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Molex Inc.

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Introduction

Molex Inc. stands as a testament to American ingenuity, entrepreneurship, and the relentless pursuit of technological advancement. What began as a small venture in Brookfield, Illinois in 1938—making flowerpots and salt shakers out of a proprietary plastic—has transformed into one of the world’s largest and most influential manufacturers of electronic connectors. The journey of Molex Inc. is more than a corporate history; it is the evolution of a pioneering spirit, rooted in family, innovation, and a drive to solve the connectivity challenges of a rapidly changing world.

This book traces the arc of Molex Inc. from its humble beginnings under Frederick Krehbiel and his son John H. Krehbiel, Sr., through periods of postwar expansion and global ambition, and into the cutting-edge fields that define today’s technology landscape. Throughout its evolution, Molex has demonstrated a unique ability to adapt—identifying new markets, embracing international opportunities, and expanding its product portfolio to serve diverse industries ranging from automotive to medical technology. Key to its success has been the Krehbiel family’s vision and the company’s culture of engineering excellence.

Molex’s rise has paralleled some of the most important technological revolutions of the last century. From supplying connectors for the first color televisions to enabling the digital transformation of the computer age, Molex products have become silent yet critical enablers of modern life. The company’s impact on personal computing through the ubiquitous “Molex connector” is just one example among many of how its innovations underpin the infrastructure of the information era.

In recent years, Molex’s journey has entered a new phase, marked by strategic acquisitions, diversification into medical and aerospace applications, and its acquisition by Koch Industries. This partnership has given Molex access to new resources and a long-term perspective, allowing it to double down on innovation, invest in research and development, and expand its global presence. Today, Molex remains headquartered in Lisle, Illinois, but its reach extends into over 40 countries, serving as a vital partner to industries experiencing profound technological shifts.

This book will explore not only the history and milestones of Molex Inc. but also the ethos and culture that have allowed it to thrive over generations. We will examine how Molex confronts the challenges of globalization, the responsibilities of sustainability and compliance, and the relentless pace of change that defines the electronics industry. Finally, readers will gain insight into the company’s current standing and its prospects as it helps shape the future of connectivity—enabling smarter cars, more intelligent machines, and safer, more responsive medical devices.

Through stories of innovation, leadership, and transformation, "Molex Inc.: The Story of An American Company" seeks to illuminate the forces that have driven Molex's enduring success and its ongoing role as a leader in the world of engineered connectivity.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Unexpected Origins of an Industrial Giant

The year 1938 dawned with the world teetering on the brink of profound change, a sentiment echoed, perhaps inadvertently, in the quiet industrial town of Brookfield, Illinois. It was in this unassuming setting that Frederick Krehbiel, a man of ingenuity and practicality, laid the groundwork for what would eventually become Molex Inc., a global powerhouse in connectivity systems. Yet, the initial stirrings of this future titan had little to do with electronics, fiber optics, or the intricate web of modern data communications. Instead, its genesis was rooted in something far more earthy: flowerpots and salt shakers.

Frederick Krehbiel, then in his late sixties, established the Molex Products Company, naming it after a unique plastic material he had painstakingly developed. This material, the very foundation of his early enterprise, was a curious concoction of industrial byproducts: asbestos tailings, coal tar pitch, and limestone. While today such a combination might raise eyebrows, in the context of the era, it represented a resourceful application of readily available, albeit unusual, components. The company's inaugural offerings, the aforementioned flowerpots and salt shakers, were a testament to the versatility of this newly created "Molex" plastic.

The choice of these initial products might seem quaint from the vantage point of the 21st century, given Molex's later prominence in high-tech industries. However, they were born of a keen eye for simple, everyday necessities and the economic realities of the time. Frederick Krehbiel was not aiming for grand technological breakthroughs at this juncture; rather, he was focused on transforming an industrial byproduct into tangible, marketable goods. This pragmatic approach, turning waste into value, would, in an unexpected twist of fate, foreshadow the company's future ability to adapt and innovate.

Brookfield, Illinois, itself played a subtle but significant role as the birthplace of Molex. A suburb of Chicago, it offered a strategic location for a fledgling manufacturing operation, providing access to resources and a burgeoning industrial landscape. While not a bustling metropolis, its proximity to Chicago meant a connection to larger markets and a pool of potential talent, factors that would become increasingly important as the company evolved.

Frederick Krehbiel's background and motivations for founding Molex Products Company were shaped by his family history and his own practical experiences. The Krehbiel family, with roots tracing back to Switzerland and Germany, had settled in the

United States in the 1820s, seeking a home that aligned with their Mennonite ideals of pacifism. This foundational principle of thoughtful consideration and community could be seen, perhaps, in Frederick's meticulous development of his proprietary plastic and his initial focus on practical, widely used items.

Before founding Molex, Frederick had attended Chicago's Armour Institute and Cornell University, followed by a stint at Arnold Engineering Company. These experiences would have provided him with a solid grounding in engineering principles and industrial processes, invaluable knowledge for someone venturing into manufacturing. His decision to establish his own business in his late sixties speaks to a persistent entrepreneurial spirit and a desire to create something tangible, even at an age when many might consider retirement.

The initial years of Molex Products Company were undoubtedly a period of foundational experimentation. Frederick Krehbiel was exploring the limits and applications of his unique plastic, seeking out markets where its properties—durability, formability, and perhaps most importantly, its cost-effectiveness—could provide a competitive edge. The humble flowerpot, a ubiquitous item in American homes, was a logical starting point, while salt shakers offered another avenue for consumer goods made from the same material.

While these early products may seem a world away from the advanced connectivity solutions Molex is known for today, they represent the very first steps in a long and remarkable journey. They established the company's manufacturing capabilities, however nascent, and initiated the process of bringing a new material to market. More importantly, they embodied Frederick Krehbiel's inventive spirit, a trait that would be passed down through generations and become a hallmark of the company's identity.

The concept of creating a plastic from industrial byproducts was, in itself, an act of innovation, driven by a desire for efficiency and resourcefulness. It speaks to a certain pragmatic creativity that would later manifest in Molex's ability to identify new applications for its materials and adapt its manufacturing processes to meet evolving industry demands. The "Molex" plastic, initially a means to make basic household items, was about to embark on a much more electrifying destiny.

This initial phase of Molex's history, though seemingly small-scale, was critical. It was here, in the manufacturing of seemingly mundane items, that the infrastructure, the early business practices, and the nascent vision for a new kind of company began to take shape. The stage was set, not for a revolution in gardening accessories or kitchenware, but for a fundamental shift in direction that would transform a modest plastic products company into a global leader in the interconnected world.

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