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Whirlpool Corp.

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Introduction

Whirlpool Corporation stands as a testament to American entrepreneurship, innovation, and the enduring spirit of enterprise. Its journey from a small operation housed in a Michigan barn to a multinational powerhouse on the S&P 500 mirrors, in many ways, the evolution of 20th and 21st-century American industry itself. Over more than a century, Whirlpool has transformed not just the way people wash clothes or store food, but how millions experience life at home—shaping daily routines with practical design, pioneering technology, and thoughtful service.

At its core, this book is both a chronicle and analysis—a deep dive into the history of Whirlpool Corporation, its pivotal moments, its leaders, and the choices that propelled it forward. From the ingenuity of the Upton brothers and the resilience needed during economic turmoil, to landmark innovations like the automatic washer and iconic brands such as KitchenAid and Maytag, the story of Whirlpool is rich with lessons in adaptation, collaboration, and the relentless pursuit of improvement.

Yet no history is written in isolation, and Whirlpool's narrative unfolds against the changing backdrop of American and global society: the rise of suburban living, the boom of consumer culture, world wars and shifting markets, as well as the more recent tides of globalization, digitization, and sustainability. These external forces—along with the company's own culture of invention—have shaped both Whirlpool's fortunes and its ongoing responsibilities as a corporate citizen.

In recounting Whirlpool's ambitious expansion into international markets like Canada, Latin America, India, and Europe, this book explores how a quintessentially American firm learned to meet diverse consumer needs, bridging cultures while building a portfolio of trusted, regional brands. The chapters that follow provide not only an account of mergers and acquisitions, product launches and financial results, but also an inside look at factory floors, research centers, and the communities touched by Whirlpool's philanthropy.

Importantly, this is a contemporary story as well as a historical one. Whirlpool's present-day landscape is marked by both formidable challenges and remarkable opportunities: fierce competition, technological upheavals, and the daily pressures of a global marketplace, but also promising advances in smart appliances, sustainability, and a renewed focus on serving households in a rapidly changing world.

"The Story of An American Company" aims to shed light on the forces that have driven Whirlpool's enduring success and its occasional stumbles. As we embark on these pages, readers will discover how one company's innovations have not only shaped the

appliance industry, but have also influenced the fabric of everyday life for generations.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Birth of Upton Machine Company

The roots of what would become a global appliance empire were planted in the fertile ground of American ingenuity and a touch of entrepreneurial daring. It was 1911, a year when Model T Fords were still a novelty, and electricity was slowly making its way into American homes, promising a future of unprecedented convenience. In this burgeoning era, three individuals, bound by family and a shared vision, laid the cornerstone of what would eventually become Whirlpool Corporation. These were the Upton brothers, Louis and Frederick, and their uncle, Emory Upton.

The journey began with Louis Cassius Upton, a man whose early career as an insurance salesman brought him into contact with the rapidly developing world of electricity. Born in Fredonia, New York, in 1886, Louis was a driven individual who, after graduating high school and facing the loss of his father, had to work to support his family. His work with Commonwealth Edison, a prominent utility company, sparked an obsession: the potential of an electric washing machine.

This fascination was not just a passing interest. Louis had previously invested his life savings, a sum of \$500, into a venture with a hardware merchant in South Bend, Indiana, who sought to manufacture home washers. That initial foray, however, ended in bankruptcy. Yet, from this setback emerged an unexpected opportunity. The dealer, feeling responsible for Louis's loss, offered him a patent for a manually operated clothes washer as compensation. This seemingly humble gift would prove to be the genesis of something much larger.

Louis, with his imaginative mind, immediately envisioned this hand-powered contraption transformed by an electric motor. He turned to his uncle, Emory Upton, a skilled mechanic who owned a machine shop in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Together, they embarked on the challenging task of motorizing the manual washer. Emory, with his practical expertise, successfully engineered a transmission that could harness electric power to automate the laborious process of washing clothes.

