

The Ruthmans: Blacksmiths, Builders, and the Machinery of Cincinnati

The Ruthman story begins before there was a machinery company, before there were pumps and factories, and before the family name appeared on buildings.

It began with immigrants.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Gerhard Ruthman left Hanover while Gertrude came from Oldenburg in Germany. They settled in Cincinnati, a city growing rapidly beside the Ohio River, where newcomers arrived with little more than trade skills and determination. Gerhard worked as a blacksmith and lived on Race Street in the city.

Their son John Ruthman was only eight years old in the 1870 census, but he was growing up in an environment of sparks, iron, horses, river traffic, and industry. Cincinnati at the time was not yet the modern city we imagine today. It was noisy and crowded—a place of foundries, wagons, machine shops, immigrants, and smoke. The city rewarded people willing to work with their hands.

John married Matilda Pistner, linking two immigrant families together. Interestingly, the families became even more intertwined when John's brother Ben married Matilda's sister Margaret.

The Ruthman children grew up in a household where work, faith, and education all mattered deeply. The children eventually followed remarkably different paths:

- Edward became an engineer and businessman.
- Alois became an inventor and industrial leader.
- Arthur entered the priesthood.
- Hildegard entered religious life and education.
- Others spread into advertising and business.

The family did not merely produce one kind of success; it produced many.

Around 1912, brothers Edward and Alois started what became the Ruthman Machinery Company in Cincinnati. Initially, they serviced steamboats that traveled the Ohio River.

But starting a company is rarely a straight line upward.

The early years seemed almost designed to test them.

First came the great flood era that struck Cincinnati. Then came the crisis of 1917: their building on East Second Street was condemned and ordered evacuated.

Suddenly the business faced possible collapse.

John—the father who had raised them—loaned \$3,000 to keep things alive. Brother Arthur loaned another \$1,000.

The newspaper recollections preserve a deeply human moment. Edward remembered feeling abandoned when others temporarily stepped back:

"The three bemoaned their fate and walked out on me to wallow..."

The words sound almost humorous today, but beneath them is real strain: young men trying to hold together a dream while watching uncertainty close in around them.

There were additional hardships.

Customers owed money and sometimes failed. The Formica company, still in its early days, owed substantial sums. Credit decisions became survival decisions.

The world itself was changing around them. Edward later recalled passing the Victor Shields site and remembering the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915. World events and local events blended together. History was not something distant—it unfolded around them in real time.

Yet the family continued.

In 1924, Alois helped create the first sealless centrifugal pump and introduced the name "Gusher." What began as a struggling machine shop serving river traffic slowly became a company with worldwide influence.

By the 1940s the company was expanding during wartime manufacturing. New buildings appeared. Production increased.

The blacksmith's descendants had become industrial builders.

Yet what strikes me most is not the business success.

It is the family pattern.

One child entered business.

One entered the priesthood.

One became an educator.

One became an executive.

Across generations, the Ruthmans seemed to build things—sometimes machines, sometimes institutions, sometimes people.

Their story is not merely about pumps or factories.

It is about immigrants who arrived with practical skills and created roots deep enough that later generations could branch outward into many directions.

The family moved from hammering iron in a blacksmith shop to helping shape part of Cincinnati's industrial life.

And perhaps that is the larger story:

The Ruthmans did not simply inherit a city.

They helped build one.