

Erie County's Toy Box

Introduction



What are as old as history, can be found in every culture and are guaranteed to amuse future generations? Toys! Toys are a very important part of history. They reflect social customs, family traditions and technological innovations, and although the technology and materials used to make toys have changed over time, toys of today are very much like those played with decades ago...dolls, hoops, animal toys, little weapons, vehicles and boats continue to entertain kids of all ages.

Let's explore Erie County's toy history, so find your favorite set of play clothes and dust off your imagination. It's time to open Erie County's toy box.

A Resourceful Entrepreneur

Louis Marx, an ambitious young man with a keen business sense, entered the workforce at the age of 16 (one year after graduating from high school), founded the Marx Toy Company at age 23, and became a millionaire by the age of 26. Marx was born August 11, 1896 in Brooklyn, New York to German immigrants Jacob and Clara Marx. At age sixteen he was hired by the Ferdinand J. Strauss Company, a manufacturing company which produced mechanical toys. Marx showed great potential and was promoted to sales in a short amount of time. Within four years he was managing the New Jersey plant and became a company director. Although Marx had the markings of a great manager, he was fired by Strauss at the age of 21 for not following the rules.

Undiscouraged by his experience with the Strauss Company, Marx pursued a career in toys. After serving in the army during World War I, Marx and his brother David began working with retail stores and toy manufacturers. They worked selling toys to retail stores for several manufacturing companies. The brothers developed ways to cut toy production costs through their work with these companies, and in 1919 they decided to use their innovative methods to create a new toy company. The Marx brother's new business, Louis Marx & Company, began to hire manufacturers to produce toys. The company was founded on two solid principles that eventually lead Marx to be known as a producer of high quality, affordable toys:

1. Give the customer more toy for less money
2. Quality is not negotiable

Louis Marx earned the title "the Henry Ford of toy-making" because of his dedication to these principles, and within just a few years, he was able to expand his operation. In 1922, Louis Marx & Company purchased the struggling Strauss Company, which owned patterns, or dies, for *Zippo the Climbing Monkey* and the *Alabama Coon Jigger*, two of the first lithographed tinsplate mechanical toys mass-produced in America. These two toys had been on the market for twenty years. Marx redesigned the toys, giving them bright colors and making them from larger models...the company sold 8 million copies of each of the redesigned toys. Marx also purchased

the Unique Art Manufacturing Company (Jazzbo Jim) and contracted with C.E. Carter of Erie, Pennsylvania to produce toys.

How to Make a Successful Toy

Louis Marx & Company's first manufacturing plant was located in Erie at 1816 Raspberry Street. The plant was 1000 feet in length - long enough to occupy an entire city block – and was responsible for producing mechanical wind-up toys and trains. This building was affectionately labeled the “Monkey Works” because so many Zippos were produced here. As the center for research and design, many of the company's original toy sketches and patents were created here.

Marx and his employees worked diligently creating wondrous new toys. According to Marx, there were six steps involved in making a good toy. First, the toy should reflect life around the child, it should be familiar; second, the toy should offer the child something unexpected, something surprising; third, a toy that requires children to practice and develop a skill are good; fourth, the toy should have play value, and should keep the child occupied for hours in an entertaining and creative way; fifth, children do not enjoy hard to understand toys, and therefore, the toy should be comprehensible; sixth, toys are often treated roughly and should be sturdy.

Keeping these six principles in mind, Marx's model makers set to work making rough sketches and working models. The first model of a toy was made for appearance and mechanical operation. First models were sent to Marx at his New York City office at 200 Fifth Avenue, where he tested all toys himself. If approved for development, a second model was hand-made and sent to a toolmaker. The toolmaker then produced a steel die, or pattern, to be used during manufacture.

Many toy ideas and concepts at Marx were borrowed from other toy companies. Marx employees spent \$12,000 every year purchasing competitor's toys. For example, Marx developed the “Merrymakers” toy, a toy featuring singing mice, shortly after Walt Disney introduced Mickey Mouse to the American public. Once these toys were analyzed, they were taken to a room called the “morgue.” This room contained shelf after shelf of old, forgotten toys.