With a working prototype in hand, Louis needed capital to turn his vision into a commercial reality. He found a crucial financial backer in Lowell C. Bassford, a Chicago retailing executive and banker. Bassford agreed to invest \$5,000, a significant sum at the time, on the condition that Louis dedicate himself full-time to the new venture, leaving his job at Commonwealth Edison. Thus, on November 11, 1911, the Upton Machine Company was officially formed in St. Joseph, Michigan, with Louis, Emory, and Bassford as its founders. Louis's brother, Frederick, joined the company a few months later in 1912, taking on the role of office manager and assisting with deliveries and repairs.

The fledgling company soon secured its first significant order: 100 electric, motor-driven wringer washers for Federal Electric, a division of Commonwealth Edison. This initial contract was a pivotal moment, offering both a crucial boost and a looming challenge. The Uptons diligently manufactured and delivered the machines, but a serious flaw quickly emerged. A recurring problem with a cast-iron gear caused every single washer to break down with daily use.

This could have been the end of the Upton Machine Company before it even truly began. However, Louis Upton's commitment to integrity and quality shone through. He personally oversaw the repair of every single faulty machine, replacing the defective cast-iron gears with more robust cut-steel gears, all at the company's expense. This extraordinary display of dedication and customer service deeply impressed Federal Electric. Far from being deterred, the company was so moved by Upton's ethical conduct and commitment to quality that it promptly doubled its initial order to 200 washers. This act of turning a crisis into an opportunity solidified a vital relationship and set a precedent for the company's future approach to product quality and customer satisfaction.

The relationship with Federal Electric, however, proved to be temporary. After three years, Federal Electric decided to begin manufacturing its own washing machines, likely to offset the impending costs of World War I. This decision left the Upton Machine Company facing a significant setback. With their primary customer now a competitor, the Uptons realized they needed to diversify to ensure their survival.

To weather this early storm, the Upton Machine Company made its first acquisition, purchasing the American Tool Works for \$20,000 in new Upton Machine Company stock. This strategic move brought with it a new product line: toys, including popguns, cork guns, and air rifles, as well as camping equipment and ironers. This diversification kept the company afloat during a challenging period, allowing them to hone their manufacturing processes and maintain operations while seeking new avenues for their core washing machine business. The American Tool Works venture proved profitable until its sale in 1925.

A pivotal turning point arrived in 1916 when the Upton Machine Company forged a partnership that would define a significant portion of its early history: an agreement with Sears, Roebuck and Co. Sears, a giant in the retail world, agreed to market two models of Upton's wringer washers under its "Allen" brand. This collaboration proved highly successful, with demand for the Upton-manufactured washers quickly outstripping the company's production capabilities. The regular model retailed for \$54.75, while the deluxe model sold for \$95.00, proving popular with consumers.

The strong demand necessitated expansion, and by 1921, Sears loaned the Upton Machine Company \$87,500 to enlarge its washer factory. This loan was eventually

converted into shares of stock in the Upton Machine Company, further solidifying the bond between the two companies. This mutually beneficial relationship led to Upton becoming Sears' exclusive supplier of washing machines, both electric and gasoline-powered, by 1923. The gasoline-powered models were particularly important for reaching rural customers who lacked access to electricity.

As the decade progressed, the relationship with Sears continued to deepen, and the volume of orders grew substantially. By the mid-1920s, Upton Machine Company needed to significantly increase its manufacturing capacity and distribution efficiency to keep pace with Sears' growing retail operations. This need for greater scale led to a crucial decision in 1929. On April 3, 1929, the Upton Machine Company merged with the Nineteen Hundred Washer Company of Binghamton, New York. This merger created the Nineteen Hundred Corporation, a new entity that combined the strengths and manufacturing facilities of both companies, positioning them as a leading player in the electric washing machine industry in the United States. The St. Joseph plant saw significant expansion to support a new product line, which would become known as Kenmore in 1930. The new corporation catered to some 4,000 dealers across the nation, and Sears, with its catalog reaching over 11 million households, continued to give the company preferential positioning. Upton machines were also sold in more than 300 Sears-Roebuck retail stores, further extending their reach.

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