

Schnaible Service & Supply Company

Founded: 1853

Location: 1200 Canal Road, Lafayette (1853–1968); 231 Chestnut Street (1968–)

Michael and John Schnaible bought a soap-making factory in 1868 from E. T. Jenks. Michael had started to work at the small soap factory in 1854 and was joined by his brother John in 1858. For the next decade the German immigrants carefully saved enough money to purchase the plant. Under Jenks and a Mr. Cherrie the company had produced lard, oil, soap, and candles. After the brothers took charge of the operation the firm continued to produce the same products but began to specialize in making soap.

During the 1870s and 1880s the business grew, and the brothers built a brick building to house the factory, added new machines for production, and expanded their sales area. Near the turn of the century the Schnaible family controlled not only the soap factory but also a grain elevator and a drug company, adding a coal company in the 1920s. Various family members acted as officers of the companies, forming an interlocking directorate of all four organizations.

In 1899 Michael and John incorporated the business under the name M. & J. Schnaible Company. The firm's laundry soaps were distributed to several states in the Midwest and South under a number of brand names, including Star City, Daylight, and Does-It-Easy Naptha. The company also produced a number of waxes. John took over the business after his brother's death, later turning control of the company over to C. George Schnaible sometime after 1916. C. George presided over the firm's affairs until 1931, when Emil Schnaible became the company's president.

After the Great Depression, with the creation of synthetic soaps and electric washing machines, the bar type of laundry soap produced by the company began to lose its appeal. After the early 1940s the firm stopped producing its most popular product, Star City Soap, distinctive partly because of its bright red wrapping. After Emil's death in the early 1950s, his widow, Alma, became the head of the business. Family members retained control of the firm until 1953, when they sold the company to Olyer U. Sullivan, a soap salesman for Procter & Gamble. At least one member of the Schnaible family continued to be employed at the plant until 1994.

In the years after 1940 the company successfully transformed itself from a soap maker into a wholesale supplier of janitorial supplies, waxes, soaps, building maintenance equipment, paper products, and shipping room supplies. Sullivan changed the name of the company to Schnaible Service & Supply Company in the 1960s. He continued to manufacture some cleaning products at the plant, but primarily the company acted as a distributor of cleaning and paper products.

In 1966 the Lafayette town inspector condemned the company's Canal Street building, still owned by a member of the Schnaible family, and ordered it razed. Sullivan moved the company to its present headquarters at 231 Chestnut Street. He presided over the business until he retired in 1982, and Donald J. Stein was elevated to the top post from the office of vice president.

Stein, a graduate of Purdue University, was the owner of a uniform rental operation when he purchased a share of the Schnaible firm in 1967. He did not become active in the concern until 1973 but provided capital for the company to expand and boosted its customer base. In fact, business at the firm began to increase after Stein

started introducing the cleaning and paper products to his 5,000 linen and uniform customers.

Under Stein the firm enjoyed higher profits each year, and employees in general were paid above the industry's average. Most of the staff had been with the company for almost twenty years. Since 1973 the firm had established seven regional offices across the state to service its 9,000 customers, operating as far south as Evansville and as far north as South Bend. The company prided itself on its service record and boasted that none of its customers had ever run out of cleaning or paper products.

In 1999 the company was a wholesale distributor of janitorial supplies and paper products, and Donald Stein continued as president. Donald's son, Terry, served as vice president and service manager. On the eve of the twenty-first century Schnaible Service & Supply was the second largest company of its kind in Indiana.