BHC-MSS 0072
Guide to the Records of the Sprague Meter Company
By Lisa Furchtgott
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Descriptive Summary:
Creator: Sprague Meter Company
Title: Records of the Sprague Meter Company
Dates: 1891 – 1983
Quantity: 5 scrapbooks; 11 boxes; 4.3 linear feet; 10 digital files
Abstract: Sprague Gas Meter Company was a manufacturing firm headquartered in Bridgeport, Connecticut and founded in 1900. Over the next 85 years, it developed meters featuring new methods for measuring and dispensing gas, along with many other technologically-novel products geared toward industrial machinery, home security, cooking and defense, made and stored within plants located across the U.S. and abroad. Sprague was bought out by the diversifying corporation Textron in 1961 and then sold to a firm concentrating on oil and semiconductor production in 1985, when it left Bridgeport. This collection consists of newspaper articles, advertisements and catalogs, usage and repair guides, factory newsletters, convention materials, newsletters, photographs, and oral histories.
Language: English; Italian
Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Administrative History

Sprague Gas Meter Company was founded in Bridgeport in 1900 by Henry Hezekiah Sprague, an 1881 Yale University graduate who developed an interest in measuring buildings' use of gas while working for a utility company in Newton, Ohio, his native state. Over the next seven decades, the gas-meter manufacturing corporation he founded underwent extensive expansion. By 1975 it maintained multiple plants and warehouses, spread nationally and in Canada, and sold its products across 25 nations. Sprague died in 1937 in Bridgeport in 1937.

The company's initial success was due in part to its technological advances. It focused primarily on making residential gas meters, refining diaphragms – a set of internal valves and containers enabling precise measures – along with other components rendering meters more easily maintained and durable. Over time, the company broadened its repertoire with gas-regulators – mechanisms responsible for dispensing gas, rather than simply measuring it – as well as industrial equipment, utility-security devices, outdoor barbeque grills, boat fittings, agricultural and climate studies, and war equipment, including bomb fuses, convoy-guiding portable lighting, and radar.

At first, all goods were produced at the Bridgeport plant, with distributive warehouses and offices located in Davenport, Iowa, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Houston. After the mid-1940s, much of

the raw-parts manufacturing took place at E.W. Griffiths, a Philadelphia plant constructed by Sprague, to be transferred for assembly in Bridgeport; short-lived factories in Anderson, Indiana; Washington, Missouri; Paris, France; and Cedartown, Georgia, were also established. By the end of the 1970s, in addition to its Bridgeport and Philadelphia facilities, Sprague operated plants in Hamilton, Ontario as well as Owenton, Kentucky. Collaborations with other companies were practiced as well.

Sprague intensified its advertising beginning in the 1950s. It increased its presence at national sales conventions, such as those run by the American Gas Association, published articles in trade journals, and dispatched sales pitches performed by a technically well-versed staff, many of whom had begun their careers as industrial engineers.

In April 1961, the Providence-based corporation Textron purchased Sprague for a sum – trade experts alleged – greater than $5 million, as Sprague's yearly sales approached $10 million. Textron, then worth about $473 million, was one of the first businesses to practice diversification: defense, auto, industry, textile, and consumer goods made up the 25 divisions of its 90 plants. With the industry group providing about 20% of Textron's growing worth, Sprague executives proclaimed the purchase would provide "new capital for expansion." By 1970, Textron's sales had risen to over $1.6 billion; ten years later, in 1970 dollars, its sales amounted to a gain of $400 million.

In July 1985, to help lessen debt it had recently accrued in its $1.4 billion acquisition of AVCO, a defense and aviation manufacturer located just outside Bridgeport, Textron sold Sprague, now with annual sales of $33 million. Its new owner was Sangamo Western Inc., an Atlanta-based division of Schlumberger Ltd., a concern centered in Paris, France, specializing in oil-extraction and semiconductor equipment. Two years later, Sprague's Bridgeport plant was shut down and 130 of its workers let go. In April 1988, after Schlumberger had been bought out by Itron, a utility-technology firm headquartered in Liberty Link, Washington, Sprague office workers still operating out of Bridgeport – largely in marketing and engineering fields – were offered the opportunity to move to Owenton, KY, so as to "work more closely with the Kentucky manufacturing operation, especially on development of new projects." By the following year, Sprague facilities in Bridgeport had been closed.