The Growth of a Toy Empire

The Marx Toy Company experienced great success and grew continuously during the mid-19th century. In 1935, Marx established the Girard Manufacturing Company, a train manufacturing plant. In addition to producing trains, the company made roller skates, pinball machines, and play sets. Marx expanded his operations further by opening offices in China, Japan, Mexico, Europe, and Glendale, West Virginia. He purchased an old aircraft factory in Glendale, enlarged the facilities, and began the production of heavy gauge toys, such as doll houses, stagecoach toys, tin buildings, pinball games, Johny West figurines, and western and battle sets. Marx's European operations included businesses in England (first), France, and Whales. Eventually, Marx developed branches in South Africa, Australia, Canada, and Brazil as well.

America's involvement in World War II affected every industry, including the toy industry. At the onset of war in the early 1940s, Marx prepared his company for wartime supply shortages by purchasing enough ink, aluminum, and steel to last his Erie plant ten years. Although well-supplied, toy production ceased for four years during World War II, and the company joined the national war effort - Marx's Erie plant produced parts for bombs, hand grenades, and even machine guns!

At the war's end the Marx Toy Company resumed toy production (thanks to Marx's stockpile of supplies), and the company quickly dominated the American toy market. Marx out-produced other toy manufacturers for two main reasons. With much of Europe in ruin, German markets were no longer competitive. Germany was one of the world's greatest toy manufacturing nations until World War II. In addition to European markets being disabled, many American toy companies were unable to sustain full production. The war produced shortages of necessary production materials. Marx was able to resume production immediately following the war due to the company's "stash" of materials. Marx proved such a successful businessman during this time, General Dwight D. Eisenhower invited him to be the Industrial Advisor to Germany in 1945, and made him responsible for helping to restructure Europe.

The decade of the 1950s was known as the "Golden Era" for the Marx Toy Company, which produced more than 20% of the toys made in the United States, and operated factories in nearly a dozen countries. The 1955 cover of *Time Magazine* proclaimed Louis Marx "The Toy King"!

The End of a Toy Tradition

At the height of his empire, Marx decided to sell his successful toy manufacturing company. Not one of his eight children wished to take over the family business, and in 1972, Marx sold his company to Quaker Oats for \$52 million! Three years after purchasing the Marx Company, Quaker Oats sold to the British firm Dunbee-Combex for \$15 million. The new company became Dunbee-Combex-Marx, but it lacked the intuitiveness of Marx. The company produced two new, expensive, yet unsuccessful toys in 1978, and by 1980, it was forced to file for bankruptcy. Louis Marx, Erie's great toymaker, died on February 5, 1982 in Westchester County, New York at the age of 86 having seen the collapse of his great toy empire.

A Marx Revival

In 1982, American Plastic Equipment of Florida purchased the company's assets from the Chemical Bank of New York. Later, in 1988, they acquired the intellectual rights. By that time, Marx toys and play sets were sought after by toy collectors, and cost hundreds and even thousands of dollars. The strong demand for Marx toys created by those who remembered playing with them in childhood gave rise to a revival of Marx toys. Toys and play sets were soon reissued at very reasonable prices, and before long, Rock-Um Sock-Um Robots were back in stores! In 1995 Marx Toy Corporation, was formed in Sebring Ohio. Although Louis Marx & Co. no longer exists, their legacy of producing quality toy products continues. (Marx Toy Corporation is a separate company from, and is not a successor to, Louis Marx & Co.)

The Marx Big Wheel – A Riding Revolution

The Marx Toy Company was one of the first toys companies to use plastic in the manufacturing of toys during the 1950s. The Big Wheel is perhaps the most successful plastic toy have to come from Marx's Erie plant. Generations of Americans can recall pedaling these plastic tricycles through neighborhoods and up and down driveways.

