

The History of Stainless Steel

Harold M. Cobb



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The History of Stainless Steel
is dedicated to my dear wife
Joan Inman Cobb

Front Cover

The Chrysler Building, erected in New York City in 1930, was once the tallest building in the world, being almost twice as high as the Washington Monument. It is widely acclaimed as the finest skyscraper, with its art deco style and the ornate tower that is clad with stainless steel.

The Chrysler Building was the first major use of stainless steel in architecture. The Nirossta chromium-nickel alloy had first been introduced in America just three years earlier, and the long-term endurance of the metal in the atmosphere was unknown. The building has become an icon of the stainless steel industry, a symbol of endurance and beauty, and a favorite of architects.

The photograph was taken by Ms. Catherine M. Houska, TMR Stainless, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the Nickel Development Association, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Inside Front Cover

1934 photograph of the Burlington Zephyr at the E.G. Budd Manufacturing Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Courtesy of the Hagley Museum

Inside Back Cover

List of stainless steels given in Carl Zapffe's 1949 book, *Stainless Steels*.

Back Cover

Top. At a height of 630 feet, the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Missouri, is the world's tallest monument, which surpassed the 555 foot height of the Washington Monument. With an exterior of stainless steel, the shape of the arch is that of an inverted catenary (or the shape of a chain dangling from two points at the same level). Courtesy of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial National Park Service, St. Louis, Missouri.

Bottom. The Ford Tudor, one of six Ford Deluxe sedans manufactured by Allegheny Ludlum in 1935 to demonstrate the formability of 18-8 stainless steel and to show its beauty.

Contents

List of Tables and Figures	ix
Preface	xvii
Acknowledgments	xix
Credits	xxi
About the Author	xxiii
CHAPTER 1 Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2 The Early Discoveries	7
The Discovery of Chromium (1797).....	8
Michael Faraday Pioneers the Alloying of Steel (1820).....	8
Iron-Chromium Alloys and the Production of Ferrochromium (1821).....	10
Woods and Clark Describe an Acid- and Weather-Resistant Alloy (1872).....	11
Discoveries in the 1890s	11
The Discovery of Martensitic and Ferritic Chromium Stainless Steels (1904).....	12
The Discovery of the Chromium-Nickel Austenitic Stainless Steels (1906).....	13
The Discovery of Corrosion Resistance (1908).....	13
Another Important Ferritic Chromium Stainless Steel Is Discovered (1911).....	14
CHAPTER 3 Discoveries of the Commercial Usefulness of Stainless Steel	17
Usefulness of a Martensitic Chromium Stainless Steel Discovered in England and America (1911–1912).....	17

Usefulness of Ferritic Chromium Stainless Steels Discovered in America (1911–1914)	21
Usefulness of Chromium-Nickel Stainless Steels Discovered in Germany (1912)	22
Usefulness of Chromium-Silicon Steels	23
CHAPTER 4 The Great Stainless Steel Symposium (1924)	25
Data on Stainless Steels Presented	26
History and Patents	28
An Iron-Chromium-Nickel Alloy	28
Continuing Role of ASTM	30
CHAPTER 5 The Life of Harry Brearley (1871–1948)	33
The Early Years	33
Brearley Becomes Manager of Firth Brown Research Laboratories	40
The Firth-Brearley Stainless Steel Syndicate	47
The American Stainless Steel Company (1918–1936)	50
Brearley’s Later Years	54
CHAPTER 6 The Early Books and Papers on Stainless Steel (1917–1949)	59
Paper by Dr. W.H. Hatfield (1917)	59
Paper on Stellite and Stainless Steel by Elwood Haynes (1920)	60
Stainless Steel Paper by Marble (1920)	61
Firth-Sterling Steel Company Trade Publication (1923)	62
Paper on Cutlery Stainless Steel by Owen K. Parmiter (1924)	66
<i>Stainless Iron and Steel</i> by John Henry Gill Monypenny (1926)	71
<i>The Book of Stainless Steels</i> (1933 and 1935)	74
<i>Stainless Steels</i> by Carl Andrew Zapffe (1949)	87
Appendix: Text of 1920 Paper by W.H. Marble	91
CHAPTER 7 The Chrysler Building (1930)	101
The First Skyscrapers	103
Nirosta (18-8) Stainless Steel	105
The Groundbreaking and Race	108
Opening Ceremonies	115
Van Alen’s Vision	116
The Exterior	117