Scope and Content

In addition to outlining gas-meter developments, Sprague's papers reveal much about changes affecting factory and warehouse development and mobility, labor management, industrial advertising and sales techniques, corporate diversification and investment strategies, deindustrialization in Bridgeport and elsewhere, and relationships between private companies and public utilities over the 20th century.

Most of the collection consists of materials produced by the company, featuring news and commercial-gas media, catalogs, technological catalogs and repair guides, as well as a substantial number of photographs. The bulk of these photos feature formal portraits of executives and sales managers, images of plants under construction and in use, and social gatherings. Several hours of oral histories feature reflections by engineers who had shifted to sales-work over their careers. Explicitly and otherwise, other materials record Sprague's interactions with its labor force, including *Metered News,* a newsletter published at points between 1941 and 1950, their content approved by the company and circulated among shop-floor and low-rank administrative workers; these feature gossip columns, social announcements and events, worker profiles, cartoons, and promotion opportunities, along with messages from managers and executives. The collection also

contains a 1971 copy of *The Bridgeporter*, a newsletter for Bridgeport Machines, another manufacturer owned by Textron, as well as a 1980 issue of *The Sprague World,* likewise aimed at secretarial and blue-collar workers and approved by company officials, and a 1971 newsletter from Bridgeport Machines, also owned by Textron. Included as well are midcentury Sprague anniversary pamphlets; clerical-job applications submitted exclusively by women from 1926 through 1950; photos of celebrations commending long-term employees; materials concerning strikes threatened or held by the Bridgeport plant union, the International Union of Electric Workers, Local 293, which gained representation in 1947; and, via the collection's oral histories, claims that Sprague workers' motivation differed among plants.

Arrangement Notes

Series I is made up of scrapbooks, made up of a wide variety of materials including clippings from newspapers and gas-meter journals, and unpublished company photos and circulations, dating from 1896 through 1969. Series II consists of financial information, including monthly audit records, clerical job applications, and an employee insurance plan. Series III contains copies of *Metered News* from 1941 through 1950, in addition to two newsletters from the 1980s; and booklets commemorating Sprague's 50th and 58th anniversaries. Series IV contains catalogs and repair guides; meter blueprints; convention materials; and trade journals. Series V features agendas for training sessions in choosing and repairing meters, conducted by Sprague. A series of convention attendance records follows. Series VII and VIII cover midcentury Sprague advertisements, accompanied by copies of American Gas Association and other business-oriented publications. Papers approving the sales of Sprague meters in Italy, including blueprints and advertisements, written exclusively in Italian, comprise the next series. The final series features clippings from mainstream newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal***,** some undated and the rest published from the mid-1950s through the late 1960s.

Series IX is an expansive photograph collection featuring images of the construction and completed states of facilities in different states, including warehouses in Los Angeles and Davenport, Iowa, as well as exteriors, shop floors, and offices of plants in Philadelphia; Anderson, Indiana; Cedartown, Georgia; and Washington, Missouri, along with unmarked photos of machinery and offices**.** Others display components and installation processes used in a variety of cities as well as exhibitions of gas-meter history. The series also contains portraits of company executives, engineers, and sales agents, along with their presence in offices and conventions. Others portray shop floor workers and drafters. The final folders capture images and souvenirs of a range of social gatherings inside and outside Sprague buildings, including company-sponsored sports teams, restaurant dinners, celebrations of soldiers' returns, Christmas festivities, bowling excursions, and house parties. As a whole, these materials display a range of expertise: some are taken by professional photographers, while others are spontaneous snapshots, or informally posed.

