

## **Prime Leather Finishes Company History, The Early Years**

In 1924 a small supplier of finishes and polishes to the leather industry rented a "brick store" on 134 Reed Street in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The two men who started the business named it with their surnames, thus Cleanay-Kean, for W. P. Cleanay and John R. Kean.

Meanwhile, Arthur W. Welch had been working in tanneries in the Eastern United States, then became a salesman. He formed a short-lived Toronto company, Tanners Chemical, Ltd., which went defunct when his partner absconded with the cash. In 1923 he returned to his home state of Massachusetts to work for S. and F. Blacking Company where he worked at various jobs, including sales. His territory included Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the home of many large tanneries, and where In 1924 he married and settled.

But Arthur Welch, ever with new ideas, began experimenting with finishes in the basement of their rented flat above a meat market on the corner of South 33rd Street and Lincoln Avenue. In March of 1929 he bought from Emil M. Langens the tiny Prime Color Company for \$2,000, and in July of that year he bought the majority share of Cleanay-Kean and changed the name to Prime-Kean, which it remained until August 12, 1933, when it became a wholly-owned proprietorship under the name Prime Leather Finishes, still situated in the same "brick store," whose street address had been renamed to 192 South Second Street.

This excerpt from a brochure for the new company describes Prime under Arthur Welch:

### **Helpful Suggestions**

**A word to Shoe Manufacturers...We have adopted the name 'Prime' for our Shoe and Leather Finishes. Uniformity of color and body and the high standard of quality maintained have made Prime Finishes the choice of careful Shoe Manufacturers. We aim to keep abreast of the developments of new processes in Shoe Finishing and spare neither trouble or expense to make our line a Standard for Quality.**

"The corporation proved highly successful, and accumulated a surplus which was large in proportion to its capital. During June, 1935, Welch transferred the business to his own name and continued the corporation purely as a personal holding investment company."<sup>1</sup> In 1935 the company spread across to 177 -79 South Second Street, and the landlord at 192 agreed to changes in the building which allowed the expansion to two more units until the company occupied the whole building, all of which it owned by 1946. By 1942, Prime had absorbed another small company, Kolorin Leather Finishes, owned by the same John F. Kean. An August 2, 1940, report by Dun & Bradstreet, Inc., said, "This established business is operating profitably, finances are in unusually sound condition."<sup>2</sup>

By 1946 the company had now been serving the leather industry in the United States and other countries throughout the stock market crash of 1929, the depression and World War II, during which it worked to keep the tanneries and shoe factories supplied with the chemicals and processes to make footwear for our servicemen and for which effort it received awards of gratitude and excellence.

In 1945 the proprietorship of Arthur W. Welch was reorganized as a Wisconsin corporation, Prime Leather Finishes Company, and Mr. Welch's brother, Francis C. Welch, was recruited as executive vice president of the corporation. Arthur Welch died of a heart attack on November 16, 1946, at the age of 52.