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The Howe Scale Company: Its Time and Its People



This advertising card for the Howe Scale Company was copyrighted in 1884. The use of an attractive female to promote product sales was in fashion even then.

About the Author

S. Kendall Wild, retired editor of the *Rutland Herald*, is the author of this concise history of the people and times of the Howe Scale Company, one of the city's principal employers for many years.

Wild is well acquainted with local and state history through his association with the *Herald* during the years 1952-1992. Starting as a reporter on the *Herald's* City Desk, he covered City Hall and worked at the Springfield and Vermont Press Bureaus. He became managing editor in 1962, and editor in 1977.

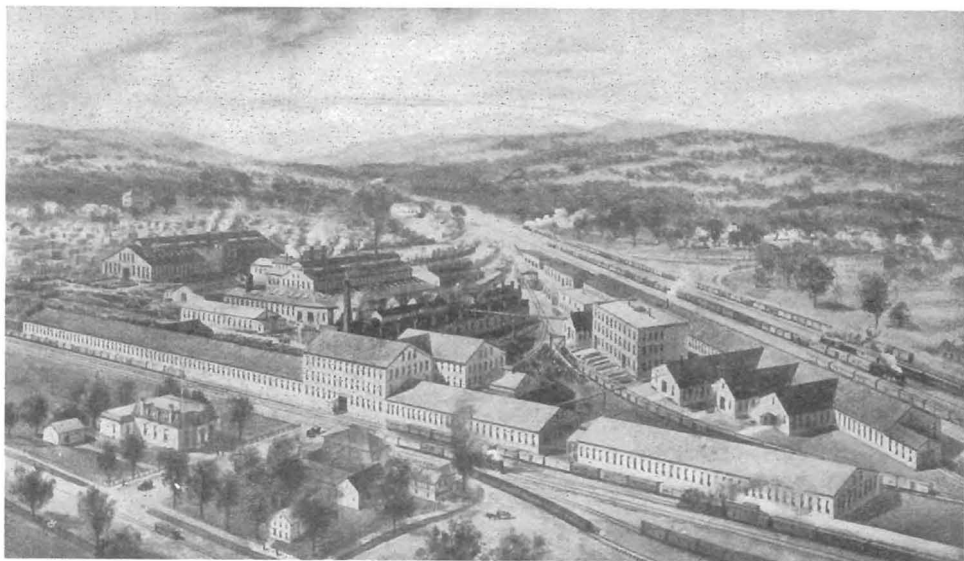
Wild has deep Vermont roots and grew up on a farm in Londonderry. He is a graduate of Rutland High School and Harvard University and served in the Army of Occupation in Germany.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Vermont chose Wild to receive its 1994 Civil Liberties Award, saying:

"Wild will be recognized for his eloquent and consistent defense of First Amendment principles. He served as mentor to a generation of reporters, and as teacher to the general public. Civil liberties in Vermont have been strengthened by his work and his example."

Although retired, Wild continues to work weekends writing editorials and an occasional news story.

He is a Life member of the Rutland Historical Society and has edited two previous Quarterlies: "Hospital Care in Rutland—The First Century" and "John Pixley Clement—Personal Impressions of the Great War (1914-1919)."



RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

General offices and factory at Rutland, Vermont.

The Howe Scale Company: Its Time and Its People

by
Kendall Wild

Weighing devices have been used by humans from the time they first started settling into specific areas instead of hunting as nomads. It is likely that scales originated in the Tigris-Euphrates valley or ancient Iran, but the earliest identifiable relic of a scale was found in Egypt, dating back about 6,000 years ago. It was a simple device but followed the principle used ever since – a stick or rod was used as a means of holding two platforms, attached by cord or string to each end of the stick. An object in one of the platforms would be determined as being lighter or heavier than an object in the other platform. This type of weighing device is held by blindfolded Justice, as she is pictured as “Libra”, the Zodiac sign.

There was nothing blindfolded about Frank M. Strong of Vergennes when he worked for the Sampson Scale Company in that town in the years before the Civil War. In 1856 he took out a patent on a system that eliminated as much friction as possible when weight is transmitted from the platform where something rests to the scale where the weight is registered. Platform scales had been in use for a couple of decades before, but they were clumsy and inefficient.

The first major use of Strong’s more efficient method was to weigh canal boats in New Jersey. The one he built had a capacity of 200 tons, was 30 feet wide and 70 feet long. The canal company (Morris Canal of New Jersey) used that scale daily for 25 years.

Strong took Thomas Ross, a friend, as a partner. They were looking for someone with a plant big enough to turn out the devices they were designing. They met John Howe, Jr., who had a foundry in Brandon. Howe took Strong and Ross into partnership. Strong’s patent of what was known as the “cup and ball” method produced scales that won top prizes and much praise nationwide, and remained a feature of scale making for years to come.