CHAPTER 8 Edward G. Budd (1870–1946), Inventor and Entrepreneur.....	123
The Early Years.....	123
The Automobile Body Business.....	125
A New Kind of Stainless Steel Arrives in America	127
Earl Ragsdale’s Shot Weld Patent.....	129
The World’s First Stainless Steel Airplane—The Pioneer	131
The World’s First Stainless Steel Rubber-Tired Train	134
The Burlington Zephyr	138
The Flying Yankee	147
The Mark Twain Zephyr	154
Transit and Trucking	155
The War Years.....	156
The Postwar Years.....	160
A Review of the Budd Era	166
CHAPTER 9 The Gateway Arch.....	171
CHAPTER 10 History of Stainless Steel Melting and Refining.....	175
The Wild Process	176
The Rustless Process.....	176
The Linde Argon-Oxygen Decarburization (AOD) Process.....	178
CHAPTER 11 Two New Classes of Stainless Steel	185
Duplex Stainless Steel.....	185
Precipitation-Hardening Steel.....	189
CHAPTER 12 Stainless Steel Applications.....	193
Household Products	193
Food Handling	197
Architecture.....	199
Aircraft.....	000
Automobiles.....	000
Trains	000
CHAPTER 13 Canada Restores a Fleet of Stainless Steel Railcars.....	229
CHAPTER 14 The Plummer Classification System of Trade Names.....	231

CHAPTER 15 The Unified Numbering System (UNS) for Metals and Alloys	235
The Stainless Steel Numbering System	239
CHAPTER 16 The Naming and Numbering of Stainless Steels.....	241
Early Classes of Stainless Steel	242
Stainless Steel Trade Names	243
Standardization	244
Appendix 1 Stainless Steel Bibliography.....	251
Appendix 2 A Stainless Steel Timeline	257
Index.....	335

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 1 Wrought stainless steel AISI designations listed in <i>The Book of Stainless Steels</i> , edited by E. Thum (ASM, 1935).....	86
Table 2 Cast stainless steel designations listed in <i>The Book of Stainless Steels</i> , edited by E. Thum (ASM, 1935)	87
Table 3 Example of the Plummer classification system for alloys with 16 to 23% chromium, 7 to 11% nickel, and 0.13 to 0.20% carbon.....	233
Table 4 Primary series of Unified Numbering System (UNS) numbers	238
Table 5 Examples of Unified Numbering System (UNS) designations.....	239
Table 6 Comparable designations for type 304 stainless steel.....	245

Captions for Numbered Figures

Fig. 1 Five discoverers. Source: Zapffe, 1949	9
Fig. 2 Six pioneers. Source: Zapffe, 1949.....	18
Fig. 3 Harry Brearley. Source: Copyright. Sheffield Industrial Museums Trust. Reprinted with permission	19
Fig. 4 Benno Strauss, who promoted the industrial application of chromium-nickel austenitic steels that he developed with Eduard Maurer at Krupp laboratories from 1909 to 1912. Source: Thum, 1933, p 374.....	27