Digitized audio oral histories are available for research at the BHC archives. Originally recorded on cassette tapes, they were meant to provide a basis for the "Sprague History Project," led by an employee who had begun working at Sprague in 1927. Six interviews were amassed in spring and early summer of 1981, totaling just under 4 hours. These interviews provide the most personal, autobiographical perspectives in the collection. Interlocutors consist of five industrial engineers whose careers eventually shifted to emphasize sales and marketing. In his own recording, their interviewer narrates a history of Sprague, beginning with the life of its founder. The other five employees recount their own backgrounds, educations, and military service; their hiring by Sprague and professional evolution, sometimes combined with relocation; physical depictions of

plants; highly detailed descriptions of Sprague technology, past and present; and new products and sales goals. Dates interviewees worked at Sprague range from the late 1920s through 1981.

Administrative information:
Provenance: Acquired from the company (Textron). ACC. #1981.01
Preferred Citation:
Records of the Sprague Meter Company (BHC-MSS 0072), Bridgeport History Center, Bridgeport Public Library.

Names and Subject Tracings
Corporate names
Sprague Meter Company
American Gas Association
International Union of Electric Workers

Personal names
Sprague, Henry Hezekiah
Evans, Dave
Jones, Don
Lockwood, E. M.
Bernegger, Howard
Sotnick, Joseph
Watt, Thomas
"Vic"

Subject tracings
Gas industry | sh 85053304
Gas-meters | sh 85053326

Series I, Scrapbooks

Box 1

Scrapbook, 1928 – 1936

Box 2

Scrapbook, 1911 – 1969

Box 3

Scrapbook, 1916 – 1950, bulk 1950

Box 4

Scrapbook, 1950 – 1959

Box 5

Scrapbook, 1950 – 1963

Series II, Financial records

Box 6

1. Monthly Sales and Analysis, 1970 – 1972
2. Monthly Sales and Analysis, 1970 – 1972, labeled binder
3. Monthly Sales Analysis, 1973
4. Monthly Sales Analysis, 1973, labeled binder
5. Administrative Sales applications
6. Sprague-Textron Connecticut Health Plan enrollment, 1980
7. Sales Office Applications, November 22, 1926 – November 6, 1950, undated
8. Blank stock certificates, undated

Series III, Company newsletters

9. Sprague's Metered News, 1941
10. Sprague's Metered News, 1942
11. Sprague's Metered News, Jan. 1944
12. Sprague's Metered News, 1946

Box 7

1. Sprague's Metered News, 1948
2. Sprague's Metered News, 1949
3. Sprague's Metered News, 1950
4. Art for Sprague's Metered News, ca. 1940s
5. Bridgeport Machines, The Bridgeporter, Feb. 1971
6. Sprague World, 1980

Series IV, Meter catalogs and usage guides

7. Sprague catalogs, 1912, bulk undated
8. Sprague Meter Co. *Bulletin*, nos. 10, 11, 12, 14, 1927 – 1928
9. Complete Catalog, nos. 16, 16A, 17, 1941, bulk undated
10. Patent 2,296476 – Apparatus for Metering Gas, 1942 Sprague Shop
11. UDI Model "K" Gas Slide Manual and Instruction Book, June 1, 1943
12. Griffiths catalog, 1960 Sprague catalogs and Practical Meter
13. Repair Procedures, 1970, undated
14. Shop Manuals, nos. 17 – 22, 23-A -24A, 5A, 25A, undated
15. Short courses, undated
16. Sprague Streamline Pressure Flow Regulator, undated

Series V, Trainings

17. Gas measure training school, December 10, 1981
18. Technical service field trip, December 15, 1981

Series VI, Convention materials

Box 8

1. Display photos, undated
2. Convention Daily News, Oct. 1972
3. "Plan for Convention," c. 1955

Series VII, Advertisements

4. Bottled Gas, An Ally of the Gas Building, undated
5. Sprague LF Meters, undated
6. Sprague Zephyr, undated
7. News Release, undated
8. Sprague 175 ad, undated