In 1956, on the centennial of Strong’s invention patent, a local scale company executive said: “Methods have changed and many new developments have been added, but that idea just hasn’t been improved in platform scales.”

Howe bought out Strong and Ross in 1864, but a series of accidents and shaky business judgment led Howe to declare bankruptcy on May 8, 1869. An early account of his time said: “In consequence of unfortunate management in the transaction of business, the company became hopelessly insolvent in 1869.”

The Brandon shops and equipment were bought by Nathan T. Sprague, Jr. of Brandon, thus founding the Brandon Manufacturing Company. In 1870, Sprague bought the Sampson Scale Company, but the name “Howe” was so well known nationally that Sprague continued to use the name on the product. Howe himself, died in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1871 at the age of 51.

Sprague continued with a full line of weighing devices of all sizes, from office scales to scales big enough to weigh railroad cars. One of Sprague's partners was John Boardman Page of Rutland, who had recently been a Vermont governor. He was also a director of the Rutland & Burlington Railroad, and had always been interested in promoting Rutland business.



John B. Page

HISTORY OF RUTLAND COUNTY

In 1872, the Brandon plant was severely damaged by fire, and although it recovered and continued for four more years in Brandon, Page increased the pressure to move the plant to Rutland.

The railroads through Rutland have had a series of names, but the tracks remained pretty much where they were laid. Next to Strongs Avenue in Rutland the line to New York went south and the line to Boston branched off to the east. It was in that angle that Page and others decided the scale company should be located. The site at the time was occupied to a large extent by the families of laborers, chiefly immigrants from Ireland, who had shanties and small garden plantings. They

were told to move. In an editorial commenting on the arrival of Howe Scale, the *Rutland Herald*, rather superciliously said: "The bog-trotters will have to dig up their taties and go elsewhere."

In 1876, the Howe Scale Company came to that railroad angle, and the Howe name in one form or another has remained at that location ever since. Although the site was ideal for use of rail connections, there were hard times at first. Page, a principal backer, had some sort of personal financial problem and had to quit the scale company, the railroads, and other firms where he had been a director. Strong and Ross were also out of the picture.

Later employees recalled how their predecessors told them about the late 1870s and early 1880s when work was so scarce they would work for a week and be paid only three dollars. Then in 1886 a person took over who put the company on a strong financial footing and gave it a renewed national reputation. He was Dr. John Abner Mead, who later became well known as the first mayor of Rutland City and later a Vermont governor.

Dr. Mead had an interesting career before he went into industry. Born in Fair Haven in 1841, he entered Middlebury College in 1860. At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, he volunteered for service and joined the 12th Vermont Volunteer Regiment. The regiment was in reserve at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, but saw action at Gettysburg. The regiment was mustered out later in 1863 and Mead returned to Middlebury.

After graduation he studied medicine for a while under a "Dr. Perkins" in Castleton, and then went to the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. He graduated from there in 1868, spent two years of residency (in those days it was called being "house physician") at Kings County Hospital near New York City, and then returned to Rutland to practice.

In 1872, Dr. Mead took part in an autopsy of a woman severely burned in a local fire. He helped determine her identity, and also determined that she had been murdered before being set on fire. As a result, a man was arrested and convicted of the murder.

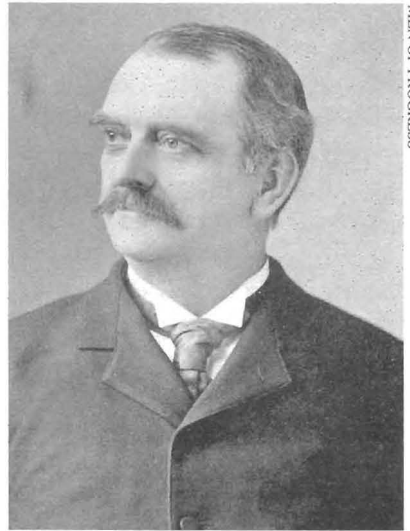
In the early days of industrial development in Vermont companies had no compunction about touting their own product and downplaying rivals by name. When the scale company was still in Brandon, it obtained this 1873 testimonial from Z.V.K. Willson of Rutland, assistant superintendent of the Delaware & Hudson: "Gentlemen – We are using your Howe Track Scales exclusively, and they prove entirely satisfactory. We have removed the Fairbanks and Rochester scales and replaced them with Howe, finding the first placing of the Howe far less expensive, and in the item of repair there is no comparison."

