



# Keeping it Cool

## Michigan's Refrigerator Capital

Refrigerator

By Gary L. Hauck

*Greenville and Belding, Michigan, seem like any other small, Midwestern towns. However, for more than a century, those communities just northeast of Grand Rapids, Michigan, were home to several dominating forces in the refrigerator industry. Gibson—eventually Electrolux—and its competitor Ranney Refrigerator Company sprang up practically side-by-side toward the end of the nineteenth century, beginning a legacy of refrigerator manufacturing that met a chilling fate.*

The front-page headline of *The Daily News* told an ominous story on September 24, 2007: “Walls Come Tumblin’

Down: Demolition means former refrigerator factory will soon be a memory.” The article in the Greenville, Michigan, newspaper began, “Like an eraser, demolition crews are well on their way to reducing the building that once was the world’s largest refrigerator factory to a distant memory.”

It was the end of an era in the Greenville and Belding, Michigan, area. In the pages of history and the memories of thousands of former employees, though, the area will always be remembered as “The Refrigeration City.”

## From Hambrook to Gibson

The first refrigeration industry to emerge in the area was the Richard T. Hambrook Manufacturing Company. Hambrook had opened a furniture manufacturing business in Chicago in 1871. In 1875, he worked with

silk manufacturer Hiram H. Belding to establish a branch factory in Belding to produce refrigerators and other wooden products. In 1878, Hambrook patented “The Perfection” refrigerator and began producing it in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Belding. In 1884, the business reorganized as the Belding Manufacturing Company, and Hambrook left the firm.

In 1895, the Hall Brothers Manufacturing Company—a furniture-making enterprise in Belding—took over. It became the Belding-Hall Manufacturing Company, with Brinton F. Hall as its president. Belding-Hall quickly became recognized for selling stylish, wooden cabinets for storing ice blocks. Belding-Hall employed skilled Danish workmen living in the Belding area and made use of available hardwood such as ash, which was plentiful throughout the region.

Belding-Hall’s products were a hit and changed the domestic landscape of household refrigeration. According to the May 1910 edition of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, the “One-Piece, Seamless Porcelain-Lined

Belding-Hall Refrigerator” sold for \$19.75. Those units for indoor use quickly became acclaimed as affordable, practical, and attractive items of kitchen furniture.

Belding-Hall was the largest plant in the industry in the early 1920s, with a payroll of \$130,000 per year and a production rate of 5,500 refrigerators per month.

Despite its success, Belding-Hall was not to last forever. Just to the north in Greenville, Frank S. Gibson Sr. had founded the Gibson Refrigerator Company in 1908. The firm purchased the former Skinner & Steenman Furniture Company factory—a natural fit because it, like Belding-Hall, manufactured wooden iceboxes. Frank Gibson Sr. died in 1926 at the age of 69. His son, Frank Jr., took the reins of Gibson Refrigerator. When Belding-Hall went into receivership in 1928, Gibson seized the opportunity and purchased its former competitor.

In the 1930s, Gibson became more and more of a dominant force in refrigerator manufacturing. The factory developed a large and complex system of production. William Delp began working in the

Below: A billboard advertising the Gibson Electric MonoUnit, which was promoted as a development that set new standards for beauty and efficiency. Below middle: P.H. Davies and Sons, a Grand Rapids-based distributor of Gibson, advertised its product in vehicles like this one.



plant in the 1930s and recalls his experience: “After the cabinets were taken to the 4th floor of Building 2 by the elevator, they were prepared for painting with a manual cleaning and chemical preparation, then taken into manual spray booths and drying ovens. This area was really crowded, and congestion was king!”

Home refrigeration became even more widespread throughout the 1930s following the introduction of Freon, a safer alternative to toxic gases previously used in the vapor compression process. Refrigerators were then produced with a small freezer compartment. With the growing use of frozen foods in the 1940s, the freezers expanded—then complete with ice cube trays. Production and sales climbed quickly.