Series VIII, Gas-equipment journals

9. Gas Age, April 1932 – September 1968
10. Gas Magazine, 1950 - May 1972
11. American Gas Association Monthly, February 1956 – 1960, undated
12. Pipeline & Gas Journal, August 1956, October 1971, and March 15 1976
13. American Gas Journal, October 1966

Series IX, Sprague Meter Italiana materials

14. Italian gas-meter certification materials, 1956, 1957, 1960, bulk undated
15. Blueprints, 1959, bulk undated
16. Advertisements and brochures, undated
17. Società Industriale Misuratori, 1949, 1953, undated

Series X, Newspaper and journal clippings

18. Misc. articles, October 1958, June 1966, bulk undated
19. Wall Street Journal excerpt, Jan. 1967

Series XI, Photos

Subseries A, Plants

20. Los Angeles scrapbook, undated
21. Los Angeles offices, undated
22. Los Angeles warehouse, September 1940, bulk undated
23. Los Angeles warehouse construction, undated
24. Los Angeles addition, 1959
25. Los Angeles interior, undated
26. Davenport warehouse construction, bulk 1949

Box 9

1. Houston warehouse, bulk 1950
2. E.F. Griffiths scrapbook, 1944, 1954, bulk undated
3. E.F. Griffith scrapbook, October 12, 1944, 1954, bulk undated
4. E.F. Griffiths loose photos, 1944, 1954, bulk undated
5. Plant construction photos, undated
6. Shop floor photos, Odell Photographers, Anderson, Indiana, undated
7. Shop floor photos, Zoff Studio, Washington, Missouri, undated
8. Prover machinery, undated
9. Misc. shop floors, undated

Subseries B, Meters

10. Combination Unit installations in Monterrey, Mexico, August, 1940
11. Welding article, Jan. 1949
12. Lodi Community Services Week exhibition of meter, Mar. 1960
13. "N.J. Nat. STD. Meter Set," March 22, 1967
14. Sample meter set for Niagara Mohawk Power Co., June 5, 1967
15. "25,000 meter, Wisconsin Southern Gas Co., Lake Geneva," April 16, 1970
16. Cascade Natural Gas assembly, Feb. 10, 1980
17. Letter, Joe Porcelli to Henry D., Dec. 22, 1983
18. Badger Meter Mfg. Co., undated
19. "Model 250, Longhorn Meter Used For Replacing Tin Meters," undated
20. CL34 installation, undated
21. Components, undated
22. Misc. meters, undated
23. "Sprague Metr '0:a,'" undated
24. "E.F. Griffith Stainless Steel Hardware," undated
25. "500,000 B.G. Campbell, G.P., Con. Power, Jackson, Mich., Nov. 1, 1959, chrome-plated"
26. Sprague 175, undated
27. Copy of photos sent to Textron, July 19-61
28. Jim Maloney to J.J. Maslen, 8-30-73

Subseries C, Workers

Subgroup 1, Individual executives

29. Archer, Alex H., Vice President, undated
30. Fairchild, F. Leslie, Pres. Sprague, 1939-1958, undated
31. Haisk, W.A., Pres. Sprague 1958-1978, undated
32. Hewey, Robert E., Vice President Manufacturing, 8/1968 to 5/1982 undated
33. Mitobe, David T., Vice President/Gen. Mgr., Sprague Canada, 10/1970 to 12/1983, undated
34. O'Hanlon, Robert P., Vice President, Sales & Marketing, 4-1981 to 4-1985, undated
35. Sayre, Philip R., President, 8/1973 to 7/1981, undated
36. Sullivan, Thomas J., President, 9/78 – 6/81