A Howe executive took a scale to an exhibition in Paris that retired President U.S. Grant was visiting. Grant was said to have stepped on the scale and discovered he had lost 17 pounds during his ocean trip.

Dr. Mead gave up the practice of medicine in 1888 and became president of Howe Scale. As a Civil War veteran he had also been active in the affairs of veterans, reaching the rank of Brigadier General in the Grand Army of the Republic. Subsequent biographical notices often called him by his military title. As one of them put it: "It is for his great and useful activities in commercial and financial lines that General Mead is most widely known." He was one of the most extensive property owners in Rutland and was a director of many banks and railroads.

When Dr. Mead first became active in Howe Scale, the company had been making about \$350,000 a year. After two decades under Dr. Mead, the company was making \$1.5 million. Dr. Mead became Rutland City's representative to the Vermont House in 1906. In those days each town or city sent a single person to the house. Mead was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1908, and Governor in 1910, serving until 1912.

Part of Dr. Mead's success as an industrialist was due to his knack for picking subordinates who were smart about their fields of work and who worked hard.



John A. Mead

MEAN OF PROGRESS

Some of them took part in other businesses as well. Among them were William Lewis, S.T. Braley, Charles Johnson, W.R. Page, J.S. Richardson and Leon G. Bagley. Bagley, in addition to being a general manager at Howe for many years, was also instrumental in the start-up of Rutland's street lighting (by electricity) and in the early local telephone operations.

At Howe, Bagley's official title for a long time was "general agent," but in effect he seems to have been general manager. As an example of his varied activities is a memorandum kept in the company's files for years, sternly instructing the shop foremen to make sure the people under them did not manufacture things for their own uses at home, while working on company time.

Another of Bagley's notes posted in all parts of the business on 26 April 1911 said this:

Attention is called to the following copy of a regulation of the State Board of Health effective May 1, 1911.

Whereas, it has been demonstrated that the use of what is known as the common drinking cup is dangerous to the public health and a source of communication of infectious diseases, therefore, under the authority of the statute imposed upon the State Board of Health ... the use of the common drinking cup in all public places, parks, fountains, school houses, factories, mills, workshops, libraries, public halls or other public buildings, railroad stations and railroad trains, is hereby prohibited from and after May 1, 1911.

In view of the law and the foregoing resolution, this company is not to furnish drinking cups or glasses for promiscuous use on our premises. The several foremen will see to it that cups are not left at the drinking places in the shops for common use, in violation of said regulation.

Yours truly, Howe Scale Co., L.G. Bagley, general agent.

In 1877, Dr. Mead married Mary M. Sherman. They had one daughter, born 12 October 1878, named Mary Sherman Mead. Meanwhile, on Christmas Day in 1873 a boy was born in St. Johnsbury who was named Carl Bingham Hinsman. His father died when he was a child and the boy came to live with an uncle, Leon Bagley, in Rutland. Bagley was the brother of Hinsman's mother.

Although his portraits show him as rather solemn looking, Hinsman was quite fun loving and rather mischievous. The Bagleys lived on Church Street not far from the site of what is now the Rutland Middle School (until recently Rutland High School). About where the school's large gymnasium and cafeteria are located was a mansion built by H.H. Baxter, prominent in railroad matters. The mansion featured a gateway flanked by two stone columns, atop each of which was an imposing cast-iron statue of a Great Dane. Leon Bagley had a small daughter, Myra Bagley. Hinsman told his little cousin Myra that the dogs would bark at midnight on Halloween. The little girl bundled up and sat patiently across the street until well after midnight, waiting for the dogs to bark.

With his uncle's connections, Hinsman was able to get a job as a clerk at Howe Scale in 1891, shortly after graduation from Rutland High School. But, it was another connection that advanced his career at Howe Scale. The dapper and fun-loving clerk had caught the eye of Dr. Mead's daughter, Mary Sherman Mead, whose nickname was "Daisy". In June 1902, they were married, and Hinsman became a vice president of Howe.

Dr. Mead continued as chief executive of Howe Scale until his death in 1920. Hinsman became president, but his interests lay in the financial side of business, rather than in production or direct sales. Consequently, in 1925 he sold his interest in the company to a group from Jamestown, New York, headed by Frank G. Riehl. Hinsman remained interested in Rutland affairs. After selling Howe Scale he constructed the Service Building on Merchants Row, in the art deco style of the 1920s with a light at the top that only recently was made workable again.

Hinsman's father-in-law had a downtown building named after him. The Mead Building at Merchants Row and Center Streets was put up after a fire destroyed a hotel at that site in 1906. While the Service Building could have been named the "Hinsman Building," Hinsman preferred to remain in the background, although he was active in the Rutland Rotary Club, Rutland Hospital directors, and as president of the Green Mountain Council of the Boy Scouts. Hinsman suffered a stroke and died in 1941. His widow lived in the Mead mansion, with its mansard roof, at Prospect and Washington streets, until her death in 1954.

