glass manufacturing facilities: Dunkirk (Jay County), Winchester (Randolph County) and Glass North America headquarters: currently in Muncie, it will relocate to Fishers in 2017. In addition, it operates a glass technology center in Marion.

“The glass manufacturing facility in Winchester was built in 1904 and has been in continuous operation for the last 112 years,” explains John Riordan, president and CEO of Ardagh Group, Glass – North America, via email. “Today, the facility – which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week – specializes in the manufacture of glass containers for the food and



Glassmaking at Ball Brothers (date unknown). Production heats up at Sinclair Glass. The gentleman in the middle is shown hand blowing a lighting piece.



spirits markets.”

Curious consumers can identify Ardagh Group’s glass bottles and jars by a punt mark on the bottom of the glass container. The symbol is the Ardagh Chalice – a famous Irish treasure and a historic and religious artifact. Beverage cans display an Ardagh Group logo printed on the body of the can.

Riordan points to product quality, reliability, innovation, customer service and geographical reach as key contributors to the company’s longevity.

Between 2015 and 2016, Ardagh Group invested nearly \$71 million in its Winchester facility.

“It’s now one of the most modern and highly invested glass container manufacturing facilities in North America,” Riordan declares. “It manufactures approximately 1.5 million glass bottles and jars each day – which is more than 17 glass containers each second.”

With a workforce of 425, it’s Randolph County’s largest employer.

Ball of fire

Born in 1923, World War II veteran Jim Dolan’s memorable career in the glass industry includes deep ties with Sinclair Glass.

A devastating fire that destroyed Fulton Glass Company’s corporate headquarters in Hartford City – where Dolan was working – in August 1966 sparked a lasting friendship and business partnership with Sinclair Glass owner Bob Hodges.

Around the same time, Hodges was adding operations under Sinclair, an organization launched some 40 years before in West Virginia that he’d brought to Hartford City.

“He had a nice factory and no business. We had one hell of a lot of business and no factory. So, he called me and invited me down,” Dolan shares. “We got together, and on a handshake, worked out a deal where our corporate offices (other plants continued operating in Vincennes and Oklahoma) got the business and sent him purchase orders. They’d manufacture it and shipped it in our name.”

“In all the years I’ve been in business, I never knew a more honorable person than Bob Hodges. I thought his word was his bond.”

Bob’s son, Dave Hodges (Dolan’s next-door neighbor), interjects.

“At that point in the mid-1960s, Sinclair became one of the most diversified glass manufacturers in the country. We did hand blowing, hand and semi-automatic pressing, sheet glass fabricating, decorating – the decorating is a whole other side of the business. We did silk screening as well as hand painting. We had hand-painted Victorian lamp parts,



Ardagh Glass – North America has approximately 1,100 employees in Indiana.

Tiffany-type shades and so on.”

Back then, Sinclair operated two plants, with each occupying approximately 10 to 15 acres. Only one plant exists today. In 1988, the Hodges sold the business to former employee Gavin Mair, currently the CEO.

It spans 80,000-plus square feet of manufacturing space and operates round the clock.

According to Sinclair’s web site: In addition to manufacturing curved glass, it supplies patterned glass, colored glass and its original antique seedy glass. Many of its products are handcrafted.

During Sinclair’s peak years it employed, depending on the season, an average of 100 workers. Dave Hodges estimates that number is closer to two to three dozen today, largely due to automation.

Withstanding the heat

In the aftermath of the glass industry’s fall, something positive began to emerge: the auto industry.

“As the wave came and glass kind of went out – with of course, exceptions – we became the hub for parts for the auto industry,” Vincent asserts. “You had that core workforce that was available and ready, and had worked in a skilled factory trade. A lot of people just made the (transition) from glass to auto.”

She muses that surviving glassmakers possessed “a savviness of looking into the future (and anticipating) what’s coming up next.”

Back to two of those businesses that have toughed out changing markets and times: Ardagh and Sinclair. Treating people with respect and diversifying offerings has played a pivotal role in their success.

“Ardagh Group has a long tradition of

hiring employees early in their career, then training, developing and promoting these individuals so they develop a career in glassmaking,” Riordan comments. “Over its 112-year history, the Winchester facility has employed three and four generations of dedicated employees, with some employees working at the facility for 30 to 40 years.”

The younger Hodges echoes that sentiment. “We treated everybody like we wanted to be treated ourselves and provided incentives. And good-paying jobs. In the 1960s, a glass-blower with incentive rates could be knocking down \$18 an hour, which for that time (was extremely rare).”

He adds that the uniqueness and nature of Sinclair’s products were contributing factors.

“The longevity is also due to the fact that we made things that at the time served needs or purposes around the world. Whether it was restaurant ware, lenses for (airplane) landing lights or the red and green lenses that went on battle ships and barge boats (for instance). We made products that serviced companies around the world.”

In the 1970s, Hodges and his dad launched Sinclair Shops in Hartford City, which he describes as “a poor man’s Conner Prairie,” featuring trades such as stain glass making, candle making and pottery. Schools would visit for field trips and ride across the street to Sinclair to see how glass was made.

They also opened an antique auto museum and eventually turned the shops into a restaurant. “One of the cool things about that was we served dinner with glassware produced at the factory,” Hodges proudly recalls.

“We were best friends and worked side by side for many years. It was a journey.”