37. Werthman, E.J., Vice President, 1948

Box 10

Subgroup 2, Individual employees

1. Burr, Robert G., Customer Service Engineer, undated
2. Richard By[?], undated
3. Camilli, Frank, 11/1945 to 3/1980 undated
4. Ceccorulli, Mark L., Supervisor, Marketing Information Ser., 6/1978 to 7/1983, undated
5. Churchill, Charles and Grace, undated
6. Clark, Robert, Research Engineer, undated
7. Corsi, Jr., Orlando, Project Manager, Materials Department, 6/1980 to 2/1983, undated
8. Demenie, Bill, undated
9. Feandson, Clifford, Maintenance Engineer, undated
10. Harrington, Ed., Sales Eng. East, Nov. 1, 1964
11. Krenke, Gerald V., Manager Electronic Operations, undated
12. Langhans, Robert, Director of Material, undated
13. Ogburn, Karen, Personal Manager, Owenton, Kentucky, 8-1980 to 2/1983, undated
14. Platt, Ronald, Sales Engineer, Nov. 1, 1980
15. Schneider, Paul J., undated
16. Simard, Norman, 9-1980 to 8/1981, undated
17. Smith, Jim, Sales Engineer, undated, 1950s
18. Spence, H. Lee, Manager, Los Angeles [?], undated
19. Sproul, Christopher, Sales Engineer, The Sprague Meter Company, 3 South Avenue, Bridgeport, Connecticut, undated
20. Toothman, Tom, Plant Manager, Owenton, KY, undated
21. Van de Water, Jerome T., Director Administration & Planning, 9/1978 to 6/1981, undated
22. Wells, George F., Plant Manager, Philadelphia, undated
23. Williams, Joseph D., Meter Assembly Supervisor, Owenton, Kentucky, undated
24. Wiltsie, Richard W., Manufacturing Engineer, 11-1980 to 1/1983, Nov. 21, 1980
25. Woodall, Jim, Sales Engineer, 1950s-1960s, undated
26. "Sprague sales," circa January 6, 1959
27. Misc. undated portraits

Subgroup 3, Sales meetings and department visits

28. "Sales meeting, Bridgeport, Conn @ Sprague Motor Co.," 1950
29. Sprague National Sales Meeting, Bpt. Conn," 1966
30. Sales Meeting, Bpt. Holiday Inn, 1969
31. Office workers, November 1973
32. Conference, undated
33. Misc. photos, undated

Subgroup 4, Shop floor workers

34. Drafters, undated
35. City of Long Beach Gas Dept., Oct. 28, 1937
36. Bridgeport shop floor, circa June 14, 1961, undated
37. Bridgeport factory visit, undated
38. Bridgeport Jaycees visit, c. Oct. 28, 1953
39. San Diego Meld Shop, 1960
40. Factory visit, undated
41. Misc. shop floor workers, undated
42. Mr. Fred Brush, Southern [?] Gas Co. Employee, 6-7-58
43. Florida Gas. Co. to Mr. Kenneth Holley, May [unreadable]

Subgroup 5, Social photographs

44. 20-Year Club celebration, May 27, 1944
45. Soldier return celebration, Dec. 16, 1945
46. Fishing group, Port Orange, 7/1950
47. Invitations and souvenirs, 1950, 1952, 1955, undated
48. Sponsored baseball and slow-pitch teams, 1954, undated
49. Bowling trophy celebration, undated
50. Corsage party, undated
51. Office Christmas décor, undated
52. Party in parking lot, undated
53. Outdoor party, undated
54. Party, Bridgeport, undated
55. Playhouse 90 playbills, undated
56. Three-door party, undated

Box 11

1. House party, undated
2. Misc. indoor gatherings, May 6, 1950, Oct. 6 and 7, 1960, 1969, 8-14-1979, 8-31-1979, undated
3. Misc. outdoor gatherings, 1940, undated

Subgroup 6, Negatives

4. Photo negatives

Series XII, Oral histories

1. Dave Evans, 4-8-1980
2. Don Jones, 3-19-1981, side 1
3. Don Jones, 3-19-1981, side2
4. E.M. Lockwood, 6-24-1981
5. Howard Bernegger, undated
6. Joe Sotnick, 5-21-1981, side 1
7. Joe Sotnick, 5-21-1981, side 2
8. Tom Watt, 3-19-1981, side 1
9. Tom Watt, 3-19-1981, side 2

10. Vic, 3.10.1981