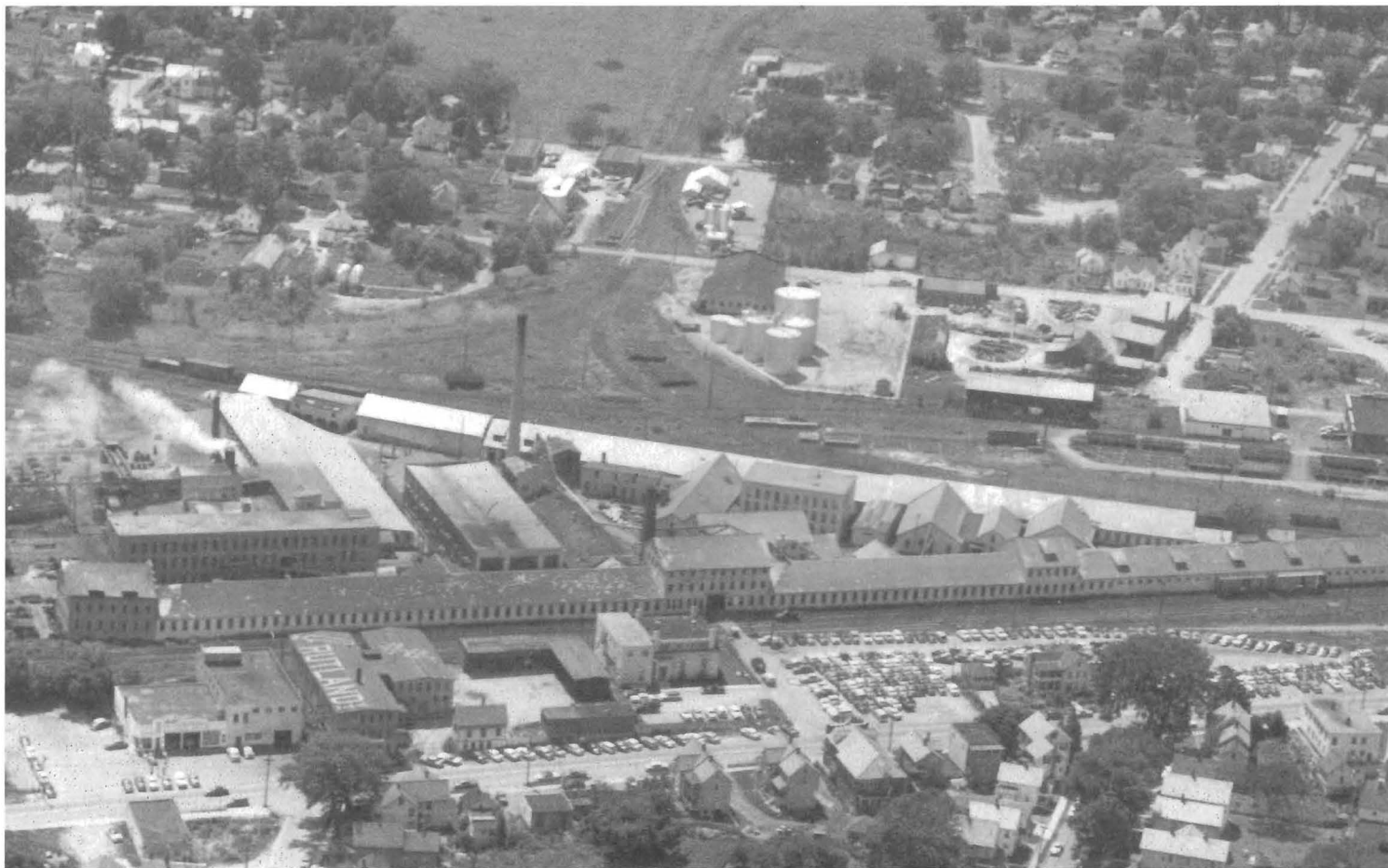
Meanwhile, Frank Riehl had acquired Howe Scale and was quite a different sort of manager. Employees often spoke of how he turned up unexpectedly, around corners or behind their desks, to see how they were doing their jobs. He traveled for days, generally by train, to pop in on the various Howe branches and have them increase their sales. In Jamestown he had been manager of a firm that made metal furniture, so he was well acquainted with metalworking.

