

Hidden History

The Unsung Saga of the Black Man



as told by

John P. & C. Buck West

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JAN ERNEST MATZELIGER

Inventor Who Gave Supremacy in the Shoe Industry to the United States (1852-1889)

(From Volume II of the late historian-anthropologist, J. A. Rogers', "Worlds Great Men of Color")

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"IN SPITE of handicaps which exceed those of the oppressed in almost every other land, there are always individual Negroes in the United States who are not content to settle down to a color-line job but have striven to play a man's part in achievement, regardless of all discouragement. These individuals are to be found in almost every field, including the very difficult one of scientific invention.

"In at least one branch of industry, America owes its supremacy directly to a Negro, Jan Ernest Matzeliger. A pioneer in the art of shoe-making, he enriched America and other nations by billions of dollars, made a dozen or more millionaires, created work for hundreds of thousands, and contributed enormously to what is regarded one of the distinctive features of civilization, namely the wearing of shoes. Massachusetts, center of the world's shoe trade, has been a particular beneficiary of his ingenuity.

"Matzeliger was born in Dutch Guiana, South America, of a Dutch father and a Negro mother. Mechanically inclined as a child, he entered the government machine-shops of the colony at the age of ten, as an apprentice.

"Ambitious to learn more, he left for New York City when his apprenticeship expired. Handicapped by his color and his lack of funds, he nevertheless contrived to learn a good deal about machinery.

"AT THE AGE of twenty-five, he went to Lynn, Massachusetts, and thanks to that more liberal environment, he found employment in the factory of M.H. Harvey, where he operated a McKay machine for turning shoes. There his attention was naturally directed to shoe machinery. Noting the time-wasting method of lasting shoes by hand, he decided to invent a machine to do it.

"Such a machine had been the fond dream of many an ingenious youth, eager to make a fortune. Inventors had burned barrels of midnight oil and promoters had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in the endeavor to change the lasting of shoes from hand to machine methods, as Blake and McKay had changed the sewing of the uppers.

"When Matzeliger announced his intention, his white fellow-workers laughed at him derisively. That a Negro should succeed where some of the best white inventors had failed, seemed ridiculous. They boasted, moreover, that whatever else was done by machinery, nothing could ever supersede hand-lasting. The lasters felt secure in their position. These skilled craftsmen were the gentlemen of the shoe-trade, earning from \$20 to \$40 a week, a very good wage then.

"SECURING A room over the old West Lynn Mission at the corner of Ann and Charles Streets, where he would be safe from too curious eyes, he worked nights studying, experimenting, and drawing. He had started out in a field never be-

fore entered by anyone.

"With no other capital but his meagre wages, he was forced to make use of such material as he could get hold of. Pieces of wood and old cigar and packing boxes were mainly used. For six months he toiled strenuously until he had constructed a model, which though crude, gave him confidence that he was on the road to success.

"Although he tried to work in secret, the hand-lasters learned of his efforts and sometimes dropped in to laugh at the odd-looking combination of sticks in the form of a machine. One of them in racial contempt, dubbed it, 'the niggerhead machine,' the name by which it was popularly known later.

"Even Matzeliger's friends advised him to give up what seemed to them a foolish undertaking, and insisted that, after a long day's work at the factory he should have rest and recreation. One man, however, thought he saw some good principles in the collection of sticks and offered Matzeliger \$50.00 for it. But Matzeliger, reasoning that if it was worth a \$50.00 first offer, it probably would have a much higher value elsewhere, refused to sell.

"HE NOW planned to make a model in metal. Gathering odd bits of iron, he worked patiently, filing and fitting the parts unaided. Four years later he perfected a machine that would work. He was offered \$1,500 for his invention of pleating the leather around the toe, which sum he again refused. Greatly encouraged by the widespread interest his model created, he started to build a better one. Perfection was his aim. For another six years he worked on his invention until a more simplified machine had been constructed.

"With his new model it was easy for him to convince practical men that his invention would work successfully. A company was formed, consisting of himself, those who had advanced him money from time to time, and some others with large capital. It was soon found necessary, however, to build another machine, different in construction, which, when completed, worked almost to perfection.

"One of the especial merits of the invention was that the pincers for pulling the upper, were positively closed by a smooth movement and did not tear even the most delicate leather.

