

Kenton Toys

by Lynne Belluscio

It was like Christmas at the post office this morning. A huge big box was waiting for me and inside were two wonderful cast iron toys that had been sent by John Jenner. He had bought them from Jack Bradbury's family when they were cleaning out the house. Jack remembers playing with the toys when he was little, but they were antiques then. He said that his father was always buying things at auctions in the area and that's how the toys came to his house.

One is the Overland Circus wagon pulled by two white horses with a bear inside. The other is a ladder wagon, pulled by three horses. It is possible that both were made by the Kenton Toy Manufacturing Company of Kenton, Ohio. It manufactured close to 10,000 designs of cast-iron toys. At one time it was the largest iron toy factory in the world.

It was founded in 1890 by F. M. Perkins and at first it was known as the Kenton Lock Manufacturing Company. Perkins was interested in a factory to make his patented refrigerator locks and for a while used a factory at



a nearby site at the Forbins Scroll Mill in Kenton. The manufacture of toys began in 1894 but because there was patent disputes with some of the toy designs, the company changed its name from the Kenton Lock Manufacturing Company to the Kenton Hardware Manufacturing Company.

In 1903, Kenton became part of the National Novelty Corporation and it continued its line of toys under the name of Wing Manufacturing. There were several unsuccessful takeover attempts,

but the company survived as a separate unit of the Kenton Hardware Company and manufactured toys from 1920 until 1935.

Only 10 per cent of their toys were ever marked and early Kenton toys were never marked. The circus wagon is marked on the horse hitch, but the fire wagon is only marked "made in USA."

In 1927 most of the company's toys were horse drawn but that soon changed. The first automotive toys appeared in 1923, but most were produced between 1933 and 1940.

As Kenton struggled through the Depression, William Bixler, vice president of the company, came up with an idea that if they could manufacture a copy of Gene Autry's pearl handled six-shooter, that every kid would want one. Gene Autry sent one

of his pistols to Ohio and a child-sized model was made by Joe Solomon, a master toy maker. In 1938, Gene Autry and his horse Champion visited Kenton, Ohio, and they became known as the town's economic saviors. The Gene Autry Repeating Cap Pistol became extremely popular and by 1939, 2 million had been sold. The success of the Kenton cap guns kept the company in business until 1952 when it closed.

The Overland Circus wagon is marked, but the fire wagon is only marked with "made in USA." Both of them have been played with and a lot of the paint is worn off which greatly affects their value, but in my mind it just means that they were well loved toys and will be great additions to the toy collection.



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