Reliance Electric-Dodge

Founded: 1888

Location: 1225 Seventh Street, Columbus (1890– )

Milton O., Marshall, Alfred, and Milton M. Reeves purchased the Edinburgh Pulley Company, renamed it the Reeves Pulley Company, and moved it from Edinburgh to Columbus. Two years later they moved their enterprise to a new brick building on Seventh Street, one that continues to house the company more than a century later. Originally the brothers made only one product, the wood split pulley. It proved strong and versatile. One of their largest pulleys was used in the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge. One model could be attached to a back hub of a car and, with other accoutrements, be used to power a sawmill.

Until the line-shaft method of powering factories became obsolete in the 1930s many factories used the Reeves pulley to power manufacturing concerns. The wooden pulleys were more efficient producers of energy than their iron cousins and were less dangerous because they were less likely to break. Around 1896 the company began experimenting with the new technology of the automobile. For three years the brothers produced a motocycle-style car, powered by a two-cylinder Sintz gasoline engine. More important for the future, Milton invented the variable-speed transmission. The transmission was, at first, too bulky for most cars and was used instead in large machines such as those that produced paper.

The brothers soon tired of making cars that provided little profit. By 1904 they began producing gasoline engines for other car manufacturers. Their first model was an air-cooled, four-cylinder, twelve-horsepower, gasoline engine. The first successful engine they created was the model E, which they sold to the Auburn and Alex Malcomson auto companies. It could deliver up to twenty horsepower.

Before World War I the brothers introduced stationary gasoline engines, used primarily in farm equipment for tasks such as grinding feed or pumping water. The low profit margin spelled doom for the gas engines, however. After 1914 the company stopped making engines and switched to producing variable-speed transmissions. The stationary-engine business was sold. Milton had created and patented the variable-speed transmission in 1896. For his invention he received the Edison Institute's Edward Longstreth Medal of Honor. Several other inventions developed from the example of Milton's transmission. Paul Reeves, Milton's son, invented the vari-speed pulley in 1929 and the vari-speed moto drive in 1935. These inventions allowed for any speed range needed and are still produced, in an updated version, by Reliance Electric-Dodge.

In 1955 Reeves merged with Reliance Electric & Engineering Company. The company's fortunes have risen and fallen with the tides of the domestic automobile market. In 1955, for instance, the company employed 1,150 and was one of the largest employers in Columbus and the largest manufacturer of variable-speed control equipment. By 1963 the factory employed only 1,000, and by 1984 the number had dropped to 334.

In 1998 the Reeves plant of Dodge-Rockwell Automation employed two hundred and enjoyed sales of more than $25 million. In keeping with the tradition of the company it continued to produce parts such as motor drives, pulleys, and transmissions, but it also made bearings, clutches, and brakes. Tom Mascari served as plant manager.