Fig. 5 P.A.E. Armstrong, who developed silicon-chromium steels used for gas engine exhaust valves. Source: Thum, 1933, p 486	27
Fig. 6 Early Firth advertisement (1915). Designed by Evelyn D. Roberts, Pittsfield, New Hampshire.....	29
Fig. 7 Text excerpts from Brearley’s 1916 patent of a stainless steel.....	44
Fig. 8 Elwood Haynes, who was a pioneer American automobile maker and an inventor of a series of complex alloys from 1907 to 1913 when searching for durable spark plug alloys. Courtesy of the Elwood Haynes Museum, Kokomo, Indiana.....	48
Fig. 9 Text excerpts from the 1919 stainless steel patent of Elwood Haynes	49
Fig. 10 Stainless steel cutlery illustrated in the book <i>Firth-Sterling “S-Less” Stainless Steel</i> , published by Firth-Sterling Steel Co., McKeesport, Pennsylvania, 1923	64
Fig. 11 Surgical and dental instruments illustrated in the Firth-Sterling book, 1923	65
Fig. 12 Golf clubs illustrated in the Firth-Sterling book, 1923.....	66
Fig. 13 Stainless steel turbine blading illustrated in Firth-Sterling book, 1923.....	70
Fig. 14 Chart from Parmiter showing the effect of quenching (hardening) on the stain resistance (comparative efficiency in percent) of chromium cutlery steels. Source: Thum, 1935, p 288.....	71
Fig. 15 Prominent contributors in the early developments of stainless steels. Source: Zapffe, 1949, p 22	73
Fig. 16 Percentages of chromium and nickel required to produce an austenitic alloy. Source: B. Strauss, <i>Non-Rusting Stainless Steels, Proceedings of the American Society for Testing Materials</i> , 1924, p 208–216.....	74
Fig. 17 Ernest E. Thum, first editor of <i>Metal Progress</i> and editor of <i>The Book of Stainless Steels</i>	76
Fig. 18 Table of contents from the second edition of <i>The Book of Stainless Steels</i> , American Society for Metals, 1935	77
Fig. 19 Carl Zapffe, who authored <i>Stainless Steels</i> (1949) and coined the term <i>fractography</i> from his original work on the microscopic examination of fracture surfaces. 1968 photo. Courtesy of the Zapffe family.....	88
Fig. 20 Effect of chromium on corrosion and oxidation resistance of	

steel. (a) Iron-chromium alloys exposed for 10 years to corrosion and rusting in an industrial atmosphere. (b) Oxidation penetration of ½ inch cubes exposed to air for 48 hours at 1000 °C. Source: Zapffe, 1949, p 31, 32	90
Fig. 21 Walter P. Chrysler	102
Fig. 22 Latticed framework of the spire and needle of the Chrysler Building. After the lattice was raised from within the building, a scaffold was built around it, so that workers could start affixing the stainless steel panels. Reprinted with permission from David Stravitz, Ed., <i>The Chrysler Building: Building a New York Icon a Day at a Time</i> , Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2002	112
Fig. 23 Stainless steel sections on the Chrysler Building. Photo taken on June 20, 1930, by the builder Fred T. Ley & Co., Inc. Reprinted with permission from David Stravitz, Ed., <i>The Chrysler Building: Building a New York Icon a Day at a Time</i> , Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2002	113
Fig. 24 Chrysler Building (same photo as cover). Courtesy of Catherine M. Houska, TMR Stainless, and the Nickel Development Institute	114
Fig. 25 Nirosta (18-8) stainless steel eagle on the 61st floor of the Chrysler Building in winter 1929–1930. Photo taken by the famous photographer Margaret Bourke-White, whose studio was just behind the eagle. Reprinted with permission from David Stravitz, Ed., <i>The Chrysler Building: Building a New York Icon a Day at a Time</i> , Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2002.....	120
Fig. 26 Edward Gowan Budd. Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library.....	124
Fig. 27 Cross section of shot weld specimens of 18-8 stainless steel with (left) inadequate fusion due to insufficient heating, (middle) correct heating and fusion, and (right) excessive heating with carbide precipitation in the heat-affected zone of the weld. Source: E.J. Ragsdale, To Weld 18-8 Minimize Time at Heat, <i>Metal Progress</i> , Feb. 1933, p 26.....	128
Fig. 28 Budd Pioneer amphibian plane. Reprinted with permission of the Franklin Institute.....	132
Fig. 29 The Budd-Michelin rubber-tired train, purchased by the Reading Company, was officially named Rail Motor Car 65. Source: Thum, <i>The Book of Stainless Steels</i> , 1935, p 429	137

