

Flexible Flyer The First Hundred Years

For 100 years, the name Flexible Flyer has been synonymous with winter, snow and kids. From movies to the Broadway stage to national advertising, the sleds with the red eagle trademark are instantly recognizable. Most everyone can remember their first ride on their very own steerable sled. Known around the world, a “Flexible Flyer” sled is a symbol of American quality and industry.

The sled has its root in the brilliant inventiveness of a Quaker businessman from Pennsylvania named Samuel Leeds Allen. Allen was born in 1841 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to John Casdoro and Rebecca Leeds Allen. The Allen family was already extremely prominent, their ancestor Nathaniel having been sent to America by William Penn in 1681 to purchase land from the Indians and to assist in laying out the city of Philadelphia. Samuel’s father John was a well known Quaker pharmacist who had graduated with honors in the first class of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy.

As has been the tradition for all generations of Allen children even to the present day, when he was eleven years old, Samuel was sent to Westtown Boarding School, a Quaker Academy (That school would come to play a leading role years later in the development of the “Flexible Flyer “..) He went from Westtown to Friends’ Select School in Philadelphia from which he graduated in 1859. The strenuous Quaker education instilled in Allen from his earliest years the desire to succeed through hard work in a variety of endeavors.

In 1861 at the age of twenty, Allen realized that he was not cut out for city life and decide to learn agriculture on his father’s farm near Westfield, New Jersey. Allen worked long and hard hours in order to understand every aspect of farming, from the basic manual labor to the fine science of proper planting to insure abundant crops. In 1866, he married Sarah Hotton Roberts, a member of another distinguished Pennsylvania Quaker family, in the meeting house of Westtown School where he had been educated and soon thereafter, they took up residence at “Ivystone” farm, where Allen was to live and work for nearly thirty years.

In the same year as his marriage, 1866, Allen invented two pieces of farm equipment: a fertilizer drill for spreading guano, the “Planter Drill”, and a seed drill, the “Planet Junior”. These two products were the impetus to the founding of the S. L. Allen Co., manufacturers of “Planet Junior” farm equipment. In early years, the company was managed solely by Samuel L. Allen and his father, John C. Allen. At the time, smaller pieces of equipment were made in the shop at Allen farm, “Ivystone” with horse-drawn implements manufactured by Bateman Brothers in Grenloch, New Jersey. Thanks to astute marketing techniques and hard work by an energetic sales staff, the S. L. Allen Co. grew and prospered. By 1881 the company was selling its equipment throughout the United States and Europe from sales and manufacturing offices located in downtown Philadelphia. A model of efficiency and “modern” manufacturing techniques, the factory the S. L. Allen Co. was situated, in 1889, on major rail lines, bounded on the north by the New York division of the Pennsylvania railroad and on the east by the North Penn branch of the Reading Railroad, offering perfect shipping possibilities in an area then known as “North Penn Junction”. Influenced by his Quaker beliefs and natural penchant for progress, Samuel Allen provided his employees with benefits unusual for the time: a dining room serving hot meals at a nominal cost, an auditorium for entertainment programs and a well equipped clinic with a full-time nurse to care for minor injuries. In addition, the S. L. Allen Co. was pioneer in providing death and disability insurance as well as retirement plan for all employees. In short, the factory was highly successful. Production of farm equipment was seasonal however, and a new product for the S. L. Allen Co. was needed to keep the factory workers occupied during the summer and fall months and to prevent them from leaving to take jobs on nearby farms. It was from this business necessity that an American tradition was born.

Sledding, or “coasting” as it was commonly called in the late 1800’s had been a passion of the young Sam Allen at Westtown School an he had instilled the same love of the sport in his children during their growing up years at Ivystone farm. According to his daughter Elizabeth Allen in her book, ‘Samuel L. Allen: Intimated Recollections and Letters’:

“Different slopes were tried about our home, until finally a hill was made on the north side of the shrubbery on our sloping lawn. Here, ice and snow remained days or weeks longer than elsewhere, and by removing a panel of fence we could get a quarter mile run down a gentle slope around the hotbeds and into the cornfield below... Every night the hill was mended and iced, and father usually took a few rides then or early next morning.”