"TODAY, according to experts, no better method of handling loose tacks for fastening the upper to the sole has ever been invented. The twist and pull of the pincers reproduced exactly the peculiar and almost inimitable skill with which expert hand-lasters treat difficult upper leather in their lasting of shoes. No other machine has been invented that is capable of manipulating and shaping a shoe on all styles of lasts, and it is practically impossible to make shoes to meet commercial requirements without using Matzeliger's machine. After twelve years of persistent pursuit of a single idea, he had won.

"With this new invention, the United Shoe Manufacturing Company rapidly drove competitors out of the shoe business until, a few years later, it controlled 98 per cent of the shoe machinery business.

"A tremendous expansion in the shoe industry followed. Shoe stocks proved a gold mine to investors. Earnings increased more than 350 per cent while wages increased but 34 per cent and the price of footwear decreased.

"THE MACHINE was set up in factories but there were stubborn and prolonged strikes against it by the hand-lasters. One veteran laster said: 'The machine revenges Matzeliger by singing as it works. I've got your job! I've got your job!'

"F.A. Gannon says: 'Sales of shoes abroad increased approximately \$16,000,000 annually. United Shoe Machinery Company machinery and shoe experts were sent around the world and American shoe manufacturing methods were adopted farthest north in Norway, in tropical Central America, in England and all the countries of Europe, in Africa, Australia and even in China, Japan and the Philippines.'

"The United Shoe Manufacturing Company constructed a model manufacturing plant in Beverly, Massachusetts. It was built of re-inforced concrete and employed 5,000 persons at a high average wage. Nearby recreational buildings, including a country club, a gun club, and motor-boat club, were constructed, and a band and an athletic team organized--all for the benefit of the employees. The health of shoe-workers under the new working conditions improved immensely, and tuberculosis, their worst menace, was greatly decreased.

"ONE OF THE stockholders, Colonel McKay,

THIS WEEK IN NEGRO HISTORY

AN "NPI" FEATURE

- Dec. 29, 1827 Hiram Revels of Mississippi, first Negro U.S. senator, was born in North Carolina.
- Dec. 29, 1952 Fletcher "Christopher Columbus" Henderson, bandleader and noted jazz arranger-composer, died in New York at the age of 55.
- Dec. 30, 1873 William J. Trent, Sr., President, Livingstone College, Salisbury, N.C., was born in Charlotte, N.C.
- Dec. 30, 1898 Irvin C. Mollison, who died in 1962, was born in Mississippi. He served as judge of the U.S. Customs Court in New York.
- Dec. 31, 1945 Lester B. Granger was awarded the Navy's highest civilian decoration.
- Jan. 1, 1804 Haiti received its independence from France.
- Jan. 1, 1862 African slave trade was officially ended in the United States.
- Jan. 1, 1863 The Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves was issued by President Abraham Lincoln.
- Jan. 2, 1647 Nathaniel Bacon, Virginia planter, colonial politician and soldier, born in England.
- Jan. 2, 1822 Monrovia, capital of Liberia, West Africa--oldest republic in Africa--was founded.
- Jan. 2, 1831 Abolitionist newspaper, "The Liberator," was first published in Boston.
- Jan. 3, 1793 Lucretia Mott, famous abolitionist, was born. She died in 1880.
- Jan. 3, 1834 Alonzo J. Ransier, Negro Congressman from South Carolina, was born.
- Jan. 4, 1789 Benjamin Lundy, abolitionist and colonizationist, was born.
- Jan. 4, 1935 Floyd Patterson, heavyweight boxer, was born. He was the first heavyweight to regain the crown, only to lose it again.
- Jan. 4, 1950 Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia warns United Nations that his country will not recognize Italian trusteeship over Italian Somaliland.

left \$5,000,000 to the engineering department of Harvard University.

"And what about Matzeliger? The amazing young genius was not to enjoy his triumph. Close confinement and overwork had undermined his health. He was stricken with tuberculosis and died two years later, in September, 1889, at the age of 37.

"In his will, Matzeliger left a few shares of his stock to the North Congregational Church, a white congregation that had befriended him. Years later this church, finding itself in financial difficulties, remembered the bequest and sold the stock for \$10,860. A tablet in this church commemorates the inventor.

"The Consolidated Hand Lasting Machine Company, in its bulletin, said of him: 'The conviction is forced upon us that this man of iron will, this man of nerve, who could not be turned from his course, knew whereof he spoke and builded better than he knew, very much better than his most sanguine friends hoped for. Such men do away with old methods and institute new and better ones. Such men make missionaries (See HISTORY, page 15)

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