Fig. 30 The Burlington Zephyr under construction. Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library	141
Fig. 31 The Burlington Zephyr outside the factory. Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library	142
Fig. 32 Flying Yankee in Nashua, New Hampshire, March 1935. Courtesy of Brian McCarthy, President, Flying Yankee Restoration Group, Inc.	149
Fig. 33 Coach cars. (a) Mark Twain Zephyr. Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library. (b) Flying Yankee. Courtesy of Brian McCarthy, President, Flying Yankee Restoration Group, Inc.....	150
Fig. 34 Observation cars. (a) Mark Twain Zephyr. Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library. (b) Flying Yankee. Courtesy of Brian McCarthy, President, Flying Yankee Restoration Group, Inc.....	152
Fig. 35 Budd RB-1 Conestoga cargo plane. Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library	159
Fig. 36 The first stainless steel aircraft built by the Budd Manufacturing Company on display in front of the Franklin Institute Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Courtesy of Craig Clauser	169
Fig. 37 The Gateway Arch. Courtesy of the Jefferson Expansion Memorial Park	172
Fig. 38 Six ton Heroult-type furnace. Source: A.L. Feild, Manufacture of Stainless Iron from Ferrochromium, from Scrap, or from Ore, <i>Metal Progress</i> , Feb. 1933, p 15	177
Fig. 39 Microstructure of a martensitic stainless steel (type 410; UNS number S41000). (a) Annealed. (b) Tempered after hardening	186
Fig. 40 Microstructure of two ferritic stainless steels. (a) Type 409 (UNS number S40900) muffler-grade strip in annealed condition. (b) Type 430 (UNS number S43000) annealed strip.....	187
Fig. 41 Microstructure of 304 austenitic stainless steel from three specimens of a fabricated part from welded strip. (a) Annealed location that was unaffected by processing. (b) Region with slip bands caused by roll forming. (c) Heat-affected weld zone with carbides in the grain boundaries. Source: <i>Atlas of Microstructures of Industrial Alloys</i> , Volume 7, <i>Metals Handbook</i> , 8th ed., American Society for Metals, 1972, p 135	188
Fig. 42 Microstructure of two duplex stainless steels. (a) Solution treated and aged 7-Mo (Fe; <0.1 C; 27.5 Cr; 1.5 Ni; 1.5 Mo). Ferrite is light	

gray; sigma phase is dark; austenite is the whitest shade. (b) Type 2205 duplex wrought stainless steel (UNS number S31803). Ferrite (darker) and austenite (white). Composition is balanced to produce approximately equal amounts of ferrite and austenite at room temperature. Courtesy of Buehler Ltd.	190
Fig. 43 Microstructure of precipitation-hardening (PH) stainless steels. (a) Martensitic PH stainless steel type 15-5 PH (UNS number S15500) in solution-treated and aged condition. (b) Semiaustenitic PH stainless steel type 17-7 PH (UNS number S17700) in solution-treated and aged condition. (c) Austenitic PH stainless steel type A286 (UNS number S66286) in annealed condition	192
Fig. 44 Stainless steel Oneida tableware circa late 1960s. Courtesy of D. Gymburch	195
Fig. 45 U.S. Steel display of stainless steel kitchenware at the Century of Progress exhibition during the 1933–1934 Chicago Centennial Exposition	196
Fig. 46 Milk truck with a 2700 gallon tank lined with 18-8 stainless steel. Source: <i>Food Handling Advances</i> , U.S. Steel, 1935	199
Fig. 47 The canopy of the Hotel Savoy. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1999, Catherine Houska)	200
Fig. 48 Arcs of the Chrysler Building. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (Tim Pelling)	201
Fig. 49 Entrance to the Chrysler Building. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1996, Catherine Houska)	202
Fig. 50 Stainless steel spandrel panels on the Empire State Building. (a) Undated photo from the 1930s. (b) 1996 (Catherine Houska)	203
Fig. 51 150 East 42nd Street (formerly the Socony-Mobil Building) in New York City. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1996, Catherine Houska)	205
Fig. 52 First cleaning of the Socony-Mobil Building in 1995. Courtesy of J&L Specialty Steel.....	206
Fig. 53 Ford Tudor stainless sedan	225

Caption for Unnumbered Figure in Chapter 6

Chart of high-temperature scaling of steels in Marble's 1920 paper on stainless steels	96
--	----