Allen's early attempts at inventing the best sled for "coasting" were all tried out by his daughter Elizabeth, on the hill at Westtown School or at Ivystone farm in New Jersey. First came the "Phantom" which Allen gave to the Westtown School girls to test. Writes Elizabeth Allen,

"Fleetwing will carry six comfortably. It is made the very lightest and strongest way that could be thought of... It is steered with handles and the front sled is fastened to the rear one by chains, so steering the front sled also guides the rear one, this being an advantage in turning curves."

"Aeriel", able to carry eight, was another Allen-designed sled on the hill at Westtown School by the boys. Front and rear "bobs" both steered, which in the judgement of the students, made it very difficult to handle on ice. None of the three early sleds was ever marketed commercially.

The true predecessor of the "Flexible Flyer" was Allen's "Fairy Coaster", a sled of entirely new design. It was a double-runner or bobsled which held three or four adults. Runners were made of steel and seats of a plush fabric. The entire sled could be foldered up into a neat package which could be easily transported from street car or train to a hill in the country. Ideal...but there was one problem: the sled had a retail price of \$50.00 which, in the late 1800's, made it too expensive to sell in quantity. Allen next redesigned a smaller version of the "Fairy Coaster" with solid wooden seat, which cost much less and looked like a good proposition as a new product, but in snow testing at Westtown School, the sled proved to be too small with not enough runner to steer properly. The entire production of the "Fairy Coaster" was sold at auction for a nominal price.

Allen's passion for sledding, his love of invention, and his need to diversify his manufacturing operations were relentless and destined him to finally come up with the "perfect" steerable sled.

A. L. Jacoby, sales manager of the S. L. Allen Co. in 1889 wrote an account of the invention, which Elizabeth Allen quotes in her book:

"Mr. Allen worked up a sled with only one pair of runners, made of rounded steel, and had these runners weakened at one point about half way back to form a sort of hinge, so they could be bent sidewise there. This gave the steering effect of a double-runner sled, but with continuous runner. This first flexible runner sled was never tried out in snow, but it gave Mr. Allen the right idea, and sled with flexible T-shaped runners and a slatted seat was soon made, and after it was a proven success, was named by Mr. Allen, the Flexible Flyer".

Application was made for a patent for the "Flexible Flyer" on February 14, 1889 and granted six months later. But the sled was hardly an overnight success.

Immediately after the patent approval, Allen, began to advertise the sleds heavily in order to introduce them throughout the trades. Toy buyers for the large department stores were wary of the new invention and said that "Flexible Flyers" were "not practical". Only a few thousand of the sled were sold each year with profits being absorbed by the cost of advertising.

The sled was met by internal resistance at the S. L. Allen Co. as well. Salesman, used to the farm equipment business, did not like trying to sell the sleds, since the sales season cut their vacations short. They also found themselves up against department store buyers who were a much tougher class to handle than the people who bought farm equipment. Soon they urged Sam Allen to sell the patent for the "Flexible Flyer" to an established sled manufacturer, Allen said "no".

The S. L. Allen Co. did not market the "Flexible Flyer" for several years. In the early 1800's with the revival of golf in the United States and the resultant interest in tennis, skating, tobogganing and other outdoor sports, Allen again started to advertise the sled. This time, his timing was right. Allen Co. salesmen succeeded in convincing two big department stores of the merits of the new sled—Wanamaker's in Philadelphia; an R. H. Macy Co. in New York City. Trade grew enormously and prompted Allen to observe at the time that probably took seven to nine years to introduce a new product properly.

The extent of "Flexible Flyer's" success in those early years is detailed in a letter sent by Samuel Allen to his wife just before Christmas 1915.

"We have been selling sleds at a great pace, averaging right along about 2,000 per day, and the demand so urgent we are sending whole car loads of about 1200 each to New York, New Haven and Pittsburgh by express: perhaps five full cars in all. There seems little doubt but that we will sell out clean, in all about 120,000; and it also seems likely that the dealers will also sell out clean".

“Flexible Flyer” sales soon outstripped those of all the other competition combined, competitors like the “Storm King”, “Swift Glider”, “Lightning Guider”, and “Safety”. After years of hard work, it was fitting that no other sled could be found in any store in Philadelphia, the city to which S. L. Allen Co. and the many generations of the Allen family contributed so much.

