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Leggett & Platt

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Introduction

Leggett & Platt is, at once, a story of American ingenuity, resilience, and the continual pursuit of innovative solutions to everyday challenges. From its unassuming origins in Carthage, Missouri, in the late nineteenth century, the company has grown into a diversified powerhouse with a global presence. At its heart, Leggett & Platt's journey reflects the evolution of American manufacturing—a sector shaped by visionaries, forged through adversity, and continually remade to meet the demands of new eras.

This book examines the remarkable arc of Leggett & Platt's history, beginning with its foundation in 1883, when J.P. Leggett's inventive spirit paired with Cornelius B. Platt's practical know-how to revolutionize bedding comfort. Their patented bedspring was not merely a product, but a solution to a universal human need, and it laid the groundwork for a business that would expand far beyond its initial focus and geography. The early years were marked by perseverance, as the partners weathered economic swings and changing consumer tastes, gradually establishing a reputation for quality and reliability.

Leggett & Platt's progression mirrors key trends in American business: diversification in response to markets, investment in technology and vertical integration, and strategic moves from public listing to global expansion. The defining moment under Harry M. Cornell Jr.'s tenure, for example, set the tone for transformational leadership—embracing change, seizing opportunities for growth through product innovation, and a broader vision that moved the company from a regional player to an industry leader with international reach.

Alongside these business milestones, Leggett & Platt has remained deeply committed to the people who power its enterprise. Employee development, corporate values rooted in integrity and collaboration, and a spirit of shared endeavor underpin the company's longevity. As it moved into the 21st century, the company not only adapted to a complex global economy but also took bold steps to address the challenges of environmental sustainability, supply chain responsibility, and ongoing shifts in consumer and industrial demand.

Today, Leggett & Platt faces a world where change is constant, and the pressures of global competition and technological transformation are ever-present. Through strategic restructuring and an unwavering focus on innovation, the company is shaping its future while remaining true to its foundational strengths. This book invites readers to explore Leggett & Platt's journey—a testament to adaptability, principled leadership, and the enduring value of ingenuity in American business.

As we trace the company's history, examine its myriad product lines, and consider its prospects for the future, it becomes clear that Leggett & Platt's story is, above all, a story about people—the inventors, engineers, managers, employees, and visionaries who turned an idea into an enduring American enterprise.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Roots of Innovation: The Founding of Leggett & Platt

The year 1883 dawned on an America undergoing rapid transformation. New inventions were reshaping daily life, from Thomas Edison's electric light to the maiden voyage of the Orient Express. In this era of burgeoning innovation, the small but growing town of Carthage, Missouri, a community steadily rebuilding itself after the ravages of the Civil War, became the unlikely birthplace of an enterprise that would eventually span the globe. This unassuming setting would be where Joseph P. Leggett, an inventor with a keen eye for practical solutions, would lay the foundation for what would become Leggett & Platt.

Joseph P. Leggett, born in Millville, Pennsylvania, in 1856, was the son of English immigrants. His father, a prominent landowner, ensured Joseph received an education at the Millville Seminary. Though details of his early career are sparse, it's known that Leggett spent time in St. Louis, Missouri, in the 1870s, honing his mechanical skills and developing various inventions. He was a man of inventive inclination, constantly seeking to improve upon existing designs and processes.

His particular focus turned to the humble bed. In the late 19th century, mattresses were typically filled with materials like cotton, feathers, or even horsehair, and often rested on rigid, uncomfortable bases. Leggett envisioned a better way to provide comfort and support. His breakthrough came with the development of an innovative bedspring made from single cone spring wire coils, intricately interlaced and mounted on a sturdy wood slat base. This design was revolutionary, offering a far more resilient and comfortable foundation than anything previously available.

However, an invention, no matter how brilliant, requires a means of production. Leggett, with his inventive mind, needed a partner with manufacturing expertise to bring his vision to fruition. He found that partner in Cornelius B. Platt, a local blacksmith in Carthage. Platt, born in Illinois in 1863, had moved to Carthage at the age of 11 with his family, who journeyed there in covered wagons, making them early settlers of the town. His father owned and operated Platt Plow Works, a testament to the family's mechanical inclinations.

The partnership between Leggett and Platt was a fortunate synergy of complementary skills: Leggett's inventive spark and Platt's practical manufacturing know-how. In 1883, the two men officially joined forces, beginning the production of Leggett's patented bedsprings at Platt Plow Works. The bedspring quickly proved its worth, receiving its official patent on May 26, 1885. This innovative product, designed to provide a durable

and comfortable base for common mattresses, was a significant improvement for the sleeping comfort of the era.

Carthage itself, in 1883, was a community of about 500 residents, still recovering from being largely destroyed during the Civil War. Despite its modest size, the town was becoming increasingly prosperous due to nearby lead mines and limestone quarries, attracting skilled stonecutters and contributing to the construction of many ornate Victorian-style homes. This growing affluence, combined with the resilient spirit of its inhabitants, provided a fertile ground for new enterprises.

The initial market for their novel bedsprings in Carthage was, understandably, limited. To expand their reach, Platt and J.P. Leggett's brother, George Leggett, embarked on a unique sales strategy. They would load a horse-drawn wagon with bedspring components—the springs and slats—and travel to surrounding communities. To maximize space in their wagon, they would often assemble the bedsprings on the spot, either in a store or on an adjacent sidewalk, drawing crowds as they demonstrated their innovative product. This early, hands-on approach to sales showcased their entrepreneurial spirit and a keen understanding of their customers' needs. Their ingenuity in both product and sales would serve as a model for the burgeoning American industry.

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