The great depression came shortly after he had acquired Howe Scale, and even those who disliked him agreed that his ability to run a large company was such that he was able to surmount the sharp drop in business because of the economic downturn. Many a person, they said, would have gone under from the pressure of the times. In one respect Riehl was far ahead of his time. Today he would have a lot of company, but in his day what he did was unusual. He jogged.

When he wasn't off visiting branch offices or trying to dig up new business, Riehl lived by himself in the Hotel Bardwell. Every morning, for years, he would rise early, put on a sweatshirt, jock strap and sweat pants, and jog down Strongs Avenue past the company he owned, to South Main Street and Rutland Fairgrounds. He would jog two laps around the fair's track, and run back to the hotel. Usually it was by way of Strongs Avenue but once in a while early risers on South Main Street Hill would see him slogging his way up past their homes, to Madison Street and back downtown.

The close attention to keeping fit started early in his life. A native of Buffalo,

A plan of the Howe Scale Company complex from the 1890 Rutland Sanborn Insurance map.



An aerial view of the Howe Scale Company at mid-20th century.

New York, Riehl was a star athlete in high school and later at Syracuse University. An associate of his at Syracuse said: "He was just a natural born athlete, one of the best in this part of the country."

While Dr. Mead and Hinsman had been active in community affairs either in politics, financial business or social work, Riehl was quite different. While close associates said he could be quite pleasant and conversational, he was not much of a "joiner" or socializer.

A *Rutland Herald* account of Howe Scale's centennial in 1956 had this to say about him: "By comparison with his two predecessors, both long established in city affairs, Riehl might as well have been general manager of the moon, for all Rutlanders knew about him. It didn't bother him in the least. When he finally sold the company in 1954, many Rutlanders not connected with Howe Scale still didn't know what he looked like."

When Riehl began to think about relieving himself of some of management's burdens, he turned to several people who had experience in the company, particularly John G. Fenton. Fenton was a Rutland native who began his work career as a machinist apprentice at Howe Scale in 1922. After a couple of years he left to join the Rutland Railroad, where he worked until 1938. After going into business for himself for a few years, he became a civilian employee of the U.S. Navy when World War II broke out. He was at Navy yards in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island.

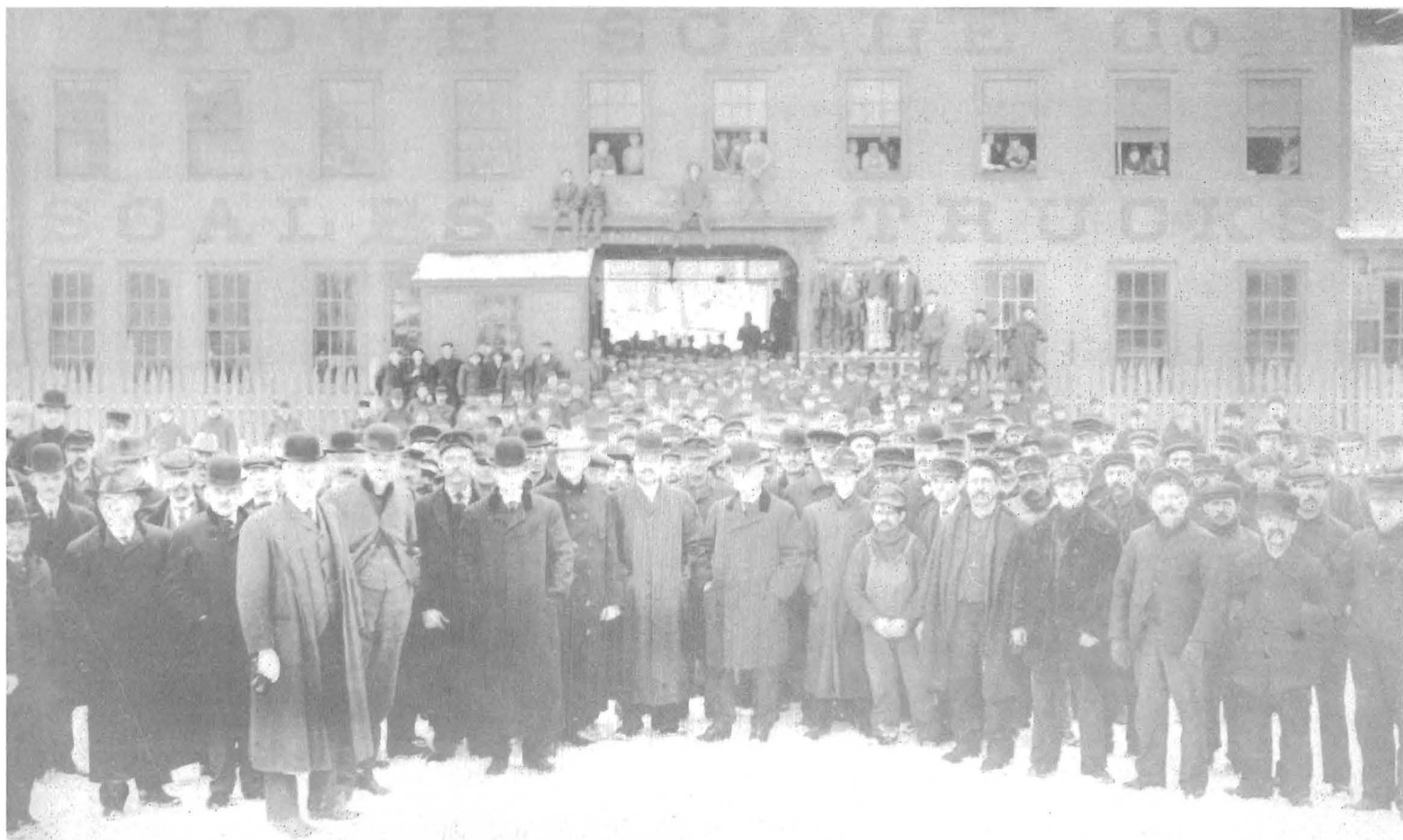
Riehl began to think seriously about his approaching retirement and got Fenton to return to Rutland to become general foreman at Howe Scale. Later he became vice president in charge of production and then Riehl made him chairman of a three-man operating committee to assume more of the daily administrative chores.

