

# Welcome to Syracuse, the Gear City

Since its incorporation as a city in 1848, Syracuse has earned an impressive array of monikers tied to its impressive manufacturing history.

For a relatively small city, Syracuse has dominated several industries in an outsized way over the years. The Salt City. The Typewriter City. Gear City. Gear City, you say? That's a new one. Well, while the beloved moniker Salt City has long outlived the area's salt industry, which died in the early 1900's, and they haven't made a typewriter here since the 1960s, Nixon Gear Company is still out there manufacturing gears in Solvay, just like they have for the last one hundred years!

When George Nixon founded Nixon Broach and Tool Company at his shop at 200 Oxford Street in Syracuse on November 17, 1920, Syracuse was one of the nation's centers of gear manufacturing and had been for nearly two decades.

Industry giants like Brown-Lipe-Chapin and New Process Gear Company had put the city on the map with their ingenuity and innovative business practices, going back to the turn of the century. It was Syracuse's reputation that brought George Nixon here from Detroit. It was no coincidence, considering that much of the growth in the gear business was attributable to the explosion in automobile ownership in the wake of World War One. Nearly 4 million Americans owned cars by 1920 and those cars needed all the gears that American factories could produce.

Originally, Nixon hired toolmakers to grind auto cylinders. His shop quickly gained a reputation for timely and skilled work. In 1924, he began the in-house manufacture of gears and he changed his company's name to reflect it, thus Nixon Gear and Machine Company was born.

Nixon Gear Company was a family business. George's wife, Kate, was secretary and treasurer, and his brother-in-law, John E. Shahan, came up from Alabama to be vice-president. Shahan's business acumen was such that by 1930, George named him president of the company and



he and Kate moved back to Detroit in 1932.

Nixon Gear and Machine Company thrived under Shahan's leadership. By the 1950s, the company had expanded into larger facilities across Oxford Street. Like so many businesses of the era, Nixon Gear Co. continued to operate as a family business, with Shahan's two sons, John Jr. and Robert, acting as vice-presidents.

By the 1970s, Nixon Gear was facing more competition and shifts in the industry away from the high-quality products they'd produced for over 50 years. In 1977, Samuel Haines, president of Massachusetts-based Gear Motions Inc., acquired Nixon Gear out of receivership, keeping John Shahan Jr. as company president.

Over the ensuing decade, Nixon Gear Inc. continued to thrive while other Syracuse-based companies started to shutter their factories. In 1992, the company moved into its current facility on Milton Avenue in Solvay, where it breathed new life into a former Allied Chemical property, closed since 1985. As the company celebrates its 100th birthday this week, Nixon Gear Incorporated, once the young upstart, is the last man standing here in Gear City. *Robert Searing, Onondaga Historical Association*

**Nixon Gear in Syracuse is celebrating its 100th birthday this week.**

*Onondaga Historical Association*