

SHINY BRITE CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS ----- THE STORY



After World War I, the manufacture and purchase of German glass Christmas ornaments resumed although it was apparent in the 1930's that another war was looming. The German ornament trade in the United States was handled by businessmen who had sales & import offices in New York. Max Eckardt, a German immigrant, was such a businessman.

In the 1920's he decided to produce his own line of ornaments, opened his company in New York City, and had a warehouse by the Harlem River for storing ornaments imported from Bavaria. His ornaments were sold under two different names, **Shiny Brite** and **Max Eckardt & Sons**. Max's relatives and their employees in Germany silvered and decorated the glass ornaments by hand. The ornaments were intricate in design with hand-painted complexity. Such shapes as Christmas balls, figures of Santas and elves, cottages, stars, lanterns, etc. were decorated with lacquer paints, stencils, glue and glitter.

In the late 1930's Eckardt sensed that a possible war would affect the supply of ornaments. In **1937**, he & a rep from F.W. Woolworth approached Corning Glass Company of New York to find a way to make American glass ornaments. Woolworth offered to place a large order for its chain of stores if Corning could successfully modify its glass ribbon machine, designed to make light bulbs by the thousands, to produce Christmas ornaments. With Corning's success, Woolworth placed an order for more than 235,000 ornaments. In **Dec 1939**, the first mass-produced, Corning-blown, and machine-lacquered, ornaments were shipped to Woolworth's Five-and-Ten-cent stores where they were sold from two to ten cents each.

By 1940 Corning was making about 300,000 plain glass ornaments a day and sending them to other companies for decoration. The skilled German glassblower made about 600 a day. Visitors to the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, can see a glass ribbon machine once used in Corning's Wellsboro, PA factory, which produced most of America's machine blown glass ornaments. Large cartons of the clear glass balls were shipped to Max Eckardt, their largest customer, and his newly built decorating plant in New Jersey, where they were silvered, lacquered, and decorated by hand. Simple forms were the only ornaments available at this time, but other shapes and sizes were soon introduced.

In **1941** Eckardt was producing under the trade name **Shiny Brite**. The ornaments were silvered on the inside as well as the outside so they would remain "shiny brite" for longer periods. Initially they were lacquered by machine on the outside and then decorated by hand. World War II wartime shortages eventually made it impossible to get either lacquer or silver for decorating. Because of material shortages, the clear glass balls were decorated with thin stripes in pastel colors which didn't require as much metallic oxide pigment. Corning altered its machines to produce a greater variety of shapes & sizes of glass balls. Due to the war, the metal cap for the hanging hook, gave way to cardboard, and often the end user had to resort to yarn to replace the hooks.

Shiny Brites were on Christmas trees all over America they were sold in Woolworth's for a very affordable price. They were packaged in solid brown cardboard boxes, and later enhanced with a cellophane window and featured the words "American Made". Following the war, Shiny Brite became the largest ornament company in the world. They were **popular throughout the 1940's and 1950's** with their heyday occurring in the late 1950's.

They stopped selling as well in the 1960's (it is said the company started making plastic ornaments), and **weren't made at all by the 1970's**.

It was during the early 1960's that Emigsville appeared on the scene. Former General Manager, Andy Rawicz, indicated that the company moved to Emigsville because of its proximity to Corning and McCrory Company, plus having a railroad siding which helped with cross country shipments.

A local newspaper article dated May 13, 1964 stated that the manufacturer of Christmas tree ornaments sold under the name "Shiny Brite" was to build a plant in Manchester Township and expected to employ 300 persons. The Max Eckardt and Sons division of Phillips-Eckardt was consolidating operations located in several eastern cities. The division was described as the largest manufacturer and importer of Christmas tree ornaments in the US. The plant, having 269,000 square feet, was to be located on a 25 acre plot off Aberdeen Road. The factory was to cost \$1,650,000 with machinery and equipment moving in shortly after November 1, 1964.