## World War II Products

Under direction from the U.S. government, Gibson converted 100 percent of its manufacturing industry to World War II production efforts in 1942. Between 1942 and 1945, Gibson manufactured more

than 1,000 Waco CG-4 gliders, which consisted of welded steel tubing fuselages and plywood wings covered with cotton fabric. Each glider could carry a load about as heavy as its own weight. Some were used to land jeeps and small bulldozers. The gliders saw extensive action, especially in the June 1944 D-Day invasion of Europe. Greenville school children raised more than \$72,000 to buy and donate four CG-4As for the war effort and named one of them “The Fighting Falcon.” Gibson also made wing flaps for B-24 Liberator bombers and produced bombs, bomb shackles, aircraft drop tanks, and lens grinding machines.

In 1946, Gibson resumed its normal peacetime production of refrigerators and introduced a new line of electric home freezers. The company entered the 1950s as the biggest name in the refrigeration industry.

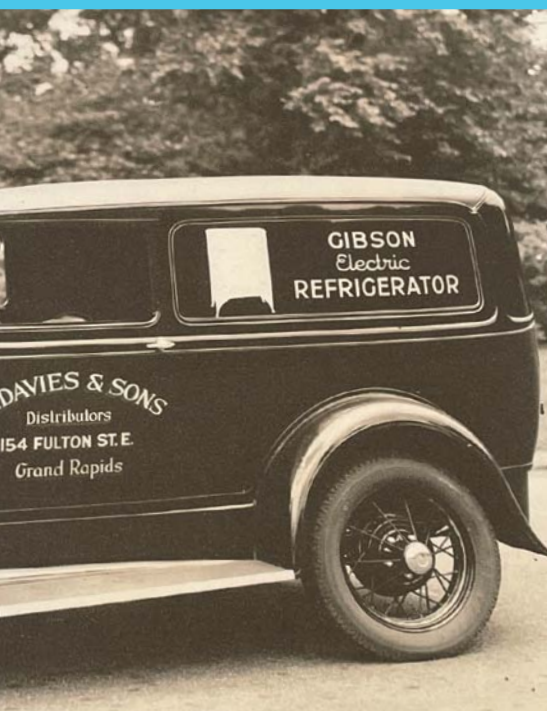
In 1956, the Hupp Corporation purchased Gibson. Then, in 1967, the company merged with White Consolidated Industries, still retaining the Gibson brand name. By the 1960s, Gibson enjoyed its national market and continued to

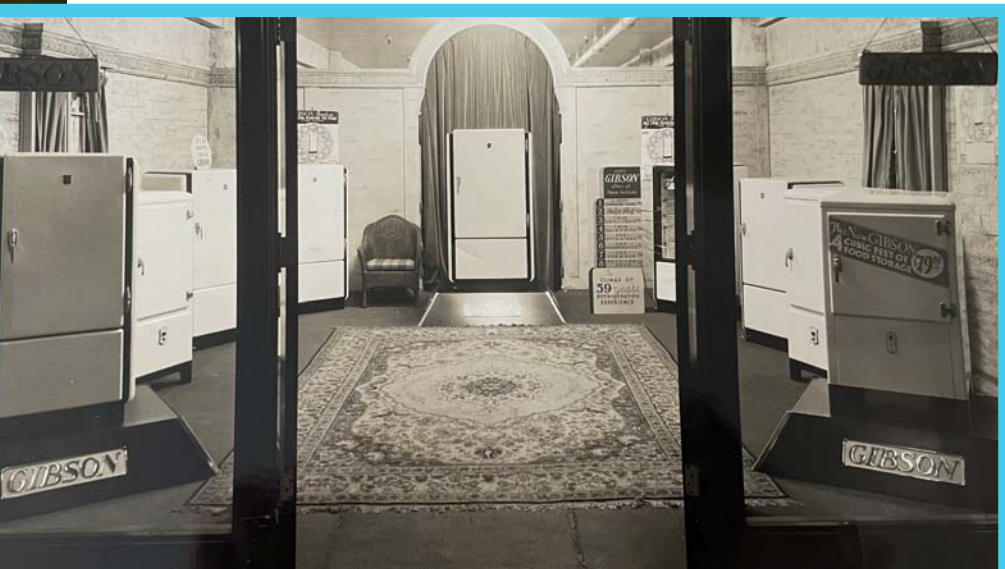
manufacture from its Greenville hub. Greenville’s *Daily News* reported in 1969, “Through its Gibson Refrigerator Sales Corp affiliate, Gibson is represented in every state by a network of 85 distributors and nearly 10,000 independent dealers, and by export and licensing agreements throughout the world.”