Captions for Photographic Insert

- Fig. A Latticelike exterior on the IBM Buildings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Five Gateway Center). The loaded bearing trusses are sheathed with sheets of stainless steel. Architects: Cutis and Davis, New Orleans. Source: *New Horizons in Architecture with Stainless Steel*, American Iron and Steel Institute, 1965, with permission.....207
- Fig. B Water tower at General Motors Technical Center, Warren, Michigan. Constructed from stainless-clad structural steel plate ($\frac{1}{16}$ inch stainless steel on $\frac{3}{8}$ inch structural steel plate). Associated architects: Eero Saarinen; Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls. Photo: Baltazar Korab. Source: *New Horizons in Architecture with Stainless Steel*, American Iron and Steel Institute, 1965, with permission.....208
- Fig. C Water intake gate structures at Niagara Power Project, Niagara Falls, New York. The 100 foot high structure was sheathed with stainless steel. Source: *New Horizons in Architecture with Stainless Steel*, American Iron and Steel Institute, 1965, with permission209
- Fig. D Pittsburgh Civic Arena, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When constructed, it had the world’s largest dome and retractable roof. There are no interior supports. The stainless steel dome is 415 feet (126 meters) in diameter and consists of 7800 pieces of stainless steel that were joined with flat lock-and-batten seams to form eight movable leaves of the dome roof, which can be opened in two minutes. Courtesy of the Pittsburgh Civic Arena.....210
- Fig. E Elephant & Castle Substation, Newington Causeway, London. Curtain wall of type 316 stainless steel exterior wall panels with a pressed pattern. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1999, Catherine Houska).....211
- Fig. F Kearns Communications Group Building, Dayton, Ohio, in 1999. Two sides of the building have type 304 stainless steel curtain walls with no windows. The other two sides are glass curtain walls and doors with solid stainless steel framing. Courtesy of Edward Madden, Kearns Communications Group211
- Fig. G Enfield Civic Centre, Enfield Borough, Middlesex, United Kingdom, in 1999. Stainless steel exterior cladding is type 316 with either a bright annealed or an embossed finish. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1999, Catherine Houska).....212

- Fig. H Pier Pavilion, Herne Bay, Kent, United Kingdom, in 1999. This two- and three-story sports center on the end of an ocean pier has corrugated external type 316 stainless steel cladding. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1999, Catherine Houska).....213
- Fig. I ICI Building, North York, Ontario, Canada, in 1981. Type 304 stainless steel panel for the curtain wall and four revolving door entrances213
- Fig. J Sun Life Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, in 1999. Curtain wall is type 304 stainless steel face panels with a thickness of 0.06 inches (1.5 millimeters). Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1999, Catherine Houska).....214
- Fig. K Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington, New Zealand, in 2000. Curved stainless steel panels cover the top and bottom of the protruding circular center of the building. There are also vertical stainless steel sunshades between the windows. Courtesy of the Nickel Development Institute (1999, Catherine Houska)215
- Fig. L Statue of Genghis Khan fabricated of 250 tons of stainless steel. Located 54 kilometers from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, this statue is 131 feet tall.216
- Fig. M Cloud Gate sculpture by Anish Kapoor in Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois217
- Fig. N Stainless steel entrance door designed and executed by Oscar Bach. Plaques represent industries of mining, smelting, fabrication, machining, building, and transportation. Top right plaque in color represents fabrication. Source: *Metal Progress*, June 1936, p 36218
- Fig. O Dramatic façade of Federal Savings and Loan Association in Brookfield, Illinois. Exterior columns are sheathed in stainless steel, and the building is accented by stainless steel mullions. Source: *New Horizons in Architecture with Stainless Steel*, American Iron and Steel Institute, 1965, with permission219
- Fig. P Escalator, referred to as a “new electric stairway,” uses bright stainless steel stringers, railings, and posts. Sears, Roebuck and Company store in Atlanta, Georgia. Source: *New Horizons in Architecture with Stainless Steel*, American Iron and Steel Institute, 1965, with permission220
- Fig. Q Stainless steel stairwell with single stringer and cantilevered steps. Architects: Daniel Badani, Michael Folliasson, Abro Kandjian, and Pierre Roux-Dorlut. Photo: Baltazar Korab. Source: *New Horizons in Architecture with Stainless Steel*, American Iron and Steel Institute, 1965, with permission.....221

Preface

What is stainless steel? The average person has no inkling, but it is all around us, and readers will be surprised to learn some of the stories of this remarkable material that one prominent metallurgist called “the miracle metal.”

