



## Bradford Soap Rises Again

One of Rhode Island's oldest companies, on the verge of shutting down last year, is staffing up after coming to terms with its union.

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WEST WARWICK—Bradford Soap Works will employ 400 workers at its flagship manufacturing plant by January, 100 more than worked here last year when it nearly shuttered its headquarters, the company said yesterday.

The business, one of the oldest in Rhode Island, has added 70 jobs this year and hopes to recruit another 30 employees in the next three months, said Bill Schmiedeknecht, human resources director.

Stephen LeGraw, Bradford's president and chief executive officer, said the job growth reflects a quadrupling in business since 2001. A spokesman for the privately held company declined to disclose sales figures.

"We're trying to hire people as fast as we can," LeGraw said in an interview. "This is where the consumers are, and this is where the product should be made." Almost all of Bradford's customers are based in the United States.

The work-force expansion represents a turnaround for the 129 year-old company, founded by two Britons. In April 2004, Bradford said it would halt manufacturing at the Valley Queen Mill, a historic stone structure built in 1889 along the Pawtuxet River. Nearly 250 production employees would have lost their jobs, and West Warwick would have seen yet another local industry disappear.

But Governor Carcieri and the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation intervened, helping to broker a contract agreement between the company and Local 64 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The employees' new contract included major concessions from workers and guaranteed jobs for at least five years.

Carcieri also pledged money for employee safety and literacy classes and offered a small-business loan for infrastructure improvements. The loan was not used, and no tax breakers were offered.

Bradford's announcement yesterday demonstrated the value of preserving the manufacturing plant, said Michael McMahon, executive director of the EDC, who helped the two sides negotiate the contract.

"They understand global competition, and they work alongside management to hold onto jobs in this country," McMahon said of the union. "Manufacturing jobs are hard to come by."

Many of the jobs are being transferred from a plant in Dayton, Ohio, which Bradford acquired in November 2003 after it purchased American Safety Razor. That plant, which employed 171 workers, was closed and auctioned off this year, along with a facility in England. Bradford still operates manufacturing plants in Columbus, Ind. and in Mexicali, Mexico.

Already, the Rhode Island plant employs more workers than at any time in its history. The company produces 70 million pounds of soap a year in West Warwick, mostly bars that are pressed, packaged and labeled in the same plant where they are made from vegetable oil and animal fat.

"Business has been great," Schmiedeknecht said.

Company officials yesterday said they had no plans to transfer jobs to the Mexico or Indiana facilities. Bradford employs 1,000 workers worldwide, but its West Warwick headquarters houses nearly all the company executives, researchers, salespeople and the skilled laborers who produce regular and specialty soaps with moisturizers, lather boosters and aromas.

"They went out on a limb to keep the plant here and it seems like everything is paying off for them," said John Grady executive director of the Rhode Island Manufacturers Association. "A hundred jobs is great."

Rhode Island had lost manufacturing jobs every year for at least a decade, said Grady, who credited skilled management and improved labor relations for Bradford's success. The union contract signed last year resulted in a pay cut for some workers, a one-year wage freeze for many others and 2-percent increases in each of the next four years.

Relations are still not perfect. The union's negotiating team recently rejected a request to eliminate the third shift and extend the hours of skilled laborers.