



L. F. DEARDORFF & SONS, INC.

..... 315 SOUTH PEORIA STREET - CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60606

Phone 312 --829-5655

Mr. Laben F. Deardorff, the founder of L. F. Deardorff & Sons, Inc. was born in Preble County, Ohio, on a farm near Eaton, on December 31, 1862. He and his family belonged to the Church of the Bretheren (Dunkards) and were "plain people" living off the land and observing all of the strict rules.

The Deardorffs raised flax and wool from which they made all of the cloth for their clothes. They also made the looms for weaving it. They had a blacksmith's shop for making their own tools and shoeing their horses, a cider mill, and a corn and feed mill which was run by horse power. They also had a saw mill with two five foot eight inch circular saws capable of splitting a log five feet in diameter, which was run by a forty horse power stationary steam engine. This engine was also equipped to make shingles and do the millwork to produce high grade lumber. Their furniture was nearly all homemade, they pegged shoes, blocked hats, and took care of most of their personal needs. Most of the food for the approximately 30 employees who ran the mill, was raised on the farm. Their back yard was equipped with two very large Dutch ovens, and a large kitchen for putting together the meals.

Laben was raised on the idea "if you need anything, make it yourself", from which he became very inventive. All his life he had a creative mind, and was continually thinking of and making new things. He graduated at age 18 from high school and almost immediately bought a new suit which was his first that was not home spun. He also had his picture taken, which was not looked on favorably by the Dunkards. On presenting a print to his favorite aunt, who was then quite old, she remarked in her down-home drawl, "Now Laben you shouldn't have done that; those photographer fellows go into a dark room when they do their work, and people that's honest do their work out in the light."

In the late 1870's the mill business became very depressed, and they had a fire which made it very difficult to operate successfully. Because of that, in 1882, at the age of 20, Laben decided to go to Chicago.

He wanted to be a business man, so he took a short business course, then got a job and went to work. He worked for an insurance company; then an elevator company, each for about a year. He then worked for Gayton A. Douglas, who had the first amateur photographic store in Chicago. This

was the opportunity he needed so he could use his inventive abilities since he could repair and make changes in the cameras, which he did after hours.

Laben combined part of a camera made by Scovil Manufacturing Company with one made by the Adams Company. Douglas sent this to Scovil, and they made it under the name of Scovil Triad. He gave one of his designs for a view camera to a man by the name of W. F. Carlton who was in a position to make the camera. Carlton gave him a $6\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ camera for the designs, and later sold them to the Rochester Optical Company. They produced the camera and called it the Premo View. Rochester sold their photographic business to Eastman Kodak, who then made the camera until about 1910.

During the years from about 1885 until about 1900, Mr. Laben F. Deardorff worked for several companies including E. & H. T. Anthony, and Sweet-Wallach & Company, which later became the Eastman Kodak Store. During this period he became very much interested in lenses and had Bauch & Lomb make changes in the Zeiss series 11 to make it more practical for photoengraving. These characteristics are still used in all process lenses. He also invented a Petzval type portrait lens which had adjustable separation for changing the shape of the field. On applying for a patent, he found that Ernst Gundlach of the Gundlach Optical Company had just patented it. Mr. Gundlach gave him the patent, and Mr. Deardorff had the lens made and sold it for a number of years. It was used for all of the official portraits made at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1903.

Just before the turn of the century, Laben Deardorff went into the supply business and later, about 1904, also did commercial photography. He built the first bromide enlarger in Chicago, which was a horizontal type, projected into the darkroom, had the negative carrier in the wall and an arc light in another room. The light was increased by a set of mirrors mounted around the arc and adjusted to reflect on the negative.

In 1909 because of a depressed condition and the fact that the Eastman Kodak Store wanted him to work for them, he sold out to them and ran their repair shop for three-and-a-half years. The store decided to close the repair shop, so he went into partnership with a man named Heyer who repaired surgical instruments. Heyer was an older man, and after about a year he sold his share of the business to Mr. Deardorff who then ran it alone repairing photographic equipment, microscopes, and some other equipment connected with the medical profession as well. By 1917 his son, Merle S. Deardorff started to work for him and he began to repolish photographic lenses. For a number of years this work became a very important part of the business. About 1920, the old Premo View cameras were about gone and the commercial photographers began demanding that we make them something. Mr. Kaufman & Fabry and Mr. Erickson of Chicago Architectural Photographing Company advanced the money for cameras. We had bought the C. J. Olstad Camera Company and tried to make them there while we ran our place in the Chicago Loop. But it did not work. A decision had to be made to move to the Olstad place or give it up. We made the move which cost us our amateur repair business, but was an advantage to the professional.