Rawicz said that the factory was equipped with elaborate automated silvering, lacquering and decorating production lines. Although the glass balls were still purchased from Corning, the very ornate hand painted ornaments were imported from Germany. The balls were packaged in boxes of a dozen each, however, there were many combinations or assortments for store chains and five and tens such as Woolworth and McCrory.

The company employed 280 people in three shifts, produced year round, storing inventory for the Christmas season of October thru December. An early snow in October or November helped increase sales.

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In the mid 1960's, the company hired representatives from Revlon to promote and advertise world-wide sales by using TV. The program made Shiny Brite a household name in the United States. To save on labor costs because of increasing competition from Taiwan, a group of engineers from Mattel was hired to automate the production process. Both the Revlon advertising and Mattel automation efforts cost a lot of money but did not produce the desired results. Sales remained flat and the business was sold to Eckmar, a conglomerate.

Eckmar brought two other divisions to the Emigsville building, Herculite (producer of truck tarpaulins), and Cycle Products (bicycles and accessories). A shortage of space for ornament inventory in 1970 required erecting two huge (320 foot long) air inflated buildings in the parking lot to store ornaments. A 1" per hour cloudburst on July 4, 1970 caused the little stream to back up at the railroad culvert, flood a large area, and collapse the inflated buildings. A million dollars worth of inventory was destroyed.

Shiny Brite was sold to Polaron about 1974 and was moved to Georgia. Continuing pressure from imports resulted in the company going out of business in the early 1980's. Cycle Products was sold and moved to York Industrial Park, but Herculite remains in Emigsville to this day.

Knight Ridder Newspapers posted an article Dec 24, 2004 stating that Christopher Radko, a holiday designer, bought the Shiny Brite name in the late 1990's and started selling the replicas or reproductions of the old Shiny Brite glass ornaments in 2001. These are not to be confused with the vintage glass ornaments in antiques shops and on eBay, at garage sales and estate sales.

Currently and locally, this raises the question of how one tells a vintage ornament from a replica. It has been noted that when looking at an original ornament, the name Shiny Brite is stamped on the metal cap, and the cap outer wall is fluted. Collectors claim that a cardboard cap, used during World War II, is a rare find, making the ornament more valuable. The cardboard caps were later replaced. It has also been observed that a metal cap, and sometimes a plastic cap may be stamped West Germany (post World War II). The import was most likely associated with the imports destined for Shiny Brite. Other imports bearing the Shiny Brite name were tinsel from Italy and Christmas lights from Japan. The original box will usually note the location of origin (in small print).

How did this Shiny Brite subject even surface in the first place? The Manchester Township Historical Society, in its effort to compile the history of the township, was made aware of the ornament production in Emigsville in the 1960's. An appeal was made for former employees to join us with a tale swap of their experiences at Shiny Brite.

Response was from several interesting folks who brought with them not only stories of their employment, but their Shiny Brite ornaments as well. There were stories of glue and glitter, operating a heat machine to cut stems off the balls, the "octopus" machine for the painted balls, counting and packing ornaments, the keypunch supervisor, the accounts receivable person, and the flexible schedule for a mother of seven children not able to work during the summer months.

Their ornaments were varied in size, shape, color, detail and even an unfinished sample. A few were of colored rayon wound over foam balls, some of which

were available to employees who personally further decorated them with sequins, beads, and cording. It was decided to present a display and share the story with the community. Even more intricately detailed ornaments were sent for the display. We were in awe!

Residents of Emigsville say that some Shiny Brite items were given to each household at Christmas time.

It is with pleasure that we bring to you the history of Shiny Brite ornaments and the opportunity to see their range from simply plain to delicately beautiful.

Sources:

The York Heritage Trust Library, local newspaper.
Knight Ridder Newspapers
Internet – scripophily.net
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, jsonline.com
TheHenryFord.org
Radkosales.com
Andy Rawicz, former general manager, Eckmar

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The Manchester Township Historical Society
" An independent group of volunteers"