Just one word: Plastics

A new report from SPI, the plastics industry trade association, presents a detailed overview of the state of the U.S. plastics industry. Size and Impact of the Plastics Industry on the U.S. Economy, published November 2013, notes that this industry has been one of the economy’s largest and fastest growing. Although hit hard by the 2008-2009 recession, it is now recovering. Most plastics are used in manufacturing and services are becoming increasingly important. Lower inflation, dollar value reduction, and lower natural gas prices have spurred U.S. exports, moderating the recession effects. Those same advantages should help stabilize the plastics industry in the future, according to analysts. Mirroring numerous other industries, a shrinking number of businesses indicate a continuing consolidation trend. Key findings of the newly released report include:

The U.S. plastics industry is large, accounting for 892,000 jobs and $373 billion in shipments during 2012. California has the largest plastics industry employment, but as a percentage of total non-farm employment, the industry is most important to Michigan, where it accounts for 15.8 of every 1000 non-farm jobs. Indiana is close second.

When suppliers to the plastics industry are included, jobs grow to 1.41 million, and total shipments reach $456 billion. The plastics portion of the industry was the eighth largest U.S. industry in 2011, while the plastics materials and synthetics sector (including rubber and fiber) was the twelfth largest.

Employment in plastics manufacturing grew 0.1% per year from 1980 to 2012, outpacing manufacturing as a whole, and shipments grew at a 2.3% annual rate from 1980 to 2012. The recent industry slowdown largely reflects the recession and slowing of the manufacturing sector as a whole.

The plastics industry has improved over the past two years.

Although manufacturing is still the main outlet for plastics, an increasing share of plastics is going into services including wholesale and retail trade; finance, insurance, and real estate; and healthcare. The U.S. plastics industry, as documented by government data, operated an estimated 15,949 manufacturing establishments in 2012 excluding businesses that produce captive plastic products or supply goods and services to the plastics industry. For more information, visit www.plasticsindustry.org.

---

feedback

More on Metallurgy Lane
Our American metals history is so interesting, especially when it includes descriptions of why things happened. I can see that Charles Simcoe, author of the new “Metallurgy Lane” series, spent a lot of time on his research including extensive travel. The most surprising thing I learned from the article is that anthracite coal was used directly for fuel in blast furnaces. I wonder if he came across the historical Greenwood Furnace* in Eastern Pennsylvania, and whether or not the Cornwall open pit mine* near Harrisburg is still operating?

Edward Dunn

I was aware of the Greenwood Furnace, but didn’t know it was an ASM Historical Landmark until I did some research after Dunn’s email. The Cornwall mine closed after the underground part flooded during Hurricane Agnes in 1972 and the open pit was abandoned in 1973. It had been in operation for more than 230 years. —Charles R. Simcoe

Pig iron production
I’d like to add a side note about pig iron production. The blast furnaces near St. James, Mo., (circa 1830) used “long leaf” pine charcoal at the rate of three tons of charcoal per ton of iron produced. The two furnaces produced about 16 tons of pig per day, hence used 24 tons of charcoal. Pine produces very little charcoal compared to hard woods, so vast stretches were denuded. No replanting was done and rain washed away what little soil was there to begin with. The railroads took the rest of the pines for ties (circa 1850-1870). Today the Ozarks have only scrub oak and cedar. The irony (pun intended) is that the major industry there today is still charcoal, now used in our country’s barbeque pits!

Chuck Dohogne

Wonder of the world
Charles Simcoe wrote a good article on wrought iron (February issue), but he failed to mention one of the wonders of human civilization—the Ashoka Pillar (Delhi Iron Pillar*) in India. It was manufactured sometime around the 4th century and has stood on open ground since. It has neither weathered nor shows any signs of rust or pitting.

Ashok Bhamari

*ASM Historical Landmarks. See more at www.asminternational.org/membership/awards/historical-landmarks.

We welcome all comments and suggestions. Send letters to frances.richards@asminternational.org.