

American Lawn Mower Company

Founded: 1895

Location: Twelfth and E Streets, Richmond (1895–1901); 705 East Eighteenth Street, Muncie (1901–96); 2100 North Granville Avenue (1997–); manufacturing elements transferred to Shelbyville in 1986.

The rise of a prosperous urban middle class after the Civil War led to neighborhood development, as the new urbanites sought to replicate, albeit on a smaller scale, the gardens that the wealthy were able to enjoy. Well-manicured grass, shrubs, and selected flowering plants replaced the prairie look of front lawns. A boom in residential construction outside of the business sector of the city, in what would later be termed the suburbs, led to a greater demand for lawn equipment, including lawn mowers.

By the 1890s the production of mowers was big business. William F. Spencer II, George M. Spencer, and Robert B. Kersey founded the American Lawn Mower Company to meet the demands of the new market in Indiana. Although other firms in the state had begun as early as the 1870s, the American Lawn Mower Company quickly established itself as a leader in the production of quality hand-push reel lawn trimmers. By 1896 the company sold 4,000 mowers per year, with prices ranging from \$2.20 for its least expensive model to \$4.75 for its Wayne mower that featured a twenty-inch cut.

In 1901 the company moved from Richmond to Muncie, occupying the factory built by the Common Sense Engine Company. By the 1930s the company boasted crafting 127 different types of mowers, had captured 46 percent of the foreign lawn mower business, exporting products to thirty-seven different nations, and employed over 150 people. The lawn equipment maker also made school desks, blackboards, and other school-related products, distributed by the Richmond School Furniture Company.

During the Great Depression the company bought the Great States Corporation of Shelbyville, a competing reel mower business. In the 1980s the company transferred its manufacture of mowers to the Shelbyville location. In 1998 the business continued to build mowers using both the Great States and American labels.

After World War II the American Lawn Mower Company faced a dark future. Power mowers had made their way to the market, potentially spelling doom to the push-reel mower business. After a failed attempt at making power mowers, the company stubbornly continued to make the nonpowered trimmer. By the mid-1950s the firm's output had shrunk to 84,000 per year.

Up to 1990 most purchasers were older than sixty years of age. The 1990s, however, brought a change in the fortunes of the company as more environmentally conscious Americans began buying their grandfather's type of mowers, which used neither gas nor oil. Major advances also have helped sales—the mowers are lighter and the blades stay sharper longer. In addition, reel mowers cost less to purchase and less to operate than power mowers. From 1985 to 1996 sales increased by 150 percent. By 1997 most buyers were under sixty and lived on lots that were less than a quarter acre in size, and more than half of the owners were women.

In 1998 the company employed close to seventy-five people at both the Muncie and Shelbyville locations and expected to sell more than 250,000 mowers, and projected record sales of more than \$1 million. The firm ships its products to several nations including England, Australia, Canada, and Saudi Arabia and hopes to expand operations into more of the world. It currently commands 94 percent of the American market, but less than 10 percent of foreign purchases. Robert Kersey, the grandson of one of the founders, is president.