When Howe was acquired by Safety Industries of New Haven, Connecticut, Fenton became chief executive of the works in Rutland.

Labor relations at Howe Scale generally were on an even keel. Considering the troubles of industries elsewhere in the country, it was unusual for Howe to have had only three major strikes in a half-century, plus a short troubled time in 1944. The three major strikes were in 1902, 1921 and 1953.

When Dr. Mead took over the operation of Howe in 1888, he was described as being "extremely solicitous for the welfare of the men working under him, and sympathetic with their interests." How long the mutual feeling of warmth lasted would be difficult to judge. Howe employees of years later were fully convinced of a story that could well be apocryphal, but which they firmly believed.

The story went that when Dr. Mead was running for the House in 1906, for lieutenant governor in 1908 and for governor in 1910, political organizers in Rutland would gather Howe workmen together, away from the plant on their own time. The organizers would lecture the workers, many of whom were not well lettered. The organizers would say: "You don't like Mr. Mead? Well, here is a ballot with his name on it. After his name is a box. The thing for you to do when you go to vote is to put a big "X" in that box. That will mean you want to cross him right out of office."



The work force of the Howe Scale Company was photographed in the winter of 1906-1907. In the center of the group is Dr. John A. Mead, president of the company. Superintendent Leon Bagley is in the left foreground with the open coat.

As for working conditions, the six-day week was common at the beginning of the 20th Century. A notice from Bagley dated 27 October 1899, said:

"To whom it may concern: Beginning Monday, Oct. 30, 1899, and continuing until further notice, the shops will run on the regular schedule of 10 hours per day the first five days of the week and nine hours on Saturday. The whistle will blow at 6:50 and 7 a.m., at noon, 12:50 and 1 p.m., and 6 p.m., except Saturday, when the last whistle will be blown at 5 p.m."

The whistle at noon would signal the time for lunch, and at 12:50 p.m. the signal would give them 10 minutes to get back to begin work at 1 p.m. Even so, there were some office notes to foremen of that period, saying workmen had been seen taking too long a time at lunch.

The 1902 walkout began on May 13th of that year, when a foreman wrote the front office: "The men all went out at 9 o'clock. Their call was for nine hours per day and a 12.5 percent advance on piecework." The strike lasted several weeks, until management agreed to the nine-hour day.

When Dr. Mead died of pneumonia in 1920, the 500-man workforce at Howe attended the funeral, and was taken by street railway to the burial site in Evergreen Cemetery. It was the first time in the company's history that the workers had been paid while not at work in the plant.

The 1921 walkout was by the molders over a wage-hour dispute, which seems to have been brought on by changes the work force perceived to have taken place after the death of Dr. Mead in 1920 and the advent of Carl Hinsman as company president. Some of the people who went out in '21 didn't return for four years.

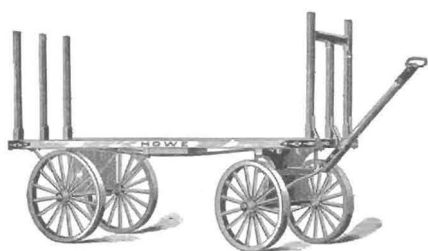
The 1944 dispute was over the approach of a couple of new unions, and while the National Labor Relations Board ruled that the company was in error in opposing the organizations it said the unions were wrong to have staged a work stoppage. The next strike, in the summer of 1953 was over wages. It lasted for about two months.