Every day, most of us use stainless steel tableware and wear a wrist-watch with a stainless steel case and band. There are stainless steel racks in refrigerators and ovens, and there are stainless steel toasters, tea kettles, and even kitchen sinks. Cars have stainless steel exhaust systems that last for ten years instead of three when they were made of ordinary steel.

The amazing story is told of Harry Brearley, who rose from poverty, became a self-taught metallurgist, was one of the early discoverers of stainless steel, and received the Bessemer Gold Medal.

In the early days of stainless steel, the metal was often used when the goal was to produce the finest, the most durable, and the most beautiful product that money could buy. The Rolls-Royce Motor Car Company, for example, was one of the first to use stainless steel on an automobile. Their 1929 car displayed the most striking radiator grille imaginable in silvery stainless steel.

In America in 1930, the office building of automaker Walter P. Chrysler opened in New York City. The Chrysler Building was the tallest and most ornate skyscraper in the world. The top 100 feet of the tower was clad in Nirosta stainless steel, making it the most beautiful and most visible building on the New York City skyline.

In 1934, a Philadelphia autobody company tried their hand at building a stainless steel train for the Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy Railroad. It was a streamlined, lightweight, luxurious, silvery train that

became the world's fastest. It traveled 3.2 million miles in 25 years and is now on display at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry.

Eero Saarinen designed the St. Louis Gateway Arch, which was completed in 1965. The 630 foot, stainless-clad arch is the tallest monument. Saarinen wanted the arch to last for a thousand years.

Stainless steel was an expensive material, costing as much as 15 times that of ordinary steel. The story is told of how one young metallurgist in 1970 discovered, in the laboratory, a process that would cut the cost of stainless steel in half and produce better steel. The other part of the story was that it took 12 years to discover how to develop the process for large-scale production.

How it was possible for things like these to happen and the story of how stainless steels were discovered are explained in this first history of stainless steel. Stainless steels have become the third most widely used metals, following aluminum and steel.

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Kennett Square, Pennsylvania
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October 2009

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About the Author

Harold M. Cobb graduated from Yale University in 1942, receiving a B.E. degree in metallurgical engineering. He has had a broad background in the stainless steel industry, where he was involved in the development of new stainless steel products, including watch screws, hollow stainless steel aircraft propeller blades, roll-formed compressor blades and vanes for jet engines, boron carbide stainless steel for moderating nuclear reactors, and sinter-bonded porous stainless steel fiber-metal products.

Cobb's industrial experience included positions at the Edward G. Budd Manufacturing Co., Westinghouse Aviation Gas Turbine Division, United Nuclear Corp., and as chief metallurgist at Clevite Aero-products and Pratt & Whitney.

He was chairman of the Philadelphia and Connecticut sections of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical and Petroleum Engineers (AIME). He holds a patent on a manufacturing process for nuclear fuel elements.

After 22 years in the metals industry, Cobb became a manager at the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) in Philadelphia, working with many of the metals technical committees, including Committee A-10 on Stainless Steel. He was one of the principal promoters and developers of the Unified Numbering System (UNS) for metals, which was organized jointly by the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) and ASTM in 1970. For many years, Cobb developed and served as the number assigner for the miscellaneous steels series of UNS numbers, the K series. He has been the principal editorial consultant for the last four editions of *Metals and Alloys in the Unified Numbering System (UNS)*.

Cobb served as Secretary of the U.S. Secretariat for the International Standards Committee ISO/TC17/SC12 on Carbon Steel Sheet and Strip for 15 years. He has edited 22 books on steel, including works on carbon, alloy and coated steel sheet and strip, tool steels, stainless steel specifications, and a *Pocketbook of Standard Wrought Steels*. In 1999, he became editor of the *Stainless Steels Products Manual*, one of the 16 steel products manuals that the American Iron and Steel Institute (AISI) initiated in the 1950s. In 2008, Cobb edited and substantially revised his second edition of *Stainless Steels*, now published by the Association for Iron and Steel Technology.

He has written the articles “Development of the Unified Numbering System for Metals,” “The Naming and Numbering of Stainless Steels,” and “The 75th Anniversary of the Burlington Zephyr Stainless Steel Train.” Cobb is a member of ASTM Committee A-1 on Steel, Stainless Steel, and Related Alloys and is a Life Member of ASM International.



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