

Made in
America

Producing Locks Since Lincoln

by VIVIAN
WAGNER

Using a machine that slices through metal, workers cut long brass bars into lock-shaped pieces at the Wilson Bohannon Padlock Co. factory in Marion, Ohio (pop. 36,494).

As the brass pieces travel through production, they are stamped with the company's "WB" logo, polished, shaped and fitted with the internal mechanisms that turn them into padlocks, which will safeguard truck cargo, security gates and utility sheds around the world.

"You wonder where they all go," says Jackie Dawson, 51, who has assembled the security devices at Wilson Bohannon since 1977. "You think about that when you put so many together."

Wilson Bohannon—the nation's oldest operating family-owned padlock manufacturer—has produced locks for more than 140 years.

The company got its start when Wilson Bohannon and his son, Todd Wilson, began tinkering with padlock designs



Wilson Bohannon (inset) received his first padlock patent in 1860, a decade before he opened his first factory (above) on Kossuth Place in Brooklyn, N.Y.

in a small shop behind their Brooklyn, N.Y., home. Bohannon received his first padlock patent in 1860, the year President Abraham Lincoln was elected to his first term. Hence, the company's motto, "Locks since Lincoln."

Back then, the Wilson Bohannon Co. produced locks that secured the contents of railroad cars, storage bins and ballot boxes. In 1927, Bohannon's grandson, Wilson Bohannon Tway, moved the company to Marion and, with the decline of the railroad industry, turned his attention to supplying locks to utility—electric, gas, water and sewer—companies, which remain a large part of the business's customer base.

Now owned by the great-great-granddaughter of Wilson Bohannon, Pam Smith, along with her husband and company president Howard Smith, the lock factory employs 60 people and produces 5,000 padlocks a day for customers around the world. And in an era when many American manufacturers have moved their operations overseas, Wilson Bohannon officials remain committed to keeping their factory in Marion.



"They really have a lot of pride in their workmanship," says John Grist, owner of North Georgia Security in Clayton, Ga., who has sold Wilson Bohannon locks to commercial and residential customers for 20 years.

Grist, who has a private collection of Wilson Bohannon locks dating back to 1860, likes supporting an American company that still manufactures its products in the United States. "We're supporting our own economy when we buy them," he says.

Wilson Bohannon's customizable padlocks feature rustproof solid brass bodies and brass, steel or stainless steel U-shaped shackles that range in size from less than an inch to 8 inches. The locks sell for \$5 to \$25 each.

Custom lock designs remain key to the company's success, and one of the brains behind those designs is Mark Williams, the company's chief engineer, who began working as a shipping clerk for Wilson Bohannon in 1977.

"A lot of the machines we use in the assembly process we design and build in-house," says Williams, 48. "When we build a new one, we just keep improving it. It's a learning process."

As Williams works at his desk, he flips a three-dimensional image of a lock on his computer screen, modifying the design and



Howard Smith, company president

**Wilson Bohannon
Padlock Co.'s plant
in Marion, Ohio**



Photos by Todd Yarrington

changing its size and shape. He says he values the company that allows him to develop and contribute his creative talents.

“I really feel like I’m a big part of the company,” Williams says. “I feel like I have some input in the way things happen around here.”

The designs dreamed up by Williams eventually become Wilson Bohannon’s time-tested padlocks, which have provided security and protection since Lincoln was president.

“We’re proud of our heritage,” says Howard Smith, 60. “We’re 100 percent American-made, and we want to keep it that way.” ✨

Vivian Wagner is a writer based in New Concord, Ohio.

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