

The What Cheer Tool Co.

by Dave Johnson

In an article entitled "Oil and Sunshine Lamp Products of the What Cheer Tool Company" (Fall 1989 MAC), Jim Steinberg illustrated several products of the What Cheer Tool Company of What Cheer, Iowa. In his article, Mr. Steinberg makes the unsubstantiated claim that the What Cheer Tool Co. was primarily a distributor, not a manufacturer. A report from the What Cheer Centennial Publication indicates this is untrue.

The What Cheer Tool company began under the firm name of *Thompson, Walker & Thompson* in the early 1880's. In the early years, their production work was performed in the *Curtin & Parkins* blacksmith shop and W. C. Johnson's machine shop, both located in nearby Oskaloosa. Early products were limited to coal drills and picks. About 200 drill machines were sold in the first year of production.

By October of 1886 the demand for its drills and picks had become so great that the firm decided to manufacture them within their own facility, located South of the Rock Island Railroad tracks. In the period of January through June of 1887 the firm produced and sold 790 drill machines. By the Fall of 1888, the firm employed 18 men in their factory and were producing 150 drill machines a week, as well as other products.

At this time the chief-blacksmith was Thomas Curtin, who had previously manufactured products for the firm in his own blacksmith shop. William



Brass and tin What Cheer (L) and Grier Bros (R) oilwick lamps.

Smith was in charge of the drill operation, Jessie Southwick was head-mechanic and James Davison was book-keeper and general salesman.

Shortly before 1900 Thomas Thompson left the firm and the name was changed to the *What Cheer Drill and Miner's Tool Co.* Alexander Walker was President and General Sales Manager, partner William Thompson was Vice-President and Treasurer, William Walker was Secretary and James Walker Assistant Secretary.

In the late 1890's and early 1900's, the firm had four salesmen on the road outside of Iowa, while James Walker covered Iowa. During this period there were about 30 employees in the factory. The firm was shipping its products to every coal producing state in the nation, as well

as Canada, Mexico and parts of South America. The firm also repaired coal cars for mining companies in its shops. Alexander Walker was a prolific inventor who held 17 patents of coal drilling machines alone, while several more were held in the firm's name.

In later years, with coal mining declining and more firms producing equipment and supplies, the firm entered the automobile business, first selling Chevrolets and later Star and Durant autos. The firm did not do well in this venture and permanently closed its doors in 1926, unable to survive in an increasingly competitive market, after having been a million dollar a year production firm.

It is not known with any certainty whether or not What Cheer produced their own oilwick and carbide lamps.

their own oilwick and carbide lamps. The firm did have the ability to produce lamps. An old photo of the interior of the What Cheer factory clearly shows a punch press and lathe that could have been used to manufacture lamp parts.

An earlier product of this firm is the seldom seen Thompson and Walker oilwick lamp. Apparently not manufactured for long or in great numbers, few examples of this brand name are seen today.

Numerous similarities between What Cheer lamps and Grier Bros. lamps would indicate that Grier produced at least some oilwick lamps for What Cheer. We may never know for certain who actually produced all the What Cheer lamps.

SOURCE: What Cheer Centennial Publication, undated. Ottumwa Public Library.



(ABOVE) *Tin What Cheer (L) and Grier Bros. (R) oilwick lamps as seen from stamped side.*

(BELOW) *Opposite side of tin What Cheer (L) and Grier Bros (R) oilwick lamps.*

(BELOW LEFT) *Stamp mark found on What Cheer lamps.*