Hupp transitioned to the name White-Westinghouse in 1975. The main plant in Greenville later became Greenville Products and produced the Kelvinator line of products.

New materials changed refrigerator manufacturing drastically in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Porcelain liners were swapped for plastic. Rather than fiberglass insulation, foam was used. Rather than using Freon as a coolant, an alternative called 134a became standard. Other innovations—including the refrigerator light, upright freezer, and air-sweep mechanism for distributing the conditioned air—improved the product over the decades, and it was designers and engineers in Michigan who made it all work.

Below right: Existing production and assembly lines like this one made it easy for Gibson to convert 100 percent of its manufacturing to World War II production efforts. (All photos courtesy of the Flat River Historical Society.)





A window into the Gibson display at the American Furniture Mart in Chicago in 1935. The American Furniture Mart occupied an entire city block and displayed hundreds of furniture pieces from companies across the United States.

Electrolux purchased White-Westinghouse—and Gibson with it—in 1986. “Electrolux was based in Sweden and had acquired many appliance companies, forming into one giant global corporation. Gone were the days when you could walk into the office of the chief administrator,” recalled design draftsman David McCord.

Electrolux was keen to restructure the conglomerate of brands it then owned. The Gibson name was phased out in the United States and replaced with Frigidaire, a former Gibson competitor.

## Ranney Refrigerator Company

The story of Ranney Refrigerator Company is a journey from starch to refrigerators. In 1890, the Greenville Starch Company constructed a factory just off Walnut Street bordering the Flat River. There, potatoes were turned into powdered starch. However, when the price of potatoes skyrocketed from 70 cents to \$1.40 per bushel, the company decided to suspend its operations. In

1892, the starch factory stockholders chose to sell the building to the Ranney Refrigerator Company.

The company was incorporated in October 1892, with Frederick E. Ranney as president and Charles T. Ranney as vice president. The business expanded rather quickly and operated its own sawmills and train with 40 cars.

Ranney produced three distinct lines of refrigerators and more than 100 styles: the “Lapland” of solid oak; the “Monitor,” made of solid ash; and the “Mascot” of other hardwoods. Those refrigerators cost anywhere from \$5 to \$125.

Ranney Refrigerator Company remained a family operation for nearly 80 years. In 1970, though the company’s assets were publicly owned by 412 stockholders, the Ranney family still managed them. However, the Fedders Corporation purchased the Ranney Refrigerator Company in 1970, ending the family’s hold on the historic business.

In 1978, Fedders Corporation left Greenville. A newly formed corporation, Northland Refrigeration Company, bought the

Greenville operation. It became the home of the Marvel brand, which produces wine refrigerators. A 2017 fire took most of the old Ranney plant—the former potato starch factory where Ranney had gotten its start. Another fire in 2018 brought down the remainder of the building.

## End of an Era

In the early 2000s, Greenville and Belding refrigerator plants were cranking out 24,000 units every day for distribution and sales. However, Electrolux—the economic powerhouse among the region’s refrigeration enterprises—was looking to move out.

The Trade and Tariff Act of 1984 and the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 drastically changed the landscape of manufacturing in the United States. Tariffs were lifted on the majority of goods produced in Canada and Mexico, and the door opened for American industries to find lower labor costs outside of the United States. The strength of Michigan’s refrigeration domain began to slide in that new landscape, which escalated in combination with other factors such as diversification, competition, and international expansion.