Walter J. German, who joined Howe in 1902 just as that first strike took place, was the first Howe workman to be elected to the City Board of Aldermen. He went on the board in 1914 and served until 1918, running on a labor ticket. Other Howe workers who became aldermen included Raymond T. Hannon and Arthur E. Crowley, Sr.

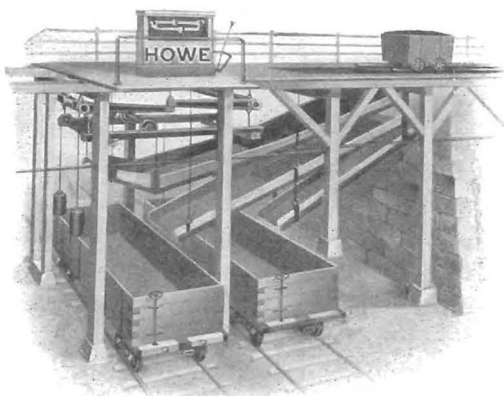
In 1954, Riehl sold Howe Scale to two men, Jay Levins and David Berdon, who headed an organization in New York City that acted as a business broker. In the sale, Riehl described Howe Scale as "a good clean company" and added: "I say with considerable elation that Howe Scale enters a new era. This will be borne out as the general program unfolds."

The brokers sold Howe in a couple of years to Safety Industries Inc., with headquarters in New Haven, Connecticut. That company had a large number of diverse holdings, and Rutland people hoped that Howe Scale would become an integral part of the diversity.

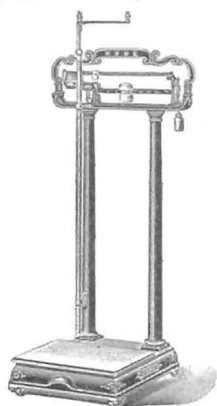
In a few years Safety Industries sold Howe to Robert H. Morse of Montreal, Canada. Morse was a grandson of the Fairbanks Morse manufacturing family whose products included the Fairbanks scale that had been such a competitor for Howe



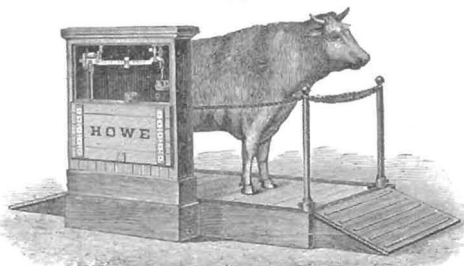
Baggage and express wagon.



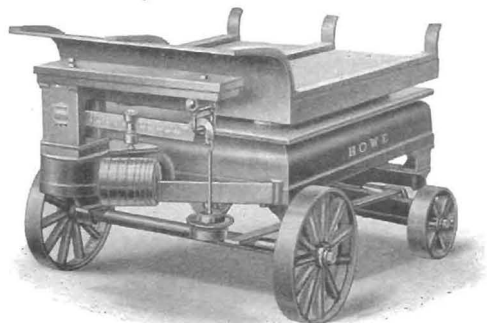
Coal tipple scales.



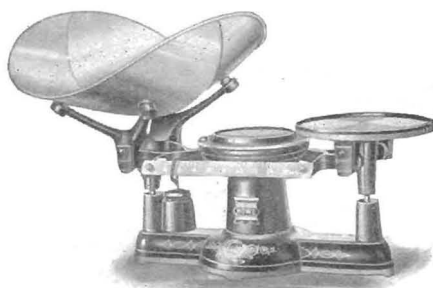
Physician's scales.



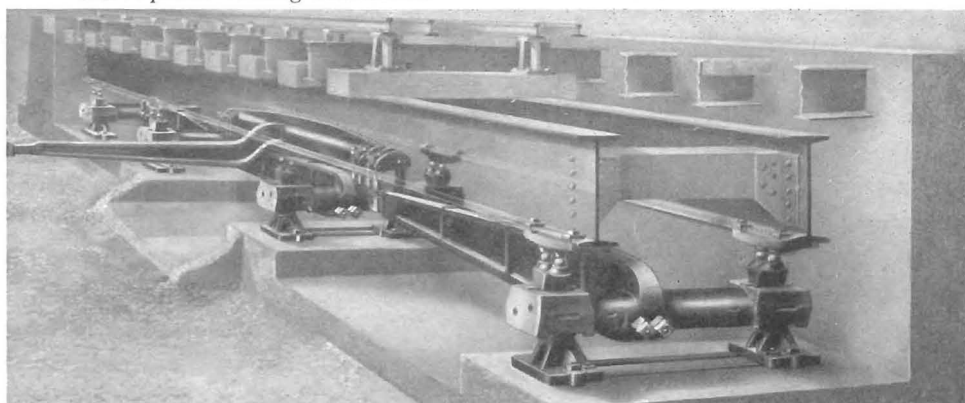
Portable bullock scale.



