A Century of Comfort

Lennox: The First Hundred Years
1895-1995

Centenary brochure
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To all Lennox employees and dealers, past, present and future: for establishing, nurturing, and continuing the traditions which make the world a more comfortable place in which to live.
Carrying only a few personal belongings and a bag of tools, a quiet-looking young man of 26 stepped from a train at the Marshalltown, Iowa railroad station on July 4, 1881. His name was David Lenoxx, just in from Chicago and looking to start a machine shop. “I walked from the railroad station to the town well,” he later recalled, “and water never tasted better.”

Lennox was born in Detroit, Michigan on April 15, 1856, the son of an expert railroad mechanic. He inherited an astonishing mechanical ability from his father, and the two must have enjoyed a close relationship when Lenoxx was very young. Tools and machines were part of Lenoxx’s life from his earliest years. The family moved to Aurora, Illinois shortly before the Civil War.

When the Civil War began, his father signed up for a three-month enlistment. It was widely believed the conflict would be over in 90 days.
But the war dragged on, and Lennox’ father re-enlisted for three years. “When my father left home the second time,” he said, “I never saw him again.”

The Lennox family moved to Chicago, where Lennox’ mother ran a grocery store and he worked at various machine shops. As he worked, he continued to develop his almost instinctive knowledge of tools and the ways they could be used.

When Lennox combined this inherited practical knowledge with his own special inventive genius, he must have been excited by the possibilities. It was a boom era for industrial America, when railroads were starting to stretch from coast to coast and scientific pioneers such as Bell, Carver, Edison, Maytag, and Firestone were laying the foundations for the next century. For inventors and manufacturers, it seemed an age of almost daily discovery — an age ideally suited to the talents of David Lennox, who had stepped off the train at Marshalltown with little more than a head full of ideas.

The “Furnace Burner” Lennox. Quick and easy product of the early Lennox furnace line. Filled in many early advertisements as “treated like a boiler” and “a practical smoke consumer,” the popular Torrid Zone design changed little from 1890 to the mid 1930s — when Lennox ushered in a new era in home comfort.
After some tough bargaining with the owner, he found a room in Marshalltown — 20 x 20 feet for $7 a month rent. "For the first few months I didn't make enough to pay the rent," he said. Finally he ran into Ed Sears, a local businessman looking for someone to make staples rapidly and for a good price. Lennox designed a staple-cutting machine which increased production while lowering costs. It was an instant success. Now he could pay his rent and expand his business as well. The reputation of the Lennox Machine Shop started to grow beyond the Marshalltown city limits.

A New Kind of Furnace

One day in 1895, Ernest Bryant and Ezra Smith from nearby Osobourne, Iowa dropped by Lennox' shop, eager to show him their plans for a new kind of furnace. The few furnaces used to heat homes at that time were made entirely of cast iron, which warped and cracked after extended use and caused smoke and coal gases to seep into houses. Their design, Bryant and Smith explained, was far more durable; riveted steel was used for the heating surface and iron castings for the grates, fronts, and other parts. Could he help them make the iron castings for their furnaces?

1896
Lennox builds first riveted steel coal-fired gravity furnace
First pro football game played in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

1888
First complete performance of Tchaikovsky's ballet, Swan Lake

1896
First modern Olympic Games held in Athens, Greece

1897
Frye vs. Ferguson decision establishes legality of "separate but equal" facilities

1904
Dave Lennox sells furnace business to a group of Marshalltown investors, including D.W. Norris
Lennox sells 600 furnaces in first year under new ownership
Lennox reluctantly agreed. His business was growing and he was planning his own projects, including improving the designs of trowels, heavy-duty shears, and other tools.

"I didn't feel at home making furnaces," he said many years later. But he understood the importance of Bryant's and Smith's ideas.

When the two inventors were unable to pay Lennox for the iron castings because they couldn't afford to pay laborers, he took over their patents and started reworking and improving their original design. Sweating for long hours in what one observer described as "sort of an overgrown blacksmith shop," Dave Lennox began building the first Lennox furnaces.

The superiority of Lennox' redesigned furnace was obvious, and Lennox furnaces quickly became popular. But by 1904, Lennox was tired of the furnace business. He was much more excited about his plans to manufacture heavy tools, especially shears. An interested group of local businessmen bought the furnace business from Lennox for $54,786.14 — and during their first year of ownership, the Lennox Furnace Company sold 900 furnaces. One of the primary new owners was David Windsor (D.W.) Norris.

Looking for more efficient ways to keep the household and congregations warm, some of the churches were outfitted with some of Lennox equipment from the company's earliest days. Lennox designed this room heater especially for that market.

Warming Up The Congregation, 1905

"Dear Sir:

"Next to a good sermon, a good furnace and a well-heated meeting house are essential to attract large audiences; in fact when the mercury drops below the zero point we are not so sure but what the furnace is needed first. Of course it is the good sermon and religious duty that get people out to church but every pastor has learned at some time during his career, that many a good sermon, after hard, conscientious effort, has been frozen out by poor heating arrangements.

"We enclose a brief pamphlet description of our Torrid Zone hot air furnaces and room heaters ... we want you to read what other pastors say about our furnaces and then to write to some of them personally. If you will send us a rough pencil plan of your building we will give you an estimate of cost ..."

"Remember that the pastor who lays before his people their particular wants and then tells them how to fill them is usually the one who gets the most support ... let us hear from you.

"Sincerely,

"The Lennox Furnace Company"
Dave Lennox might have been starting to think seriously about selling his furnace business when John Windsor Norris was born in Marshalltown on August 5, 1903. As a boy, one of John Norris' summer chores was delivering milk to a couple of neighbors in what a family member described as “an enormous 12-cylinder Packard.” Before he graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Norris began working for the Lennox Furnace Company as a furnace cleaner in the summer of 1925. His first full-time job after graduating in 1927 was as a salesman in the company's new factory in Syracuse, New York.
John Norris was interested in engineering new products at a time when the heating industry was on the brink of fundamental change. He had developed plans to put blowers on furnaces so warm air could be pushed through longer pipes and heat larger homes and buildings. But despite Norris' enthusiasm, his father showed little interest in these new-fangled ideas.

Unable to convince his father by talking about the benefits of forced-air heating, John Norris decided to actually prove it to him. He found a secluded corner in the rear of a Lennox warehouse — a place he was certain D.W. would never visit. Filing tools and other equipment into the dim, cramped space, Norris began quietly experimenting with blowers, oil burners, and gas furnaces with another engineer, F.H. Whit Whitcombe.
Norris’ secret project was nothing less than developing an entirely new home heating system. Realizing more people used their basements for living space, he concentrated on building a smaller, quieter, cleaner furnace. He also worked on developing the technologies involved in sizing pipes and locating registers in the new system.

Once Norris felt he had developed a practical product, he showed it to a group of Midwestern dealers. They were excited, and their excitement finally persuaded D.W. Norris of the practical value and market potential of his son’s ideas.