

PA's Zippo Produces 500 Millionth Lighter

Joe Mandak, Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The 500 millionth lighter produced by the family-owned Zippo Manufacturing Co. in northwestern Pennsylvania didn't exactly roll off the assembly line Tuesday.

Rather, it was passed along, hand-to-hand, in two pieces — the lighter's brushed chrome-plated brass case and its fuel-and-wick assembly innards — by each of the company's 620 employees, who were lined up between the plant and the Zippo museum a few hundred yards away.

CEO Greg Booth then put together the pieces, owner George Duke, the 59-year-old grandson of the company's founder, lit the device and the lighter was placed in the museum for safe keeping.

"I think it's a great way to get everybody involved and make everybody feel a part of this 500 millionth celebration," Booth told The Associated Press.

The company in Bradford, about 130 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, has been making the cigarette lighters with distinctive metal cases that go "click" when their lids close since 1932.

Tuesday also happened to be the birthday of the late George Blaisdell, Zippo's founder who died in 1978. When it became clear months ago that the milestone lighter would be produced sometime this year, company officials began manipulating the plant's production schedule to ensure it would coincide with Blaisdell's birthday.

The case for the actual 500 millionth lighter came off a metal press at 8:26 a.m., said Jim McDonough, Zippo's vice president of operations who personally guided the lighter through each step of production. The case was stamped with the time it was finished — 10:51 a.m. — before the hand-to-hand delivery to Booth began about 11 a.m.

Zippo was celebrating the milestone by creating about 60,000 replicas during the day, each stamped with the commemorative date. McDonough said Zippo's workers reported earlier than usual Tuesday and were staying late so they could enjoy a picnic during an extended lunch break to celebrate the feat.

About 50,000 of the replicas will sport the company's well-known brushed nickel chrome case and sell for \$50 each, while the others will get a higher polished Armor case with gold engraving and sell for \$100.

The 500 millionth lighter also has a brushed nickel chrome case and is known as a Model 200 — so named, because the lighter sold for \$2 when Blaisdell invented it.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

That model normally retails for \$16.95.

Zippo lighters come with a lifetime guarantee and its museum contains a handful of lighters that have been replaced — at no cost — even though the damage suffered, such as being run over by vehicles or chewed up by heavy equipment, could hardly be described as normal wear and tear.

The company is savvy enough to realize that the rugged dependability helps make its lighters retro chic, and officials say they've never paid to have their products placed in movies. Hollywood and some of its stars, instead, come to Zippo for permission to feature the lighters, usually as an unspoken symbol of cool. Charlie Sheen even flicked the lid of his Zippo in public appearances meant to rehabilitate his public persona last year.

Zippo's popularity is just one reason the company last year launched other Zippo-branded products, including clothing and cologne in a lighter-shaped decanter with a "clicking" lid.

The company took 10 years to produce its 1 millionth lighter, and received a considerable boost when Zippos were issued to U.S. soldiers during World War II. It took the company 37 years to hit the 100 million mark.

The 300 millionth lighter was produced on April 15, 1996 and the 400 millionth was produced on Sept. 4, 2003, making Tuesday's milestone the third for A.J. Comilla, who holds the company record for perfect attendance dating to 1994. He joined Zippo in June 1989 and said the company's reputation for dependability helped inspire his attendance streak.

"Oh, that's a part of it, sure. I'm very proud to be a Zippo employee and what they've accomplished throughout the years," Comilla said.

Barb Reid, 67, is the company's longest tenured employee. She'll celebrate 47 years on Sept. 21. She started out in the plating department and now clerks in the maintenance department, ordering products that keep the plant's machines humming.

"It's mind boggling to think of how many lighters, you know?" Reid said.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/21/2014 - 5:15pm):

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