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Owens-Illinois Inc

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Origins of Owens-Illinois: Innovation in Toledo
- **Chapter 2** Michael J. Owens and the Bottle-Making Revolution
- **Chapter 3** Edward Drummond Libbey: Backer and Visionary
- **Chapter 4** Early Expansion and Stock Market Debut
- **Chapter 5** The 1929 Merger: Owens and Illinois Unite
- **Chapter 6** Surviving the Great Depression
- **Chapter 7** Entry into Tableware: The Libbey-Glass Acquisition
- **Chapter 8** Fiberglass Frontiers: The Owens-Corning Partnership
- **Chapter 9** Plastic Innovation and the Packaging Boom
- **Chapter 10** Forest Products and Corporate Diversification
- **Chapter 11** Asbestos, Kaylo, and Legal Legacy
- **Chapter 12** The 1980s: Leveraged Buyout and Strategic Sales
- **Chapter 13** Going Global: International Expansion
- **Chapter 14** Notable Acquisitions and Partnerships
- **Chapter 15** Refocusing on Core Glass Packaging
- **Chapter 16** O-I in the 21st Century: Modernization and Change
- **Chapter 17** The Shift to Sustainability: Environmental Responsibility
- **Chapter 18** Innovation in Manufacturing: Lean, Six Sigma, and MAGMA
- **Chapter 19** Recycling and Circular Economy Initiatives
- **Chapter 20** Financial Highs and Lows: Navigating Market Cycles
- **Chapter 21** The Fit to Win Program: Streamlining Operations
- **Chapter 22** Regulatory and Legal Challenges: Price Fixing and Antitrust
- **Chapter 23** People, Culture, and Leadership at O-I
- **Chapter 24** Present Day: O-I's Global Impact and Brand Partnerships
- **Chapter 25** Looking Forward: O-I's Future Prospects and Continuing Legacy

Introduction

Owens-Illinois Inc, now known as O-I Glass, Inc., stands as a symbol of American industrial innovation and resilience. From its beginnings in the heartland of Ohio to its emergence as the world's largest manufacturer of container glass, Owens-Illinois has charted a path defined by technological breakthroughs, strategic growth, and a steadfast commitment to serving society's needs for safe and sustainable packaging. This book, "Owens-Illinois Inc: The Story of An American Company," is both a detailed chronicle of the company's history and an exploration of its enduring influence on the global economy and the glass packaging industry.

The company's journey began with an inventor's dream—Michael J. Owens and his revolutionary bottle-making machine. Supported by visionary backers like Edward Drummond Libbey, Owens's technology transformed the production of glass bottles, ushering in an era where bottled beverages and packaged goods became staples of modern life. Over more than a century, this spirit of ingenuity and adaptation has remained at the core of Owens-Illinois's identity, propelling its expansion from a regional manufacturer to an international powerhouse.

Central to the Owens-Illinois story are pivotal moments of transformation—mergers that forged new identities, investments in emerging materials like fiberglass and plastics, and forays into sectors ranging from tableware to forest products. The company's willingness to embrace diversification while staying true to its glassmaking roots speaks to both strategic boldness and the challenges inherent in evolving markets. Along this path, Owens-Illinois has weathered economic crises, legal battles, technological revolutions, and shifts in consumer demand that have shaped its character and leadership.

No account of Owens-Illinois would be complete without acknowledging its enduring impact on communities, customers, and the environment. The company's commitment to sustainability runs deep: from pioneering recycling programs and advancing greener manufacturing technologies to setting ambitious goals for reducing emissions and increasing the use of recycled materials. Today, O-I is not only a supplier to some of the world's most iconic food and beverage brands but also a champion of circular economy principles and environmental stewardship.

Yet, Owens-Illinois's journey has not always been smooth. The legacy of past decisions, such as involvement with asbestos-containing products, has given rise to significant legal and financial challenges. The company has faced periods of financial stress, market downturns, and operational restructuring. However, its enduring ability to navigate these obstacles and adapt its business strategy has ensured its ongoing

relevance and resilience in a rapidly transforming world.

As this book unfolds, readers will discover how Owens-Illinois has maintained its leadership in glass packaging—not by resting on its laurels, but by continuously embracing change. Through innovation, sustainability, and a dedication to quality, O-I continues to shape the future of packaging and to create lasting value for its stakeholders. This is the story of an American company that remains, against all odds, an industry pioneer and a beacon for responsible manufacturing in the 21st century.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Genesis in Toledo

To understand Owens-Illinois Inc., one must first appreciate the city that became its cradle: Toledo, Ohio. Often dubbed "The Glass City," Toledo's destiny as a global glass manufacturing hub was not preordained but forged through a combination of industrial acumen, abundant natural resources, and, most critically, a spirit of invention. It was here, at the confluence of human ingenuity and strategic advantage, that the foundations of Owens-Illinois were laid in the early 20th century.

