

Masport marks 100 years

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When a company is starting out, success is an elusive promise glittering on the horizon, but when it becomes established, you might well measure success in terms of longevity.

In which case, Masport has been very successful indeed.

Masport, a company synonymous with the weekend whirr of a lawnmower, is celebrating its centenary.

Starting out in 1910 as a small engineering firm in Auckland, the firm went on to make New Zealand's first commercial push mower in 1929, followed by a motor mower in the 1930s.

Today it exports 90,000 such machines.

The company has published a book documenting its history, which was chief executive Steve Hughes's idea.

Hughes found it particularly interesting to see how the company's story was interwoven with aspects of New Zealand's social history.

The book tells that during the great influenza epidemic of 1917, Masport founder Reuben Porter could be seen walking for miles to visit the families of ill or dead workers.

Before World War II, the company was one of the country's first commercial businesses to put women on the factory floor.

During the war the factory was turned over to making grenades and tank tracks.

In the 1940s, regular Saturday night dances were held for the workers in the company's lunchroom.

They were so popular that one employee recalls a couple popping in on their wedding day to take a turn on the makeshift dance floor.

On the technological front, the prototype for the Masport push mower was produced in great secrecy but had a disastrous unveiling.

"It was assembled in a blackened shed off-site at a secret location. When the mower was finished the team packed it up to take it across the road to put into production," Hughes said.

"But while on the way there, it turns out that some of the bolts weren't secured.

"It fell apart on the street and was run over by a truck."

A little-known fact is that in the 1930s Masport produced New Zealand's first home refrigerator and developed a prototype of the country's first washing machine.

The company continued making a vast range of products until the 1980s, when heavy protection of the manufacturing sector was lifted.

"From trailer couplings and trailer braking systems, outdoor furniture, waste disposal units, woodworking machinery, vacuum pumps – we were just making a raft of different products," Hughes said.

Once the import licensing regime ended, "there were a lot of products to be discontinued and it took maybe 20 years, I think, for the company to really work through that process, work out what they were still worldwide competitive with."

Masport now sells more than 200 types of lawnmower.

Its turnover is more than \$70 million a year, 70 per cent of which is earned outside New Zealand.

The company decided to outsource its manufacturing to China five years ago but retains 90 engineers and sales staff in Australasia. Masport – 100 Years in the Making (Allnatt, Masport Ltd) is available from Masport and Whitcoulls stores.

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