Two other sons, James Russell and John Milton were with us by that time, so Mr. L. F. Deardorff had the ideas and experience and the sons supplied the cheap labor. The Olstad place consisted of an obsolete saw, planer and sanding disc, plus a good jointer. It was about two thousand square feet in an old wagon factory with an old volcano stove and a shut-off valve so the water could be shut off at night to keep it from freezing. We partitioned off a small space for our engine lathe and polisher and started to make cameras. Ten were made in the first lot. JM & JR did the woodwork and MS made the special screws on the engine lathe. The big problem was work normally done on a punch press had to be done by hand. Because of the small volume and the cost of dies, MS scribed these on sheet metal and chisled them to the lines in a small vise. Mahogany was another problem. There was not enough money for new wood, so L. F. found a lot of bar tops that had been scrapped because of prohibition. From these the first ten cameras were made. The mahogany was good, but it contained too many nails and screws. The cameras were hand finished, including the laquer which was hand brushed and polished to a piano finish. The metal work was polished and rubbed with French emery so the finish was the same as that of a microscope. These were very hard days. In winter it was difficult to raise the temperature to 65 degrees. At night it would often go below freezing. One morning it was 13 degrees below zero in the shop. No work was done that day. The ten cameras were sold long before they were finished, so we decided to make an additional fifteen.

We went to several dealers to see if they would be interested, but they told us the camera was too expensive. One dealer said he couldn't sell an 8x10 View Camera for \$150.00 if it was made of gold.

We bought the screws for this lot, but made the punch press parts by hand. The third lot had punch press as well as screw machine parts, and was also sold before completed. The dealers then came to us for cameras. By this time things were better. We overcame the heat problems with two morw stoves, bought some new machinery, and a party gave us an air compressor, spray booth and a paint spray gun.

About three years later the 5x7 camera was designed and offered for sale. In 1932 the Commercial Series studio stand was developed and a year later the 11x14 Commercial Series studio camera. This outfit made it possible to illustrate merchandise much more efficiently and made considerable improvement in that business. The navy also found it very practical for their use.

In 1935 the business was moved to 11 South Desplaines Street. This space was much more efficient than the old one and gave us room for the expansion that was needed. The period from about 1935 to 1945 was very difficult. Because of the depression it was hard to exist even though a fair amount of sales were made. Mr. Kellsey, son-in-law joined the company and pressed the idea of a hand camera with swings. The Triamapro camera which was made from 1936 to 1947 was developed for this purpose. Mr. Kellsey was also very anxious to write a book and after spending much time, effort and money, finally brought out "CORRECTIVE PHOTOGRAPHY." The business was incorporated in 1945 and during the war period we sold many cameras to the government. In 1949 the Air Force

gave us our largest order for 353 8 X 10 View cameras, carrying cases, tripods, focusing clothes, and lenses. After the war we discontinued the Triamapro and the small 4 X 5 camera which was brought out about 1940. In 1954 the Portrait camera was developed and placed on the market in 1955. Our most prosperous years were 1956 and 1957 and left us in a very strong position, but from 1958 to 1970 business was very poor.

Some very interesting devices were developed during this period, such as the tax map projector which is in use by Sidwell of West Chicago, Illinois; the Criminal Identification camera, which was made for the City of Chicago, but sold all over the country, the criminal evidence camera for Chicago, and the Aerial Map Projector for the Army Map Service at Washington D. C. The Army Map Projector was so large it had to be cut down to fit the largest highway trailer.

Mr. L. F. Deardorff died in 1952, Mr. Kellsey in 1962, J. M. in 1969, and J. R. in 1970. This left the business with only one of the original partners.

During the early 1970's business picked up rapidly, particularly in View Cameras; and because of the lack of experienced help, it was decided to concentrate on our standard equipment rather than special orders. It became necessary to move again, and although the business was in good financial condition, this was very expensive and caused a lack of capital for several years. Mr. J. M. Deardorff, Jr. joined the company with the idea of eventually taking over its management. It has been very difficult during this period because it was necessary to organize production so it could be accomplished with people who have developed the necessary skills, but do not understand the camera. This requires volume and may cause great difficulty when business is slow. The company is capable of producing more View Cameras than ever, so now we are planning to make the 11 X 14 View Model, and then some of the heavy equipment. With this organization, we feel we can still supply what we believe to be the best equipment in our field.

The history of L. F. DEARDORFF & SONS, INC.
as told by Mr. Merle S. Deardorff.