Short pillar rolling mill scale.



Even balance scales.



Howe ball bearing railroad track scale.

Scale. Morse's chief problem was too much debt. He combined Howe with the Richardson Scale Company of New Jersey, and that was when the company here officially became known as Howe-Richardson, although Rutlanders continued to refer to the plant as "Howe Scale." Some top engineering and technical jobs went from Rutland to New Jersey as a result of the merger.

In 1965 a Rutland group headed by Albert A. Cree, head of the Central Vermont Public Service Corporation, negotiated a \$4.6 million refinancing program through the Vermont Industrial Building Authority. Cree headed a non-profit group known as "H-R Development Corporation" which sold mortgage notes to First National City Bank of New York and National Commercial Bank of Albany.

The Rutland people hoped that performing this service for Morse would encourage him to see to it that Howe Scale remained a local industry, even bringing back some of the jobs sent to New Jersey. They were disappointed. The financial help, it turned out, only put Morse in a better position to sell to General Tire Company which put Howe in its Aero-jet General Division.

Howe Scale was not unique in its experience. Many industries across the nation have gone through much the same change as consolidation and streamlining have taken place. For instance, a company will be started by a local family and the family will have close personal ties to that specific community. There may be labor unrest of one sort or another, but when people are recognized as being part of the same community, whether in labor or management, a certain amount of stability and solidarity remains.

When, due to financial pressure or lack of interest, the family, after several generations, decides to rid itself of daily burdens and sell to an entity whose headquarters are at a distance, attrition and outright change are very common.

Much of what came about at Howe Scale is mirrored in the events in Springfield. The machine tool shops that were the backbone of that community were owned by local families. When outside interests acquired ownership, the same sort of attrition and impending change has taken place.

Aero-jet General closed Howe Scale in 1982. An industry employing several hundred workers, one of Rutland's biggest employers, was no more.

Joseph Giancola, a local building contractor, acquired the Howe property in 1988 and 1989. A major event in his ownership was being able to extend the length of Porter Place, which branches off Park Street, opposite the fairgrounds, to the Howe property. This allowed movement to and from the property without having to find out if the railroad tracks were in use between the Howe building and Strongs Avenue.

Over the course of several years, Giancola and his family have turned the former industry into what is appropriately called "Howe Center." There are shops and galleries, including the Moon Brook Art Gallery, that occupy some of the many buildings on the property. Giancola is on the lookout for more tenants. His efforts are a good example of how imagination can make use of something that in former times had a completely different function in the community. Instead of sitting as a deteriorating hulk of an abandoned industrial building, the Howe Center plays an

active part in the efforts of the Rutland community.

In this respect it is worth noting what Robert W. Mitchell, publisher of the *Rutland Herald*, wrote in an editorial in mid-1991, after the revival of the Howe Center was under way:

Apparently successful restoration of the former Howe Scale property as an urban industrial park by Joe Giancola has been going on quietly during the past several months ...

The initial benefits at Howe Center can be measured by the 18 tenants that have occupied an estimated 150,000 square feet of the sprawling scale manufacturing property which for a century or more was one of Rutland's leading industries.

As the city's largest owner of real estate and as a construction contractor, Giancola was perhaps the only individual Rutlander having the wherewithal and the will to take on such a challenging project. He estimates that his investment so far has reached \$2.5 million, including the \$550,000 purchase price, renovation of buildings and \$750,000 for infrastructure improvements. His report that the project has reached the break-even point represents a remarkable achievement ...

His success in completing the first stage of the project is all the more remarkable under the unfavorable conditions prevailing during most of the reconstruction period. Its value to the community is that much more enhanced under the circumstances.

Although Giancola calls the project a "labor of love" and says "it's like play for me," he has never been noted for tackling a job where there wasn't some prospect for a financial return. Such a philosophy is needed when taking on single-handed something as formidable as rehabilitation of the Howe property. He deserves the wholehearted thanks of the community and any profit, if any, he can make.

(The author wishes to thank many people for providing the background material for this article, particularly Joseph Giancola of the Howe Center and Elaine Purdy of the Rutland Historical Society.)



A portion of the Howe Center which was developed by Joseph Giancola on the site of the Howe Scale Company.