Before Toledo earned its glassy moniker, glass production was a laborious, often dangerous, hand-blown craft. Skilled glassblowers, often aided by young boys performing grueling tasks, shaped molten glass into bottles and other containers. This traditional method limited output, made standardization difficult, and kept costs high. The industry was ripe for disruption, and the answer would emerge from a seemingly unlikely partnership in Toledo.

The story truly begins with Edward Drummond Libbey, a prominent figure who inherited the New England Glass Company from his father. In 1888, seeking better production conditions, Libbey relocated his entire operation, machinery, and a contingent of workers from East Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Toledo, Ohio. The move was driven by the promise of cheap natural gas—a crucial fuel for glass furnaces—along with accessible silica-rich sand and a robust transportation network. This bold relocation marked a pivotal moment, transforming Toledo into a burgeoning center for glass manufacturing.

Among the workers Libbey recruited from West Virginia was a young glassblower named Michael J. Owens. Owens, born in 1859, had a starkly different background from the New England-educated Libbey. Starting in a glass factory at the tender age of 10, after a brief stint in coal mines, Owens possessed an intimate, hands-on understanding of glass production from the ground up. Despite his limited formal education, his ambition and practical expertise were undeniable, and he quickly rose through the ranks, becoming a supervisor at Libbey's plant.

It was this potent combination of Libbey's entrepreneurial vision and financial backing with Owens's profound practical knowledge and inventive mind that would prove revolutionary. Owens, recognized by Libbey for his genius and comprehensive understanding of glassmaking, began to experiment with automating the bottle-making process. His initial endeavors focused on semi-automatic machines for light bulbs, drinking glasses, and lamp chimneys.

The real breakthrough, however, came in 1903. Michael J. Owens, with the crucial

assistance of engineer William Emil Bock and others, perfected the first commercially viable, fully automatic bottle-making machine. This wasn't merely an incremental improvement; it was a seismic shift. Before this invention, glass bottles were blown manually, a process that was slow, inconsistent, and often relied on child labor. Owens's machine, capable of producing thousands of bottles a day, drastically increased efficiency and significantly reduced costs.

The impact of Owens's invention extended far beyond mere industrial efficiency. The automatic bottle machine played a direct role in eradicating child labor in glass container plants. The National Child Labor Committee of New York City, in 1913, explicitly acknowledged that the rapid adoption of Owens's machines achieved more in eliminating child labor than legislative efforts had managed. This technological leap not only streamlined production but also brought about a significant societal change, removing young workers from hazardous factory environments.

With this groundbreaking invention in hand, the Owens Bottle Machine Company was founded in Toledo, Ohio, on September 3, 1903. This new entity, succeeding a New Jersey firm of the same name established earlier that year, was primarily focused on manufacturing and licensing the use of Owens's revolutionary automatic bottle machine. The company also retained the right to manufacture and deal in glass, and to hold stock in other companies.

The early days of the Owens Bottle Machine Company were marked by rapid expansion and the strategic acquisition of other glass-related businesses. These acquisitions included everything from sand quarries, crucial for raw materials, to companies producing cardboard boxes for shipping the newly mass-produced bottles. The company's innovative machines were quickly licensed to various bottle manufacturers, spreading the reach of this new technology.

The Owens Bottle Machine Company also had an experimental and demonstration factory in Toledo on Libbey Street, where the original Owens machine was developed. Initially, this facility produced bottles for demonstration purposes, but it soon began commercial production, making beer bottles under the control of the Northwestern Ohio Glass Co.

By 1916, the company's growing prominence was reflected in its listing on the New York Stock Exchange. A few years later, in 1919, the company formally changed its name to The Owens Bottle Company, signaling a shift in emphasis from merely selling the machines to the large-scale manufacture of bottles themselves. The "O in a square" mark, associated with Owens, began appearing on a wide variety of bottles, from medicine and food containers to beverage bottles, becoming a common sight in the market.

The stage was now set for the next major transformation in the company's trajectory,

one that would solidify its position as a dominant force in the glass industry. The initial spark of innovation in Toledo, ignited by Michael J. Owens and supported by Edward Drummond Libbey, had matured into a formidable enterprise. The story of Owens-Illinois, Inc. was just beginning, but its roots were firmly planted in the "Glass City" and in the remarkable invention that reshaped an entire industry.

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