

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 14, 2008

The Demise of Hercules: The Hercules Powder Company, later Hercules, Inc., has been an outstanding addition to the Wilmington business community since its incorporation in 1912. Last Friday's announcement that it had been bought by Ashland Chemical closed out an outstanding record of accomplishment and good governance in our community and across the country. Divested from the DuPont Company to comply with the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the new company left DuPont on the friendliest of terms, with the larger company staging a farewell dinner as a testimonial to those managers leaving it to go with Hercules.

In 1947, I applied for a job in the Traffic Department. Morris Shepherd was head of the department, and Harry Shaw was his assistant. I had interviews with both, and they treated me very courteously. There were no openings, but Mr. Shaw asked me how much time I had spent in engineering school, as he had an opening for a surveyor. Since I couldn't qualify, I never got a job with Hercules.

My early associations with the company were with the Sporting Powder Division. When trapshooting, and to a lesser degree skeet, were major sports promoted by companies making gun powder, shotgun ammunition, trap guns, and clay targets, Hercules and DuPont were the major manufacturers of sporting powder, and they competed head-to-head for shooters' favor. Each had a number of shooters "on the road" for their company, not only to set examples by making excellent scores, but in helping gun clubs run their shoots and tournaments. These men were called "professionals," and nicknamed "trade men" (today they are known as industry representatives). Wilmington, being headquarters for both DuPont and Hercules, had more than its share of trade men, and many of them helped my father run the Yorklyn shoots for 30 years. When I was a serious trapshooter (1935–1950), there were five main manufacturers of shotgun shells: Remington, Peters, Winchester, Western, and Federal, and all were labeled with the brand of powder they contained, DuPont or Hercules. After DuPont bought Remington, Peters, and the Parker Gun Company, it promoted shooting through these avenues and phased out its Sporting Powder Division, and although shells were still loaded with DuPont Powder, Hercules soon got the upper hand. Its local "pros," Charlie Hymer, Henry Winchester, and Norman Wright, were very popular in the East, and all over the country Hercules was well represented. Arthur Cuscaden of Tampa, Florida, put together the World Record Squad that made its records at Yorklyn in 1935 and 1936, and all five squad members shot Hercules Powder. Johnny Jahn of Spirit Lake, Iowa, represented Hercules in the Upper Midwest and was one of the best shots in the country. When J. R. Hinkle of Corsicana, Texas, retired, Charlie Mason, an elementary schoolmate of mine, took his job to represent Hercules in the lower midwest. Unfortunately for Hercules' Sporting Powder Division, the Olin interests of East Alton, Illinois, owners of Winchester and Western, got a bill through Congress eliminating the label of the powder manufacturer in sporting ammunition, so there was no point in Hercules promoting an unknown quantity. Shooters could still choose what make shells they wanted, but didn't know who made the powder that was in them. Hercules took its trade men off the road about 1950.

In more recent years, I have had wonderful associations with Hercules personnel. I played tennis on the courts at the Hercules Country Club as a guest of Joan Hannum, a war bride from Britain who worked for Hercules. Alto Smith, an official in the Finance Department, worked on the original Auburn Valley and was the second president of Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc. The late Walt Lumley, an old classmate and a charter member of our Steam Team, was a lifelong Hercules employee, as was Bob Krewatch. Among our most active members are two Hercules retirees, Emil Christofano and Steve Bryce, and two are still working for the company, Jim Personti and Rich Williams. Delaware National Country Club and Ashland Chemical Company have very large shoes to fill.