



## Company Cars: Hooker Chemical, Niagara Falls, NY

by Mike White

It occurred to me that it would be interesting to know a little about the companies named on some of our modeled freight cars. There are many kits and ready-to-run cars available decorated with the names of companies that use or used the type of car modeled. Some are long gone but others are still in business today. The old billboard reefers are the most familiar example but there are other types as well. This series will look at some of these and provide some background information on the company behind the name.

### Hooker Chemical, Niagara Falls, NY

The Hooker Chemical Co. is best known for burying drums of waste chemicals in Love Canal in Niagara Falls, which became a major environmental site in the 1970s. Hooker Chemical was founded in 1903, as The Development and Funding Company by Elon Hooker, of Rochester, NY. He was from an old line New England family and had degrees in civil engineering from the University of Rochester and Cornell. A search for a suitable business for investment identified the Townsend cell, which converted salt to sodium hydroxide/caustic soda/lye, chlorine, and hydrogen by electrolysis. The chlorine was sold for "sanitation" (and chlorination of drinking water) and bleaching as chlorinated lime. (This was before the development of

steel cylinders allowing shipment of liquid chlorine.)

Electrolysis of salt had been known since 1807, but the Townsend cell was the first practical cell. It used an asbestos diaphragm to keep the products from recombining in the cell. Hooker called in experts to assist in testing and improving the cell. Elmer Sperry, founder of Sperry Electric, and Leo Baekland, inventor of Bakelite (and Velox photographic paper) consulted for the company. After a cell



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was successfully tested at a rented site in Brooklyn, NY, Niagara Falls was selected as a plant site, taking advantage of low cost electricity from the Niagara Falls power project (completed in 1895), nearby salt mines (within 60 miles), and abundant water from the Niagara River. Syracuse, NY is the historic salt mining site in North America (known to the Indians and French Jesuits from 1654), but salt mines were also in Wyoming Co., NY near Mt. Morris, and salt deposits are known to extend from Albany, NY, through Detroit and Saginaw, MI, and on to Iowa and Wisconsin.

In 1922, Hooker bought S. Wander & Sons and undertook retail sales of lye and chlorinated lime. The venture was sold in 1927. A West Coast chlor-alkali plant was built in Tacoma, WA in 1929.





Later products included sodium sulfide, sodium sulfhydrate, sodium tetrasulfide, and aluminum chloride. In World War II, Hooker was a leading supplier of dodecyl mercaptan for the synthetic rubber program. Other wartime products included arsenic trichloride, thionyl chloride, and hexachlorobenzene. In the era of plastics, Hooker developed Hetron epoxy vinyl ester resins, and in 1955 acquired the Durez phenolic resins business.

Hooker was acquired by Occidental Petroleum where it continues as part of Occidental Chemicals. Vinyl chloride monomer and PVC/vinyl plastic are now major chlorine derivatives.

For more information, see "Salt & Water, Power & People: A Short History of Hooker Electrochemical Co.," by Robert E. Thomas, Hooker Chemical Co., Niagara Falls, NY, 1955

<http://boards.fool.com/hooker-chemicalcompany-29250894.aspx>

*Mike White is a member of several clubs and historical societies all rail oriented. Mike is currently MER Secretary and Potomac Division Paymaster. His Solomons and Patuxent Railroad, inspired and informed by the Maryland and Pennsylvania Railroad, represents a rural north-south line between Owings, MD and interchange with the Chesapeake Beach Railway and Solomons*