Through the years, the S. L. Allen Co. developed various typed and models of the “Flexible Flyer” and other winter sports equipment, including a line of wooden skis, which were based on Norwegian design and highly popular in the 1940’s. In 1968, the S. L. Allen Co. was sold to the Leisure Group, a Los Angeles based manufacturing conglomerate which also bought Blazon, Inc. a manufacturer of outdoor swing sets. The Flexible Flyer operation was moved to Medina, Ohio in 1970, while swing sets were made in West Point, Mississippi.

In 1973, a group of private investors including five Blazon employees bought The Leisure Group’s toy division which had plants in Medina and West Point and consolidated all operations in West Point, Mississippi under the name of Blazon Flexible Flyer, Inc., where sleds continue to be made today*.

Flexible Flyer has expanded their business to include various types of outdoor play equipment, the leading line of gym sets, spring mounted horses for children, and a line of molded plastic toys, in addition to that famous wooden sled that still bears Samuel L. Allen’s distinctive red eagle trademark. The company’s product line today* are sold to big volume toy distributors across the country such as Toys R Us, Sears, J. C. Penny, Wal-Mart, Target, and Service Merchandise.

Today*, Flexible Flyer’s snow toy best sellers are not only that famous sled but a full line of plastic, toboggans, saucers and inflatables. Times have changed.

But that old-fashioned wooden sled, invented by Samuel Leeds Adams 100* years ago on February 14, 1889, is still what gets the most attention. The sleds can be found pictured on holiday greeting cards, in advertisements, on TV, in movies—and even in the Smithsonian Institution. President Mark Bobinchuck states, “We’ve celebrated 100 years of an American tradition, we know that kids around the world will enjoy Flexible Flyer toys for the next 100 years!

Samuel Leeds Allen would be proud.

FLEXIBLE FLYER CHRONOLOGY

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| 1841 | Samuel Leeds Allen, inventor of the “Flexible Flyer” sled, born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. |
| 1861 | S. L. Allen begins to study farming. |
| 1868 | S. L. Allen invents two pieces of farm equipment, “Planet Drill” for fertilizer and “Planet Junior” seed drill. S. L. Allen Co. founded to manufacture “Planet Junior” line of farm equipment. Allen and wife move to “Ivystone” farm. |
| 1881 | S. L. Allen Co. of Philadelphia is a leading manufacturer of farm equipment, marketing products throughout the U.S. and Europe. |
| 1884-1887 | Samuel Allen realizes need to diversify product line and prevent seasonal layoffs of work force: Experiments with various types of sleds: “Phantom”, “Fleetwing” and “Aerial” which are never marketed. All sleds tested at Westtown School in Moorstown, N.J. and Ivystone farm. |
| 1888 | Allen unsuccessfully markets predecessor to “Flexible Flyer” called the “Fairy Coaster”. |
| Feb. 14, 1889 | Application for patent for “Flexible Flyer” filed by Samuel Leeds Allen. |
| August, 1889 | Patent granted for Flexible Flyer and production begins—sled meets with resistance from toy buyers. |
| Early 1900’s | S. L. Allen Co. actively markets the “Flexible Flyer” sled; Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia and R. H. Macy Co. stock sleds for Christmas. |
| 1889-1968 | S. L. Allen Co. continues to manufacture sleds for worldwide distribution. |

- 1968 The Leisure Group, Los Angeles, buys S. L. Allen Co. of Philadelphia.
- 1969 The Leisure Group buys Blazon, Inc. manufacturers of outdoor play equipment in West Point, Mississippi.
- 1970 Flexible Flyer plant moved to Medina, Ohio
- 1973 Private investors buy The Leisure Group's toy division and consolidate operations under the name of Blazon-Flexible Flyer, Inc. at West Point, Mississippi.
- 1989 Flexible Flyer celebrates 100th Anniversary. Flexible Flyer introduces Centennial model sled.
- 1990-1999 Flexible Flyer continues the great tradition of quality products and services that began in 1889
- 1993 Purchased by ROADMASTER CORP, sled production move to Olney, Illinois
- 1996 Divested Flexible Flyer Toys, retained all snow toys
- 1998 Moved production to China
- 1999 Ended production