



The founders of USM, Sidney W Winslow, Col. William Barbour, John Hanan, George W Brown and Elmer P Howe

Mention Texon and the first thing that springs to mind is insoles and, in particular, cellulose insole board. Indeed, insole materials are still vital and now cover a far greater variety than the original cellulose-based product. Texon's roots, however, go back more than a hundred years and the company has been through its fair share of changes.

Texon—what's in a name?

In February 1899, a merger of the supposedly non-competing Goodyear Machinery Company, Consolidated Lasting Machine Company and McKay Shoe Machinery Company took place in New York. The new enterprise was called the United Shoe Machinery Company and it was not long before it was universally referred to as USM. It was also the year in which President McKinley became the first American president to ride in an automobile and the first speeding ticket was issued—for travelling at 12 miles per hour.

The merger revolutionised the production of both shoe machinery and shoe manufacturing itself, and marked the beginning of automation and standardisation within the industry. With headquarters at Lynn, Massachusetts, and branches in New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and Chicago, the company grew rapidly. By the end of the year, not only had foreign and experimental departments been established, but the assets of Pearson & Bennion of Leicester, England, had been bought and combined with those of the Goodyear and McKay companies in the UK to

create the British United Shoe Machinery Company Ltd.

Subsidiary companies were established in France and Germany, quickly followed by Canada and Latin America. These various moves constituted the building blocks of what would eventually become

a global organisation. The company also had the foresight to see that, as well as supplying the machines to make shoes, it could also sell components and accessories that were used in their construction. The Boston Blacking Company eventually grew into Bostik,



The original Texon plant still operates by the Westfield River in Russell

while the United Fast Colour Eyelet Company, the tack manufacturer WW Cross and George Tucker Eyelet of England were combined to create the USM Fastener Group.

The impact on the footwear industry can be illustrated by the fact that, by 1902, the labour cost of making a pair of men's good quality shoes had fallen to 74 cents from \$5.65 in 1865. It also took less than nine hours to produce them against two and a half days working by hand. USM also gained a reputation as one the most service-orientated companies in the world. Company representatives would not only lay out a customer's factory and supervise installation of the machinery but would also stay until production was running at an optimum level.

The beginnings of Texon

At the end of the Second World War, DuPont was trying to develop synthetic replacements for leather and rubberised coating materials in an old paper mill located by the Westfield River at Russell in western Massachusetts. It did not meet with much success and put the mill up for sale. In what must be regarded as a courageous move, 66 DuPont employees and friends raised enough funds to buy it and Texon was incorporated in September 1947.

The timing could not have been better. The war had shown that natural resources were limited, not always available and often expensive. A rapid rise in population demanded new, more efficient and economical ways to meet its increasing needs. Texon chose to produce man-made materials that would replace the best nature could offer at a lower price. Using DuPont's experience, it sought to combine neoprene elastomers with cellulose fibre structures and to find suitable industrial applications. One was an insole board that would have the advantages of leather but without its disadvantages. It had to breathe, absorb and release perspiration, have the right balance of firmness and flexibility, and provide lasting comfort.

Within a few months, a wet-web saturating process was developed that locked neoprene and cellulose fibres into



Texon cellulose board

a leather-like material. It met the required performance criteria and could be produced uniformly in rolls and sheets in a variety of substances. Shoemakers swiftly adopted it as it proved suitable for almost every type of construction and offered good performance and uniform quality together with considerable cost savings.

The company grew steadily as its product came into use throughout the world. Production was still based in the original mill at Russell but, by the 1960s, it became necessary to open production facilities at St. Rivalain in France and Möckmühl in Germany to service the large European footwear industry. These were followed by a fourth plant in Taiwan in the late 1970s as footwear production in the Far East began to take off.

Changes in ownership

Then, in 1976, the Emhart Corporation from Connecticut bought USM. In 1981, it also purchased Texon, so bringing the two companies together. In 1987, the shoe machinery business of USM was bought from Emhart through a management buyout and became the United Machinery Group (UMG). In 1989, Black & Decker acquired the footwear materials business when it acquired Emhart. Then, in 1990, it promptly sold Texon to UMG, which in turn changed its name to USM Texon Ltd the following year.

By 1994, USM Texon was the largest

shoemaking machinery and materials supplier in the world with a turnover of £193 million. It moved its Far East production from Taiwan to Foshan, China, in line with the rapid expansion of the Chinese market and then, still in 1994, it was bought by APAX Partners Corporate Finance. In 1998, USM Texon Ltd was legally demerged into two separate companies, with the world-wide machinery business becoming USM Group Ltd. and, the world-wide materials business, Texon International plc.

Ownership continued to change. In 1999, it acquired the Esjot Goldenberg Group and, in 2000, Crispin Dynamics (bought from BUSM) and Foss, Boxflex &

Clarks. In that October, USM Group Ltd (including BUSM) went into receivership, swiftly followed by a management buy-out which formed a new company called British United Shoe Machinery Ltd (BUSM). BUSM is now a competitor of Texon International.

In the meantime, Texon International set up a nonwoven plant in Crea, China, in 2002 just before it changed hands yet again. Now Matlin Patterson, a global investment company became the majority shareholder. Reorganisation saw the disposal of what were considered non-core operations, so Crispin Dynamics and IVI Metallics went to management buy-outs. Finally, in March 2005, Texon International Group Ltd was formed as the parent company to manage all company holdings.

Despite all of the upheavals through changes of ownership, the company has managed to maintain its position as a leading component supplier. Why? The truth is that Texon has a loyal and long serving staff. It also has an exceptional core product on which it has built successfully over the years. If you have successful products and good employees, you stand a better chance of staying in business. Today, the company finally appears to have settled down and has a stronger product offering than ever before.

The future

Texon International is the largest organisation of its kind and the only one to manufacture cellulose, nonwoven and



Texon India employees

metallic solutions for a global footwear industry. It does so on three continents and sells to more than 90 countries.

Texon (India) Pvt. Ltd., is a good example of the company's forward thinking. A wholly-owned subsidiary, it

started out during the 1990s with a bonded warehouse in Chennai to supply the growing footwear industry in southern India. It now covers the shoemaking areas of southern, north-central and eastern India. It is able to

supply a wide range of products including cellulose or nonwoven insoling and Esjot safety components on a direct basis or from stock. It services major footwear producers as well as supplying small quantities to hand shoemakers. Over the past two to three years the growth in business has been between 20-25% in line with India's increased footwear exports.

Texon will be 60 years old in 2007 and, with over 100 years in the footwear industry it is still determined to provide a quality service to its customers. It sees long-term relationships with global brands as a key asset and aims to achieve major growth in all the sectors in which it operates. It has plans to develop products that will achieve real added-value benefits to customers, remain committed to lean manufacturing and to actively protect the environment through a global recycling and sustainability strategy. A remarkable achievement in a tough industry. 

✓ PL, NP, DB