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The Generations of Corning: The Life and Times of a Global Corporation (review)

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Davis Dyer and Daniel Gross. *The Generations of Corning: The Life and Times of a Global Corporation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xx + 507 pp. ISBN 0-19-514095-8, \$25.00.

Writing under the auspices of the Winthrop Group, a history-for-hire firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Davis Dyer and Daniel Gross have published the first full-length history of Corning Incorporated, known for many years as Corning Glass Works. Commissioned by Corning to celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2001, this official corporate history is dedicated by Dyer and Gross to the multiple generations of people who have long sustained the firm: the Houghton family, which founded and managed it for nearly fifteen decades, and countless employees, who first provided skilled labor to an isolated glass factory in upstate New York and, later, the expertise that enabled the firm to expand globally, with sites on six continents. The “generations” metaphor also refers to the firm’s highly diversified product portfolio, invented and reinvented through this convergence of management and labor.

The task of chronicling a company’s entire history, from A to Z, is daunting, but Dyer and Gross have met the challenge admirably. Their decision to divide the book into five major sections—each part focusing on a successive generation of Houghton managers in action—provides the authors with a handy periodization. The authors show how, from the 1850s to the 1990s, five Houghton generations, each distinctive in personality and temperament, guided the firm through market realities that were unique to particular moments. During the Gilded Age the glassworks struggled in three locations—Somerville, Massachusetts, and Brooklyn and Corning, New York—as founder Amory Houghton grappled with problems indigenous to glassmaking in the handicraft era, wrestling with labor unions, insufficient capitalization, and saturated markets. His sons, Amory Jr. and Charles, made a dramatic break from tradition by deciding to pursue cutting-edge technology markets of their era, forging lasting ties with big business by making signalware for the railroads and light bulb components for electrical manufacturers. The third generation, the brothers Amory A. and Alanson B. Houghton, broached even newer territory, giving full support to industrial research and venturing into the wider world through licensing and joint ventures. The fourth generation steered the firm through the Great Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War, strengthening through military applications the commitment to research and development and expanding

the horizons of glass technology to include television tubes and miracle materials like glass-ceramics. Finally, the fifth generation took the firm into high-technology markets, developing lucrative businesses in auto substrates, fiber optics, pharmaceutical services, and so forth, as it expanded internationally. The authors show how each generation encountered difficulties, such as struggling with Justice Department antitrust prosecutions, failing personal health, or foundering product lines.

Whether discussing Corning in 1900 or in 1970, the authors focus primarily on the deliberations, decisions, and actions at the executive level, with special emphasis on the Houghtons. To be sure, key figures such as R. Lee Waterman, a former chain store executive who expanded Corning's profile in consumer lines, and Tom MacAvoy, a modest and mild-mannered chemist from Cincinnati (both of whom became top managers), are given due consideration in the narrative. What is missing, however—as might be expected in such a sweeping survey—are the excavations beneath the surface that often provide insight into the story of particular product lines. Dyer and Gross's story of Pyrex baking ware, for example, largely reiterates corporate lore holding that innovation to be the outgrowth of a eureka moment on the part of a highly valued scientist and his wife, rather than the brainchild of the firm's chief sales engineer, as supported by documents in the company archives. Similarly, the discussion of the corporation Steuben Glass does not address why Corning has retained this wholly owned subsidiary even though it has operated in the red for much of its existence. The inclusion of these and other stories side-by-side with company legends would have served to deepen readers' understanding of Corning's unique corporate culture.

Overall, Dyer and Gross have produced a useful study of a leading American firm, documenting its transformation from a specialty glassmaker into a global leader in high-tech markets. Their story is rich with human interest, providing historical insight into the operations of a family firm and of a company town that has remade itself again and again. After a 1972 flood devastated Corning in the wake of Hurricane Agnes, the company established a professionally staffed archives and records management program. Although much had been lost to Agnes and in earlier floods, Dyer and Gross had access to what remains of Corning's corporate records, as well as to a thriving community of Corning retirees willing to speak about their work experiences. Able historians, the authors have made good use of these resources. *The Generations of Corning* is not only fast-paced reading, but it also provides a map for future generations of scholars who

might choose to explore the many important aspects of Corning's history in greater depth.

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Diana Davids Olien and Roger M. Olien. *Oil in Texas: The Gusher Age, 1895–1945*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xi + 307 pp. ISBN 0-292-76056-6, \$39.95.

“Was there enough oil in Texas to bother with?” (p. 1) is the wonderfully ironic question that opens this indispensable, encyclopedic history of the first fifty years of the oil industry in Texas—ironic because petroleum became the dominate economic force in Texas, which became the nation's largest oil-producing state. Roger M. Olien, appointed to the Spindletop Centennial Commission by former governor George W. Bush, holds the J. Conrad Dunagan Chair in Regional and Business History at the University of Texas Permian Basin, where Diana Davids Olien is a senior lecturer in history. Readers will find *Oil in Texas* thoroughly researched, clearly organized, and candid in its appraisals, characteristics of the authors' previous five books on the petroleum industry and oil culture. Like many of the oil fields the Oliens write about, this book's modest size belies its astounding wealth of information.

This is masterful business history, compelling in its revelations. The authors establish how the Texas petroleum industry consisted of “some visible large companies, some conspicuously successful independents . . . and above all, of circles, and of circles within circles” (p. 51). These “circles,” or patterns of interconnectivity, portray unappreciated complexities in how oil transformed the economy, built cities, attracted investment and work opportunities, funded schools, redefined government's role with industry, and created unprecedented wealth. The Oliens reveal “symbiotic relationships” amounting to a loosely knit business community among independent oil companies and the corporate giants (despite folklore, successful wildcatters were hardly solitary), entwined yet further by the “aggressive involvement” of the state's economic, social, and political elites. The enormous challenges of finding oil (and natural gas), and of pumping, storing, and transporting it (certainly significant issues in themselves), are connected with how Texans conspicuously kept political power while accepting needed capital from outside the state. Texas politics, bound by traditional antimonopoly sentiment,