Electrolux and its Frigidaire products were a dominant force in Greenville and Belding’s economies. However, in 2004, Electrolux announced that it would close its Greenville plant in 2006. Despite efforts from the state government to retain the plant in Michigan, Electrolux began to lay off its thousands of employees in batches.

Electrolux officially closed its doors on March 5, 2006. Its new manufacturing hub was just across the border in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. After the last refrigerators rolled off the line in Greenville, every production employee stopped

for a moment to sign them. The plant buildings were soon torn down. Only one warehouse of the Electrolux plant remains, now used by West Michigan Compounding. It was the end of a proud era.

Bill Willison, who worked at Gibson from 1964 to 1992, mused, "From 1908 through 2006, several generations of families worked together to make this a successful and profitable operation. The rural work ethics definitely impacted all areas of this company. Definitely a family atmosphere throughout my time with the company. I witnessed several times when people would put in the extra effort that was needed once they knew the cause." He added, "It was a very sad day when the plant was closed."

One of the workers who lost their job due to the closure reflected, "Many people are still angry about Electrolux leaving. But for me, I am thankful for the job I had. I raised my family from the money I worked for 32+ years and was blessed there by many friends and life lessons."

Marvel Refrigeration, the new name of Ranney Refrigerator Company, maintains a modest-size plant in the region. Between that and the impact that Gibson had on the area for more than a century, the history of the refrigerator industry is inexplicably and undeniably tied to Greenville and Belding.

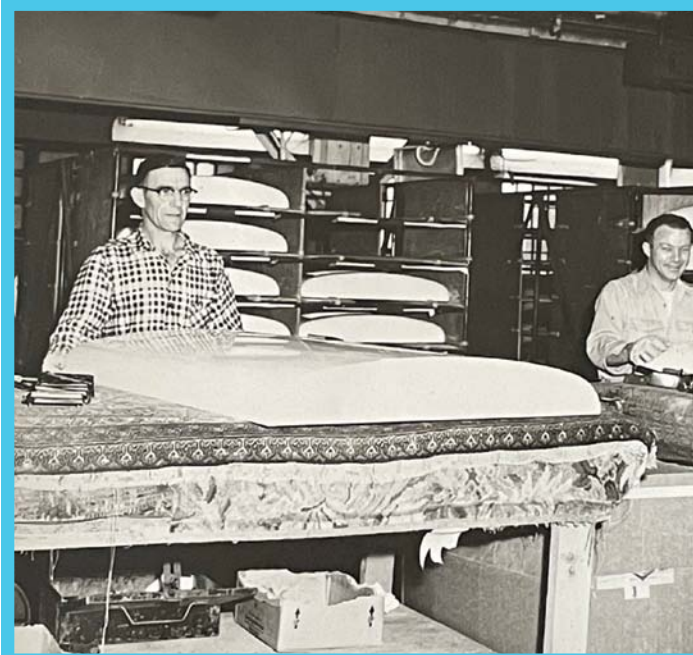
In a letter dated November 4, 1946, Charles J. Gibson celebrated the many accomplishments of Gibson, calling the company "one to be remembered with great pride." It still is.

However, as early as the 1970s, perhaps there were already some who saw the writing on the wall when Greenville was renamed from "The Refrigeration City" to "The Danish Festival City."

Of course, we cannot forget that those early workers who fashioned

the ash tree wood into fine iceboxes were, after all, Danes. 🇩🇪

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Top right: Refrigerators experienced major assembly changes starting in the 1970s.

Porcelain liners were replaced by plastic, and fiberglass insulation was swapped out for foam. Middle right: Gibson Refrigerator Company had plants in Greenville and Belding; the largest, Belding-Hall, produced 5,500 refrigerators per month in the 1920s. Bottom

right: A Radium ice refrigerator from Ranney Refrigerator Company. Shown to the left is the front of a Ranney packing crate.

